

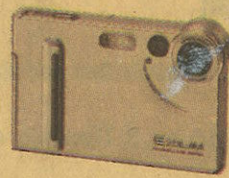
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

# EVERYDAY

GET OUT TONIGHT

"Beauty and the Beast"  
opens at The Fox

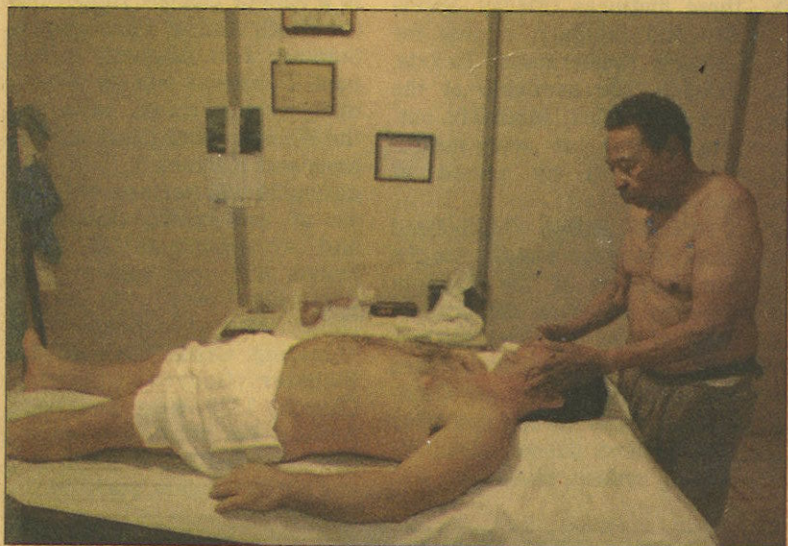
E2



COMING WEDNESDAY

Ideas for Father's Day  
(like this digital camera).

In Everyday



Claude Bell, who doesn't plan to retire, gives a massage to David Straight.

So *that's* who that is | Claude Bell

## The message is massage

Bell, 91, will rub your back — which he started doing in 1938 at The Original Springs Hotel in Okawville — or he will cackle and slap his knee, which he does with regularity as he cracks jokes.

By JOE HOLLEMAN  
Of the Post-Dispatch

**T**o the best of anyone's recollection, Claude Bell has never rubbed anybody the wrong way — personally or professionally.

Bell started giving massages at The Original Springs Hotel in Okawville, Ill., in 1938. At 91, he is still going strong, working full shifts on Wednesdays and weekends.

"I just did 13 massages last Sunday," Bell said in a recent interview, and shrugged off any notion of aging.

"It all depends on how old you feel, and I don't feel that old," he said, then paused for effect. "Except when I realize that all my friends are dead or in nursing homes."

With that punch line, Bell cackles loudly and slaps his knee, two things he does with regularity.

"I'm so old that I worked as the busboy for the Last Supper," he said, with another cackle and knee-slap.

Bell hails from Kosciusko, Miss. The oldest of nine children, he was born March 4, 1912.

In 1938, the recently married Bell real-

ized that, to support a family, he needed a job, and one better than any he could find in small-town Mississippi. With the help of his uncle, George Miller, he landed a job at the Okawville hotel baths.

The hotel's main attraction is the mineral baths, which have been bringing in customers since the 1880s. One of the hotel's founders was C.H. Kelle, a German immigrant who had worked at the famous baths in Baden-Baden.

"Uncle George had come up to St. Louis years before and started doing massages at the hotel. Well, he got the owner, Tom Rogers, to send me a train ticket," Bell said. "I arrived on the Illinois Central on Aug. 8, 1938."

Bell and his wife got a house in St. Louis, and Bell would stay at the hotel for several days at a time, sleeping in a small room right off the bathhouse area.

"I watched my Uncle George give massages. That was my training."

Looking for greener pastures, Bell quit the hotel in 1941 and started giving massages at the Belcher Bath House in downtown St. Louis. Bell said baseball legends Joe Medwick and Leo Durocher were

regulars.

Bell is a serious Cardinals fan and talked of going to games when he was a young man. Now, he listens to the team on the radio.

"I used to sit in the bleachers for 50 cents. I'll be damned if I'll pay 12 bucks for the same seat," he said.

Bell served as an Army medical assistant in World War II. After the war, in the fall of 1945, Rogers called Bell and offered him a job. "And I've been here ever since," Bell said.

