

Downtown Haunts

Nine Phantasmal Locomes Await Your Investigation

BY MICHAEL IMLAY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Rumor has it the City of Angels is also a city of ghosts. Nowhere is this more true, it seems, than Downtown, where the rich history and vintage buildings brim with ghostlore. From the founding spot of modern Downtown to the center of government to a few spooky ho-

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tels, the area is ripe for haunted happenings. Halloween, of course, causes many people to turn their attention toward the paranormal. However Diane Melvin, president of the San Gabriel Valley Paranormal Researchers, says there is no specific "ghost-hunting season."

"The holiday really has no bearing on whether a place is more haunted versus another time," says Melvin, who prefers the term paranormal investigation to ghost hunting. Nor are ghosts exclusively creatures of the night.

"People tend to notice things more in the evening only because it's a quiet time," she says, "but if a location is haunted, it doesn't really matter whether it's day, night, morning or whatever."

No matter when you decide to brave a real-life encounter with the dead, Melvin agrees the shadowy legends surrounding Downtown offer useful leads. But before chasing them down, beware: Even true believers approach these tales with a grain of salt.

"In some cases we find ghostlore very reliable," Melvin says, "although many times there is additional information that has been added to the stories to make them more interesting. Separating fact from fiction can be difficult."

With that in mind, here's a quick guide to nine intriguing Downtown locales for lunchtime or after-hours exploration. Even if you don't strike ectoplasm, each offers a unique cultural spirit you're sure to enjoy.

El Pueblo/Olvera Street

Lively tourist mecca by day, deserted plaza by night. Well, not exactly. Approach the right insiders; they'll tell you the truly

frantic visitors come *after* closing. Before its 1930 makeover, L.A.'s birthplace fell into poverty and decadence. That may explain the restless footfalls, jostling furniture and lurid screams said to echo through the historic buildings. Hot spots include the firehouse, Simpson/Jones Building and La Golondrina, L.A.'s oldest Mexican restaurant, where manager Joseph Rubio says, "there have always been ghost stories." For more festive spirits, sip a frosty margarita or two at the plaza's colorful Day of the Dead celebration, Nov. 2. (622 N. Main St.)

Hotel Alexandria

Built in 1906 this once-posh hotel attracted presidents, royalty and the Hollywood elite through the 1920s. Although it's a voucher residence, several ghost hunting guides assert that long-departed visitors from the hotel's heyday are booking returns. The phantom register includes a dark lady in mourning dress and the immortal Rudolf Valentino, but for architectural fans, this building's most haunting legacy is the Tiffany-adorned Palm Court, a city historic-cultural landmark. (501 S. Spring St.)

City Hall

Paranormalists say a well-tailored man from a bygone century haunts the third-floor vestibule, accosting people on city business. The problem? City officials, archivists, building engineers, docents — no one seems to know the tale. Nor can anyone explain why such an antique apparition would roam a 1928 building. Then again, the magnificent rotunda, ornate corridors and period fixtures would attract anyone with fine taste. Consider also that these hallowed halls occupy the former site of an adobe townhouse built by Don Juan Temple in 1851. Hmmm. Looks like the perfect mystery for aspiring ghost hunters. (200 N. Spring St.)

Theater District

In the 1880s, Main Street boomed with opera houses. By the 1900s, a flood of Vaudeville stages, nickelodeons and lavish movie palaces was spilling onto Broadway. Sadly, after the 1940s, the curtain fell on the district. "Behind the locked doors, the ghosts have the run of the place," says Eric Lynxwiler, a Los Angeles Conservancy docent. In fact, nu-



photos by Gary Leonard
Among the Alexandria Hotel's ghostly visitors are a dark lady in mourning dress and Rudolph Valentino.

merous witnesses report chilling encounters with spirits reliving the glorious past in the few houses that remain, including the Orpheum, Tower and Palace. For a preview of these dramatic haunts, catch the Conservancy's weekend walking tour. (300-800 S. Broadway)

Variety Arts Center

This 10-story, 1926 Spanish Revival building once hosted the Friday Mornings Club, an enclave of Angeleno society wives. Boasting a sizable stage and ballroom, many believe the hall is frequented by the shadow of Pauline Fredericks, a big theatrical talent of the day. "She was the actress who opened the place," explains Magic Castle founder Milt Larsen, one of the center's former owners. "People would swear they'd see her on stage or just sitting there watching." The new management, however, says she seems to have taken a hiatus. (940 Figueroa St.)

