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I ain't afraid of no ghost

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Lifestyle

I ain't afraid of no ghosts!

By WILLIAM M. MICHAEL
Herald & Review Lifestyle Writer

CHARLESTON — As a ghostbuster, I'm a bust.

The ghost of "Mary" — if it exists — still roams Pemberton Hall at Eastern Illinois University.

But, I'm getting ahead of my story.

With Halloween just around the corner, I decided it would be a good time to try to meet the fabled Mary, who has thrilled and chilled students since the 1920s.

What better way than to spend a night in her fourth floor quarters at Pem Hall (nobody calls it Pemberton). Opened in 1908, it is the oldest women's dormitory in the state. The fourth floor is where Mary is supposed to hang out when she's not haunting.

When I arrived a few days ago, resident assistant Patty Krenz of Glen Ellyn took me to the locked fourth floor for a quick tour. I wasn't too impressed. It looked like any other old unfinished attic in which several rooms had been built and abandoned. But that was late in the afternoon, and there was plenty of light streaming through the grimy windows.

THEN ABOUT 15 coeds met with me in the hall's lounge and pumped me full of eerie incidents they had experienced or seen: shadows in unoccupied rooms, doors locked and unlocked, stereos and TV sets turned on and off, fingernails scratching on doors.

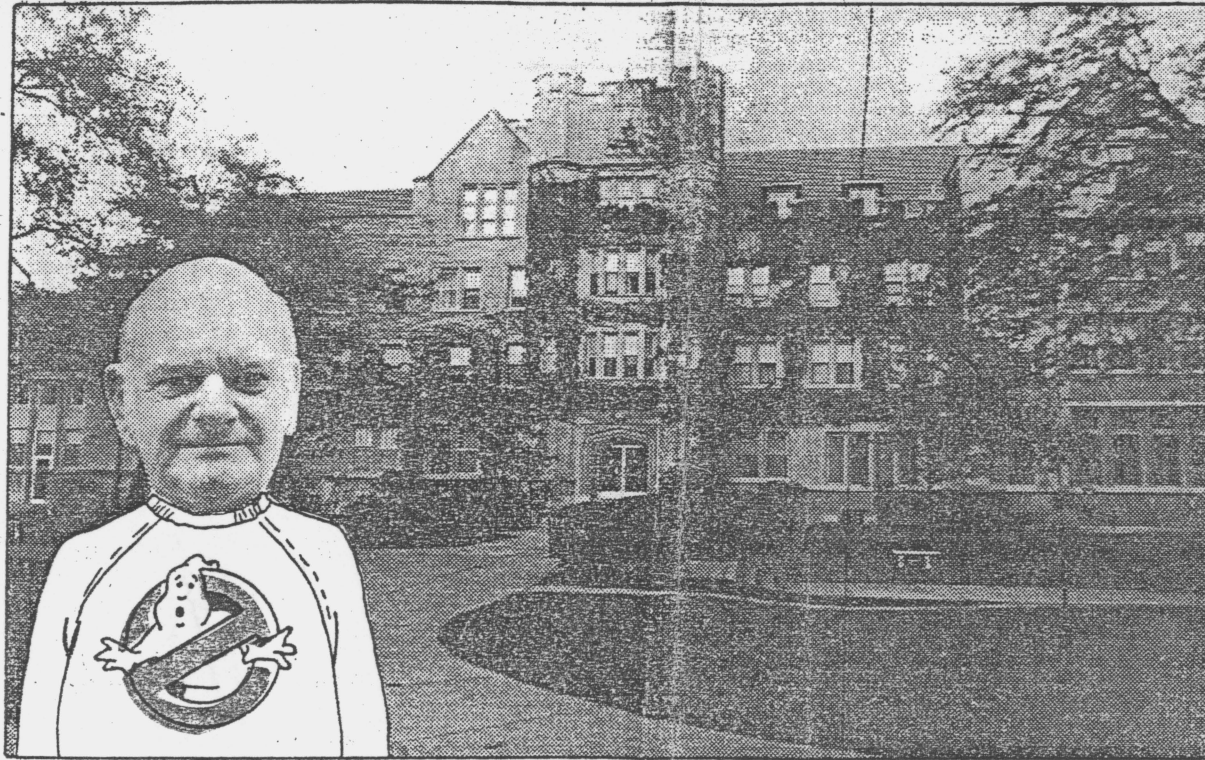
By the time they had finished, the wind was howling and rain was falling. It was the kind of night ghosts love.

I passed a student ironing on the third floor. "You're not really going to sleep up there?" she said, noting the sleeping bag I carried. She shivered.

Arriving at my destination, I too shivered. The wind whooshed around the gables, rain rattled against the roof, dancing tree limbs cast flickering shadows. The air felt heavy, musty.

At the top of the steps, I flicked light switches, but bulbs were burned out. Fumbling in my camera bag, I pulled out a penlight that threw a small, weak beam.

I FOUND THE music room where I would spend the



'Ghostbuster' Michael and Pemberton Hall, home of the ghostly Mary.

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. (I also had learned earlier that there are at least three other ghosts in the dormitory, but none is as well-known or active as Mary.)

In my room, a dirt-littered green rug covered most

of the hardwood floor. Furnishings included two sagging leather couches without cushions, an overstuffed chair, an old floor-model radio and a black upright piano.

An open door separated the finished attic area where I was from an unfinished section. There I found working light bulbs. With white-painted wall studs forming unfinished rooms and hallways, the space looked like the bleached skeleton of a prehistoric monster. And here the wind roared even louder and boards creaked and

groaned. I flicked off the lights and retreated to the music room.

I SPREAD MY sleeping bag on one of the couches and settled down to wait for a spectral visitor. I had begun to doze when I heard doors opening. Mary?

Alas, it was earthly voices ... some of the students dropping in for a visit. I welcomed them properly by hiding behind a door. As they approached, I jumped and yelled. They screamed and giggled and I invited them into the music room. They wanted to see the rest of the fourth floor so I became a tour guide.

When they left, I again stretched out on the couch. Soon whispering voices murmured, "Maybe he's sleeping." "You think it's OK?" I took up my position behind the door. They screamed better than the first bunch when I popped out. I conducted another tour.

By now the fourth floor was as familiar as my cluttered garage. At 12:44 a.m., the hall doors opened again. "Now don't scare us," a voice called, so I stepped out from my hiding place into the beam of their flashlight. This group of six and I talked until 1 a.m. and they plied me with more ghostly tales.

ALONE AT LAST, I slept fitfully. Unusual noises brought me instantly awake. At 3:16 a.m., the pungent smell of old wood jarred me. Incense? Was Mary burning incense? No. It was just the smell of the couch I hadn't noticed before. A door banged somewhere in the distance. The wind quieted and with it went many of the attic's sounds and shadows. I was alone on Pemberton Hall's infamous fourth floor.

I slept.

As I was leaving in the morning, one of the students asked, "Weren't you scared? Did you see Mary?"

"I was a little apprehensive at first," I said truthfully. "And, no, I didn't see Mary. But I sure saw a lot of non-ghosts."

I was disappointed Mary didn't appear, but deep down I didn't think I would have a ghost of a chance of meeting her anyway.