Bell spoke kindly of Rogers, his longtime boss, whom he called "a good man." He recalled how Rogers backed him up in the "only ugly incident I can ever remember, the only time anyone called me a nigger."

"I didn't say anything, but someone told Tom," Bell recalled. "(Tom) came up to the massage room and said that if I wanted, he'd give the man his money back and tell him to never come back."

"I told Tom that the man paid for a massage, he gets a massage. Then the next day, the very next day, that man came back in and apologized to me in front of everybody."

See Bell, E6

"So that's who that is" features recognizable St. Louisans — people we often see at their places of business or out on the street — but whom we know little about. Check out today's sketch, as well as upcoming ones in the Everyday section on Tuesdays.

STLtoday.com

See an archive of the  
"So that's who that is"  
series at  
STLtoday.com/  
sketches

### IN HIS OWN WORDS

"I'm so old that I worked as the busboy for the Last Supper."

"It all depends on how old you feel, and I don't feel that old. Except when I realize that all my friends are dead or in nursing homes."

CLAUDE BELL



Before getting a massage, Roger Hund (left) talks with Claude Bell, who started giving massages at The Original Springs Hotel in Okawville in 1938.

PHOTOS BY O'DELL MITCHELL JR. / POST-DISPATCH



# The Okawville Times

Established - 1893

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The Original Springs Hotel. The "Ghost Hunters" television show filmed at the hotel on October 2.

## Hotel To Get TV "Ghost Hunters"

on company in-  
taped at the Ho-  
in June. About  
involved in the  
hotel owner-op-  
negarbe.

Hunters staff  
fternoons and  
0 a.m.

Cast members Grant Wil-  
son, Kristen Luman, and Daryl  
Marston roamed the building,  
taping and narrating.

Footage includes the room  
where owner Schierbaum was  
found dead by suicide. His dog  
sat beside him.

They taped outside another

room where an owner died.

They taped virtually every  
aspect of the Hotel, from the  
guest rooms to the Boiler Room  
dining room/bar, to the bath  
house, pool, and Steampipe bar.

They also did research of  
the Hotel and Okawville, main-  
ly using local author Warren  
Stieg's history series.

A professor from SIUE ana-  
lyzed the mineral content of the  
water.

The Original Springs Hotel  
started in 1868 when mineral  
water with medicinal value was  
discovered on the site. The ex-  
isting building was constructed  
in 1893.

The television crew also  
taped other places of interest in  
Okawville.

Mary Rennegarbe and her  
son, Jeremy, who works at the  
Hotel part-time, and daughter-  
in-law Kendra, the evening  
restaurant manager, were inter-  
viewed.

The production company  
has videos of Don and Mary  
Rennegarbe and their four chil-  
dren and families. Although  
their children have gone on to  
other career interests, they all  
grew up working in the busi-  
ness their parents have owned  
for thirty years.

What will be aired in the  
one-hour show is still a mys-  
tery, even to the Hotel owners.  
"We have not seen it yet," said  
Rennegarbe.

### The "Open" Secret

Mary Rennegarbe was un-  
der orders for secrecy about the  
Ghost Hunters from the time  
she got the first e-mail inquiry  
in February 2019.

The Hotel explained the rea-  
son for its shortened hours dur-  
ing taping in June as "private  
event". The long-term residents  
were moved to another hotel.

But it didn't take long for  
local residents to start specu-

lating, when they saw lots of  
equipment unloaded from large  
vehicles. People holding large  
cameras were seen outside the  
Hotel and around town.

Since the presence of ghosts  
at the Hotel is well known, and  
the business even hosts its own  
ghost hunting events, the unof-  
ficial word on the street was the  
"Ghost Hunters" were in town.

### Optimistic About Impact

Don and Mary Rennegarbe  
are optimistic that the televi-  
sion show with 2.4 million  
viewers will bring in new busi-  
ness.

The exposure will pique in-  
terest for the only remaining  
mineral springs hotel in Illi-  
nois. People who know about  
the Hotel but haven't been  
back in years will see the build-  
ing improvements, said Ren-  
negarbe.

A boost in patrons for the  
Hotel means a boost for other  
local businesses as well, said  
Rennegarbe. "When people  
come here, they also go other  
places in town."

"We hope a new customers  
from the TV show helps keep  
the Hotel and the town alive,"  
said Rennegarbe.

