

Wandering the Dark Path: A “How To” Spell for Creating a Wicked Walk

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Introduction

For centuries ghostly visitations warranted sidestepping lonely locales and avoiding gloomy haunted abodes. Nowadays, however, the mere hint of a disembodied whisper or the vague possibility of a floating severed-hand serves as an invitation, rather than a warning, to the curious. In fact, the curious are arriving in droves and eager to pay for the privilege of witnessing macabre settings. Welcome to the world of Dark History tours.

Since 2012, I have provided ‘Wicked Walks’ for the Barnum Museum in Bridgeport, Connecticut, United States. These leisurely haunted strolls wander throughout downtown and highlight library ghosts, experiments in reanimating the dead, the birthplace of the worldwide phenomenon known as Men in Black, unsolved Victorian-era murders, a bizarre Suicide Club, and a World War I statue that sheds tears (Bielawa 2012 and Bielawa 2005: 58–64). The walk offers something for everyone in the realm of the supernatural. Sadly, the most populated city in the state is less thought of in connection with the paranormal and more associated with its gritty, post-industrial, headlines about crime and corrupt elected officials.

Yet the fact remains that the Barnum Museum’s popular lantern-illuminated ambles cast quite a different light on the beleaguered city. Wicked Walks actively celebrates Bridgeport’s romantic past, unique architecture, and paranormal heritage. In turn, participants return home with an entirely different sort of shudder as well as a renewed perception of the truly wicked history of Bridgeport. Public opinion, which can foster a positive economic impact, is improving one Wicked Walker at a time. The spectrum of entertainment and educational elements being proffered by such haunted rambles should not be underestimated. Discussing the invaluable teaching potential of the supernatural, Michele M. Hanks notes, ‘...indeed, ghost tours

foreground the significance of learning about ghosts, the paranormal, and the past' (Hanks 2011: 129).

For those eager to celebrate their city's own Dark History by inaugurating haunted tours, allow me to provide you with a barebones (pardon the pun) how-to guide...

The Tales, First and Foremost

Stories of the supernatural occur practically everywhere. Hanks articulates in her work, *The Cultural Politics of Ghost Tourism, Populism and the Past*, that 'ghosts constitute a type of disembodied heritage' (2016: 15). The older the preserved history of one's locale, the greater chance for a spectral legacy of strange and tragic tales. That being said, the extent of a Dark History tour's supernatural stories weighs upon two factors: the conservation of indigenous legends from the area's earliest inhabitants, and the availability of a city's written history. To exhume the macabre, make libraries your go-to destination and, consult local town and city histories. If one is unfamiliar with these leather-bound treasures, commence searching the index for keywords such as 'legends,' 'ghosts,' pirates,' or the names of any infamous individuals or cults that may have resided in your chosen *genius loci*.

For hundreds of years newspapers were the best proprietors of the bizarre (some would say they still are, if reading political news). Many newspapers, dating back to the eighteenth century, are now available through databases. Not too long ago, before dailies and weeklies were indexed online, it was an overwhelming and onerous chore to scroll through thousands of spinning pages on clunky microfilm reading machines. Unheard of for generations of academics, technology now allows for the glowing celluloid pages, once restricted to microfilm, to be printed, emailed, or even captured in a photo taken with one's own cell phone. Yes, ghost hunting has become easier. If perchance you do not have access to any indices, jumpstart your research by going straight to the autumn issues of your newspaper. Perhaps as a result of the epic blockbuster movie, *The Exorcist* (1973), throughout the 1970s, New England dailies began a regular practice of highlighting local paranormal occurrences as Halloween celebrations

approached. However, remember to consult older editions as well. Scanning issues printed on the cusp of All Hallows' Eve will augment the odds of rediscovering an old mystery or an unsettling tidbit that had once been pounded out on an anvil-sized typewriter by an anonymous, cigar-chomping reporter well over one hundred years ago.

Dark History tour guides should consider interviewing knowledgeable individuals within the community. Local historical societies are a great source. Speaking with the members of these organizations can possibly lead to undocumented gems.

