

1-1-1994

The Music Room (from 'Haunted America')

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Recommended Citation

Haunted America, "The Music Room (from 'Haunted America')" (1994). *The Pemberton Hall Ghost*. 12.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/pemberton_hall_ghost/12

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From:

HAUNTED AMERICA by Michael Norman & Beth Scott
Tom Doherty Associates, Inc. New York 1994

The Music Room

THE TIME:

A spring night in the early 1920s

THE PLACE:

Pemberton Hall, Eastern Illinois University

She screamed. No one heard. The wind was high and rain lashed the windows of the old building, blotting out all other sounds.

In the morning, Jenny found her friend's bloodied body in the third-floor hallway, slumped against the door of the room they shared. Fingernails had clawed the door, leaving crimson trails.

Jenny wept.

Today, no one is alive to mourn the victim, but students at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston know her story.

They say her name is Mary. That she'd been practicing the piano late at night in the music room on the fourth floor of this old residence hall when she was bludgeoned to death by a crazed custodian wielding an axe. That the murderer was never apprehended. That it happened seventy years ago. And they add, with a bit of pride, that Mary has never left "Pem" Hall. Her spirit remains, gliding silently through the rooms, locking and unlocking doors, turning stereos and television sets on and off, busying herself with myriad mundane tasks—an ethereal housemother watching over the 225 women students who occupy the hall.

Patty O'Neill is one who can vouch for Mary. She believes she was visited by Mary in the spring of 1981.

Midterm exams were at hand and O'Neill had stayed up to study until early in the morning. Her roommate was already asleep. Before turning off the lights, O'Neill went to lock the door, but a recent rainy spell had swollen the wood to such an extent that she couldn't shut it all the way. The coed decided against slamming the door and awakening her roommate. The women of Pem Hall were trustworthy, she reasoned. They looked after one another and respected a person's privacy. Doors were routinely left unlocked, at least during the day.

O'Neill left the door unlocked and climbed into bed. She turned over with her back toward the door.

"I was in a very light sleep when I got an awful feeling that someone was watching me," she recounts. "As I turned over to look, I glanced at the lighted digital numbers on the clock. It was two-fifteen A.M.

"I saw a figure standing by the side of my bed dressed in something like a

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long nightgown or robe. She stood there for several seconds, then turned away and walked toward the door.

"She opened the door and started to leave when she turned around with one hand on the door and looked back at me for several more seconds. She left, closing the door behind her. . . ."

In the morning, O'Neill checked with other residents and learned that in two nearby rooms *locked* doors had mysteriously opened several times during the night although no students claimed to be up and about.

O'Neill had been living in Pem Hall for three years before she had this encounter with the ghost. She never saw it again. And she doesn't believe she was dreaming.

Is it possible another resident had entered her room by mistake, or on some nefarious mission? The door was unlocked, after all. The identity of the intruder, mortal or otherwise, was never determined.

Although few students admit to seeing Mary, many have had experiences they couldn't explain. Lucy O'Brien and several companions discovered that all the shower curtains in the communal bathroom had been closed. A short time later, they found the curtains were open and a heavy chair had been moved. No water had been running in the showers and they'd heard no one enter or leave the bathroom.

No one pays much attention to stereos, television sets, and radios playing in the residence hall. Not even when they operate all by themselves. But one night Pattie Hockspiel and her roommate, Deanne Radermacher, had an unsettling experience. Both were awakened from a deep sleep by a whispering voice saying either "Hi" or "Die." The women weren't sure which word it was, and they couldn't figure out where it came from.

Another "Pemite" reported hearing the faint sounds of a piano coming from the fourth floor late one night. That floor is locked and off-limits to students. However, there is a black upright piano there, along with sagging upholstered furniture, an ancient floor-model radio, and some storage bins. Wall studs form unfinished rooms. Not a comfortable or inviting place to be, unless perhaps you are a ghost.

Students say a shadowy figure sometimes exits through hallway doors into a stairwell, only to vanish before their eyes. Is it Mary? Or one of Mary's "neighbors"? The women believe that at least three other ghosts "live" with Mary on the fourth floor of the ivy-clad building.

A saucy "pin lady" in a long white gown taps on doors at night, begging for safety pins. One night several girls followed her to the fourth-floor landing, where she disappeared.

A "lounge ghost" overturns furniture in a rec room every few years in the middle of the night. In 1976, Nancy Vax, a sophomore student, recalled the resident director who found all the lounge furniture tipped over and the room in total disarray. The director ran to get help to clean up the mess. When she returned the room had been restored to perfect order.

Another spirit makes nightly rounds to lock any unlocked doors.