"Don and I may own the Ho-  
tel, but it's a place that belongs  
to the people of Okawville,"  
said Rennegarbe. The history  
of the town and the Hotel are  
interwoven.

## Watch Party . . . . .

**The Original Springs will host a Watch Party on Oc-  
tober 2 on a large TV for the public in the dining room.  
Free popcorn will be served.**

**The event begins at 6:30, when equipment used  
in the paranormal investigations by the Hotel will be  
shown.**

**People will also be invited to tour guest rooms and  
the Bath House.**

**The restaurant and the Steam Pipe will be close at  
7:30 p.m. so that employees may enjoy the Watch Party.  
The bar will remain open during the Watch Party.**

observer might  
ask if there is



# News Around The Cou

April 24, 2019

The Okawville Times



Don and Mary Rennegarbe in front of the The Original Springs Hotel, which they have owned and

## The Original Springs Hotel T Historical Preservation Awar

Okawville's most noted landmark, The Original Springs Hotel, has been renovated from

and events. The Boiler Room also caters food to businesses and for events.

**The Rewards**  
The Rennegarbes consider it a privilege to work in busi-

people can come to slow down and spend time together," Mary said.



### The Rewards

The Rennegarbes consider it a privilege to work in business with such a significant and long history. "I really love this place," said Mary. "We enjoy talking to the guests and developing friendships."

The Hotel is the site of many significant life events. Everything from full-emersion baptisms in the pool to baptismal celebrations, birthday parties, family and class reunions, to retirement parties, bridal and baby showers, bachelorette parties, weddings, and even funeral memorial services are held at the Hotel. Organizations and businesses also host meetings and parties there. "We feel privileged to be part of these events," said Mary.

### Challenges

Repairing, renovating, and planning the next major improvements are a never-ending focus of the The Hotel owners. "We take clues from the building. The building tells us what the next renovation will be," said Mary.

Hiring and retaining staff takes constant effort.

The Rennegarbes are also always looking for ways to market and enhance services to develop more business. Expanding ghost tours and other special events may be planned.

One challenge is to develop new clientele - especially younger people. "This is a place

people can come to slow down and spend time together," Mary said.

Hotel patrons are typically the best ambassadors for getting new customers. "A guest who came for the first time last week said that he loved this place, and put a photo of The Hotel on his facebook page for his 1,500 FB friends to see."

As Don, 61, and Mary, 58, soon begin their fourth decade in business, they hope to bring the building and services to a higher level. They want to ensure continued operations and the legacy of the historical and famed The Original Springs Hotel.

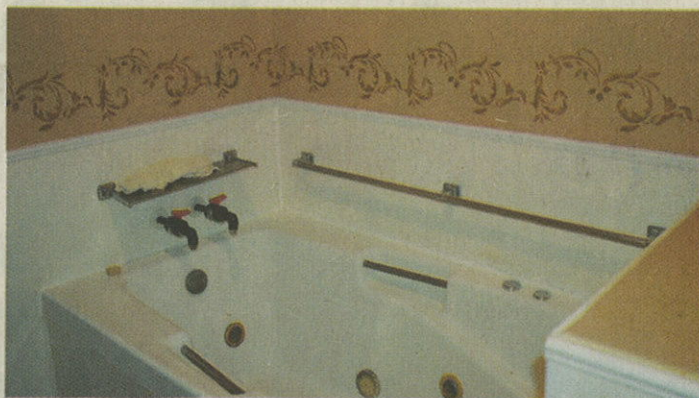
### Business History

The Original Springs Hotel history dates to 1867, when property owner Rudolph Plegge noticed that the water from his well differed from other water. A water analysis later showed it was high in minerals.

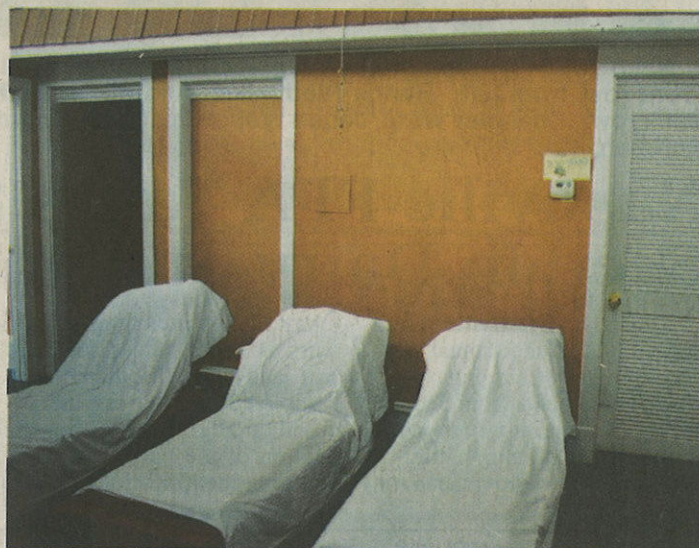
Plegge enlisted C.H. Kelle, who had worked at the famous baths at Baden-Baden, Germany to build a bath house with him. They treated rheumatism and other diseases the way they were treated in Europe.

