

Haunted Milwaukee: Ghost tours mix spooky stories with city history



Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

Dressed in a Victorian costume, Anna Lardinois leads her Gothic Milwaukee ghost tours through downtown Milwaukee.



Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

The Bronze Fonz depicts actor Henry Winkler as Arthur “Fonzie” Fonzarelli in the sitcom “Happy Days,” set in Milwaukee. The statue is a popular photo-op site on Milwaukee's RiverWalk.



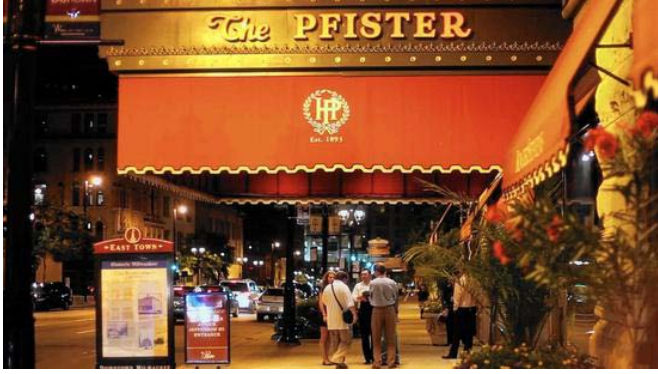
Katherine Rodeghier/for the Chicago Tribune

The ghost of a choirboy is said to haunt the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist on Cathedral Square in downtown Milwaukee.



Visit Milwaukee

A bronze statue of Gertie the Duck memorializes a mallard that captured the attention of Milwaukee residents in 1945.



Visit Milwaukee

Opened in 1893, The Pfister is a luxury hotel in downtown Milwaukee and a member of the Historic Hotels of America.



Visit Milwaukee

The Pfister hotel, built in Romanesque Revival style, is said to be among the most haunted locations in Milwaukee.



Gothic Milwaukee

Gothic Milwaukee ghost tours operate rain or shine from spring through fall.



Visit Milwaukee

The Milwaukee RiverWalk winds along the Milwaukee River through downtown and city neighborhoods.

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Katherine Rodeghier Chicago Tribune

I think we can all agree there are few things more romantic than staircase love,” says Anna Lardinois.

Standing in a billowing hoop skirt outside a 19th-century building in downtown Milwaukee, this high-spirited storyteller has her listeners enthralled. She’s telling one of several ghost stories she spins on her 90-minute tour around town.

Lardinois taught high school English in suburban Milwaukee and often indulged her interest in the supernatural by taking ghost tours in destinations she visited on vacation. Six years ago, she decided to try leading a tour of her own. [Gothic Milwaukee](#) was born. It grew so popular that she quit her teaching job and devoted her energy full time to her blossoming tour enterprise.

In addition to her Classic Tour downtown, she leads a Ghosts of Yankee Hill Tour in Milwaukee’s East Town neighborhood, has a weekly radio program, “[Haunted Heartland](#),” and a new book, “[Milwaukee Ghosts and Legends](#),” that came out in September.

Lardinois likes to weave bits of Milwaukee history and architecture into her stories of the paranormal. At [Cathedral Square Park](#), where her Classic Tour begins, she tells listeners the site originally was known as Courthouse Square because Solomon Juneau, one of the founders of Milwaukee and its first mayor, donated the land for a courthouse and jail in 1836. After the courthouse came down, the square became a park named for the [Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist](#) on its east side.

In 1935, the cathedral caught on fire. The flames spread so quickly it became apparent the entire building could not be saved, so firemen had to make a choice: salvage the main church with its

altar or the majestic tower that stood sentinel at the entrance. They opted for the tower. A 10-year-old choirboy, Hans, watched the fire spreading and dashed into the burning church to save the hymnals. He perished. When the cathedral reopened for midnight Mass on Christmas Eve 1942, worshippers claim to have seen the ghost of Hans during the service.

The cathedral, seat of Milwaukee's Catholic archdiocese, is on the [National Register of Historic Places](#) and has been designated a city landmark. It's designed in German neoclassical *Zopfstil* using Milwaukee's signature "Cream City" brick.

A few blocks away, the ivory-colored brick also stands out on an Italianate building that has housed offices and restaurants over the years. Lardinois stops to recount the love story of Molly, a small-town girl who moved to the big city and lived here when the building was a rooming house more than a century ago.

