

Spooky Old Town San Diego

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I've always liked the holiday Halloween. As a child it was a day to go to school in costume and then go trick or treat and get loads of candy. In my early adult year I still had a blast going to costume parties and going out with friends to clubs in our costumes.

Now as I push middle aged, Halloween has taken on a new direction for me. Actually, in 2002 I was in Poland during Halloween and it turned out that everything shut down for All Saints Day and All Souls day and was a huge holiday in Poland. The following year I was lucky enough to be in Guanajuato, Mexico where I was able to participate in traditional Dia De Los Muertos celebration. Since then I've tended to focus this holiday on the memory of the dead and the celebration of their lives and all our lives.

I contemplated returning to Mexico this year, but crossing the border back into the states requires more time and patience than I have now. So I did the next best thing; I went to as close as the border as I could go namely San Diego. I turned Halloween into a two day event with two exciting stops and two different ways to celebrate Halloween a mix of traditional culture and ghostly hauntings!

My first stop on Halloween Night was Old Town San Diego. Old Town San Diego is considered the "birthplace" of California. San Diego is the site of the first permanent Spanish settlement in California. It was here in 1769, that Father Junipero Serra came to establish the very first mission in a chain of 21 missions that were to be the cornerstone of California's colonization. Father Serra's mission and Presidio were built on a hillside overlooking what is currently known as Old Town San Diego. At the base of the hill in 1820's, a small Mexican community of adobe buildings was formed and by 1835 had attained the status of El Pueblo de San Diego. In 1846, a U.S. Navy Lieutenant and a Marine Lieutenant, raised the American flag in the Old Town San Diego Plaza.

In 1968, the State of California Department of Parks and Recreation established Old Town State Historic Park to preserve the rich heritage that characterized San Diego during the 1821 to 1872 period. The park includes a main plaza, exhibits, museums and living history demonstrations.

Historic buildings include La Casa de Estudillo, La Casa de Bandini, La Casa de Altamirno Pedorena and the Mason Street School, San Diego's first one room schoolhouse. Just up the hill from Old Town San Diego Historic State Park, you'll find Heritage Park where several of San Diego's most notable Victorian homes have been relocated and authentically restored to their original splendor.

I've been to Old Town San Diego numerous times but I focused on a few specific places which brought out the festivities of this Holiday. The Plaza of the Past Old Town's Recipe for Fun & Entertainment

After arriving and stopping for some Mexican Food I walked around the historic town visiting the old bank, the candy shop, historical homes and the church. But my main stop was the Whaley House which I had never been to.

According to the Travel Channel's America's Most Haunted, the Whaley House is the number one most haunted house in the United States. The alleged hauntings of the Whaley House have been reported on numerous other television programs and been written up in countless publications and books since the house first opened as a museum in 1960. There are voluminous documentation of paranormal occurrences at the site makes a compelling case.

The earliest documented ghost at the Whaley House is "Yankee Jim." James (aka Santiago) Robinson was convicted of attempted grand larceny in San Diego in 1852, and hanged on a gallows off the back of a wagon on the site where the house now stands. The local newspaper reported that he "kept his feet in the wagon as long as possible, but was finally pulled off. He swung back and forth like a pendulum until he strangled to death." Although Thomas Whaley had been a spectator at the execution, he did not let it dissuade him from buying the property a few years later and building a home for his family there. According to the San Diego Union, "soon after the couple and their children moved in, heavy footsteps were heard moving about the house. Whaley described them as sounding as though they were made by the boots of a large man. Finally he came to the conclusion that these unexplained footfalls were made by Yankee Jim Robinson." Another source states that Lillian Whaley, the Whaleys' youngest daughter who lived in the house until 1953, "had been convinced the ghost of "Yankee Jim" haunted the Old House." A visitor to the museum in 1962 mentioned that "the ghost had driven her family from their visit there more than 60 years [earlier], her mother was unnerved by the phantom walking noise and the strange way the windows unlatched and flew up."

Many visitors to the house have reported encountering Thomas Whaley himself. The late June Reading, former curator of the museum, said, "We had a little girl perhaps 5 or 6 years old who waved to a man she said was standing in the

parlor. We couldn't see him. But often children's sensitivity is greater than an adult's." However, many adults have reported seeing the apparition of Mr. Whaley, usually on the upper landing. One said he was "clad in frock coat and pantaloons, the face turned away from her, so she could not make it out. Suddenly it faded away."

