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Perth Amboy couple turns interest in history into book about their city

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Around March 17 each year residents of the senior citizen building on the corner of High and Smith streets have told authors Paul Wang and his wife Katherine Massopust it's not unusual to hear weird noises in the building.

"They hear the noise at night," Wang said, around the same time a 1969 fire destroyed the former Hotel Packer on that site. The fire, which claimed several lives, was started by a hotel guest smoking in bed.

"It's pretty bizarre," Wang said.

"People are interested in ghosts and bizarre stories," Massopust said.

The haunting of the senior building was one of the interesting stories the couple learned while conducting research for their book "Perth Amboy," a Then & Now series pictorial history, published in March by Arcadia Publishing in Dover, N.H., a publisher of local and regional history books.

The couple will discuss their book at 6 p.m. Saturday, May 30, at the Perth Amboy Gallery, 339 Reade St.

While working on the book, Wang said he also learned that a city graveyard was located on the State Street site where the former Perth Amboy High School and now the William C. McGinnis Middle School is located.

"I found that surprising," said Wang, adding students now might question whether their stately school building is haunted. "It makes history interesting."

Wang, a photographer who provided many of the photos used in the book, said his wife encouraged him to put a pictorial history book together.

Wang, a 1975 graduate of the former St. Mary's High School in Perth Amboy who later studied photography at Coronet Studios in Edison, said he and his brother had been involved with the Kearny Cottage Historical Society.

"Our whole family is interested in the history of Perth Amboy," he said. Three generations of his family have lived in the city.

Wang and Massopust, a 1985 graduate of Perth Amboy High School who studied math and physics in college and graduate school, said Perth Amboy is a changing city with a multitude of cultures and ethnic groups.

"That's a constant in Perth Amboy, the ethnicity's ever expanding," Massopust said.

Wang, who grew up in Perth Amboy during the 1950s and 1960s, said he sees the book as enjoyment for people to remember Perth Amboy the way the city was as one time.

"Perth Amboy was the place to be in the 1950s," said Massopust, adding crowds of people would be downtown on Saturdays.

Wang said he likes to hear older residents reminiscence about Perth Amboy.

Massopust said young children can use the book to learn about the city's history.

The couple, who are considering creating a similar book about New Brunswick as well as a contemporary book of Perth Amboy, said they used historical photos from some resident's personal collections.

They advocate creating accurate archives, whether documenting a family's history or a community's.

"It's important people document their photos. Write down on the back who the people are and when the photo was taken and where," Massopust said.
