

# LOWE-CATION: PRESTON CASTLE

By Rachel Bozek



Preston School of Industry, also known as Preston Castle. (Photo: Alamy)

**LOCATION:** Ione, California

**BACKSTORY:** Originally established as the administrative building for the Preston School of Industry, a boys' reformatory, Preston Castle was in use from 1894 through 1960, when it went vacant as the school relocated. Throughout its years of operation, reports of poor living conditions and student mistreatment were common.

Except for trespassing teenagers and the authorities who chased them, the castle was neglected until 2001, when the Preston Castle Foundation was formed, with the intention of acquiring and rehabilitating this prime example of Romanesque Revival architecture.

Karl Knoblauch, president of the Foundation, says, "It's all that's left, historically speaking, of the youth-corrections-reform movement from the 1890s, when the state transitioned from housing juvenile offenders at Folsom and San Quentin State Prisons, with the adult inmates."

By the time the castle came into the Foundation's ownership, the five-story, 77-room building was in a desperate state of disrepair, with floors in dire need of replacement, and some areas without a roof.



The Preston Castle infirmary. These hospital beds are original to the Preston School of Industry. (Photo: Gary W. Stout)

**PARANORMAL ACTIVITY:** Preston Castle is home to an active paranormal community, which holds nighttime investigations, a.k.a. ghost hunts, seeking out the spirits many believe still inhabit the massive space. Mysterious voices, doors slamming, items falling with no explanation, and sometimes even sightings of orbs or whooshes of air within the castle have all been reported.

For more than 30 years of involvement with the castle—first as a local law-enforcement officer and later working for the foundation—Knoblauch says he never doubted the stories. His standard line used to be, "Just because the spirits aren't talking to me, doesn't mean they're not talking to somebody else."



From 1894 to 1895, the basement of Preston Castle housed Company A. The boys slept in one room, ate in another and had classes. Each youth spent a third of his waking hours with school work, a third learning a trade and a third marching and learning military bearing. (Photo: Gary W. Stout)

That is, until 2014. One summer night, he was out in front of the castle helping set up for the annual outdoor movie-night programming. All of the guests were in the back, so it was just Knoblauch and a guide, in front. Or so they thought.

Knoblauch says, "Suddenly I heard what I would describe as a calm, adult male voice, about six feet behind me, state my first name. I turned and looked, and she and I are the only two people in the parking lot. So of course, my initial reaction was, *I'm cracking up*. I looked at her, and asked, 'Did you just hear something?' And she said, 'Yes. I heard somebody say your name.' And I looked around and said, 'Who?' And she said, 'There's no one here.' And I said, 'Yeah, exactly. There's no one here.' That's the only time that's ever happened to me."



The second floor East hallway. Much of the second floor was dedicated to staff apartments. When new employees arrived and hadn't yet found a place to live in town, they would stay in one of the staff apartments. Those on the north side of the building had coal-burning fireplaces. Those on the south side had bathrooms. All apartments had sinks. (Photo: Gary W. Stout)

**THE MYSTERY OF ANNA CORBIN:** Reports of mysterious deaths in and around the castle abound—anywhere from 23 to 26—depending on which blog or article you read. But the one that has gotten the most attention over the years is the 1950 murder of Anna Corbin, a reportedly well-liked woman and Preston's head housekeeper at the time. While there have been outside reports that she is the source of some of the unexplainable activity in the castle, Knoblauch says there hasn't been any evidence to support that: "Our paranormal people say they've never connected with a spirit they believe to have been Anna Corbin's spirit, or who has identified themselves as Anna Corbin's spirit."



The annex is attached to the administration building. During nice weather, wards could relax in the day area, in the basement of the annex, during their short free time each day. (Photo: Gary W. Stout)

**CLAIMS TO FAME:** Preston Castle has been named a California Historical Landmark and is on the National Register of Historic Places. It has been featured in books including *Behind The Walls: A Historical Exposé of The Preston School of Industry*, by J'aime Rubio; *Arrested Innocence*, by Gary W. Stout; *Capturing the Castle: Images of Preston Castle 2006-2016*, by Angelica R. Jackson; and *The Preston School of Industry: A Centennial History, 1894-1994*, by John F. Lafferty. Movies based on the castle have also been made, including *A Haunting at Preston Castle* (2012), which is noted as being "inspired" by true events.

**SEE FOR YOURSELF:** The [Preston Castle Foundation](#) regularly holds tours, wine tastings, its annual (scary) movie night, an annual Halloween event, and even an annual benefit, called ParaCon. Proceeds go toward the ongoing rehabilitation of the massive facility. In 2016, an estimated 15,000 people visited the castle.