

# Haunted West Michigan

Whether or not you're a believer, everybody enjoys a good ghost story. If you're in the "spirit" for a few scary tales, start with some local lore.

BY KIMBERLY MONAGHAN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHNNY QUIRIN

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— Patricia Meyer

## The Ada witch

One can't say "haunted West Michigan" without hearing the story of the deadly love triangle that spawned the "Ada Witch." During the 1800s in the settlement of Ada, a young married woman would sneak out to meet her lover near the area now known as Seidman Park. One night when her husband followed and caught her in the arms of her lover, he started a fight, during which all three were killed.

"People have reported at various times seeing a woman in a long white dress walking along the roadside. When people draw close, she dissipates," said Deb Millhuff with the Ada Historical Society. "The legend goes that on a full hunter's moon, you see the woman. Sometimes she's alone and sometimes with both companions."

Stories place sightings near Honey Creek and Conservation Drive, or within a few

miles of the Findley Cemetery. Though the story has grown to include broken tombstones, sounds of a mysterious being taking flight and a ghostly reenactment of the fatal scene, the sightings live on.

## Felt family ghosts

Built in 1925 as a summer home for millionaire Dorr E. Felt and his family, the Felt Mansion in Saugatuck is home to many resident spirits.

"There are a lot of ghost stories about Felt Mansion," said Patricia Meyer, manager of the Felt Estate Restoration Project. "What is true is that Agnes Felt died here in the master bedroom six weeks after the house was completed. That happens to be the room where many things inexplicably happen."

One such incident occurred while Meyer was prepping the estate for the 2005 Christmas holiday. Each time she laid a decorative rug in Agnes' bedroom, she returned to find it crumpled and pushed aside. She and her assistant, alone in the house, decided to test the theory that something paranormal was afoot.

"We stayed downstairs within eyeshot of each other, then two hours later went back up to the room," Meyer said. "The rug was balled up and pushed into the adjoining sunroom. Needless to say, we left for the night."

Meyer had another encounter near the top-floor ballroom, now used for weddings and receptions. When she and a male visitor reached the top of the stairs, they saw a shadowy figure floating in the vestibule. Meyer and her guest wasted no time fleeing the building.

"He tore down four flights of steps and ran out the door," she said with laugh. "I quickly ran after him."



Felt Mansion



## Jack the lumberjack

The week before the Travel Channel planned to stop by The Grill House in Allegan to review the steaks, the establishment’s resident ghost, nicknamed Jack, started a ruckus. Patting and pulling on legs and feet, knocking on walls, tossing bar glasses, turning on faucets and televisions and lighting candles are all common occurrences when Jack makes his presence known. He’s called Jack because he’s believed to be the ghost of a lumberjack who was murdered in the taproom in 1847.

“Everyone who has seen him has described him exactly the same,” said owner Marcia Wagner. “Six feet tall, dark pants, white shirt, with dark hair. You never really see his facial features, but when he shows up in pictures, he is an image of a person,” she explained, referring to the proudly displayed image of the ghost captured by the Kalamazoo Gazette.

Built in 1836, The Grill House has been utilized as a boarding house, sawmill, stagecoach stop, tenement house and a private home to several eye witnesses of the ghost.

Jack seems loath to stray from the scene of his demise. “He’s always here,” said Wagner, “but we never know if he is going to be a good or bad mood.”

## Lost souls of Allegan jail

Built in 1906, the old jailhouse in Allegan has served as the area’s prison, been home to the local sheriff, the set for a movie, and more recently, a museum run by the Allegan Historical Society. A paranormal conference and several investigations have taken place on the property to find answers to unexplained activity that occurs there.

“There’s been some weird things that have happened here, such as hats being knocked off and other things,” said Brad Fisher, society president.

Filled with a myriad of antiques and relics, including the mast of the 1895 shipwrecked Chikora and posts marred with Civil



Above the layers of prison chambers are ladies’ and juveniles’ cells, an eerie confinement cell (complete with scarred padded walls) and an infirmary filled with voices and cries of the inmates who have died there.



