

# Granny's Blue Ceiling



**KAL'S**  
kaleidoscope

by Anthony Wayne Kalberg

As a child, I spent many spring afternoons playing on my Granny's front porch. It was a typical Southern porch. Comfortable wicker rocking chairs invited conversation. A porch swing constantly whispered, "It's nap time." And framing it all in Kelly-green perfection were lacy ferns gently swaying in the dancing afternoon sunlight. In keeping with all things Southern, Granny's front porch also sported a blue ceiling. Do you know why her ceiling, along with countless others across the South, was painted blue? There are two schools of thought concerning blue porch ceilings. One deals with the practical,

while the other deals with things that go bump in the night.

Granny told me that she had painted her ceiling blue because the color helped ward-off pesky dirt-daubers. The color apparently tricked the eyesight of the little flying darlings, making them think that they were looking at the sky. Can't build your dirt-dauber dream home in sky, can you? The old-timers even had a paint color that was called Dirt-Dauber Blue. First made around 1850, the paint was mixed in pits which were dug on the construction sites where the painters were working. Raw materials like blue-col-

*All of the houses below are located in Tyler, TX. Photo credits: Charles Wohletz*

*Upper left: private residence*

*Lower left: Ramey-Granger House (open to the public)*

*Upper right: Smith-Butler House (open to the public)*

*Lower right: private residence*



ored minerals, milk, and lime were the paint's ingredients. The old-timers also notice that the local bug population refused to land on the blue-painted surfaces, mostly likely due to the lime in the home-made paint. But the legend began - blue-painted ceilings ward-off bugs and dirt-daubers. Does it work? Ask someone who has a blue porch ceiling and see what they tell you.

If blue paint could put the hex on dirt-daubers, could it do the same for haints? For those who may not know, the word "haint" is of European origin, and usually refers to bodiless spirits with nasty personalities. Because these less-than-nice haints needed corralling, a variation of Dirt-Dauber blue was created - Haint Blue. Haint blue was reportedly first used by African slaves through out the Deep South to secure their home from spirits. It was thought that Haint Blue represented water, which spirits can not pass over. Slaves often painted not only their porch ceilings Haint Blue, but doors, shutters, and entire rooms as well.



During the making of the movie "The Skeleton Key," Beauchamp Fontaine - set decorator for the movie - immersed herself in Southern folk lore. Because the movie was set in a rambling, anti-bellum mansion located somewhere in Louisiana, she wanted to accurately portray the house and its surroundings. And what color did she paint the porch ceilings of the fictitious Devereaux plantation house? You guessed it! Haint Blue! As she said, "Even if the audience is not aware of these details on a conscious level, it creates a mood that will make it all worth while."

The audience who watched "The

Skeleton Key" may not have known why the Devereaux's porch ceiling was painted blue, but now you do! So the next time that you are out and about, taking afternoon tea on a friend's front porch, take a gander at the color which your friend has painted his or her porch ceiling. Is it Dirt-Dauber blue? Or does your friend need protection from something a bit more sinister - a haint?

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