



Colin Demarest

Rick Mickle and Rick Callahan, two self-proclaimed ghost hunters, explore Ventfort Hall during David Raby's paranormal investigation. Both men had their own gear.

Paranormal enthusiasts spend night ghost hunting at Ventfort Hall

By Colin Demarest

LENOX — Paranormal investigator David Raby led an investigation at historic Ventfort Hall and found overnight paranormal results that he described as “unprecedented.”

The night began slow. Raby introduced himself and Ventfort Hall's history via PowerPoint.

The first couple of rooms to be investigated were dead — no voice phenomena, no classically creaking floors, no full-body apparitions. A bedroom turned dining room showed very little promise. Those that came for the investigation did not seem pleased.

“We don't have editors. On television, everything is exciting,” Raby said to his investigation group. “Even if it's your interest, it's sometimes like watching paint dry or grass grow.”

But the night soon built momentum.

Sitting in an upstairs nursery with about 10 other paranormal enthusiasts, Raby began getting fluctuating readings off his K2 machine, an investigatory tool that reads changes in the electromagnetic spectrum. According to Raby, spirits and ghosts often times have electro-magnetic signatures in the sense that their presence affects a room's standard.

The K2 reader jumped from green to red tens of times in the 30 minutes Raby and his group spent there. The K2 only spiked red, however, at knee-height, or, as Raby assumed, child-height.

The room was relatively colder, too, a tried and true indicator that something paranormal might be going on.

“Spirits need to source energy from somewhere,” Raby said. “This happens sometimes through the air, by touching other people or by sucking the life out of batteries.”

There was a five-degree difference in room temperature in a spot by the nursery's 1865 crib.

A flashlight on the floor — purposely put there by one of the investigators — suddenly turned on when asked if the spirit in the room was a boy. It turned off when asked if the spirit was a girl. The flashlight turned back on again when Raby asked him — the spirit — to do so. This happened back and forth three times over the course of 15 minutes.

Great Barrington budget, school assessment approved at town meeting

By Colin Demarest

GREAT BARRINGTON — The town's operating budget and the town's total Berkshire Hills Regional School District assessment have been approved, each seeing very little pushback at annual town meeting.

The total fiscal year operating budget for Great Barrington is \$11,112,034. It is an approximate 2 percent increase in comparison to last year — \$216,293 to be exact.

The BHRSD assessment totals \$15,329,397 this fiscal year. Great Barrington's share makes up 72 percent of the district's total budget

A woman in the back of the nursery group then jumped. She calmly — and sternly — asked the woman next to her if she had touched her.

Her neighbor declined, adding that she did, however, feel a “cobweb sensation” across her shoulders. Another woman, standing next to the crib, freaked out when she said she felt cobwebs running across her face. Another woman said someone was tugging on her hair.

Despite the exceptional claims, the investigation eventually moved on — downstairs, more specifically, to both the billiards room and later the dining room.

“I'm impressed,” Raby said, smiling. “The nursery was absolutely bonkers. There are a lot of places to explore.”

Raby, a so-called ghost hunter for 10 years, said he had always had some connection to the paranormal in his formative years.

“Strange things have happened to me growing up,” Raby said.

More specifically, he said, his experiences began at 10 years old. According to him, when an elderly neighbor lost his wife, Raby and his brother volunteered to help the man — bringing in the mail, helping him with chores, that sort of thing. But one day, when bringing in the mail, both Raby and his brother saw doorknobs unexplainably turning and, eventually, a ghost.

“I was screaming frozen solid,” Raby said of the experience.

But Raby is also a self-described “open skeptic.” He said he would rather explain away the rumors of haunting — drafty windows slamming doors, dust being to blame for floating orbs in photographs — than to accept the claim and sensationalize it.

“A lot of this stuff that can happen, you can explain,” Raby said before he began his investigation. “You have to look for a logical explanation first. Not every sound is a ghost.”

Something unexplainable did happen in the dining room that night, however.

Sitting in the dining room, calling out to the former owners and visitors of Ventfort Hall, Raby was keen on enticing something — or someone — into interaction.

Suddenly, the K2 spiked to red, quickly going back to green. But then there was a bright flash of light from un-

derneath a door. Raby went to check it out: nobody was in the hallway, all the lights were off and no headlights from cars could sneak into the space he was currently examining. Then the bathroom door creaked open. No one was inside.

Ventfort Hall is, anecdotally, known for its hauntings. Paranormal claims include doors shutting on their own, women whispering, the smell of lavender perfume — the kind women of the gilded age would wear — and cigars, and the seldom sighting of a woman descending the mansion's stairs.

Of the 40 or so people who attended Raby's investigation, almost all of them were adults. Only one kid, 12-year-old Nicholas Vaber, tagged along.

“I'm not that scared,” he said, explaining that he was at Ventfort Hall as a part of a school report. “I've been here before.”

Travis Dickson, a tall, muscular man, said he was not scared, either. It was his first paranormal investigation.

“I absolutely believe in ghosts,” Dickson said. “Energy has to go somewhere.”

“I don't want anyone to be scared,” Raby later said. “But I can't guarantee what's here, who's here. They have an advantage over us — we can't see them.”

Part of not being scared, Raby said, is treating the spirits with respect, which was actually one rule of a greater set that he explained at the beginning of the night.

“I like to go to places and have people care for the spirits,” Raby said, highlighting the fact that another one of his rules explicitly states that provoking the paranormal can prove hazardous. “I don't like it when they're treated like a carnival.”

