

Humbuggery, Medical Hoaxes, and Sweet Promises in Eureka Springs

If you look closely into a single, little nook of the elegant, spirit-riddled Crescent Hotel, Eureka Springs, Arkansas, you'll see an arc, I'm told, a portal that'll usher you right into the fifth dimension. I'm walking fearfully through the place.

"Look closely because at this very spot it frequently appears," our guide told us, a true believer, giving us the tour. She jerked her arm sideways, in a motion I simply assumed was conjuration, and I took the picture.

I'll show it to you sometime. You got to look hard, worse than hard.

The Crescent Hotel is an ancient, five-story, behemoth, built in 1886, a creaking-stairway hotel that has every reason to be haunted. It's seen more booms and busts than a brothel, and likely was one at least once in its checkered 125-year history. It's been most everything else, in fact, including a hospital, of sorts, when, in 1937, an Iowa charlatan crook named Norman Baker moved his medical humbug from Muscatine to Eureka Springs, to take over the sprawling old hotel and create a reign of medical tomfoolery that lasted just three years until Arkansas tossed him in the clink for mail fraud.

Somewhere in the hotel basement, there reportedly was a morgue. Baker took on dying people and their loved ones by the dozens, even hundreds, promising miracle cures that never came, and taking, in return \$4 million of their money, in fact. That some patients died seems more than possible; he kept no records, apparently. Was there a gallery of the dead in the basement? No one knows.

See the ghosts? They're there all right. Listen closely.

Eureka Springs is itself a monument to delusion and grand, American-style chicanery. Throughout the sharp wooded hills, sweet natural springs abound, where mineral water once bubbled gloriously, drawing thousands of seekers to the neighborhood in hopes that drinking that mineral water--sometimes bathing in it--would cure their ills.

And it did. See the ghosts? Look closely now, very closely--that arc is the means by which all of us make it into the fifth dimension.

Eureka Springs is a remarkable place with an incredible history. The scary Crescent Hotel is its capstone, officially called "the Queen of the Ozarks." You really have to see it. If any place on Mother Earth should be haunted, the immense, imposing Crescent, high above town, high above the valley, does. Some dark midnights, it just has to howl.

If you climb the stairs to the observation deck, you can see all over the valley, a hundred--at least--Victorian mansions, and at least something of the town that's made it's living in sweet and glorious promises.

Across the valley, you won't be able to miss the huge "Christ of the Ozarks," third tallest Jesus in the world, a sculpture so massive it could dangle three cars from each wrist, so big that its feet had to be cut off, lest its holy head require a red beacon to warn off aircraft--and how, pray tell, would that look? So, oddly enough, this mammoth Jesus has no feet; but then some wry cynics claim the statue is not work of art at all, just Willie Nelson in a white dress.

Even though Eureka Springs is the home of the world's largest passion play, I'm not sure that the place is all that good for your faith--there's just way too much of it. Even though thousands come every year to see "the greatest story ever told," Eureka Springs has a history of just too many stories, too much silliness, and way too much fraud.

We're all seekers--every one of us, I'd guess, all looking, some more seriously than others; but all of us itch to find some long-lost goodness, some hope and joy.

Eureka Spring has been trying for more than a hundred years to scratch it.

Room #218. Be sure to stop there, the most haunted room in the whole Poe-like Crescent Hotel. Seriously.

Scary.

But if you want to stay there, you better book long in advance, months in advance because it's the most requested room in the Crescent. Sheesh! Makes me shiver.