

10/26/86

As Halloween nears, so do tales of Danbury-area ghosts

By Susan Guerrero
Assistant Sunday editor

Diane Domroe had been living in an old farmhouse in Bridgewater for about a year when a guest saw the ghost sitting on a sofa. Now, 10 years later, she says she has grown fond of the ghost, who keeps her company and infuses her house with a special warmth.

Melissa West moved into a house in New Milford that had not one but three ghosts. One, she says, was a child; another was a man whom she recognized when she saw him standing in the living room, because she had known him in life. A third did not make her presence known until West and some friends held a seance to help these "earthbound" spirits "ascend to the next plane."

John D. Herrick, assistant headmaster of The Gunnery in Washington moved into a cottage on campus this summer with a famous ghost — that of a barmaid murdered during the French and Indian Wars — but he hasn't seen or heard a thing. "My wife may have wondered about some of the noises," he says. "Maybe I'm just too tired at night."

Every town in New England seems to have what Mark McEachern of the Torrington Historical Society calls "at least one case of a supposed ghost inhabitant" and at this time of year, with Halloween around the corner, stories about them are told and retold over the traditional cups of cider.

In this area, which abuts "the Bermuda Triangle of the Northeast" — ghosthunter Ed Warren's name for the state's northwest corner — several stories are told and retold. They range from the tale of Dudleytown, an abandoned community near Cornwall, and a property in Kent said to be so haunted that Indians began to avoid it long before white men arrived in Connecticut — to other, more local and often, more pleasant, accounts of "private" ghosts like Domroe's.

People respond differently to these reports. Domroe and Melissa West are casual and cheerful about their ghosts, although West isn't the New Milford woman's real name. (For business reasons, she asked that her identity be disguised.)

Patricia St. John of Bridgewater, a psychic, recalls entering a haunted house in Fairfield County and delightedly watching her purse, so heavy that it "could deck a mugger at 30 feet," float through the air and a wrought-iron gate slowly close of its own accord. "It creaked and all that stuff. I loved it. Of course," she says with a laugh, "my idea of fun isn't everybody else's."

David O'Reilly, now a resident of New Jersey, experienced a summer of terror when he lived on a farm in New Milford. He and several roommates became so frightened of the various ghosts in the house that they abandoned their upstairs bedrooms and began sleeping in the living room. When one of the roommates reported being told by a ghost to leave, O'Reilly and the others fled. It was only after they consulted the I Ching, the Chinese book of divination, and came up with the hexagram for peace that they moved back in a week later.

Ray Tompkins, owner of a sports supply store on Newtown's Main Street that is said to be haunted by a disgruntled sea captain, doesn't believe a word of the legend. Almost every year including this one, he says, "PM Magazine," a television show, brings ghosthunters Ed and Lorraine Warren of Monroe to the store for a special Halloween broadcast. "The Warrens quiver and scare everyone," he says. "But I think it's a joke."

"If he is up there," he says, by "he" meaning the captain, who is said to reside in the attic, "I wish he'd come down — I'd put him to work, teach him to restring racquets or something."

Scott Jones founded the Center for Applied and Anomalous Research Phenomenon in Washington, D.C., in the hope of "getting the light of science" on ghosts. He can't prove it, but he believes the best available "evidence" — "put that in quotes," he says — indicates that they do exist.

"There is an unfortunate lack of science to this," says Jones, a retired Navy commander who is, in addition to being the center's founder, a special assistant to Sen. Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island. "But we do have a theory about what ghosts are. The theory is very simple."

"At the moment of death, assuming life is a continuum and that the spirit or soul does survive the transition from a physical plane to a spiritual plane, some circumstance causes confusion. The person dies suddenly, with no preparation or anticipation — he is a young person, or the victim of a violent crime. The surviving energy does not realize what happened and it sticks with what it knows."

In other words, the dead person does not realize he is dead, and stays on earth rather than ascending to the next plane.

"I say 'energy,'" Jones says, "but that's kind of a copout. Ghost is a legitimate term. It addresses the idea of an earthbound spirit. I only say energy to avoid controversy."

Our way of dealing with ghosts

and ghost stories, Jones says, suggests "something psychologically significant about how our culture handles the unknown. We trivialize ghosts, make them humorous."

"Halloween," he says, "is a ritual we have that allows us to safely acknowledge that maybe there is something out there. We acknowledge it by dressing up as ghosts and ghouls and going around saying 'Boo' to each other. But the bottom-line is fear, and how our culture handles or mishandles it, is death."

"Our culture has been rather shallow in addressing this issue. But we can't escape knowing about it; we have to come to some sort of understanding of it. Death is not good news, and we face it once a year, on Halloween."