

Ghost hunters at work

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Feeling a presence in one of the darkened rooms of Victoria's Black Swan Inn, Gloria Young began to speak.

"If you're here, will you make your presence known?" she asked.

Nothing. She tried several more questions. Then, finally, "If you're here, will you speed up the Geiger counter?"

It had been clicking about once every 30 seconds.

Click click click click click.

"Thank you," she replied, ever respectful.

The Geiger counter was just one of the many devices pressed into service by Young and the handful of other ghost hunters who descended on the inn for a ghost hunting seminar, which took place Saturday in the day and night at the storied inn. Though Young acknowledged no one yet knows if a Geiger counter can detect ghosts, it is one of many technologies she and other ghost hunters use.

The inn and the buildings surrounding it on the 35-acre property along Salado and Walzem creeks are thought by many to be chock-full of spooks and spirits.

American Indians lived on the land for hundreds of years. The Mexican Army and early Texans met in bloody battle there in 1842. The grand old house that now hosts weddings and brunches has seen its share of tragedies.

Jo Ann Rivera, who bought the property in 1987, became a believer not long after moving into the inn. She says she constantly hears voices, piano music and footsteps. She says she's even seen apparitions, including a little girl who shows herself more often to men staying at the inn.

Last year, she began hosting "haunted sleepovers," allowing the curious to rattle around the place during prime witching hours.

But Saturday was the first time the inn held an actual ghost hunting seminar.

Hosted by D. Disparti, a "sensitive" — they prefer that term over "psychic" and ghost hunter from Eagle Lake with five decades of experience, the seminar aimed to offer participants lessons in dowsing, which the hunters say is an ancient art of finding energy with dowsing rods; how to set up cameras, tape recorders, electromagnetic field meters and other technical equipment to catch evidence of paranormal activity; and how to deal with spirits once they've been found.

Having a ghost in the house can be "like having a teenager," said Disparti, who had arrived at the inn early to do a little pre-seminar ghost hunting of her own.

With her were Starr Chaney and her daughter Jessi, both experts in dowsing and collecting EVP, or electronic voice phenomena.

As Young cajoled the shy spirit into rapidly clicking her Geiger counter in one part of the old house, Chaney taught a newcomer how to hold and use a pair of dowsing rods, which look a bit like bent coat hangers with beads covering the portion grasped in the hands, so the rods can swing freely while being held.

She explained that when the rods cross, one has come upon energy. If the rods swing back toward the body, that's usually a sign the spirit would rather be left alone.

She demonstrated as she spoke. The rods crossed immediately in one room, but when she began to ask questions, the right rod swung back and hit her in the arm — over and over.

"OK, I get it, I get it," said the Kentuckian, laughing as she backed out of the room.

Participants such as Nanette Patton sat rapt as speakers shared photos, audio recordings, spooky stories and practical tips, such as always letting the cops know when you're in a cemetery looking for ghosts.

"I've always been interested in the paranormal," said Patton, a major stationed at Fort Sam Houston. "Now that I'm an adult, I can indulge in it. It's really fun."

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