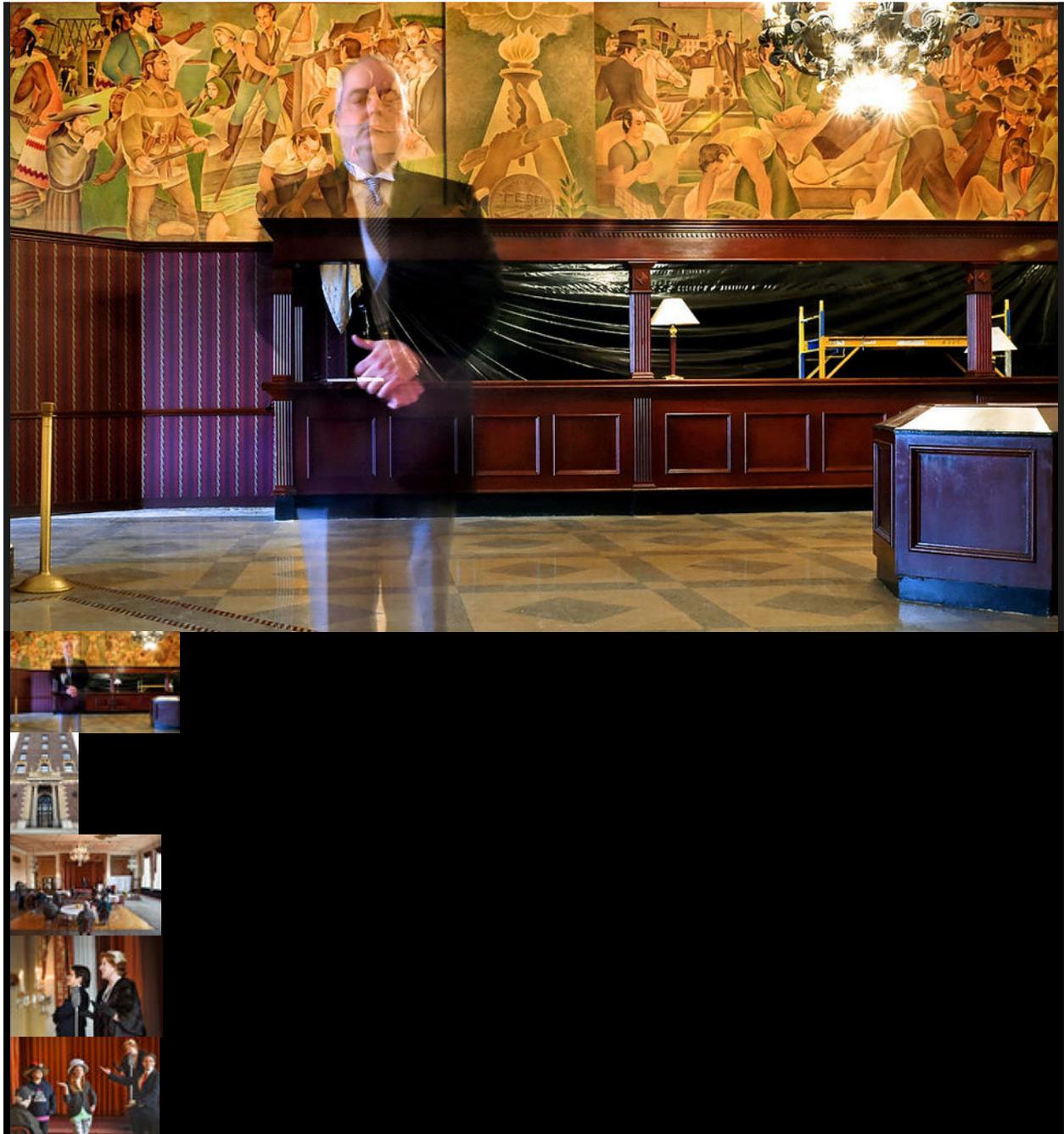


# 'Ghost walks' at the Hotel Syracuse: Overflow turnout, passionate memories, dreams of a revival







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Edward Mastin plays the role of hotel concierge during an Onondaga Historical Association's Historic Ghostwalk at the Hotel Syracuse. He appears ghostly during a long exposure as he stands in the lobby under a 40 foot mural by Carl Roters which was covered by mirrors for the last 37 years. Saturday Dec. 27, 2014 David Lassman | [dlassman@syracuse.com](mailto:dlassman@syracuse.com)

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Priscilla Bailey stepped into the lobby and saw ghosts, and she wasn't talking about the official ones, in costume. She and her husband Jim drove in from Bridgeport Saturday for an Onondaga Historical Association "Ghost Walk" at the Hotel Syracuse. Actors in period dress did presentations on hotel history, but Pat -- like so many visitors -- didn't really need the help.

She walked into the place, [empty since 2004](#), and she saw what it was as much as what it is: Sixty years ago, there'd always be an assistant manager at the top of the stairs, "greeting you like you were the queen of England." Brass railings would be gleaming and the carpets immaculate and she could close her eyes and hear the long-gone voices of Mr. Christino and Mr. Martino, two beloved regulars who were maitre'ds in the Persian Terrace.

Beyond the emptiness Saturday, Priscilla visualized the "men's shop and the lady's shop and the shoe shop and the house doctor and the house nurse and the pharmacy ...."

It was "heartbreaking," she said, to reconcile those memories with what the hotel is today, a crumbling echo chamber, abandoned for too long. Priscilla,

81, had a job there for about a quarter-century, beginning in 1950. For a long time, she worked at the front desk.

