

PRF Case Study Review: An Allegedly Haunted Japanese Restaurant

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Ghosts mostly seem to be a universal phenomenon, in the sense that they do not appear to be limited in their diversity to just one human culture: Whereas some mythical and mysterious creatures tend to be largely associated with cultures in one particular region of the world (e.g., leprechauns in Ireland, vampires in Transylvania, mummies in Egypt), reports and stories about ghosts seem to be found in nearly every culture on the planet.

In Japan, for example, the cultural view of ghosts has its basis not only in folklore, but also in the traditional religion of *Shintō*. Generally, according to this view, the inner spirit of each individual person leaves the body upon death and heads for an afterlife in some eternal realm of existence (known as *anoyo*). This eternal realm is thought to exist not far from the earthly plane (*konoyo*), making it possible for the spirits of the dead to still occasionally interact with the living. In some cases, it is thought that restless and unhappy spirits may come back and remain in the earthly plane because of unfinished business, unfulfilled obligations, a need/desire for proper burial, or any other matters which may preoccupy a person's mind. In reflection of this view, several of the rituals and death customs observed in Japan are specifically focused toward honoring and appeasing the dead.¹

Likely influenced by this cultural view, many ghost stories and legends have appeared as themes in plays performed in the traditional Japanese theatre art of *Kabuki*. In these stories and legends, the ghosts are often depicted as vengeful spirits of the dead intent on remaining earthbound so that they can pester and frighten those among the living who did them wrong.²

In light of the "haunting" influence that ghosts have long had upon Japanese culture, perhaps one shouldn't be too surprised to learn that reports of apparitions and haunt phenomena had begun surfacing at a small Japanese restaurant in Georgia in the early 1990s.³ This is one reported case which indicates that even modern-day buildings can be the focus of an alleged haunt, and not just the stereotypical old, abandoned, and eerie-looking mansion that's so prominently represented in folklore and horror stories.

The Witness Reports

Reports of haunt phenomena came from both customers and the restaurant's staff (including the manager, the head waitress, the bookkeeper, the sushi chefs, and the cabaret performer), and they took a variety of forms. Some of the staff said they'd hear phantom noises late at night, including footsteps and sounds of objects being shifted around. In one such instance, the manager heard noises that sounded like they were coming from the restaurant's back staircase: "Because the staircase is steel, they make a distinct sound...and you can hear someone walk down and walk through the kitchen, moving a box...it's like someone is dragging a cardboard box on a tile floor."^{3,p.153} However, when he went down to see who it was, he found no one there. Similar sounds were also heard by the head waitress on other occasions.

Actual movement of objects would also be reported: On more than one occasion, customers and staff have heard the restroom toilets flushing when no one was known to be in there. And the head waitress told of a girl who had come running out of the restroom "...scared to death because somebody opened the door and turned on the water – but nobody was there...There is just one cubicle."^{3,p.155} Reports of electrical disturbances would also occasionally surface: A light in the ladies' room upstairs would spontaneously turn on and off on its own, and when checked, its bulb would often be found unscrewed from its socket. Ceiling lights in the upstairs hallway would also sometimes flash.

There were also a number of anomalous malfunctions or failures reported with the restaurant's appliances and equipment. One potentially hazardous example involved the deep fryer in the kitchen: The fryer was a gas-powered unit operated by a hand valve, and the staff always made sure to turn it off every night before leaving. However, there was more than one morning when the staff came in and was alarmed to find the fryer turned on and heated to a very hot temperature. According to the manager, "Every night we would turn [it] off...two people watching and one person turning [it] off, and in the morning it would be on." When asked if the fryer could have turned on by the hand valve accidentally slipping, the manager added, "It can't slip – there's no possible way."^{3,p.153} And only he, the restaurant owner, and the bookkeeper had keys to the building.

