

# Our Town

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## Local group searches for paranormal proof

By Chad Mearns  
Our Town Editor

In the silence, everything is magnified. Every creak of the floor boards, every clink from the pipes expanding in the late August heat. Even a chair shifting a few inches in the upstairs room sounds like thunder to those sitting quietly, peering into the darkness in the room below.

Jamie Muscatello is feeling fidgety. He repositions himself in the uncomfortable steel chair, and the sound of his clothes rustling is surprisingly loud. "That was me," he calls out, mainly for the benefit of the digital recorder running just a few feet away. When the recording is analyzed days later, that statement

will be crucial in identifying the sound as Muscatello's jeans rubbing together, rather than some phantom noise caused by the shadowy figure workers claim to have once seen at the Portage Railroad Museum.

"What's your name?" he asks the figure, as if it was still present in the room.

Silence.

"Why are you here?"

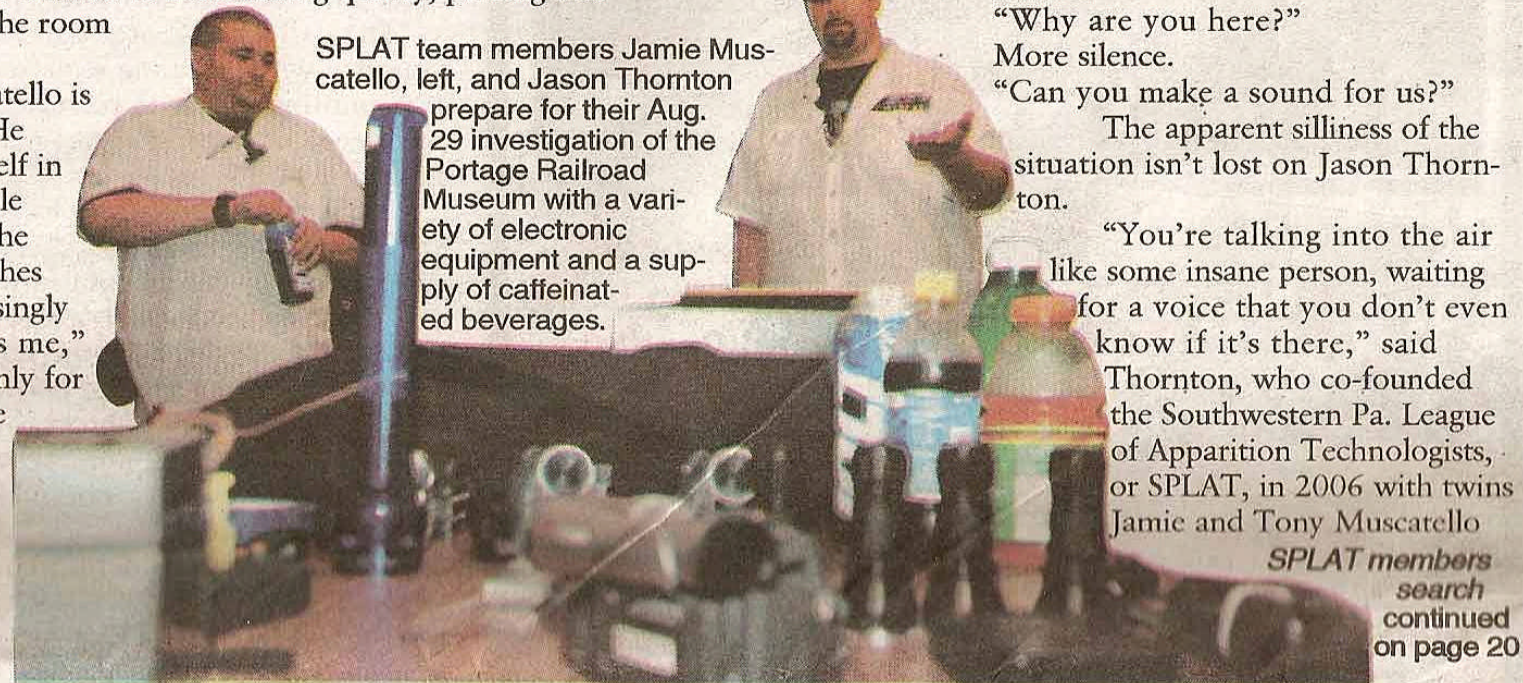
More silence.

"Can you make a sound for us?"

The apparent silliness of the situation isn't lost on Jason Thornton.

"You're talking into the air like some insane person, waiting for a voice that you don't even know if it's there," said Thornton, who co-founded the Southwestern Pa. League of Apparition Technologists, or SPLAT, in 2006 with twins Jamie and Tony Muscatello

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and friend Walter Hutsky. Since then, the team has investigated more than 20 area locations purported to house some sort of strange activity.

Most of them end up like their case at the Portage Railroad Museum: lots of time, effort and preparation, but little in the way of results.

