

1884 courthouse scoured for spooks

Group explores Seneca County building with hazy future

Sunday, April 5, 2009 3:33 AM

BY J.C. REINDL

THE BLADE

TIFFIN, Ohio -- Seven figures crouched in the dark one recent night in the chilly bowels of Seneca County's shuttered 1884 courthouse.

A soft, reddish glow from a streetlight spilled through a plastic-covered window. The other light in the room, a small green dot, came from a device the size of a cordless phone that measures change in the electromagnetic field.

After a long silence, ghost hunter Penny Reynolds posed her first question to the "other side."

"Is there anybody here with us tonight?" she asked.

The group was greeted with more silence.

"Do you understand why we're here?"

Still more silence. And no movement from the illuminated green dot.

So Denny Bishop of Findlay, who sat beside her on the floor, gave it a shot.

"You know, they're going to tear this place down soon," he said to any unseen spirit. "You'll have absolutely no place to go. You will have to pass on -- this will no longer exist."

"How do you feel about that?" Reynolds added.

For whatever reasons, those dead but not yet departed kept a low profile March 28 for the Buckeye State Paranormal and Haunting Investigators. County commissioners granted the ghost-hunting group permission to stake out the courthouse that Saturday evening and into the predawn hours.

Several members spoke of a last-chance feel to their visit, as the question of whether the building will be demolished or renovated still hangs in the air.

A group of 22 people roamed the courthouse for nearly seven hours with flashlights, night-vision cameras, thermal-imaging devices, digital voice recorders, walkie-talkies and other tools of their ghoulish trade.

It was about 9 p.m. when the team assigned to the building's lower level gave up its initial attempt at spirit

rousing.

"Why are you ignoring us?" Bishop asked.

Seneca County's is the first courthouse that the ghost-hunting group based in Bellefontaine has tackled, but it is just one of dozens of buildings, graveyards and private residences that its members investigate each year.

Founder Gene Lafferty, 41, said that of all the sites visited by the group in its five-year history, only about 10 to 15 were determined to be truly haunted.

"We're pretty strict on what we consider haunted," Lafferty said, citing sound and image recordings as acceptable evidence. Ghost-hunting shows on TV often are too quick to declare a haunting, he said.

"Some of the shows will show stuff that I would never consider to be evidence," Lafferty said. "They'll play an EVP (electronic voice phenomenon) that is clearly a dog barking outside, or there are some shows out there that will claim that every house has a demon, which is far from being true."

Before entering, Lafferty and others said that they knew of no ghost stories specific to the courthouse and would have their eyes, ears and recorders ready for anything: wronged defendants, fiery prosecutors, perhaps an eccentric judge.

"I heard a rumor that somebody hung themselves in the basement, but I don't know if that's true or not," said Gail Searles, 52, of Upper Sandusky.

Lafferty said it's too early to determine whether the courthouse is haunted. Group members need to examine the more than 70 hours of video and audio footage that they captured on their visit.

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