

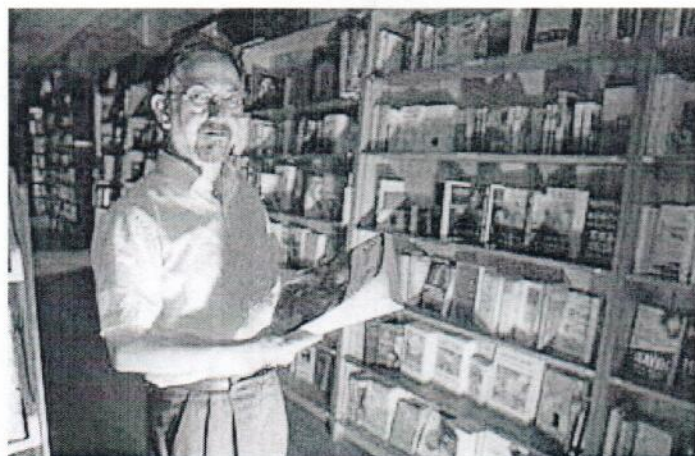
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Hunt for haunts

A skeptic inspects a few spooky sites in the bay area to pick apart tales and shed light on bumps in the night. But still, you may feel a little shiver up your spine if you visit them.

By TOM ZUCCO, Times Staff Writer

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[Times photo: Bill Serne]

Gary Posner, founder of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, holds a book in a section of Haslam's bookstore where books are said to fly from the shelves.

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Almost every city or town in America has some place people think is haunted. An old building, a cemetery, a brokerage firm . . .

It's no different in the bay area, as Bill Miller detailed in his 1997 book Tampa Triangle Dead Zone, noting dozens of stories of strange disappearances, unexplained voices and sounds, and other phenomena that either defy human understanding or are too disgusting for a family newspaper. And that's just at city council meetings.

In the interest of science, the St. Petersburg Times took a pre-Halloween visit to three of the area's most notable sites of reputed haunted or bizarre occurrences. Since it was getting dark, we didn't go alone.

Acting as interpreter, adviser and general voice of reason was Gary Posner, a Tampa physician, writer, and founder of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, an educational and scientific organization that since 1989 has offered \$1,000 to anyone who can "demonstrate any paranormal phenomenon under mutually agreed-upon observing conditions."

Several have tried. No one has pocketed the cash.

Posner wasn't out to debunk any of the "legends." After all, he said, people are free to believe whatever they want. He merely offered to provide a possible explanation and try to seek the truth.

And he wasn't doing anything else that night.

Haslam's Book Store, 2025 Central Ave., St. Petersburg

The building dates to at least the 1920s and contains more than 300,000 new and used books, some of which have reportedly flown off shelves. Most of the aerobic volumes took off from the metaphysical section. Several books by Jack Kerouac, the beat generation author who died in 1969, also apparently found the shelves unacceptable. Kerouac often visited Haslam's, which opened in 1933.

"We've had some odd occurrences in the store," said Haslam's co-owner Ray Hinst. "The temperature seems to change in certain spots, and books have flown off the shelves."

Hinst said a psychic recently went through the store with "little sensing things."

"She concluded spirits were around and one was Kerouac. He was restless . . . but comfortable."

Posner walked slowly up and down the metaphysical section.

"When objects fly across the room, that's usually the work of a poltergeist," he said. "As opposed to a ghost. Not that I can accurately define the difference. More often than not, the source is something like a troubled teenager who is seeking attention. I don't see any around here right now, so I don't think we'll see a poltergeist."

"People find great comfort in the belief that when you die, you live on forever with your loved ones," he added. "Once that is part of your reality, it's a tiny step to haunted houses and poltergeists and books flying across a room."

Don CeSar Beach Resort and Spa, 3400 Gulf Blvd., St. Pete Beach

The second, fifth and sixth floors of the Don CeSar are said to be haunted by the ghost of Thomas Rowe, who built the hotel in 1928. Staff have reported seeing an older man wearing a dark suit and (this is a nice touch) a Panama hat. The ghost of a nurse also has been seen, presumably because the Don was a convalescent center during World War II.

"About nine years ago, there were so many noise complaints that the general manager built a room for him (Rowe) in between the floors and asked him to please stay there because he was scaring the guests," said Michael Chagnon, director of sales and marketing. The hotel uses the ghost stories as a marketing tool, hosting haunted tours for \$10 per adult.

“It was early evening about three years ago and I was fixing a toilet in Room 616,” said Jon Flack, 31, an engineer at the hotel. “I heard a knock on the door. I said, ‘Come in.’ No one came in, so I opened the door and there was no one standing there. This happened about seven or eight times.”

His supervisor clued him in: “He said the sixth floor is one of the haunted floors and I probably experienced Thomas Rowe.”

Listening nearby, Posner wondered how a ghost, which has no physical form, could manage to knock on a door.

“Was it a loud knocking?” Posner asked.

“Normal,” Flack answered. “And I got to the door quick enough that I would’ve seen someone running.”

Posner crossed his arms and thought.

“I don’t know if the hotel has a vested interest in knowing that an employee would tell this story to hundreds of people. They could have had a confederate. Someone holding the door and hiding in the stairway.”

Flack told Posner about the haunted tours. His face lit up.

“I’m not accusing anybody of anything,” Posner said. “Maybe it was a ghost knocking on the door. But the Don CeSar has a vested financial interest in making me believe there is a ghost.

“Look, if he (Flack) is telling the truth, something was knocking over and over on the door. Either it was a dead person who no longer has a physical hand to knock with, or a living person.

“Call me close-minded, but somehow it makes more sense that a living person would make that noise than a dead person. But that’s just me.”

Don CeSar officials stand by Flack’s story.

1200 Cherry St. NE, St. Petersburg

The one-story cream-colored apartment building on the corner is a quiet place. Today. But in July 1951, when the building was known as the Allamanda Apartments, it was the focus of a national sensation.

Sometime early on July 2, Mary Hardy Reeser, 67, fell asleep in her easy chair in her small studio apartment. When firefighters broke down the door at 8 a.m., they found a modest pile of black ashes, a human skull the size of a teacup, and a slippered foot. Amazingly, the apartment had almost no fire damage. The FBI was brought in. No one heard a scream, the electric system was in good working order, and foul play was ruled out.

Among the explanations: spontaneous human combustion.

Posner knew the case. What people forget, he said, is that Reeser was a stout woman (she weighed 175 pounds), who had apparently taken a sleeping pill and then fallen asleep with a lighted cigarette. The chair's stuffing burned slowly, fueled by the melted body fat and a partially opened window.

"To call it spontaneous is ridiculous," Posner said.

As for the shrunken skull, Posner said a forensic anthropologist theorized that the skull probably burst in the fire and was destroyed, and the object found was the musculature of the neck where it attaches to the base of the skull.

Case closed.

So what do we believe? None of it? Some of it?

"I want to believe the truth, whatever the truth might happen to be," Posner said. "There are natural explanations for bumps in the night. I'm not saying it can't be a ghost. But there are other possible explanations."