Stories can be recovered from seemingly unlikely sources, too. I always interview local police and fire officials. However, be advised that active first responders are reticent about divulging confidential work-related matters. Luckily, one police officer was forthcoming and freely spoke about their encounter with the unknown. Allow me to share the following apt, and macabre, example of just how valuable an interview weaves into a place's supernatural fabric.

During the latter half of the twentieth century in Stratford, Connecticut, (which borders on Bridgeport), urban legend was resplendent with stories about policemen witnessing bizarre events occurring inside the long-abandoned Phelps Mansion. Built in 1826, the Elm Street home's appearance invited comparisons with the plantation home, Tara, as depicted in the Academy Award winning film, *Gone with the Wind* (1939). The Stratford mansion was the scene of renown poltergeist activity, dubbed the Stratford Knockings, or Stratford Mysteries, which plagued Reverend Eliakim Phelps and his family during the spring and summer of 1850.¹

In 1982, I visited Stratford's police headquarters and introduced myself to a desk sergeant (police identities will remain anonymous). Inquiring about the Phelps Mansion, the officer informed me that I should make it my business to visit a certain, nearby, bait and tackle shop, on the Housatonic River, just a ten-minute drive away, and owned by a recently retired policeman. The desk sergeant behind the bulletproof glass stated that the retired officer, who was now a fulltime fisherman happened 'to be on duty the night *something* happened in the house.' My next stop would be on the banks of the Housatonic River. Upon knocking on the door, I found the former police officer examining a tangled cache of lures inside his dockside shack. Inviting me to take a seat across from him at his work bench, I commenced questioning the former policeman about the Phelps Mansion.

Following the massive home's use as a private residence, and later, as an assisted care facility in the late 1960s, the Phelps' place fell vacant. Sadly, due to its supernatural notoriety, the mansion was continually broken into and extensively vandalized. The building's deteriorated condition led to the historic house being razed in 1972, the vicinity now sports several ranch style homes. However, according to the testimony of the retired officer I interviewed, prior to being torn down, something very 'weird' inhabited the abandoned rooms of that Doric-columned mansion.

Sitting in his well-lit bait shop, I asked if the retired cop would detail his experiences inside the Phelps place. He obliged, and began to recount his supernatural tale: My partner and I were on special duty one night around Halloween, some years back. We were in our patrol car on Elm Street when we saw a light inside one of the upper floor windows of the abandoned mansion. The policeman continued:

The abandoned mansion was a magnet for teenagers looking for late night excitement. Too often kids were getting inside and wrecking the place or starting fires, so when we saw that light, we went in for a look around. We were surprised to find the front door wide open. The entrance was usually covered over and nailed shut to deter vandalism. We took our flashlights out and walked into the main hall. It was complete darkness. Cautiously we checked for trespassers; the way the mansion was laid-out, each floor had two separate sets of steps. Simultaneously we could each proceed up the stairs on opposite sides of the house, that way no one could run down the stairs and escape. Above us, on the second floor, we thought we heard something like a voice. But right away there was only an uneasy silence.

We walked slowly up the flight of stairs that opened onto a long gallery. Pointing our flashlights down the corridor, we peered into the dark. At the end of the hall, we suddenly saw something: the outline of a black figure. We couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, only that it was a black shape. All I could think was that the form resembled a monk, a monk in a cowl. I shouted, 'There he is!'

The figure moved slowly from one side of the hall toward a doorway on the opposite wall. Only it wasn't like it was walking. It looked as though it was *floating*. I asked my partner if he saw the same thing I did, a levitating black shape, and he replied, 'yes'. We

weren't sure if this was some kind of a joke or prank or if it was kids. We both called out, 'Halt' and 'Stop'. But the shape continued to move slowly into the room off of the hallway. There was something that we *felt* in the air, it was a feeling that there was something definitely wrong. We followed the *shape*, this black figure, quickly down the hall.

