

# Midnight in Manassas: 'We're not ghost hunters'

*Jenny*



Judith Henry's gravestone

By LIZ ESPIN

A spiritualist in a flowing robe, a couple commemorating their 13th anniversary and a group of about 30 people outside the home of Judith Henry, the first woman and second civilian to be killed in the Civil War, were my companions at Manassas Battlefield National Park last night.

The evening opened with Russ Pelletier state director of the Jaycees, assuring us that "what this is, we don't know. We came up here to investigate what's been told to the local police. We're not ghost hunters, but if it's here, it's here; if it's not, it's not."

Spooky feelings were a part of most everyone's evening. The Manassas Jaycees originally planned to have a medium from Haymarket come perform a seance, but Madame Olga never showed. Instead, Alice Kowatch, a spiritual healer led us in reaching into our minds, "opening up and letting your

mental powers develop."

We were originally prepared to contact Mrs. Henry. Judith Henry died a terrifying death during the Civil War because she refused to leave her house after the gunshots of First Manassas were fired around her estate. As Chuck Colgan Jr., the Jaycee who planned the evening, said, she was a rich, probably pampered lady, 85 years old and bedridden—she did not allow her son or daughter to take her out of the house.

She was shot by five bullets, and died within a few hours of the firing. Yet, the story goes, she never rested because she was buried in her front yard instead of next to her husband at the family graveyard.

Last night, 119 years later, the Jaycees decided to investigate the rumors of a woman slinging within the rebuilt Henry house.

Mrs. Henry stayed silent all night, but nobody was disappointed.

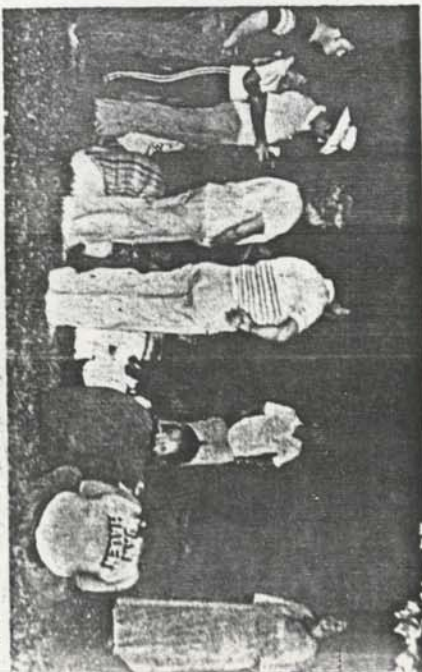
Kowatch, or "Alice," evasive at the beginning of the evening, gradually began to instruct us in the ways of reaching the spirits. She captured our attention by telling us of the Indian ghosts she saw almost immediately in the field behind the Henry house.

"They're there, they won't cross the fence," she said. "They're very sad, crying for the loved ones that died there."

Pelletier decided to investigate, and walked over to the fence. Soon, we were all investigating. Steve Wessell claimed he "felt something" in the field behind him. He called Alice over and came back to the crowd stunned.

"I didn't see anything," he said, "but when I asked Alice what she saw over there she said some cows and horses." Wessell never asked Alice what kind of animals: he was amazed she saw the cows and horses he had "felt" were

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The Manassas group listens to Alice Kowatch

Photo by Russ Pelletier

# SEANCE

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there.

Park acting superintendent Stewart Vogt told us later: "There used to be a barnyard there." He knew nothing of Wessel's find.

That was enough to scare one Manassas resident, Marianne O'Connor into saying she was "petrified to cross over that fence." O'Connor's 19-year-old daughter had already left us because of her panic, so severe that she was suffering hot and cold "shakes" and had to be escorted to the park exit before she could drive herself home.

I felt a few shivers run down my back when, after midnight, a group of 10 decided to cross the field and try to contact Mrs. Henry on their own. In spite of Alice's warnings that a seance by an inexperienced person could be "deadly," Pelletier and other curiosity-seekers were willing to try.

We asked Alice what she meant by deadly, and she explained that once a medium goes into a trance and speaks to the "other side," they have the option of allowing a spirit to take over their body or not. If they let the spirit enter, the "silver cord" keeping the body and spirit united could easily be broken by anyone walking into the medium's "aura."

The seance did not "reach" Mrs. Henry.

Yet Wessel said he had a strong feeling to take off the cowboy hat he had been wearing all night, and a few quivers did occur among the hands in the circle. Pelletier said he planned to spend the night alone on the field to see if anything happened there instead of by the house where the others were.

Alice fascinated all of us with her claim to have seen Mrs. Henry, however. She said she heard a woman cleaning house and carrying wood. One woman was convinced it was the same person she saw in the field, and described her as wearing a faded blue skirt.

We went on a number of walks near the house. A few people claimed to hear a horseback rider. I was impressed when I heard the same story from two different sources; two young girls heard a rider tear away and yell "Eric" once. Another couple heard one hoofbeat and a horse that rode away at "an outrageous speed."

The park is not usually open at night, and the Jaycees had to obtain a special

permission to spend the night there. Of the 30 originals, only three stayed the whole evening: Pelletier, Colgan and Drew Bannister. The anniversary couple, Mrs. and Mrs. John Grezelka, stayed most of the night and said it was an intriguing way to spend their "lucky 13th."

Nobody claimed to be disappointed. In fact, most of the group said their belief in the supernatural was reinforced. The evening was a success because, as Colgan said, "We got to make friends, we all had a little fun," and "we got to investigate the local

history that people are interested in."

I tend to agree with Vogt. The park supervisor said he would neither "support nor deny" whether or not the field or the house had ghosts. Yet as he walked away to leave, Vogt did not shine his flashlight in a straight path, but all over the field, almost as if he expected to find something.

Was it all the power of the imagination, I wonder, or was Alice right in saying what Madame Olga had said before: "That field is loaded with ghosts."

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# Monument vandalized

One of the oldest monuments at the Manassas National Battlefield Park was vandalized over the weekend.

David Ruth, park historian, said it was discovered Sunday that two 200-pound shells, one imbedded in each side of the base of the monument that stands by the Henry House, had been stolen.

Ruth said it would take at least two persons to remove the parrott shells and roll them away. He said there was a clear path of mashed down grass across the field where the shells had been rolled, to a broken place in the fence, where they were evidently rolled to a waiting vehicle.

The monument, built in 1864, originally had four shells, one at each corner of the base, but the two in the back were removed some years ago for placement elsewhere. Ruth said that in the process one exploded because it was loaded.

Ruth said if the stolen shells are loaded, they are dangerous. The shells are valuable to collectors and Ruth believes a Civil War history buff, someone who knows their value, stole them, rather than it being a simple case of vandalism.

He said there is little hope the shells will be recovered, but an investigation will continue. Ruth said people who deal in Civil War artifacts and other National Parks will be notified to be on the lookout for the stolen shells.



**VANDALIZED**—Shells like the one atop this monument were stolen.