

THROUGH THE HISTORIAN'S LENS

A HAUNTED HISTORY – THE FORMER COLLEY HOME, LEROY STREET, BOYNE CITY

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Each week we'll visit some aspect of the lesser-known history of Boyne City and the surrounding area. Not only major events, but the people and families who assisted in making them happen. In doing so, we help to preserve our rich, colorful and fascinating local history. Please don't hesitate to suggest areas of interest or to share additional information and stories by emailing throughthehistorianslens@gmail.com. Come learn with us!



[An early photograph of the now-abandoned home at the end of Leroy Street. Photo courtesy of the Patrick McCleary Collection.]

My article last week appeared in print on Halloween. I had chosen not to retell the story of the former Colley home on Leroy Street as it has been some time since I've been asked to do so. However, many of you immediately contacted me to say, "Hey, we wanted to see the story on the "haunted house!" I would like to remind you readers, that this is a really just a good example of the "process" behind researching a house or property history. There is no need to make up details as you go along. The stories themselves are usually interesting enough without all of the embellishments. Following is the home's timeline of residents and events as I know them to be. Just remember, I'm not here to report all the "spook stuff." I'll leave all of that up to your own imagination.

Before I go any further with this, let me clarify something. Do I believe in all the mumbo jumbo of ghouls and goblins? No. Do I think that the house is "haunted?" Yes. However, over the years I've heard the home referred to as "a sad home," an "unhappy place," and a "lovely old house... that's very troubled." That is the kind of haunted that I choose to believe. I started researching the stories surrounding my great-grandparent's house over 30 years ago. I've spoken with people who lived in the home, resided near it, and those who have simply paid it a visit at one time or another. For generations people have said that things were "unsettled" there. I can only attest to the fact that I was in the house once, experienced nothing more than a few hairs raised on my neck and arms, and I "lived to tell the tale" that you are about to read.

FACT: This home is private property. While you may view it from the road, the current owners have clearly stated that pedestrians are NOT permitted on the property. Please respect their wishes.

SOME BASICS FACTS ABOUT "HOUSE HISTORIES"

When you compile a history of a house, or even a piece of property, you have to base the information on facts- or at the very least, oral history that can be documented in one way or another. Plat books, property deeds, vital records, cemetery records, local and county newspapers, obituaries, published local history works and written personal accounts of the local landscape all get used to do this. Ask yourselves, would an "axe murder" REALLY be something that would go undocumented in vital records as well as in all city and county newspapers? It simply doesn't happen. Human nature is what it is and is the same today as it was 100+ years ago. No one is going to miss out on reporting a scandal like that! Charlevoix County newspapers date back to 1878. Later, Boyne City news was being covered by three newspapers in Boyne City alone, as well as newspapers in East Jordan, Petoskey, Gaylord, Elk Rapids and as far south as Traverse City and north as St. Ignace and Newberry! To claim a "lack of press coverage" for such far-fetched stories as murders and self-inflicted harm is simply ridiculous. Common sense needs to also come into play here.

Now, on with our story... should you dare to read further. [\[Click here.\]](#)

A HAUNTED HISTORY THE FORMER COLLEY HOME, LEROY STREET, BOYNE CITY

THE EARLIEST YEARS

Prior to 1875, all of Wilson Township was held by the United States Government within the Commission of General Lands Office. It wasn't until March of 1875 when the portion of Wilson Township that comprises the Leroy Street property was taken under ownership by the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad for "speculation." The street was not called Leroy Street then of course, it was nothing but a "horse path" through the woods, and later a dirt road through a field. It would be MY speculation that the street acquired its name around 1888, in an entirely different way, as you will soon read.