As the night wound down, the enthusiasts gathered in the mansion's library — a spot known for its hauntings, as well — to discuss what happened over the course of the five-hour investigation.

Some people said they were unexplainably touched and poked. Others said they had a sense of cobwebs running down their arms. A smaller group said they smelled flowery perfume in the dining room. And though there were skeptics in the group, Raby said people are welcome to believe what they wish.

“You'll find out when you die,” he said, laughing.

— approximately \$26.4 million — and is an increase of 6 percent compared to the 2016-2017 school year.

“Berkshire Hills has had a great year,” BHRSD Superintendent Peter Dillon said May 1 at the annual town meeting. “This is where we land.”

Both budgets received recommendations — despite some back and forth — from the Select Board and Finance Committee in March.

The most expensive items in the town's budget, according to the book handed out at annual town meeting, include the public works department, at \$2.1 million; insurance, at \$1.7 million;

the police department, at \$1.5 million; debt service at \$1.47 million; and retirement, at \$819,000.

In the BHRSD, 30 percent of the total budget will be spent at the high school level. 22 percent is apportioned for the elementary school level. Almost 20 percent of the budget will be spent at the middle school level.

“Most of our money is in the schools,” Dillon said back in March. “And it should be.”

According to Dillon, the increase in cost to Great Barrington stems from changes to two things: population — more easily understood as enrollment — and overall minimum local contribution.

Egremont, Sheffield split on budget

Continued from A1

Committee.

“The taxpayers will pay for this lawsuit,” Hawver told residents. “They are committing your tax dollars without your say.”

The proposed SBRSD budget strips operational funding from the Egremont school, which currently serves 15 students from kindergarten through first grade.

Egremont's legal complaint against the SBRSD School Committee, filed in Berkshire Superior Court, alleges that the committee breached its legal constitution in acting, without proper procedure, to close the school. The complaint seeks an injunction enjoining the school district from closing or suspending operation of the Egremont School.

“Perhaps if the school committee had sat down with Egremont and had an open discussion...” Hawver suggested to the crowd, “we wouldn't be in this position.”

Sheffield resident Rene Wood pushed back against Hawver's claims that the school district was to blame for Egremont's animosity.

“If Charles Flynn had attended the finance committee meetings, this wouldn't have been a surprise to him,” Wood said, referencing the former school committee member and current Egremont Select Board chairman.

At the Egremont annual

town meeting, the Select Board made it clear that it had no plans to endorse the school committee's proposed budget.

“If the school committee wants to close our building, they have to follow the agreement,” Flynn said to residents. “Voting this budget down will send a message to the school committee that were not in support of their budget.”

Sheffield resident Marcella Bush, a current member of the SBRSD School Committee, criticized Flynn for not keeping apprised of the school committee's discussions on the Egremont School when he sat as a member of the committee.

“You missed school committee meetings and didn't look at the minutes,” Bush said to Flynn, referring to a series of meetings earlier this year that dealt directly with the issue of funding.

Flynn resigned from his position on the school committee last month following the release of the committee's proposed budget for the 2017-2018 school year.

Genis Melendez-Delaney succeeded Flynn in his seat on the school committee.

Melendez-Delaney pleaded with Egremont residents to vote yes on the school budget. She pointed out to residents that the SBRSD is faced with tough financial decisions as student enrollment in the district drops.

“This budget is only going up \$73,000 from last year's

budget,” Melendez-Delaney said to the crowd.

Egremont resident Jared Kelly asked the crowd to vote down the proposed budget.

“This is a critical juncture for the Egremont school,” Kelly said. “The school has been open since 1883, and we are the stewards of that legacy.”

While the town's lawsuit may be one way to keep the school open, Kelly said, “a second way is that we send a message to the school committee by voting down the budget.”

Kelly argued that the continued presence of a school in the Egremont community would reap benefits for residential and commercial development in the area.

If two of the five member towns of the SBRSD decide to vote down the proposed budget, the budget would return to the school committee, which could then choose to either adjust the budget or resubmit it to the towns unchanged.

If four of the five SBRSD member towns choose to endorse the district's budget, Egremont would have no choice but to contribute to the district the amount currently listed in the proposed budget, which, for the 2017-2018 school year, is \$1,559,052.

New Marlborough residents, in their town meeting on May 1, voted to approve the school district's budget. Monterey residents will vote on May 6, and Alford residents will vote on May 9.

State police arrest pipeline protestors

Continued from A1

human barricades across the construction site's two main access roads.

Activists pulled a chain and banner across one access road, while at the other road activists simply linked arms, according to Ferla.

The activists were able to stop construction for four hours, before police took them into custody, Ferla said.

All of the arrested activists have since been released from

jail and have hearing dates in Southern Berkshire District Court later this month.

For the past two years, as part of the federally approved Connecticut Expansion Project, the Tennessee Gas Company has planned to build a 4-mile pipeline extension through the Otis State Forest. However, activists, until now, have been able to stave off construction through court action.

In a statement released Tuesday, state police said that

they “will seek to ensure that the rights of all parties are protected, including the rights of the contractors to complete this legally authorized project, the rights of nearby residents to safety and privacy, and the constitutionally-protected rights of demonstrators to have a safe environment to lawfully assemble, speak and protest.”

Ferla told The Record that Tuesday's arrests would not slow down the momentum of Sugar Shack activists.



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