The Ghosts Of Belcourt Castle

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second edition
2011

iUniverse, Inc.
Bloomington
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Introduction

Belcourt is not haunted, despite the rumors. Yet on occasion some inexplicable apparitions have appeared to its owners, staff, and guests. The best explanation for those happenings, or at least the explanation most people prefer, is that there are ghosts in Belcourt Castle. It seems most likely that some ghosts came with antiques.

Figure 3: Belcourt Castle West Façade

Sensitive people such as Virginia Smith have provided persuasive answers to many of the unexplained phenomena. She confided in me that, as a young girl, she had seen a ghost. It
did not frighten her, but instead gave her the curiosity to do extensive research on the subject. Fascinated by the spirits she could sense among the historical artifacts at Belcourt Castle, she inquired about any unexplained visions the residents and visitors have had.

The Ghosts of Belcourt Castle may be centuries older than the summer cottage Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont built in Newport, Rhode Island between 1891 and 1894. Designed in the Louis XIII style by famous architect Richard Morris Hunt, it cost three million end-of-the-century dollars. For most of its first sixty years, the mansion afforded plenty of time for the spirits to cavort. Except for six weeks a year during that period, the mansion was uninhabited. That was not unusual for, with few exceptions, the Newport mansions were considered “summer cottages”.

After only one summer, 1895, in Belcourt, Belmont married Alva Smith Vanderbilt, who had divorced the multi-millionaire railroad tycoon William K. Vanderbilt. They spent the next twelve seasons at Belcourt, living a lavish lifestyle in a flurry of social events. Oliver Belmont died in 1908. Alva then made significant changes to Belcourt. She added the English Library and the Reception Room that is now the Chapel. She changed the staircase three times and gave the castle the first-ever kitchen. Alva Belmont became an active suffragist, hosting many parties for influential politicians and joining women protesters, who had suffered at the hands of proponents of the male-oriented status quo. With her inherited fortunes, she designed and built a new mansion on Sands Point, Long Island, demonstrating her ability as a female architect. She promoted the equality of women in a man’s world. At the age of 80 in 1933 Alva Belmont died at her restored castle on the French Riviera. Her feisty spirit is sensed in the halls as Belcourt moves into the twenty-first century of gender equality.

The Belmonts owned Belcourt until 1940, when the 90-year-old Hon. Perry Belmont, Oliver Belmont’s oldest brother, sold it. During the next fifteen years the adaptive uses of some 60,000
square feet included an antique automobile museum, an army depot, and a concert venue for the second annual Newport Jazz Festival in July of 1955.

In November 1956, Belcourt was purchased by Harold B. Tinney (55), his wife Ruth (50), their son Donald (23) and Ruth’s aunt, Nellie Fuller (75). They opened the museum in 1957 and hosted events and concerts. After attending several recitals at Belcourt between 1957 and 1960, I took a position as a tour guide for the summer of 1960. On December 2, that same year, at the age of 19, I became Mrs. Donald Tinney, and the newest resident of Belcourt.

Years later Miss Virginia Smith presented a slide lecture on ghosts she had encountered in her travels. I found it to be entertaining and informative. Her research and personal experiences, genuinely presented, dissolved my fear of being ridiculed for having seen the Monk apparition twice.

Now I relate my own experiences, and take the chance that some will understand.

Harle A. Tinney
Chapter I
Belcourt Is Not Haunted

Belcourt was abandoned from about 1940 until the mid 1950s, when a caretaker, Benny Collin, a Danish-born artist, took responsibility for keeping the vandals out.

Gaining illicit entry became a challenge. Twenty exterior entrances and more than 50 second story doors and windows were boarded up. Nonetheless, determined trespassers occasionally succeeded in getting in, and Benny could only repair the damage and replace the boards.

One particularly bad day, after boarding up yet another point of unlawful entry, Benny had an idea for catching the culprits, or for at least ensuring that they would never return. He bought a white sheet, a broom, and a flashlight. He moved his pallet bed from the cozy southeast corner studio to the cavernous third floor Musicians Balcony overlooking Belcourt’s French Gothic

Figure 4: Self-portrait of Benny Collin, artist, resident caretaker of Belcourt ca. 1948-1972
ballroom. From this central point, he could hear any activity in the eerie, echoing, empty halls.

After several nights of peace, Benny was awakened by the clump of footsteps on the grand stair. Intruders had found another way in! He threw his white sheet over himself and the broom, to which he had attached the flashlight. The barely five-foot tall Dane picked up a piece of chain he had gleaned from the beach after the 1954 hurricane, and waited until all the noises came from the ballroom. Then he lit the flashlight under the sheet, raised and lowered the broom, moaned, groaned, and rattled the chain.

The startled intruders barely touched the stairs on their way out! Benny flew after them, his white sheet flapping in the wind. He chased them down the grand stair, across the marble floor toward the east basement, and through the ninety-foot tunnel. They went out as they had entered, through the tunnel door in the south courtyard. Down the dark street they ran. At Bailey’s Beach, Benny, winded, gave up the chase.
Within a few days, the word had spread all over town: Belcourt was haunted. It worked! There were no more broken windows or damaged doors that season.

The Sequel: Years later, as I was giving a tour, I overheard a gentleman talking to his five-year-old grandson. “You know, son, if it weren’t for you I never would have come back into this house.”

Curious, I asked the man, “Why?”

“The last time I was in this house was over 35 years ago,” he replied.

“Before the Tinneys bought the house?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “back when nobody was living here. Something chased me and some buddies of mine out of this house, and I swore that day that I would never come back here again. Wouldn’t have, neither, if my grandson hadn’t talked me into it.”

That middle-aged grandfather had harbored the memory of Benny’s sheet, broom and flashlight for thirty-five years!