



Media Relations

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PHOTOS: Visit <http://photolab.etsu.edu/images/BurlesonChristineNR/> to download photos. Captions are **4337b**, Christine Burleson's house today in Johnson City, and, inside that house, **4746b**, a long staircase to the second floor; **4751b**, the original police report from her death Nov. 2, 1967; **4761b**, novelist T.S. Stripling from the 1920s; **5911b**, researcher Dr. Robert Sawyer with the obituary of Christine Burleson and the portrait of her father in Burleson Hall; **5934b**, a contemporary photo of Burleson Hall; and last, a photo of Christine Burleson in her 20s. Additional art is available upon request.

Rest, rest, perturbed spirit: ETSU English professor attempts to give a university 'ghost' deserved comfort

JOHNSON CITY – It would come as no surprise that, as a scholar of Shakespeare at East Tennessee State University, Dr. Robert Sawyer would be drawn to the story of Christine Burleson's life, with its classic Shakespeare markers: unrequited love, ghostly haunting, and suicide.

But in launching a research project on her life and death, Sawyer set out not to draw parallels between Burleson's life and a Shakespearean tragedy, but to dispel them. Sawyer, an ETSU professor of language and literature, will do just that when he presents his research findings Tuesday, March 29, in ETSU's D.P. Culp University Center Ballroom. Sawyer's talk, *Rest, rest, perturbed spirit*, will be held from 7-8 p.m., with a reception to follow in the East Tennessee Room.

In a sense, Sawyer has donned a hat – at least temporarily – that has nowhere near the luster he is accustomed to, fashioned from his years spent studying and explaining the Bard in such books as *Shakespeare and Appropriation* and *Victorian Appropriations of Shakespeare*; in essays on Shakespeare and Dickens, as well as on Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf; and in presentations at international venues from Stratford to Valencia to Prague.

Robert Sawyer, Shakespeare scholar, meet Robert Sawyer, ghostbuster.

"I guess you could say I am ghostbusting," Sawyer said. "One of my goals from the start was to find out where the whole haunting thing started."

Sawyer's research on Burleson is more relevant than ever, as ETSU celebrates its Centennial and the luminous people and events of its 100-year history. The research and resulting paper by Sawyer were funded by a grant from the ETSU Centennial Committee.

Burleson, who taught English, was one of the most respected professors ever at ETSU. She began her teaching career at the university in 1925 and taught until her death in 1967. She was the first woman chosen to receive the ETSU Distinguished Faculty Award, one year after the award was established. She, like Sawyer, focused her career on Shakespeare. The hall that bears her surname is named for her father, David Sinclair Burleson, a former dean of the ETSU faculty from the school's earliest years.

And if you take a tour of ETSU, guides will point to Burleson Hall and relate the story that the ghost of Christine Burleson supposedly haunts the building. Her spirit even possesses a painting of her father that hangs there, the story goes.

It is no coincidence that Sawyer draws his project title from the ghost-haunted “Hamlet,” but he believes the haunting of Burleson Hall is mere legend.

“I thought it was crazy from the beginning, and I didn’t find anything in my research to make me think otherwise,” Sawyer said. “One, she’s not haunting the place where she died. But the craziest thing is about the eyes of her ghost looking out through the eyes of her father’s portrait. Even the year of her death was reported erroneously.”

Sawyer said that in his research, he could find no reports of ghostly Burleson sightings until the staging of a 1988 play written about her life, *Cancell’d Destiny*. Also, likely due to the dramatic compression of time in the play, Sawyer said that *Cancell’d Destiny* suggests her despondence over the end of an affair with a Tennessee writer contributed substantially to her decision to shoot herself in 1967. The writer, T.S. Stribling, was a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist.

Sawyer’s research, however, yielded no proof that the professor’s suicide was in any way related to her former relationship with Stribling. The affair with Stribling began sometime in the early- to mid-1920s and ended in 1930 when he married another, but Sawyer does point out that Burleson and Stribling continued to write and remained friends. Burleson settled into life as an English professor at ETSU and fashioned a distinguished career. According to Sawyer, she was suffering from a debilitating illness when she shot herself twice, the gun reportedly misfiring the first time.

Where Sawyer does draw parallels is between Burleson’s life and his own.

“I don’t want people to lose sight of the fact that she had quite a career at the university,” Sawyer said. “If she wasn’t a Shakespeare scholar, I probably wouldn’t have done this research at all. And there’s also the fact that she wasn’t married and didn’t have children. I can relate to her developing a surrogate family of faculty, friends and former students, as she seems to have done.”

Sawyer said this project ultimately arose from his affection for ETSU and his appreciation of Burleson’s career of teaching and mentoring students. He praised the ETSU Centennial Committee for funding his research.

“I thought this was a chance to rewrite a chapter in the history of the university,” Sawyer said. “And I consider this my gift to her.”

Sawyer’s lecture is free and open to the public. For more information, call Sawyer at (423) 439-6670 or send e-mails to sawyerr@etsu.edu.

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