

TV team uses technology to root out spirits at Ashmore Estates

By **NATHANIEL WEST, Staff Writer**

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ASHMORE — There are few occupations in which thunderstorms complete the ideal job site. Tornado chasers and Weather Channel field reporters come to mind.

So do ghost hunters.

And as the cloud-to-cloud lightning transforms the early morning sky over rural Coles County from a bottomless flat black to retina-searing strobes of white, while thunder emanates like bass from some cosmic subwoofer, the paranormal investigators and film crew that have invaded the area's spookiest asylum smile excitedly, savoring the comfort of the familiar.

"We always seem to have" thunderstorms, said Philip Adrian Booth, who, with his twin brother, Christopher Saint Booth, makes documentaries about supposedly haunted places.

An advertisement with a red background. On the right, a man in a dark blue shirt and light-colored pants stands holding a laptop. On the left, white text reads: "Break free from Wi-Fi with Broadband Access from Verizon Wireless and Barbeck Wireless, on America's Most Reliable Wireless Network." The word "Reliable" is in a larger, bold font.

**Break free from Wi-Fi
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"It's a rockin' place to shoot a film."

In fact, the only member of this ensemble not thrilled with the inclement weather is their soft-spoken gadget guy, a retired electrical engineer who scurries to put plastic tarps over cables leading to homemade high-

powered lasers as rain begins to leak through the crumbling plaster on the ceiling.

It's July 3 — barely — at Ashmore Estates east of Charleston, and the production crew from California-based Spooked Television Releasing has just wrapped up shooting of promotional footage for the Sci Fi Channel documentary, "Children of the Grave II." Set for release next year, the film follows "Rock-n-roll Ghost Hunter" Keith Age and his fellow sleuths as they probe eerie confines like old boarding houses and deserted schools.

They're at Ashmore Estates for an overnight shoot because of the one-time mental institution's reputation for paranormal activity. Reportedly built near the site of a fatal schoolhouse fire, Ashmore Estates is now a tourist destination — especially in the fall, when owners Scott and Tanya Kelley and about 65 actors stage their annual "haunted house."

But it's also a draw for people looking for real ghosts — people like Juli Velazquez, president of the Illinois Chapter of the International Society of Paranormal Investigators. Based out of Chicago, she has already convened half-a-dozen classes at Ashmore Estates since the beginning of this year.

Of the six locales she visits, Velazquez said Ashmore Estates "is probably my favorite because of all the (paranormal) activity."

On this night, she is part of Age's roster of ghost hunters.

President of the Louisville (Ky.) Ghost Hunters Society and host of "Children of the Grave II," Age said Ashmore Estates "is pretty interesting. We've had a few things happen."

The production crew also enlisted the help of Rick Hays, who claims abilities as a psychic medium. "When I walked in I felt that this is my last home," he said after arriving at Ashmore Estates. "The words 'last home' — this was a home for many ... this was their last place before they moved on to a different place of their lives."

According to Ashmore Estate's Web site, more than 100 people died at the mansion when it served as the Coles County Poor Farm during the first half of the 20th century.

Rounding out the team's key players is Bill Chapel, owner of the small company Digital Dowsing in Loveland, Colo. Now semi-retired, the former electrical engineer devotes much of his time to building equipment specifically designed for measuring and recording the paranormal.

On this hunt, Chapel has brought along several lasers that he's arranged in a "convergence" pattern to detect entities in the upstairs hallway of Ashmore Estates. The green laser's beam, in fact, emits at such a low frequency that prolonged exposure holds the potential for tissue damage, Chapel cautions.

"We're trying to set up a grid so if something walks through it, you will be able to determine its shape (or) its shadow," he said.

He also fabricated several devices that react to anomalies in the environment's electromagnetic field. This equipment is connected to a computerized 2,000-word dictionary, and generates two-word responses to questions. If these answers are "contextual" — if they make sense under the circumstances — then the ghost hunters are led to believe that something other than their presence is affecting the EM field.

For example, Philip Booth said he asked the device a question and it replied, "Lady burn," which he interpreted as a reference to the schoolhouse fire fatality that supposedly occurred near the location of Ashmore Estates in the late 19th century.

Surprisingly, Chapel appears to be the most skeptical member of this ghost-chasing cadre. "I don't make a lot of claims about these devices," he said. "I think people jump to conclusions too quickly."

But this doesn't mean he is close-minded on the subject of the supernatural. An avid poker player, he said the contextual responses to his EM tools alone defy the odds.

"I've seen enough to realize something really is going on but I'm not quick to jump out and say it's a departed spirit," Chapel said.

He also acknowledges that many of the two-word replies are nonsensical. For example, when asked, "Are you here?" the machine answers, "Slowly frigid." "Descend Betty" is the response to "Is this real?"

"It would be a hard stretch to make that (contextual), but you will get people here who will do whatever it takes in their head to make it contextually correct," Chapel said.

After setting up their equipment on the night of July 2, the crew records promotional and dramatic reenactment footage: Think fog machines, flashlights and spooky music.

Then they make their way upstairs to the laser grid, where they let the video cameras roll freely. And something happens, they say, although they're not sure what. The Booth brothers and Age will evaluate the video and the data collected by Chapel later.

Age is also armed with a thermal camera, and he and Kelley venture into one of the more notorious rooms of Ashmore Estates. Kelley reports seeing shapes that resemble human heads and torsos — which show up on the thermal imager as colder, darker blues than the cold, dark blue of the room's wall — appearing, moving around and then dissipating.

However, Kelley said the ghost hunters are holding off on certifying Ashmore Estates as truly haunted. "I can appreciate that," he said.

The first "Children of the Grave" documentary still airs occasionally on the Sci Fi Channel, said Philip Booth. The sequel is slated to run sometime in the summer of 2009.

In addition to Ashmore Estates, "Children of the Grave II" also looks at "Death Alley" in Chicago, where in 1903 more than 600 people, including at least 200 children, perished after the famed Iroquois Theatre caught fire.

"We won't come unless it's got some serious credibility," said Christopher Booth.

Kelley said the Spooked Television crew is the 15th investigative team to tackle Ashmore Estates during his 2 ½ years as co-owner. "Every group that has been here has said this place is active, definitely," he said.

For more information, visit www.spookedtv.com or www.ashmoreestates.net.

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