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*Ghost Stories from the Wine Country*  
By Steve Pitcher

This started out to be a story about "ghost wineries," those stone relics of the 19th century that dot the Napa and Sonoma wine country, some transformed into functional buildings for modern use, some inaccessible and derelict, their windows dark and blank and their cobwebbed interiors dusty and still.

But the more I poked around for background, the more it became apparent that ghost wineries, so named not because they are haunted, but because they are but "ghosts" of their former selves, were pretty much a dead subject, whereas wineries and related buildings reputedly harboring one or more ghosts or poltergeists were much more intriguing.

While Napa and Sonoma are not exactly awash in ectoplasm, there are persistent accounts of paranormal goings on in certain places. Inquire discretely about a building erected in the 1800s, and you're likely to hear a story about a spectral inhabitant or mischievous poltergeist. It's not a topic that's discussed openly in winery brochures or by winery public relations folks, but after some gentle prodding on my part several people who work in and around these buildings -- many previously reluctant to go public with what they know -- finally opened up.

Maybe the tales are true, maybe they're told tongue in cheek or the product of an over-active imagination. None can be verified, although I tried on more than a couple of occasions to coax out a ghost by spending the night in supposedly haunted surroundings. (Note to self: Don't do that again.)

You don't have to believe in an afterlife to appreciate this history and the modern goings-on. It's another side to a familiar region. The tales aren't dreadful or sinister, but they can send chills down your spine and cause the hair on your arms and the back of your neck to stiffen and tingle.

Some tell of encounters experienced by others, stories that linger about the property steadfastly defying explanation; others are first-hand accounts of something inexplicably strange that personally happened to the narrator. The great majority of these recollections feature a "poltergeist," from the German for "noise-spirit," describing a ghost or spirit that supposedly manifests itself by making loud noises, knockings -- the source of things that go bump in the night -- or playing tricks on the living with otherwise normal things that suddenly behave abnormally: objects moving on their own or flying through the air, flickering lights,

doors opening and closing of their own accord. Rarer still is the personal account of a face-to-face confrontation with a specter.

Consider the ghost in the manor house of Stags' Leap Winery (SLW).

For some reason, gothic architecture and ghosts seem well met, and the imposing, stone, manor house on the grounds of SLW, with its crenellated turret rising above the second story, is about as gothic a structure as one will find in California. Built in 1888 and tucked away in a valley within the Napa Valley about a half-mile east of the Silverado Trail, this venerable building has had many incarnations in its time -- country residence, fashionable resort, retreat for Navy personnel during WWII, rooming house, probably a brothel, a deserted derelict, a residence again and now a winery hospitality facility. A suicide occurred here while the manor was a residence, but that seems unconnected to subsequent ghostly activity.

The 240 acres of the estate are also home to a ghost winery (circa 1893) that has been brought back to life and today serves as an adjunct to the modern winery on the grounds that produces excellent, estate-bottled Petite Sirah, the flagship wine, along with other Rhône varietals and blends, Cabernet, Merlot and Chardonnay.

Winemaker Robert Brittan has been at SLW since 1988, consulting for then owner Carl Doumani beginning in 1986. He has never before detailed his remarkable encounter with the supernatural as extensively as he would during our lengthy interview.

"It was in the late autumn or early winter of 1986, the very first time I spent the night in the manor," Brittan recounted last July as we sat in the spacious, ground-floor great hall, its intricate, mahogany, Chippendale staircase off to the side leading up to the bedrooms on the second floor. "Some noise woke me up around 2 or 3 in the morning and I got out of bed to investigate. As I walked from the bedroom into the hallway and toward the bedroom at the front of the house, where I thought the noise came from, I saw a young woman facing me. She was there in the hallway, near the landing at the top of the stairs. I had the impression I could look through parts of her -- she wasn't all dressed in white, there seemed to be colors, too."

