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A Scary Christmas Memory

It was frigid-cold that night in December, 1967. The moonlight on the path through the woods was like a sparkling silver ribbon that lured us closer to our destination: Old Leather's Place. The older neighborhood boys had promised us younger boys that our Christmas Holiday wouldn't be complete without a visit to a real haunted house. Earlier that night they first regaled us with stories of a headless ghost who played melancholy tunes on an old piano—his music floating eerily through the late night air, and then they led us into the woods.

Suddenly, lumbering out of the woods that surrounded it, a rambling, derelict house materialized. It rested high on thick brick pillars, was enshrouded in peeling paint, and reeked with age. As we approached the house, the older boys did their best to frighten their young charges, but it didn't work on me. I turned

toward the wind, my ears wanting to hear tickling piano music. The words to a favorite Christmas song whistled in my mind: *There'll be scary ghost stories, And tales of the glories, Of Christmases long, long ago.*

The telling of ghost stories at Christmas is often attributed to the 1843 publication of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, whose original title included: *Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*. Ghost stories were especially popular during Victorian times. Huddled around a crackling fire during the Christmas season, families shared supernatural stories to help pass the long, dark winter nights. These nights were thought to contain ghosts and other evil spirits. On the night of my Christmas Holiday adventure, as I approached Old Leather's Place, I was hoping the piano-playing ghost would make *himself* known—and he would, but not as I had expected.

Old Leather's Place was built in 1845 by William Balfour, a New Orleans physician, as a summer home for his family. It once stood just east of Lorraine Cowan Road and Hwy 90. The March, 1927, article in the *Biloxi Daily Herald* stated the house had a long succession of owners, one of which was James Leather, a Gulfport attorney. The house often stood empty for long periods of time. In those idle times, said the Herald, "tramps passing through the country got into a habit of going into the house, and people passing along this secluded portion of the beach noticed light in the house and heard sounds issuing, until the house gained a reputation of being 'haunted.' A reputation that was added to by stories of hearing a piano played when no one was in

the house." The article also stated the house was known for harboring "unsatisfied and wandering spirits." But the living can have "unsatisfied" spirits too; Russell Galloway was one of those spirits.

According to Ray Thompson's "Know Your Coast" article dated November 2, 1956, Mr. Galloway's relatives owned the house for a time. He was well-acquainted with its "noisy ghost." Around 1905, he and a friend decided to investigate in an attempt to "de-haunt the venerable building and restore it to respectable society." I'm sure they approached the house much like I did on that cold December night. They also ascended the same broad stairs that led up to an equally broad front porch. I can see them looking in the shuttered windows, as they strained to hear piano music and hoped to see the headless ghost who played that music. They were not disappointed!

Nola Daniels Ladner, a long time Coastal resident, lived in Old Leather's Place as a child in the 1950s. Her mother operated a nursery and kindergarten there. She stated her family had also heard tales of ghosts and "things that go bump in the night." Those tales involved a piano, too, but no headless ghost. The story she was told was this: "A fisherman and his wife lived there. He went out in his boat one time and never came home. She loved to play the piano and would play while he was gone. After he was lost at sea, she became a recluse and played all the time." After the lady died, legend had it that "On stormy nights, you could hear the ghost playing." So, was the ghost headless or not? Did it really play the piano? I was soon to find out!



Mrs. Ladner's parents, Marian and Eugene Daniels

Standing on the front porch, I was stymied. The house was boarded up nice and tight, or so I thought. Looking around, I spied a small hole between some of the boards. Being the runt of the litter, an older boy hoisted me up. I managed to crawl through the hole. And there I was...in Old Leather's Place. The frigid breeze, oozing through every crack and crevice, stirred up long dormant smells of rot and decay. The silence in the old house was deafening.

One of the boys handed me a flashlight and I proceeded to look around. There was a long hallway that cut the house in two, with rooms on each side. Some of the doors to those rooms were boarded up. It was then I spied a large opening in the backdoor. Alerting my chums to our good fortune, they scrambled to the back of the house, up the back stairs, and entered with fear and trepidation.

Suddenly, from one of the front rooms came piano music. Could it really be? My fellow "ghost busters" fell silent. Creeping ever so quietly toward the room, the music got louder and then stopped. A floorboard creaked. There was a rustling of cloth. My chums and I, in lock step, approached the door where the music and sounds came from. We peeked in. The yellow-gold light from the flashlight exposed a room filled with tables laden with old books. A huge tester bed jumped out at us, its torn canopy dancing with the cold breeze. And then we saw it—an old, ramshackle piano.

The stagnant silence that engulfed us was slightly alleviated by our heavy breathing; our breath freezing before



our faces in the night air. Was this the legendary piano? If so, where was the ghost? Then it happened! With a banshee scream, a vision of diaphanous white loomed before our eyes! One of the older boys yelled, "RUN!" And we did, knocking each other down as we raced toward the back door and freedom from the misty-white horror.

Then we heard it. Raucous male laughter filled the air. The older boys started laughing, as some of the younger boys wiped tears of fear from their eyes. The "ghost" turned out to be another older boy in the neighborhood. He had been aided by his mother's frilly lace sheers and his brand new 8 Track Player, an early Christmas present. Our moment of sheer terror quickly turned into a shoving match of playful hits and slaps. We all had a good laugh at our own expense!

So, was Old Leather's Place haunted? Did a headless ghost play the piano in the dead of night? Or was there a ghostly lady who played while she pined for her lost lover? What did Russell Galloway see back in 1905? According to Mr. Thompson's article, "Yes, there was a musician without a human head—a very much alive noisy ghost. It was an opos-

sum...!" The opossum would appear after dark and scurry across the keys of the old piano.

Even after the piano-playing ghost had been exposed, Old Leather's Place never shed its ghostly legacy; that legacy scaring young kids like me into the 1960s. Unfortunately for the old house and its wandering spirits, it was destroyed by fire in 1968. Nothing was left standing except the cathedral of

old live oaks that still surround the site where Old Leather's Place once stood. But legends sometimes die hard. It is said on cold winter's nights, if the breeze is just right, you can still hear haunting piano music drifting through the oaks and across the placid Gulf waters.

Here's wishing each of you a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless you and keep a song in your heart.



Anthony Wayne Kalberg
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About the Author

Anthony W. Kalberg was born and reared on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and has a background in the arts and stage performance. A Gulfport resident, he had front-row seats for Hurricanes Betsy, Camille, and Katrina and survived them all. Those life-changing storms have had a major impact on both his writing and his life. *A Chasing of the Wind* is his first novel.

If you enjoy Kal's Kaleidoscope, you might enjoy his first novel, *A Chasing of the Wind*, which was released in October, 2014.

You can read the Prologue at his website, www.anthonnykalberg.com.

Book can be purchased at the Gulfport Galleria or directly from the author via his website.