In another example, an emergency alarm would sound and the fire escape door at the back of the restaurant would be found unlocked and hanging open. The manager stated that: "Almost nightly, when we were busy, we would have alarms going off and I would have to come [back and] stay until 2:30, 3 o'clock in the morning before we got out of here." And in some instances, despite having been checked by the staff before closing, the door would again be found unlocked and open when the restaurant was closed. The manager added, "Then we would have to come back at 4 and spend an hour going through the building with the police."^{3,p.153} No signs of burglary or an intruder were ever found in any of these instances.

Aside from physical disturbances, the staff also reported subjective experiences: There were certain areas of the restaurant that some of the staff found uncomfortable and unnerving, and regularly avoided whenever possible. One such area was a plain-walled back stairway corridor with a dimly lighted atmosphere where the air was said to feel "real heavy," according to the head waitress. She further added: "Nobody wants to go back there...we even have a few chefs that when they have to go past the area, they run."⁴ There were also several cold spots felt

throughout the building that, according to the manager, “made one’s hair stand up” when passing through them.^{3,p.154}

Apparitions were seen on various occasions by the head waitress and the sushi chefs. The head waitress described one experience she had when she was standing near the restaurant’s front entrance one morning, getting it ready to open for the day’s business. At one point she looked up and saw someone in shadow coming down the restaurant’s long hallway towards her: “He was kind of dark, although I couldn’t make out any features, but he had on an old style fedora, baggy pants and an overcoat...really subdued colors, like grays and browns.”^{3,p.154} Thinking it was the restaurant’s manager as he was arriving, she greeted the figure with a pleasant “good morning,” but the figure gave no response in return, which struck her as odd. She stated that the figure had taken two more steps, and then simply vanished. Apart from one of the chefs and the bookkeeper, no one else was in the restaurant at the time.

On two other occasions, one of the sushi chefs saw a shadowy figure in one of the dining rooms, but he was unable to tell whether it was a man or a woman. At first, he thought it might have been the head waitress, and she recalls the time that he’d asked her about it: “He came in one morning and thought he saw me sitting at the sushi bar, and he asked me why I was sitting in the dark – and he turned on the light and nobody was there – and it scared him – and...he’s got to where, in the mornings when he comes in, he doesn’t look around. He just goes into the kitchen and keeps his back away from anything he might see – he’s frightened.”^{3,p.155} This chef would also see figures going quickly past the kitchen in the mornings at around 10:30, when he’d be in there preparing lunch boxes.

The manager himself would regularly see two male ghosts that were described as being complete opposites of each other; both were seen by other members of his staff from time-to-time. On one of those occasions, the manager and another employee were outside on the deck, while two other employees were inside doing accounting work. One of them came running out onto the deck, stating that the intercom on the bar telephone had suddenly turned on, even though there was no one at the bar downstairs. When she and the other employee working inside had turned to look down toward the bar, they saw an “old, short, fat guy standing behind the bar drunk, and they were afraid of him.” Thinking an intruder was present, the manager grabbed his gun and went down to the bar. He found no one there, but he noticed that a locked back room door was now unlocked, and that the padlocks on the liquor cabinets were now open. He stated: “And there are only two of us with keys and we were both outside.”^{3,p.155} This short, obese-looking ghost was also said to have been frequently seen whenever there were group parties being held at the restaurant.^{5,p.72}

The manager also regularly saw (usually out of the corner of his eye) the figure of a slim man in a white shirt and dark pants. This figure would usually be seen after a busy night at the restaurant, either standing behind the bar, in the lounge, or in the upstairs hallway. And on one occasion, the manager even mistook the figure for a real person: He had been taking a nap on one of the barroom couches when he awoke and heard footsteps, accompanied by the feeling that someone was watching him. Upon looking up, he caught sight of the figure of a man that suddenly disappeared. Thinking there was someone else in the restaurant, the manager searched the building, but found no one.^{3,p.154}

The Investigation

Unable to rationally explain these ostensibly anomalous occurrences at the restaurant, the manager contacted the late parapsychologist William Roll (the PRF's first research director) for help. Roll subsequently began an investigation which consisted of three general approaches: one involving physical instrumentation, another involving neuropsychology, and a third involving a test of psychic sensitivity.

