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Folklore or Fakelore?

A trio of haunted Plantations

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Kevin Kelly, the affable owner of Houmas House Plantation in Darrow, is perplexed over his unusual predicament: Visitors and staff describe the ghosts of his antebellum home on a daily basis, but Kelly says, laughing, “I can’t understand why they see them, and I don’t.” He’s prepared to be a genial host – if the two male phantoms will just show up. “I tell everybody that I go to bed at night with my favorite drink, Wild Turkey and 7UP. I have three drinks ready, one for me and two for the other ghosts in the house, and I always have to drink all three.”

Witnesses who have seen the male spirits declare that one is exceedingly tall and lanky and the other appears dressed in uniform. “The one in uniform, he’s probably a riverboat captain ... he walks around on the rooftop, the widow’s walk.” The magnificent belvedere at Houmas House offers sweeping views of the Mississippi River, a perfect vantage point for any river pilot, real or phantom, to spend his leisure hours.

The second male figure strolls the grounds. “There is a tall, tall black man, very gentle and slow-moving,” states Houmas House historian Jim Blanchard. “When I first saw him, he went behind me, and I went, ‘Who’s that?’ And then he walked through the wall!” Later, Blanchard understood that this ghost knew exactly where he was going. “I was redoing the cottage in the back, opening up the paneled walls that had been added on, and discovered a doorway that had been covered up. He was walking through a doorway that was original to the back cottage.”

Kelly agrees that this particular ghost sticks to familiar paths, ignoring any contemporary obstacles. “When I bought the property, I put a big circular fountain right behind the house,” he says. “People tell me he walks right through the fountain but doesn’t get wet. He walks from the rear of the house to what used to be a slave cottage in the back.” This restless spirit is also spotted near the front portico.

Blanchard adds: "There is an old Fonville Winans photograph ... and in it is a 7-foot-tall black man stepping off the front porch. It's an incredible spooky photograph when you think about it."

In addition to the adult spirits, a tiny specter causes considerable consternation. "Everyone describes her in the same way: She has on a blue dress with a pink ribbon in her brown hair," says a baffled Kelly. Kelly purchased Houmas House in the spring of 2003 and immediately began a massive restoration. Along with regular updates on their progress, the workmen began reporting the sight of a little girl wandering about. She appeared so real to one electrician that he was concerned for her safety in what was then a construction zone. She is often seen descending the freestanding spiral staircase, and her constant presence inside the house and playing in the gardens has earned her the nickname *La Petite Fille*, which means "The Little Girl" in French. In the early stages of his occupancy, Kelly allowed a séance to be held. "The séance people talked to her when I was in the room," Kelly says, but he emphasizes: "I didn't see her. I didn't hear her." The exchange between medium and spirit produced a few interesting moments. "The séance person said the ghost would like to be friendly with me, but she is afraid of me because I am so big. So I said, 'Well, how am I supposed to be friendly?'" Kelly was informed that the ghost child would like to play hide-and-seek with him. "Evidently, this is her favorite game in the yard because most people that talk about her say that's what she does."

The early owners – the Hamptons, the Prestons, the Beirnes and the Porcher Mileses – all raised children at Houmas House. An antique doll's dress may hold a clue to the identity of the diminutive spirit. Blanchard relates the history of the delicate garment: "I acquired it from the Preston family through an auction. There was a little handkerchief attached to the dress with May Preston's date of birth appliquéd on it." May was the daughter of owners John Smith Preston and Caroline Hampton Preston. According to Kelly, when May became ill with yellow fever, her parents made plans to return to their family home in South Carolina. May died on the way. "Her body is in Columbia, S.C., but her soul," says Kelly, "is here. I am quite certain it is May Preston. She was born May 20, 1840, and died in 1848 of yellow fever. Let's put it this way: If the séance lady was right, it was May Preston because the doll's dress belonged to May, and when the lady held up the doll's dress, the ghost supposedly asked: 'Where is my doll? I've been looking for it for a long time.'" Kelly quickly reiterates, "Of course, I've had no personal experience with her or our other ghosts."

Near the carriage archway that connects Alexander Latil's original 1773 French provincial dwelling with the main 1840s Greek Revival mansion is a marble statue of a young girl. Barefoot with one leg crossed over the other, she sits on a child-size ladder-back chair. Her eyes are downcast, her face pensive. Intrigued, visitors ask if she represents one of the children who lived or died in the house. Blanchard shakes his head. "It is odd that we have her here," he says. "People comment, 'How sweet.'" The statue adds a layer of mystery to the idyllic gardens. She appears to be merely catching her breath, as though she will soon pop up to join in another game of hide-and-seek.

In 1857, sugar baron John Burnside acquired Houmas House from the Prestons. Fellow Irishman Kevin Kelly's lavish restoration pays homage to the Burnside era with its grand "Sugar Palace." During efforts to reacquire the original furnishings, a few acquisitions arrived with phantoms intact. Blanchard attests to an incident with an antique French clock: "The clock was reputed to be from Napoleon's

collection, part of the collection that John Burnside bought. He adored this clock so much that he gave it as a wedding present to a good friend. We tracked it down . . . and I went to Baton Rouge to pick it up.” To avoid damage to the mechanism, the pendulum was removed for the return trip. “I pull up to Houmas House, turn the alarms off and bring the clock in. The minute I set it on the dining room mantel, it starts: dong, dong, dong.” Blanchard was incredulous. “It shouldn’t have been able to make a sound because the pendulum was not on. And then I hear voices of men all around the room as if the room is full of people. I just left the clock there, turned the alarm on, locked the doors and said: ‘I am not sleeping here tonight. I am going to New Orleans.’ Blanchard’s only explanation for the phantom sounds? “The clock came home. After a hundred and something years of being gone, it let us know it’s back. I get goose bumps right now just talking about it.”

A haunted clock, disembodied voices, a tall specter, a ghost in the belvedere, and a playful spirit should be enough for any plantation, but Kelly wishes there were just one more. In 1963, Hollywood legend Bette Davis arrived at Houmas House to film scenes for *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte*. “I would say that is our No. 1 draw; so many people come here just to see where Bette Davis stayed,” Kelly says. “They would love to see a ghost of Bette Davis. If I could get the world to believe her ghost was on this property, I’d get millions of people here a day.”