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Ghost tales: Bringing mysterious places to light

By Karen Johnson
Times Southeast Bureau

Twilight approaches as Regan Vacknitz walks toward the century-old house, her excitement palpable.

"It's ideal night for an investigation," she says.

On an evening when most people would rather be snuggled up at home, members of Auburn Paranormal Activities Research Team are doing what they love most: searching for ghosts.

Area groups that specialize in "paranormal investigations," or ghost hunting, say the Kent-Auburn valley is particularly ripe for ghostly activity. Some say the water beneath the valley floor draws spirits. Others say new buildings and housing developments encourage activity.

Like police scoping a crime scene, the group searches for clues and evidence that might prove paranormal activity exists. Recent excursions have included the Meeker Mansion in Puyallup, the Neely Mansion in Auburn and a slew of cemeteries and private homes.

Although the team has researched haunted locations throughout Southeast King County, Vacknitz said they have yet to find solid proof of ghosts

Tonight, group members are combing through Kent's historic Bereiter House, a city-owned museum originally built as the home for a local lumber tycoon.

Norm Turner, president of the Kent Historical Society, which oversees the museum, says rumors of strange things happening at the house are nothing new.

Museum volunteers have long reported feelings of unease when working alone at night. One claimed that a display of children's dolls was mysteriously rearranged when the museum was closed overnight.



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Paranormal investigators Julie DeStefano, left, of Spanaway, Stephen Johnston of Kent, and Regan Vacknitz of Auburn prepare to begin a ghost hunt at the Bereiter House, home of the Kent Historical Museum. The Auburn Paranormal Activities Research Team was called in by the Kent Historical Society to investigate after some unexplained phenomena occurred at the house.



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Investigator Stephen Johnston sets up a video camera on the third floor of the Bereiter House. After setting up the camera, the team left the room for about an hour but kept the video recording to see if they could pick up any activity.

Others have complained of strange voices and footsteps.

"I don't know about ghosts, but I feel there must be spirits here," Turner says.

Inside the Bereiter House, Vacknitz joins team members armed with the usual gadgets: cameras, audio recorders and a device to measure electrical currents to record unusual activity.

On its last visit, the group recorded a man's voice inside the empty attic of the house. A historical-society board member said he had heard the voice before.

Inside the house, the team investigates a steep set of steps on which visitors and volunteers often trip. Some volunteers and visitors say have felt the sensation of being pushed down the stairwell, which is lined with hand-drawn portraits and faces of former owners, a museum volunteer says.

The group has a slim chance of figuring out whether the home is haunted, team members say, because there is little science behind their craft.

But Vacknitz, who lives in Auburn and grew up in Kent, says the thrill of maybe someday finding something concrete keeps her returning to the area's supposed haunts.

"I grew up here," she said. "I've just always been drawn to these places."

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A group from the Auburn Paranormal Activities Research Team gathers on the first floor of the Bereiter House after combing the home with an electromagnetic field detector, cameras and audio equipment in search of a possible ghost.



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An electromagnetic field detector is one of many tools used by the Auburn Paranormal Activities Research Team.

Types of haunts

Ghost hunters classify spirits into three types:

Residual: Recurring event that happens at the same time, on the same day, repeatedly. In these cases there is no sign of the ability to communicate or function.

Intelligent or active: Random occurrence in which a person can

actually tell there is something/someone there with the ability to communicate, move things and act lifelike.

Anniversary: Event that has characteristics of residual and intelligent haunts. They occur on a specific date and can communicate. These cases are left often documented because they occur infrequently.

Source: Stephanie Davisson, vice president of Advanced Ghost Hunters of Seattle-Tacoma

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