The modern building erected to replace it burned down in 1892. The building constructed as its replacement is still in use.

In 1979 The Original Mineral Springs Hotel and Bath House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



A whirlpool tub for mineral water baths.



The Bath House.



Original Springs Hotel.



The enclosed swimming pool at the The Original Springs Hotel.



## Hosts in Okawville

s Hotel in Okawville, appears on screen (and reflection in the e hotel last Wednesday.



## No Ghost At The Original Springs Hotel?

mon  
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tecting paranormal activity in the bath house, dining room, and guest room 350. Guests have previously reported feeling ghosts in the room, where a suicide occurred. The investigation was conducted at night with lights off.

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“Ghost Hunters” came to the Hotel at the prompting of Jeremy and Kendra Rennegarbe, the son and daughter-in-law of business owners Don and Mary Rennegarbe. They said that they were concerned for Mary, who they said is “consumed” by the building. Suicide of three previous owners looms large in their mind, they told Ghost Hunters.

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At the conclusion of the show, “Ghost Hunter” hosts recommended to Mary Rennegarbe that she take more time for herself. She agreed to reevaluate her priorities and the time she spends working.

The hosts said that Mary Rennegarbe is different from the previous owners who com-

mitted suicide, because she has family who love her.

Jeremy Rennegarbe literally grew up working in the Hotel. He was five years old when his parents bought it in 1989. He now works at the Hotel part-time, and Kendra works full time.

Other employees interviewed on the television show were Caryssa Kennelly and Amber (Kiser) Benfield.

### Watch Party Held At Hotel

The Hotel hosted a watch party for the general public in the pool area, attended by almost 400, Mary Rennegarbe estimates.

“The dining room was full, the pool area was full, and the Steam Pipe Lounge was full of people,” Rennegarbe said. “It was so great that so many people came out and supported us.”

The Lions Club donated the big screen television that was set up in the pool area, allowing for even more people to watch,

Vice President Mike Pence and Tyler Roesener

## Okawville Grad Gets Selfie With VP Pence

Tyler Roesener, serving in the United States Air Force, recently had the opportunity to take a selfie with Vice President Mike Pence.

Roesener, who is currently stationed at Rammstein Air Force Base in Germany, met Pence during his visit to the base last week.

“I asked if I could take a picture with him, and the Vice President said I never had to ask that,” Roesener said.

Roesener has served in the Air Force for just over 14 months. He has been to Berlin, Greece, Paris and Spain during his service. The 2018 graduate of Okawville High is the son of David and Jennifer Roesener.

## County Board Hires Attorney for FOP Negotiations

In a special meeting held last Thursday, the Washington County Board of Trustees voted to hire an attorney to negotiate a labor contract with the Fraternal Order of Police.

R. Michael Lowenbaum of Jackson Lewis P.C. from St. Louis, who specializes in labor law and labor relations, was hired to represent Washington County in negotiations with the police union.

The current contract with the FOP, which represents Washington County Sheriff’s deputies and jailers, expires November 30.

Lowenbaum had worked for the county earlier this year to negotiate the contract with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, which represents other county employees.

According to Paul Todd of the FOP Committee of the Washington County Board, the county is not expecting difficult negotiations but wanted an expert in labor law to represent the county’s interests.

“When you get a divorce, you hire a divorce attorney, so it makes sense to do it this way,” Todd said. “The state’s attorney works in criminal law, so it would be good to have an expert on labor laws.”

Todd says the plan is for the contract to last three years and expire at the same time as the contract with the IBEW.

including Mary’s granddaughter, Maddie Zaring.

“I don’t like seeing myself on screen, but it was cute because my granddaughter Maddie was watching it with me, and she said, ‘It’s you Mamaw!’” Rennegarbe said.

