

Smith Crossing seniors go ghost hunting

Members of retirement community's book clubs meet local mystery writer

By DONNA VICKROY

Inside the 186-year-old limestone church, local author Pat Camalliere talks about the days before the Cal-Sag channel was built, about a time when farmers donated land that would become the grounds of St. James at the Sag Bridge Church and cemetery.

The history is rich with ghost stories. And a chapter of it is the setting for Camalliere's first novel, "The Mystery at Sag Bridge."

About 20 seniors from Smith Crossing Retirement Community in Orland Park filled the pews, listening to tales about ghostly sightings of Native Americans along Archer Avenue, of monks wandering the area and of a spirited woman who was killed in a wagon accident on the grounds of the church returning in an apparition.

Lemont, Camalliere said, has its share of ghost stories and many them are centered on the church area.

"Every time I come here I get this kind of awesome feeling walking through the cemetery and the forests around it," Camalliere said. "It almost has a little bit of surrealism to it. So you can see why people would think about ghosts and hauntings. Even in the daytime, there's a slightly different feel to this place."

"The Mystery at Sag Bridge" (Amika Press), the fictional story of an amateur historian who is haunted by the ghost of a young woman who was killed at the church in 1898, is the impetus for the seniors' field trip.

"It's the story of how she digs into the woman's life. There is a part when the ghost actually tells the story of her own life, for a number of chapters leading up to her own death," Camalliere said.



Pat Camalliere, author of "The Mystery at the Sag Bridge," discusses her book at St. James at the Sag Bridge Church with a group from Smith Crossing Retirement Community on June 28, 2019. (Gary Middendorf / Daily Southtown)



Members of Smith Crossing's two book clubs, the seniors have come to experience the setting of the story they recently read and to learn more about the early days of Lemont, which Camalliere said was once a destination for travelers coming from St. Louis and was once bigger than Chicago.



“In the story,” Camalliere said, “when Meg was looking for her husband, she would have come here and walked alongside the church.”

That was back before the canal was built in the 1920s, she said.

“The Sag Valley was all farmland at the time in my book,” she said. “It started as a swamp. After the area was settled, the swamp was drained and it became all farmland. There was more valley there then. Today it is all forest.”

Camalliere, who says the overarching theme of her first book is the relationship between mothers and daughters across generations, is now finishing up her third novel in her Cora Tozzi historical mystery series.

“I didn't start writing until after I retired,” she said.

After years of working in health administration at Rush Hospital, during which she penned many letters, reports and memos, she decided to heed the advice of her colleagues and give writing a try.

Her first book came out in 2015. The following year she published, “The Mystery at Black Partridge Woods.” She hopes to have her third book on shelves by the end of the year.

“Everything takes place in forest preserves in and around Lemont,” where she has lived for about 20 years, she said.

Smith Crossing resident Tom Ryan organized the outing, which began with a stop at the Lemont Historical Society and then a stop for lunch before culminating at the church.

Residents of Smith Crossing Retirement Community and Pat Camalliere, author of "The Mystery at the Sag Bridge," pose in front of St. James Church at the Sag Bridge on June 28, 2019. (Gary Middendorf / Daily Southtown)





Pat Camalliere is author of "The Mystery at the Sag Bridge," a novel that takes place at the St. James Church at the Sag Bridge. (Gary Middendorf / Daily Southtown)

Ryan started the club when he and his wife moved to the retirement community.

"We're on our 57th book," he said. Camalliere's "The Mystery at Sag Bridge" was a recent read for both Ryan club and another book club for women started by Bobbie Hett.

"I enjoyed the book," Ryan said, even though his book club focuses primarily on nonfiction. "We were able to get (Camalliere) to come to this meeting and talk about it. That was a great plus."

Hett said she and the other women in her club also enjoyed the book.

"I loved the outing, especially because Pat really gave us insight," Hett said. "She has spent the whole day with us. We read the book and we enjoyed the book, but coming out here, I don't (think) we actually realized what it's like until you see it. We're really grateful for that."