CLAIM: *"It is the oldest house in Charlevoix County."*

"HOUSE OF ILL REPUTE"



It appears that the Leroy Street house was erected sometime around 1878- certainly not the earliest in the county by any means. It was built on property owned by the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad. Being part of what was then termed "overflow land," the railroad had no immediate use for this particular section. The land appears to have been "lent out" to a woman, or possibly several women, during a period when there were far more men than woman in the area. Small scale bordellos had cropped up throughout the northern Michigan landscape around that time, in houses that were known for offering "entertainment" to those seeking it and left alone as "inappropriate conversation" for those not interested in patronizing the establishments. Far from a "sordid" place of business through, the mere size and appointments of the home would indicate both good taste and an attention to detail. The money was either very good, or there was a "patron" with deep pockets very early on.

While no one seems to recall who they were, or the eventual whereabouts of those first female inhabitants, perhaps as the men moved on, they did too. In any event, it seems relatively clear that when the railroad sold the property, including the home, in 1878, the "and others," referred to on the deed were our ladies of the evening. Oral histories make mention of a young girl that passed away in the house after a long illness. Does this account for "sightings" in the years to come of a young girl who "looks sick and always seems so hungry?" Stories of a similar nature can be traced clear back to 1906, but is there any truth to it? Vital records reveal two young children to

die in the township during that same period of time- each of which simply lists a mother's name and an "unknown" father. However, none give specific addresses where the deaths occurred. I do know that obituaries were seldom printed for very young children that early on and particularly if the child was illegitimate. I have never located even a notice of death for these two little people. So, your guess is as good as mine on this one.

CLAIM: *"It was once the biggest mansion in Boyne City."*

A "FORMIDABLE DWELLING"

Most certainly not. The largest mansion ever erected in Boyne City was the Shaw Mansion, located where the Harborage tennis courts now sit. However, around 1880 there was a trendy style which called for a home to be built "higher-up," with a steep set of steps leading to the front door. This was considered very up-scale and fashionable and happened to be the architectural choice of the builder of the home on Leroy Street. Large stone blocks were used to form the foundations of the building, with windows facing out on all sides. There was no front porch on the original structure, and the front door, at the top of a nearly six-foot incline of steps, was made of heavy oak with ornate wood detailing and a large spring-wound doorbell. The original door and doorbell remain in place as far as I know.



[The W.S. Shaw mansion- corner of Elm and Second Street, Boyne City. Photograph courtesy of the CCHPS Collection.]

Some of the more unique features of the inside of the house included a stained-glass window in the front foyer; a dining room able to seat a large number of people; a hanging chandelier in the main parlor; and a support pillar which divided the parlor and living room- adorned with twelve inches of carved woodwork at the ceiling. A large Franklin stove warmed this main room- its diamond shaped Izen glass windows sending out dancing patterns of light throughout the room- "perfect for dancing a step or two if you pushed the table back."

Later, a greenhouse was attached to the south wall of the dining room, when horticulture being a popular pastime. It has also been said that around 1910, the outhouse was perhaps the only one in the county to boast curtains! In the cellar was an Artesian or "flowing well" along with several rooms- offering cool retreat from the heat of summer. In the furthest portion of these cellar rooms was a large contraption that made "home brew," as well as several rooms for canned goods, and bins for storing potatoes, apples, pears, wood and coal. I even have a have in my possession a hand-written recipe once used to make wine in this contraption.



The upper floors contained four bedrooms, two side attics and a nursery, as well as an attic big enough for three additional large bedrooms. What later became a large storage cupboard on each floor began as a "dumb waiter," able to lift things up and down from one floor to the next. What part of this does not sound like a bordello to you? There was one item that remained from the dumb-waiter days, kept in a corner of the main level's newer storage cupboard- a hollow round, clear glass ball, drawn closed at the bottom by the glass blower. Later residents recall that they were told to "leave it right where it is." Now, some would say it was a glass float. Others may have called it by another name, "a witch ball." I have never seen it myself, but you look up the term if you don't already know it. A fun read.

