

CULT MOVIE VAULT: LOCAL HISTORY SPOTLIGHT NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

What do *Night of the Living Dead*, Greeley's now-defunct Chief Theater, and a local ghost story have in common?

Well, this article, for one thing.

This is a little departure from our normal Cult Movie Vault because we've got local history mixed in with the cult movie, but don't worry, this isn't local history like you probably got from our nemeses at the Greeley History Museum (Editor's Note: We are not actually

enemies with the museum or their staff, this is totally unfounded and seems to be added here just to make this article more scandalous).

This is local history that starts with a question:

Was an aging man so horrified by a screening of *Night of the Living Dead* in a Greeley theater that he keeled over from fright?

Night of the Living Dead is definitely the movie that lit the zombie fire. This is partially because it's great, partially because it spawned great sequels and spin-offs, and partially because of a copyright mistake that gave the film



wide distribution (uh-oh, nerd alert, copyright talk coming in 3...2...1...).

You might notice *Night of the Living Dead* is available almost everywhere. If you've ever, like me, bought one of those collections of movies with 100 horror films



packed onto 5 discs, usually stuff like *976-EVIL II* (quick aside: famous bad film maker Jim Wynorski made this, and even HE thinks it's bad. Oh, and Brigitte Nielson appears briefly because she lost a game of pool to Wynorski. Really!) and at least one entry from the Howling series, you're almost guaranteed to find *Night of the Living Dead* somewhere among the rubber sea monsters and weirdly lit interpretations of *Dracula*.

Why is *Night of the Living Dead* absolutely everywhere? The short version is that copyright law is funky, and in the funky 60's, it was even funkier.

Back then, if you didn't put specific copyright notice on a film's prints before distributing, the movie wasn't protected by copyright.

Somebody somewhere messed up big time, didn't put the proper notice on the prints, and because of this clerical error, *Night of the Living Dead* has been out of copyright since it was released. On the plus, this means it was screened and distributed nonstop, so it gained quite a bit of notoriety.

But let's get down to business: Did an aging man have a heart attack in a Greeley theater during a showing of *Night of the Living Dead*?

The Chief Theater in downtown Greeley (near the location of the current Clarion hotel) didn't have the easiest run. It was supposedly haunted by a ghost, who was rumored to be an actress killed by the theater's owner and buried somewhere on the premises (though when the theater was demolished they found no evidence

of this). There were a few fires in the theater and a partial balcony collapse, but deaths were not reported for any of these events. Nevertheless, a ghost was spotted by at least two employees who described her almost identically.

A group of paranormal investigators also came by The Chief, and they claimed that they found peanuts and popcorn in cracks and crannies that seemed oddly well-preserved, suggesting the presence of supernatural activity.



Orrrrrr maybe those butters and salts are stronger than we thought, in which case my insides are shellacked and will survive many eons beyond my natural death.

There's also the unsolved murder of Cora "Rose" Allyn, who was murdered in her home after attending a matinee at the Chief. Greeley teacher Susan Seager

tried to find evidence as to whodunit, and she even spent the night in Allyn's former home to try and record any ghostly sounds, but she came up mostly empty-handed. Some theorize that "Rosie" was The Chief's ghost.

There were two sources I found that claim an aging man died in the theater during a screening of *Night of the Living Dead*: One was in an old *Tribune* article, and the other is in *Haunted Hotels of Northern Colorado* by Nancy K. Williams. Neither provided a direct source or exact year as THEIR source, however.

I searched the Newspaper Archive (available at your local library!), and I didn't find the story of a man clutching his chest and toppling over in his seat during *Night of the Living Dead's* epic climax.

While I can't definitively say that it didn't happen, I have reason to believe it's a tall tale: If a scary movie was

SO scary that someone actually died in the theater, I'd think that'd be heavily publicized. Maybe people in the 60s were a little classier and didn't want to use a man's death to sell tickets. But I would think that someone somewhere would throw class out the door and go for it. There had to be at least ONE slimeball advertiser out there in the 60s, right? Based on my viewings of *Mad Men*, slimeballs in the 60s BUILT the world of marketing.

For the record, if I die of fright while watching a movie, please use my death to publicize the movie. Taxidermy my body and place it in the theater seat. I don't know where else to put this information, so I'm leaving it here: I, Pete, am of sound mind and body (arguably, mostly), and would be happy to have my demise used to market the scariness of a movie, provided I did die of fright and not a heart attack related to overdoing it on the popcorn and "butter" that they have at the theater. That's the more likely cause of my death, so start there, then,

if by some miracle my arteries look okay, assume it was fear-based.

We could lay the story to rest there, but there is the matter of how this rumor got its start.

I can't be sure, but I have a guess, and it's that the rumor has something to do with this ad for *Night of the Living Dead* in *The Greeley Tribune* from the era:

GREELEY'S FINEST THEATRES

Colorado
352-3636
1516 Eighth Ave.

**FRIDAY 13th
MIDNIGHT
SHOW**

**IF 'NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD'
FRIGHTENS YOU TO DEATH -
YOU ARE COVERED FOR..... \$50,000**

A \$50,000 POLICY covering death from heart attack for anyone in the audience during a performance of "NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD" for this special engagement only has been obtained through a leading international insurance company in London.

TONIGHT ONLY at 11:30

**NIGHT
OF THE
LIVING
DEAD**

An IMAGE TEN
Production

The ad reads, "If 'Night of the Living Dead' frightens you to death- you are covered for...\$50,000. A \$50,000 POLICY covering death from heart attack for anyone in the audience during a performance of 'NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD' for this special engagement only has been obtained through a leading

International Insurance Company in London.”

I'm guessing this was mostly a scam, a challenge to get people to show up. Which would absolutely work on me. I'd be in the front row. This is like \$400,000 today. You know how a lot of pro athletes will buy their mom a house? This is my version of that: I take a horror movie challenge, am frightened to death by it, and she collects. It probably wouldn't leave her swollen with pride the way it goes for moms whose sons win Super Bowls, but we all have to work with what we've got.

Anyway, I feel some guilt because I feel like I've debunked a spooky story in the season when spooky stories are meant to thrive.

BUT, *Night of the Living Dead* is still the one that started it all, the sequel, *Dawn of the Dead*, is the GOAT, *Day of the Dead* is the underrated third in the trilogy, and even *Land of the Dead*,

which isn't as beloved, has a few tricks that make it worth a watch. The *Dawn of the Dead* remake is also amazing, and I say this as someone who loves the OG and was not prepared to enjoy a remake. *Shaun of the Dead*, of course, would not exist without *Dawn*, which would not exist without *Night of the Living Dead*.

It's totally worth a watch, it's easy to find, and because of the copyright weirdness, you can always screen it at your own drive-in theater, if you were to build one in Greeley (I would be there, heck, I'd probably see if I could buy a permanent space and build a shed on the grounds so I could just watch a movie whenever. I promise not to try and pull an insurance scam to buy my mom a house).

For bonus points, you could get a room at the Clarion, which sits where the Chief used to be, and which is still a hot spot for paranormal activity in town. The third floor is the one where most of the ghostly sightings have been

made, so get your third floor room, one with a microwave for some popcorn, get your *Night of the Living Dead* ready, and if you wanted to take out some extra insurance, I wouldn't give you a hard time about it.