She knew Edward Everett Horton, the veteran actor who was the narrator for television's "Fractured Fairy Tales." She remembers when singer Dean Martin and comedian Jerry Lewis came into Syracuse for a show, yet detested each other so much they demanded rooms on separate floors.

Standing in the lobby, Priscilla thought of a day when a work crew, several men in coveralls, arrived at noon to take away an oriental rug for cleaning. When the assistant manager came back from lunch, he said:



Organizers expected a passionate response, but big crowds for the Hotel Syracuse "Ghost Walks" overwhelmed even the best expectations. *Sean Kirst | skirst@syracuse.com*

Hey. Where's the rug?

Gone. The carpet had been stolen. The hotel of that era was a place of grand stories, a destination loaded with so many services that a guest never really needed to leave the building.

For Priscilla and her husband -- who used to run the hotel laundry -- the ghosts were everywhere.

Lynne Pascale, an [OHA](#) administrator, had a feeling the event would be popular. But she didn't anticipate a turnout so overwhelming that the OHA had to turn away hundreds who wanted to take part in the tours, spread over two weekends.

The "Ghost Walks" were tied to [an exhibit on Hotel Syracuse history](#) that will stay up into June at the OHA on Montgomery Street, and Pascale said the response speaks to the communal power of the landmark.

"The hotel is very evocative," she said. "People feel a deep connection, a sense of place."

For the first time in years, they also feel some hope. Developer Ed Riley is [piecing together a \\$62 million plan for reviving the 90-year-old hotel](#). Some work -- mainly cleaning up, and a detailed "investigation" for purposes of accurate historic restoration -- is already under way.

By March, Riley hopes to begin full-blown renovations. The goal: An upscale hotel with 261 rooms, employing about 300, that will be open for guests by spring 2016. His decision to get involved, Riley said, involved more than just emotion.

"I wouldn't have taken this on," he said, "if I didn't think it made sense, business-wise."

Still, he knows from experience how much this project means to the community. Riley and his wife Janet took the tour Saturday, accompanied by family members and an infant grandson, Benjamin Thorpe. When the couple was in high school -- Ed at Christian Brothers Academy, Janet at Bishop Ludden -- they went there together, for their senior ball.

They still have a program for the event: June 2, 1972. The Persian Terrace. Music by Jack Kreisler, and his Orchestra. The Rileys can appreciate the passionate connection of the many Central New Yorkers who were married at the hotel, or went there on first dates, or had family parties there, or in some way still feel a part of their own lives in the old walls.



No one there: During a "Ghost Walk," Fred Rhoades

tries a pay phone, shut down long ago, at the Hotel Syracuse. Sean Kirst | [skirst@syracuse.com](mailto:skirst@syracuse.com)

Even so, Ed Riley was startled at how quickly 900 people signed up, selling out the "Ghost Walks." It reinforces his belief that the hotel -- **if a renovation is finally done with real quality** -- will not only be a success, but will lift the "streetscape" of the downtown neighborhood around it.

"The amount of interest in this," Riley said, "is phenomenal."

Riley, too, is always aware of the ghosts: The reception area by his office is a testament to all the hotel used to be. Kay Frizzell, Riley's office manager, found a tattered artificial Christmas tree in a long-forgotten hotel storefront. She cleaned off the dust, straightened the branches and decorated it with such artifacts as a matchbook from the Persian Terrace and a card from a 1930 Colgate "dinner and dance" at the hotel.

Downstairs, beneath peeling ceilings, lines of hushed visitors moved from one stop to another. Susan Hall, of North Syracuse, remembered getting the bridesmaids dresses, for her wedding, from a shop at the hotel. She remembered how she and her mother would watch televised coverage of "Fashions at Luncheon," a regular program at the Persian Terrace. OHA volunteers on the "Ghost Tour" delighted Hall by recreating that event.

Everyone, it seemed, bumped into distinct memories amid the chilly rooms: Kathy Brown, an OHA volunteer, recalled a family tradition of going downtown for Christmas shopping with her mother, and then stopping at the Tea Room at the hotel. Bruce Harvey, a local photographer, wore a snappy fedora to the Ghost Walk.

Inside the brim: The stamp of the John F. Zell & Sons Mens Shop, once a fine establishment at the Hotel Syracuse.

Susan Hall's husband John walked into an empty downstairs space -- in its prime, the location of the Dutch Coffee Shop -- and pictured the old "Library," a dance hotspot where books lined the walls. Don McLaughlin, a former Democratic chairman in Clay, remembered the regular and dominating presence of the late Lee Alexander at hotel events; the bigger-than-life mayor of Syracuse later went to prison.

Fred Rhoades, a wrestling fan, said he stopped by the hotel one night, before a wrestling card at the [Onondaga County War Memorial](#), to mingle with such stars of the ring as "Jake the Snake." Marcia Mahaffy, a volunteer guide for the OHA, is also a mime; the Hotel Syracuse, she said, used to be a favorite place to perform on New Year's Eve.

The old kitchen, today, is essentially an empty, tiled vault. When Mahaffy stepped into it Saturday, what she remembered in an unexpected and heartbreaking way -- powerful, distinct, almost as if the scent remained in the air -- was the signature aroma of seafood.

"Oh my God," said Mahaffy, expressing the same do-we-dare-to-hope dream as everyone who walked the halls:

Imagine -- just imagine! -- if the hotel really comes back.

*Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard. Email him at [skirst@syracuse.com](mailto:skirst@syracuse.com) or send him a message on [Twitter](#).*