

Ghost tracking group finds haunts in Fort Myers

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Most nonprofit groups exist to help the living.

One Southwest Florida organization, however, caters to the living-challenged - better known as the dead.

For the past seven years, the Peace River Ghost Tracker has spent its time and resources conducting paranormal investigations to better understand the world of the departed.

Founders of the group, Scott Walker and Ellen Dvorak, investigate throughout Southwest Florida and the U.S. in order to prove or disprove the existence of ghosts, poltergeists or other paranormal experiences.

Slamming doors, creaking floor boards and hazy apparitions are all up for scrutiny and examination. And unlike the popular 80's spoof Ghost Busters in which a zany group vacuums up green ectoplasm or supposedly ghostly residue, this group is on a mission to uncover what can and cannot always be sensed.

"Most of us doing this (ghost hunting) are serious," Walker said.

According to group members, one of the memorable paranormal experiences happened right in downtown Fort Myers.

Walker, 40, said the group were checking out the Esperanza Pullman train housed at the Southwest Florida Museum of history in downtown Fort Myers when they heard keys jingling. Other members of the of the group, including South Fort Myers resident Toni Ray remembered the jingling keys.

"I actually audibly heard them," Walker

said.

As for who or what was jingling those keys — it didn't seem have a human origin.

And just in case you're not sure — a ghost is a form of energy. Most consider ghosts to be the spiritual matter of once-living beings.

Fort Myers could be rife with spiritual matter because of its age and history, according to Dvorak. She said the group is hoping to get a chance to investigate some more of the historic downtown district such as the Arcade theater.

Places or buildings with considerable age are prime ghost hunting material.

Two years ago Helena Finnegan, Public Relations & Marketing Manager for the Southwest Florida Museum of History/Imaginarium/Burroughs Home, was looking into the possibility of creating a ghost tour in Fort Myers. She let the Peace River Ghost Tracker and two other ghost hunting groups check out the train.

At the present time there is no ghost tour. For one to possibly happen in the future, there must be enough authenticated haunted sites as well as volunteer guides and permission from the owners of the haunted places, Finnegan said.

"Hosting a ghost tour is something very much we would like to do," Finnegan said.

During a recent investigation in Punta Gorda, the five-member group attached wires to monitors and tinkered with a variety of high tech super sensitive devices, including, video cameras, infrared thermometers, digital tape recorders and electromagnetic field detectors.

In order to collect evidence such as audible voices, apparitions or other unearthly phenomena, the ghost trackers must carry the elaborate and expensive equipment to supposedly haunted locations at night - when most of the living is asleep.

The equipment measures temperature drops, electromagnetic energy, voices and, of course, apparitions.

The cool night air seemed to prick at the skin as the ghost hunters trekked across the unoccupied buildings with their gauges and sensors in different directions.

Dvorak said since the area was supposedly considered historic the group wanted to investigate.

And just because something registers on their equipment does not guarantee a ghost or other supernatural activity is roaming about. The evidence must go through a rigorous examination. Often evidence is dismissed if it doesn't meet the ghost hunters' standards.

For instance, if an orb of light is detected, it must exhibit a sense of intelligence as it moves — like it is moving in a particular direction, Walker said.

One group member, Tom Land, does not easily believe in anything paranor-



COURTESY PHOTO

The Peace River Ghost Trackers monitor equipment outside the Esperanza Pullman train at the Southwest Florida Museum of history in downtown Fort Myers recently. The group was checking the old train car for ghostly activity.

mal.

The Fort Myers man uses his skills as a security installer to help him set-up the elaborate monitors and equipment during an investigations.

"I am the skeptic of the group," he said. "I am looking to find something I can't explain."

Ghost hunting has gained attention with the airings of shows like "TAPS: Ghost Hunters" on the Sci Fi Channel.

Aside from trying to establish if an unearthly presence is around, the local ghost hunter group also tries to help ease the fears of the living by explaining supernatural phenomena found in homes or businesses.

To date the group has conducted between 40 and 50 investigations in three states.

"We do it because we're looking for evidence," said Dvorak, 38. "It's a passionate hobby."

And this is one hobby that is not for the faint of heart.

Disembodied voices, odd noises, strong smells - both good and bad, apparitions and even possessions have been experienced by the group.

And as far as becoming a ghost hunter — think very carefully. Walker cautions people from just watching a TV show and then deciding to become a ghost hunter. He said there are dangers such as getting injuries from investigating old, dilapidated buildings or tripping over headstones in unlit cemeteries.