Psychic Sensitivity Approach

Would psychics and mediums who claim to have the ability to see (or otherwise sense the presence of) ghosts be able to gather psychic impressions about the alleged haunt that support what the witnesses have experienced? To find out, Roll brought in a group of psychics from a local psychic development school to have them participate in a psi session. This was a unique combination of a spiritualistic séance and a psychological assessment using the "empty chair" technique (often used as a therapy tool in clinical psychology). In this technique, two chairs are placed side-by-side and the client receiving therapy is asked to sit in one of them. He or she then imagines that the person with whom he or she has unresolved problems is sitting in the other, which (with the guidance of a therapist) allows them to project their inner feelings outward and help resolve their personal issues.

Roll thought that doing the same (but instead imagining the ghosts in the empty chair) might reveal something about the psychological aspects underlying the haunt. During the psi session, the psychics sat in a circle and invited the supposed ghosts in the restaurant to join them. They then described the two ghosts that the manager said he often saw.⁶ According to them, the slim ghost in the white shirt and dark pants had a solemn, responsible, and protective demeanor. On the other hand, the short and obese ghost behind the bar reportedly had a very carefree and sloppy personality, and was said to have something of a drinking problem. Because these two ghosts were seen so frequently and seemed almost like real people, the manager and his staff playfully dubbed them "Harry" and "Charlie."^{3,p.165; 5,pp.71-72}

To further explore a possible psychic aspect to the haunt, Roll asked parapsychologist Michaela Mahler to join the investigation at this point. Mahler had once been a student of the late Gertrude Schmeidler (one of the leading female parapsychologists of her time), and during the investigation, she chose to implement an ingenious method that was first developed and applied by Schmeidler in the 1960s as a useful way to test psychics in the field, as well as to explore any possible ESP-related aspects to a haunting.⁷ In order to see how this method works, it's best to illustrate how it was applied in the investigation:

First, Mahler interviewed the restaurant staff, and she asked those who had seen a ghost to fill out a checklist form. On this checklist were various words that could potentially describe the ghost's personality, and the witnesses were asked to circle any words on the list which seemed (to them) to closely fit the ghost. Mahler then asked them to mark the place where they'd seen the ghost on a floor plan of the restaurant. Once the staff had done this, Mahler placed the checklists and floor plans in a secure place (usually her locked briefcase) for safekeeping.

A bit later on, Maher had a group of psychics brought to the restaurant while it was closed and empty.⁸ She handed each of them a blank checklist and floor plan, and asked them to tour the restaurant one-by-one on their own, sensing for ghosts or anything else unusual. If they sensed a ghost or received an unusual impression in any area of the restaurant, they were asked to mark that area on the floor plan. And if their sensations or impressions seemed to reveal something about the ghost's personality, they were asked to circle any words on the checklist that seemed to match it. As each of the psychics completed the tour, Maher collected their checklists and floor plans and again placed them in a secure place.

Then on another day, Maher brought in a separate group of skeptics and had them do the same thing, but instead asking them to simply guess on the checklist what kind of personality characteristics the ghost might have, and to circle any areas on the restaurant floor plan that just looked "spooky" or felt weird to them.

Once all of this was complete, Maher retrieved the checklists and floor plans completed by both the psychics and the skeptics, and statistically compared them to the ones completed by the restaurant staff. The purpose of doing this was to see if the psychics' responses were closer in correspondence to the responses of the staff than those of the skeptics were. Although the results indicated that the psychics' responses did not reach statistical significance as a group, there was one psychic whose checklist responses closely corresponded to the manager's to a significant degree (with odds of about 62 to 1 against chance).⁹ And in attempting to perceive something about the personality of one of the ghosts seen by the manager, eight of the psychics produced checklist responses that were significantly closer in resemblance to the manager's answers than those of the skeptics were (with an odds ratio of about 1,000 to 1 against chance).

