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## The science of ghost hunting

By **JOE LAMB**

LOG CABIN STAFF WRITER

When things go bump in the night, it's a bit like the old tree falling in the forest analogy if nobody's there to record it somehow, it might as well not have happened.

Often dismissed as pseudoscience or outright lunacy paranormal investigation flies under the radar of mainstream science, but the Arkansas Paranormal and Anomalous Studies Team (ARPAST) hopes to change this by using solid science to confirm and record ethereal phenomenon.

I went with ARPAST to an investigation in Mayflower on Friday (the 13th) at the home of Rick and Theresa Brown. Having never experienced anything more paranormal than my amazing disappearing car keys, I didn't know what to expect when I met up with the team at a Mayflower restaurant.

Tiffany Pressler, vice-president of ARPAST, said the team's objective is to find a specific set of environmental conditions under which the unexplainable is possible.

"It's basic physics," she explained while more than a dozen ARPAST team members finished their pizza and sandwiches behind her. As she delved deeper into the subject, "basic physics" turned out to include quantum mechanics and string theory and the air got pretty thin for a country boy like me I'll have to take her word for it then.

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Both Pressler and ARPAST president Larry Flaxman seem well-versed in physics and science, with a strong respect for the scientific method. Flaxman said a difference in methodology caused ARPAST to split from the Central Arkansas Society for Paranormal Research.

"We hope to pursue a more scientific method," he said.

Laying it all on the line, Flaxman said most paranormal investigation teams, including all as-seen-on-TV outfits, deal in sensationalist nonsense with little basis in science or the scientific method.

He holds a special distaste for spirit orbs the points of light that show up in photographs or float through video clips that seem to be the mainstay of many a TV ghost hunter show are nothing more otherworldly than illuminated bits of dust. Photographs and video aren't evidence either, he continued. These days, anybody can do anything to a photograph or video inside a computer, he said.

Flaxman claimed the team's staunch refusal to accept all but indisputable scientific findings as evidence leaves ARPAST, which has been an independent nonprofit organization since February, with no true peers in the field of paranormal research.

Although they don't call it "evidence," Flaxman and Pressler do claim to have seen some odd things. It's their personal encounters with things they can't explain that have sparked an interest in the paranormal and keep them looking for more evidence.

Pressler's fascination with the unknown began when she was a teenager camping out with some friends, she said. Pressler said she and the others looked across a field saw a figure walking back and forth in front of a tree line. Assuming it was a friend's brother, the girls yelled catcalls and playful insults.

"It just kept walking back and forth and ignored us and we didn't really pay much attention to it," she said.



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"But after a while when I looked back, this person was walking back and forth about 40 feet up in the air."

The girls ran inside, terrified, but Pressler went back out the next day and found 19th-century gravestones buried in dense vegetation near where they had seen the apparition.

Flaxman said he's never seen a ghost, but he once saw a man choke during a CASPR seance. After the man stopped choking, he said, finger-shaped marks could be seen on his neck. Also, he said he's seen scratches form out of nowhere on the bodies of researchers.

Most of the team's volunteer researchers have similar stories, but when it comes to absolute and irrefutable proof, Flaxman says it just doesn't exist. He's seen spooky stuff, but nothing that's led him, as a scientist, to believe in ghosts. But he does, of course, accept the possibility. In fact, the possibility intrigues him so much he invests much of his spare time into the field of paranormal research, and has bought more than \$100,000 worth of scientific instruments.

Arriving at the residence, the team was greeted warmly by the Browns and their teenage daughter. Theresa said odd things seem to follow her, and she's had encounters with the unexplained for years at the couple's home in Mayflower and elsewhere. At her current home, she said, a bathroom trash can "vanished" for several days. She looked all over the house, she said, but couldn't find it. One day, it was back where it had always been.

She's also felt someone sitting on her bed in the middle of the night, she said, though she could see no one in the room.

Flaxman gathered the team in the home's kitchen and went over the ground rules. I later learned one of these rules is a no-tolerance alcohol and drug policy while on an investigation. It's the kind of thing that seemed funny until Flaxman explained that an alarming number of other paranormal investigation teams treat an investigation more like a ghost-themed social gathering than a field laboratory.

Flaxman and Pressler divided the team into three groups, and Flaxman unpacked the team's equipment, paid for at his expense.

His equipment includes ultrasonic microphones, several devices to measure temperature, barometric pressure, humidity and wind speed; Geiger counters, night-vision monoculars and cameras, electromagnetic field detectors and a forward-looking infra-red camera which "sees" differences in temperature (and I can't help but refer to throughout the investigation as "predator vision," referring to the film starring, in no particular order, the current Governor of California, a space monster with dreadlocks, and the former Governor of Minnesota).

Sometimes, Flaxman admits, he goes a bit too far with his equipment. When the team investigated the Pea Ridge battlefield (the first group to get governmental authority to do so, he claimed) he said he had trouble pointing to faraway areas of interest with a garden-variety laser pointer. The solution, he reasoned, was a bigger laser.

To the amazement of the team, Flaxman produced a light saber-sized device and switched it on, producing a bright green pencil-sized beam of light almost too bright to look at. The only problem, he explained, is that if you point the laser at something for too long, you'll burn a hole in it retinas definitely included.

I suppose however professional a group is, you have to factor in a few minutes of gadget play time with such fascinating equipment being passed around (lighting a cigarette with a laser has been crossed off my to-do list), but after a minute or two of fun, it was time to get to work.

In a bigger setting with fewer people the team would set up sensitive microphones in the hopes of recording unexplainable noises or voices, but with more than a dozen people in a small home, there's no way to prove that a ghostly whisper isn't really coming from researchers in the next room. This left the team to monitor the dozen or so other environmental factors.

Over the course of the night, the team didn't record any unusual activity. Though some members reported out-of-place smells and Flaxman said he thought he felt something brush across his face, the initial investigation turned up no hard evidence.

"The personal experiences that several of us experienced are exactly that, and certainly not scientifically acceptable or forensically sound," he said Monday.

The team will review the data gathered over the next couple weeks though, he said, before ruling anything out.

"We're not really looking to prove or disprove the existence of spirits at all," Pressler said as the team was packing up early Saturday morning. "We're looking at what environmental variables need to exist for paranormal phenomena to occur. ... When a paranormal event occurs, it's a natural event, but mainstream science analyzed it enough."

Intriguingly, Pressler said one of the team's ultimate goals once they determine these variables is to re-create the conditions, and therefore possibly repeat the phenomena.

"One of the principles of science is repeatability," she said.

So, no ghosts caught in Mayflower this time, but ARPAST has a busy schedule for the rest of the year. The lack of evidence aside, impossible things have a way of seeming more possible when the lights are out, and if something really does go bump some night, it'll be people like ARPAST with the best shot at figuring out what it is.

(Staff writer Joe Lamb can be reached by e-mail at joe.lamb@thecabin.net or by phone at 505-1238. Send us your news at [www.thecabin.net/submit](http://www.thecabin.net/submit))

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