

# Springhouse Ink

**H**ow can a person have a serious discussion about ghosts when there has never been proof there even is such a thing?

People can define ghosts all they please. They are spirits of the dead. They walk the earth until some unfinished business is complete. They are confused and roam not realizing they are dead and are supposed to “move on.” They are moments in time that continue playing like a broken record. They are malevolent spirits that possess the weak. How can we claim to know WHY they are here if we haven’t even determined IF they are here?

When the dark begins coming early, people start lighting bonfires recreationally. Horror movies start running in theaters and on television. People still continue to talk about ghosts.

Charles Neely collected many fantastic stories of ghost sightings in his 1939 book *Tales and Songs of Southern Illinois*. One of the most remarkable was of a wagon team driven through the air at Dug Hill just a few miles west of Jonesboro in Union County. It’s too bad telephonic technology had not advanced to the point it has today. Imagine a phone video or photo of a wagon being pulled by horses driven by a spectral driver through the thin air. How could a skeptic deny such a captured image?

They didn’t carry cameras in their overall pockets back then, so the people who heard the man’s story had to decide whether or not his powers of observation were keen. These days most everybody has a phone capable of taking photos and video. And, yet, a quick Internet search for “ghost photo” will show predominantly old black and white film images taken during conditions of poor lighting. If ghosts are indeed around us and can be captured in an image, we should have conclusive evidence of ghosts by now. But we don’t.

Technology is a double-edged sword when it comes to investigation of the supernatural. On the one hand we can take clearer images than ever — even in poor lighting conditions. That diminishes the chance of lighting and primitive cameras creating anomalies prone to misinterpretation as spirits. So we should be happy about that. If we capture a transparent form in an image, then it is probably the real thing, right? That assumption is not necessarily so. As technology has improved camera performance, it has also created opportunities for undebunkable hoaxes. Using the old film technology, fakes could be exposed by scrutinizing the negative. Dark room tricks didn’t have many places to hide. Today, people wanting to prove a photo was “doctored” must determine exactly which of the hundreds of programs were used to do the “doctoring” and then try to replicate the conditions.

If I capture the most convincing ghost photo ever seen, that still doesn’t prove anything to skeptics. It may only mean I was really sneaky at concealing my photographic mischief.

With these aforementioned issues in mind, we are back where we started: Having to decide whether or not to trust the witness. I could sit down at a campfire with a ghost or Sasquatch and record our entire interaction on video or still photography and there would be doubters. Only now it wouldn’t be my mental capacity in doubt, but my reputation and trustworthiness. That’s kind of a sad state of affairs for those wanting to collect modern folklore.

You can take me at my word that I’ve been on a few paranormal investigations and been to several supposedly haunted locations, with a good camera, and never once have I taken a photo of or observed anything that could be interpreted as a ghost. But, of course, I can’t prove that.

I’ve been in rooms with others claiming to see or otherwise sense ghosts, but I neither saw nor sensed anything. People have held out their hands and asked me to hold out mine to feel the mysterious pocket of cold air that some say accompanies spectral visitors, but I’ve never felt the temperature differences they felt. Call me a killjoy, but I subscribe to the notion revelation must precede belief.

We DeNeals have been blessed — or cursed — with active imaginations. As the years have progressed I’ve noticed my own imagination has dulled significantly. The nightmares that once involved fantastical entities carrying out unspeakably cruel — if original — acts have morphed into those of a more “boots-on-the-dirt” variety. On the morning of this writing I had a nightmare involving my former editor at my former newspaper reporter job dressing me down for not catching a variety of errors in proofing the day’s edition. One of these involved a headline being printed upside down and me at the verge of tears for not having noticed this glaring error before going to press. I’ve been away from the newspaper business for a year and a half, but the nightmares persist, causing me to awaken in a disposition best described as grumpy and humiliated. If there is a sympathetic ear to be lent, please, spare it for my innocent family.

Fear once involved entering the home’s basement and reaching into the darkness for a light switch, only to feel a strange and fungal hand’s grasp. That atavistic fear evolved into one of crashing down the stairs with head bursting on concrete.

Outside in the dark there used to be a suspicion something malicious was lurking in the trees, waiting for me to turn and open the door before it pounced. This entity’s stare was palpable. It’s physical presence was undeniable,

especially when it went “whoosh!” and ran away like so many bedded whitetail deer. Now, fears of the dark involve a curious dog’s interest in a skunk obscured in the night’s murk.