What is even better is that the Hotel has already received bookings from the show.

“We got two calls the next day from people saying they’d watched the show and wanted to stay there, so we’re excited about that,” the Hotel operator said.

### Many Still Believe

Although no “official” ghosts were recorded by the show, residents, former guests, and especially workers still believe in the local lore of the “lady in white” and other spirits of the century-plus-old hotel.

Read more on 1B about the experiences and the after-show tours given by hotel employees.





PAUL NEWTON / THE SOUTHERN

## the block

e-drawn carriage is one of many for sale at today's auction of the Collins Collection in Mount Vernon. It begins at 10 a.m. at the Collins Double C Ranch. For the full story view, see LOCAL 1B.

## n would ow-wage k in prison

NGFIELD BUREAU

ELD — If former Gov. George get reprieve soon, he will have federal prison next month and

# A Haunted Hunt

## Group takes ghost-seeking adventure to Okawville

Check out the times and locations for local trick-or-treaters. Page 2B.

BY ADAM TESTA  
THE SOUTHERN

OKAWVILLE — The old downstairs bar of the Original Springs Motel in Okawville seemed lifeless — darkness engulfed the

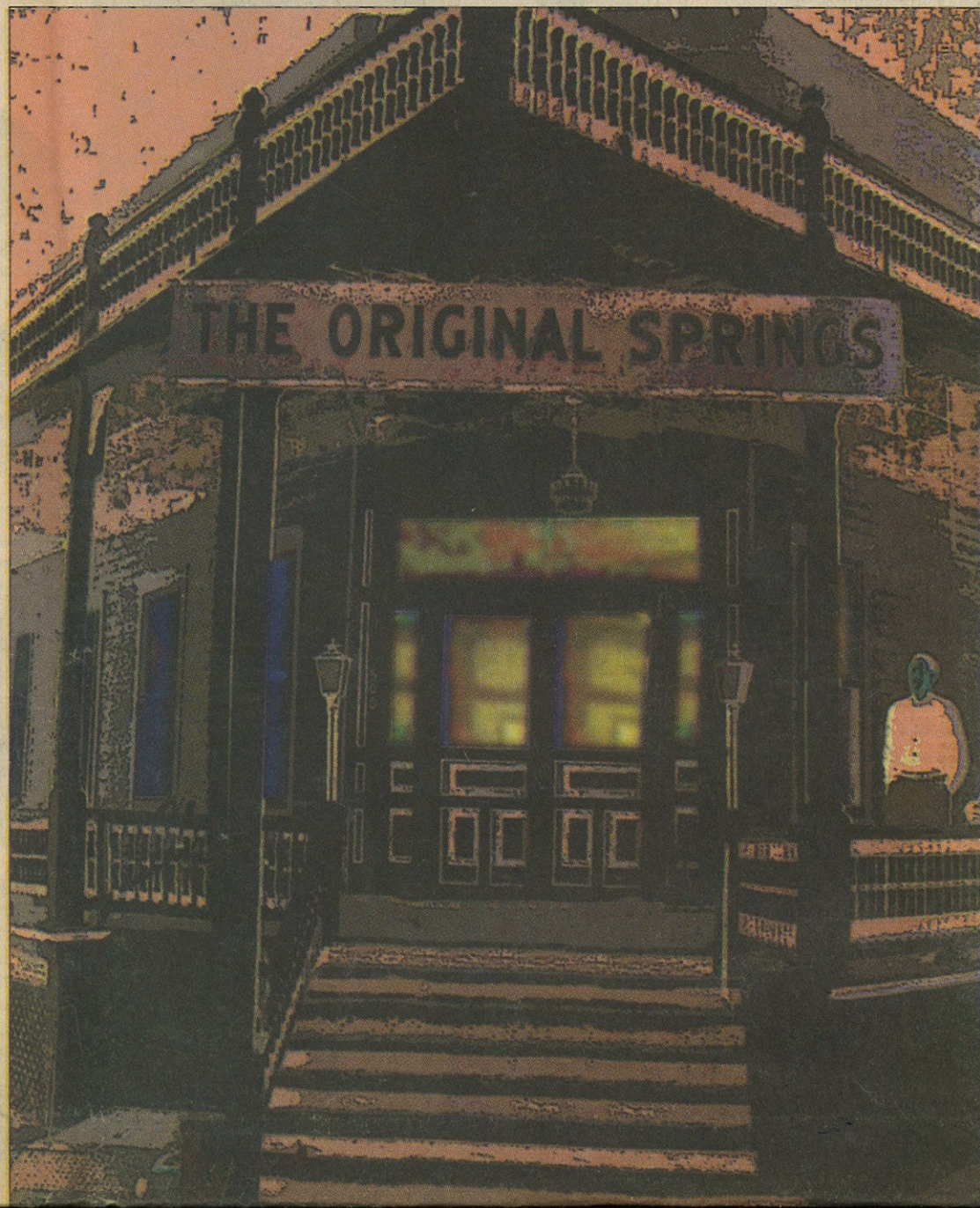
room and the air was silent.

