



# MAIN STREET AT WORK

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## HAUNTED HAPPENINGS

What’s happening on Main Streets now? What are the most interesting stories, the newest strategies, the lessons learned? In this column, National Trust Main Street Center staff share the latest trends and successes from the field.

It’s late in the afternoon and upstairs in the antique shop and museum, most visitors have left for the day. But on the first story of the Old Opera House in downtown Arcadia, Florida, the tenants hear children laughing and running up and down the hallways above. They’ve heard it before. And others have told even stranger tales.

The paranormal activity is so renowned locally that it has attracted the attention of paranormal investigators who visited the 1906 John J. Heard Opera House and

described the building as “extremely active,” recording both sounds and movement. Their conclusion was that the building has “multiple benevolent presences.” The

ghost hunters’ visits and documentation are currently being pitched to TV networks such as the Travel and Syfy channels. While some people might shy away from such a property, the building’s owner, Dick Chernoch, believes its reputation attracts visitors who hope to experience their own encounter with the paranormal.

Believer or not, the stories can captivate an audience as they did at a reception held during the Florida Main Street quarterly training workshop in June. Chernoch recounted the story of an elderly Arcadia resident, in her nineties, who lived in a nursing home. She asked her family to bring her to the Opera House so she could see it one last time. She was carried up the stairway and once there, she recounted her memories of the old theater space, where her family had come to watch vaudeville acts. Adults would gather to share the news of the day and



the children – well, the children ran up and down the hallways, playing tag, chasing each other, and laughing.

Chernoch, owner of the building for the past 15 years, has many tales to tell about visitors to the antique shops and the free museum. But his story starts with the previous owner who was alone in the building one day and heard children laughing in the hallway. She ran out to see who was there

but saw no one. She heard the laugh again, ignored it, and turned to walk back to her office. That’s when she felt something brush up against her leg. Shortly thereafter, she sold the property.

Although the spirits are “benevolent” and

non-threatening, their presence can be unnerving. Many people report that when walking down the stairs, they felt someone coming down behind them. People who have stood in front of the old stage get a strange feeling and report the hair on their arms standing up; others say they get goose bumps. In the former office of J.J. Heard, a woman became hysterical after seeing the face of a man in the window with his hand up, as if stopping her. When Chernoch showed the woman a picture of Heard, she said that was the man she saw in the window. She became short of breath and had to leave the building.

Chernoch had his own scare when he was checking for termites and heard noises – the sounds of a crowd of people. He walked around with his hammer in his hand and found nothing, so he began working again. The crowd noises started up again, and Chernoch decided to call it quits for the day.

Passersby on the street have reported seeing a girl in a frilly dress, peering out of the second-story corner window; she’s typically seen at the end of the day. Local folklore is that a small girl fell out of the second-story window but that the incident was covered up. There are no news accounts of such an accident ever happening. A woman shopping in the room where the girl has been seen left with a feeling of overwhelming sadness.



Looking for a close encounter of the supernatural kind? Visit the Old Opera House in Arcadia, Florida!



Fall weather brings out the spooktacular in Main Street communities all across the nation. Events range from graveyard tours in towns like Dover, N.H., (far left and left) to Halloween festivals in South Orange, N.J., (opposite page) and scores of other downtowns.

The antiques, museum, and history of the building are enough of an attraction for Dick Chernoch. Although many folks know about the building's reputation and come specifically to visit it, Chernoch is reluctant to promote the building as haunted. He takes comfort in hearing that there is no evil in his building; it's just a place spirits revisit because they enjoyed life here.

There are many such stories in communities throughout the country, especially in historic homes that surround our downtowns. One famous hotel, known for its paranormal activity, is the Ramada Plaza, previously named the Retlaw Hotel, in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The spirit of the former owner, Walter (Retlaw is Walter spelled backwards) Schoreder likes to turn on faucets and lights, bang on the walls, and scream. While many people have reported seeing his apparition, this writer spends a week in the hotel every Christmas and has never witnessed any haunted happenings.

Graveyard tours, Halloween festivities in haunted houses and along haunted trails, haunted house tours, October festivals, and the like are promoted widely in the fall. Curiosity drives thousands to these events to experience the thrill of a good scare or to hear a spooky story they can pass along to others. Here's hoping that your spirits are "benevolent presences," too, but if you can't find your own, take heart, the space on the second floor of the Arcadia Opera House is for lease, complete with antiques and friendly residents.

## Tapping Your Local Heritage

One of the eight guiding principles of the Main Street Approach is "Identifying and Capitalizing on Existing Assets." Promoting and celebrating what is unique to your community and business district and capitalizing on these assets will give your promotional calendar a competitive edge and help attract heritage travelers.

Unique assets may include:

- **Architecture.** Recognize significant buildings, especially those located in historic districts or listed in the National Register of Historic Places, as well as buildings designed by famous architects. Celebrate the history of mills, tobacco warehouses, grand hotels, public institutions, colleges, etc.
- **History.** Fur trading, railroads, the Civil War, the Wild West, forts, famous historians with ties to the community, manufacturing, and historic events all provide a wealth of ideas for promotions. Even obscure historic events or recent history can make for fun promotions, such as the Manitowoc (Wis.) Sputnik Fest, which celebrates a 1962 event when a piece of Sputnik crashed into downtown.
- **Culture:** Celebrate the diversity of your community's population. Milwaukee, known as the City of Festivals ([www.mkefestivals.com/hilton-milwaukee/](http://www.mkefestivals.com/hilton-milwaukee/)), hosts dozens of events, including Arab Fest, Irish Fest, Polish Fest, Pride Fest, Bastille Days, Greek Fest, Indian Summer Fest, Mexican Fiesta, Fiesta Italiana, and German Fest.
- **Claims to Fame.** From Home of Pollyanna, Home of the Hamburger, Home of Elvis Presley to the birthplace of the blues, jazz, country, alternative, or hip hop, claims to fame can bring visitors flocking to your community. Many towns have achieved international recognition for their unique heritage, such as the Ice Cream, Fire Hydrant, Lost Luggage, Fruitcake, Cowboy, Cow Chip, and Jell-O Capitals of the World. And setting a Guinness Book of World Records in any category can help establish a history for your community.

Looking for your next promotional event? Take an inventory of your community's assets under each point listed above. Identify your strongest asset, then allow yourself ample time to stir up creative ideas that can honor and celebrate your place in history.