



2011 Ghost Walk

Ghosts played by Shelby Wilson, Marty King, Steve Hovis, and Gail Lewis

Esther Baker Steele

I was born Esther Adele Baker in 1839. My upbringing was concentrated in practical and studious subjects. Being the daughter of a Methodist reverend, what other way would there have been? My parents made sure I was an educated lady. I attended the Mexico Academy and Valley Seminary in Oswego County. I later became the music teacher at Mexico Academy.

Now, this teaching position was the start of my life in more ways than one. For only a year after I began teaching, the school hired Joel Dorman Steele as the science and ancient languages teacher. A year after Joel began teaching he and I married on July 7, 1859. That's 'back in the day' for all of you. As it turned out, I ended up marrying my best friend, the most fabulous work partner and my favorite travelling companion.

Our first trip together was to Elmira in 1866. Joel was offered the position of Principal at Elmira's Free Academy, EFA as you all know it. After he whipped the school into shape, it actually became the jumping off point for our life's work. With Joel being Principal and privy to all of the textbooks in the school, he found that many subjects were lacking good information. So we decided to write textbooks on science and history. I know, I know, sounds so very exciting, but it was! This line of work afforded us many travel opportunities and the chance to work together. Because of these textbooks, I saw every single country in Europe, as well as Egypt and Palestine. I also travelled to Florida for many winters. I know this is sort of cliché these days, but at least we didn't have those awful Hawai'ian shirts.

I've always been so grateful that Joel and I were able to work together and in turn spend so much time with one another. Especially since I lost my love in 1886...so much time lost with him.

After Joel's death, I donated in his name to the First Methodist Church of Elmira and richly to Syracuse University, his alma mater. Syracuse was so thankful that they bestowed on me many honors; Honorary Degree of Doctor of Literature, trustee of the university, membership in the Phi Kappa Beta Society and having the science building named for me.

While the gifts to the church and Syracuse were very important to Joel and me, our biggest dream was to found a library for our home of Elmira. We had planned for many years to finance a library for this town. After Joel's death, I made sure it happened. With 50,000 of my own personal books on the shelves, the doors of the Steele Memorial Library were opened on August 2, 1899 to the public. That was one of the greatest days of my life, for while not our largest accomplishment, it was the one closest to our hearts.



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Molly Beers

I suppose you could say I was once a camp follower. Oh, not like that. I am a lady, I'll have you know, and an officer's wife besides. My name is Molly Beers and when my Edmund answered President Lincoln's call during the Civil War, well, I went right along with him. And I certainly wasn't the only one. For all they can shoot their guns, gallop about on horses and other such manly things it's not as though the dears can actually look after themselves, now is it, ladies?

When the war broke out, we were living here in Elmira. Ed and his brothers William and Jacob ran a carpentry business. Ed and I had been married for a while by then and I had a household and a little girl, Emma, to manage. We had a good life here, but when your country calls, a patriot responds and so Ed and Jake joined the 50th New York Engineers on August 1, 1861. Now the 50th wasn't your average unit with lots of marching and fighting. No, they were combat engineers, building bridges, laying railroad tracks and doing all those things that make it so other soldiers can get to the fight. With his age and all his carpentry experience, they made Ed a Captain straight away and put him in charge of Company H.

During the winter of 1861-62, the 50th was stationed in Washington DC where they could build bridge components and practice putting them together. I took Emma and headed down to Washington to make sure Ed ate right and had uniforms that weren't covered in sawdust. Now, the 50th wasn't the only unit in town and let me tell you, that city was packed. There were soldiers from all over the Union, including a good many from right around here, guarding supply depots and rail lines and forever getting under foot. Why you couldn't go to a play or visit a museum without having to content with a veritable mob of drunken soldiers at their liberty.

Soldiers aside, Washington was a wonderful city. Emma and I were up and about all day, rushing through chores so we could go and see the stuffed birds from around the world at the Smithsonian Museum or the unfinished monument to President Washington. My absolute favorite though was just strolling about near the Capitol to see who I could see. Why, I swear I even caught a glimpse of Abraham Lincoln himself and don't you think he looked just like a man and a good tall one at that.

Of course, then spring came and the 50th marched to Virginia to help with the fighting near Rappahannock Station. Ed gave Emma and me some marching orders too. He wanted us home while he tramped all over creation. There were other women marching with the army, laundresses, nurses, and women of questionable character, but Ed said it wasn't safe. Still, every year as soon as they settled into their winter quarters in Rappahannock Station, Emma and I were right back with Ed and the 50th, cooking, washing, mending and looking after the men.

Now, the war did end eventually with the North victorious and our boys, *my* boy, came home again. The army was good to Ed and he stayed in it. Oh, he dabbled in business and was even sheriff for a while, but he kept his commission in the New York State Militia and made it all the way up to Brigadier General. Of course, with no war on there was a lot less adventuring to be had, but still, the commission was an honor. And, as for me, well, I never got tired of seeing that man in uniform.



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General Alexander S. Diven

I was born the only son of an immigrant farmer at the beginning of the 19th century. Over the course of my life I was an attorney, a business man, a politician and a soldier. I accomplished a great deal and was able to retire to a large beautiful home where I could do good works for my community and watch my children carry on in success after me. I am General Alexander S. Diven and I lived the American Dream.