A group of 10 people entered the space and ceased talking for a few moments. Flashlights went off. Other equipment turned on. Electro-magnetic field detectors beeped. Little red lights from infrared thermometers appeared. Those with cameras and

### MEET SIGHT

Members of the Southern Illinois Ghost Hunting Team are:  
Chris Hughes,  
Murphysboro  
Wayne Gordon,  
Mount Vernon  
Jody Barnhart,  
Christopher  
Latausha Barnhart,  
Christopher  
Evelyn Bradley,  
Herrin  
John Deason, Sesser

camcorders began snapping pictures and shooting video, hoping for something unusual to appear.







Ryan

likely start a job mopping floors or cleaning toilets. The rate of pay for such work starts at 12 cents an hour, said federal Bureau of Prisons spokesman Mike Truman.

U.S. District Court Judge Rebecca Pallmeyer Friday ordered Ryan to report to prison Nov. 7. The former governor and secretary of state was convicted of federal corruption charges last year and lost an appeal Thursday.

Also Friday, Ryan's lawyers asked that the former governor be allowed to remain out of prison as the U.S. Supreme Court decides whether to hear his appeal. If that request isn't granted, Ryan, 73, will begin serving his 6 1/2 year sentence.

"If the Supreme Court won't hear our appeal, that will be the end of the line and Gov. Ryan will have to report to prison," said Ryan attorney Jim Thompson.

Truman said that no decision had been yet made as to what prison Ryan would enter should he run out of legal options. But, Truman said, Ryan's lifestyle would be similar no matter which prison he eventually ends up in.

SEE RYAN / PAGE 8A

The group obviously wasn't in the room to enjoy a drink; they were there searching for something more

SEE PARANORMAL / PAGE 6A

PHOTO BY ADAM TESTA / THE SOUTHERN — PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RHONDA M. ETH

## Paranormal investigators focused on the science, not the

BY ADAM TESTA  
THE SOUTHERN

Chris Hughes believes it's better to be a skeptic than a believer if you want to become a paranormal investigator.

Hughes, a co-founder of the Little Egypt Area Paranormal Society, tries to focus on the science of the paranormal rather than the hype. LEAPS is a group of Southern Illinois paranormal investigators that branched out from the Southern Illinois Ghost Hunting Team.

Skeptics are more

likely to question any possible activity they may find, Hughes said. The line between skeptic and believer also depends on your end goals. For those interested in studying the paranormal, skepticism rules supreme, but for someone wishing to "make contact" with a deceased relative or friend, it may be better to believe.

Whether you are a believer of a skeptic, the process of becoming a paranormal investigator is basically the same. Hughes said you can



ADAM TESTA / THE SOUTHERN

Chris Hughes unpacks equipment at the Original Springs Motel in Okawville.

start the hobby with only a digital camera and an audio voice recorder if they want to try it out. As you continue to expand interest in the hobby, there is much more equipment available for purchase.

But the key tool needed is not a physical object, but rather a personal characteristic — professionalism.

Professionalism for a first-time investigator begins with not intruding into someone else's home, he said. A first-timer should start by investigating your own home, even if you do not believe it to be haunted, to learn how to use the equipment.

When entering someone else's house, show professionalism by taking what they say seriously and never laughing at them.

