

## A Home for Even Odder Fellows?

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One must suspend a certain amount of disbelief and open their mind to the realm of the metaphysically inconceivable to see the ghosts wandering the halls of Odd Fellows Home. There is no ectoplasm oozing from the walls, no bloody footprints mixed with mud trailing around the campus: such ghoulish things might ruin the stately landscaping of Belvoir Winery, a palatial tourist location that calls the once-abandoned manor home. In 2010, Liberty’s famed Dr. John L. Bean and his wife Marsha kindled their love of rustic Jacobean architecture and remodeled the looming Odd Fellows Home into their beautiful winery—but the Home has a story of its own beyond the grapes, a mythology born from the mundane that occasionally takes a turn for the sinister.

In order to comprehend the enigma that is Odd Fellows, we have to go back to the days before the Beans’ charming winery made light of its supposedly dark past with scintillating merlots and gently humorous “Ghosts and Grapes” tours. In the years preceding the remodel, Liberty Public School District students both young and old spoke of the Odd Fellows Home in

the most hushed of tones, assuring each other (at sleepovers, around campfires, or to school newspapers, as kids often do) that the Home really *was* once an insane asylum, and if you listened closely enough, you could almost hear the elderly and insane being electrocuted or lobotomized by mad doctors until their hearts gave out, overwhelmed from hours of desperate screaming. A quick trip to a YouTube page maintained by any so-called local paranormal “experts” will tell you—with an accompanying video filmed *Blair Witch Project*-style, intermittently riddled with atmospheric, sepia-tone panoramic photos of the Home’s front lawn—that bloody handprints have been found streaked across bathtubs in the old hospital building and strange voices heard muttering into the crew’s boom mics. Kids who grew up in the Claywoods area of Liberty were especially captivated by these ghostly tales and had perhaps the some of the most convincing stories to contribute—and why wouldn’t they? The mansion, with its grasping vines, crumbling bricks, and sweeping grounds, loomed over their backyards, menacingly: the silent hilltop cemetery and abandoned hospital building just dared some group of bold young adventurers to investigate the Odd Fellows’ cruel fates and wrap up the mystery for once and for all. It is hard to imagine a more perfect scene for a ghost story: before Belvoir Winery took its place, Odd Fellows was Liberty’s very own Radley House, a Scooby-Doo mystery just waiting to happen.

As legend would have it, though, the Odd Fellows Home got its start in the same way you might expect from any intimidating-yet-impressive old building: not as a place to torture and slaughter the invalid, but as a rest-stop at which the fabulously wealthy were mercilessly pampered. The year was 1887, the location a plot of bright green grass stretched out along modern-day 291 Highway like a big elastic tarp. This time marked a significant real estate boom for Clay County and a prominent financier called the Winner Investment Group found the future

vineyard to be ripe for the picking. The Group set to work, constructing a posh hotel which they christened the Reed Springs Hotel. This hotel, as you may suspect, would someday come to (supposedly) house the ghosts of the Odd Fellows. Initially, building plans to expand Reed Springs Hotel called for some elaborate landscaping to add more luxury to the already architecturally magnificent building: blueprints proposed a racetrack, pagodas, and a boathouse, none of which were ever constructed. In 1891, at the height of its popularity, notorious head investor at the Winner Group, W.E. Winner, purchased Reed Springs for himself, creatively renaming it the Winner Hotel. Winner's name proved to be terribly ironic, as 1895 saw his utter financial ruin; he sold the hotel off to a fraternal organization, the International Order of the Odd Fellows, to pay off his debts. In 1900, a fire raged through the building—now renamed the Odd Fellows Home—taking no lives but leaving behind an incredible mansion with a damaged foundation and a suspiciously asylum-like name.

It might disappoint any ardent ghost-lovers reading this essay to discover that the Odd Fellows Home was not reconstructed immediately into a foreboding loony bin as prescribed by its rather unfortunate name, nor was it ever actually the home of any genuinely odd fellows. The International Order of the Odd Fellows was—and still is—an organization dedicated to extreme benevolence, charity, and general kindness to all people. The beautifully reconstructed Odd Fellows Home mirrored the organization's image: additional buildings—the Old Folks Home, Old Hospital, and Old School—were built over the years, not as a part of some hideous Lovecraftian horror scheme, but to house and care for those in need. Orphans and the elderly were sheltered and well-fed behind Home's warm, brick walls. The hospital building, for a time, served as Liberty's most state-of-the-art care facility and medical research lab, while the Liberty Public School District and local colleges offered excellent academic programs and scholarships

to the hardworking orphan students. By the 1930s, the Odd Fellows Home began to show some signs of wear: the hospital's medical technology was quickly becoming outdated, and New Deal social reform brought with it other, more appealing nursing homes that drew the elderly away from Odd Fellows. In the 1950s, remaining hospital residents were admitted as paying clients, while the school building shut down from lack of students. Later on, the Home would temporarily be used to educate Liberty students during times of classroom overflow; eventually, however, the forgotten old Odd Fellows Home fell quiet and dormant, leaving its history up to our imaginations for the next fifty years and plenty of space for ghosts to move in.

Impressive as its dynamic past may be, the present day Odd Fellows Home these days remains quaint, thoroughly untainted by the supposedly depraved medical experiments that many believe once went on in its halls. Though the days have long since passed when Liberty kids all aflame with fearful excitement would entertain fanciful notions of slipping past the grounds guards and living out their own real life ghost stories, those same kids may soon be old enough to sip a fine glass of wine at the Belvoir Winery and perhaps catch just a little glimpse of something unexpected. After all, with such a long-standing history behind the Odd Fellows Home—so many different people who have come and gone over the past century—there's always the slightest chance that you're not just hearing voices because you've had one sip too many.

## Works Cited

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