

Fairview resident maintains Web site about local haunts



Clef Notes

By Charles Cassady

It's summer-vacation season, but remember as you plan your travels that the world is a very dangerous place, beset with terrorism, plague, revolution and stampeding bulls.

Instead, why not just stay home and explore Northeast Ohio? Where the worst that can happen is you get sacrificed by the cult-worshippers of Hell Town, attacked by Melonheads, eaten by the Lake Erie Monster, or spirited away by the ghosts of Gore Orphanage.

That's if you plan your one-tank trips via Creepy Cleveland (<http://creepycleveland.blogspot.com>), a popular Internet site maintained by Chuck Hawley of Fairview Park. A mild-mannered computer programmer for the Cuyahoga County Sheriff's office, Hawley dons another guise when the darkness falls — which, on the World Wide Web, is anytime you want — as a curator of local tales of the strange and offbeat.

"Too many times I've been at a party or just hanging out when the topic of discussion turned to the dead grandfather somebody swears they saw, or the blinking lights that nobody can explain," said Hawley.

"Northern Ohio is all I've ever known and a big reason why I wanted to start a Web page for local ghost stories."

Click on Creepy Cleveland today and you'll see a photo of Squire's Castle, a shell of an old gatehouse for a tycoon's planned (but never built) estate that's now a part of the Cleveland Metroparks' North Chagrin Reservation, and reputed to be haunted by bobbing lights at night. An enlargement of the photo seems to show the outline of somebody staring out the window — when the photographer was sure no living person was there.

There are also reader postings and images of the notorious Franklin Castle on Cleveland's near west side, a haunted bar in Fairport Harbor, the gruesome Mansfield Reformatory and tales of would-be ghostbusters going hunting for "Melonheads" — feral humanoids with deformed, enlarged skulls, in the country roads around Mentor and Kirtland.

"I grew up trading creepy stories about the old Crile Hospital behind Tri-C West," said Hawley, who was born in Parma. "Once we swore we were being chased out of the woods behind the duck pond on Big Creek Parkway, and when we got back to where we parked our

bikes, they were all thrown in the bushes and covered in blood! No, they were covered in mud, but we were so scared, and it was almost dark. Y'know how it is."

In the wild-frontier days of the Internet Hawley found an outlet for his fascination with spooky North Coast yarns, originally in the text-only mode of online bulletin boards.

"In the early 90's I was, in fact, on USENET posting and contributing to alt.folklore.ghost-stories and asking if anybody had ever heard of some of the places around Cleveland," Hawley said. "It wasn't until 1997, when I was starting to dabble with making a personal Web page, that I was able to get a page online."

"It was horrible. I called it 'Links to Fringe of Sanity' because that's all it was — a bunch of links. Little by little I started collecting little snippets from, USENET and links to other people's Web pages where I found information on local legends. Eventually, I had a brainstorm to tear down 'Links to the Fringe' and just devote my time to ghost stories and legends."

Demands on his time compelled Hawley to stop updating Creepy Cleveland for a while, though archived versions were kept accessible for fans. It was the dreaded Melonheads we have to thank, in part, for Creepy Cleveland's resurgence.

"Last October I was thumbing through the Free Times and stumbled across the [Halloween tie-in] article 'Mutant Melon Heads Terrorize Kirtland.' Creepy Cleveland was mentioned at the end of the article. I was sad. I missed Creepy Cleveland and I wanted it back. I contacted the guy who was running it and he happily agreed to give it back, saying he just wanted the page to be online."

"Halloween, 2006, Creepy Cleveland was reborn."

Hawley described his credo for a local X-File.

"The line between a boring true story and a great lie is thin," Hawley said. "I think there must be a kernel of truth to most creepy stories, and the act of making them better without totally destroying that kernel is an art form. Some of the best stories I've received on Creepy Cleveland have the kernel of truth and leave it to you to decide whether there's any truth involved."

Thus, Hawley said, he doesn't try to confirm or deny the creepy postings.

"I almost never try to verify any claims," Hawley said. "I decided a long time ago that I wanted to provide a (nearly) uncensored forum for anyone to submit stories. I wanted other people to be able to comment on them. The way I figure it, a good story will promote itself. If the story is obviously hokey, it'll get criticized and in the process maybe someone will post a link or submit a story that proves it's untrue. A good, possibly true story will remain unexplainable."

"Only once have I ever held a story back. The author sent a story in which he admitted doing something that was blatantly illegal. Even if it was a true story, I didn't want to encourage that sort of behavior."

Some of those illegal shenanigans involve trespassing, and Hawley warns would-be adventurers to show prudence in their paranormal hunts, lest they meet with his boss, the sheriff.

"While it's not technically illegal to go to many of these places, the local authorities have been on the lookout for trespassers and wild parties for many years now," Hawley said. "Places like Gore Orphanage, Boston Township and Franklin Castle are best visited in the daytime."

Has Chuck Hawley ever personally confronted the awesome mystery of the unknown, plunging his mind screamingly into the abyssal depths of eldritch terror that warps into the madness of nightmarish ghastliness that is...Cleveland?

"I've only had a few really hard-to-explain experiences," Hawley said. "There was the occasion when our locked apartment door opened during a Ouija board session at a party. My wife stepped over and pushed it closed, only to have it bounce back because the deadbolt was sticking out. Then the time when no amount of remote-clicking, button-pushing or unplugging would turn the television off until I left the room; that was weird."

"Oh, also, I hear people that aren't there talking in cemeteries sometimes. That last one might just be in my head. Maybe."

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