

TRADITIONALLY, a haunted house should be empty, lonely, a bit worn and dilapidated, and, if possible, of an unusual size and shape. If it can sit on a slight elevation, surrounded by gaunt trees—all the better. But how many of our really interesting ghostly retreats have filled this bill? Very few, in fact.

In Virginia I discovered exactly such a house, reposing in lonely isolation on a hill above Fork Union, a small town geographically almost in the exact center of the state. Careby Hall, the home of Dr. William E. Hatcher, the founder of Fork Union Military Academy, glimmers palely through the trees by day and is even more spectrally effective as it shines in the dark by reflected moonlight. When it is visited it rejects one with that hollow-eyed vacant stare that only a plethora of uncurtained windows can produce. Even its unusual lopsided construction—a round tower on the right, dormer windows and a porchless front entrance in the center, a gabled roof over square-shaped rooms on the left—gives it the austerity a proper haunted house should have. A slight list to starboard and general disrepair add to its forlorn and defenseless aspect. A house like this was made

for warm hearth fires and busy, bustling inhabitants. For it to be sitting starkly alone and untended seems unfair and unkind—but certainly and very definitely ghostly.

This eleven-room structure did not always have the lean and hungry look of a place that time has forgotten. Once it was a happy, sociable home where an energetic family was raised, and the center of jolly campus parties and friendly gatherings at the feet of the eminent minister who built it in 1897 and lived in it until his death at the age of seventy-eight in 1912.

When I was driven up the hill by Capt. Kenneth Hardesty of Fork Union Military Academy to see Careby Hall it was in November and there was an early snow on the ground. The bare trees in the grove surrounding the house were shivering, and the house itself looked as if it were cringing from the unseasonal cold. We were unable to go inside, but wandered around looking at the forbidding exterior as long as the penetrating wind would allow. I knew nothing about this house except its reputation for being haunted, yet I called Ken Hardesty's attention to an upper-right-hand window in the tower. I did not think I actually *saw* anything looking out of it, but I had a very strong feeling that something was watching us from there. I was later to learn that at least six people associated with the Academy have either seen an apparition looking from this window or experienced something else of a curious nature involving it.

Capt. Robert K. Spencer later told me that this window was in what might be considered the attic, a portion of which had been made into a small reading room or study. From the windows one can see a great distance. Even now, scattered around all over the floor are fragments of old books and some business and personal letters—many of them in Dr. Hatcher's own handwriting. Capt. Spencer said, "Some of these that I have read give wonderful insight into the personality and character of Dr. Hatcher—a very considerate gentleman, a loving husband and father, a devout man of God, a tireless traveler and worker, a good organizer and businessman, and a generally wonderful humanitarian.

If I had lived at Careby Hall, I'm sure I would have found this the perfect spot, as he must have, for meditation, for study, and for preparing sermons."

The home is still owned by descendants of Dr. Hatcher, but none of them find it expedient to live there at the present time. It has remained vacant since the passing of the last of Dr. Hatcher's children, Mrs. Elizabeth Sadler. Bob Spencer stated that soon after his arrival at Fork Union he used to visit Careby Hall often, accompanied by cadets, to see "Ma" Sadler, as she was affectionately known to them. She enjoyed taking them on tours of the house and telling them about the old days there. Capt. Spencer particularly commented on Dr. Hatcher's study, which his daughter kept as if she were expecting him to come in at any moment. His desk and chair were there with folio of paper and pen and ink; several books were spread around; and his spectacles were open on the desk. Ma Sadler said the room was just as her father had left it. Perhaps in the days of television's "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir," the idea does not sound as impossible as it once did, so may I suggest that from time to time the good minister used to drop in to read a favorite book or go over his accounts? Now that this den is no longer furnished, he goes up to the tower and looks out the window.

Dr. William E. Hatcher came to the town of Fork Union for the first time in the summer of 1864. He was then the pastor of the Bainbridge Street Baptist Church of Manchester, Virginia, and had been invited to conduct a one-week revival meeting at the local Fork Baptist Church. He achieved success during that week, not only as a revivalist but as a suitor, for he met the true love of his life there. He and Miss Virginia Snead were married on December 22 of that year.

When Dr. Hatcher later became pastor of Grace Street Baptist Church in Richmond, about fifty miles away, he and his wife and children visited her relatives at Fork Union every summer. Finally, in 1896, he decided to build a country summer home at Fork Union as a place of retreat for himself and his

family. He bought twenty-six acres of hilly land and built on the most symmetrical elevation. When the house was completed, he named it Careby Hall after the Hatcher ancestral home in Lincolnshire, England.

