Visitors and local residents walk the streets of Mount Airy, but they aren't alone. According to local legends, the real-life Mayberry plays host to a number of ghosts. And in a 90-minute tour visitors can become acquainted with them, their stories and some of the history of the city. Matt Edwards, executive director of the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History, said about six years ago he was approached with a new idea — ghost tours. Edwards can't take credit for the idea or the implementation of the program though. He said a museum volunteer, Mark Brown, stepped up to the plate and built the program. Brown, who is also involved in community theater, designed the initial ghost tour from 13 stories, some of which hit pretty close to home. "The museum is home to several," said Brown, who explained that spirits often attach themselves to items or places which meant something to them in their lives.

That's likely the story behind the Lady in White, said Brown. She was last spotted in the stairs leading to the clock tower at the museum. When a medium visited, she determined the woman was a nurse, and she likely showed up at the museum with some medical equipment that was donated. "At first we wondered if she was a prostitute ghost," said Brown. "The museum sits on the site of a former saloon." With a large building filled with old stuff, Brown said the museum is filled with spirits like the Lady in White. "We are kind of running a retirement home for ghosts," joked Brown.

The building which houses the museum meant a lot to Mr. Merritt, who built it, and he still keeps an eye on it. Mr. Merritt sightings are pretty frequent, and though Brown has never seen him, he knows Mr. Merritt better than most. On New Year's Eve a few years ago, Brown was tasked with lowering a lighted sheriff's badge from the roof of the museum. As he passed through the dark third floor a few minutes before midnight, he said, "Come on Mr. Merritt. Let's go up on the roof." Brown said he is afraid of heights. After carrying out his duties he had a panic attack on the roof. He laid down flat, and Brown's dad came up to check on him. "When my dad got up on the roof he saw me laying down and somebody standing over me," said Brown. "Mr. Merritt must have come up on the roof after all." Edwards said the tales of those two ghosts are two of more than 20 stories folks on a ghost tour might hear. When the community got word of the ghost tours, they submitted a number of other ghostly tales. "Ghost stories are like Hawaiian shirts. Once you have some, people give you more," joked Edwards.

Edwards said the tours are guided by four regular guides and two trained fill-in guides. Though they all know the stories of the 21 or 22 ghosts they can choose which stories to tell on any given night. Thus, Edwards said one is likely to get a different ghost tour experience every time he or she takes a tour. Many of the guides have backgrounds in theater like Brown, and others have a background in story-telling. Such experience makes for an entertaining 90 minutes of wandering around downtown Mount Airy. And for the history buffs, Edwards is making sure

those storytellers aren't concocting a story about too big of a fish. "The historian in me wanted to make sure this was factually accurate," said Edwards. That stated, Edwards said the tour is about ghosts, so a little imaginative license is granted to guides. "It's entertaining, and it's a great way to share some of our local history," said Edwards. "There is some sort of documented paranormal activity surrounding most of the ghosts." Looking back at the tour's origins, Edwards had to admit, he was skeptical at first. "I wasn't a huge proponent of the idea after it was pitched to me," recounted Edwards. "I wasn't sold. I just didn't get it." However, the museum's board president at the time advocated quite hard for the program. Eventually, Edwards gave in, and now he's glad he did.

About 1,000 people annually hop on a ghost tour on Friday or Saturday nights. At $13 per person, that makes the tours a great source of revenue for the museum. "It's been a tremendous program for the museum," said Edwards. "It's a good, dependable source of income for our non-profit organization." Edwards said ghost tours begin at 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday evenings from the Memorial Day holiday through November. The cost for the tour is $13 per person, and tours are capped at 20 people. Individuals interested in taking a tour may call the museum at 786-4478, or book online at www.hauntedmayberry.com. Groups of ten or more can arrange a tour for another night or during the off-season, added Edwards.