Even though these statistical results looked interesting, an unforeseen problem occurred during the investigation which ultimately made them inconclusive: While the psychics were still touring the restaurant, the manager had shown up unexpectedly, having been called there by the bookkeeper because she thought he should be around to keep an eye on things when there were so many unfamiliar people wandering the building. As a result, he briefly came into contact with some of the psychics. Even though the psychics did not believe that the manager had cued them in any way about the ghosts during that brief time, it isn't possible to rule this out with complete certainty, and in the interests of considering only valid, reliable data, it is better method to just throw these results out.

Physical Instrumentation Approach

To explore a possible physical aspect to the haunt phenomena, Maher took AC magnetic field readings throughout the restaurant with an Alphaslab Tri-Field magnetometer. Initially it was suspected that the appliance and equipment malfunctions, as well as the subjective experiences of the staff, might be related to high-intensity electromagnetic fields being present within the restaurant. The results of Maher's magnetic field survey did begin to lend support to this possibility, finding that the specific areas in the restaurant where the staff reported apparitions and haunt phenomena had significantly higher magnetic field readings than other areas where no phenomena had been reported (with odds of about 142 to 1 against chance).¹⁰ A basic graphical summary of the results is shown in Figure 1 (next page).

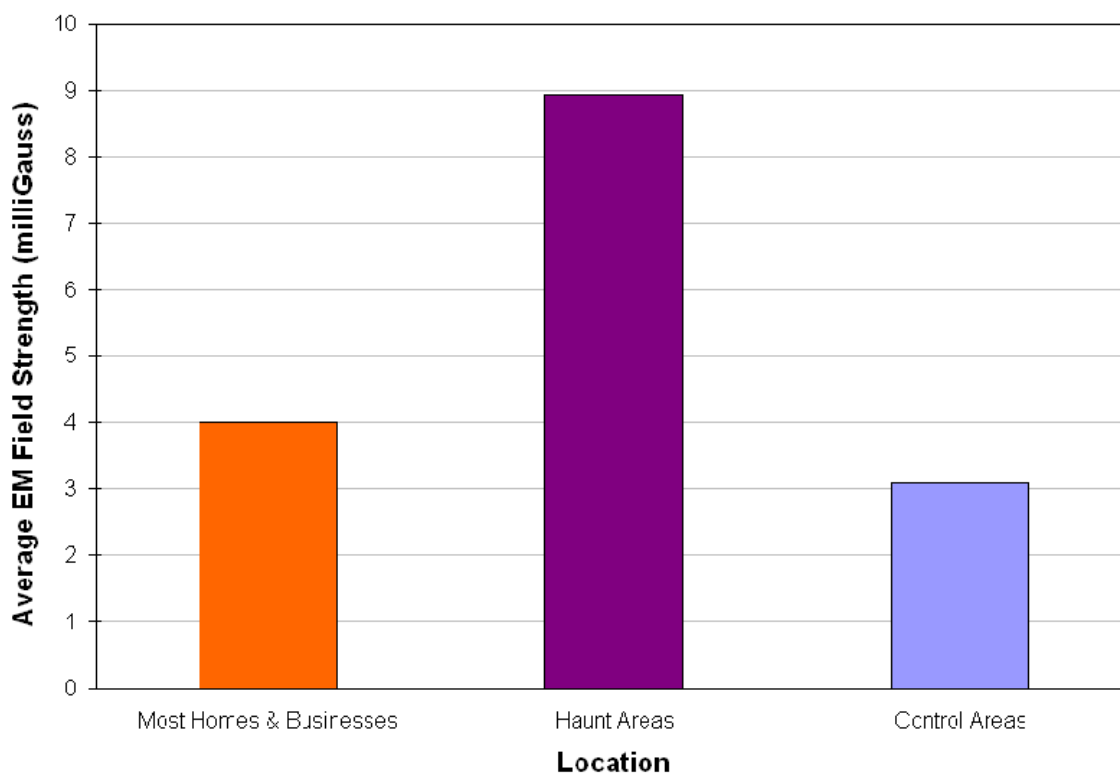


Figure 1. Relative comparison of the average electromagnetic field strength detected in the areas of the restaurant where ghosts & other phenomena were reportedly witnessed (“haunt” areas) with the average field strength in the areas where no phenomena occurred (“control” areas). Also shown for comparison is the high-end average field strength reportedly found in most homes and businesses. Based on data reported in Roll et al. (1992)³ and Hafemeister (1996).¹¹

