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## Spirits willing for ghost weekend

50 trek to Eureka Springs hotel for paranormal conference

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By Bill Bowden

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PHOTO BY BILL BOWDEN

Larry Flaxman of Little Rock (second from left) uses a thermal camera Saturday morning to check for paranormal activity in the basement of the Crescent Hotel in Eureka Springs. The room once served as a hospital morgue.

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EUREKA SPRINGS — Ghosts are naturally a little skittish.

They're less likely to make themselves known when there are 25 people in the room, said David Chaffin of Richmond, Ky., who was in Eureka Springs this weekend for the Crescent Hotel's fourth annual paranormal conference.

For that reason, Chaffin didn't go along on an organized "search for ghostly activity" in the wee hours Saturday in some of the hotel's more famously haunted rooms.

Instead, Chaffin sat quietly in one of those rooms earlier, on Friday night, with his wife, daughter and a low-tech digital recorder. He said it picked up a couple of sounds: a faint scream and the sound of someone clearing his throat. A reporter also heard the sounds on the recorder.

"The worst enemy is contamination - people around," said Chaffin. "You don't know what you're listening to the next day."

Since about 2004, the Crescent Hotel's management has billed the place as "America's most haunted" hotel. For decades, owners of the hotel said it wasn't haunted, fearing that such a reputation would scare guests away, said Bill Ott, a spokesman for the hotel. But when Marty and

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Elise Roenigk bought the hotel in 1997, they decided to play up its supernatural reputation. In the 1930s, the building served as a cancer hospital.

Keith Scales, coordinator of the Eureka Springs Paranormal Weekend and ghost tour coordinator for the hotel, said for the first two years of the event, all they did was leave certain rooms open for ghost hunters to visit at all hours of the day and night. Last year, he began organizing a conference around the weekend, in part to give paranormal sleuths something to do during the day. The paranormal weekend is primarily a nocturnal event. This year, about 50 signed up to attend the conference.

Larry Flaxman of Little Rock, founder and president of the Arkansas Paranormal & Anomalous Studies Team, led the search for ghostly activity early Saturday, although he doesn't like to use the word ghost. Flaxman, who has written five books, generally speaks in more scientific terms.

"The term ghost assumes death," he said. "I don't think that death is the end."

Flaxman began the tour about 12:30 a.m. Saturday in Room 419, which is referred to as Theodora's room. As the story goes, Theodora was a cancer patient who stayed in the room. She likes to fold clothes and has trouble finding her room key.

Flaxman opened a case containing several paranormal measuring devices. He placed two static-charge meters on the bed, spread several feet apart and began talking to Theodora. One of the devices lit up, showing a variety of colors. When requested, the other one lit up.

"That's a very strong signal," said Flaxman. "Thank you, Theodora."

Doug Sain, one of Flaxman's team members, said later he was surprised by the display of light.

"That was a rare occurrence," he said. "Lighting up happens, but to get it to go from the left to the right on request, that doesn't happen."

The group then moved to the basement of the hotel and into a small room that had served as a morgue for the hospital.

About 25 people squeezed into the room. Flaxman placed three detection devices on the floor, including an Ovilus, which is used for electronic speech synthesis. Flaxman tried to coax the late Dr. Norman Baker, who ran the cancer hospital, into a conversation.

A few words came from the Ovilus, but it wasn't clear whether they had any meaning or were from random electromagnetic signals. With long pauses between each word, and more coaxing from Flaxman, the device seemed to say "Howard," "psycho," "ha ha," "unable," "hallway," "haunting" and "sorry." Some people in the crowd thought the device said "screw you" instead of "sorry."

Flaxman then took the group to another part of the morgue, where he used a Flir thermal camera to show a heat reflection on the front of a metal cabinet. Flaxman said explorers from the Ghost Hunters television show on the Syfy cable channel thought they found a ghost in the cabinet a few years ago, but they had really detected a heat reflection of one of the explorers.

Afterward, Flaxman said he wasn't expecting a lot during the tests.

"There are just so many people here," he said. "The average events we do hardly get anything at all."

But that doesn't mean there's no paranormal activity in the hotel, Flaxman said.

"This morning, the lights in my room kept going on and off," he said. "This place is extremely haunted. Something always happens here."

And the display in Theodora's room was "a complete surprise," he said.

The Crescent's paranormal weekend began Friday and will continue through today.

Hotels are popular destinations for ghost hunters, particularly since Stephen King wrote The Shining, which was published in 1977 and released as a movie in 1980. The novel was set in a haunted hotel in Colorado. Hotel ghost tours now are conducted in several cities around the country.

The Crescent has a website devoted to its ghosts: americasmosthauntedhotel.com.

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