Whoever it was, we were sure that he or she was now trapped, there was only one entrance to the room this thing had entered. When we shined our beams of light inside, no one was there, the space measured about 12'x14', and there was no place to go, but we noticed another door, a closet. Now we were certain, whoever was in the house, we had the culprit cornered. But like I said, there was that feeling that something just wasn't right. Both of us stood, one on each side of the closed closet door. Nodding to one another, we had our weapons drawn... you never know, and there was that feeling we had. There was complete silence; I reached for the doorknob, twisted it, and whipped the door open. We pointed our lights inside. The closet was empty! It was beyond weird. Our minds couldn't comprehend what happened, we KNOW we saw someone enter that room! We got out of that abandoned mansion as fast as possible. (Bielawa 1982)

Once the story concluded and I returned to the bait shop interview, the policeman again gazed over my shoulder, picturing in his mind that strange memory he held of the Phelps' place. He jabbed a finger at the air in the direction of the long-gone haunted mansion. He proclaimed, 'I don't know what IT was doing in the mansion, or where IT went, or what IT was... but it is a true story. And to this day I don't know what it was that was in that house up there' (Bielawa 1982).

The above, dramatic interview, certainly far outweighs social media hauntings endlessly popping-up in chat groups. A certain romance exists within dusty books, little used microfilm reels tucked away on forgotten shelves, and personal interviews. The methodology of your ghost hunting is an enriching part of the tour's narrative. Share it with your Wicked Walkers.

Presentation

Costumes do *not* necessarily make a good ghost tour guide. Please wear whatever you feel is appropriate, comfortable and creates confidence. I traditionally don a fedora and carry a walking stick while draped in a cape. I enjoy wearing a Victorian style vest with a pocket watch attached to a long chain. This is a simple costume, but the sartorial arrangement sets a mood while augmenting the mystery and awe of the performance. It also separates the speaker from the crowd while casually casting the wearer outside the milieu of contemporary times. Fashion outlets such as the Historical Emporium offer fun and attractive clothing from a variety of periods. Like a seasoned magician's costume, antique outerwear provides the Dark History storyteller with a unique 'stage presence.'

As for accessories, I find a lantern to be an extremely useful tool. Totting a large glass enclosed candle helps to identify the guide and supplies a natural rallying point to encircle at each stop during stories. It becomes especially handy when crossing streets; waving a lantern in the middle of the road in downtown Bridgeport is quite a novelty. A lantern can smilingly halt vehicular traffic, which is necessary for escorting participants safely across the street.

While theatrics play an important role, enthusiasm and good storytelling delivered at evocative locales are what matter most. Gavin Weston, Justin Woodman, Helen Cornish and Natalie Djohari, observe, '...ghost walks operate differently to other forms of thanatourism as they embed memories, places and events through recounting spectral tales in narrative and experiential spaces that allow for tragedy to be dealt with in a less problematic way, and often explicit aims to entertain participants' (2019: 39). Emotional feelings will arise when airing stories about expressly egregious acts. By their very nature, gruesome crimes will always remain unsettlingly gory. But depicting heinous acts, such as a decapitation murder, which, in fact, is discussed during the Bridgeport ghost walk, can still be brought to light through the prism of time, combined with a dialog of compassion.

Group dynamics mark another important facet within a walking tour. The number of participants should be anticipated in advance and can be accomplished by employing an online, or phone, reservation requirement. Bridgeport's Wicked Walks are planned to accommodate 20-25 people. These smaller audiences make the ghost walk much more accessible. Speak loud enough to be heard, do not feel shy about asking if everyone can discern what you are saying. If necessary, employ a wireless mini-voice amplifier with a small portable speaker. Create a sense

of inclusion and engagement with your audience. When introducing a particularly spine-chilling tale, invite people to move closer with a beckoning hand gesture and an enticing comment, such as ‘this is a story I do not often share.’ Inquire about your fellow walkers’ thoughts and how they might explain a particular phenomenon (indicate that their opinions are important!). Small gestures matter, ask any parents in the group if it is permissible for their children to carry your candle-lit, or battery-powered, lantern.

I share historical photos and illustrations with the group, highlighting former streetscapes and individuals being discussed during the Wicked Walk; lacking these, photocopied and laminated newspaper headlines do nicely. I carry a pouch to transport these large pages. The old images frame and contextualize a site and humanize victims of traumatic situations by putting an actual face on folks from the past. Holding a picture makes a paranormal story eerily visceral.