Being a great socializer, Dr. Hatcher continually invited friends to visit his new place in the country. Knowing him, they were willing to take the risk that the "hut in the brush" to which he invited them would not be quite the rural structure he depicted. Every summer the house was made lively with numerous guests from all over the South, many of them fellow Baptist ministers, who are noted for their spirited gatherings.

The Sabre, Fork Union Military Academy's newspaper, tells how the Academy came into being.

"After retiring from the ministry, Dr. Hatcher made his summer residence into a permanent, year-round home. Looking across from Careby Hall to a gently rising slope, he could see a magnificent grove of oaks and kept thinking it would be a 'splendid place for a school.'" After voicing these sentiments occasionally, Dr. Hatcher convinced himself it was worth some effort on his part to accomplish. He twisted the arms of ten of his friends to make a loan of fifty dollars each to establish a school for college preparation with a five-hundred-dollar endowment. With this money, Dr. Hatcher proposed to secure a teacher and schoolhouse in the village to use until more funds could be acquired for building construction.

On October 15, 1898, Fork Union Academy opened its doors to nineteen boys and girls from the local area. Dr. Hatcher was elected to the post that eventually became known as the President of the Board of Trustees. At the beginning of the 1902-03 session, the school became known as Fork Union Military Academy. Today it is a nonprofit institution owned by the Baptist General Association of Virginia, fully accredited as a Military Preparatory School with highest rating.

In Careby Hall members of the Academy's new Psychic Science Club are offered the unique experience of having right on

their own campus a haunted house to investigate to their hearts' content. They have already had some interesting results. Two cadets presently at the academy, seventeen-year-old John M. Sioris of Silver Spring, Maryland, and sixteen-year-old Felix Rexach of San Juan, Puerto Rico, made an expedition to the house one night in March 1969. Since they could not get in, for it is kept carefully locked, they shined their flashlight all over the exterior of the house and into the windows.

If a ghost alone in such a house became aware that he was suddenly receiving unusual attention, would he not most likely endeavor to make his presence known? The ghost of Careby Hall did exactly this by whistling. The cadets definitely heard someone whistling a tune inside the house. It was unfamiliar to them and sounded, they said, "like an old tune . . . something like a waltz. . . ." The whistling came from the upper-right window of the front of the tower. That same one I mentioned earlier.

The year before the Psychic Science Club was formed, Cadet Karl Woelfel of Miami, Florida, went for an off-the-record visit to the house with two other football players. They discovered that there was an assailable secret window that might be pried open, and so they entered the building. This does not preclude the possibility that someone else may also have entered the same way and was secreted there. However, in such a small community and such an isolated house, it hardly seems probable that anyone would have been hiding out there on as many occasions as visitors have reported hearing noises or seeing ghostly manifestations in the house. Just before this was written Capt. Spencer reported to me that he had been inside the building on an inspection tour and there was no evidence whatever that it had been used for a hideout at any time.

Cadet Woelfel and the other two boys entered the house and were looking it over. They had gone through the six downstairs rooms and were standing in the spacious entrance hall near the beautiful solid-oak staircase looking at its intricate carvings, when all three heard a noise from upstairs. It was apparently not

an easy-to-describe noise, because the cadets were completely unable to agree on exactly what it sounded like; but it was definitely not the kind that should be heard in an uninhabited house. It was real and solid and earthy. The youths hastily scrambled back through the window, having no desire to confront either man or ghost under such inauspicious circumstances. About twenty feet from the house they stopped running and stood and looked back. Then, Woelfel says, "We all noticed that the window upstairs on the right was open and a dim glow was visible there. It was distinctly a presence of some kind, but one that seemed to be made of fog or smoke."

It has been said in that community for many years, particularly among the Negroes, that the old Hatcher home was haunted. Capt. Spencer talked to an elderly man who is employed by the school at present and has been familiar with Careby Hall, the Academy, and environs for many years. His name is Wyatt "Cracker" Bryant. Bob said, "Cracker told me that one night many years ago he was attracted by a pack of small yelping dogs and puppies on one of the roads leading to the Hatcher place. He said that the dogs seemed to be jumping up at someone who was there other than he, but he could see no one. He could see only the dogs jumping up and standing on their hind legs around 'something.'"

