



# a Spirit for the Times

## Resident, town or county— *for whom does the Bell Witch Toil?*

BY KATIE PORTERFIELD

*They* say every Adams resident has a Bell Witch story. And one only has to Google “Adams, Tennessee,” to understand that the legend of this spirit, which tormented an Adams family in the 1800s, is forever tied to the small city (pop. 566) 10 miles northwest of Springfield.

City and county officials, not to mention residents, like it that way. After all, the story itself is a proven crowd-pleaser, inspiring several books and documentaries as well as *An American Haunting*, a 2006 major motion picture starring Donald Sutherland and Sissy Spacek. And while Adams does offer a few opportunities through which tourists can capture the mystery surrounding it all, some residents and officials would like to do more to capitalize on the city’s Bell Witch ties.

PHOTOS BY ERIC ENGLAND

“We’re just scratching the surface of the potential for visiting tourists who are interested in the Bell Witch,” says Margot Fosnes, executive director of the Springfield/Robertson County Chamber of Commerce.

## “I’d rather fight the *entire* British Army than deal with the Bell Witch.”

— pREsiDEnt An DREW JAc Kson

Indeed, it does seem Adams, home to the kind of supernatural events that undoubtedly fascinate a significant portion of the population, is sitting on a goldmine. As the story goes, in 1817, several years after John Bell and family moved from North Carolina to what is now Adams, they began hearing strange noises. Soon the noises turned to whispering, and eventually, Bell’s children began having their covers and pillows pulled from their beds during the night. The youngest daughter, Betsy Bell, had repeated encounters with the spirit in which it slapped her and pulled her hair. Even President Andrew Jackson (Gen. Jackson at the time) witnessed hauntings on the Bell property that reportedly caused him to say, “I’d rather fight the entire British Army than deal with the Bell Witch.” Legend has it that, years later, when John Bell died, the spirit claimed responsibility and sang songs at his funeral.

Today, in Adams, there’s at least one family cashing in on the Bell Witch story. The Kirby family offers \$10 tours of a cave on the old Bell property.

“Supposedly, there was an incident in which the Bell children went into the cave to explore, and one of the boys climbed up in a back area and got stuck,” says Chris Kirby, who purchased the cave and the surrounding property when she and her husband moved to Adams from Nashville about 15 years ago. “His face was down in the mud and water, and he couldn’t breathe, and something grabbed him by the legs and jerked him out. That night at the supper table, the spirit told Lucy Bell that she needed to ‘put a halter on that boy of hers because he would have died in that cave if it weren’t for me.’”

Photos taken at the cave—which was recently added to the National Register of Historic Places—have revealed unusual images that weren’t present when visitors snapped them.

“Cameras act up,” Kirby says. “We’ve had flashes go off on their own. People walk through the cave with a camera on their neck, and all of a sudden it will flash a picture.”

The Kirbys also promote a special two-hour nighttime excursion (minimum of four people, \$100, by appointment) that includes a tour of the cave and a candlelight tour of the John Bell cabin, which the Kirbys built as a replica of the original. Kirby says thousands of people (17,000, according to the Tennessee Historical Commission) visit

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each year, and they come from all 50 states and beyond.

“We’ve had people here from South Africa, Germany, France, China and Australia,” Kirby says. “When the *Blair Witch* movie came out [in 1999], that was a busy year. And when *American Haunting* came out, it was like opening up a can of worms for people.”

Yet, while the Kirbys make money from operating what has become a popular tourist attraction, the city of Adams doesn’t benefit as much as it could. One reason for that, of course, is the fact that the cave is on private property. Hours of operation are subject to the will of the Kirby family, who also resides on the property. The cave has regular hours about six months out of the year and even then, during three of those months, it’s only open on weekends. When it rains, the cave floods, forcing the Kirbys to close. The schedule, coupled with the rain, makes it difficult to plan a visit.

Beyond the challenges associated with private ownership, however, Adams could be capturing more dollars from the tourists who manage to visit each year. Often, when people make the trip to see the cave, they eat at the cafeteria or the tea room in the old school building. They even shop at the antique mall. But if they want to spend the night, they have



to go to Springfield, Clarksville or Nashville.

“This little city brings in more tourists than anybody else in our county,” says Kay Bagby, who has lived in Adams for more than 40 years. “We need a hotel or a bed and breakfast. If we just had a place for them to spend the night, we could entertain them all day long.”

Bagby, however, hasn’t had any luck convincing homeowners to turn their houses into bed and breakfasts. And Fosnes says it would be difficult to convince a hotel chain to build in a city that, located at least 10 miles off I-24, is the definition of off the beaten path. The bed and breakfast idea or a small guest house, she says, would be the city’s best bet, and she agrees that there are enough attractions in Adams to warrant such an accommodation.

“It could definitely be an overnight trip,” she says.

The cave, after all, isn’t the only attraction, Bell Witch or otherwise. Adams also hosts the annual Bell Witch Bluegrass Festival and the Tennessee-Kentucky Threshermen’s Show—an event that attracts about 10,000 people each year. The Adams Museum contains Bell Witch paraphernalia and other items of historic interest. In addition, several years ago, at Bagby’s suggestion, the community began putting

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on a play about the Bell Witch every fall.

“When I first came to Adams, everybody had a story about the Bell Witch, and I think everybody believed in it,” she says. “But I was beginning to see those stores die out, and I think they’re worth preserving because they are part of our history.”

She asked Adams native David Alford, former executive artistic director of the Tennessee Repertory Theater, to write the play. For the past six years, during the last two weekends in October, professional actors, as well as members of the community, put on *Spirit: The Authentic Story of the Bell Witch of Tennessee* in the open air pavilion at the historic Bell School. With a \$30,000 yearly budget (collected from donations and ticket sales), the performance has been a success, drawing more people each year. Last year more than 1,300 people from 20 different states and three foreign countries were in attendance. And each year, patrons say, something out of the ordinary happens.

“One year, it was calm with no wind, but a tree with dead leaves on it rattled throughout the performance,” says Sarah Head, president of Community Spirit, the nonprofit formed to produce the play. “Black dogs show up and wander around.” (It’s said that the spirit sometimes came back in the form of a black dog.)

Although Adams’ residents have taken steps to preserve the legend and the stories that surround it, Bagby still believes they could do more. As it stands, she says, “We’re probably missing out on the biggest enterprise that Robertson County has. This is major, and if we develop it a little bit, there’s no telling what this county would see from it.”

But even a little development can be a tall order for a small, agricultural city like Adams—regardless of ghostly intervention. Perhaps intervention of another sort, be it promotional or financial, would help this sleepy town fulfill its potential. **tn**

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