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Abingdon, VA 32° Feels Like: 32° Clear

Owner Of Tavern: “By Midnight, We Try To Be Outta Here”



By Kelly Cales/TriCities.com

Haunt Masters Club investigator Toni Greenway uses a Electro Magnetic Field detector to gauge any energy in the first floor dining room of the Tavern in Abingdon, Va.

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By [KELLY CALES](#)

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Editor’s Note: In recognition of Halloween, multimedia intern Kelly Cales and a couple paranormal investigators spent the night in the old Tavern Restaurant in Abingdon, to explore the 229-year-old building’s ghost stories.

ABINGDON, Va. – The lure of the old Tavern Restaurant in Abingdon is more than the cuisine.

Two centuries of history reveal broken love stories, murdered call girls and wounded Civil War soldiers gracing the building’s threshold. But the stories are more than tales shared from one generation to the next: They’re in the sights and sounds that restaurant owner Max Hermann and his staff say they experience on a regular basis.

Server and bartender Amy Jo Stilner tells one about the time she was cutting bread with another server.

“There was a whole loaf of bread that was wrapped up and it just projectile flew at her – it was the craziest thing I’ve ever seen,” Stilner said. “It’s like someone pushed it.”

Many employees will work together at the end of the night, to avoid being alone.

“You’ll hear something in the other rooms, and it’s like someone’s there but no one’s here,” said cook Scott Surver. “Ghosts,” he said.

And few like to stay much beyond the restaurant’s 5 to 10 p.m. operating hours.

“We own this building from about 8 a.m. ‘til midnight. By midnight, we try to be outta here,” said Hermann, who has owned the building for 15 years.

Recently, though, Hermann gave after-hours access to this reporter and a couple of members of the Haunt Master Club, a Tri-Cities-based group that researches paranormal activities.

The evening began with five investigators from the club setting up their equipment in the third-floor attic. Laptops, cameras and a slew of cords and other devices were placed strategically in the attic and throughout the three-story building.

Built in 1779, the Tavern is the oldest building in Abingdon. It has uneven floors, creaky stairs and jagged doors that could cause misleading, even

mysterious, sounds. And coupled with the building's colorful history there is little surprise that its past and present are full of ghost stories.

Over the past two centuries, the building has taken on many identities: bakery, bank, tavern, post office, barber shop, private residence, general store and antique shop. Most notably, the third-floor attic once served as a hospital for wounded Union and Confederate soldiers during the Civil War.

"According to the stories of the building, a lady of the evening got murdered right here in this room," Hermann said, referring to one of the dining rooms on the second floor during a tour of the place.

According to local legend, the spirit of a prostitute, now known as the "Tavern Tart," can be seen peering out of the second-floor window in the middle of the night, usually around 2 a.m.

The most active of the spirits is believed to be that of Capt. Gordon William Rife, who was shot on the grounds of the Tavern. As the story goes, Rife was caught cheating with another man's wife in the building when it served as a hotel. He was shot and killed by the vengeful husband. Pictures of both men remain on a wall at the Tavern.

Other lore includes that of a man shot and killed after being caught cheating at poker.

Skeptical that we would find any proof of paranormal, I enlisted the help of the Haunt Masters with the hope of debunking or even verifying the stories. Yet after a full night in the building, and reviewing the investigators' evidence, I'm still trying to make sense of inexplicable things.

Formed in 2003, the Haunt Masters Club includes both believers and firm skeptics, according to its Web site, who have extensive experience in both paranormal and historical research. That night at the Tavern, as the group members performed base temperature and electromagnetic field or EMF readings, everything seemed typical.

The investigators check temperature fluctuations because it is believed that spirit incarnations affect the air around them and cause changes in air density and temperature.

The EMF detector measures electromagnetic energy possibly given off by spirits.

Then, a few minutes after midnight, the group began electronic voice phenomena or EVP readings using a simple tape recorder. They use the recordings to capture voices that would otherwise be inaudible to the human ear.

During the first EVP session in the Tavern's attic, nothing out of the ordinary developed. But as we moved downstairs to the second floor, strange things did seem to happen. In one of the dining rooms, group members heard whispering coming from the next room, and a loud thumping downstairs.

"Can you give us a sign of your presence?" investigator Toni Greenway said repeatedly.

The noises from downstairs grew louder, and investigator Justin Guess ventured downstairs to be sure the building was secure and no one had entered or exited.

"We've already checked downstairs and in the other rooms and there's nobody else in the building except us, and we we're all in the same room," Greenway said. Later, she described the voices as muffled.

"It was more like a whispering noise than like a conversation going on," she said.

When the investigative crew left around 3:30 a.m., I chose to stay, to see if I could make it through the remaining early morning hours without becoming too uncontrollably scared. For the rest of the morning, I sat in the attic on a single makeshift bed.

Though I heard odd creaks and noises, I refused to let my mind settle on something supernatural as the source. I called my mother and sisters to add a sense of normalcy to my surroundings.

Around 6:30 a.m., Hermann came by to see if I was still there.

For the next five days, the Haunt Masters Club members combed through the hours of audio and video recordings they'd collected at the Tavern.

On the video from the first floor they'd captured a moment in which a chair moved – unassisted – in a quake-like fashion on the floor. That event was logged at 3 a.m., a time when no one was in the room, and just a half hour before I was left alone in the attic.

Two investigators were in the room next door at 3 a.m. and acknowledged that no one was in the room where the chair was.

Also, discovered in the hours of audiotapes, there were three EVP recordings, interpreted by the investigators as saying: "Pretty upset when I saw that," "not gone yet," and "go forth."

Are the voices real or a case of overactive imaginations?

I was there and am still uncertain.

Hermann said he, too, has no answers, but he acknowledges there is some unexplained activity.

"I have learned over the years to respect what's happening in this building," Hermann said. "We have never had nothing bad happen ... All the spirits in here seem to like us."

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