

this town has spirit

DO YOU DARE TAKE A HALLOWEEN-WORTHY WEEKEND TRIP TO HISTORICAL MEMPHIS TO INVESTIGATE ITS INFAMOUS GHOST SCENE?

BY KRISTIN LUNA

I've never seen *The Exorcist*. The previews of *Alien* alone were enough to ignite nightmares. In fact, I'm such a scaredy-cat that I eschew horror movies entirely in favor of romantic comedies and superhero flicks. (I like a happy ending.) Yet, when I went to Memphis last year and heard about the city's haunted past, my curiosity trumped fear and I set out in search of a dose of living—or, in this case, dead—history.

Elvis may be the most famous ghost in town, but he's definitely not the only one. With both the Civil War and a lethal yellow fever epidemic claiming the lives of thousands in the 19th century, much of the 1800s in Memphis was beset by tragedy. And hand

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in hand with tragedy come spirits who opt not to cross over into the "other world."

After spending my first afternoon taking the trolley up and down Main, I made my first pit stop: Earnestine & Hazel's (901-523-9754), a well-known dive in the South Main district, where owner Russell George was manning the bar. The place was nearly empty that mid-afternoon, so I sidled up to a stool, ordered a beer and hoped to make a new friend. I gained more than a friend: Russell offered me the oral history of his beloved watering hole. Through the decades, Earnestine & Hazel's has worn many hats: brothel, dance hall, blues joint, movie set and, now, reported stomping ground for ghosts. Upstairs, in the old brothel quarters, they say you might spy apparitions—unless they're downstairs having a drink. If the stories are true, you may not even have to leave the main bar to find paranormal activity: The "haunted jukebox" is known for playing songs that are applicable to patrons' conversations. The bar has started offering ghost tours, when staff are more than willing to share their supernatural encounters.

Sure, the ghosts here aren't known for being unfriendly, but the hair on my arms was still standing on end when I exited the establishment. It was an overcast and chilly day, and remnants of last week's snow still sat in dirty, discarded piles on the side of the road. It seemed the perfect day for a peek inside the Orpheum Theatre (901-525-7800; orpheummemphis.com), where the ornate interior evokes images of *The Phantom of the Opera* and its most famous resident is a weepy little girl named Mary. Mary's sobs often can be heard ringing through the empty theater, and some claim to have seen apparitions of her nightgown, too. A series of séances by a band of parapsychology students revealed that Mary was a vaudevillian back in the 1920s whose love of the theater brought her to the Orpheum to stay after she died in a tragic accident.

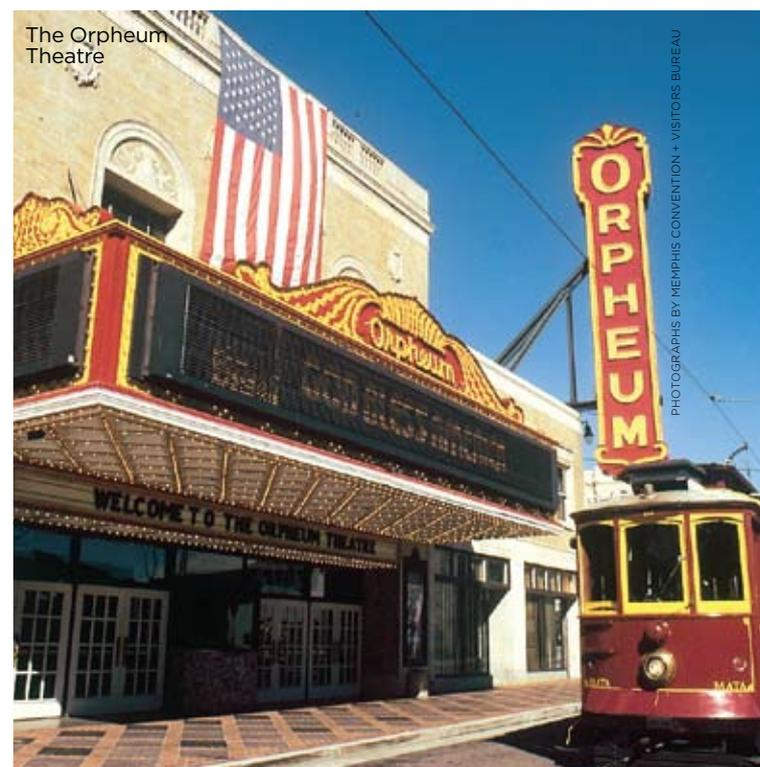
I started my next morning down by the Mississippi River at the National Ornamental Metal Museum for a break from the spooks—only to find that it, too, was reportedly haunted. The oldest building on the grounds was formerly part of the Marine Hospital, and many still working there avoid stepping foot in the basement where the old morgue once saw hundreds of yellow fever victims in the 1880s. Some of those victims are still said to be "present" today.

