

Witness of the Spirit

An unusual, flowery description of a ghostly setting
from Dr. John H. Lemon's writings, which can be read in its entirety at
"Don't Know Much About History: City of New Albany and Early History".

On the left going west from the old tollgate opposite the Briggs Spring stands the very old "Haunted House," so known for many years. Many years ago a peddler was seen to enter but was never seen again. The place, in the difficult tangle of roads, especially at night, seemed to me, as I rode past, a proper place for a ghost to live.

Silent old John Royer was an old-timer of pure blood. My father and his grandfather were leftovers of the bloody-border of Pigeon Roost. His grandfather put John under my father's care, and in Bloomington College for several years. He was paralyzed in one side. The faculty were kind and only expected punctual attendance. John Royer was a genius in history. The faculty sometimes exacted a summary of pioneer memorable events, and essay, and his was so fine that he was let off from other recitation.

John, when he had eaten his small dole of inheritance, and his kinfolk were dead, browsed here and there. Sleeping in a contributed nook – in Shrader's or other hayloft. Someone told him he could stay in the Haunted House. So he made a fire in the wide, deep fireplace, gathered sticks of wood. He found an iron fire screen. He doubled this over and sat on it in front of his fire. He had a narrow, thick mattress and a blanket, and slept sweetly. He did not get up to replenish the fire, but reached back and threw sticks over the two-foot-high screen into the fireplace. The room was empty, only the great sloping cellar door in the corner. On a night of lightning, thunder and rocking wind, the heavy door blew open, the cellar door banged open against the wall, a large black dog, or whatever it was, ran down in the cellar, and the black dog, or whatever it was – like the peddler of many years before – was seen no more.

John Royer was pious and religious by nature, and contented. It was a wonder what he had to be content!

I went to [see] him in his little narrow house in George Shrader's morgue. They had given him a nice new black coat, and had fixed the fallen side of his face, so that it looked like the other side. He appeared the happy, dark-faced boy of 17 again. I had asked him about the black dog, or whatever it was. He explained that probably a stray, storm driven, seeing a light, had crouched by the door and a gust of wind from the north turning back in the room, had driven the front door in and sucked the cellar door open, and the dog ran in and down into the cellar. The next gust of wind closed all doors.

The Haunted House was always the same silent, deserted place, sometimes, more often in long, dry, hot August there would be sheet lightning quivering low along the north and northwest too far away to hear the thunder. The rooms were seen lighted in a flickering way, yet vacant. There are real ghost nights.

A still, soft June night with a thin curtain over the moon, or a circle or black cloud over the moon for an [instant], there was something about such a night that my horse, quiet, plodding, brave creature he was, he saw, or felt something; he snorted, stiffened his ears, broke into a shiver as we passed this house. He had seen a ghost, perhaps a horse ghost. People say horses can see a ghost, hesitating at the stable door, booing at something in there in the dark.

I left the State street pike at 8 p.m. to pass the Haunted House to see a man who had to have a physician that night. It seemed to start out to be a ghost night. Heat lightning quivered and on the inside back wall of the front room figures appeared, too indistinct to define, only that they trembled and disappeared with the flash. Little whirlwinds gathered straws and dust and stole away around the corner. There was the ghost moon up there with its thin cloud veil and halo.

Everything went to help a ghost that night. I got behind the hill at 10 o'clock and remained until midnight. A thunderstorm shook earth and air, and passed by. The moon again sailed along, free of thin veil and halo, and the night now was washed and silent, the horse no longer booed as we came near the Haunted House. I confided in his sense of all being clear, but we were mistaken. A gust of wind came down the knob and a leftover or delayed troop of ghosts sprang from concealment on the south side of the house to meet us. It commenced with a tall, slender ghost peering around the southwest corner of the back of the house, dodging back, peeping again. Others came to peep around the corner, seemed bold, stayed to point fingers, reach out long, white arms.

The wind changed to southeast, and the white figures went wild, swishing in dance. As the wind came strong, a larger figure in white and dark and a broad, flat tam-o'-shanter hat came out and joined the troop. She bowed and bowed – all bowed – as the wind died. The performers stole behind the house.

Going past the Haunted House a few days afterward, I rode around back of the house, and found the whole company standing, prim and composed, against the back of the house.

They had changed their stage finery to every-day dress of elderbloom, now wind-torn, dust-bedraggled. I noticed a pile of half-rotted timber, joists and scantlings, had lain over a clump of elder bushes and held them bent down, and some one, looking for a sound piece of timber, had liberated the bent stalks. They had straightened up, and now in full bloom. The larger stalk

becoming stage manager, or perhaps lady star, with the temperamental knob wind for orchestra.

It was a great performance.

[Directions to the Haunted House – Go north on the State street to the old tollgate, the north end of old New Albany. Go west a few hundred yards. Down there on the left is the old Frank house, or the Haunted House. It is vacant. It has been vacant many years. It is the house a peddler went in and never came out; where John Royer saw the great black dog run down the cellar and never came up again; where white elder bushes peeped and bowed, and pointed white fingers and danced and swirled away.]

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