

# Don't go to Rugby if you are afraid of ghosts! – Part 1

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on October 27, 2014)

My good friend Fred Eiler brings you this *Historically Speaking* story of our utopian neighbor community to the north, historic Rugby, TN. I have a longstanding fondness for Rugby and am pleased to have been selected to speak there in their Appalachian Writers Series. Their "Ghostly Gathering" is scheduled for October 31, 2014, at 6:00 PM Eastern Time!

Enjoy Fred's Rugby story:

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I recently noticed the schedule for this fall's Ghostly Gatherings evening activities at Rugby. My experience with the historic colony's mysteriousness dates back to my earliest childhood.

My parents were both from Kentucky and came to Oak Ridge in 1943. We often passed through Rugby on our trips from Oak Ridge to their hometowns. My earliest memories of Rugby were from the window of our car about 1950. I could tell that the houses, school and church were like nothing else I'd seen, and my parents explained that they were from an English Colony established there in the 1880's.

When I was a student at Oak Ridge High School in the early 60's, I had an assignment from my favorite teacher, Catherine Ledgerwood, who taught combined English and Social Studies, and sought the help of our incredibly talented librarian, Anna Cebrat. As best as I can remember, as part of a committee book report, my assignment was to prepare a glossary of words and terms that might not be understood by the modern reader of the novel written about a hundred years earlier.

Miss Cebrat pointed out that some words had disappeared from our vocabulary and others had changed meaning through the years. She suggested that I use reference books contemporary with the work, and pointed out that I could find them in the library at Rugby, the historic utopian settlement founded by Thomas Hughes, the British novelist, in the 1880's.

She said that she was going there for a visit the following Saturday and offered to take me and arrange access to the library. My parents, of course, were delighted that I would be working with the teacher known for her fascinating puppets and incredible singing instead of goofing off.

I don't remember how Miss Cebrat was connected to the Rugby community, but she seemed to know everyone and, quickly got me ready to work in the library. Rugby, from my earliest memories, seemed a mysterious place, quaint but out of place in its wilderness setting on the Cumberland Plateau.

Miss Cebrat explained that the Rugby Library was started by the local master carpenter, John Winkley and, when he died working on it, was finished by his widow. She said that the meticulous hand written catalogue of the 7,000 volumes in the collection was the work of the German colonist Edward Bertz.

Sensing my discomfort at the mention of the dead carpenter, she added that some say the spirit of the first librarian still lingers in the library. But she assured me I had nothing to fear as long as I treated his books with respect and didn't attempt to steal a volume.

I finished my assignment and, although alone in the library, felt that the spirits of those who founded the library and so lovingly cared for it throughout the years were still guarding it. I was relieved when Miss Cebrat returned to check on me and give me a tour of Rugby's other ghost-like reminders of its long lost utopian dream.

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She gave me a tour on the historic places there, some that survived and others that didn't, with special emphasis on the ghosts that were said to inhabit various place. I had forgotten the details of these fascinating stories, but then something happened to bring them all back.

About fifteen years ago, at the time of my retirement after a thirty-year teaching career, my attention was drawn to a paperback in a local bookstore. Entitled "Strange Tales of the Dark and Bloody Ground," it lead me to believe that it would be about my parents' native Kentucky, but the subtitle was "Authentic Accounts of Restless Spirits, Haunted Honky-Tonks, and Eerie Events in Tennessee." Published in 1998, and written by Christopher K. Coleman, it contains forty ghostly accounts, the first of which deals with historic Rugby.

Coleman points out that, despite its quaint charm, Rugby is considered "one of the most haunted towns in America." The first documented haunting, he relates, concerns a Mr. Davis, who was the second of the dozen-or-so managers of the second Tabard Inn. The original magnificent inn was destroyed by a fire just before Halloween of 1884, but an even more opulent successor opened in 1887.

The first manager of the resurrected inn was a British sea captain, who was soon followed by Mr. Davis, from Buffalo, accompanied by his charming wife. A perennial problem at the colony had been the lack of female candidates for marriage with the mostly male colonists who settled there.

Perhaps with this problem in mind, Mr. and Mrs. Davis held a grand ball at the Tabard Inn on New Year's Eve of 1897. The crème de la crème of society of Rugby and the surrounding area was invited, and a band from Harriman played for dancing in the ample lobby from eight until midnight, when all sang "Auld Lang Syne."

Affectionate kisses were exchanged and much enjoyed, perhaps too much, in the opinion of Mr. Davis, by his beautiful, young wife. At any rate, many said he remained sullen after that dance.

