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WESTWORD

WEB EXCLUSIVES

Chicago hauntings more historical than frightening

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While many prefer to visit Halloween haunted houses, some choose to attend the real haunts Chicago has to offer. Chicago Hauntings Ghost Tours (CHGT) seeks to afford the ghost hunter such an experience.

CHGT provides a two-hour tour that begins at the corner of Clark and Ohio streets in downtown Chicago. Even the bus provides an environment of a true ghost tour, with neon lighting, pictures of the dead skeletons and bone-chilling music playing in the background.

On this reporter's tour, the guide for the evening, Dan Bielski, introduced himself as CHGT founder Ursula's husband and spoke about the tour. "Chicago is one of the most haunted cities in the world. We believe that at these locations we will provide you with helpful understanding of why exactly they are haunted. These tours are designed to let your mind relax and enter into the world of the spiritual and paranormal," Bielski said.

Heading southward, the bus made its first stop at the **Oriental Theater**. Located on Randolph, this was once the anchor of downtown theater life. Previously known as the Iroquois Theater, and once what Bielski called "the grandest showplace" in the city, a true disaster here ruined the lives of theatergoers and their families on the evening of Sept. 30, 1903. According to Bielski, during the production of *Mr. Bluebeard*, with an audience of more than 600, the houselights caught the main curtain on fire and the entire theater began to burn. Six hundred two patrons were killed within a matter of 20 minutes, one of the deadliest fires in American history.

Bielski noted that many believe that the spirits of those killed in the fire haunt the old theater. Electric circuits going haywire; toilets flushing on their own, screaming and suddenly dropping temperatures have been witnessed inside the theater over the years. The guide told the group that sightings of apparitions both inside the building and in the alley have been recorded. None of the above were in evidence during this stop.

Turning the corner and heading toward the Chicago River, the bus approached the **Eastland Disaster** site. Bielski related the story: On a bright, early morning in 1915, the Eastland cast off from the Chicago River dock at the Clark Street Bridge with more than 2000 passengers. At one point, Chicago Fire Department fireboats shot out water cannons, causing commotion on the Eastland. The passengers immediately crowded to one side of the ship, and the ship began to tip, due to the unevenly distributed weight, and many drowned. Today, as people walk up the boardwalk, Bielski said, they still experience strange paranormal activity and hear all sorts of sounds, and period-style wide-brimmed hats have been witnessed floating on the surface of the water. However, tourists on this voyage reported no incidence of such activity.

Departing, the bus once again headed south. As it entered the University of Illinois Chicago campus, Bielski began filling his audience in on nearby Jane Addams' **Hull House**, explaining that strange activities often occur when people enter the yard of the house, including tingles in their arms or hair standing up. He also mentioned the Devil Baby story. Due to a murder of a baby in the house, the baby reportedly still haunts the house to this day, causing all sorts of chaos. Security alarms go on throughout the night, and evidence of ghosts in the yard has been reported.

After a 15-minute visit at Hull House elicited no paranormal activity, the final destination was the site of the 1929 **St. Valentine's Day Massacre**, in which Chicago's original gangster Al Capone hired three men to kill members of a north side mob. Posing as police officers, they entered the parking garage at 2122 North Clark Street with 300 rounds of ammunition and began slaughtering seven men. As was the case at the other locations, amazing photos have been taken at the location that seem to prove the strange paranormal activity. Bielski reports that psychics still sense the violence from the cold-blooded murder, but no one of the tour group reported such sensations.

Overall, the CHGT provides an interesting history lesson but falls short of the frightening experience one might expect from such a tour. The tour is recommended for those who have relatives or friends from out of town who wish to learn more about the city's history but might disappoint anyone interested in a scary Halloween experience.

CHGT tours occur Tues.-Sun. at 7:30 p.m. Tickets cost \$30 for adults and \$20 for children. Visit www.chicagohauntings.com for more information.



Chicago Hauntings tours sites thought to be inhabited by ghosts.
Photo by Zoe Ljubic