

Resident Spirits

Lady Bird Johnson's experience with haunted houses—first her childhood home, then the White House

BY MARTHA DEERINGER

IN AN IMPOSING, 17-ROOM ANTEBELLUM mansion just a mile outside of Karnack, in deep East Texas, Claudia Alta Taylor was born December 22, 1912, into wealth and privilege. Her nursemaid, enchanted by the 6 1/2-pound, dark-haired baby, pronounced her “as purty as a lady bird,” introducing a nickname the tiny girl would bear for the rest of her life.

Thomas Jefferson Taylor, the baby's bombastic and domineering father and the wealthiest man in town, owned a 65,000-acre cotton plantation, two cotton gins, a fishing business and two country stores, on which he posted the optimistic sign, “T. J. Taylor—Dealer in Everything.”

Perhaps it's prophetic that Karnack (misspelled by a postmaster who intended to name it “Karnak” for the temples of Egypt) lies near the town of Uncertain and just 20 miles from Jefferson, which claims to be the most haunted town in Texas. Many believed Taylor's mansion sheltered a resident ghost.

Built in 1843 and known as the Brick House, the mansion was the scene of a tragedy in 1861. Owner Milt Andrew's beautiful 19-year-old daughter, Eunice, known as “Oonie,” sat alone in a rocking chair in her bedroom beside the fireplace during a violent thunderstorm. Lightning coursed down the chimney and struck her, consuming the girl and her chair in a fiery inferno. Rumors suggest that Ononie's ghost never left the house.

When Lady Bird was 5, the Brick House, which is still standing and used as a private residence, witnessed a second tragedy. Minnie Lee, Lady Bird's genteel

mother, fell down the spiral staircase and died from complications of a miscarriage caused by the fall.

Minnie's death came during her husband's busiest time of year, and Taylor, not to be distracted from his business, took the 5-year-old to the store with him and set up a bed for her on the second floor, where coffins were stored. When she inquired what those long boxes were, her father replied, “Dry goods, honey, just dry goods.”

Lady Bird's brothers, still away at school, were not told of their mother's death for almost a year.

With her two older brothers away at school, Lady Bird's childhood centered on her bedroom, with the view from its windows blocked by trees. The family's servants repeatedly warned her to stay away from Ononie's bedroom, just down the hall from her own, and the whistling of the wind around the floor-to-ceiling windows added to Lady Bird's fears. Although she says she never saw Ononie's ghost herself, in later years Lady Bird admitted that, “I felt quite sure that ghosts did exist, and I was scared.” In her 80s, she told biographer Jan Jarboe Russell, “I would not, even now, at this age, feel comfortable being alone in that house myself.”

In the fall of 1919, Lady Bird started school, and her mother's sister, Effie, came to Karnack to help her niece adjust. Effie believed that Minnie's ghost inhabited the Brick House and visited her at night with instructions on caring for Lady Bird, washing windows and tending to other derelict household chores.

To escape the atmosphere of the house



and its resident spirits, Lady Bird turned to nature. The pine forests and swamps reminded her of her mother, who had once strolled barefooted through the woods in a white dress with a bouquet of wildflowers in her hand.

Lady Bird also explored nearby Caddo Lake and its adjacent bayous, where “time seemed ringed around by silence and ancient cypress trees, rich in festoons of Spanish moss. Now and then an alligator would surface like a gnarled log. It was a place for dreams,” Lady Bird said in Russell’s book *Lady Bird: A Biography of Mrs. Johnson* (Scribner, 1999).

“Growing up alone, I took my delights in the gifts nature offered me daily,” Lady Bird

said. Her love of wildflowers and interest in the environment are part of her inheritance from her mother, along with a shyness that was occasionally mistaken for aloofness. After she graduated from the University of Texas with two degrees, Lady Bird’s marriage to Lyndon Johnson propelled her out of the Taylor ancestral home and on the road to the White House, another residence purported to house spirits of the departed.

Four former first ladies have claimed to sense the presence of Abraham Lincoln’s ghost during their stints in the White House. Grace Coolidge glimpsed him standing by the window in his former office. Eleanor Roosevelt felt Lincoln’s spirit enter the room late one night while

she worked alone in the Lincoln Bedroom. Jacqueline Kennedy sat quietly in the Lincoln Bedroom on occasion to draw solace from Lincoln’s spirit, and Lady Bird Johnson strongly sensed his presence in the hallway of the private quarters.

Staff members and dignitaries such as Winston Churchill and Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands also sighted the former president and other apparitions in the White House.

But if Lady Bird actually saw those spirits herself, she kept her own counsel—a trait she had probably developed many years earlier at her childhood home in Karnack.

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