In its heyday, the outbuildings surrounding the house provided a backdrop of prosperity and good planning. A large barn was erected to house cattle and horses, complete with a large "drive-through" which allowed the hay wagons to carry their loads right inside to be unloaded. Another large shed was used for storing small wagons, cutters and sleighs for winter use, and the equipment needed for winter lumbering- done in the rear area of the acreage in later years. Add to this the pig pens, cattle pens, a chicken coop and run, smoke house and the other small outbuildings, it must have made the house appear almost a community unto itself- particularly since it was situated so far from what was then only the small Village of Boyne.

[Portrait of William & Lucinda Calbert. Photograph courtesy of the Bob Morgridge Collection.]

CLAIM: *"Two little girls in white dresses are often seen in the upstairs windows."*

WILLIAM & LUCINDA CALBERT

Here is a test of your Boyne City History class memories. I've heard it rumored that William and Lucinda Calbert (check out Settler's to Sidewalks if you've forgotten who they were) took up residence in the home next, and that it is their two little girls, always seen in white dresses, that still make their appearance from time to time. Is there any fact behind this tale? All I can tell you is that the Calberts did lose three little girls, in consecutive years, while residing in Wilson Township- Lucy in 1879, Leola in 1880 and Lola in 1881. All three are buried in the little cemetery on the corner of Division and Leroy Streets. The Calberts also appear on the property abstract from 1880 to 1896- a portion of which is known as the "Calbert Addition to Boyne Village."

CLAIM: There are "Footsteps on the stairs."

ANTHONY JEPSEN & FAMILY

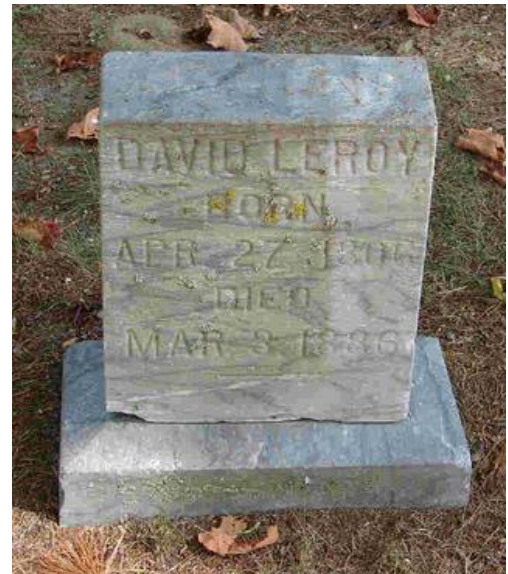
One "ghost story" repeated by at least three generations of previous owners and local residents has been the sound of footsteps on the stairs- "as if someone is checking on those sleeping in the bedrooms." Sometime around 1882 (perhaps after the death of their third child), the Calberts apparently attempted to sell the home on what we would now call a "land contract." Anthony Jepsen was a conductor on the railroad according to later Federal Census records. Oral history states that his wife loved the home and intended for them to spend the rest of their lives there. In 1882, however, the property reverted back to the Calberts in lieu of regular payments. Did the family really not want to move, or did Anthony's job just take them to another location? I have no way of answering that question. I do know that the Jepsens went on to reside in Petoskey, raised a family and lived long lives. However, based on the rest of the house's historic details, this would appear to be a good candidate- a woman who continues to check on her family in a home that she once loved very much and never wanted to leave. That is if you believe in such things.

CLAIM: *"David Leroy butchered his wife and children, then killed himself in the home! They named the street after him and He still walks in the graveyard at night with his axe in hand."*

THE MYTH OF DAVID & HANNAH LEROY

A David Leroy did die in Wilson Township in 1887. However, it was on his farm at Deer Lake at the age of 84 of inflammation of the bowels. Hardly an axe-wielding maniac! After his death, Hannah Leroy his widow, sold the farm and purchased a small home in East Jordan. She died there in 1909- peacefully in her sleep. The Leroy's had four children, all of which were alive and well at the time of their mother's death.

