

Spirits at the Grey Moss Inn, Part I

By Cynthia Leal Massey

Tucked in a valley surrounded by ancient oaks festooned with Spanish moss is a rock restaurant and cottages that would look perfectly at home in a Thomas Kinkade painting. Although the Grey Moss Inn was established in 1929, the area where it is located on Scenic Loop Road along Helotes Creek has a long history of habitation.

In 1723, Apaches killed a Spaniard looking for stray horses near the limestone cliffs along Helotes Creek and the ancient Indian path now called Scenic Loop Road. When a scouting party returned, they found the Spaniard scalped, his body riddled with arrows. Thus began more than a century of warfare between Spanish and European settlers and the various Indian tribes—most particularly, Apache and Comanche—that had laid claim to the cavernous hills for so long.

A mystical and romantic quality pervades the area in and around the Inn, which sits upon a large underground spring of the Glen Rose aquifer. There is little doubt that the spirits of our Native American predecessors and early pioneers linger amongst the ancient oaks in the vicinity of the Inn, but the most dominant spirit is that of its original owner Mary Howell, herself a descendant of Cherokees removed from their southern Appalachian homeland in the early 19th century.

Howell died April 3, 1976 in Boerne, just eleven days after selling her beloved restaurant. Her strong attachment to the Grey Moss Inn, however, could not be dissolved by death. Perhaps her Cherokee background and the memory of her ancestors' tenuous hold on their native land is one reason Mary's spirit lingers on at the Grey Moss Inn, revealing itself in startling poltergeist activity, and in more subtle ways—in the scent of the rose fragrance she always wore and in the periodic apparitions of a slim and stylish woman, dark hair up, wearing a long skirt and white blouse, appearing as she was in her heyday.

Howell was the driving force behind the Grey Moss Inn. It was *her* dream and *her* restaurant, forged in a time of depression and hardship. Born on August 19, 1890 in Decatur, Texas, Mary was the fourth of ten children—nine daughters and one son—born to James Jones and Mary Mershon. When Mary was three, the family moved to the Indian Territory of the Cherokee Nation in present-day Oklahoma, presumably to claim ownership of land in response to an 1893 revision of the Dawes Act, which provided for the break-up of commonly held tribal land and distribution and full ownership to families of Indian descent.

By 1910, nineteen-year-old Mary was living in Sequoyah County, Oklahoma, with her parents and younger siblings, working as a sales lady in a dry goods store. The next year, she married Arthur Edward Howell, who worked for the railroad, and they moved to San Antonio. On July 26, 1912, twin sons Arthur Jr., and Tyrus were born.

In the late-1920s, the Howell family was returning to San Antonio from a fishing trip to Medina Lake. They decided to stop at a new development they'd heard about called Scenic Loop Playground. When Mary saw the quaint rock summer cottages, she thought that one of the cabins—the real estate office—would make a perfect building for a restaurant. She convinced her husband that she could make a go of it, and worked out a deal with the owner/developers, H. E. Hildebrand and E. N. Requa, for a lease/purchase agreement. The couple moved into the cottage next to the inn in 1929, a few months

before the stock market crashed in October. Although the following years proved challenging, Mary, with the help of her family, was able to get and keep the restaurant on solid ground.

In 1940, Mary was honored in a *San Antonio Light* feature story titled “Outstanding Business & Professional Women of San Antonio,” with a story of the success of the Grey Moss Inn, which was by then internationally known and the destination of many “distinguished persons,” including American stage actress Katharine Cornell, silent film actress Colleen Moore, and New York scion John Jacob Astor, born four months after his father’s tragic death in the 1912 sinking of the *Titanic*.

Not content with one successful business, Mary opened a candy store in San Antonio in 1946, where she sold chocolate-coated butter cream, caramels, and nougats, among other confections. She even created a non-fattening candy that she swore was as good as her rich chocolates. Two years later, she started a third enterprise, a guest ranch located between the Sisterdale and Walnut Grove roads, five miles north of Boerne.

But her first and most ardent love remained the Grey Moss Inn.

In 1948, the Inn was listed in Gourmet’s “Guide to Good Eating.” Howell explained to a *San Antonio Light* reporter, “Success was not easy—pioneering in the face of an immediate depression—and the lack of telephones. It took all the courage and hard work any human could muster to survive.”

But survive it did due to Mary Howell’s formidable tenacity. After her husband’s January 28, 1954 death at their Scenic Loop home, Mary poured herself even more tenaciously into the Inn, where a newspaper report said, she “presides over the wishing well on which sizzling steaks are prepared with a fragrant, nut brown steak sauce, to be served with butter-soaked baked potato, little green peas, and a delicious slice of apple pie.”

By 1963, Mary’s son, Arthur (who would later become mayor of Boerne) was managing the restaurant. Her health failing, Mary Howell died in 1976 at the age of 85. She was laid to rest in the Boerne cemetery next to her husband.

New owners Gerald and Mary Martin continued the legacy of the Grey Moss Inn as a world-class restaurant for the next 12 years. In 1988, the couple sold the property to current owners Dr. Louis Baeten, a San Antonio orthodontist, and his wife Nell.

(To be continued: The Baeten era and investigations of paranormal activity at the Grey Moss Inn.)

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