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NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

New York's Haunted Bars

BY LIBBY TUCKER

Upstate and downstate, New Yorkers can find bars with reputations for being haunted. New York City has more haunted bars than any other metropolis, but there are haunted bars all over the state. Something about bars invites ghost stories, especially when the bar is in an old building. When people drink and hear stories about the dead, strange things may happen.

The association of alcohol with “seeing things” is an old one. A traditional cure for the common cold suggests that you can recover from your cold quickly if you have a four-poster bed, a top hat, and a bottle of whiskey: Put your top hat on one of the posts at the bottom of the bed, climb into bed, and start drinking. When you see a top hat on *both* bed-posts, you can go to sleep. The next morning, your cold will have vanished.

Both ghosts and alcohol are sometimes called “spirits,” and people have questioned whether seeing a ghost after having a few drinks constitutes a true supernatural experience. Is such an encounter actually a hallucination? While some hasten to say “yes,” others insist that bars are ideal places to find ghosts.

One of the most famous haunted bars of New York City is the White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street, where the celebrated poet Dylan Thomas enjoyed spending time. Stories about his last day of life note that because he had had 17 or more drinks at the tavern, he had to go to Saint Vincent's Hospital, where he died. After his death, people working in the bar sometimes found a beer glass and a shot glass on his favorite table. Thomas's spirit was never unfriendly, these folks commented; he just wanted to spend some more time with fellow drinkers in his favorite bar.

Another allegedly haunted building in the Big Apple is the Chelsea Hotel in lower Manhattan, where Dylan Thomas resided until his untimely death. Sid Vicious, a member of the Six Pistols, allegedly stabbed his girlfriend in one of the Chelsea's rooms in 1978. Servers in the Chelsea Hotel's bar have seen lights go on and off, heard weird noises, and found furniture rearranged inside locked rooms. Hotel

staff members do not identify this restless ghost as Dylan Thomas; apparently Thomas prefers his familiar table at the White Horse Tavern.

Anyone who wants to learn more about Thomas's alleged bar haunting can sign up for a commercial tour organized by Ghosts of New York, “Phantom Pub Crawl of the West Village, Starring Dylan Thomas.” This is just one of their many tours, including “Peter Stuyvesant and His Ghostly Friends of the East Village,” “Edgar Allan Poe and His Ghostly Neighbors of Greenwich Village,” “Ghosts of Times Square,” “Ghosts of Brooklyn Heights,” and “From Ghost Busters to John Lennon: The Ghosts of the Upper West Side.” There is even a tour suitable for rainy days, “Indoor Ghost Walk: The Ghosts of Grand Central,” which introduces tourists to Poe, Stuyvesant, and their “legions of wispy, wailing, wasted wraith friends” (<http://www.ghostsofny.com>). Whether these friends have become “wasted” because of bar-hopping is not specified.

The oldest New York City bar with a reputation for being haunted is the Fraunces Tavern on Pearl Street, where George Washington said farewell to his troops in 1783. Built as a residence in 1719, the Fraunces Tavern has a long history of deaths: five people and two cats have perished there. In the late 1700s, a man stabbed his wife to death in the tavern. At the turn of the 20th century, two beloved cats named George and Martha Washington died there in a fire, and in 1975, a bomb exploded, killing four people and injuring many more. Late at night, visitors to the tavern have heard doors slamming, keys rattling, and footsteps going down the hall. Members of the Sleepy Hollow Paranormal Society have tried to determine these sounds' origin, but with such a long history, it is not easy to find one explanation.

Upstate New York also has its share of haunted bars. The Hotel Utica has a star-studded past involving celebrities from the fields of politics, sports, and entertainment. Franklin Roosevelt, William Taft, Mickey Mantle, and Judy Garland all stayed at the

Hotel Utica, which was built in 1912 and renovated in the early 21st century. The hotel's bar, the Lamplighter Pub, is one of the most comfortable parts of the hotel. Visitors and staff members claim to have heard spectral conversations and caught glimpses of an eerie figure called “Tuxedo Man.” They have also heard sounds of a big party emanating from the hotel's ballroom. Like the Stanley Hotel in Colorado, which inspired Stephen King's novel *The Shining*, the Hotel Utica has earned its reputation as a place that party guests never want to leave, even after their deaths.

Other upstate hotels have gotten reputations for being haunted because of tragic fires. At the Holiday Inn Grand Island near Buffalo, guests talk about the ghost of a little girl who perished in a fire on the site where the hotel was built. Running, playing, and giggling, the little girl reminds people of the happy days before her house burned down. She is not a difficult or dangerous ghost, just a playful young person who does not want to go away.

This little girl ghost at the Holiday Inn Grand Island has much in common with ghosts in New York bars. Lively, engaging, and loyal to their favorite places, these bar-hopping ghosts heighten visitors' enjoyment of a night out drinking in a historic place. People who are imbibing and talking may find that ghosts give them a *memento mori*: a reminder of the preciousness of life and the inevitability of death. Whether they are famous or virtually unknown, these happy, socially active ghosts of bars add resonance to the term “good spirits.” ▼

Libby Tucker teaches folklore at Binghamton University. Her book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) investigates college ghost stories. Her most recent book is *Children's Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008). Her next book, co-edited with Ellen McHale, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices*, will be published in the fall of 2013.



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