

in downtown Cornwall, 8:30 p.m., late May. Built in 1833, decommissioned in 2002, and now a tourist attraction, the Historic Cornwall Jail is believed by some people to be haunted. Calvano is one of those people.

He hunts ghosts with the Ottawa Haunting and Paranormal Group (OHPG), an investigation club that, at the moment, is divided into three teams. Team Green, led by group president Roger Miller, is in the courtroom upstairs. Team Blue just began a shift outside the women's cellblock. Calvano is leading Team Red. In total, 12 paranormal investigators are in the building — six full-fledged OHPG members and six trainees.

Two of the rookies are with Calvano and me in this windowless cell. They sit across from us, quiet but alert, as Calvano makes another attempt to provoke a supposedly badass ghost. "You must have been a real pushover," Calvano says, louder now. "You must have been the jailhouse bitch." Still no tapping sound; still no door movement; still no anything. If there is a ghost in here, he isn't easily offended. Or perhaps, Calvano speculates, the spirit has something to hide — a secret from his prison days that shames him even in the afterlife.

"Were you a stool pigeon?" asks Calvano.

"A snitch?" says one of the trainees.

During previous investigations at the jail, OHPG members captured audio that they say contains unidentifiable voices. Paranormal investigators call such recordings EVPs, short for electronic voice phenomena. Calvano says he once heard the voice of a child saying, "I'm scared," in this very room. And though a Level-1 EVP ("Voice is clearly audible and what was said can clearly be heard and/or understood" — OHPG Investigation Procedures Manual) is nothing to snicker at, Calvano wants more.

More than a ghostly murmur on an audio recorder. More than an unusually low reading on a thermometer (theory: ghosts steal heat from the air for energy). More than an uncommonly high reading on an electromagnetic field (EMF) detector (theory: ghosts emit electromagnetic fields). What he wants is to see a full-blown, hair-whitening, soiled-underpants-causing apparition — a no-doubt-about-it ghost, live and in



# Ghost Town

The city's paranormal community is surprisingly large — and surprisingly diverse. On the quest for otherworldly beings with a group of gadget-laden investigators from the Ottawa Haunting and Paranormal Group **By Roger Collier**

**THE LARGE MAN SITTING BESIDE ME** in solitary confinement is trying to piss off a ghost. And not just any ghost. He's badgering the spirit of a dead inmate whose violent tendencies often landed him in this concrete closet.

"You were supposed to be a real badass," Anthony Calvano says into the dark. "Come on, give me a sign. Make a tapping sound. The door is partially open. Come on, close it all the way. Show us how tough you are."

I look at the door; it doesn't budge. We wait in silence for a while, but nothing happens. I glance at Calvano, his face blue in the glow of his LED headlamp, and can see that he's frustrated. We are in the belly of a defunct jail

**Jail time:** After taking this portrait of members of the Ottawa Haunting and Paranormal Group at the defunct Cornwall jail, photographer Jonathan Hobin got creative with Photoshop to generate the eerie apparitions. Sitting (left to right): Lucie Ouimet-Wright, Roger Miller, Debra Miller. Standing: Daniel Touchette, Anthony Calvano, Carlo Sangiorgi





**Command central:** Daniel Touchette, founder and director of operations, monitors the investigation from the jail's main hallway

the flesh (so to speak). It would no doubt be scary, Calvano admits, but that's his dream. That's the dream of every paranormal investigator.

It was last month, during a meeting at OHPG headquarters on Lebreton Street South, that Calvano suggested the group compel a ghost to manifest itself by enticing it or by provoking it or even by insulting it. Hence, jailhouse bitch. But would it work? Would aggravating a spirit make it angry enough to slam a door or move a chair or show itself in all its semi-transparent glory? Would tonight be the night Calvano at last gets his ghost?