Leaning forward in his chair, Brittan continued. "I spoke to her, because I was initially startled to see someone there at that hour -- I said something like, 'Oh, excuse me.' Pretty soon it dawned on me that this wasn't a person. Then she spoke to me." Brittan is very protective of "his ghost." "I can't tell you what she said," he insisted. Can't or won't, I inquire. "She asked me -- no, rather told me -- to do something I couldn't do that night," but he adamantly refused to disclose what the

ghost said -- or what he subsequently did or did not do in response to the utterance.

"I turned around and went back to my bedroom and crawled into bed. I thought to myself this can't be happening to me. I was scared," he said earnestly. No amount of prodding could get him to recount the ghost's words. "There's no logical explanation for the ghost to ask me to do something," he concluded, somewhat testily.

Brittan surmises the ghost was that of a prostitute who died in the house when it was being operated as a brothel, but "Maybe we have more than one ghost," he speculated. "Whenever I come into this house, I'm very much aware of the place. I've spent lots of time here -- alone -- in front of the fireplace in this grand hall," he confided, "but I have somewhat of a reluctance to go upstairs alone after dark."

A guest staying in the house has also told of seeing the apparition of a young woman. Emerging one morning from the big bedroom at the back of the house and walking into the hallway at about the point where Brittan saw his ghost, the guest encountered a woman in white who had just walked out of the wall and proceeded to pass silently in front of her. Two members of the kitchen staff just last December, while working around 10:30 in the morning, told of observing the door between the kitchen and the dining room open and shut by itself, and then the refrigerator door opened and shut on its own. No apparition this time, probably a poltergeist.

### Three little acorns

As marketing director for Stags' Leap Winery, Bill Piersol originally had an office in the manor house after the Doumani family moved out in 1989, a small sitting room just off the dining room that was furnished with an antique rolltop desk. For his first year, he was the only person in the house most days. Sitting at his desk one day, an acorn dropped in his lap. Puzzled, he stood on a chair to examine the ceiling but couldn't find any opening big enough for an acorn to fall through.

Two months later, again alone in the house, he felt something hit his shoe as he sat at his desk. Another acorn. On a third occasion, another acorn dropped right in front of him as he pushed away from his desk and started to leave the room. Piersol kept those three acorns in his desk drawer for a decade, leaving them to his successor when he moved on to other things. Today, they're kept in a box in the manor's library for the curious to examine. Brittan suspects that "his ghost" was behind the dropping acorns. "She was messing with him," he says.

"On another occasion," Brittan recalled, "a group of us was gathered one night during winter in the great hall with a fine fire going in the fireplace. One of the

guys nearest the staircase suddenly seemed to sense something was at the foot of the stairs and his voice sort of trailed off. The conversation died down and then we all felt something unseen move diagonally through the hall to the dining room beyond."

The night following my interview with Brittan, I had the entire house to myself by prior arrangement. Repairing upstairs to the smaller of the two front bedrooms, which had been converted into a library, I went over the interview tape and made notes, often checking the reflection in the window in front of me of the hallway behind me leading toward the stairs. I couldn't shake the feeling that I wasn't alone, being watched, but nothing made an appearance or any unusual sounds -- then or during the rest of the night as I tried, unsuccessfully, to fall asleep.

Brittan's tale had left me with the stark realization that maybe my overnighiter totally alone in the manor wasn't such a prudent idea after all, inasmuch as the only way out of the house -- should anything untoward manifest itself -- was down those stairs beyond the landing that the ghost seemed to favor.

On a tree-shaded rise above Niebaum-Coppola Winery the afternoon before my overnighiter at SLW, casual luncheon conversation with winemakers following a tasting for the media put on by the Rutherford Dust Society somehow gravitated to the subject of ghosts at wineries (I admit I kind of steered it in that direction). Sitting across from me, John Williams, proprietor-winemaker of Frog's Leap Winery on Conn Creek Road said, "I can tell you a story of something that happened to me in our Red Barn."

The Red Barn was built in 1884 originally as a winery, Williams explained. After purchasing the Red Barn Ranch in 1993 as the site of their winery, Williams and his wife Julie spent a year renovating the run-down, yet still functional building, completing the process in time for the 1994 harvest.