In addition, free-ranging sweeps revealed isolated magnetic field strengths of 10, 15, and 50 milliGauss present in a number of areas throughout the restaurant; these values are notably higher than the values ranging from 0.5 to 4 milliGauss that are typically found in many homes and buildings.¹¹ It’s possible that these higher-intensity fields may have been naturally produced by such factors as unshielded power lines, faults in the electrical wiring, and any large industrial cooking equipment in the kitchen which may not have been properly grounded.

Photographs were also taken throughout the restaurant using both infrared and Polaroid instant film, but no photographic anomalies appeared in any of them.

Neuropsychological Approach

Roll was particularly interested in exploring whether some of the unusual experiences reported by the witnesses might be tied in some way to instability or slight malfunctions in the temporal regions of their brains. To examine that possibility, he asked two of the main witnesses (the manager and the head waitress) to fill out a questionnaire designed to assess this particular neurological issue.

While the responses of the head waitress were within normal range, the manager noted in his questionnaire responses that he sometimes experienced odd scents and odors (such as rotten eggs, sweetness, and perfume) and would hear various sounds (like buzzing noises, music, and words) when there was no apparent source for any of them. He would also occasionally have sudden feelings of dizziness, confusion, and fear when there seemed to be no reason for him to have them.

Projective psychological tests also completed by the manager and the head waitress revealed no clear hints of mental disorder, although the manager's responses did seem to offer hints that he harbored some amount of inner aggression, which he kept "bottled up" (or repressed) deep inside.

What Might Be Said About the Case?

On the surface, the testimony given by the customers and the staff did seem to indicate that some rather unusual things were occurring inside the restaurant. Of particular interest were the anomalous electrical and equipment disturbances, the unusual subjective sensations, the apparitional sightings, and the apparent movement of objects without any clear physical source. Initially, responses given by some of the psychics also seemed to hint at something unusual to a certain extent, although their unforeseen encounter with the manager ultimately left the reliability of these results in question.

Some of the investigation findings seemed to offer hints that some amount of the unusual phenomena may have had a conventional (albeit not immediately overt) explanation. The detection of significantly higher AC magnetic fields in areas of the restaurant where apparitions and other haunt phenomena were reportedly experienced is consistent with the findings from some other field investigations which have found increased AC magnetic fields present at alleged haunt sites.¹²⁻¹³ This led the investigators to suspect that the witnesses might have been particularly sensitive to these fields, with their prolonged exposure bringing about subtle electrophysiological changes in their brains and nervous systems that would cause them to briefly experience mild sensory hallucinations. Rather in line with this hypothesis, certain laboratory studies have found that changes in brain electrical activity can potentially occur in certain individuals in conjunction with exposure to strong magnetic fields¹⁴, although the exact process by which these changes are facilitated has yet to be understood in fuller detail.

The experiences that the manager described on his neuropsychology questionnaire also seem to hint at a possible neurological source, as abrupt feelings of disorientation and fear have been considered a few of the possible signs of temporal lobe instability¹⁵⁻¹⁶, as have the sensing of odd smells and hearing various sounds without clear source¹⁶⁻¹⁷, among others. There have also been studies which suggest that signs of temporal instability may be correlated with increased personal reports of psychic experiences¹⁸, although again the precise nature of the link has yet to be more fully understood.

