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Forrest City, Monticello offer haunt-themed tours

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As humans, we seem to be continually looking for an explanation for those things that cannot be easily defined or justified. For centuries, explorers have searched the seas, foreign lands and even outer space looking for answers to the unknown. Two homes in the Arkansas Delta — the Rush-Gates House and the Allen House — have come under paranormal scrutiny from organizations in search of answers that have, thus far, defied explanation.

Rush-Gates House

On a corner lot along Front Street in Forrest City stands a lovely older blue-gray home, overlooking the nearby railroad tracks that once played a significant part in the town's economy. In 1906, the structure was built as the home of Dr. J.O. Rush and his family. The choice of the location of the house was a strategic decision by Rush, who served as a physician and surgeon for the railroads and felt it would be sensible to build the home near the tracks. Day and night, the home was filled with the maimed and injured, especially those involved in railroading accidents. In the decades to come, many would claim seeing strange movement through the darkened windows. Some local residents claimed that those who were brought to Dr. Rush's office for medical attention haunted the house. After Dr. Rush's death in 1961, the house stayed in the family until 1995. Over the years, the stories of weird occurrences and shadowy figures in the windows continued to flourish.

After extensive renovation, the Rush-Gates House opened in 1998 as the home of the St. Francis County Museum, dedicated to sharing the history of the county through exhibits, artifacts and photographs. Shelley Gervasi, the museum's curator, is hesitant to make assumptions but she will admit to odd things happening in the century-old house.

"Things disappear ... a lot," Gervasi said. "You'll put something down and within minutes, it will be gone. Virtually every staff member has had incidents happen that are unexplainable."

It was those unexplainable incidents for which the Rush house was known that led to the formation of a group dedicated to investigating the paranormal. Paranormal Research in Unknown Phenomenon was established in January 2008 and uses the Rush-Gates House as a training facility. Several of the founding members had worked with other paranormal organizations, such as Arkansas Paranormal and Anomalous Studies Team, in studying the Gates-Rush House before forming their own group. The organization's mission is to find unmitigated proof — whatever the outcome. They use state-of-the-art equipment, such as electronic voice phenomenon and electromagnetic field meters, in their on-going quest for answers.

The St. Francis County Museum now offers A Night at the Museum program at various times throughout the year, including Halloween. Guests come to the museum and spend several

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hours inside the house alongside members of the paranormal investigative team. The event starts with a history of the Rush-Gates House and museum staff share stories of strange occurrences they've experienced. Tour participants hear a series of electronic voice phenomenon that were previously recorded in the house and, following a quick overview of the equipment that will be used, the visitors watch and participate as team members collect data. Before the guests leave, the investigation team scans the audio recordings that were made throughout the evening and allow participants to hear any easily recognized vocal recordings (not requiring computer enhancement) that were captured.

Tours normally start between 8:30 p.m. and 9 p.m. and conclude around 3 a.m. For more information on scheduling A Night at the Museum tour, contact the St. Francis County Museum at (870) 261-1744 or visit www.SFCMuseum.org. To learn more about Paranormal Research in Unknown Phenomenon, log on to www.PRUPH.org.

The Allen House

Along Monticello's North Main Street, an imposing structure located off the street and surrounded by a handsome wrought-iron fence, quickly catches the eye of visitors. Built in 1906, the Allen House is a beautiful example of Queen Anne Victorian architecture that also features Gothic and neoclassical design elements such as massive porch columns and multi-storied turrets.

Joe Lee Allen, a successful local businessman, planned the home to be the most impressive the town had ever seen. Allen, his wife Caddy and their three daughters moved into the stately home. In the following years, Allen became an hotelier, bank president and automobile salesman. Allen died at age 54 in 1917. His widow lived in the notable home until her death in 1954.

It was the week leading up to 1949 that would begin the legend surrounding the Allen family and their home. The Allen's second daughter, Ladell, consumed mercury cyanide-laced punch on Dec. 26, 1948, in the master suite of the family home. She died one week later. Her mother sealed off the room and it would not be entered by anyone for nearly four decades.

The house remained in the Allen family until 1986. The home was divided into apartments in 1956 by the Allens' grandson and remained a rental property for three decades. During this time, the Allen House became known for more than its architectural grandeur. Tenants in the apartments would tell stories about paranormal experiences ranging from hazy figures in photographs to furniture being unexplainably rearranged. Many people often commented on a lady sitting in a turret window.

The current owners, Rebecca and Mark Spencer, bought the home in summer 2007. "The house seems to "eat" things," says Rebecca, somewhat amusedly. "Things just seem to disappear into thin air. It's almost like an everyday part of life for us now."

The story of Ladell and the supposedly haunted Allen House had become regional legend by the time the Spencers bought the home. In late June of this year, Louisiana Spirits Paranormal Investigations, a group dedicated to investigating paranormal activity, conducted a full paranormal investigation of the Allen House. It was the group's second visit to the home — the first visit was cut short when a large limb fell on a power line the backyard, pulling the electrical meter off the house and cutting all power, despite no wind or severe weather in the area. During the second visit, Louisiana Spirits did capture several electronic voice phenomenon during their investigation, along with photos and a video clip.

The Allen House is now open for historic guided tours by appointment and also is a popular spot for weddings. The historic property opens its doors the last two days of October for special Halloween tours. The tour includes all three floors of the home, with tour guides providing historical information and pointing out Allen family artifacts. During the Halloween tours, guests will also hear five of the voice phenomenon that were captured during the Louisiana Spirits investigation in June.

The Allen House Halloween tours run from 4-10 p.m. on Oct. 30 and 31. Tickets can be purchased in advance or at the door, although tour space may be limited. The average tour time is 25 minutes. To learn more about the historic Allen House and the special Halloween tours, log on to www.AllenHouseTours.com or phone (870) 224-2271. To learn more about the investigation of the Allen House, visit www.laspirits.com/allenhouse.

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