The specter of Anna Whaley has also been reported, usually in the downstairs rooms or in the garden. Other visitors have described seeing or sensing the presence of a woman in the courtroom. "I see a small figure of a woman," one visitor said, "who has a swarthy complexion. She is wearing a long full skirt, reaching to the floor. The skirt appears to be a calico or gingham, small print. She has a kind of cap on her head, dark hair and eyes and she is wearing gold hoops in her pierced ears. She seems to stay in this room, lives here, I gather." None of the Whaleys fit this description, but the house was rented out to numerous tenants over the years. Perhaps the mysterious woman in the courtroom was one of these.

Another presence reported by visitors and docents is that of a young girl, who is usually found in the dining room. Psychic Sybil Leek encountered this spirit during a visit in the 1960s. "It was a long-haired girl," Sybil said. "She was very quick, you know, in a longish dress. She went to the table in this room and I went to the chair." Urban legend has it that this is the ghost of a playmate of the Whaley children who accidentally broke her neck on a low-hanging clothesline in the backyard, and whose name was either Annabel or Carrie Washburn. There are no historic records of any child dying this way at the Whaley House; nor is there record of any family named Washburn residing in San Diego at the time. It is believed that the legend was started by a one-time employee of the Whaley House, in an effort to add to the house's mystique.

Even animals aren't left out of the singular occurrences. A parapsychologist reported he saw a spotted dog, like a fox terrier, that ran down the hall with his ears flapping and into the dining room. The dog, he said, was an apparition. When they lived in the house, the Whaley's owned a terrier named Dolly Varden.

The Whaley House stands silently watching over San Diego Avenue as it has done for a century and a half. Every day visitors come from around the world to tour the historic museum. It contains so much history within its walls, that even the non-believer will enjoy the tour.

Unfortunately I had no paranormal experiences there, but it was an interesting and historical tour!

My next stop a short way down from the Whaley House was the Old Campo Santo Cemetery, one of the first in San Diego.

This very old cemetery is located on the outskirts of Old Town in San Diego. Established in 1849, the cemetery is rumored to be the nexus for a surprising amount of spiritual activity ranging from cold spots and misty figures to floating torsos of spirits and vanishing spectral people.

The cemetery was bisected by a street car line in 1889 and parts were later paved over in 1942 becoming San Diego Avenue. Cars parked on the street would often have problems starting and their car alarms would often go off. In order to appease the spirits beneath the street, special marks have been placed in the pavement to show where the original graves were. If you visit look for them, they are little metal circles that simply state "GRAVE" on them.

A lot of spiritual activity is said to occur here. One possible spirit is Yankee Jim Robinson, a man who stole San Diego's only row boat, and was hung at the nearby Whaley House. Afterwards he was buried in this cemetery.

Antonio Garra, a Native American and chief of the Cupenos tribe, is also buried here. In 1851, Garra led an uprising of Native Americans against the people of San Diego. San Diego levied taxes against the Native Americans who not having the right to vote, found this practice of taxing unfair as they were denied representation. Garra was eventually captured, and found guilty of leading the uprising. He was made to stand before his freshly dug grave, and executed by a firing squad. On the day of the execution, January 17, 1852, while standing before his open grave, Garra was requested of Padre Juan Holbein to ask for pardon from the large crowd that had gathered to witness the execution. Eventually, Garra stated, "Gentlemen, I ask your pardon for all my offenses, and expect yours in return." Afterwards the firing squad shot him and his body fell backwards into his grave. Several visitors have had odd experiences standing in the position where Garra did all those years ago. As a side note, Thomas Whaley of the Whaley House was apparently a member of the firing squad.

Supposedly the local businesses and residents pooled their money and had the graveyard and surrounding area exorcised in 1996. It is reported that spiritual activity has declined since then.

As night time fell, children arrived with their parents to Old Town San Diego where the stores provided Trick or Treat. In addition there were other family happenings like a night time reading of The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and night time Ghost Tours of the Whaley House and Cemetery.

After a long day of driving to San Diego, touring the historical district, and searching for "ghosts and

goblins” I called it a night for tomorrow’s adventure to celebrate Dia De Los Muertos (Day of the Dead)...