Both David and Hannah Leroy are buried in the Division Street cemetery in Boyne City. **IF** Leroy Street was indeed named after them it was linked to the cemetery. The Leroy's never owned or resided in the home at the end of the road. Now, as to seeing "apparitions in the graveyard," perhaps it is David Leroy himself... demanding that his good name be restored and these ridiculous tales of murderous gore are put to an end!



[David Leroy's tombstone. Wilson Township Cemetery. Photograph courtesy of the Patrick McCleary Collection.]

CLAIM: *"David Leroy was the first person buried in the little cemetery on the corner of Division and Leroy Streets."*

He was most certainly not. The "Old Boyne City Cemetery" as most know it today, has had many names since its earliest conception. However, in its earliest years of existence, many locals referred to it as the "Morgan Cemetery," as this is where pioneer citizen Zachariah Morgan's parents were first laid to rest- long before the deaths of either Mr. or Mrs. Leroy.

CLAIM: *"A local lawyer was murdered in the back yard and the body wasn't discovered for 30 years or more."*

THE CORBETT & HARRIS ERAS

The next two owners were lawyers who practiced in the city- Roscoe Corbett and John M. Harris. By this time the house must have certainly come with a "reputation," but remember, it was also a very desirable piece of property. The oral histories (from a number of sources) claim that these two men even had a duel of sorts over the future ownership of the home- right in the back yard. For many years there was a small, bullet-like hole in an upstairs windowpane which even seemed to attest to the story. Some even claimed that one of the men was shot to death and that the body was buried by the other to escape legal action. Is it fact? I've never found anything to prove or disprove a duel, but plenty to prove that the two lawyers and their families were on very friendly terms with one another.



[The Roscoe Corbett home on the corner of Water and South Park Streets- present day location of Boyne City Hardware. Photograph courtesy of the Patrick McCleary Collection.]

Roscoe Corbett and his wife, Marion, later built a beautiful home on the corner of Park and Water Streets, right where the hardware store stands today. It was later razed in the name of progress. Mr. Corbett WAS shot to death by the way. He was shot by a random bullet during a hunting expedition with his son and friends from within the local community. He died from the wound and it wasn't until 30 years later that the boy (a man by that time) admitted on his death bed to firing the fatal shot. Boyne City's longest running "unsolved murder mystery!" But why bother with factual stuff like this when you can drum up a dual to the death, right?

Marion Corbett sold the Leroy Street home to John M. Harris and his wife, Nellie, although it is doubtful that they ever made this their permanent home. The Harris home was located in downtown Boyne City. Lawyer Harris was known to have rural land holdings and even a "rural home," so perhaps this was the latter. Remember, even at the turn of the last century, the end of Leroy Street would have been considered "rural" Boyne City.

CLAIM: *"Very wealthy people have owned the home for generations. They all died there."*

JOSIAH & ELIZA PRATT

When William S. Shaw brought his tannery operation from Bracebridge, Ontario, Canada to Boyne City in 1901, he not only erected the tannery on front Street but also an entire neighborhood of workman dwellings on Front, Elm and later, Cedar Streets. He later built a grand mansion for himself on what are now the tennis courts of the Harborage. When Mrs. Shaw and their children came from Bracebridge they took up a temporary residence in one of the Elm Street homes until "the mansion" could be finished. Mrs. Shaw's parents, Josiah and Eliza Pratt, followed the family shortly thereafter. In need of a residence to suit their stature, W.S. Shaw put his father-in-law in contact with the now Judge John M. Harris and the Pratt's purchased the Leroy Street home. Mr. Pratt was a very successful jeweler in both Ontario, Canada and in the United States. Perhaps they fit the bill as very wealthy? I couldn't say. They only owned the residence for a few years, staying in it whenever they were in Boyne City. However, neither of the Pratt's died there. Josiah Pratt, upon becoming ill, was taken to be cared for in the W.S. Shaw home, and later died at that location. Mrs. Pratt died of tuberculosis in a Battle Creek hospital- thus ending another chapter in the history of the home.

