The Ghost That Didn't Like Ghost Hunters

Like many other ghost hunters, Dusty Smith is fascinated by history. Indeed, the founder of the Daytona Beach Paranormal Research Group (DBPRG) lists her preoccupation with the past as one of the reasons she got involved in paranormal investigation. In many ways, the ghost hunter is also the amateur historian, sifting through local folklore and digging through historical records to get to the roots of the haunted sites in their neighborhoods. Yet Dusty is quick to point out that being a history enthusiast living in Daytona Beach can be challenging.

“Daytona is kind of different in the way we treat our history,” Dusty says. “In a lot of other parts of the world, people have a pride in preserving their history, whereas here, we’re amazed when a building survives more than 35 years.” While Daytona real estate developers make sure that not too many such buildings stand for too long, Dusty laments the way the historical landmarks of her home state are fighting a losing battle against concrete and steel development.

Yet although Daytona’s historical buildings are being reduced to rubble by the inexorable advance of bulldozers, there seem to be enough ghosts from the past to keep Dusty busy. Not that she’s complaining. “You know, I find the scientific end of paranormal investigation really fascinating. I mean, the questions that mount up when you’re out there are just unending. Nobody’s come up with any answers yet, and people have been studying this stuff
forever.” And yet for years now, ever since Dusty set up the DBPRG in 1997, people have been coming to her for answers to their questions about both their history and their hauntings—not such a surprise when one considers what Dusty’s been up to for the last few years.

In addition to heading the DBPRG, Dusty also guides groups through her Haunts of the World’s Most Famous Beach tour, taking people on a walk through some of the town’s cemeteries and haunted sites. While ghosts are certainly a focus of her tour, she also uses the opportunity to educate the sightseers about the history of the town.

“The ghost tour started because of our research group,” Dusty says. “Soon after we started investigating, we realized that we needed funds for all our ghost-hunting equipment.” Charging per head on her ghost tour, Dusty soon had enough money and more. Still, after the DBPRG had all the necessary equipment, it felt wrong making money off the town’s deceased. “I felt funny about it. It was like, here I am standing outside this cemetery, talking about these people who were gone. I just couldn’t take a paycheck from it.” So out of the ghost tour was born The International Association of Cemetery Preservationists, Inc.—a group dedicated to the improvement and maintenance of Daytona’s graveyards. The association has adopted three cemeteries that, despite the ravages of the occasional hurricane, are in far better shape now than they were under county care.

Founder of the DBPRG, principal guide for the Haunts of the World’s Most Famous Beach tour and head of the Association of Cemetery Preservationists, Dusty might be called Daytona’s resident specialist on matters paranormal.

Nevertheless, as is so often the case where supernatural phenomena are concerned, even the specialists are left clueless. That was certainly the case in the investigation of the house in Deltona, about 20 minutes west of Daytona.

Of all the haunted sites the DBPRG has investigated, one nondescript concrete block home stands out in Dusty’s mind, so much so that she’s just completed a book of her own about her experiences there. “A young couple contacted me by e-mail in September 2001,” Dusty begins. “To tell you the truth, at first I wasn’t sure what to make of it. I mean, it was full of all sorts of stuff that was kind of over-the-top. I couldn’t help wondering if this guy who wrote me was for real, but I thought okay, let’s check it out—do the interview and see what happens.”

It was obvious from the very start of the investigation that the tenants of the Deltona home were dealing with something that the DBPRG had never seen before. Furthermore, Dusty’s group and the current tenants weren’t the only ones who knew there were strong forces at work in the house. During her preliminary tour of the house, Dusty discovered a garage full of unpacked furniture. The tenants told her that it wasn’t theirs but belonged to the owner, who, it turned out, moved out of the place in the middle of the night in the spring of 2000, only three weeks after he purchased it. Whatever the owner experienced in the house must have left an impression, because he still gave the front door wide berth, choosing to stay in his car and honk the horn whenever he dropped by for the rent.

It didn’t take long for the ghosts to manifest themselves to Dusty and her team. “Right off, we recorded hot
spots and cold spots, and picked up banging sounds in the walls. This place had a real nasty haunting going on.” It would only get worse.

