



THE PLAIN DEALER

New life for an old haunt

Developer transforms Franklin Castle into a private club

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Charles Milsaps has an invisible partner in his \$3 million dollar business venture.

She likes to stay way, way in the background. She has no say in day-to-day operations, let alone his plans to turn the faded Franklin Castle into an upscale club and restaurant. She doesn't even know where the money's coming from or where it's going.

But she has given Milsaps' ambitious dream her mighty blessing. At least, that's what the Lakewood real estate developer figured when she lent him a helping handkerchief.

"I was in this room right here," says Milsaps, pointing to a dank, dusty room on the ground floor of the near West Side mansion. "I'm sneezing like crazy, when suddenly, out of the blue, I look down and see a handkerchief.

"It was strange. It just appeared there as if they were saying, 'We give you our blessing.'"

The history of "they" is as macabre and labyrinthine as Franklin Castle itself. The once opulent, now-dilapidated Victorian hulk at 4308 Franklin Ave. is considered the most haunted of houses in the area, if not the country.

Sometimes, "they" appear as Rebecca, the home's ever-elusive face in the second-floor window. Sometimes, "they" are the wailing children who are said to have perished in agony. Sometimes, "they" are the German socialists who allegedly were mowed down in a late-night killing spree.

"They," you see -- or hear or feel or sense or summon -- are Franklin Castle's longest-running tenants. Or ghosts. Or legends.

"It's hard to separate what really happened and the folklore surrounding the murders and deaths that allegedly took place," says Chris Woodyard, Dayton-based author of the "Haunted Ohio" book series. "But there's no doubt the house has had a troubled past."

Milsaps imagines a happy ending, or, at least, a happier chapter in what has been a horror story.

Since 2003, Milsaps, 33, has been plotting an elaborate project to turn the neglected but sturdy shell into the luxurious Franklin Castle Club, a private social club that promises 30 meticulously decorated rooms, a gourmet restaurant, a snazzy ballroom and a lounge replete with an 8,000-bottle wine cellar.

He'll make some of those plans -- as well as the long-shuttered house -- public starting today, when he holds a tour stop of "Ohio City and Beyond." The ooky, spooky bus tour visits various haunts, including the castle.

"People are still fascinated with Franklin Castle," says Chuck Gove, owner and operator of Haunted

Cleveland, which conducts the tours. "Just say Franklin Castle,' and right away people think of bones and skeletons, murders and ghosts."

History, or make that urban legend, is part of what makes the home a lucrative attraction, Milsaps admits. But he's hoping there's more to it.

"This is an architectural gem," he says. "When I was a kid, my parents used to drive past it all the time. I've been fascinated with it ever since."

The fascination became an obsession when Milsaps learned Franklin Castle was for sale in the late 1990s.

"I started imagining what it would be like to own a place like this," he says.

Too late. In 1999, the home was purchased by Michelle Heimburger for \$350,000.

Heimburger -- a Cleveland native who lives in San Francisco and works for Internet lion Yahoo -- is one of a long line of owners. She hired Cleveland architect Robert Mashke to oversee a million-dollar renovation that would restore it to its 19th-century grandeur.

But a fire in 2000 severely damaged the woodwork, guts and roof, turning Heimburger's dream home into an eerie labyrinth. Ghostmongers saw it as yet another sign that the castle was hopelessly cursed.

Milsaps, on the other hand, doesn't believe in curses.

"The home just needs a lot of work," says Milsaps, who has renovated numerous distressed properties in the area.

And, it seems, a lot of patience.

In the two years since Milsaps took over development of Franklin Castle from Heimburger -- who remains the building's owner -- he's had to deal with everything from a skeptical neighborhood to the finer and no doubt more obscure points of renovation.

"At first, there was a concern that Charles was going to turn Franklin Castle into some wild party house," says Mashke, who continues to oversee the renovation. "Quite the opposite: Charles and I have been spending a lot of time on the designs, every last detail to make it tasteful and turn Franklin Castle into a landmark the whole city can be proud of."

During a recent tour, Milsaps was glowing with the pride of a dreamer with the powers to turn dreams into material fact.

Some would have seen only the tattered remnants of wallpaper. The dust, dirt and mess on the ragged wooden floors. The torched, blackened woodwork and cracked marble.

Not Milsaps.

He saw the custom-made arches. The spacious ballroom. The 500 or so members he hopes to attract sipping wine. Even the man playing the baby grand piano.

I kept one eye on Milsaps, the other wandering around the castle -- just in case "they" decided to pop up for a spell.

"Ah, so what's with this empty can of pop lying on the ground?" I asked Milsaps. The ghosts must like Dr Pepper?

"Must be something the workers left behind," said Milsaps. "Same for that potato-chip bag."

"What about the strange, harrowing sounds up here?" I said, as we ventured into the top floor.

"Just the birds," said Milsaps, pointing to a family of fowl who looked like something out of Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds." "They've been living up here for a while -- no big deal."

"Actually, I can't really say that I've found anything really scary here. Well, one thing."

I detected a slight tremble in his voice.

The dried bones of babies? The eerie howl of spooks? His invisible partner stirring up trouble?

"No, some of the wallpaper I encountered," said Milsaps. "So totally '80s and oh-sooooo scary."

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