"If you want to experience what it's like to go on a ghost hunt, go in a dark closet and sit there for eight hours," Thornton joked.

But the hunt is often the exciting part.

During each investigation, the SPLAT team is constantly running its arsenal of digital audio recorders and night-vision cameras, and every second of the data collected must be reviewed in painstaking detail.

"If we do a five-hour investigation and have six audio recorders running, that's 30 hours where you have to sit and listen to a static hiss," Thornton said. "That's mind-numbing."

That lack of excitement is fine with Hutsky. Like the other team members, he's not in it for the thrills.

"It's just curiosity. That's pretty much what I'm in it for."

In fact, Hutsky says that although he's intensely interested in the paranormal, that doesn't necessarily mean he believes.

"I'm extremely skeptical. People get mad at me because I don't buy into the



Submitted photo

A SPLAT team member took this photo of an apparent apparition at an area cemetery. The group maintains that the image, although digitally lightened using a computer program, is not a hoax or forgery.

claims," he said.

Hutsky says he has yet to experience anything he's willing to chalk up to ghostly activity, although the team's first investigation in March, 2007, at a home in East Conemaugh did yield some interesting results.

During the set-up stages of the investigation, the team placed a golf ball in a pile of saw dust in the attic, where the residents heard cries of what they believed to be the spirit of a young girl. The saw dust, the team figured, would provide physical evidence if the ball would move.

Later in the evening, the team returned to the attic after hearing a series of thumps coming from the attic. The ball had been moved several feet from its original position, and the imprints in the sawdust suggested the item had

been picked up and dropped.

"I can't say how it was moved," Hutsky explains. "I can only just assume."

And those assumptions aren't enough to convince Hutsky of anything paranormal.

"I would pretty much need to see a full-body apparition or have a conversation with someone I can't see," he said.

Tony Muscatello also considers himself a skeptic, but admits the first investigation had him questioning his stance.

"There have been a few different occurrences that have me wondering about the afterlife," he said. "The biggest by far was the golf ball incident."

That same evening, the team recorded the crying sound the residents had reported, and Tony heard a

strange growling sound that he says is hard to attribute to an animal since none were present.

"It's hard to ignore those types of experiences."

Jamie, meanwhile, said he was a believer before joining SPLAT — mainly due to experiences at his home from 2002 to 2004.

"It had an ominous feeling to it. It wasn't a good feeling at all."

His experiences there included everything from phantom smells and strange, fleeting visions of dark masses to a cell phone charger that mysteriously disappeared, never to be seen again.

But when mysterious scratches began appearing on his son, he had seen enough.

"At that point, it was time to move, to get out of that place."

Thornton's first run-in with the paranormal came at an early age.

"They say I punched the devil."



As a child, he explained, he would often play at an area funeral home, owned by a friend's parents. The viewing area, with its large, open floor plan, was a favorite spot to play.

"I was swinging a toy sword," Thornton recalled. "On a downstroke, my hand hit something. The sword came to a dead stop and blew apart into pieces."

Meanwhile, the light bulbs overhead burst, and the plastic sword's handle melted in his hands.

He's been searching for an explanation ever since, eventually ruling out any natural cause he could imagine.

"You could not generate enough heat to melt that plastic or to get those light bulbs to burst," he said.

With natural causes ruled out, Thornton now attributes the incident to some sort of paranormal activity.

And he says he's not alone.

"All across the world, in every culture, people are experiencing these same instances of something coming out of nowhere, approaching them, trying to communicate and then dissipating back into nothing. They have these stories, but they don't talk about them because they're afraid they'll be shunned by those who don't believe."

Tony Muscatello said he receives a similar reaction when he tells people he's a part-time paranormal investigator.

"Usually it involves intense staring," he said. "Some people look in disbe-

lief, and wonder why we would want to 'mess' with these sorts of things."

But "mess" is hardly a word the SPLAT team likes to see used.

"We're not out there having seances and channeling (spirits) or anything like that," Jamie said. "We're taking data, recording on video tapes and voice recorders, measuring temperatures, taking EMF (electromagnetic field) readings, just seeing if we can catch anything."

Those misconceptions, Thornton said, have kept the team from investigating several Johnstown area locations believed to be hotspots for paranormal activity.

But property owners, he said, often believe anyone on a ghost hunt is simply looking for scares — exactly the type of behavior SPLAT tries to discourage.

"These haunted hayrides and events like that, those are good ways to get your scares. When it comes to paranormal investigating, if it is really scaring you and there's something you feel that is so foreboding that you run out of there, that's a sign you shouldn't be there."

Not every ghost story, Thornton warned, is harmless.

"You could be opening yourself up to a world of hurt. You'll find out the hard way when your life is turned upside down."

For additional information on SPLAT, visit the group's Web site at [www.splatinvest](http://www.splatinvest)