Williams prefaced his story by noting that the wife of the original owner committed suicide by taking poison in the Red Barn in 1894. "One night a couple of years ago, I was walking through the darkened barrel room in the barn quietly 'communing with the barrels' as winemakers sometimes do, when the hair on the back of my neck went straight up, causing me to stop in my tracks. I felt I wasn't alone, but I knew no one else was around at that time of the night. So I figured I'd done enough communing for the night and got out of there."

The next day, Williams told his Spanish-speaking winery manager of his experience in the Red Barn. "He asked me, did this happen around barrel No. 19? I said, yes,

right about there. Then he sort of smiled and said, 'So, now you have met la presencia.' That's Spanish for female ghost.

Joshua P. Warren posits in his book "How to Hunt Ghosts: A Practical Guide" (Simon & Schuster 2003) that a spirit uses free-floating, static electrical charges in the air called ions to manifest itself. "When someone comes into contact with strong static electricity, his or her flesh and hair are exposed to the same charges," Warren writes. "This makes the hair push away from the flesh, thereby standing up. Electrical charges rushing across the skin also create an 'ion wind.' This produces a cool or cold sensation on the flesh. This could certainly account for cold chills when a ghost is encountered."

Less chilling, but still inexplicable are the stories of ghost and poltergeist activity on the grounds of Beaulieu Vineyards in the Rutherford House, a private facility built as a residence in 1913 just off Highway 29 that BV uses for trade education and hospitality. Lynn Higgins, who is in charge of trade relations for BV and thus is often in this grand old house, told me that the housekeeper for the last 10 years has reported seeing the apparition of a young girl in the upstairs rooms more than once. "Lights go off and on and doors open and close -- all by themselves upstairs," she said, recounting what the housekeeper has told her.

"Just last week," she wrote in a letter on August 2nd, "one of my employees felt he encountered the ghost. He had just set up for a private tasting in the tasting room and had the wines with all the labels facing toward the head of the table. He went into the kitchen briefly to get some tasting crackers and when he returned, all the labels were facing to the right." No one else was in the house at the time.

Robert Larsen, who's now the marketing communications manager at Dry Creek Vineyard, recounted that he slept off and on in the Rutherford House when he was relocating for the PR job at BV some years ago, and heard some of the stories firsthand from the housekeeper. One night, he said, while sleeping alone in the house in one of the five bedrooms, "I was awakened around 2-3 a.m. by music coming from a room down the hall. I got up to investigate and found the music was coming from a clock radio. But the alarm was set to 'off.' I had to turn it on and then off to stop the music. This happened two more times that night, clock alarms going off in different bedrooms under the same circumstances. I thought to myself, this is either really sloppy housekeeping or there's something else going on."

Most visitors to the Napa Valley have at least seen, if not visited, Beringer's stately Rhine House in St. Helena. Built in 1883 as his residence by German-born vintner and businessman Frederick Beringer, who, along with his younger brother, winemaker Jacob, founded Beringer Bros. Winery in 1876, the 17-room Victorian

mansion was modeled after the Beringer family home in Mainz, Germany. It was operated as an inn called "The Country Manor" in the 1940s, and completely refurbished in 1971. The next year it was placed on the National List of Historic Places.

Not only historic, but likely haunted as well, according to a chronicle of numerous stories of unexplained activity compiled by Allison Simpson, Beringer's director of public relations, from records of former employees and first-hand accounts by current staff.

Referring to a sheaf of papers in a bulging file, Simpson ticks off a laundry list of instances of strange happenings:

"The specter of a man has reportedly been seen at the north end of the tunnel of elms. It disappears. There have also been reports of people seeing a woman's figure in the tunnel that disappears.

"There are multiple reports of movement in the Rhine House, footsteps on the stairs, sounds of people walking around when there's no one else in the house except those who hear the footfalls, sounds of doors shutting, lights going on and off at weird times, and so on. Two different people spoke of being in the basement early in the morning, stocking wine, when no one else was in the house and the doors were all locked, when they heard footsteps walking across the floor above them.

