

I Was a Middle-Aged Ghost Hunter

By Scott Nicholson

Green Park Inn, perched on the carapace of the Eastern Continental Divide, has had a lot of time to settle during its 125-year history, but perhaps the past imbues the architecture in more ways than just through slightly skewed floors.

The Hauntmasters Club, based in eastern Tennessee, rolled into Blowing Rock to conduct a paranormal investigation of the historic inn Thursday. The five-member crew brought technical equipment, such as electromagnetic field (EMF) recorders, digital audio recorders, digital thermometers, cameras, and night-vision camcorders to document their exploration of the ethereal.

Three of the members also claimed clairvoyant powers, a sensitivity to the presence of those whose spirits might still cling to the earthly realm. I was invited along as an impartial observer and journalist, and even though I've been known to adapt a local supernatural legend or two, I belong to the "I'm open-minded, but I'll believe it when I see it" camp.

Justin Guess and Christy Rach were the first to arrive, browsing a "ghost log" kept at the reception desk that has been used since 2004 to record strange encounters. Based on reports by guests and staff members, the club selected a handful of rooms for a closer investigation. They were then given a tour by a former long-time employee and made notes.

Compliments of the inn's management, the Hauntmasters set up shop in Room 318, which is by far the most-haunted room, according to visitor reports. Legend has it that a woman named Laura or Laurel Green had been jilted at the altar and died in the room either of a broken heart or suicide. Another take on the legend is that her would-be groom, feeling guilty, returned to the room in search of her after his death. That might explain the mysterious pipe smoke, an olfactory hallucination that has been reported in the room.

Christy said she felt the room was "the safest one on the floor" and said she'd heard a woman's voice whisper "Beware." She believed the warning was made because of the two rooms at the end of the hall, 332 and 333, which she said were "evil." "Whatever is back there is not happy we're here," she told me.

I was given a brief history of the group and descriptions of its equipment. The other three Hauntmasters arrived – Tony Davidson, Jake Denton, and Tammy Pickett – and went over the notes. They then visited various parts of the inn and made measurements of EMF readings and temperatures for later comparison. One odd incident occurred during this phase of the investigation. In a first-floor hallway, EMF recorders held by Tammy and Jake began to go off while they stood waiting for another group member. The readers flashed at brief intervals, at a rate similar to the time it would take for someone to walk (or float) between the two recorders. No apparent electrical sources were nearby.

Room 327 was suggested by inn employee April Marcuz as a place that gave her the creeps. During her two years working there, she said children sometimes ran crying from the room for no apparent reason. The cramped quarters were used long ago by the caretaker when the inn was closed during the winter.

It was the first room where the team set up equipment. With the lights off, Christy sat in a chair and asked a series of questions aloud, such as "What's your name?" and "Are you sitting on the bed?" as well as the chilling "Did you die here?" Tammy's EMF recorder was triggered over a spot on the bed, with no visible electrical source, such as TV or wall outlet nearby. Jake asked "Can you turn on the TV or radio for us?" with no response, while Justin made a video record of the sequence. After five minutes, Christy abandoned her chair and went to the door, saying she'd experienced "an overwhelming sense of panic." Jake then sat in the chair and reported a feeling of loneliness, though he had the impression that whatever spirit occupied the room had spent a lot of time reading.

Some of the questions were followed by a low booming or thudding, which could have been explained by distant sounds from the hotel's pub or someone banging on the walls below. Justin noted that sometimes investigations are spoiled by people who rig noises or play tricks and hoaxes, and a few of the employees had been a little resentful of their presence. Christy believed she'd heard someone knocking or scratching on the room's walls.

The group then proceeded to 332, where both Christy and Tony originally reported feelings of being smothered or closed in. Tony described it as "something gets on you," but when the group set up its equipment, both clairvoyants felt that whatever spirit had bothered them was now gone, possibly traveling across the hall to the adjoining room.

In 332, they asked, "Are there three of you?" and "Is there something you need to tell us?" Christy added, in an interrogator's tone, "Did you murder someone?" They cut this stop short, on the consensus belief that it was devoid of any activity.