**I FIRST MET CALVANO**, a good-humoured bear of a man, last October at the OHPG Halloween potluck. Members in attendance talked about upcoming investigations while loading up plastic plates with meatballs, chicken wings, pumpkin pie, chocolate cake, and finger-shaped cookies, complete with fingernails. The buffet table was decorated with plastic tarantulas, jack-o'-lanterns, and zombie dolls that sang "I Got You Babe."

Over the following nine months, I attended several OHPG meetings and investigations and spoke with members of other ghost-hunting clubs. I discovered that the paranormal community in Ottawa is surprisingly large — and surprisingly diverse. Some ghost hunters are thrill-seekers, some are history buffs, some are "sensitive" to spirits, some are hard-core data collectors, some are



**Night watch:** OHPG president Roger Miller and his team conduct a shift in the general-population cell-block. Miller, a diligent researcher, is always seeking new investigation sites and learning more about old ones. On this investigation, teams were also set up in the solitary-confinement cell and the courtroom

blue collar (plumbers, contractors, house cleaners), some are white collar (civil servants, college professors, business owners), some break into abandoned buildings and hold seances, some run public investigations to raise money for charity, some have a nearly Vulcan-like respect for logic, some are croissant-grade flakes, some join groups for friendship, some join groups because they are truly obsessed with the paranormal — and few are more obsessed than a moustachioed, pot-bellied school-bus driver by the name of Roger Miller.

At 9:30 p.m., I leave Calvano and his crew still downstairs in solitary confinement and meet up with Miller and the rest of Team Green in the jail's courtroom. The courtroom's small windows allow in just enough light from the street lamps to illuminate the chandeliers, which look like giant spiders descending from the ceiling. At the long wooden table below the chandeliers, Miller reads aloud from a list of 93 questions.

"Henry Seguin, you were sentenced to hang on January 19, 1954, for the murders you committed on August 16, 1952. But in the jail, you committed suicide on January 18, 1954, the day before your hanging. Why did you commit suicide?" Miller is OHPG's most diligent researcher. He's on the Internet every night, looking for new investigation sites, learning more about old ones. If he can't find what he's looking for online, he looks for it at Library and

Archives Canada on Wellington Street. "Henry Seguin, you were found guilty of shooting a Maxville garage owner," says Miller, moving on. "Is that true? Please show us a sign. If there are any other spirits present with us, please show us a sign. You can come and touch somebody, come and sit beside somebody. Make a noise. We have a few things that use batteries — use our battery power to get energy. Just show us a sign. I know we are trying to provoke you a little bit, but we don't mean any disrespect. So we ask you, please, show us a sign."

Miller pauses. Silence. No sign.

This is the extent of the action at an OHPG investigation. Group members sit in a building in the dark and ask questions to people who died there. If a question is followed by an "event" (a motion detector goes off, someone hears a noise, the EMF reader beeps), an investigator records the location, time, event, EMF reading, and temperature in a logbook. Audio and video captured during the event are later examined for signs of paranormal activity. After all data has been cross-referenced and reviewed, a designated member writes a detailed report to be uploaded to the OHPG website.

This might seem like a humdrum way to spend a Saturday evening, but ghost hunting is becoming an increasingly popular hobby all over the world. Many paranormal groups have doubled or tripled in size over the past few years. Some people claim that popular reality

## Society

television shows such as *Ghost Hunters* and *Paranormal State* are responsible for the surge. But whenever I asked Ottawa paranormal investigators what sparked their interest in ghosts, they invariably gave me one of two responses, neither related to television. Some said they were born into it: their parents were psychics or mediums or otherwise involved in communicating with the dead. Others said they had experienced something spooky and seemingly inexplicable, often during childhood, and had been curious about the paranormal ever since. Calvano, for instance, recalls seeing a dark, wraith-like figure at his aunt's house as a child. The most vivid accounts of frightening experiences I heard, though, were told by one of Calvano's trainees, Luc Ouellette, a former RCMP officer.

