

So, What's in Your Ghost Hunter's Tool Kit

by Rick Moran

It was recently reported that there are more than a thousand groups who claim to be researching things that go bump in the night just in the United States, with an average membership of at least five active field investigators each. That is a lot of people. But do they all do the same job, the same way? Probably not, some are very well organized non-profit corporations with strict by-laws; require training for their members and stick to a pre-acknowledged plan of action, while others are purely freelance, without ties to other groups or written standards. Regardless of which kind of group you might be affiliated with, your investigator's tool kit should have at least some of the following gear.

To begin, the most important piece of equipment any field investigator must have is a notebook! After it is all said and done, if you didn't write it down, it didn't happen. Even if you carry a recorder with you when you work, your notes are the most important part of your investigation. The second most important piece of gear is a first aid kit and a cell phone. That's because safety, your own and your team members is critical. If you don't have one, get one. Take a first aid course and a CPR class and know how to contact the nearest EMS provider. It is your life, so protect it, or we will be studying you down the line.

The list of tools in our field is obviously growing, with no real weight given to any one item over another, I offer this list randomly.

Digital readout thermometer – I carry the pistol grip type, some of these have infrared laser pointers to tell you precisely what you are reading the temperature from, but any good investigator will probably tell you to turn off that feature, so why pay the extra money. A good thermometer can cost from \$35 to \$70. Depending on what you want it to do. This is a great item, if you use it. Cold spots are seen as a sign that something is trying to manifest itself, thus drawing the warm air in and expelling frigid cold air in return, but there's nothing worse than

watching a trained investigator groping at thin air to “feel” a cold spot, with a non-contact thermometer on his belt.

An EMF meter (Electro-Magnetic Field) meter is a great tool, both to locate activity and ruling out natural causes. The standard of the industry is the Sperry, which sells for about \$80 and will give you a continuous digital reading. The top of the line EMF meter is the Tri-field meter that can monitor electrical fields, geo-magnetic and radio waves for about \$200 but there is also a handy little gadget called the K-2 meter, which is basically a simple EMF meter, using a series of LED lights to show relative strength of a field. This particular device costs about \$45 but doubles for the ghost hunter who wants to ask his target questions.

The K-2 can be placed in the hands of an operator, while a second person asks a series of yes or no questions of the “spirit” present after explaining that they want the spirit to make the lights all light up once for “no” and two or more times for “yes”. In the hands of a sensitive individual, who is holding the activation button down firmly, this is a fantastic device. But some will question how you would know the answers are true. That’s a whole other topic for another column.

Recording devices are equally important on an investigation, especially if you are interested in collecting EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomenon). We will not waste space here rehashing the history of such communications (see FATE July-August 2008 for that topic). We will also refrain from a lengthy discussion of whether such recordings are real or simply noise being selectively matrixed in our minds into discernable messages. I think the body of evidence would suggest that many EVPs are some sort of spirit communications and have existed since the introduction of the first wire recorders a long time ago.

As an example, sometimes the lack of an EVP is even better than a talkative ghost. For instance in a recent ASUP case the residents of a reportedly haunted apartment mentioned in passing that they had very noisy neighbors who walked around upstairs as if they were all in combat boots. But in prolonged EVP sessions, those foot stomping folks who supposedly lived upstairs were never recorded, even in cases where there was a host of paranormal investigators sitting in the living room below who hear them. That is called a reverse EVP, the noise is audible to people but not to the recording devices in the same room.

Of course most EVP work involves trying to record disembodied spirits and many times the recording devices do record voices and messages that are not being heard by the

investigators. To do that, you can use virtually any recorder, but as with everything else, the higher priced gear often will outperform the inexpensive.

First, we have to say that any recorder will work; the ASUP was doing field recordings with a Wolensak reel to reel recorder decades ago and with relatively good results. The only drawback, besides its size and weight, was the possibility of recording the noise of the device itself, the scraping of tape against the reel and sound of the drives that turn the mechanism, but in their day, they were the best. After that the Radio Shack and Panasonic cassettes came into play, they were relatively light, but shared their noise problems to some degree, including the hiss of the tape passing over the heads.

Then, entered the digital recorders; light weight, relatively inexpensive and sporting long memories. For the past several years the ASUP has encouraged our members to use the Olympus line of recorders, which our own Quartermaster stocks. One might think that this would be the end all of recording devices, but it wasn't. In the last year we have seen another high quality recorder on the market that has become the "must have" item for ghost hunters. The H2 is a music man's dream and perfect for EVP work as well. Housed in a relatively small case are four microphones, true computer technology that can give you surround sound quality onto a tiny memory card and filtering of virtually any condition, or no filtering whatsoever if that is your preference. The unit has LCD readout to tell you what it is doing and even has a digital track display. This little beauty will work well on batteries or AC current and has limitless memory in four hour sequential files. No it isn't cheap; it costs about \$200, but in a world where an ordinary mini-recorder goes for \$80, that isn't all that bad a deal.

So then what do you do with those files? You feed them into your computer. But this could be a problem, some folks just don't have much in the way of disk memory on their machines, so you may want to add an external drive to store all those audio and photo files. This is one where the tools are fairly inexpensive. You can get a 500 GB external drive for about \$95 and a Terrabyte unit for \$180. The good news is that once on the computer, the program used to edit the recordings is a free download. Audacity is a free program and rivals some other software that costs hundreds of dollars, doing a host of editing jobs flawlessly. You can cut portions of your session to be downloaded, clean up a good deal of extraneous noise if necessary and have the computer repeat the sequence that you chose.

