

Spirits of Stonewall – Good and Otherwise

By T.E. Ricks

I do not personally believe in ghosts. I've never seen one nor heard one. Any number of persons have told me of seeing ghosts at Stonewall or of hearing unexplained noises. Most of these I question.

I had a young lady to tell me that she frequently came out to Stonewall and parked at night to watch for ghosts. She told of seeing a lady holding a baby in a third floor window on a number of occasions and another woman who appeared on the third floor balcony, screamed and then disappeared.

Another young lady who was at Stonewall rehearsing for her sister's wedding asked if Stonewall was haunted. When I responded that I didn't believe in such she remarked "Oh, I definitely feel the presence of spirits in the house", but she hastened to add "they are happy spirits!".

In spite of my opening comment of my disbelief in ghosts, I have had an unexplainable experience that developed over a period of time. For some year to 18 months, every time I would go up to the 3rd floor the back door would be unlocked despite the fact that I had personally locked it with the key and carried the key to the basement and put it in its proper keeping place there. This episode continued, as I have said for over a year. I questioned Dr. Margaret Battle who with the aid of her maid does the cleaning of the house, thinking perhaps they were unlocking it for some reason. She assured me this was not the case. The one day I went up to check the door and found it slightly ajar – the door knob laying on the floor several feet into the passage way. The shaft and outer knob were gone – not on the porch outside – nowhere to be found. I went downstairs to the basement, got the key and went back upstairs, closed and locked the door and returned the key to the basement. After some months and at this writing (December 1996) the door remains locked. I might add being on the 3rd floor it would take a 25-30 foot ladder to gain access from the ground to the porch off which the door in question opens!

The other instance in which I have some personal involvement occurred recently at our annual Christmas open house. The vent was co-sponsored by the Sons of Confederate Veterans and they had a re-enactment going on during the weekend. There were a number of re-enactors on hand. One of the "soldiers" and I had visited together on the main floor and he had gone alone on up to the 3rd floor. After a few minutes he called to me from the head of the stairs and said "I suppose you know as much about Stonewall as anyone around, don't you?". I answered "I suppose so". Then he asked, "In your research of the house did you ever read or hear of a deal involving a small child there?". "Well, yes I have, why?" "I think I know what room the child died in", he said. "Which one" I asked and he responded "the back room on the west side". "Why do you think it was that room?" I asked. As we had been carrying on this conversation, he had been coming down the stairs and by this time he was standing in front of me and he said "when I stepped to the door of that room I felt a very strong presence of a child in distress." Then I said that I didn't know if the child died in the house or what the circumstances of its death had been; though as I remembered the story it was a fairly short but devastating illness and I hastened to add that it was not early in the history of the house. He responded with "oh no, it was after the turn of the century". I asked him which sex was the child and he answered immediately "a boy". I asked if he had a feeling for its age and he quickly replied "5 or 6 years old". And then he said the little boy was lying curled up on

the floor by the window looking out and when he approached, the child turned his head, looked at him in a piteous manner as if he had hoped he would come but was not at all sure that he would and whispered “you came, you came”. Then man was obviously moved by the experience and seemed hesitant to talk about it almost as if by doing so he was betraying an intimacy that he had shared with the long dead child. I questioned him further and asked if he had a feeling for what time of year this had occurred. He said he did not. Then I told him that I knew the little boy had a sister still living in the area and it would be interesting to know if she knew what room he died in or if he died at Stonewall. Then I realized that I had momentarily forgotten the family name of the boy. I could only remember the sister’s married name, not her maiden name. I disclosed my lapse of memory to him and asked if he had a feeling for the family name. Without the slightest hesitation he answered “their last name started with an “S””. As we talked we had moved towards the ground floor and as I remember we were descending the stairs when he offered this information. I immediately proceeded to where Dr. Margaret Battle was sitting, knowing that she was familiar with the story – in fact, it had been from her that I had learned of the death of the child. And so as I approached her I asked if she remembered the name of the family who had lost their young son while living at Stonewall. She answered “yes it was the Stevens family”. If I had ever had any doubt as to the sincerity of this individual, it dissolved at that moment. This man was from out of town, he had no way of knowing anything about the death of this child. In fact, I doubt if there are even a half dozen people still living in Rocky Mount who know of that death.

I called the sister that night. She was 12 when the death occurred. It was her room in which the “soldier” had seen the apparition and she said her brother was 4 years old. She thought he died in the hospital but wasn’t sure. She mentioned a friend who would probably remember. I called her the next day and she confirmed that he died in the hospital as best she remembered but she had no documentation to prove it. I asked if she remembered what time of year it was and exactly what year. She did not know. I asked the sister and the same question and she had thought it was late fall. The reason I had asked this question of the “soldier” – and the sister and her friend – was because the porch just beyond the room was used as a sleeping porch during the hot summer months, and if it had happened in the summer then the child could conceivably have been on the porch on the other side of the window of that room. I also asked the sister if her little brother spent a lot of time in her room. She first said “no” but then she added that the stables would have been visible from the window and “Son” loved to watch the animals being worked.

The episode continued to fascinate me and I suddenly thought “wouldn’t it be weird if this had happened on the anniversary of the death of the child – but no one could tell me when that was. Frankly by now I was quite touched by the whole thing and was becoming obsessed with getting to the bottom of it. So I drove to Pineview Cemetery and rode all over the old sections without finding a stone marked “Stevens”. I had all but given up when I spotted it in the distance after starting to criss cross my original path of travel. I approached the plot with some feeling of anticipation, parked and got out of my car. I knelt and read the stones – that of the father and the mother and then that of Ronald E. Stevens, Jr. who was born on August 17, 1933 and had died on November 23, 1938 at age 5 years and 3 months – the age the “soldier” had cited – not the age the sister had remembered. It was not the anniversary of his death but interestingly enough exactly 2 weeks after the 58th anniversary of it.

Lee Stevens Gravely told me her father never got over the death of his son. Shortly before he died in 1967, she asked him something about her little brother and her father simply said “I can’t talk about it”. Ronald, Jr., called affectionately “Son” died tragically of spinal meningitis while he and his parents and sisters Ann, who was just a year older than he, and Lee, who was some 7 years older, were residing in Stonewall. Ronald Stevens, Sr. was associated with Rocky Mount Mills having joined the company in 1933, the year his son was born. He later became Assistant Treasurer of the Mills and jointly ran the daily operation with Hyman L. Battle. Lee told me she had fond memories of Ann and “Son” crawling up and down those winding stairs their little bottoms twitching back and forth clad only in their diapers. The family friend, Nancy Newby remembered “little Ronnie” as being a darling, sweet, lovable child who tended to let his slightly older sister, Ann, dominate him. She remembers an occasion when the Stevens family was visiting her and they were sitting on the porch. Ann, for some reason, slapped Ronnie and the father told his son to slap her back but he wouldn’t and he climbed into his Daddy’s lap and told him “Daddy, I can’t hit her”.

I really don’t know what conclusion to draw from this whole experience other than to say that I truly believe that some people have an ability to communicate with the past – I don’t have that ability, but I respect and to some extent admire, those that do.