Exceptional tour leaders are perspicacious and quick-witted. As Weston, Woodman, Cornish and Djohari, explain, ‘...humour can be deployed in ways that are contrary to the earnest tone of other thanatourism, even while ghosts are mostly attached to tragic and traumatic stories relating to “bad deaths”’ (Weston, et al. 2019: 39). Infrequently, a passerby might shout a mocking comment at the group or make a barbed remark toward the Dark History guide. Do not address the outsider. Allow the critic to pass and casually announce to your Wicked Walk attendees something inoffensive and humorous, to the effect of, ‘There is always one “Carl Sagan”, or “Amazing Randi”, out for a stroll’. Alternatively, in the face of blatant rudeness, you can simply tell your audience ‘Ahh. I remember my first beer, too.’

It is necessary to know the history of the neighborhood being toured. Without bludgeoning your fellow walkers with mundane facts, do highlight significant names and dates pertinent to the area. Touch upon the architectural features and details of the buildings along the route. Include information such as the year(s) of construction, noting relevant famous architects, and, when possible, some of the buildings’ previous owners. This lends the property a Poe-esque sense of reality to your ghostly legends. Vocalize any recent supernatural occurrences, as the slightest rumor lends itself to the audience mentally inventorying a site’s enchantment. Hard, historical data woven with macabre tales help dye the entire fabric to be believable.

To effectively incorporate the historical with the macabre it is extremely helpful to prepare an outline, or even a script, and create a list of points to be touched upon at each stop along the route. The presentation should flow, and not appear forced or contrived.

There is a strategy to mapping a stroll. First, consider distances between sites. Allow for an easy walk and keep the overall range manageable. Variety creates supernatural spice. Avoid simplistic, or repetitive narratives; for example, you visit different sites but recount similar poltergeist activity. If possible, pair your inventory of ghostly encounters with other strange phenomena including any local cryptid sightings and/or alien visitations. Not to make light of any tragedy, but a calamity or unsolved murder will lend a frighteningly realistic tone to a haunted walk. Bridgeport has been uncannily blessed, or cursed, with an assortment of paranormal events and I enjoy offering different tales with each year's Wicked Walk.

A note on recordkeeping: do yourself a favor by maintaining a list that includes the date and sites visited on each tour; this will definitely help in balancing locations and/or revising the route. I find such a roster especially helpful when the walks are provided annually, as memory can be fallible, or if you wish to introduce a new stop for any person(s) repeating the Wicked Walk.

I always remind walkers that they are taking part in both a ghost tour and an active paranormal investigation. This announcement, at the beginning of the tour, usually generates an additional level of excitement and anticipation. Therefore, I always invite walkers to take as many photographs as they wish and to utilize EMF Meters or EVP Recorders – used for detecting energy fluctuations and electronic voice phenomena, respectively – which they might have brought along for the hike. I do not allow video recording because the Wicked Walk could be broadcasted or find itself on the Internet; thus, the host loses control over material which they have researched and written, and it also diminishes the firsthand experience the real-world tour provides.

Dark History organizations often offer both day and night guided walks, with the former focusing on history, while guides for the latter provide tales highlighting the supernatural. However, ghost stories can be just as entertaining during daylight hours as in the dead of night, and sunny periods work better for strolls tailored to elementary school-age audiences or adult

walkers concerned about streets seeming too lonely; which leads us to a conversation about safety...

Safety and Partnerships

The welfare of all Wicked Walkers and their hosts during a haunted jaunt is of the utmost importance. Some ghost tours require a signed waiver regarding the possibility of an Entity following a participant back to their home.²¹ In this essay, I am discussing ‘safety’ as applied to this world’s physical realm. The slightest injury could ruin a tourist’s holiday. It would be a great misadventure if someone should fall or twist an ankle stepping off a curb. However, accidents do happen. Having a partnership with a museum, historical society, school, gallery, or municipality is vital with regard to insurance coverage. During one’s own time, the guide should become familiar with the physical trail in order to remind walkers about uneven pavement or curbs; also, it is best to avoid completely unlit areas.

