



Lexington County Museum's **Murders and Mysteries** TOUR

Looking for a way to have fun while exploring the Lexington area? Rather than turning pages in a dull history book, dark tales and stories weaved with fact and folklore come to life right before your eyes during the Lexington County Museum's Murders and Mysteries Tours. The tours fill to capacity almost as soon as they become available, and with good reason: Whether you are a resident or just visiting, you will be intrigued by these twilight adventures.

by Kim Becknell Williams

As participants stroll through a guided tour of Main Street, they are captivated by eerie stories of homicide investigations, bizarre trials, and ghost sightings, which may or not be embellished with creepy details and accounts claimed by Lexington natives. Education blends with entertainment as historical locations are pointed out; no cemeteries are explored, but several resting places for interesting characters are referenced. Each stop along

the tour allows participants to mentally “tag” or “earmark” the location of these occurrences from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because of the nature of discussions related to crimes, the tours are open to those 18 years of age or older. Parental permission is considered for those younger. No reservations are required, but early registration is suggested.

A casual discussion between two Lexington County Museum employees

sparked the Murders and Mysteries Tour, which began eight years ago. The tours continue today, led by J.R. Fennell, the museum director, and Patricia Shandor, visitor services coordinator at the museum. Except for last year, due to the pandemic, the tours have been held regularly; the first tour since the pandemic was held on July 17 in Lexington beginning at the Icehouse Amphitheater. Guided tours last approximately 1-1½ hours and

are held in three towns: Lexington, West Columbia, and Irmo. Once dusk begins, participants are gathered, briefed, and split into small groups.

“We think that people really enjoy the tour,” Fennell says. “We’ve gotten good reviews online from the tour.” Joyce Mize is a museum volunteer, who has served on the Museum Commission. She is a regular spectator at the tours and says she’s been so many times that she has lost count. “Even though I have experienced the stories more than once, I still enjoy the tours,” Mize says. “J.R. does a great job. I enjoy the tour to learn the history of Lexington County.”

Each respective city tour features factual history and landmarks, notorious crimes, legends of the past, suspicious characters, pertinent events, and plenty of mysterious folklore related to the area. History buffs, tourists, and residents who want to learn more about the history of the town will relish the opportunity to learn and be entertained at the same time.

Lexington

Tours are usually held three times a year in downtown Lexington. What are some of the stories that spectators might hear?

“Among others, we discuss a duel that occurred in 1861,” Fennell says. “Several murders, a couple lynchings, and the haunting of the Hazelius House.” Villains, shady characters, and notorious events emerge during the tours. “One

of the people we discuss is Black Luke Manning, an outlaw who terrorized Lexington in the 1820s,” Fennell continues. “He impersonated militia officers and stabbed several people. He gave the town of Lexington the nickname ‘Pompey Town,’ which apparently was quite popular in the nineteenth century.”

One story is reminiscent of an old Western film where tumbleweeds roll along dirt roads and duels start outside the swinging doors of a saloon. Perhaps a coyote howls in the distance. The story is about a duel between two men named Baylis Boozer and Sims Frederick Hendrix. “Boozer and his father Lemuel Boozer were well-known Unionists who did want South Carolina to secede from the Union,” Fennell says. “Because of his Unionist beliefs, Baylis Boozer was ridiculed by S.F. Hendrix. According to family legend, Boozer then challenged Hendrix to a duel. Although they started off fighting each other with knives, Boozer switched to a shotgun after being deeply cut. Boozer missed and was killed by Hendrix and his pistol.” You can almost smell gun smoke in the air. This is said to have happened right on Main Street in Lexington. Pistols, shotguns, and knives in a duel never end well for somebody.

The stories continue and almost come to life, as mysteries unfold in the dark of night. One of the stories centers around South Carolina’s “trial of the century” when a crime happened in Columbia, but the trial was relocated to Lexington’s courthouse. “This case involved



Next Tour: November 6th at 8pm

Watch the museum’s website for upcoming tours and explore their social media pages for amazing photographs and details about the area.

When planning to attend a tour, here are a few helpful tips:

- Bring a flashlight for better viewing in the dark.
- Wear comfortable walking shoes.
- Keep an open mind.
- Dress for the weather.
- Carry bottled water, especially when the weather is hot.
- Bring a camera.
- Bring a pad to jot down notes or make notes in your smart phone for later reference.

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the murder of Narciso Gonzales, the founder and editor of the State newspaper by South Carolina's Lt. Governor James Tillman in 1903," Fennell says. "The jury ended up finding Tillman not guilty despite the fact he never disputed shooting Gonzales." Case details can be found at www.knowitall.org/video/tillman-gonzales-murder-trial-palmetto-special. Guilty or not guilty?

Buildings that residents pass by on a regular basis have interesting histories, too. "In Lexington, we highlight the 1940 courthouse, which now houses the county magistrate court and is known as the 'old courthouse,'" Fennell explains. "Due not only to its age but because that was the site of the jail before the construction of the courthouse." If buildings could talk, what a story they would tell.

West Columbia

The West Columbia tours are usually held twice a year. Fennell says the West Columbia tour includes visiting many historical structures located along State Street. Some buildings from the past take on a new life in the present. These include the old fire department and city hall/jail, which are now part of Savage Craft Ale Works.

The tours are likened to pulling an old library book off the shelf, blowing off the dust, and opening the cover to discover remarkable tales of yesteryear. One such tale took place during Prohibition. The years of banned alcohol sales and speakeasies were certain to find those who conjured up schemes to get their favorite intoxicating beverage. "One story from



West Columbia involves the old jail," Fennell says. "The police would store confiscated liquor there during Prohibition. There were three attempts to steal it, including one in 1923, where a fake call was placed to the police. When the police left the building to investigate the call, the thieves broke in and stole the booze." Clever tactics.

Irmo

The Irmo tour happens once a year. During this tour, stories include members of a religious cult known as the

Weberties. "It was believed that a man named Jacob Weber was an incarnation of God, a man named Hans Schmidtpeter was Jesus, and an escaped slave named Dauber was the Holy Spirit," Fennell tells us. "They were on the north side of the Saluda River during the early 1760s. After Schmidtpeter and Dauber murdered a man, Weber declared that Schmidtpeter and Dauber were actually Satan and had them killed. A militia from Charleston then came to arrest several of the ringleaders. Weber was the only one found guilty, though, and was executed." ■