

A neighborhood haunt

Littleton's Melting Pot is ghost-friendly

BY PETER JONES

Tony Wheeler wasn't much for ghost stories before taking a job at the Melting Pot in Littleton nine years ago.

"I'm the one who makes fun of ghost people," the restaurant's longtime general manager said. "I think they're kind of dorky, you know. I'm a total skeptic."

Not totally, as it turns out.

Wheeler's doubts about ghosts went down the drain some years ago – late one night after the restaurant closed, while standing alone in the downstairs men's room.

"One by one, the other urinals started flushing," he said.

When one refilled, the next would flush. Then came the stalls, each flushing and refilling in a sequential dance of plumbing gone mad.

Wheeler laughed awkwardly as the flush orchestra reached its crescendo.

"Here are the Melting Pot ghosts finally coming to get me," the manager chuckled to himself as he stepped away to wash his hands.

"As soon as my sink comes on, the other sink comes on and the light went off," Wheeler recalled. "All the hair on my body stood at attention. It was super-duper creepy. I ran all the way up to the office."

A couple of weeks later, Wheeler was again the only person in the restaurant, armed with a flashlight, doing a final walk through the eatery's dark cavernous lower level, where privacy curtains partially covered some of the dining tables.

"I heard what sounded like two or three people whispering in my ear, like really, really close," he said. "I stopped and I whipped open the curtain. The chair was now flipped upside down on top of the table."

A freaked-out Wheeler ran up the stairs, before slowly making his way back down – only to hear that creepy whispering again.

The general manager is now a believer.

"Everyone says they're friendly ghosts and I just kind of have to go with that," he said. "Otherwise, I'd kind of overthink it a little bit. Based on those two experiences, I kind of believe something is going on here."

Ghoulishness and foolishness

During its 17 years at the end of Littleton's Historic Main Street, the Melting Pot has been the site of numerous – some say daily – reports of paranormal activity, putting the restaurant on the national map for paranormal investigation.

Over the years, the Melting Pot has attracted the likes of the Biography Channel and radio talk host Peter Dinklage, who has made a habit of broadcasting from the Melting Pot on Halloween. The building, which has made the Ghosts and Ghouls website list of the 100 Haunted Restaurants in the United States, continues to draw a monthly parade of psychics, séances and would-be ghost busters.

Oh yeah, people eat there too.

"There's always little stuff happening. Glass flying off the table – but nothing like floating heads or anything stupid like that," Wheeler said.

The mischievous ghosts seem to have a particular fondness for playing with the minds of skeptics, according to 11-year bartender Sean Berry, who says he has experienced a range of unexplained ghoulishness over the years – from

extra-worldly footsteps to ghosts inexplicably helping themselves to the beer tap.

One night after an after-hours bull session with a dubious co-worker, Berry says the specters seemed determined to make a convert of the uninitiated newbie.

"Two or three minutes later, we hear the front door open and close and then we hear footsteps go all the way to the bottom of the stairs," Berry said. "All three of us kind of jumped on edge. We locked the door, searched the building high and low, and we couldn't find anybody anywhere."

Two years later on New Year's Day, the same thing happened, he said.

The lure of such reports has led paranormal investigators to bring the latest in apparition-detection equipment, prompting the restaurant to get in on the fun with associated promotions and all-inclusive dinners/ghost investigations.

"They have all their computers set up so they can track temperature drops and stuff like that," Wheeler said. "October is the only time we really talk about it. We are a restaurant after all."

A haunted history

It is hard to separate fact from fiction at metro Denver's most famously haunted restaurant and few would be interested in doing so anyway.

The original building was designed by prominent Denver architect Jacques Benedict, who had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Described by his biographer as "eccentric and flamboyant," he was rumored to have had an interest in the occult, according to Wheeler.

"You see traces of that type of architecture in the building," he said.

The structure was finished in 1916, a delayed completion, reportedly due to flooding of the then-much closer South Platte River. Floods may or may not have killed one of more of the construction workers, depending on whom you believe.

Rumors persist that the building that became Littleton's Carnegie Library was also haunted

by a girl who drowned in a nearby fountain – a speculative rumor that ghost hunters have had some difficulty proving.

"My wife's grandmother remembers coming here when it was a library. She was telling us stories about books flying off shelves," Wheeler recounted.

After the building was converted to a police station, reports of botched escapes and shot inmates helped build on the lore before a disco and several restaurants came and went, some say due to the haunted building.

The Melting Pot took over in 1997.

Ghostly happenings would not scare away the resolute fondue restaurant, despite video surveillance that captured a bulky cappuccino machine leaping off a table seemingly by itself. The women's restroom has also become particularly infamous for its reports of noises, unseen grabbing and a general "feeling" of being watched.

Although the restaurant ownership has held firm on its senses, the same cannot be said for all employees or customers – a few of whom have suddenly resigned or left suddenly without paying their bill, respectively.

"One guy said he had claw marks on the back of his neck one night," Wheeler said of a former employee. "I had a manager who said the ghost followed him home. He ended up quitting."

Not so for hostess Emily Dornbos, who went out of her way one day to have lunch with friends at the notoriously haunted table No. 63.

"All of a sudden, the lights over our table just dimmed and turned back on," she said. "Then the lights in the whole section turned off and turned back on. I'm a bit of a skeptic, but there



If these walls could talk – oh yeah, they do. They whisper, actually. The multi-level and cavernous Melting Pot is ripe with ghost stories.



Many diners request table No. 63 for a particularly haunting experience – but there are no guarantees of anything but good fondue.

are things that just can't be explained."

Even by the server on duty, who swore he had nothing to do with it.

Dealing with ghosts has in part become an occupational hazard of working at the Melting Pot, a frequent destination for birthdays and anniversaries.

After more than a decade at the popular res-

taurant, Berry says he has grown to consider the Melting Pot's ghosts as part of the job – a bit like dealing with a regular customer, whether you like them or not.

"Nothing's ever hurt me," the general manager said. "I just think they want to be recognized from time to time."



ABOVE: The Melting Pot in Littleton may have Halloween ghosts hanging by the doorway this month, but ghost chasers say the place is haunted by the real McCoy. Photos by Peter Jones



RIGHT: Melting Pot General Manager Tony Wheeler remembers the time these faucets seemingly turned on by themselves, one by one, after the urinals and toilets completed a similar feat



BELOW: Bartender Sean Berry looks at the beer taps that have reportedly been known to pour by themselves.



Hostess Emily Dornbos greets more than customers. She has only worked at the Melting Pot for six months, but she is a believer – almost.