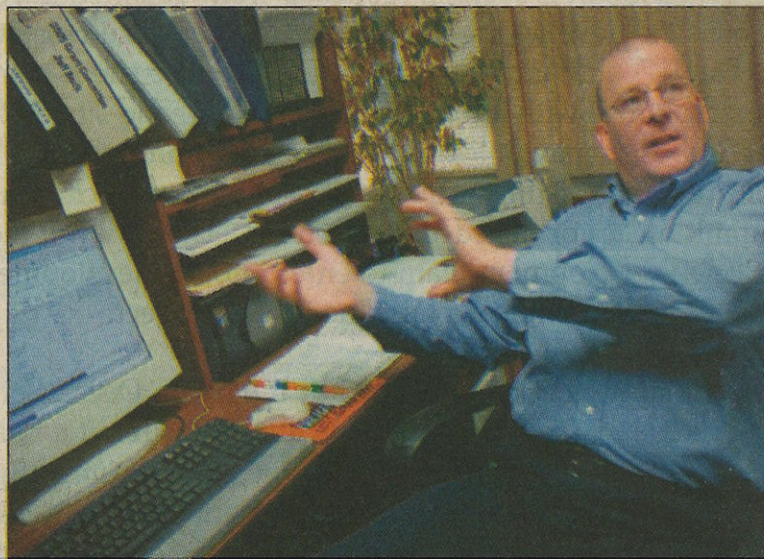
Hughes said investigators help people understand

For those who become involved in a group of paranormal investigators, several options are available. LEAPS, the Southern Illinois Ghost Hunters and Indiana Ghost Team operate while there are national organizations such as the Ghost Society.

adam.testa@thesouthern.com  
351-5031

## Murphysboro police take advantage of military surplus program

Murphysboro Police Chief Jeff Brock explains Tuesday how he uses the Illinois Central Management Service to get military surplus items for the Murphysboro Police Department.



BY BETHANY KRAJELIS  
THE SOUTHERN

MURPHYSBORO — When Murphysboro Police Chief Jeff Brock gets into the office each morning, he follows a routine.

Feed fish. Get a cup of coffee. Check e-mail. And then he logs onto a Web site that offers state law enforcement agencies a chance to get free military surplus items ranging from computers and phones to M-16 rifles and squad cars.

"They've got everything on here," Brock said as he looked at the Web site on his computer screen. "I don't know why anyone would pass it up."

In fact, the computer Brock was using was the first item he received after signing up for the Central Management Service Law Enforcement Support Office program last year. The program offers agencies military surplus items for free as long as the departments pick the items up and pay an annual user fee.

### DETAILS

For more information on CMS's Law Enforcement Office program, contact program coordinator at (217) 785-6903 or curtis.howard@illinois.gov

Air Force base in Texas. It is one of the items Brock has requested since March. One of his requests have been approved, including the department's phone service truck, a crime scene vehicle, a soon-to-be command unit and other items valued at \$300,000.

A \$300 annual fee gives the Murphysboro Department a huge opportunity, Brock said. The program allows Brock to get items he cannot be able to purchase with the department budget.



# News Around The County Section

July 5, 2017

The Okawville Times

Page

## Okawville's Oldest Business Reaches 150 Year Milestone

Okawville's oldest and most famous business - The Original Springs Hotel - has reached its 150 year milestone. It enjoys a status as Illinois's only remaining mineral water spa.

In 1867 Rufolph Plegge learned that the water at his harness shop property that corroded the pipes was high in mineral content.

That spawned an entrepreneurial spirit that continues today with owners Don and Mary Rennegarbe.

Back 150 years ago the local physician, Dr. McIlwain arranged for one of his rheumatic patients to bathe in the mineral water. He was almost immediately cured. A German farmer who had once worked in the Carlsbad Baths in Germany and Plegge opened a small bathhouse.

The bathhouse was enlarged several times. Overnight options for out of towners were limited to local boarding houses.

The railroad coming to Okawville in 1871 made Okawville only an hour trip from St. Louis. Several hotels sprang up.

only mineral water bath house in town. It competed with the Washington Hotel (which became a nursing home in 1949 and operated until 1976), which was located on Front Street at the present site of Weeke Sales and Service. That is why the business' original name, The Mineral Springs, was changed to The Original Springs, to designate that it was the first.

Years of boon for the Hotel were followed by a decline in the Great Depression. When then owner, Conrad Paeben, committed suicide, the management was taken over by employees Tom Rogers and Louis Elardin. Rogers promoted business and tourism with Saturday night dances for visitors and the community, and entertainment by the Okawville Orchestra. He started Okaw Pleasureland in the Hotel park across the street, with music, horseshoes, croquet, outdoor bowling, and other games. That lasted two seasons. A Recession continued after the Great Depression was over.

Business declined over when a fire broke out while



The Hotel built in 1892 replaced the first building constructed in 1885.