“Basically,” Dusty continues, “what started as a Friday night party conversation in eight months turned into a very dangerous situation.” Yet as the phenomena in the house grew ever more dramatic, Dusty’s determination to study it also increased. At first she was spending an average of two nights a week in Deltona; by the end of the case, she was there practically every night.

“It was incredible,” Dusty recalls. “In that first week, we were getting activity from three of four spots at the same time. To me that denotes that there’s more than one ‘entity’ on site. There’d be a hot spot or a cold spot in the baby’s room, banging noises in the hallway and a mist forming on the back roof of the house all at the same time.

“On top of it,” Dusty continues, “our EVP readings were crazy.” EVP, or Electronic Voice Phenomena, is one way investigators determine the presence of ghosts. It’s a common theory among ghost hunters that spirits often emit sounds that are imperceptible to human ears but can be heard when played back on audio recording devices.

“When we listened to our recorders after our investigations, there were so many voices, it sounded like a cocktail party going on.” If so, no one at this ghostly soirée seemed to be having much fun. The voices sounded harried, frantic, interspersed with growling noises and something that sounded like someone vomiting violently. Every now and then, Dusty and her investigators could make out barely legible speech. Whoever or whatever was speaking wasn’t too happy that the investigators were there. “What are you doing here?” they heard the voice say over and over again.

With each passing week, as the phenomena grew more and more intense, so too did the DBPRG’s sense of hopelessness. Dusty recalls how lost she felt in her search for an explanation. “Three months into it, I was absolutely stumped. I did all the background history, checked all the building records and property records, and everything I could get my hands on.” Nothing. This house was a standard Florida concrete block home, built in 1968, with no outstanding events in its history. She found only one death associated with the property—an elderly woman who died peacefully a few years back. Dusty and the DBPRG just couldn’t see how a solitary old woman dying of natural causes could be responsible for what they were witnessing.

And then things got worse. In December, right around Christmas, Dusty was attacked. She recalls: “The tenant and I were standing next to a set of golf clubs, talking about something, when his wife came by and told him to lay the clubs down, just to keep their baby from knocking them over and hurting herself. Well, I was standing there watching him lower the bag when suddenly they just came up off the floor and slammed me right in the mid-section.”

The DBPRG contacted members of the ghost-hunting community for advice, including established investigators such as Troy Taylor in Illinois and Dave Juliano in New Jersey. Juliano and Taylor promptly got back to Dusty, but even these ghost-hunting luminaries were stumped,
suggesting that she either consult with a psychic or get out of the house all together, before other people got hurt.

Taking their advice to heart, Dusty sent photos to Kelly Weaver, a known psychic in Pennsylvania, and then went to the tenants. With three broken ribs rattling in her chest, she decided to level with them. “I told them we could keep coming back to the house, documenting this, getting really great pictures, EVPs and video footage, but it was time for them to make a decision. They were renting. They could move out at any time. And the situation was getting dangerous.”

If, at first, the family hesitated at taking these words seriously, the events of early January 2002 convinced them it was time to pack their bags. By that time, the DBPRG had isolated the most extreme activity just outside the baby’s room. They set up night vision surveillance cameras inside to monitor the cradle. The footage from this camera would ultimately decide the matter for the Deltona family living in the haunted house and, for that matter, effectively end the DBPRG’s investigation of the site.

To this day, Dusty shudders when she recalls the tape. “The footage opens with the mother putting her baby into the crib; she turns on the little music box on the side of the crib, gives the baby her bottle and then turns the light off. It’s only a few minutes after her mother leaves. You can still hear the baby; she’s barely sucking on the bottle, so you know she’s almost asleep. You can still hear the music box playing—everything’s fine. And then out of nowhere you hear this voice.”

It came out clearly on the audio. It said: “Oh, Emmy.”

But it wasn’t spoken affectionately. Dusty describes the voice as neither male nor female, but something about the tone gave the DBPRG founder goosebumps when she heard it. “We stopped the tape there and played it back several times, and sure enough, it was there,” Dusty recalls. “Well, the baby must have heard it too, because then the baby sat up in its crib and went ‘Uh-huh!’”

