

From *Haunted Longmont: A Close Shave*

The Elite Barber Shop—339 Main Street

Like so many of the city's historic buildings, the Elite Barber Shop has a rich and fascinating history, of both the normal and the paranormal variety—which should come as no surprise, given that it is Longmont's oldest barber shop, having served the citizens since 1872.

Taking a step inside the Elite is like taking a step back in time. Once the front door closes on the hustle and bustle of the busy Main Street traffic, you could be entirely forgiven for thinking that somebody has set the clock back fifty years. Orville Christiansen has owned and operated the Elite for the past forty years, ably assisted by his two sons Jeff and Mike. The family has lovingly maintained the leather upholstered barber chairs, the wooden cabinetry, the mirrors and the many other furnishings. Some of these chairs actually date back to the 1920s, and one wonders just what tales they would tell, if only they could talk.

The Elite is a barbershop of the old school, one of a dying breed. We live in a time in which corporate chain store barbershops and hairdressers seem to be opening up in every strip mall across the country, but the haircuts and beard trims with straight razors performed by Orville and his family are accompanied by the personal touch that is flat-out refreshing, harkening back to a simpler time and small-town America. This approach seems to be working. The store has a dedicated base of loyal clientele, some of whom have been coming back to the Elite to get their hair cut for more than thirty (and in some cases forty) years, some of them being grandfathers who have brought their own sons and grandsons into the fold.

When I visited the Elite Barber Shop in order to research its history, I was struck by a carefully framed barber's certificate that dated back to the late 1870s. Shorty Foster, the recipient of this particular document, was the original occupant of the store at 339 Main. His picture still hangs in a frame inside the store—he is a mustachioed man with a twinkle in his eye, a jolly man of short stature who cut the hair of Longmont men through the last third of the nineteenth century. By all accounts, Shorty loved both Longmont and his barbershop.

Could Shorty Foster be the man who is said to haunt the Elite Barber Shop? Numerous passersby have reported seeing the figure of a man wearing clothes that look to be out of date standing inside the locked and deserted barbershop long after business hours have come to an end. He is said to stare out at them forlornly, sometimes fading away before their eyes. If the haunting is of the intelligent variety, then Shorty's motivation for returning to the shop that he is said to have loved so much during his lifetime would most likely be positive, stemming from his deep affection for the place.

My personal suspicion is that the apparition is not that of Shorty Foster, however. For one thing, the eyewitness reports describe the ghost as being on the taller side. I asked the Christiansen brothers about him, wondering if maybe "Shorty" was an ironic nickname, in the same way that "Little John" was huge in stature, but they were able to confirm for me Shorty was indeed of short stature.

Which begs the question: who is the ghostly man seen by passersby on Main Street? The Elite Barber Shop's staff members have come up with a theory of their own, one that is on the tragic side but seems to fit with the history of the building. If you should visit the Elite sometime, make a point of walking down the length of the shop and taking in the wealth of newspaper articles, barber memorabilia and fine old photographs that are mounted proudly on the left side wall, directly facing the barber chairs and mirrors. This collage provides a fascinating visual chronicle of the Elite Barber Shop's history. Generations of barbers can be seen, cutting the hair of smiling patrons or trimming their beards and moustaches neatly. One such photograph shows a group of three barbers, posing together next to their chairs. The middle of the three men was pointed out to me by Jeff and Mike Christiansen as a former employee who was afflicted with a buzzing or ringing sound in his ears, most likely tinnitus. The affliction is said to have driven him to such great depths of frustration and despair that, one night after closing up and locking the barbershop securely, he went to the room that can still be seen at the back of the store, took out a pistol, sat down and shot himself in the head with it.

This deeply tragic story may be a better explanation for the haunting of the Elite Barber Shop than the idea of Shorty Foster returning to keep an eye on things (although that is certainly a possibility too). Remembering that the male apparition is said to be quite tall, I scrutinized the framed photograph of the three barbers mounted on the wall. The man in the middle—the man whom the Christiansen brothers told me had committed suicide in the room at the back of the store—is taller than his two companions. Could it be that the spirit of this tormented man has never left his place of work—and his place of death—because of the violent way in which he took his own life?

The reported apparition is not the only ghostly activity that is attached to the Elite Barber Shop. Staff members told me the story of an Elite barber who, quite a few years ago, was on his way home from a long road trip. Realizing that he was starting to feel some fatigue, the man—who happened to be driving along Main Street—sensibly decided to pull over and get some rest for the night rather than push on and risk getting into an accident. Parking up in the lot behind the store, the tired barber let himself into the store and settled down to sleep on a chair in the back room—the same back room that was the scene of his predecessor's suicide.

Drifting off to sleep, it seemed as though he had been out for barely a few minutes before he was awakened by a loud banging sound that seemed to be coming from the main room of the barber shop. Initially writing it off to the usual sounds made by an old building that is settling itself down at night, creaking and contracting as the structure cooled, the barber tried to ignore it and get back to sleep, but the noise intensified.

Frustrated, the barber jumped out of his chair and stalked into the shop itself. Each barber's chair has a wooden cabinet assigned to it in which the barber keeps his combs, razors and other supplies. To his astonishment, one of the cabinet doors was opening and closing itself at will, in an otherwise completely empty shop. The loud, repetitive noise that had awoken him turned out to be the door slamming repeatedly against its frame.

Needless to say, the barber got no further sleep that night and could not wait to get out of there in the morning.