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2024 Breaking News Pulitzer Prize winner

HAUNTED
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CALIFORNIA
Park at Rispin Mansion
A Historic Landmark, Reimagined as a Community Park: Investor Henry Allen Rispin (1872-1947) built his Italian Renaissance mansion between 1920 and1921, designed by architect George McCrea with the assistance of apprentice Helen Benbow. Over the decades, the home changed hands, fell into foreclosure, and stood empty for many years.
Although the Mansion suffered vandalism, fire, and neglect, it has long captured the imagination of residents and visitors. Today, the house remains closed for safety, but it continues to serve as a dramatic backdrop to a vibrant new public park.
Today's Park: The Rispin Mansion grounds have been transformed into a welcoming public park, featuring: ADA-accessible pathways and a loop trail • Amphitheater • Fencing, lighting, benches, and site furnishings • Native and riparian landscaping • Restoration of original architectural features
Looking Ahead: Future enhancements may include: Public Art at the historic reflecting pool • Garden arbor
Key Dates:
1920-1921 Rispin commissions architect George McCrea to design the 22-room mansion.
1929-1936 The Mansion changes owners, falls into foreclosure, and stands vacant.
1941-1959 Occupied by the Poor Clares, a cloistered order of nuns.
1985 City of Capitola purchases the property.
1991 Listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
2009 A devastating fire destroys nearly 75% of the structure.
2015 Community workshops envision a public garden space.
2024 Work begins on transforming the grounds into a public park.

Mary Anne Porter, author of "Haunted Santa Cruz" and founder of Santa Cruz Ghost Hunters, at the Rispin Mansion in Capitola. Credit: Jana Marcus

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Ghosts among us: Five of Santa Cruz County's most haunted places

BY **JANA MARCUS** October 11, 2026

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Phantom children, mysterious nuns, a woman in white, and one invisible dog

Quick Take

with a very bad attitude. Just in time for Halloween, Santa Cruz Ghost Hunters founder Mary Anne Porter takes us through five of her favorite haunted places, where local history and ghostly legends have a way of getting tangled together.

Santa Cruz has always been good at ghost stories.

Maybe it's the fog. Or the wooded mountains.

Or it could be because, for a relatively small county, we have accumulated an impressive collection of places where the dead are rumored to have neglected to leave.

There's Golden Gate Villa on Beach Hill, with its infamous "door to nowhere" and the darker story of a man who murdered his daughter there in 1907 before killing himself. There's the old McCray Hotel on Front Street, long rumored to have helped inspire the creepy Bates mansion in Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho." And on Mission Hill, Holy Cross Church and the last surviving adobe from the original Santa Cruz mission stand on ground with a murderous history.

And that's before we get to phantom nuns, dead children, serial killers, a lady in white and at least one invisible dog with a very bad attitude.

Santa Cruz, it seems, has plenty of ghosts.

Mary Anne Porter has spent more than two decades looking for them.

Porter founded Santa Cruz Ghost Hunters and wrote "Haunted Santa Cruz, California," part of Arcadia Publishing's Haunted America series. Her fascination with the unexplained began in childhood, but became more serious in the early 2000s after a close friend was killed. Porter says she began hearing his voice, and her telephone would sometimes ring around the time he used to call. When she answered, there was only static.

"I started connecting the dots that something else was going on," she said.

After her father died, similar experiences became more frequent. Curious whether the ghost-hunting shows she watched on television were real, Porter grabbed a digital recorder and began investigating on her own.

She asked a question. When she played the recording back, a voice answered:

“Hello.”

It was her first EVP, or electronic voice phenomenon.

“Once I heard that, I was hooked,” she said.

Santa Cruz Ghost Hunters was born.

But Porter says ghost hunting is as much about history as it is about things that go bump in the night. She digs through newspapers, public records and death certificates looking for the real people behind the legends and trying to separate what happened from what generations of storytelling have added.

“We try to follow the evidence and make sense of it,” she said.

Sometimes the history checks out. Sometimes the ghost story falls apart. And sometimes nothing happens.

“Ghost hunting can be boring,” Porter said. “Spirits don’t jump on command.”

But after years of investigating Santa Cruz County’s considerable supply of spooky places, Porter has a few that still give her goosebumps.

Here are five of her favorites.

5. Rancho San Andrés Castro Adobe

184 Old Adobe Rd., Watsonville

The front of the Castro Adobe outside Watsonville. Credit: Courtesy of California Preservation Foundation

Not every ghost is trying to scare you. Some apparently want to join the party.

Built around 1849 by Juan José Castro overlooking the Pajaro Valley, the two-story adobe was once the center of a sprawling rancho where fandangos filled the upper floor with music and dancing, feasts came out of the cocina, and crowds gathered for bull-and-bear fights.

The lore here is surprisingly gentle. People have described lights going on and off, whispers, unexplained touches and the feeling that the old house is still somehow occupied.

Porter calls it "more of a romantic place. It has a happy glow about it."

During EVP sessions in the cocina, the adobe's traditional Mexican kitchen, her team captured what sounded like Spanish words, some apparently related to food.

Then one night, team member Jay Alvarez began playing flamenco music.

