

The ghosts of Simcoe County

I've been fascinated by ghosts and the paranormal ever since I was a child. In 2006, I joined Black Creek Pioneer Village as an historical researcher and jumped at the chance to research the ghosts haunting the site for their Halloween special. I started the first ghost walk in the village and from my research, I wrote the book, 'The Ghosts of Black Creek' which will soon be featured in Terry Boyle's next published book, 'Haunted Ontario: Ghostly Historic Sites, Inns and Miracles'.

I discovered the Haunted Barrie Meetup Group when I was doing my research and joined them after I moved to Barrie from Toronto. They are the 'Ghost Hunters' of this area with an impressive collection of professional ghost tracking equipment to aid in their investigations. The group was formed by Jeff Ostrander in 2007. Jeff is no stranger to investigating and documenting reported haunted locations throughout Canada and the United States. Tara VanderMeulen has been with the group from the beginning and is now the public relations manager and assistant organizer for events. There are currently over 600 ghost enthusiasts who are members of this 'spirited' organization.

I recently sat down with Tara to discuss Simcoe County's ghostly hotspots which she was more than happy to share with me:

The Museum on the Boyne

The Museum on the Boyne (or the 'BOO'yne) in Alliston features a collection of haunted buildings. There is the MacDonald Log Cabin dated 1851, the 1858 English Barn as well as the 1915 Agricultural Fair Building. According to Tara, there have been many strange occurrences that have happened in these buildings over the years. Activity in the museum ranges from loud stomps across the floors, a blue haze traveling across the back room, an unexplained cold presence, display cases flung open and artifacts removed, display cases rearranged and unknown lights and orbs spotted in the attic of the main museum, the barn and the first floor of the cabin.

Katie, the Curator, is very familiar with the spirit of 'Andrew', an older gentleman who once worked in the building but who now frequents the attic and balcony. There are the 'Lovely Ladies' who appear every June in high heels for a dance or social occasion of some kind and then disappear shortly after. There is also a ghost cat who has been seen wandering around the first floor of the main building.

In the cabin are the sinister MacDonald boys. Psychics have described 'Angus' as an angry sort who does not like women with long dark hair. In the past, women who fit this description have described an uneasy feeling, have felt a pressure on their back and have even been pushed. An apparition of a hand was witnessed in the log cabin followed by a loud bang on the first floor table. In one EVP (electronic voice phenomenon) session in the cabin, a male voice was heard saying, 'Get Out?' to a group of women investigators followed by the 'B?' word. Another EVP captured the sound of a baby crying. There are cold chill spots throughout the cabin and compasses have been known to go haywire in there. During a strictly controlled audio recording session in the cabin, unknown male voices were heard talking over top of Jeff, while a loud bang sound from the loom was captured on camera.

The Penetanguishene

Centennial

Museum and Archives

The Penetanguishene Centennial Museum and Archives originally housed the C. Beck Lumber Company Ltd., a milling and logging business founded by German immigrant, Charles Beck. The existing General Store and Lumber Office date back to 1875 and are filled with artifacts of the Victorian era. Charles Beck became one of Penetanguishene's first mayors in 1882 and by the time of his death in 1915 he had amassed a personal fortune.

The Rescue Mediums, from the popular television show, did an episode at the museum. They picked up on a boy child in the

museum and while they were in the basement, a door opened on its own. The mediums were able to confirm the presence of a lady in the basement as well. Tara actually has a videotape of the ghost boy saying, 'thank you?' in the store. You can find the recording on youtube under 'Haunted Barrie Meetup Group 022512 Penetang Museum EVP?'. After Tara says 'Thank you?', you can clearly hear the voice of this ghost child say the same thing back at the 9 second mark on the video. Apart from seeing this little boy, staff and museum guests have seen a headless suit that disappeared in a flash of light and a woman in Victorian dress in the store front window. This may be the same woman the Rescue Mediums picked up on in the basement. They have also witnessed strange unexplained lights and lights being turned on and off or dimmed down and back up again. Footsteps as well as things falling and being dragged across the floor are common occurrences. When tours were given in the past, guests reported feeling uncomfortable in several areas of the building. In particular, there is a wall upstairs between the older and newer section of the building where Tara and several other people have felt headaches, uneasiness and nausea. It has often been thought that Charles and some members of the Beck family may still be haunting the building which played such an important role in their lives.