Cracker Bryant also recalled that about twenty-five years ago one night a group of the boys were having a 'possum hunt in the woods near Careby Hall. The dogs treed a 'possum right in front of the old house and the hunters gathered around the trunk with the yelping dogs. Just then the whole group saw a ghostly figure standing at the upstairs-right window intently watching what was going on. Some of the men said the figure looked like Dr. Hatcher.

The Psychic Science Club has been collecting accounts of the haunting for its records. Organized in the spring of 1968, it has proved to be one of the most popular extra-curricular activities on the campus. Capt. Hardesty and Capt. Spencer started the

club because of their own personal interest in the subject and their conviction that it was shared by many of the students. Their faith in this concept was rewarded by a membership that from the beginning has filled all available meeting places to capacity. The goals of the club have been established as "The desire to promote serious discussion and study of the now well-established field of psychical research, because this area of man's increasing knowledge about himself and the hitherto unrealized and unexplored qualities of his mind is becoming a subject of interest and importance in every circle of our culture."

I was invited to Fork Union in November 1968 to address the Psychic Science Club, but interest in my subject was such that the entire student body and most of the faculty and their wives—numbering approximately eight hundred persons—turned out for the lecture. It was then that I learned that the campus not only had many enthusiastic cadets, but also a haunted house for this book.

Psychic Science Club members have been investigating Careby Hall unofficially since then in an attempt to acquire evidence for me. It is curious, however, that the only time Dr. Hatcher was actually seen and identified on the campus was not in his old home. Of course, he must have affection also for the main administration and classroom building of the Academy, for it is named Hatcher Hall, and its lobby contains a large portrait of him.

This incident occurred about eight years ago, and the cadet who reported it to Capt. Spencer revealed by his straightforward account that he was not seeking attention or notoriety, he was merely stating an unusual occurrence. This young man had pulled guard duty and had to spend the night in the guard room in Hatcher Hall. After he had checked the entire campus, he returned to Hatcher Hall and extinguished all lights in the building except the one in the guard room. Then he prepared to retire. Just then he heard what sounded like a door opening and closing on the second floor. Shining his flashlight before him, the

cadet went up the stairs, opened the large door onto the main hall, and observed that the hall was totally dark. He walked a short distance back and forth, shining his torch all about. Just then the cadet felt something brush up against him, and he turned abruptly and flashed his light behind him. He was astounded when its glow revealed an elderly man with a gray beard, wearing a black overcoat and Homburg and carrying a cane or umbrella. The old gentleman did not stop to pass the time of night. He walked with a sprightly step down the hall and disappeared. And his face was a duplicate of the face in the large painting of Dr. Hatcher in the entrance hall.

The most recent report comes from two cadets, Malcolm W. Smith of Laurel, Maryland, and Alex P. Woskob of State College, Pennsylvania, who went into the house one night in April 1969. While standing near one of the nine fireplaces, both became conscious of something beside them. They did not actually see a phantom, but they felt his presence strongly; and they also heard a sound like shuffling feet on the floor near them. These two cadets left quickly.

It is to be hoped that the Psychic Science Club will continue its interest in Careby Hall, and will organize an occasional séance or development circle to meet there and attempt to learn what can be manifested by Dr. Hatcher and any of his invisible cohorts. Insistently maintained rumors, such as the one that some students have tried to open the front door only to have it pushed shut in their faces, must be tested under controlled conditions. It has already been ascertained that there are no springs on the door that would normally force it to resist being opened. Now they will have to learn if any other natural pressures can be at work, and if not they will have to institute a stakeout to observe the door under any and all possible conditions. If there is then evidence that the resistance is more than a rumor, some gains for the "cause" of psychical research will have been made.

Careby Hall thus will have a continuing role to play on the campus. It will not be considered as simply a relic of the past.

This is why plans for a restoration that are now under way, supervised by a local contractor, Alex W. Leland, were not received with any joy by Psychic Science Club members. Although they share with other cadets and faculty members at the Academy the desire to see lights shine again from the windows of Careby Hall, they are not in any hurry for this to happen. They want first to give Dr. Hatcher the opportunity to attempt to prove in any way possible to him that he does still survive and is interested in his home and his school.

So far he has not been doing too bad a job of it.

SOURCE:

"Ghosts Around the House"

By Susy Smith, NY: World Publishing Co., 1970, pp. 135-143