

By the light of the silvery spook...

Just another journey on Devil's Promenade

Editor's Note: UPI staffer Paula Maynard recently visited the southwest corner of Missouri to join in some traditional autumnal revelry — pursuit of the elusive Will'o-the-Wisp. This is her report.

By PAULA MAYNARD

HORNET, Mo. (UPI) — Three hours south of Kansas City and some five bone-jarring miles down a gravel road, my guide blinked through the dust and pointed to a spark on the horizon.

The moonless sky was bright with stars. Our car lights silhouetted the tall tangled weeds, casting scary shadows along the roadside.

"There it is," she whispered as much with reverence as with excitement. When I blinked, the light — suddenly shy — winked away.

The Ozark spook light, a century-old will'o-the-wisp shared by Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma, appeared to be nothing more than a mote of glitter at the end of a dusty country road.

But through the years, multitudes have found the trip worthwhile and on this night more than a dozen vehicles jammed with spook seekers saw fit to join us. Cars and customized four-wheelers zipped along, their occupants tossing beer cans, revving engines and flashing lights — not my idea of an ideal atmosphere to lure a lonesome spook.

I also was not particularly pleased that we had shattered what was left of our shock absorbers to spend an evening in the woods with people intent on smooching, raising dust and basically clowning around. And the silliness of straining in the dark at a tiny twinkle miles away while ignoring the glittering canopy of stars overhead was starting to sink in.

Had it been any night except Sunday, I could have entertained myself with touring Garland "Spooky" Middleton's Spook Light Museum — a one-room affair furnished with pool tables and nickel-powered pinball machines with broken flippers.

The bow-tie bedecked Middleton has plastered the walls of his establishment with newsprint detailing various theories about the light, said Robert Hoenike of Muddy River Outdoor Adventure, a Kansas City shop which sponsors trips to the wilds to take in the light.

Spook fanciers wanting to strike out on their own should proceed west from Joplin on I-44 to the last free exit in Missouri, turn left toward a Nickerson Farms restaurant and then head south on the state line road about five miles to the museum.

A coin in the museum's juke box buys a recorded account of some of the spooky tales associated with the light, one of the most popular being that it belongs to a Civil War turncoat searching for his head.

After a Union officer led his troops into an unsuccessful ambush, his men allegedly strapped him to a stump and blew his hat and head off with a cannon ball. But so feisty was the traitor that he wrested his headless torso loose, grabbed a lantern and ran off into the woods in search of his missing cranium.

A story styled more for lovers than fighters is a Quapaw Indian legend. A brave and his maiden, despondent that they were not allowed to marry, leapt into nearby Spring River from a cliff called Devil's Promenade. The lovers became separated and have been searching nightly for each other ever since, or so the story goes.

Another Indian story ties the light to atrocities committed by the whites to the Indians along the Trail of Tears migration route.

Scientific types have explained away the light as mine gas or refracted beams from cars traveling down Route 66 as it snakes through Quapaw, Okla.

Simpson Yeomans was part of an expedition in 1955 with his classmates from Shawnee Mission (Kan.) High School. Newspaper accounts at the time said the seriously scientific young men were satisfied they had solved the mystery when they observed the flash as automobile lights. The group never saw the second light — the one that moved — but were certain they could also explain that one with the scientific method if given a chance, the papers said.

"I don't think we were really convinced of anything to tell you the truth," said Yeomans, confessing he was never really

certain his group had stumbled on the truth. "We probably did just see car lights. We probably didn't even see the darn spook thing."

Whatever it's origin, the glittering globe was not about to send my group home disappointed this night. It twinkled coyly again through the dust and noise.

I grabbed binoculars for a better view of the horizon to the west. The light peeked out of a V-shaped notch where the Black-jack Oaks and the road come together against the sky.

There has no denying it, something shone there besides flash lights borne by fellow spook hunters. It could very well be headlights, I thought. But the refraction theory does not account for the light changing color and seeming to float away from the notch and toward the viewers.

As we looked on the globe reddened and drifted to the left through the trees. Whatever car shining that light would have to be floating across a ravine.

A few minutes later the light moved to the right, again through a clump of trees, and then headed down the road surface toward us. It looked as if a burning ball was rolling along the roadside ditch in our direction.

It snuck closer — to about 100 feet away — shrinking smaller as it came nearer until it more resembled the glow from a cigarette more than a headlight. Then — poof — it blinked out and did not repeat itself.

As we piled into our cars to depart for home, it suddenly blazed in the rear view mirror. We accepted the invitation for entertainment but it went out unspectacularly.

Again we turned to leave and again the mystery light pulled its peek-a-boo trick. But it was late and we were tired. As we drove away, it bounced silently on without us.