Since I was already on a roll—and my adrenaline was substantially heightened—I figured I might as well pay a visit to the Woodruff-Fontaine House next. Located on what once was called Millionaire's Row, the Woodruff-Fontaine House is an impressive mansion that was commissioned by carriage maker Amos Woodruff in

Woodruff-Fontaine House



The Inn at Hunt Phelan



The Orpheum Theatre

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1871. One of the family's children, Mollie, lived in the house after she married, and her first baby fell ill and died soon after being born in the second-floor bedroom. Later, her husband also passed away in the bedroom; then, after marrying for a second time, she had another baby who died as well. Poor Mollie passed away in 1917, but guests say they can still hear her sobbing in that cursed room, and on more than one occasion she has been spotted in 19th-century garb, rocking back and forth in a chair in the old mansion. Psychics have run diagnostics on the room and not only could pick her out in a lineup afterward, but also were able to describe her outfit—with no chance of ever seeing it beforehand. Eerie!

Another Victorian home, the Blackwell House (*Sycamore View Road, Bartlett*), out in the suburb of Bartlett, has a pair of resident ghosts who roam the premises in their Sunday best, turning on lamps after they'd already been turned off for the night.

The famed Elmwood Cemetery was a bit of a drive out of the city's center, but worth the trip. Roughly half of the victims from the yellow fever epidemic of 1878—an estimated 5,000 locals—are buried here, as well as

more than 1,000 Confederate soldiers. The winter temperatures and gray skies provided a sufficiently spooky setting as I ventured out into the Lenox Circle to spy the four "gentleman ghosts" who inhabit these parts.

After a long day of chasing the dead, I retired to my accommodations for the evening: The Inn at Hunt Phelan. However, it was hardly the end to my haunted happenings. The restored antebellum mansion was built in 1828 and is most noted for being a stop on the Underground Railroad and a soldiers' refuge during the Civil War. Union General Ulysses S. Grant even mapped out the Siege of Vicksburg from the front parlor of the home. Scuffs and imprints from the soldiers' spurs still can be seen on the aging wooden staircase.

But it's not Grant or even the army who roam these grounds in the afterlife. The Hunts abandoned their beloved home in the 1870s when yellow fever was at its pinnacle. The story goes that they entrusted a valuable treasure to their servant Nathan Wilson, who died guarding the whereabouts of its locale. Some visitors to the inn claim to have seen Nathan's ghost appear to them in an attempt to point them toward the treasure's burial spot.

Although the house has its fair share of history—and haunts—a \$1 million renovation has made it the most comfortable stay in town, while maintaining its historical attributes. I had a nightcap in the bar—whiskey, since I was in Tennessee, after all—before returning to my room for a peaceful evening beneath a colorfully lavish hand-painted ceiling mural. I slept incredibly soundly, and dreamt of friendly ghosts. **V**



Blackwell House



Elmwood Cemetery

Need to Know

What to see and where to stay in Memphis

ORNATE METAL

The National Ornamental Metal Museum and its exhibits are open every day except Monday. Tours are available with a two-week notice. 901-774-6380; metalmuseum.org



HAUNTED HISTORY

Elmwood Cemetery has 90-minute, docent-led tours every Saturday at 10:30 AM, except during October, when they will be held on Friday nights at 5:30 PM. 901-774-3212; elmwoodcemetery.org



ANTEBELLUM COMFORT

The Inn at Hunt Phelan's 10 cozy rooms all include Wi-Fi, TV, a four-poster bed, Molton Brown bath products, hot or Continental breakfast and gated parking; some have whirlpool tubs. There's also an on-site restaurant and bar. 901-525-8225; huntphelan.com



GHOSTS AND BEYOND

Woodruff-Fontaine House hosts group tours, teas, parties and occasional ghost tours. 901-526-1469; woodruff-fontaine.com