Are these ghosts separate entities or only various manifestations of Mary?

And most important, is there any truth to these stories?

Shirley Von Bokel, a resident of Pem Hall in 1992, told the authors that she

has reservations about the ghost business, yet her door swings open when no one is there. "Everybody still talks about Mary," she says, "but I'm not sure if her spirit is around my room because people are always coming and going."

Doris Enochs, Pemberton Hall counselor from 1970 to 1980, says the story of Mary is not true, "but the upperclassmen keep it as a tradition to pass on to incoming freshmen. Everyone who tells it adds more and more to it."

Mrs. Enochs thinks the story had its genesis in the death of Mary Hawkins, a dorm counselor from 1910 to 1917. A plaque in the hall's lobby honors her. However, the woman did not die in the hall, but in a hospital. Further, there are no records of any murder or other unusual death in Pem Hall.

Although Mrs. Enochs does not believe in ghosts, she did tell a news reporter, "Some weird things happen there." She did not elaborate.

Stella (Craft) Temple was a 1921 resident of Pem Hall. She had a different perspective on the ghostly tales.

"Those myths have no origin in dead dorm counselors or murdered coeds either," she told student news reporter Karen Knapp.

Temple recalled a thirty-year-old student named Euterpe Sharp who was studying psychology and was much interested in hypnotism. According to Temple, Sharp used to hide in the janitor's closet next to the restroom and jump out at the girls as they walked by. In time, no coed would walk the halls alone; they traveled in groups of threes or fours.

Temple said that Sharp wasn't really strange, but "she had different interests than the rest of us. Her eyes were crazy." Temple contends that the ghost legends originated from Sharp's frightening prowls through the halls.

Journalist William M. Michael was less concerned with determining the origin of the ghost legend than with finding a good Halloween tale for his newspaper. Michael, a lifestyle writer for the *Decatur Herald and Review* before his retirement in 1988, spent a night on the fourth floor of Pem Hall. All reporters had heard the fantastic rumor about the attic: that it had been partitioned into beautifully furnished rooms whose closets were filled with elegant gowns, presumably worn by the numerous ghosts.

On a brisk October afternoon, Michael climbed the stairs to the "murder" floor. He carried his sleeping bag under one arm. Fifteen Pem Hall residents followed him.

"You're not *really* going to sleep up there?" one asked.

Michael shivered. Yes, indeed, he was going to sleep there—all night. "The wind whooshed around the gables, rain rattled against the roof, huge leafless trees shook. The air felt heavy and musty," he wrote.

"I found the music room where I would spend the night. A light in the closet was burning. Who had left it on? How long ago? Mary? Are you here? My courage began to falter, but then I remembered that Mary is a good ghost—prankish but the non-hurting type," his account read.

Michael noted the dingy furnishings, including the ancient piano. He spread out his sleeping bag on an old leather couch that had no cushions, and settled down to await his spectral visitor. He had just started to doze off when he heard voices—human voices. Michael jumped up and hid behind the door. When it opened, he jumped out from behind it.

The curious coeds screamed and giggled and asked to see the rest of the attic. Thus, William Michael's career as a Pem Hall tour guide was launched. Several more groups of women made their way up the dark stairs that night. All were disappointed to find a vast unfinished area and a less than attractive music room whose floor was covered by a dirty green rug. To please them, Michael spun ghost stories until the wee hours.

Alone at last, he slept fitfully.

At a quarter past three he was jarred awake by a pungent smell. Mary? He squinted into the darkness. The odor of the old couch had awakened him; he hadn't been aware of it before.

At dawn, the bleary-eyed newsman packed up to leave. As he made his way out of the hall, students crowded around to ask if he'd seen Mary.

"No." He shook his head. "I didn't see Mary. But I sure saw a lot of non-ghosts," he said, looking at his audience. He added that he was disappointed to have missed Mary, "but deep down I didn't think I would have . . . a ghost of a chance . . . of meeting her anyway."

Although William Michael's ghost search was uneventful, his visit to Pem Hall brought him a different distinction. He told the authors that he believes he and the late distinguished actor and folk singer, Burl Ives, are the only two men to have spent some time in the women's dorm.

Burl Ives attended Eastern Illinois University from 1927 to 1930. Legend has it that the singer visited a Pemite one evening and was seen crawling out a lower-floor window shortly before dawn the next morning.

In 1986 Burl Ives received an honorary doctor of humane letters degree for his many years of dedication and financial support to Eastern Illinois University. Later, the Burl Ives Art Studio Hall was dedicated to him in the spring of 1990.

Some day Eastern Illinois University might see fit to award their famous ghost similar honors. In absentia, of course.