

# MML ACHIEVEMENT AWARD – *Creating a Tourism Niche* Medium Town Winner (3,000 – 10,000 population): Sykesville



I reached out to Ellicott City, Harpers Ferry and Gettysburg to research and learn how to create a successful tour. We wanted to see if this idea was going to work and decided to have the tours during October to coincide with Halloween. Tours were offered several nights per week at \$10 per adult and \$8 for children and seniors. Posters were made, press releases were sent out, social media was updated and word of mouth started to spread. All of our ghost tours sold out within a few weeks and people were still trying to sign up. We had 40 people on each tour. We made over \$3,000 that first year and have continued this success each year since then. Tour participants come from all over Maryland, and also from neighboring states. We gave a coupon to each attendee to use at local restaurants and shops and tracked their usage.

The ghost tours began to put Sykesville back on the map. People had heard rumors of the Big Foot sightings, and the ghosts of Baldwin's Station and the Town House – now was their chance to hear all of the stories. People who didn't attend the ghost tours told shop owners they came to Sykesville just to see where these stories took place. What's innovative about our Ghosts & Legends Tours is that most of the stories have taken place within the last 30 years. Some of the stories are even told by the people who experienced them. Tours include Sykesville's historic jail, which is now a residence right off Main Street. An added bonus is we had actual ghost hunters experiment with their equipment in our Town House attic and one of the tour stories details what happened that night.

Here's why this works. There is no cost involved because volunteers help run the tours. The additional income helps Sykesville subsidize other events that also bring people to town. Each year our ghost tours help pay for the Sykesville Art & Wine Festival which is another event that draws people to our town.

The success of the Sykesville Ghosts & Legends Tours caught the attention of the organizers of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Main Street Conference, where Ivy Wells gave a presentation in April entitled "How to Start Your Very Own Ghost Tour." ❖

## SYKESVILLE GHOSTS & LEGENDS Tours

By Ivy Wells  
*Director of Economic Development/  
Main Street Manager, Sykesville*

**W**hether you're a believer or a non-believer, there's no denying the allure of a good ghost story. Sykesville has its share of ghost stories, that's for sure, yet no one really knew about them until now. Stories would circulate about the ghost of Millard Cooper haunting the Sykesville Town House [town hall], the ghosts of Civil War soldiers, and even the legend of Big Foot that brought federal agents to town to decipher the alleged sightings. Back in 2009 the recession was in full swing and downtown shops were hurting. We were still struggling with the Route 32 bypass that left our Main Street abandoned. Not many people knew that Sykesville existed. What could we do to bring tourism back to our town and bring awareness to our commercial district?

The ghost of Millard Cooper seemed to answer this question. One day in 2008, Captain Mike Blair of our auxiliary police department had, shall we say, a scare up in the Town House attic. I looked into the story and starting asking questions about similar haunting experiences. I interviewed town staff past and present, shop and property owners, and discovered that starting a Ghosts & Legends Tour was exactly what this small town needed. Not only did it highlight Sykesville's history, but it also brought in tourists who had never visited, and we hoped that they would come back and shop in the future.



On a cloudless night, this ecoplasm was visible at the Sykesville Town House.