Room 13 at the rebuilt Tabard Inn was in the southwest corner of the second floor. For obvious reasons, it was difficult to rent, so the Davises took it as their own upon their arrival. About three weeks after the New Year's Eve ball, Mr. Davis' employee Roy, as was his morning ritual, went to room 13 to announce to the couple that breakfast was ready.

On knocking on the door, he got no answer, and was perplexed, since his manager was an early riser. Afraid something might be wrong, he opened the door to a scene of indescribable horror. I'll try to describe it anyway.

Still in the bed lay the body of Mrs. Davis, as pale as the fine white linen sheets had been before they became stained with her blood. Her throat had been slit from ear to ear. Nearby, the body of Mr. Davis was on the floor, with blood still oozing from a head wound. The terrified Roy ran for help to the house of Dr. Raynes.

Within minutes, news of the terrible tragedy had spread throughout the small community. Dr. Raynes and the local authorities determined that Mr. Davis had risen early, gone to the bathroom, took out his straight razor and sharpened it before proceeding to kill his wife in such a horrible manner.

The doctor determined that Davis had taken poison, but, apparently unhappy with the slowness of its action, shot himself in the head with his pistol. Speculation as to the motive of the murder-suicide was rampant. If room 13 was difficult to rent before the event, it was probably impossible afterwards.

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The new Tabard Inn, like its namesake, burned in 1899. Witnesses said that room 13, on the southwest corner of the second floor, was the last part to burn, and that they heard cries from that area, even though it was empty.

Coleman points out that, although nothing remains of the second Tabard except the overgrown foundation stones, the slow progress of the fire allowed some of the furniture to be rescued, including the furnishings of room 13. They are now scattered throughout many of Rugby's historic homes, including Newbury House, which is also haunted.



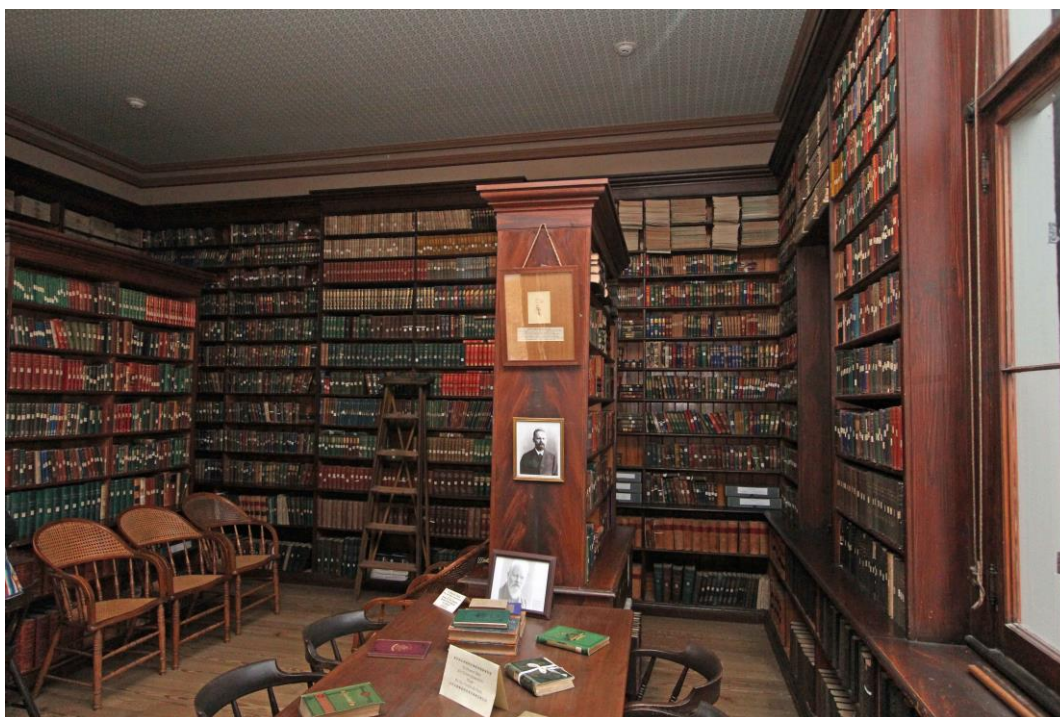
This historical photograph shows the interior of the Rugby Public Library

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Rugby Public Library as it looks today



Rugby Public Library interior as it looks today