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Old Pen a real spook house

BOISE -- Considering the grim stuff that went on there for decades, spirits must stand elbow to elbow at the Old Pen. The Travel Channel's show "Ghost Adventurers" let the world in on Boise's spooky wonders when its team came to town last year to film an episode at the Old Pen.

The prison, a satisfyingly sinister hulk of sandstone and chilly, graffiti-covered cell blocks at the far end of Warm Springs Avenue still makes the top of Marie Cuff's list of haunted places that deserve more investigating.

That's saying a lot, since, as director of the local office of the International Paranormal Reporting Group, Cuff can rattle off the names of America's haunted sites like she's reciting the alphabet. She and her team of investigators, armed with cameras, energy sensing devices and digital recorders, have documented the Old Pen before. Cuff had a memorable brush with some kind of presence in a cell -- a ticklish stroke through her hair as she leaned in to read a smudge of graffiti on a wall.

The words, "Ooh, pretty," popped into her head as she felt the touch -- perhaps one channeled from a beauty-starved spirit doing hard time?

Team member Caleb Johnson admits that paranormal investigation often consists of "sitting and listening in the dark, hearing nothing and seeing nothing." Fellow investigators Shane Anderson and Kelly Winn said that their ghost-detecting equipment helps their clients locate more out-of-whack electrical wiring than spirits. The team, which does not charge for its services, is booked months in advance.

They're their own harshest jury when it comes to hauntings, real or imagined, they said. Sometimes Hollywood gets in the way of serious study. Cuff and her team said that TV programs on ghostly topics can make the paranormal easier for people to talk about -- but they also can play up the drama.

The scenery-chewing ghost hunters on the Travel Channel ran through the Boise Foothills, apparently terrorized by snakes, then spent the night on Death Row, hollering out for Raymond Snowden, the last man hanged at the Old Pen in 1957.

Oddly enough, Cuff said, she and the team have never picked up any trace of spirit energies in the "death house" or in the "drop room" below, where Snowden dangled. Still, team members agree the Old Pen has lots more information to offer. For example, paranormal investigators have never studied the old hospital ward, where Harry Orchard -- who confessed to assassinating Gov. Frank Steunenberg in 1905 -- died, along with victims of the 1918 Spanish Flu and many others.

Between 1870, when the Old Pen opened as a territorial prison, and 1973, when it closed, the place housed more than 13,000 inmates. "That's 13,000 stories," said Amber Beierle, interpretive specialist at the site.

Amid the countless tales, 10 executions and documented deaths -- a man "shived" on the basketball court in the 1950s; a prisoner, Gee Gin, who cut his own throat not once, but twice, before dying in the late 1800s. Who knows what ghosts still walk the grounds?