Now, all my success wasn't just some happy accident, oh no. It took a lot of ambition and hard work to achieve what I did and maybe just a bit of luck. When I was 21 I came to Elmira to study law in the office of Judge Hiram Gray. Now that was a good decision and a stroke of luck. When I went to take my bar exam I brought with me a letter of recommendation from Judge Gray. Upon seeing the letter the examiner asked me if I played whist. Well, I like a good card game as much as any man so I said yes. We commenced to play and thus did I pass my bar examination. Judge Gray's letter meant that much. I'm proud to say that I lived up to his recommendation and that was just the start of my success.

In the 1840s I got into the railroad business and became the director of the Erie Railroad. By 1844 the railroad had gotten as far as Binghamton but the funding gave out. Many officials were discouraged and wanted to abandon the project but I was not about to let that happen. I raised millions of dollars to complete the project, even using my own money at times to pay for company expenses. It was hard work but it was worth it. When the line was completed from Piermont to Dunkirk in 1851 I gave the welcoming address to President Fillmore and Daniel Webster when they arrived in Elmira for its commemoration.

After that I got into politics. When the Civil War broke out I was serving in the 37th Congress of the United States. I was granted a leave of absence from my office to return to Elmira and recruit the 107th New York volunteers with Col. R.B. Van Valkenburg. We were one of the first units to answer President Lincoln's call for fighting men. I always liked Mr. Lincoln. It was a shame the way he ended up. After he was assassinated I spoke to a crowd of about 10,000 people over in Wisner Park to memorialize him.

I retired from most of my business activities in 1870 when my wife Amanda Malvina Beers, and I moved into Willowbrook, our beautiful new mansion on Lake Road at the foot of East Hill. Amanda died just five years later. She was a fine woman, well liked by all. Her funeral procession was over a mile long when we laid her to rest. We had eight children together, four boys and four girls, and I have greatly enjoyed watching them grow and achieve their own successes. But my retirement was not spent just watching others work, oh no. I could not sit idle when there was still so much to accomplish. I helped provide a street car system for the city and a more efficient public water works. I was a great supporter of Elmira College in its early years and I served as chairman of the Arnot-Ogden Hospital Board. All my success and wealth made it possible for me to give back to my community, to Elmira.



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William T. Post

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. My name is William T. Post. My main business was real estate but I had the honor of serving in several public offices. In fact, I was the county treasurer and a member of the New York State Assembly during a significant time in our nation's history – the Civil War.

On April 23, 1861 (just eight days after President Lincoln called for troops) Governor Edwin Morgan designated Elmira to be a military depot. This basically meant that men were enlisted and received very basic training in Elmira before being shipped south. I know what you may be thinking, why Elmira, especially when the other military depots were Albany and New York City. One word – railroads. At the beginning of the war, Elmira was a major transportation center because of the railroads. With east to west and north to south routes, Elmira was connected to New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington D.C. Thus New York and out-of-state troops could easily be shipped in and out of the area. Over the course of the war nearly 21,000 men were trained in Elmira.

Despite the honor, we were ill prepared to receive the soldiers. During the first few months of the war churches, meeting halls, hotels, private homes, and other buildings were used as temporary housing and dining halls. Four camps were eventually established. The camps were named after prominent Elmirians and Camp No. 2 was named Post Barracks in my honor. Eventually the arrival of the troops doubled our population to around 20,000. Needless to say soldiers were everywhere and made it both an exciting and troubling time.

Whether you enlisted, knitted socks, or gave speeches everyone wanted to do their part for the war effort. Why the war had barely began when the citizens of Elmira raised \$10,000 to help local soldiers' families. Life went on and to be honest there was money to be made. Materials and labor to build and supply the camps were needed. I received one of many government contracts and provided daily rations to the soldiers at \$0.42 per man. It certainly kept me busy as I had to supply 5,000 lbs. of beef, 6,500 lbs. of sugar, 300 lbs. of coffee and 13 bushels of beans on a daily basis.

Other types of businesses also thrived but as there are ladies present suffice it say these others businesses led to questionable behavior. Army patrols were constantly rounding up soldiers who were drunken and disorderly or absent from their posts. Fighting and accidental shootings were commonplace. In February 1864, the 1st Michigan Cavalry stopped in Elmira on their way to Washington and nearly caused a riot. Local troops were called out to control them and a pitched battle ensued on Water St. between the Michigan and local troops resulting in several soldiers being shot and severely wounded. Unfortunately, one soldier lost his life.

Although the soldiers did not make life easy for us, they did provide moments of fun during those difficult times. There were dress parades, concerts by military bands, public rallies and balls at the Brainard Hotel. Secretary of State William Seward even visited in 1864. To cement good relations with the soldiers, I hosted a picnic for the enlisted men and a sit down dinner for the officers at my estate in Southport. Crowds gathered to watch the parade when the regiments marched from their barracks near Washington Ave. to attend these festivities.

By 1864 two of the camps were closed, but Camp 1 and 3 remained opened. Perhaps you have heard that Camp No. 3 became a Confederate Prison Camp but that is story for another day....