The first incident happened when Ouellette was 10. He was playing with his 16-year-old brother one Saturday morning when he noticed a young girl approaching from some nearby trees. She appeared to be floating. Ouellette

**Some of the group said they were born into it: their parents were psychics or mediums or otherwise involved in communicating with the dead**

asked his brother if he saw the girl too. "Yeah, I think it's a ghost," he recalls his brother responding.

His second encounter with something otherworldly occurred during his RCMP career. Responding to a 4 a.m. domestic-disturbance call, he arrived at a house to find a naked woman, her face covered with blood. She was screaming and growling and speaking in strange voices. And she was strong: it took six people to restrain her. "It was the scariest thing I've ever seen," Ouellette said at his membership interview in April.

Curiosity bred of isolated incidents is rarely enough, however, to sustain long-term interest in spirit stalking — if the high turnover rates in paranormal groups are any indication. Most nov-



**Sound advice:** Anthony Calvano listens to audio captured on a digital recorder after he asked about a person rumoured to have died in the jail

ices are eager at first, but their initial enthusiasm usually fades in short order. They don't realize how much research is required before an investigation, how much patience is required during one, and how much data there is to wade through after.

At 10 p.m., I visit OHPG director of operations Daniel Touchette in the main hallway, the only part of the jail that's lit. He is sitting at the "command centre," where he watches each team on a monitor connected to several digital video recorders. Occasionally he offers an instruction to a team leader via two-way radio.

Touchette founded OHPG in 2003. The best evidence he has ever collected, he says, is a photograph he took at Watson's Mill, an industrial heritage site in Manotick. He believes the ghost of an Aboriginal woman can be seen in the image, standing at the bottom of a staircase with a baby in her arms. At a meeting in April, he showed the photo to Ouellette, who said, "I can see a face." Then Ouellette handed the photo to me. Though I did see a cloudy discoloration, I couldn't make out a face or the figure of a woman.

A little after 10:30 p.m. — ahead of schedule — Calvano and his team emerge from the dark and into the fluorescent light of the hallway. They walk quickly to the command centre, their excitement evident. They have something. Calvano says he captured an EVP

after asking a question about a person rumoured to have died in the jail.

"Someone said, 'Who's that?' And it wasn't one of us!" blurts one of the rookies.

Touchette puts on his glasses, plugs his headphones into Calvano's audio recorder, and fiddles with the controls. He raises a hand to quiet everyone. A few seconds later his face breaks into a smile. "I hear it," he says. "It sounds like 'Matthew? Who's that?'"

Ever the evangelist, Touchette turns to David Kawai, one of two photographers taking pictures for this article, and passes him the recorder. "I'm going to make a believer out of you," he says. The photographer accepts the device, listens to the clip, and says, sheepishly, that he hears "something." I listen to it next and also hear "something" — a low hiss. It might even sound like "Who's that?" But having been told several times what two words to listen for, I'm not surprised I sort of hear them. I'm not immune to the power of suggestion.

**I WAS A SKEPTIC WHEN I BEGAN** hanging out with OHPG, and the evidence I've seen and heard since has been underwhelming. (Of course, my concept of evidence — as an electrical engineer who writes primarily about science and medicine — probably differs from that of a paranormal investigator.) So I am still a skeptic, though I do not dismiss out of hand the idea that there are spirits among us. Like millions of other people, I believe in God, and there is no scientific evidence that He exists either.

Though my experiences with the paranormal investigators of OHPG didn't convince me that ghosts like to commune with gadget-laden hobbyists, I did come to admire how dedicated they are to their nocturnal hobby. Getting that two-second snippet of audio tonight, Touchette tells me, has made the entire investigation worthwhile. Few people would be willing to sit in the dark for six hours for such a meagre reward.

After listening to the audio clip, I pass on the recorder, and it eventually makes its way back to Calvano. He pockets it and rises from his chair. Midnight comes in an hour and, with it, the end of tonight's investigation; there is little time to waste. He gathers his team and they head back into the dark. **END**