

A Rialto Haunting

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By Rachel Carter and Pamela Dickman

Writers Clarence Herrin's fingers moved quickly and deftly, with the skill of 23 years, as he threaded the film, "Island in the Sun," into the projector. That Tuesday, Oct. 8, 1957 - a day marked with drizzling rain - was the final day Lovelanders could pay \$1.25 at the Rialto Theater to see Joan Fontaine, James Mason and Harry Belafonte in CinemaScope color. As he had since 1934, Herrin carried heavy metal canisters up and down flights of steps and threaded each 20-minute reel, one at a time, into one of the two projectors. The last strip of film he fed into a projector was for the last showing of the drama-romance, which caused a stir with an on-screen interracial kiss. Sometime that night, the 57-year-old suffered a heart attack in the projection booth in which he had spent so many hours over so many years. Loveland resident Floyd Keener, now 94, remembers that day 49 years ago. While his memory is hazy, he cannot forget helping carry Herrin down the stairs. "That is the truth," said Keener, who worked nights as assistant theater manager after his day job with the U.S. Postal Service. "He died running the booth." Records show that doctors actually pronounced Herrin dead two hours later at Loveland Memorial Hospital on Douglas Avenue. Could Herrin's spirit still linger at the Rialto Theater after all these years? Could he be one of the benevolent spirits that theater manager Jan Sawyer and others have encountered? "I never heard any ghost stories," Keener said. But Sawyer thinks so.

Two different groups of paranormal investigators have researched the Rialto Theater: the first in 2001 and the second, Denver-based ParaFPI, six months ago. Both measured unusual energy in the building, which in its 86 years has been a movie theater with offices upstairs and down, before it was converted into shops, then transformed back into a theater.

Investigators, like employees who spend time in the theater, felt something strange in the projection booth, which looks out over the balcony and stage. Without any prior knowledge of theater history or legends, Jessica Harris and other investigators with ParaFPI - some relying on psychic abilities and others depending on technical equipment - reacted immediately upon stepping into the booth in May. "I had gone in with the equipment, and I just thought, 'This is nutty. I keep getting a feeling of this old guy, and he reminds me of Crankshaft,'" said Harris. She tends to rely on her equipment rather than her feelings, so the strong sensation she felt in the projection booth was unusual - but undeniable. Drea Penndragon, a psychic investigator and founder of ParaFPI, stepped into the projection booth and almost immediately started having chest pains and difficulty breathing. "I felt like I was having a heart attack," Penndragon said, "but as soon as I stepped out of the room it disappeared. So I just knew, 'Somebody in here died of a heart attack.' I was standing in that room feeling somebody else's heart pain." Penndragon sensed an older, stodgy man - not unkind - but someone who was "very much accustomed to being by himself while he was alive." Another paranormal investigator who visited the theater in 2001, Sawyer said, claimed to actually have seen the ghost. The investigator was the first to step into the projection booth - and she immediately stepped back out. "Are you sure we're the only ones in the theater?" she asked. Sure, Sawyer said. Why? "Because I just saw a man go through the other door."

While Sawyer hasn't seen a ghost in the booth, she and other employees have repeatedly felt a presence there. "My earliest contact here has been on these stairs," Sawyer said, standing on the steps that lead to the balcony, then to the projection booth. "As I was coming up the stairs, it felt like somebody walked past me. You know that feeling that somebody brushed past. There was nobody there, no corporeal being. "I call him George. To me, he is George." She never knew the name of the person who died in the booth - only the legend. Then earlier this year, Keener stopped in the theater and confirmed her suspicion. Still,

she did not know the details until the Reporter-Herald staff pieced them together through records, memories and past newspaper articles. Is Herrin, or someone else, still hanging out in and around the projection booth? Several unusual happenings lead some Rialto employees to believe so. "I spend a fair amount of time in the projection booth, and there has been something going up there lately," said Scott Dunn, technical coordinator for the theater. Twice in the past several months, projectors have "mysteriously decalibrated, like a linebacker rammed it." Once, the projected image moved left to right. Another time, the sound settings were off. "We kept asking ourselves, 'Who's been up here? Who's been up here?'" Dunn said. "And then we realized, nobody. Obviously nobody's been up here." Once, Sawyer tried to unlock the projection booth, but the key would not turn. She checked to make sure she had the correct key. She did, yet it still would not turn. Under her breath, she said, "Can we please come in?" "I put the key in again, and it turned easily." Although odd things happen, employees don't feel frightened or threatened. They even try to respect the Rialto's spirits by not making fun of them - and not blaming them too often for the broken copy machine. "I don't want people to be afraid to come here," Sawyer said. "We have absolutely wonderful spirits here." Sitting in the deserted theater one afternoon several months ago, Sawyer felt completely comfortable tackling paperwork. Suddenly, out of the theater's intercom system, a male voice broke her concentration: "Fairy tales do come true."

Hmmm, Sawyer thought, the system must have intercepted someone's cellular phone call or radio station. She mentioned it to Dunn the next day, who told her that simply was not possible. Dunn explained that the intercom system is hard-wired in the theater - not wireless, not radio. A few months later, in May, Keener, downtown for a haircut, stopped into the Rialto, where he had worked so many years before. He and Sawyer walked together through the theater in which both had spent so many hours. As they stood at the bottom of the stairs leading to the projection booth, Keener glanced up and said, "I carried a dead man down those stairs." Sawyer took those words to heart and could not banish them from her mind. That Sunday, Sawyer and her family sat on her back patio, talking about the projectionist. "I think that's the voice I heard and presence I felt," she said to her family. The thought still in her mind, she opened the theater for a ballet rehearsal. After the last performer filed out, Sawyer made sure the building was empty, then locked the doors. Once again, she settled alone in the box office to tackle paperwork. Suddenly, the same male voice uttered one sentence over the intercom: "You're exactly right."