Bayview Wildwood Resort

The Bayview Wildwood Resort in Port Stanton is over 110 years old and has long had a reputation for being haunted. Tara told me the Ghost Girls of Simcoe County, from the popular local television show, came to investigate the site with Jeff and Tara and other members of the Haunted Barrie Meetup Group. The main building, which is the oldest on the property, has had reports of apparitions on the second floor and main staircase. There are reports of footsteps and sounds of someone running on the upper floors. Doors have been seen to open and close. Staff has reported seeing legs going up the stairs but they say there is never an upper body on the figure.

On the cold winter night when the investigation took place, the investigative team managed to capture a man by the name of 'Webster?' on EVP. Webster was a native man who did work at the site before his death. The Ghost Girls saw a shadow figure walk into room 14 and also saw someone peek out of the doorway. New camera batteries died and had to be frequently replaced. At one point, Tara was overcome with crying while her body was buzzing with a pins and needle electrical feeling. One of the psychics saw a sad man standing beside her. This spirit said something about a fire. A ghost cat has been known to jump on the beds of unsuspecting guests and many felt the cat that night. In one area of the building, a few people complained of pressure and pain in the chest. It was later confirmed that a visitor from the United States died of a heart attack in that exact location.

Orillia Opera House

This infamous reported haunted location built in 1895 has been written about in many books and has aired on several Canadian TV paranormal shows. The Haunted Barrie Meetup Group raised money for a local Children's Charity while doing an investigation here.

In the Gordon Lightfoot Theater, there are often reports of piano sounds when no one is there. Footsteps and disembodied voices are often heard in office areas and the basement which once served as a police station. Cold spots have also been reported in these places over the years. In the balcony a male presence has been seen and felt and another male figure has been seen peering out of the windows of the old sound booth.

On the night of the investigation, the investigative team taped the sound of footsteps in the change rooms. Quite a few people reported their hair being touched in the old sound booth. Objects would roll off tables and during an eerie ghost box session with a radio, they heard a young man say he worked at the opera house, fell down the elevator shaft and died in hospital. Tara claims it was a constant voice they heard, there were no random words but that was his actual message. It was later confirmed that a man who worked at the opera house did fall down the elevator shaft and later passed in the hospital of his injuries.

Historic Fort Willow

Historic Fort Willow is a reported hot spot for psychic activity. The fort was strategically located as a supply depot during the War of 1812. The Fort Willow area was also actively used for centuries by the native people, the fur trade and French explorers as part of a major transportation route known as the 9 Mile Portage. Recent restorations have located and outlined the buildings used by the

soldiers. It is believed that a head commander of the fort who went on a hunting trip and never came back may still be haunting Fort Willow. There is also the story of the young soldier who was flogged and hung for desertion who has been seen walking beneath the palisade and into the woods. Ghostly gun shots have also been heard in the fort. The night of the investigation, psychics picked up on two spirits and the smell of pipe smoke. They also heard the clanking together of tin plates and cups in the wooden structure that once housed the kitchen.

Taste of Freedom Inn

The Taste of Freedom Inn in the historic town of Tottenham was built in 1883 and was originally a bank. Its vaulted ceilings and the original vault still exist today. The Inn is joined to another building which is a dental office. Tara explains that the Haunted Barrie Meetup group was the very first investigation group of any kind to document and carry out an investigation here. Psychics picked up on 2 male spirits. An apparition in a red smoking jacket or housecoat was seen walking throughout the main floor of the Inn. This spirit was also seen in the adjoining hallway in the dental office area. In the past, one of the bankers used to make sure all the bedroom doors were locked just in case the bank was ever broken into at night. To this day guests hear the door handles rattle during the night and this was observed happening on the night of the investigation in one of the upstairs bedrooms as well.

South Simcoe Theater

One of Tara's favorite haunted sites is the South Simcoe Theater in Cookstown. The theater has been a landmark in the town since 1867, the year of Confederation. According to locals, the building originated somewhere near the fairgrounds and was moved to its present location during the 1920's. Over the years, the building has been used as a temperance and meeting hall, a dance hall and is still used today by the South Simcoe Theater.