"She did not always make the best choices," said Lardinois, wagging her finger in a prudish gesture that seems befitting of her Victorian costume. Molly met a charming traveling salesman and, as Lardinois puts it, "romance ensued." She listens for her lover to climb the staircase to her room each time he swings through town. When Molly learns the scoundrel is married, she decides to end the affair, "go home and marry a nice farm boy." She confronts the salesman. It doesn't end well. Years later, people continued to hear Molly's footsteps on the staircase and her door opening and closing.

In a coda to Molly's tale, Lardinois says the cad ran to catch a train after Molly's murder and got what was coming to him in a gruesome accident. Karma, perhaps?

The tour continues down Jefferson Street to [The Pfister](#), Milwaukee's landmark luxury hotel. Built in Romanesque Revival style and opened in 1893, it has hosted U.S. presidents, celebrities and, reportedly, more than a few ghosts.

Owner Charles Pfister was a big baseball fan and supporter of his home team. After his passing, rumors spread that his spirit would try to disrupt the sleep of players on visiting teams who often stayed at the hotel, says Lardinois. She tells the story of Dominican Republic native Carlos Gomez, a guest of the Pfister when he played outfield for the Minnesota Twins.

"He's getting ready for bed because that's where all good ghost stories start," she explains. Emerging from the shower in a towel, he catches some movement in his peripheral vision and "sees his iPod shimmy across the table." Lardinois says this supposedly paranormal encounter so unnerved "Go-Go" that he ran to the hotel lobby still wrapped in his towel yelling "get me outta here."

Baseball players weren't the only guests who reported unsettling incidents. Joey Lawrence, actor in the sitcom "Blossom," said his baby's toys mysteriously moved around his guest room, the TV turned on and off when no one was watching, and the cover of the air conditioner flew off.

Not all of Lardinois' tales deal with Milwaukee legends who are human or who are dead. Leaving the Pfister, she leads her audience down Wisconsin Avenue, pointing out buildings of noteworthy architecture or history on her way to the [Milwaukee RiverWalk](#) and a 4-foot-tall bronze sculpture of Gertie the Duck.

The mallard captivated the World War II-weary city in 1945 when a newspaperman wrote about a duck precariously nesting on wooden pilings in the Milwaukee River under the Wisconsin Avenue Bridge. Readers followed the story for weeks, some sending Mother's Day cards to Gertie. Life magazine and Reader's Digest ran articles. The Boy Scouts and the Humane Society stood watch, and when Gertie's ducklings finally hatched, they were put on display in a window of Gimbels department store before being relocated to [Juneau Park Lagoon](#).

Farther along the RiverWalk stands a tribute to a man still very much alive. The so-called Bronze Fonz depicts recent Emmy Award-winner Henry Winkler, actor in the legendary, Milwaukee-set sitcom "Happy Days." Arthur "Fonzie" Fonzarelli was a larger-than-life character on the screen, but the statue is just shy of Winkler's actual height: 5 feet, 6 inches. Created in bronze at a cost of \$85,000, The Fonz appears in his iconic T-shirt, leather jacket and jeans, giving his characteristic thumbs-up gesture.

Lardinois encourages her tour groups to take selfies with the statue — something just about every visitor to the RiverWalk does. Some say hugging Fonzie or grasping his thumb brings good luck. No guarantees it will protect you from mischief by ghosts.

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance writer.

Gothic Milwaukee: Classic Tour departs at 7 p.m. from Jackson and Wells streets on select dates through Halloween, \$15, 414-301-2266, [gothicmilwaukee.com](#). Also available: Ghosts of Yankee Hill Tour, \$15. (Private tours available year-round.) These walking tours are outdoors and go at a gentle pace for 90 minutes, rain or shine. Self-guided walking tours highlighting the history and architecture of Milwaukee, not ghosts, can be purchased on the website as a GPS-guided audio tour of downtown Milwaukee or sets of cards with maps and descriptions of Milwaukee or suburban Wauwatosa.

The Pfister: 424 E. Wisconsin Ave., rooms starting at \$199, 800-472-4403, [thepfisterhotel.com](#). Anna Lardinois is the current narrator-in-residence at the hotel, where she blogs about the property and guests' experiences, among other things. She'll hold the post until next May, when the next narrator-in-residence takes over. Lardinois said she's happy to show people around the historic hotel; email her at hotelnarrator@gmail.com to set up a time.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/travel/ct-trav-haunted-milwaukee-1007-story.html#>