One aspect of the case that seems rather difficult to explain through purely conventional means is the ostensibly anomalous movement of objects. This might hint at a possible parapsychological factor in the case, and some of the investigation findings would seem to indirectly point in that direction: For instance, according to one interpretation, the hint of repressed aggression in the manager's projective psychological test results could be seen as

consistent with psychokinetic (PK, or “mind over matter”) ability, as it is reminiscent of the subtly aggressive tendencies found among some of the individuals who are at the center of reported poltergeist disturbances.^{12,19-21,24,26-28} Although parapsychologists have recognized that poltergeist and haunt phenomena tend to have some subtle but distinguishable characteristics²², there have been uncommon instances in which the two have seemingly occurred in tandem within the same reported case.²³⁻²⁵

Seemingly in line with this PK view, there were occasional suggestive instances in which some of the phenomena appeared to take place in the manager’s presence; in one such instance, the manager was standing outside the door to a restroom on the second floor with the cabaret performer. According to the performer, the manager reached his hand in through the restroom door and told him: “Watch this’...and he turned the [interior restroom] light to make it come back on because it was off.” The skeptical performer then told the manager, “I’m checking that light and if it’s off, I’m leaving this place.” And indeed, when the performer opened the door a moment later, he was stunned to find that the light was off, even though no one had reached back in to turn it off in the meantime. The manager had done a similar light-affecting demonstration for his visiting cousin on another occasion, as well.^{3,p.156}

Consideration of a PK aspect on the part of the manager would seem to offer a way to possibly account for the various instances where objects had apparently moved – including the mysterious openings of the fire escape door and the activation of the deep fryer. While they are not too common, occurrences like the latter (which seem to take place while the agent is absent) have also been noted in at least a few poltergeist cases, as well.²⁶⁻²⁸ Although the underlying process is not yet clear, one might speculate on a possible delayed PK effect being involved in these occurrences (perhaps somewhat conceivable as the converse of the PK “linger” effect that has been found in some laboratory studies²⁹).

The psi session also revealed hints that the two ghosts, “Harry” and “Charlie,” seemingly reflected different facets of the manager’s personality, when examined closely: In describing the impressions received of the tall, slim ghost (“Harry”), one of the psychics told the manager, “It’s almost like that man is your mirror.” And indeed, the manager was a very professional and attentive person who lived up well to the high level of responsibility bestowed upon him by his Japanese bosses. The ghost’s protective manner seemed to reflect his inner need for support and mentorship in his managerial duties (the manager was in his early 20s when he received the position).

At first, the short, drunken ghost (“Charlie”) appeared to be the complete opposite of the manager’s personal character. However, when the investigators asked if he ever wanted to just “kick back and be a drunken bum” at times, the manager openly admitted, “Sure I do.” Yet, his traditionally-minded Japanese bosses highly valued a professional, polite, and responsible appearance in their management employees, and his personal need to keep up such an appearance, even outside of the workplace, didn’t allow him the latitude to be very casual and relaxed. So instead, the short drunken ghost may have reflected his inner need for occasional leisure time away from his demanding managerial duties. Limited by his duties at the restaurant, the investigators suggested that the manager “...may be seen as projecting this [casual] part of his personality onto his surroundings, much as a screenwriter projects his personality onto the movie screen.”^{3,p.165} If the manager did have some degree of PK ability, then perhaps this projection onto his surroundings may have been psychically achieved through PK, manifesting as

what he and others perceived as the two ghosts.²⁰ Seeming to further urge consideration of this possibility, reports of apparitions which appeared to reflect the personality and preoccupations of a living witness (rather than those of a dead person) have also surfaced in a handful of other haunt cases, as well.^{23,30-31}

The manager considered the suggestion that the two ghosts might be psychic projections of his personality, and made an effort to re-evaluate his life. And when he eventually moved up in his company and subsequently left the restaurant, “Harry” and “Charlie” apparently left with him, and were reportedly not seen again from then on.^{5,p.74} This brought the investigation of the allegedly haunted Japanese restaurant to a close.