People started feeling unseen hands touching them.

Porter says it felt less threatening than welcoming, as though whoever might still inhabit the adobe liked the music.

"There are layers of history embedded there," she said.

Maybe after nearly two centuries, the party isn't quite over.

If you go: The Castro Adobe is generally open only for special events and scheduled programs, so check before visiting. If you get inside, spend some time in the cocina. Listen for a whisper and pay attention if something seems to brush your arm. More information here.

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4. Tuttle Mansion

723 East Lake Ave., Watsonville

The front of the Tuttle Mansion in Watsonville. Credit: Jana Marcus

The orchards are gone.

Legend has it Morris Tuttle isn't.

Built in 1899 by architect William H. Weeks for the wealthy Watsonville orchardist, the enormous red Victorian has turrets, gables, tall windows and more than a century of family tragedy, death and ghost lore attached to it.

People have reported a tall man staring from an upstairs window toward the land where Tuttle's orchards once grew. Other stories tell of children's laughter and footsteps in empty rooms, doors opening by themselves, an older woman appearing near a dinner bell and an old-fashioned typewriter clacking away with nobody at the keys.

But some of the creepiest stories come from the carriage house.

Porter's team investigated it repeatedly when it housed an antique store, and they became convinced a child was there. They left out toys and electronic equipment and asked whatever might be listening to touch them. Porter says the equipment responded.

One team member got something considerably more unsettling.

Sitting alone in the carriage house, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

A small child was walking toward him.

Then it walked through the wall.

Inside the mansion, Porter and her team have photographed what they believe are orbs and apparitions and experienced unexplained tugs on clothing and hair. Porter herself has sensed a tall figure she believes might have been Morris Tuttle.

Apparently some homeowners are reluctant to give up the property.

If you go: The mansion currently houses businesses, so stick to areas open to the public. Before leaving, look up at the second-story windows. You might catch Morris Tuttle looking back.

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3. Mount Madonna

Mount Madonna Inn, 1285 Hecker Pass Highway
Mount Madonna County Park & Miller Homesite, 7850 Pole Line Rd./Highway 152, Watsonville

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Left: The old Mount Madonna Inn sits shuttered and decaying on Hecker Pass Road above Watsonville. Right: The ruins of Henry Miller's bungalow estates, now part of Mount Madonna County Park. Credit: Courtesy of Sterling Pacific Financial via Localwiki.org and uer.ca

Drive Highway 152 over Hecker Pass toward Mount Madonna at night, and the road twists into darkness beneath the trees.

Legend says that's where you might meet the "white woman."

For decades, motorists have told stories of a pale woman appearing suddenly along the highway. Some say she has long, dark hair. Others say she wears white. A few claim she steps into the road, forcing drivers to swerve.

When they look back, she's gone.

Another version turns her into a hitchhiker dressed in red. Pick her up, the story warns, and something bad may happen before the night is over.

Porter believes the spirit may be a young woman whose violent murder along

Highway 152 in 1969 became folded into older tales.

But the "white woman" is hardly alone up there.

Visitors to the campgrounds have reported cries for help in the woods, shadow figures moving between the trees, and a young girl in a frilly white dress near the ruins of cattle baron Henry Miller's old mountain estate.

Legend identifies the girl as Miller's 8-year-old daughter, Sarah Alice, who died in 1879 after a horseback riding accident. Stories have since circulated of the child appearing on horseback throughout Mount Madonna.

The old Mount Madonna Inn has accumulated its own scary history, including violent deaths on and around the property, along with stories of lights switching on inside the shuttered building and phantom horses crossing the grounds.

Porter said she had her own encounter while photographing behind the Inn in 2011.

She heard hoofbeats.

A horse seemed to be rushing toward her.

Then came the unmistakable snort of an animal directly behind her.

Porter felt warm breath against the back of her neck.

She froze. There was nothing there.

Later, she discovered the inn had once been the El Corral Café, and was a working horse ranch.

If you go: Skip ghost-hunting along Highway 152 and head to Mount Madonna County Park. Walk to the ruins of Henry Miller's old estate and watch for the young girl on horseback. You may hear the horse before you see her.

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2. Rispin Mansion

2000-2200 Wharf Rd., Capitola

The shuttered Rispin Mansion now has a lovely renovated city park on its grounds. Credit: Jana Marcus

Rispin Mansion has never really needed help looking haunted.

Built in 1921 for businessman Henry Allen Rispin, the 22-room mansion has survived its owner's financial collapse, years as a convent, decades of abandonment, squatters, vandals, fire and generations of teenagers daring one another to get inside.

Naturally, it has ghosts.

A woman dressed in black has reportedly appeared on an upper balcony. An old man sits reading near a fireplace, and a voice calls for help from the basement.

Then there are the windows.

Porter was given a journal kept by paranormal investigator Sarah M. Harvey, who interviewed Poor Clare nuns who once lived at Rispin. They described two ground-floor windows beneath the portico that mysteriously opened late at night.

The catch was that the windows opened from the inside, and none of the sisters could find the entrance to the lower-level room.

During the day, the windows would be closed.

At night, they opened again.