Room 210, which their tour guide said always caused her uneasy feelings, proved to be the strangest investigation. The initial visit revealed high EMF activity, which the group attributed to the sprinkler system's valve in the ceiling, though it used no electrical power. On the return visit, the group sat in the dark for several minutes before Christy reported hearing a number of voices, including children who said they were 11 and 13. Shortly after that, Tony stood and fled the room, holding the side of her head and saying "something" had been



Justin Guess checks out a mirror that seals off an old fireplace as Christy tries the bed in Room 236, where a guest reported the words "Help me" had appeared on a steamy bathroom mirror. Photo by Scott Nicholson

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at the table where she sat.

Jake's digital photographs taken during the incident showed "orbs," white circles or specks that are sometimes attributed to supernatural activity, though skeptics say they are caused by dust or lens flare. In one photo, three orbs were clustered around the table where Tony had been sitting.

Room 218, a lush honeymoon suite with elegant sauna and an antique clawfoot tub, was next on the list. Tony had reported seeing someone at the window during her arrival, though the entire second floor was empty of guests (at least the corporeal, paying customers). Justin, the most tech-oriented of the group and probably the most skeptical, at one point turned to Tammy and said, "Did you say something?" I was sitting near Tammy and heard nothing myself, but Justin, a 10-year ghost-hunting veteran, said, "Hmm, maybe that was the first time I've ever heard someone."

Room 226 had an actual recorded death in the room and was the focus of my final investigation. Christy asked aloud the standard questions about age and year of death, then asked, "Do you play music?" About 30 seconds later, Tammy, who had been quiet most of the night, said, "Do you guys hear an organ playing?" Jake left the room to check out a perceived shadow in the crack under the door, but it proved fruitless. The Hauntmasters tried to interview employees on camera, but almost all were reluctant to be filmed. April said during her time working the front desk, she'd heard televisions and radios come on at the same time for no apparent reason and people often complained about "children running around" and making noise even when no children were registered. In addition to Room 327, she said she got uneasy feelings from the boiler room, a meeting room and the kitchen. The ghost stories have never caused her to consider quitting. "You get used to it after a while," she said.

As a whole, the Hauntmasters could be defined as skeptical believers, despite their willingness to linger in haunted places. Christy said she sometimes has recurring dreams that are connected to remote events, but other times the dream is meaningless. "I don't necessarily take what I see or feel as evidence," she said. Tony, who grew up in a family that was sensitive to unexplained forces, was making her first investigation with the group.

Justin paid attention to where people were staying in the hotel and how their noises might affect the recordings. At one point, believing the third floor was empty, the group discovered a radio playing behind a locked door. When they checked at the front desk, they found the room had been rented, though Justin noted, "It was playing horrible music."

The Hauntmasters plan to spend the next couple of weeks reviewing the recordings, particularly the digital audio. Justin said he uses editing programs to change the speed and equalization of the recordings to listen for EVP, or electronic voice phenomenon, which some say are voices from beyond the grave. They also plan to compile a DVD of their research at the Green Park Inn and make it available through their Web site, www.hauntmastersclub.com. The group has been in existence 10 years and has 11 members, though some of them focus solely on technical matters and don't conduct field research.

My first experience at ghost chasing was mixed. I tried to focus and "open myself up" to experiences beyond my usual limited range of perception, but I've always believed that if ghosts do exist, they are unlikely to communicate with a cynic. Due to an amateur career as a rock musician, my hearing isn't so great, so I missed all the murmuring voices and organ music. None of my photographs revealed any orbs or odd misty shapes, and no lights flickered despite the structure's old wiring. I was a little bothered by the fact that many of the bedside alarm clocks were flashing, as if the power had gone off, but all were flashing vastly different times. Now, if one had been flashing "6:66," I probably would have made an early and hasty exit.

As I left shortly after 1 a.m., I still maintained my original position of "I'll believe it when I see it." But I said a little cleansing prayer anyway in case I needed to discourage any invisible hitchhikers who might want to follow me home.

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