Walker said people also need to be wary of evoking spirits during hunts and becoming entangled with them — AKA possessions.

"Something can become attached to you," he said.

Walker who is particularly sensitive to paranormal experiences has had brushes

with death since he said his departed grandfather, Babe Lesky started making guest appearances to him years ago.

This experience among several other unusual events parlayed him and his partner, Dvorak, to delve into and examine the hereafter.

Walker, a tall, soft-spoken man, said he helped a troop of spectral Civil War soldiers in New Orleans. The men's spirits were allegedly trapped in the world of the living. Walker said he helped them pass over to the spiritual domain.

For this group, helping spirits in the netherworld or helping the living deal with spirits is just as ordinary as a mechanic fixing a car for a customer.

The Peace River Ghost Tracker is interested in helping anyone investigate anything that may be considered paranormal. They do not charge for their investigations, but will accept donations for their batteries and equipment.

If a resident or business owner does indeed have a spirit present and wants it relocated or removed, the ghost hunters can get them the help they need to do that, Dvorak said.

Detailed reports come with all investigations. The group has had requests throughout Southwest Florida, including businesses and residences in Lee and Charlotte Counties.

And for anyone wondering — spirits are much like their former human personas. According to Walker, good people who pass away usually leave good spirits and mean, angry people tend to leave more malicious spirits.

Walker said most people who are experiencing something bizarre in their home or business don't want to get rid of the spirit.

"People just want to know that they're not crazy," Walker said. ■

Ghostly Information

Haunted?

Tips if you think you being haunted:

- Start a ghost log; write down times and events of unusual incidences. Check for patterns in these incidences.
- Contact the Peace River Ghost Tracker to have home or business investigated.
- Though the Peace River Ghost Tracker doesn't cleanse spirits from homes they can contact someone who will.

Source: Peace River Ghost Tracker

On the Web

The Peace River Ghost Tracker can be contacted through its Web Site at www.peacriverghosttracker.com.

Ghostly facts

- About half of the nation say they believe in ghosts; 38 percent men and 56 percent women. Fifty-four percent of people under 45 years of age believe in ghosts compared to 41 percent of those over 45.
- Twenty-two percent of Americans say they saw a ghost; 14 percent men; 29 percent women.
- 78 percent believe in life after death.
- Only 8 percent believe science will ever prove there is life after death.

Source: CBS News poll conducted in 2005

NEWS AROUND TOWN

Dry season getting dryer

This year's dry season currently ranks as the third driest hydrologic season in recorded Florida history, according to the National Weather Service. Meanwhile, the U.S. Drought Monitor, which identifies general drought areas by intensity, has recently categorized all areas of the South Florida Water Management District as either moderate or severe drought zones with a prediction of possible drought intensification.

The drought and subsequent water shortage of 2007 are the result of per-

sistent low rainfall dating back to 2006, which ranked as the sixth-driest year on record in terms of district-wide rainfall. The trend has continued through the first three months of 2007, as only 2.61 inches of rain has fallen year to date district-wide; this is 37 percent of the historical average for the three-month period ending March 30, 2007. During the month of March, only 0.60 inch of rain has fallen District-wide; this is 21 percent of the historical average for the month.

Fort Myers

Challenger Johnny Streets defeated longtime city councilwoman Veronica Shoemaker for a seat on the Fort Myers council. Streets is a retired police officer and activist. Shoemaker represented east Fort Myers for nearly 25 years. Councilman Michael Flanders defeated challenger Terry Hall for the other seat in elections held Tuesday, April 3. They were sworn in to office on Monday along with Thomas Leonardo who won the new Ward 6 seat in a February election.

Cape Coral

City voters overwhelmingly defeated a proposal to borrow up to \$110 million to build a new public safety building by a 78 to 22 percent margin. Only about 15

percent of registered voters went to the polls on Tuesday, April 3. City officials are trying to come up with alternatives to the pricey building that voters rejected.

Bonita Springs

U.S. Rep. Connie Mack, R-Fort Myers, told a Bonita Springs crowd last week that Southwest Florida has big problems that Congress is ignoring. Mack said officials aren't spending enough money in our area for Interstate 75 and immigration.

Alva

Manatee Park on Palm Beach Boulevard recently opened Ethnobotany Trail to teach about plants. Guided trail walks are every Saturday in April at 10 am. The program is free. ■