While trying to sleep, the tickle on the skin is no longer the fingernail of a ghoul, but well could be intimate contact of a brown recluse spider. Whichever the cause, sleep becomes elusive, both for me and for my wife, who bears the interruption of me standing and hopping while brushing my skin with the back of my hand.

The corn rustles in the darkness, trying to reawaken old anxieties about the unknown, but the years have built a sort of mental wall unscalable by evening apprehension.

There were no creepy hands in the dark. There were no devils in the trees. There were no ghostly faces appearing in the bedroom window on sleepless summer nights. None of these happened. But there was one thing that did happen for which I still have no explanation. I think about it often.

I’ll never regret being raised on a secluded farm instead of in a busy neighborhood. My brother and I had playmates, but it wasn’t as though we could step out of the house and join a group of neighborhood boys gathered there. This was probably a good situation for keeping us away from temptation and peer pressure, but during summer vacation there were times of loneliness. Some of my closest friends during that time were the fish in the two ponds on our property. I’d spend hours most afternoons casting my line, mostly from the bank, sometimes in an inflatable raft. Reading horror novels passed much of the time and fishing passed some more. I subscribed to several fishing magazines and came to learn about fishing for bass at night. Night fishing had its advantages. Fish couldn’t see movement on the bank so a quiet fisherman could sneak up on his prey. I learned that when fishing in the darkness, black lures appear the most natural and less spooky. In early summer frogs are active at the water’s surface.

On this one night, I’m going to assume I was using a black Jitterbug lure that pops and wiggles on top of the water the way a frog will do. The dogs were with me. They were outside dogs, practically wild, but followed every time anyone left the house on foot.

The night was black. I probably had a flashlight, but don’t remember using it. I could walk from the house to the little pond with my eyes closed. I was at the northeast corner of the pond. I set the tackle box down as quietly as I could. Then I cast my bait toward the south where bass typically surfaced for insects falling from the willow tree.

The lure flew silently and the line grew slack, but there was no splash. Not only was there no splash, but neither was there a plop or rustle of the lure landing in the tall grass on the bank. The only explanation for the lack of any sound was that the line had passed over one of the willow limbs which slowed the lure’s decent down into the blanket of floating pond weeds. It was not a good situation. Missing the pond usually equated to a tugging match with undergrowth or tree limb that inevitably resulted in a lost \$5 lure.

I triggered the bail on my reel and prepared to crank in the lure, hoping it wasn’t horribly snagged on some obstruction. There was resistance, so the lure was caught on something. Whatever that something was then tugged. It was not a jerk. A slow, unrelenting force tautened my line and I clutched the rod as there came a “snap” and whistle of released fishing line. Fishermen know the snap and whistle sound defeat. The line is broken and whatever was on the other end is gone forever.

What could have been on the other end of that line? It was something that pulled hard, yet there was no sound of water nor rustling of leaves. There was a 4-foot-long grass carp in that pond at the time. Hooking the carp would certainly break a line, but those fish are so skittish a lure splashing within 10 feet of them would cause them to splash in an explosion of water. A lure striking that fish’s back would have startled it into a dramatic display.

The lure could have landed on the back of one of the dogs, but I’d caught dogs before and they would thrash, panic and yelp at such an unexpected attack. I could have snagged a deer, but deer were common and would have run and snorted in complaint.

It was as though I’d cast and caught a bird passing through the darkness. But even the largest night bird — a Great-horned Owl or Great Blue Heron — surely would not have had enough force in flight to break a fishing line.

What if there was a temporary black hole above the pond that sucked in my Jitterbug, broke the line and then disappeared? That theory makes as much sense as anything.

The next day with aid of sunlight I returned determined to solve the mystery. There was no Jitterbug floating on the pond. It wasn’t hung in the tree and there was no sign of it on the bank. The incident seemed to defy logic as well as the laws of nature. What goes up must come down and when it does it must make a sound upon impact. This much I know: Something was hooked on that lure because I felt it pull. Whatever that was moved soundlessly and powerfully.

That’s my mystery. I’ll never solve it and I’ll always remember it.

As that wise, old angler Friederich Nietzsche said, be careful casting your bait into an abyss, because the abyss might take it.

The adventure continues...

