

Escapes

Afterlifers

In a Former W.Va. Prison, Ghost-Hunters Want to Show You How Long-Dead Inmates Are Still Doing Time

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
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In the middle of a supposedly fun weekend getaway, I found myself in a pitch-black de-commissioned West Virginia prison. It was long past midnight, and I was forcing myself to creep toward a room that was reportedly a hot spot for some of the undead spirits left behind by the prison's history of death. Before the maximum-security facility closed in 1995, it recorded 85 hangings and nine electrocutions. Add suicides, stabbings and other deaths, and the toll is 998, which means lots of potential paranormal activity.

I was nearly petrified. The only thing that kept me moving was the overwhelming panic anytime I ended up at the back of my group. As long as there were others behind me, I thought, I would survive.

What had I been thinking, volunteering for this misery? I spook easi-



The prison closed in 1995 but is now open for tours.

ly. I tend to steer clear of horror movies. And when it comes to the supernatural, I am generally a non-believer. But there I was, on an overnight ghost hunt at the former West Virginia Penitentiary in Moundsville, a Gothic-style prison that opened in 1866 in the northern panhandle of the state.

A friend who pursues ghosts as a hobby encouraged me to sign up when I showed some interest in these agents of the afterlife. He'd talked about his own trips to haunted hotels and orphanages as though they were scientific expeditions. Poking around online, I found the

prison ghost hunts organized by the Moundsville Economic Development Council. They are held one Saturday a month from March to November and give spirit-chasers a chance to do their thing in what paranormal experts say is an unusually haunted setting. I brought along some protection, a veteran who assured me that after living through Iraq, ghost hunting would be cake.

The tour began at 8 Saturday night, with the coordinator telling the group, "I don't know what's going to happen tonight, but you're going to be scared." There were 67 of us thrill-seekers, mostly under 40, who came from nine states and all walks of life. My own goal was simply to find out: Just what is ghost-hunting — a hoax? A science? Clearly there were some serious enthusiasts, judging from the group.

I was drawn to the pros: a threesome from a group called C&C Investigators, which they explained as "Ghostbusters, but we don't do it for money." They work at a Rubbermaid factory in Winchester, Va., and moonlight in the ghost industry, following up on calls of paranormal goings-on. They wore black satin C&C jackets and had six-packs of Diet Pepsi and Red Bull, No-Doz, two-way radios, laser thermometers and

recording devices. They told us that cameras can pick up ghostly images even when the eye can't. They often show up as orbs, which ghost-hunters consider the most basic form of a spirit.

The night started with a 90-minute tour of such cheery spots as where a prisoner was stabbed to death and a guard was thrown over a railing.

"Inmates don't like to know that people die in prison," said Mike Pariczka, a former supervisor in the prison's psych ward who led one of the tour groups. "So we did CPR on a lot of dead bodies, put them in an

ambulance and sent them off like they were going to the hospital. It was a violent place."

After the preliminary tour, we ate pizza, watched a documentary on the prison and, by midnight, broke into smaller groups. A few of us headed out with the C&C crew. The guys led us to different rooms, whipping out gadgets to make recordings or measure temperature (significant temperature drops, they said, can indicate the presence of a spirit). We all took digital pictures and then examined our images. "Oh my God, check out the ectoplasm," someone would whisper if a picture was filled with orbs. What I saw were tiny circles, which my inner skeptic wrote off as dust particles reflecting the flash.

There was a lot of downtime during our 10 hours in the pokey, during which people told spooky anecdotes from their previous ghost hunts (spirits drinking out of water bottles or pulling a ponytail). It was disconcerting to ponder all this rampant activity that I couldn't hear, see or feel but that others claimed to sense through pictures and recordings. During the breaks in the well-lit lobby (where they sell edible gummy handcuffs and T-shirts that read, "I survived the WV Penitentiary Ghost Hunt"), I desperately wanted to see or feel — something. Hoping to be bumped or scratched or slimed, I ached to be a believer, like the cool kids with the pricey gadgets.

Before long, we were at the witching hour. An expert from the Paranormal Research Society had told us earlier that things really came alive at 3 a.m. That was also the time that — implausibly — my friend with a Purple Heart was telling me he didn't want to be in back of the group either. We silently maneuvered in front of two unsuspecting girls so they could bring up the rear. Moments later, the C&C guys



Left, a recent participant in the overnight ghost-hunting tours at the former West Virginia Penitentiary shines his flashlight around a room known for strange activity. Right, ghost-hunters check a digital camera for spectral images.



PHOTOS BY KATE ROBERTSON FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

motioned us to sit on a bench in a basement room, where they set up their recording gear.

A guy named Chuck began interrogating the void: "Is there anybody here with us tonight? Do you want us here with you? What is your name?" We sat for what seemed like 30 minutes, afraid to move or breathe too loudly. I was so tense I felt as if I'd been kicked in the gut.

I nearly skipped with joy as we approached the bright lobby. Chuck played the recording, and we heard nothing, although a jumbled earlier recording had included what the C&C guys interpreted as a woman's voice crying, "It shines!"

The tour ended at 6 a.m. I didn't have any encounters. Or did I? At one point, I had felt something brush through my hair. Probably just a draft through a broken window. Right?

"You can keep rationalizing everything," my soldier friend challenged me, "and not believe in anything."

I was too exhausted to argue.

We stopped at Cabela's giant outdoor goods store in Wheeling on the way home (after sleeping half of Sunday in our Moundsville B&B) and shot some pictures in front of the trophy animals. In the car, I skimmed through them.

And there I was — in front of the stuffed geese — surrounded by orbs.

ESCAPE KEYS

GETTING THERE: Moundsville, W.Va., is about 300 miles from Washington. Take I-270 north to I-70 west toward Hagerstown, Md. Merge onto I-68 west, toward Cumberland, and follow for 112 miles. At Morgantown, W.Va., take I-79 north to Washington, Pa. Merge onto I-70 west, then, at Wheeling, onto I-470 west. Take that to U.S. 250 south at Exit 1, through Moundsville, and turn left at Jefferson Avenue. West Virginia Penitentiary is at 818 Jefferson.



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minute non-ghost tours of the prison are held hourly from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday April through November, for \$8.

WHERE TO STAY: Bonnie Dwaine B & B (505 Wheeling Ave., Glen Dale, 888-507-4569, www.bonnie-dwaine.com) is minutes from the prison. Just after sunrise, after tromping around jail cells all night, nothing feels better than a bed in one of the inn's floral, frilly, sunny guest rooms. Rates are \$89 to \$125. When I called to tell the owner I'd be in town for the ghost hunt, she quickly offered to set aside breakfast before she went to church and extend checkout time until I finished my Z's. There are numerous motels in and around Wheeling, 12 miles to the north.

WHERE TO EAT: Before your overnighter, Acapulco (800 Lafayette Ave., 304-843-0111) is just about the only (non-fast food) game in town, with a full Tex-Mex menu and dirt-cheap tacos (think Taco Bell in Chi-Chi's decor).

INFO: Wheeling Convention & Visitors Bureau, 800-828-3097, www.wheelingcvb.com.