Having a solid relationship with a bonified institution brings a sense of trust to individuals seeking a ghost tour. Any institutional partner’s brick and mortar facility, ideally located along the walking route, can provide an initial meeting place where introductions are made and refreshments served, as well as provide shelter should inclement weather suddenly occur. Use the space to take the opportunity to distribute pamphlets and information about the host institution, the guide’s biographical information, as well as to sell appropriate local history and paranormal books.

Marketing

The institutional partner, be it a museum, cultural attraction or school, should already have a media contact list in place. Prevailing social media must be included. Flyers announcing the date and time of the ghost tour posted in businesses, restaurants and pubs along the haunted route are optimal, especially if one of these enterprises happens to be a supernatural stop on the Wicked Walk.

Basic Checklist to Confront the Uncanny

*Lantern/Candles/Matches

*Cape/Cowl

*Walking Stick

*Fedora

*Victorian Vest

*Crucifix (for comfort and protection)

*Talismans/Necklaces (for Good Energy)

*Enlarged Laminated Images

*Pouch

The value of Bridgeport's Dark History tourism was addressed by Kathy Maher, Executive Director of the Barnum Museum, during a 14 November 2018 meeting of the Bridgeport Downtown Special Services District (DSSD). Sharing insights with the gathered arts, business, and elected officials, regarding the Museum's annual ghost tour event, Ms. Maher noted:

Over the years in which our Wicked Walks have flourished, the tour consistently brings guests from the local community, and even neighboring New York City, which is an hour train ride away. Individuals from Canada and even as distant as Australia have enjoyed these paranormal adventures. The program has prospered, and our Wicked Walkers make use of the amenities provided by Bridgeport's downtown attractions and restaurants. Our celebrated hauntings stimulate the regional economy and inspire curiosity for the mysteries that shadow these historic streets. (2018)

Maher succinctly captures how yesteryears' spirits are indeed far more than mere fleeting will o' the wisps. The museum's executive director notes exactly how ghosts from Bridgeport's past tangibly entice citizens of today's living world into visiting downtown. In so doing, paranormal activity energetically contributes to the community's wellbeing.

For centuries, cities around the globe harbored a hidden litany of shadow people, aliens, poltergeist manifestations and an array of paranormal activity. Where once a frightened public

shunned such terrifying experiences, today many are enamored with these same weird events. Dark History tours provide an entertaining and educational peek beyond the veil. By shining a lantern's light on these once volatile mists, audiences become acquainted with the romance, history, and heritage of a community. In searching for lost souls, Wicked Walks finds the soul of a city.

Endnotes

¹ The story of the Phelps Family's poltergeist has been extensively documented; the main sources can be traced to contemporary newspaper accounts. Some of the earliest histories of these weird phenomena appear in E.W. Capron, *Modern Spiritualism: Its Facts and Fanaticisms, Its Consistencies and Contradictions with an Appendix*, Boston: Bela Marsh, 1855; Charles Wyllys Elliott, *Mysteries; Or Glimpses of the Supernatural*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1852; and William R. Gordon, *A Three-Fold Test of Modern Spiritualism*, New York: Charles Scribner, 1856. An excellent modern recollection of the Phelps occurrences appears in William Howard Wilcoxson's chapter, 'The Stratford Knockings,' from his *History of Stratford, 1639-1939*, Stratford, Connecticut: Stratford Tercentenary Commission, 1939.

² Examples of such a waiver of liability are included in the Houston [Texas] Ghost Tour and the Athens [Georgia] Haunted History Tour websites: These tours 'are not responsible for damaged property, injury, or lost items relating in any way to the tours. We are not responsible for any ghosts or spirits or any other paranormal entity that may follow you home or be connected to you or frighten you in any way. By attending the tour, you agree that the [Houston Ghost Tour/Athens Haunted History Tour] is not responsible for trips, falls, possessions, injuries, animal bites, natural disasters, altercations between guests, vehicles, accidents, break-ins, robberies, assaults, or anything bad/negative that may happen during the tours.' See <https://athenshauntedhistory.com/book-a-tour/waiver-of-liability/> and the <https://houstonghosttour.com/refund-policy-and-disclaimers/>

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