# Who goes there?

## Township treasure goes bump in the night

When **Patty Meyer** brings up the Felt Mansion, most people don't ask about the years of work it took to restore the nearly century-old building, or the countless volunteers that made the restoration possible. They just have one question: Is it haunted?

The answer? Well, it's complicated.

Years ago, Meyer, who's the Friends of the Felt Estate nonprofit director, flatly dismissed even the possibility that ghosts exist. But a few evenings at the **Laketown Township** (Allegan Co.) Felt Mansion may have changed her mind.

Over the years, she's seen lights lit with no connection to electricity and objects move when there was no one around to move them. She's heard the distinct sound of furniture being slid across the floor above her head when she knew for a fact she was alone in the mansion.

"If it isn't ghosts, I certainly don't know what it is," Meyer said.

### Embracing the unexplainable

But the Felt Mansion's ghostly reputation isn't scaring away visitors. If anything, Meyer has embraced it. Whatever might be responsible for the "unexplained events" seems to be friendly, and most people who visit seem intrigued by the paranormal activity instead of scared. She sees the rumors of ghosts as a way to attract people to the mansion who might otherwise have ignored it.

In addition to being a popular wedding and event venue, the West Michigan estate hosts "Darkness Tours" each Halloween season, where anyone can walk the mansion and grounds, including the carriage house, after the sun goes

down. This year, the estate also partnered with a paranormal group that rented the mansion for a weekend. They'll share what they found—or didn't find—at special October events open to the public.

## Restoring a township treasure

No one would have imagined the Felt Mansion could be such a hub of activity just 15 years ago. Meyer, a former teacher, didn't know it existed until she and her husband stumbled across it during a hiking expedition through the Saugatuck Dunes State Park on their 2001 anniversary. The once-grand manor was in shambles, with boards nailed over its windows.

"Anyone else would have dismissed it, but I fell in love with it at first sight," Meyer said. "It spoke to me. I could tell the beautiful bones were still there, just neglected over time. I guess I'm just one who believes that with passion and love, even things that are neglected can come back to life. And that was true."

Meyer learned that the 12,000-square-foot mansion was built in 1928 as the summer home of Dorr Felt, inventor of the comptometer, the first adding machine. He and his wife both passed away within two years of its completion, and in 1949, their daughters sold the home to the St. Augustine Seminary to be used as a Catholic prep school for boys. Later, in the 1970s, the State of Michigan bought the property to use as a prison.

When the correctional facility was shut down in the 1990s, Laketown Township stepped in and bought the property for just $1. The building used as a prison was torn down and turned into Shore Acres Township Park, but when no one knew what to do with the mansion, they boarded it up until they could decide.

That's where Meyer came in. Even though she's a **Jamestown Charter Township** (Ottawa Co.) resident, she marched straight to the Laketown Township building authority and convinced them to let her recruit volunteers and funds to rehab the property into a wedding and event venue.

## An element of fun—and a piece of history

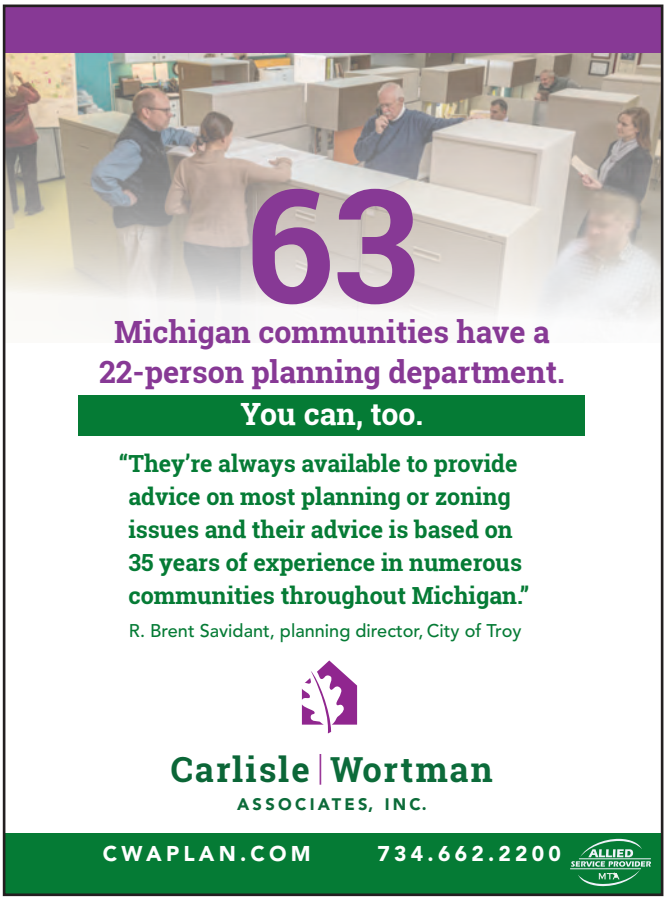
All along, Meyer was asked if the house was haunted. She got her answer one night when she and her assistant were working late to prepare the estate for Christmas. Meyer carefully placed a large red rug in a bedroom, but every time she left and came back, the rug had been dragged to a different corner. After fixing it multiple times, only for it to be placed in another corner, she finally confronted her assistant, asking her, "What's with the rug? I'm tired of straightening it out!" Her assistant was stunned. "I haven't touched the rug," her assistant said.

The two straightened out the rug together and spent the next two hours working downstairs, each not letting the other out of her sight. Then they slowly headed upstairs to the bedroom, not sure what they would find. Sure enough, the red rug was gone. They found it in a nearby sunroom.

Not long after that, Meyer and her husband were leaving the mansion one night when they noticed a light had been left on. They went back inside to switch it off, but once they were outside, the light was on again, and again, and again. Meyer thought it was an electrical short and called an electrician. The electrician couldn't fix it—because the light fixture wasn't connected to wires. It never should have turned on in the first place, he told them.

Sometimes, when Meyer is alone, she's heard the sound of furniture moving upstairs, even when she knows no one is there. People who've rented the property say they've seen doorknobs move.

"I've not seen a ghost," Meyer said, "but I don't know how to explain the inexplicable."

Not surprisingly, ghost hunters and paranormal groups have flocked to the mansion. One group told Meyer they didn't want to know anything about the history before they explored the estate. Later, one group member told Meyer they'd communicated with a spirit who said someone died in this house, and there was a person beside her whose name started with a V. A quick conversation with the Felt family confirmed that a woman had in fact died there, and that a woman named Virginia was at her bedside.

But despite the odd activities, Meyer says she's never felt afraid. If there's a ghost at the Felt Mansion, it's a friendly ghost. She believes it adds an element of fun to the estate and helps draw in a larger audience. If the lure of paranormal activity helps more people to experience a piece of history, it's well worth it to Meyer.