One little suggestion, get a good pair of earphones to plug into your computer when reviewing your audio, believe me, it makes a big difference over trying to hear something on external speakers. Another add on to your portable audio recorder is an external microphone, a real necessity if you are moving around a lot during an investigation. A good lapel mic will cut down on recording noise and enhance the quality of your session immensely and will probably cost you \$30. If you work in cold climates, the external mic will save batteries; you can keep your recorder inside your jacket and relatively warm.

Some groups now carry a portable pocket “weather station” on outdoor investigations. Why? Well it is not enough to just get that ghostly image on film or your digital camera or video camera, you have to be ready to defend the conditions under which you took the photos or video. The weather station, firmly attached to a hook on your investigator’s vest, is recording a minute by minute transcript of the temperature, humidity, barometric pressure, wind speed and direction and a host of other atmospheric conditions that can prove you have not just captured fog being carried by the wind. For the hardened pro, this is a must, and costs \$300 for the top of the line model.

While we are talking about electronics, don’t forget your GPS unit that can pinpoint where you are standing from moment to moment and where the nearest 7-11 restroom is hiding, or a GMRS radio to be able to call for help from your partner when you trip and fall into that bear pit over the ridge. Of course you are always working with the buddy system, but even then you might lose sight of him or you both may want to tell your group leader that you just found Bigfoot’s lair. The GPS will cost you about \$100+, the radio about \$35, but be sure it will work with your team’s other radios before you buy.

I have not really gone into cameras and should mention that video equipment is coming down in price and is more and more common in the field. Today you can get a video camera with night vision technology that works with IR lighting and a hard disk drive to store the material on for below \$350. But be sure your camera will work with infrared technology and night vision. In some cases the user may want to use this outdoors, if so, they can now get high energy IR light systems for under \$200 that will illuminate the better part of a darkened football field. These lights emit no visible light, so it is like working in the dark, until you look into your view finder on the camera, then what you see is almost daylight. In addition to this, be sure the video camera you are considering has an external microphone jack.

As for still cameras, get one that will take filters on the lens and that will take time lapse photography. While you can't take real infrared photos with most cameras on the market today, at least not the affordable ones, you will still want a camera that you can add a UV (ultraviolet) filter to, thus removing those pesky orbs that are really only reflected dust for the most part. Also be sure the camera will work with a cable release or electronic shutter release for those long exposure shots.

Of course there are other incidentals that you will want. I don't recommend you go out in the forest without a good flashlight, preferably one with a colored lens to allow for your own night vision. And for those who can't see in the dark at all, there are always night sights and night vision devices, which are really pricy but nice if you can afford them. One item many ghost hunters love is the "headlight" a night light system with straps that lets you wear your flashlight without tying up your hand. They can be had for about \$20.

Some investigators are as much CSI experts as ghost hunters, and you can get a special UV flashlight that will show you where the bodily fluids are hiding for about \$50. For a few bucks more you can get a Luminol chemistry set that will raise any blood trace evidence and of course, you will also need evidence bags when you find that Bigfoot's fecal droppings out there in the woods, but please wear your latex glove before harvesting the evidence.

If that is not enough, try an investigator's vest I keep mentioning, with 23 odd pockets to carry it all for about \$70. The vest is one of those items that was designed by a group, and available through them. If you are interested, you can contact ASUP's Quartermaster through the group website, www.asup-inc.org for more information. For those who still have some big money left in the budget, there is always the Mini-Box version of Frank's box, \$350 to \$600 depending on the version, but for that money you can reportedly talk directly to the departed without searching them out. You can also spend a small fortune at your local camera store on either a digital still or video camera or go all the way and pick up a FLIR camera for a few thousand more.

Other incidentals are tailored for the individual group. ASUP encourages members to become Ham Radio operators, so there is a long list of handi-talkies and portables to be considered. We even go so far as to utilize our own portable repeater system when the need arises, while others trust the cell phone. Less exotic? You can also add to your list of goodies some simple things, for example hair bands to keep your hair out of your camera's field of view

and well as your eyes (this goes for both sexes, by the way) and no one should be going out in the warm weather for a hunt without a full can of OFF! insect repellent. Last but certainly not least, bring along a good supply of extra batteries... ghosts eat batteries and there is nothing worse than having all this great gear and dead batteries to render them useless.

If this list overwhelms you and you are a newbie, don't despair. The older, more well organized groups have a policy of lending equipment to new members for investigations and several have their own Quartermaster to guarantee the best possible prices for members. And of course there is the inevitable hand-me-downs from established members who are trading up to the newest and best equipment who will simply give away their older gear to the new guys or at least sell it to them at bargain prices.

I hope this list helps. Happy ghost hunting!

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Rick Moran has been a long time contributor to FATE magazine, writing the definitive debunking of the Amityville Horror in our pages. He is a retired journalist who has more than 35 years experience in the paranormal field. He is currently the Coordinator for the Association for the Study of Unexplained Phenomenon (ASUP, Inc.) a 501 (c)(3) non-profit research and educational corporation, now based in Texas. Rick welcomes your questions and comments at www.asup-inc.org or on the FATE magazine discussion group site.