CLAIM: *"There was a boy who lived there who killed his girlfriend, then killed himself in the attic. His face appears in the upstairs window at times."*

BACK TO THE BANK

After the Pratt's departed the home, it came under the ownership of the First National Bank of Boyne City. Now remember, the President of said bank was at that time, William H. White. Since W. H. White and W. S. Shaw were very close friends, there was probably some reason behind this transfer of ownership.

As to "factual" accounts, I am unable to provide them at this point. However, the oral history from this period of time states that, "the owners of the home were very pleased with their acquisition. Unfortunately, their only son got himself into some trouble with a local young lady. While the details are sketchy, some even unknown, the young lady apparently died accidentally. The boy may well have had nothing to do with her death, but the father was quite convinced that his son would be blamed and would be sentenced to prison. His answer was to hide the boy in a room in the uppermost section of the house until the heat of the situation had passed, at which time they planned to make their departure for another area. His plan worked and he managed to get the boy out of Boyne City when the night train departed." Is this the "young man who peeks from the window of the upper floor?" Your guess is as good as mine.

The story goes on to state that when the father found himself in desperate need to sell the home quickly, he "found a buyer and moved west." Now, it isn't my place to make assumptions to suit a story line, but it does seem rather interesting to me that Riley Calbert, a son of William and Lucinda Calbert, abruptly sold the home (which he had only recently acquired) to Henry C. "Harry" Colley in April 1908. Riley had only recently regained possession of the family home, when he hurriedly wanted to sell. Once the deeds were signed, these Calberts all moved west to California, where Riley remained for the rest of his life. This is an interesting coincidence, in my humble opinion.

CLAIMS: *"A man can be seen looking out of the attic window as if in pain. Another appears and disappears in the loft of the barn (now demolished) looking out into the yard. A baby can be heard crying at late at night."*



HARRY C. & ELIZABETH J. (IRISH) COLLEY

The Colley family had come from Bracebridge, Ontario in 1901- Harry being one of the five foremen that William S. Shaw brought with him to start the tannery operations in Boyne City. The situation to befall the previous owners was a stroke of good fortune for the final occupants of the home. In temporary residence since their arrival from Canada, and with a large family, Harry Colley had spoken with the owner of the Leroy Street home on several occasions- trying to acquire the home and its much-needed living space. Family oral history states that, "offers were continually declined until the evening the family was to depart. Then the needed papers were signed over and money transferred hands after the family had resettled out west."

Harry Colley owned the Leroy Street home from 1908 until his death in 1941. His wife Elizabeth died in the home as well as two of their 14 children. One son died in the hay loft of the barn. Another, a baby who was born unable to take nourishment from birth, was left to "cry itself out" in his mother's arms. A son-in-law and a daughter-in-law also passed away in the house, both in bedrooms on the second floor. After Harry's death his son, Lyle Colley took possession of the home and he, his wife and three daughters resided there. The house remained in the Colley family until after Lyle's death in 1983 when it sold to the current owner.

[Portrait of Harry C. & Elizabeth J. (Irish) Colley. Photograph courtesy of the Patrick McCleary Collection.]

TODAY

When the home at the end of Leroy Street went up for sale in 1983, an ad appeared in the real estate section of the local newspaper. It was captioned, "We know a special place for you..." One aged resident of Leroy Street once said to me, "It's a special place alright. Lights on and off with no one living there; spooks whooping it up at all hours of the night; no thanks. I'm staying right where I'm at!"

The true tragedy of this remarkable landmark may be that it has been allowed to fall into utter decay. It remains one of the few examples of Boyne City's landmark residences. This once showplace home has become little more than an eyesore, with its final claim-to-fame being a "haunted history" of made-up murders and other ridiculous notions. A perfect example of how history becomes distorted when you remove the facts and allow them to be replaced with pure fiction.

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We Know A Special Place For You...



Large 5 bedroom older home with lake view. Not many of these fine older homes left. Could be restored to be a real showplace.