County’s Past Was Spirited

St. Charles County

St. Charles County residents in search of some good ghost stories to trade around the campfire this summer don’t have far to look. They have ghosts galore right in their own back yards.

Some of the phantoms are practically famous. Others are downright legendary. And now, thanks to a book on this area’s spirited past, even some of the more anonymous apparitions are unknown no more.

"Haunted Odyssey: Ghostly Tales of the Mississippi Valley," is an $8.95 soft-cover compendium which was published by Ste. Anne’s Press last October. The book is exactly what its title implies: the story of one man’s search for tales of the supernatural.

The author is St. Louis native Jim Longo, a teacher, learning counselor, coach — and story-teller par excellence. He lives in University City and teaches at Meramec Community College and at Maryville College.

His interest in things that go-bump in the night was sparked by a ghostly encounter of his own during a childhood game of hide-and-seek. That meeting, which he describes in the introduction of his book, became the first in a treasure trove of tales that he has since collected.

For a while, his stories served merely as a way to amuse youngsters at the summer camps in Missouri, Michigan and New Hampshire, where he has worked as both counselor and director. Then, he read a magazine article that said St. Louis had no good ghost stories.

"Longo, of course, knew better. But when he went to the library for a book to prove his point, he could not find one.

"So," he said in his office at Learning Consultants in Clayton. "I wrote it.

Longo’s four-year search took him to both sides of the Mississippi River, from Hannibal to Cape Girardeau, with enough stops in St. Charles County to earn it a chapter all its own.

"Oh, yes. St. Louis has a lot of stories," said Longo, citing the great tradition of supernatural story telling among the early pioneers of this region. "Some of them go back a long, long time — back to the Indian legends.

He mentioned in particular an Indian ghost named Motauk, who supposedly lived in the woods along the river bluffs. When children got lost in the woods, he said, Motauk would lead them to safety.

Has Motauk been seen in modern times? Not by anyone Longo talked with, although one of the people he interviewed remembered hearing about the friendly Indian guide from playmates who claimed to have seen him.

Among the more well-known

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ghosts, the ones that first drew Longo to St. Charles County, are Rebecca Boone, Daniel’s wife, “who supposedly haunts the road near her grave in Defiance.” Another is murdered abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy, whose spirit is said to walk St. Charles’ historic Main Street.

Try as he might, however, Longo never found anyone who had seen either of those elusive spirits.

Ambler claimed to know somebody who had,” he wrote in his book. “They just couldn’t give me their names.”

The one name he did get was that of Henry Evans, a St. Charles native then living in South St. Louis. Evans’ family could trace its history back through many generations in the area, and most of the ghostly tales in the book’s St. Charles chapter are based on Evans’ remembrances.

Many were tales he had heard from his mother, who came from an old German family in Harvester, although Evans claimed his family home on Boonslick Road in St. Charles had a haunting of its own—a long-gone Dutch cook who still watched over the house where he used to work.

Probably the most famous haunted house in St. Charles, Longo said, was the old Poinsett home on Jefferson Street. Among the spirits said to inhabit it was a former slave who had hanged herself upstairs, and a sailor killed in the Civil War.

Rumored to be the scene of “unbelievably terrible” noises at night, the house was vacant more than it was occupied and was finally torn down in 1963 to make room for the St. Charles Post Office.

Longo’s talks with students at nearby Lindenwood College provided him with stories of the school’s pioneer founder, Mary Easton Sibley, who is buried near Sibley Hall, the scene of her hauntings.

The most frequently cited occurrences are the lights that appear in parts of the building that are always locked and never used. And Longo quotes one Lindenwood alumna who blames her weak heart on a run-in with the departed Mrs. Sibley one Halloween night.

Mary Elizabeth Ambler of Kirkwood, Lindenwood College’s archivist, says that ghost tales abound about the ghost of Mrs. Sibley.

“Students say that Mrs. Sibley played the organ in the chapel after her death,” Ambler said. “Maybe a pedal got stuck, but an eerie sound would come from chapel in the middle of the night, or at least what the story is.”

Another tale is that Mrs. Sibley would rise from her grave on Halloween, Ambler said.

“Probably it is some girl dressed in white who runs across the campus at night,” she noted. People talk about a girl student who hanged herself in the attic of Sibley Hall after earning that her lover had been killed in the Civil War, Ambler said.

In the fall of 1979, Longo was asked to conduct a ghost tour of the school.

“Or, consider these tales, Ambler said.

“People who have lived in Sibley Hall say they feel a cold breeze sometimes, even when all the windows were shut. And one man said he had been climbing the steps in the hall when he fell backwards, but something caught him and stopped him from falling.”

While the ghost of Mrs. Sibley apparently is a homebody, other apparitions in St. Charles County seem less attached to their haunting grounds, as evidenced by the tale told by a blacksmith in Augusta. When an unidentified man and his family in Longo’s book moved from their farm in the Femme Osage Valley, the smithing spirit moved right along with them.

As for how Longo explains all the unexplained tales he has heard, he doesn’t. “I take no positions in the book,” he said. “I just share the stories.”

While he really isn’t sure himself what to make of all the strange stories, he is convinced that the people who shared them are “honest people who sincerely believe what they’re saying.”

Although the author has no immediate plans for another “Haunted Odyssey,” he has no shortage of stories to start tracking down, many of them, again, from St. Charles County.

A talk he gave not long ago at the Kathryn M. Linenman Branch of the St. Charles City-County Library drew more than 100 listeners, a lot of them with ghostly tales of their own.

“I got so many names and phone numbers, it’s going to take a while to get back to everyone. But I will,” he vowed.