Actors, actresses, stagehands and paranormal investigators have witnessed poltergeist activity, heard voices and have seen apparitions over the many years the theater has been open. During the investigation of the Haunted Barrie Meetup Group, they were able to capture several EVP's which contained quite clear disembodied voices and sounds. They picked up whispering in the sound booth area and there was also physical contact reported by two seasoned investigators. On audio, they heard a child giggling and whistling. A recorder in the basement picked up piano music which no one heard in the building until they listened to the recording the next day. Jeff and another member of the team were in the booth when they both saw a shadow figure walk across the stage. Another member of the group saw a female shadow figure on the back stairs behind the stage. While Tara was sitting in the theater audience seats with a psychic, she felt something or someone walk around her. She then felt a touch on her shoulder and nearly jumped out of her chair when she felt a hand put pressure on her knee. The psychic sitting beside her was able to confirm a male energy, "He wants you to pay attention to him and confirm for everyone he is right there?".

To learn more about the Haunted Barrie Meetup Group or to join as a member or if you suspect you have a ghost in your house and want it investigated, check out jeffostrander.com on the web.

The Toronto/Ontario Ghosts and Hauntings Research Society have listed several more haunted hot spots in Simcoe County. Among the sites listed are the Collingwood Caves, known to be haunted by a native woman who took her own life after her lover was killed by her tribe.

Discovery Harbour in Penetanguishene is home to 3 ghostly soldiers. Private Drury was a soldier who froze to death while standing duty on a bitterly cold night and brothers John and Samuel McGarraty of the 79th Foot died on a march from Barrie to Penetanguishene in 1831. All three have been reported at the Harbour.

Sainte-Marie among the Hurons in Midland is said to be haunted by Etienne Brule, a French explorer who was killed by the natives in 1633.

The Stephen Leacock Memorial Home in Orillia is said to be haunted by the writer himself and his troubled son who causes a feeling of foreboding and unease. His son's dark presence is especially felt upstairs in his former bedroom.

St. Columbkille Church in Orillia is said to be haunted by the ghost of Father Henry McPhillips who died in 1897. The organ in the church is heard to play by itself when no one is there. Candlelight is also seen flickering in the windows on dark stormy nights.

The Thornton Village Inn is said to be haunted by a woman guest who was killed by her physically abusive husband when they were staying at the Inn in the 19th century. Her battered, broken and lifeless body was found lying at the foot of the stairs. She still haunts the second floor of the building to this day.

The Chestnut Inn in Innisfil, which was recently the Princely Pear Tea Room, is reported to be haunted by a woman named Catherine who is dressed in black, a little girl and a man who once lived in the basement. All three have been seen in the upstairs windows. Some mediums have reported more than 35 spirits in this very haunted location.

Finally, Barrie's Simcoe Hotel is reported to be haunted by Elizabeth Meyer, a woman who froze to death outside the hotel on a bitterly cold night in the winter of 1872 after a night of heavy drinking. Her corpse was brought into the hotel by the coroner and apparently she has never left.

The Ghost Girls of Simcoe County, shown on Rogers TV, investigated four more haunted sites in our region with the help of Deborah Johnson who is a popular local medium. The Meaford Museum in Meaford is said to be haunted by three spirits. The first is a shy, depressed young gentleman who avoids contact with people. Another portly gentleman continually searches for his missing pipe and a young woman in a blue and white Victorian dress with brunette hair haunts the upstairs attic where she is often heard walking around.

Mylar and Loreta's Restaurant in Singhampton is haunted by the original owner Mylar himself. He frequents the bar area and the dining room where he moves cutlery and chairs around. It is also haunted by an older woman and young girl.

The Coldwater Canadian Heritage Museum is haunted by the ghost of Archibald Woodrow who appears to look out of the upstairs windows of his old home. It is also haunted by the spirit of a young child who likes to play with the radio.

Finally, the S.S. Keewatin, docked in Port McNicholl, is a century old ship haunted by at least three spirits. There is a lady in a long dress who dances in the ballroom at dusk. There is a young man in a crumpled suit who likes to run along the upper deck. There is also a distressed officer who has been seen and heard making noises in the dining room.

It is my hope that this article has provided ghost enthusiasts with a list of local, public and haunted historic sites to explore in this county. I wish you many happy hours of ghost hunting ?

By Cate Crow