And then there's the dog.

For years, people have reported an angry dog barking or growling inside the empty mansion. Some describe it as a demonic dog guarding the building.

Porter has heard the guttural sound herself. But there was no dog present.

Santa Cruz Ghost Hunters conducted what Porter says was the first official paranormal investigation of Rispin in 2012 with then-Capitola Mayor Michael Termini and psychic medium Monnica Sepulveda.

That night, Porter and Sepulveda both sensed the woman in black. Sepulveda said the spirit warned of an angry male presence downstairs and told her someone would fall before the investigation was over.

Soon after, a team member tumbled down the stairs.

Porter says the investigator was suddenly pushed and fell. Everyone present, she said, saw what appeared to be a large shoe print on the back of the investigator's pants.

Rispin's legends grew darker after the nuns left. By the 1960s and '70s, squatters and drug users had moved through the property, and local lore places Herbert Mullin there in the early 1970s. Mullin, who murdered 13 people around Santa Cruz County, became one of the area's most notorious serial killers.

As the mansion decayed, stories grew of secret rooms, satanic rituals and even human sacrifice.

Porter doesn't believe all of them.

When the TV show "Ghost Adventures" investigated Rispin in 2025, Porter was involved with the production and objected to some of its more lurid claims.

"There was none of that," she said of the human-sacrifice stories. "It was the drama of TV."

Apparently a serial killer, a phantom nun and a demonic dog weren't scary enough.

If you go: The mansion is shuttered, but the renovated surrounding park is open. Watch the boarded windows and balconies. And if you hear a dog growling, first make sure there's actually a dog.

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1. Brookdale Lodge

11570 Highway 9, Brookdale

The Brook Room at the Brookdale Lodge. Credit: Tripadvisor

Of all the places Porter has investigated, Brookdale Lodge remains the one she returns to again and again.

Maybe because it found her first.

Once a playground for the rich and famous, the lodge has accumulated more than a century of fires, deaths and ghost stories. People have reported footsteps in empty hallways, music and laughter from empty rooms, shadowy figures and a mysterious woman near the Brook Room.

But Brookdale's most famous ghost is a little girl named Sarah.

Legend says Sarah was a niece of Judge James Harvey Logan, who established a resort at Brookdale around the turn of the 20th century. The story goes that she drowned in Clear Creek and has wandered the lodge ever since.

People claim to have seen her near the fireplace, on the Brook Room balcony, and running through the lobby. One version has a crying Sarah asking guests to help find her mother or nanny.

Porter knew none of this when she went to Brookdale for dinner with friends in the early 1990s.

In the crowded bar, she noticed a little girl wandering among the adults, whispering into people's ears and poking them on the shoulder.

Nobody reacted.

When the girl approached, Porter asked if she was OK.

"The girl stared at me like a deer in the headlights," Porter remembered. "Then she turned and ran."

Porter followed as the child opened the door to the Brook Room and disappeared inside. Concerned, she alerted an employee and pointed toward the room.

The doors were locked.

Then came the question: Had she ever heard of Sarah?

No.

Only then did Porter learn the legend.

Mary Anne Porter with Don Philips at the Brookdale Lodge for the 2024 TV episode of "American Supernatural."
Credit: Courtesy of Mary Anne Porter

Years later, she searched historical records for Sarah and couldn't find her.

"I have never found any proof that Judge Logan had a daughter or relative named Sarah," she said.

She did find a death certificate for a 10-year-old girl connected to the Logan family, but that child died from illness, not drowning.

Which leaves Porter with a historical mystery and one inconvenient fact:

She saw the girl.

Sarah isn't Brookdale's only reported ghost. An older man in an orange suit is said to sit at the bar. Employees have reported glasses tumbling on their own and people being shoved. Porter also recounts the story of a housekeeper who said she was struck from behind so hard that she fell and broke her nose. A handprint was reportedly found on her back at the hospital.

But Sarah stays with Porter, perhaps because that first night she wasn't carrying ghost-hunting equipment or looking for anything paranormal.

The ghost found her.

If you go: Brookdale Lodge is open to visitors, so keep an eye out for the little girl. You can also get your Halloween thrills at the annual Witches Ball on Oct. 24 and the two-day Freakers Ball on Oct. 30 and 31.

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When history runs out

For Porter, all those ghosts increasingly lead back to the archives and one question:

"Is it a ghost or a ghost story?"

Her upcoming book, "Unfinished Tales from the Archives," expected in paperback by Christmas, combines historical research with fiction, imagining what might have happened where the records fall silent.

"It's a tapestry of fiction and nonfiction," Porter said.

After COVID scattered the original Santa Cruz Ghost Hunters team, Porter is rebuilding it and recruiting new investigators. The group also accepts requests from people who believe something unexplained may be happening in their homes.

More than two decades after Porter first asked a question into an apparently empty room, she's still listening for the answer.

And in a county with this many old houses, dark mountain roads and stories that refuse to die, she isn't likely to run out of places to listen.

Perhaps somewhere, another voice is already waiting in the dark to say hello.

For more information: *Visit www.santacruzghosthunters.com or email santacruzghosthunters@yahoo.com*