Conclusion

This case is one of at least a handful in which one seemingly finds haunt experiences being reported in tandem with instances of ostensible poltergeist phenomena.²³⁻²⁵ On the surface, such cases seem to suggest that rather being due to the activity of discarnate spirits (as is traditionally assumed), some of the phenomena reported in haunt cases may actually be tied (to a certain extent) to the latent PK abilities of a living person, who in some cases (as in this one), may be one of the witnesses. Akin to the situation often found among agents in poltergeist cases^{19-21,24,26-28}, this particular living witness may be facing certain personal issues/problems in his or her life which are subtly preoccupying his or her mind. For the manager in this case, this personal aspect may have tied into the demands of his job, for which he may have had a bit of a hard time coping. In such situations, one might predict that directly addressing this personal aspect with the living witness through counseling and reflection may be subsequently followed by a marked diminishing (or even full cessation) of the reported phenomena. If some hauntings are indeed person-oriented to some extent (as Roll initially observed^{20,p.400}), then perhaps this personal aspect in tandem cases may be reflective of that extent. Further study of cases like these might one day be more revealing in this regard, and potentially offer more insight into the ways in which poltergeists and haunts may occasionally intersect with each other.

References & Notes

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²For more on the representation of ghosts in Japanese culture and illustrative examples of the kinds of ghost stories and legends told in *Kabuki* plays, see Reference 1, as well as pages 73 – 81 in the book *Phantom Encounters* from the Time-Life series “Mysteries of the Unknown” (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1988).

³Roll, W. G., Maher, M. C., & Brown, B. (1992). An investigation of reported haunting occurrences in a Japanese restaurant in Georgia. *Proceedings of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 35th Annual Convention* (pp. 151 – 168). Durham, NC: Parapsychological Association, Inc.

⁴Quoted verbatim from a sound bite given by the head waitress in a segment profiling the restaurant’s alleged haunt that was shown on a pilot episode of the popular paranormal documentary TV show *Sightings* in 1992.

⁵Duncan, L., & Roll, W. (1995). *Psychic Connections: A Journey into the Mysterious World of Psi*. New York: Delacorte Press.

⁶For an illustrative example of how a psi session proceeds, see the account given in Koob, D. (1986). The phenomenology of a psi-session. *Theta*, 13/14, 52 – 59.

- ⁷Schmeidler, G. R. (1966). Quantitative investigation of a “haunted house.” *Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research*, 60, 137 – 149.
- ⁸It should be mentioned that the individuals in this group were not experienced or professional psychics in this case; rather, they were college students who reported having frequent psychic experiences.
- ⁹While this finding doesn’t appear in the original report (Ref. 3), it is mentioned in the condensed version that appeared in the *Research in Parapsychology* series; see Roll, W. G., Maher, M. C., & Brown, B. (1996). An investigation of reported haunting occurrences in a Japanese restaurant in Georgia. In E. W. Cook (Ed.) *Research in Parapsychology 1992* (pp. 62 – 67). Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- ¹⁰These odds are based on the more conservative probability value cited in the condensed version of the report (Note 9).
- ¹¹Hafemeister, D. (1996). Resource letter BELFEF-1: Biological effects of low-frequency electromagnetic fields. *American Journal of Physics*, 64, 974 – 981.
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- ²²For summaries of these aspects, see the Appendix of Reference 19, as well as pages 399 – 400 of Reference 20.
- ²³Roll, W. G., & Tringale, S. (1983). A haunting-type RSPK case in New England. In W. G. Roll, J. Beloff, & R. A. White (Eds.) *Research in Parapsychology 1982* (pp. 132 – 136). Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.
- ²⁴Rogo, D. S. (1986). *On the Track of the Poltergeist*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc. (See Chapter 6)
- ²⁵See the Martinez case described on pages 107 – 117 of Reference 13, the cases referred to on page 399 of Reference 20, and the PRF case study review of the Johnson case, which can be found in a blog entry on the PRF website: <https://www.psychicalresearchfoundation.com/single-post/2017/10/31/Revisiting-the-Johnson-haunt-case>
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