Old Allegan Jail

War shrapnel, the Old Jail Museum offers fodder for ghostly lore. Above the layers of prison chambers are the ladies’ and juveniles’ cells, an eerie confinement cell (complete with scarred padded walls) and an infirmary filled with voices and cries of the inmates who have died there.

“Some groups that have done various investigations here have found photographic and audio evidence — in one of the cells, in particular,” explained Fisher.

## Bordello banshees

“They used to call this side of the tracks ‘Tickleville’ — most likely because this building was a bordello,” laughed Georgie Roth, owner of Georgie’s Consignment Shop in Ada.

Rumor has it that a man was murdered in the house, and although the details of his demise are foggy, it was enough to warrant an investigation by the West Michigan Ghost Hunter Society.

“They recorded a woman’s voice saying ‘spook house’ of all things,” said Roth. To be on the safe side, Georgie had a “cleaner” come into the building to coax any unwanted spirits out.

“I’ve never personally experienced anything paranormal but my husband refuses to be in the building alone,” she explained. “It creeps him out.”

## Heritage Hill haunts

“The Heritage Hill District has been classified as one of the most haunted neighborhoods in the country,” said Nicole Bray,

author and founder of the West Michigan Ghost Hunter Society. “Probably because over half the homes have claims of a haunting, and at last count there were roughly 1,300 homes.”

Frank Lloyd Wright’s Meyer May House and the Voigt House — both open to the public for tours — are rumored to be haunted.

“In the Voigt house parlor, everybody comments on the strange feelings they get in there,” said Bray about the reported eerie sensations, chest constrictions and nausea afflicting many visitors. “What’s even more interesting is the claims of a dark figure roaming around one of the upstairs bedrooms.”

One of the better known privately owned haunted houses is the Phillips mansion, built in 1864. Incidents include people being pushed or having their feet grabbed in the middle of the night. Others have seen balls of light flying through the house and dark figures moving about.

“James T. Phillips, who passed away in the mansion, is believed to be one of the apparitions,” said Bray. “One of my investigators experienced a very odd feeling as soon as she walked in. She said the air seemed heavier and it felt like you were being followed room to room.”

One possible source of the haunting is linked to a former owner, Dr. John Burleson, who purchased the estate in 1912. His daughter was into spiritualism and routinely performed séances and other occult-based activities rumored to have led to a devastating fire that drove the family from their home.

“Who knows how experienced she was,”





said Bray. “Perhaps she successfully brought forth entities still trapped in there.”

## Kirby House ghost

Maybe it’s the image of Leonetto Cappiolla’s grinning devil looming overhead or the barred stairway leading to a mysterious chain-locked door. Whatever the cause, the second floor of the Kirby House Grill in Grand Haven is a haven for haunted lore.

“When I started here, people would come up to me and say, ‘You’ve heard about Emily, haven’t you?’” said Tim Reilly, manager. “The main story is that after the building was built in the 1860’s as a hotel by the Kirby family, a young girl called Emily died by falling down the stairs.”

The legend has grown to include “Emily” banging on the basement walls, grabbing people’s arms and even shutting and locking doors.

Employees (who asked to remain anonymous) recounted first-hand experiences of lights turning on and off, a white cloud floating above the rafters, and a shadow moving swiftly around the bar and stairway.

“I don’t believe the claims,” said Reilly, “But now that I’ve heard the story, there’s a lot of times when I’m closing at night, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.”

## Little Boy Lowe

Not only does it house the administrative offices for Aquinas College, the Holmdene house, built in 1905 by Edward Lowe, also harbors many mysteries. Everything from a



The Holmdene House  
at Aquinas College

child’s cry to sightings of apparitions climbing the stairs make up the stories shared by students and staff.

“There’s a lot of folklore surrounding this building,” said Gary Eberle, professor of English and author of “Haunted Houses of Grand Rapids.”

“The most popular legend is tied to the elevator, which seems to operate with a mind of its own. The students believe that one of the Lowe children fell down an elevator shaft and died here, and now he haunts the property roaming around in a little World War Two army suit. They hear voices, and although no one is in the elevator, it will move or the doors will slam shut.”

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