



MIKE GROFF
SEES DEAD PEOPLE

PHOTO: BEN RICKER

Local Haunt

MERLIN'S BAR IN LEBANON IS FULL OF GHOSTS AND EVERYONE KNOWS IT by Ben Ricker

Terry Kennon isn't on the clock, but she's at work anyway — because why not. What the hell else is there to do Wednesday night in Lebanon?

She hops down from her barstool, walks outside and lights a cigarette under a sign that reads Merlin's Bar and Grill.

"I've worked here forever," Kennon says, matter-of-factly. "Don't tell me this place isn't haunted."

Unfriendly fluorescent lights blink to life over the sidewalk. It's mostly little things, she tells me between drags, like the uneasy feeling you're being watched or something brushing past you when you're alone at night.

Though staff and patrons are reticent at first, their tongues loosen as empties accumulate and cigarette butts pile up. Merlin's is haunted, they say, and everybody here knows it.

But it's not just hot air from a cadre of well-oiled boozers; private detectives from the Western Oregon Organization of Paranormal Investigators know it, too.

For Kennon, the neighborhood saloon just off Lebanon's main drag is like a second home. She recalls her first night shift here, nearly 18 years ago, when it was still Clementine's Cantina. An odd straggler seated alone at a table on the dark second-floor balcony vanished into thin air at closing time, she says.

Today, classic rock pounds loud over the stereo and the lights are low. Regulars nurse pints at the bar and shoot the breeze; others silently feed a row of insatiable video poker machines.

The dance floor, where people occasionally see a whirling mist rise up out of the scuffed wooden boards, is empty.

Corner booths next to the pool table, where a ghost in a white dress sometimes weeps quietly to herself late at night, are abandoned.

It's subtle things, but it's concrete things, too, Kennon says, like the phantom that storms around the kitchen, playing

with light switches and faucets. The unruly spirit sometimes kicks the ice scoop out of its cradle on top of the freezer, sending it skidding across the floor.

The surveillance camera in the kitchen once recorded trash bags hurling themselves into the air. Owner Mike Groff says he's got the footage "on disks somewhere," but I didn't get to see it.

Regulars tell me they've seen the shadowy kitchen wraith. And though they aren't the least put off, it tends to unnerve some first-time patrons.

A couple years back, Kennon tells me, a guy came in early one morning and ordered a beer. "Hey!" he said, pointing through the service window. "You got someone in your kitchen."

She looked, but found nobody there. "That's just the ghost," she told him.

Badly shook up, the poor guy tipped his head all the way back, poured the whole beer into his mouth and skittered out the door.

"I don't know what the big deal is," she shrugs. "The ghosts never hurt anyone. They don't mean any harm."

Groff is equally blasé.

"Eh, you get used to it," he says.

Groff purchased the historic Cormier building almost 14 years ago. He renovated it and opened Merlin's a couple months later.

Groff says he knew right away something was off.

According to Groff, at least five ghosts haunt his bar. He counts them on his fingers: You got the troublemaker in the kitchen, the crying lady, the little girl who sometimes appears on the stairs to the balcony, the mysterious tall man who wears a brimmed hat and rain slicker, and the dog.

Often, while using the employee bathroom, Groff hears what sounds like a big dog pawing insistently at the door. Twice, he's seen the shadowy beast dart through the tavern, from one end to the other.

What's more, Groff's friend, Dave Rousey, practically made out with the undead hound.

Groff chuckles remembering the night Rousey passed out drunk on a couch in Merlin's back room. When Rousey woke up hours later, a black dog was busy licking his face.

The plastered biker stumbled back to the bar and asked Groff: "Hey, whose dog is that back there?"

Groff had no idea, but Western Oregon Organization of Paranormal Investigators director Elaine Davison might know.

Between 2010 and 2011, WOOPi investigated Merlin's three times.

"People think an investigation is one night and you're done," Davison says. "Not so. A thorough investigation takes months."

While digging through old issues of the *Lebanon Criterion* and the *Lebanon Express*, Davison came across a story about a guard dog that once had free rein of the Cormier building at night. Sometime in the 1940s, when part of what is now Merlin's was a pool hall, the doberman pinscher got loose, raced out into the street and was hit by a car, Davison says.

Is it the same dog? She thinks so.

The ghost in white lace who cries at night is likely the woman Davison read about who committed suicide there in 1918, one week after being jilted at the altar.

Ultimately, Davison's team failed to come up with any "conclusive evidence" that Groff's place is haunted, but she's still convinced something strange is happening there. The stories people tell about the apparitions they've seen line up too neatly with the building's history, Davison says.

"Oh, Merlin's is haunted," she says. "Take it from someone who's spent the night there. Trust me, it's hecka haunted."

During the investigation, Davison sent photos taken at Merlin's to a psychic in Las Vegas named Rose McClough.

McClough called Davison right away to tell her that one of Merlin's ghosts is in love with the bar's owner.

When asked about his secret admirer, Groff said only: "Yep," and that he's sometimes grateful for the company.

About 10 years ago, Groff sat alone at the bar drowning his sorrows in alcohol after an ugly breakup with his long-time girlfriend and business partner. It torments him still. Just thinking about her, Groff's friendly bearded face clouds over.

"It was a dark time," is all he says.

Hunched over the bar, trying to obliterate his mind with liquor, Groff felt a commiserating hand fall on his shoulder.

And he felt a little less miserable. ■

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— Terry Kennon