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Article published March 30, 2009

Paranormal group unsure if Seneca County courthouse gave up the ghost 'Other Side' offers mostly silence

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Penny Reynolds of Kenton, Ohio, joins members of the Buckeye State Paranormal and Haunting Investigators in looking for ghosts during an all-night stakeout at the historic courthouse. (THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH)

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TIFFIN - Seven figures crouched in the near dark late Saturday 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 for measuring 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.

PHOTO GALLERY

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The group was greeted with more silence.

"Do you understand why we're here?"

Ghost Hunting at the Seneca County Courthouse



Still more silence. And no movement yet 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?" Ms. Reynolds added.

For whatever reasons, those dead but not yet departed kept a low profile Saturday for the Buckeye State Paranormal and Haunting Investigators. County commissioners granted the ghost-hunting group permission to stake out the courthouse Saturday evening and into yesterday's 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, packing 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?" Mr. Bishop asked.

Seneca County's courthouse is the first that the Bellefontaine, Ohio, organization has tackled, but it is just one of dozens of buildings, graveyards, and private residences that they investigate each year.

Founder Gene Lafferty, 41, said that of all the sites visited by the organization 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," Mr. Lafferty said, citing sound and image recordings as acceptable evidence. Ghost-hunting shows on TV are often too quick to declare a haunting, he said.

"Some of the shows will show stuff that I would never consider to be evidence," Mr. 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, Mr. Lafferty and others said that they knew 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.

Saturday's group included ghost hunters from throughout the state and of all ages. Just about everyone had a story about witnessing paranormal activity.

Scott Grey, 40, of Findlay, described his tussle with a shadowy entity that allegedly haunts the Jones Building on South Main Street in downtown Findlay.

"Let's say I got hit in the back of the head and thrown to the ground," Mr. Grey said. "I was provoking what we think is the old man up there."

Yet aside from a close encounter with bats and mice on the courthouse's third floor, Saturday's ghost hunt was markedly peaceful.

Group members spent the first hour stringing video cameras throughout the building and tying them in to a central recording system that they set up on the second floor. At about 8 p.m. the hunters split into teams, shut off the lights, and proceeded to comb the corridors.

Several prowled with eyes fixed to night-vision cameras, trusting electronics to separate the spirits from the shadows.

Jas Breidenbach, of Lima, who described herself as a full-time decoder of electronic voice phenomena, said she used Radio Shack equipment to have a conversation with two spirits who haunt the ground floor of the courthouse.

The phantom pair, on the whole, seemed a bit ornery. "They're not in a very good mood," Ms. Breidenbach said with a laugh.

"I asked them how many were here. The female said 14, the male said 20," Ms. Breidenbach recounted. "I asked them what their names were again and the male rattled something that wasn't even a name. It sounded like he just said, 'Why? What's it to you?'"

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

"One person did get a rather interesting photo," Mr. Lafferty said. "But trying to look at it on the little camera screen - we can't really draw any conclusions from that."

The group plans to pay the county \$300 for opening the courthouse and staffing it with two maintenance workers throughout the evening.

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