Millennium Biltmore Hotel

Rumor is several otherworldly guests haunt this majestic hotel, which is currently marking its 80th anniversary. They include a young boy in the Crystal Ballroom, a former em-

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ployee, and a red-haired woman in a white Victorian dress making rounds in the basement. Equally macabre, Elizabeth Short, the famed Black Dahlia, was last sighted leaving the hotel before her death in 1947. While there are no reports of her ghost, you can retrace her steps through the richly de-

tailed halls and lobby, and imbibe a spirit named for her at the Gallery Bar. (506 S. Grand Ave.)

Bradbury Building

"Take Bradbury Building. It will make you famous." That was the message George Wyman supposedly received from his dead brother via a Ouija board. A mere draftsman, Wyman fretted over the architectural monument desired by millionaire Lewis Bradbury. But the Ouija was right: Sculpted in iron, marble and glass, the building's light and airy center court made Wyman an instant legend. Unfortunately, it was to be his only significant work. Worse, Bradbury died just months before the building's 1893 opening, proving the demon board really does have a twisted sense of humor. (304 S. Broadway)

Elysian Park

Part of the original Pueblo land grant, this civic retreat is the alleged haunt of a white-shrouded lady who peers and shrieks into the parked cars of young lovers before vanishing

into oblivion. Treasure hunters claim the early *pobladores* buried valuables amid these romantic bluffs and vistas for safekeeping. Does the prudish spirit keep vigil over a lost fortune? Frightened couples don't care to find out, but when they attempt a quick getaway, they discover their engines — like other things — rendered lifeless. (1880 Academy Dr.)

Cathedral High School

Ask an alumnus why the team moniker is The Phantoms. Here lies the site of Old Calvary, one of Los Angeles' first major cemeteries, which succeeded the small Plaza Churchyard around 1844. In the early 1900s, Old Calvary and its faithful departed were excavated for relocation several miles east of the river, clearing the way for this private school. Rumor has it, however, that not everyone made it to the new digs. Drive by for a peek, but no trespassing! (1253 Bishops Road at N. Broadway)

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Tips for Ghost Stalkers

How to Explore Downtown's Dark Side

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A frequent lecturer on the topic, paranormal investigator Diane Melvin has numerous tips for novices.

First, know what to look for. The most common phenomena associated with ghosts are odd sounds, moving

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objects, strange lights, eerie touches or sudden chills. "It's very rare to see a full apparition," says Melvin.

Next, know your spirits. There are several types of ghosts, ranging from intelligent spirits to poltergeists to residual hauntings.

"An intelligent spirit is generally someone who has passed on but hasn't crossed over yet; they're fully aware of what's going on," she explains.

By contrast, a residual haunting is not a true spirit but an "impression" of a strong emotion or event that's usually result from the distressed emotional projections of living persons.

Melvin's remaining tips are common sense:

- Keep an open, serious and observant mind, noting weather and other conditions.
- Be respectful of the living as well as the dead. Get permission when visiting private property and never intrude on people's sensitivities or spiritual beliefs.
- Avoid smoking, perfumes and colognes, which can mask the scents that sometimes accompany ghosts.
- Take plenty of pictures, and keep hair, fingers and other objects clear of the lens to avoid false images.

Above all, warns Melvin, avoid those Ouija boards. "People use them for games and stuff, but little do they know they're opening up a whole new world," she says.

Equip Yourself

For the merely curious, an open mind and simple powers of observation may be more than enough for a lively ghost hunt. However, truly dedicated investigators arm themselves with a few extras.

Here are some items they rely on:

- 35 mm SLR or Polaroid camera. (Digitals are considered unreliable.)
- High-8 camcorder, preferably with night vision.
- Any type of tape recorder to detect Electric Voice Phenomenon (EVP).
- Infrared thermometer for measuring cold spots.
- Portable motion detectors.
- Flashlights and extra batteries.
- Plenty of patience, fortitude and snacks.

If you're serious enough to invest in this type of equipment — not counting the snacks, of course — you should consider a workshop or "ghost tour" offered by experts like Melvin. A quick web search can also help unearth paranormal groups in your area.