"Jim Eckert, a long-time employee, remembers being in his Rhine House office a few years ago, closing the registers before leaving for the day. No one else was in the house -- he had locked all the doors himself. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a figure pass by the doorway. He couldn't tell if it was a man or woman, he just had a glimpse of a shirted shoulder. He immediately investigated and found that the house was empty and the doors still locked as he had left them.

"Another story relates to some small silver trays we used to use in the Founder's Room, our reserve tasting room, upstairs in the Rhine House where Frederick's room used to be -- the room in which Frederick Beringer died in 1901. One night while closing up, two managers were downstairs after checking the house and were preparing to leave. Suddenly they heard a noise coming from upstairs, so they ran up to investigate, each taking a different route to cover both exits. There was no one in the building, but somehow one of the silver trays had flown halfway across the room and landed in the middle of the floor.

"According to Jim Eckert, there was more than one janitor who saw a man coming through the wall upstairs. At least one of these people ran out of the house and refused to return.

"That's the best of it," Simpson concluded as she closed the folder. "I don't know about you, but my skin is crawling!"

At Dry Creek Vineyard in Sonoma County, Shelley Donohue, the winery's hospitality director for the last six years, told of her peculiar, and to this day unexplained, experience in the ivy-covered, stone winery on Lambert Bridge Road.

"It was in July, I think about four years ago. I was working late in the winery after a hospitality event, closing things down. I was alone in the building, as all of the employees had gone home and most of the people who might possibly be around at that time of the evening -- quarter past eight -- were attending a trade event in New Orleans.

"After closing the heavy, wooden double doors in the cellar, securing each one with a solid wooden plank that slid through a pair of iron brackets, I turned out most of the lights and went upstairs to my office to close down the computer and turn off the lights. As I came back down the stairs into the cellar, I remember glancing to my right and noticing that the double doors on that side of the cellar were closed and secured by the plank. So were the doors on the other side of the cellar. I walked into the tasting room and briefly made sure everything was locked up, and then went back to the cellar to turn out the lights. It had only been a matter of seconds that I had been in the tasting room, but now all the double doors were wide open and the planks were on the floor.

"That startled me, and I shouted out to see if anyone was still here who might have opened the doors. No answer -- I was the only person on the grounds, absolutely alone. Then I began feeling uneasy, not so much scared as creepy. I said to myself, 'OK, I'll be leaving now.' I quickly closed and secured the doors again and took off.

"The next day, back at the winery, I recounted what had happened, and while there were a few chuckles, one of the staff members told me that I had been 'initiated' by the ghost. 'Eventually, anyone who works here and finds himself alone in this winery after dark will experience something like what you experienced,' he told me.

"One of the women who had been with the winery for many years said she thought it was the ghost of an Indian because she had once seen a vague apparition of a tall man wearing what looked like a loincloth and sort of a headdress. It was when she found herself alone in the winery."

These accounts are just the tip of the supernatural iceberg. There are dozens of other Wine Country buildings with a history of harboring something strange within. The curious can visit many of them, such as the Rhine House or the winery at Dry Creek Vineyard, in an effort to personally experience a ghostly encounter or a poltergeist's playful prank, but in crowded, daytime circumstances it's unlikely to happen.

But take a room in the historic Hatt Building, which since 2000 has been the Napa River Inn in the City of Napa -- especially Room 207 or the suite in 208, the heart of the haunting. Guests and visitors have reported hearing strange footfalls and rustlings in otherwise empty hallways, doors opening and slamming shut on their own and noises eerily similar to the sound of a heavy weight swinging on a rope just above the spot where Albert Hatt committed suicide by hanging himself from a beam in what was the warehouse on the ground floor (now the Sweetie Pies Bakery) in 1912. Some guests told of encountering a specter on the stairway next to Room 208, who spoke briefly to them before vanishing.

General Manager Nancy Lochmann readily responds to questions about ghostly goings on in the Inn, which was featured on a Travel Channel program called "Haunted Hotels." Members of the staff have tales of their own, too.

Is it humbug or the truth -- or something in between? Whatever the answer, these accounts add another layer to the subject of wine and spirits.

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