What followed was a truly bizarre exchange in which the 11-month-old child spouted garbled baby talk, while something in the darkness responded with a guttural stream of growls that left Dusty’s blood cold. “Then all of a sudden, on the tape, we see this gray, transparent blob of mist come from the center of the room up over the crib rail and into the crib.”

That was when the child’s nonchalant baby talk turned into something else. “The girl started screaming—loud. We could hear her screaming ‘No! No! No!’ over and over again. On the tape, this went on for 45 straight minutes. She screamed at the top of her voice for 45 minutes.”

Not wasting any time, Dusty picked up the telephone and called the house. “I told them, get the baby out of her room, now, and then I headed over there as fast as I could.”

By the time Dusty arrived, the parents were in their bedroom, putting their daughter’s crib together. “Of course the first thing they asked me was what was on the tape,” Dusty says. “I didn’t want to tell them in a way that would get them upset, but I had to get across that they were in a dangerous situation and really should get the kid out of the house.”

Dusty’s attempts at tact were rendered meaningless when the girl came toddling into the room. “The moment
I turned around to look at her, the crib rail came off the floor, over the corner of the bed and pinned her to the floor. It took all three of us to get that crib rail off that kid.”

The family didn’t stick around too much longer after that. The mother took her daughter to Maryland to stay with her parents, while the father stayed behind to close up the house and find a new place to live. “He ended up staying for about three weeks, spending most of his nights at the neighbor’s house,” Dusty recalls.

During this period, the DBPRG heard back from Kelly Weaver about the photos Dusty had sent. Apparently the house’s bad energy was able to reach as far as Pennsylvania, where Ms. Weaver was having a difficult time with the package that had been sent to her. “She told us that it took her quite a while to even touch the envelope because she’d feel physically ill whenever she would touch it,” Dusty says. When she felt able to study the photographs, the Pennsylvania psychic got back to Dusty immediately. “Basically, most of what she told us we already knew,” the DBPRG founder says. “That the activity in the house was centered around the baby’s room.”

The forces that were in possession of the Deltona house apparently weren’t happy about the baby’s location. A few days after the mother and baby left, Dusty received a bone-chilling e-mail message that had been sent out from the family’s e-mail address to her ghost tour’s address. It contained two simple questions. Though the words were horribly misspelled and riddled with strange punctuation, Dusty could make out the questions. They asked: “Where is the baby? How is the baby?”

Dusty headed to the house posthaste, making a beeline for the family’s computer when she got there. Checking the log of sent message on the e-mail server, she found no such message directed to the Haunts of the World’s Most Famous Beach tour e-mail address. Furthermore, while the DBPRG e-mail had been added to the computer’s address list, as the AOL e-mail server automatically does whenever an e-mail is sent out to a new address, the tour’s address wasn’t on this list. So Dusty believed the husband when he told her he hadn’t sent out the message.

“I have to say, this case really got to me,” she says. “Not only were the findings so off the charts compared to anything we’d done before, but as much time as I put into it, I couldn’t find any explanation for why whatever was in the house was so interested in the baby. No clue. This case was completely unresolved.”

Despite all the time and work she continued to put into the house in Deltona, she still couldn’t provide any answers. “There was nothing in any of the developers’ blueprints, none of the local realtor reports. I talked to everybody. I was going nuts working the case because there was no logical reason for the amount of activity that was going on in that house.” By the time the husband moved out, the only explanation she was able to suggest was a half-hearted theory about the possibility of a prehistoric Indian burial ground. Dusty makes it clear that this theory was just an educated guess, based on the fact that the area was once an Indian settlement. “Who knows?” she concludes. “They didn’t exactly map sacred ground on colonial maps back then.”
Another family moved in after the father left. Dusty came by once to drop off her card to the new tenants; though she never heard from them, they only ended up staying there for three months. The house then sat empty for nine months, after which a single guy moved in. To Dusty’s knowledge, this man still lives there.

“I used to date a gentleman who lived around there,” Dusty says, “so I used to drive by the house fairly often. I did leave my card with the people next door, telling them if they have any problems they could give us a call. But we never heard anything.”

The truth is, Dusty had problems letting the case go. “It became personal. We became like family, and even though I tried to remain emotionally removed from it, the things going on were so extreme that it was impossible to keep up that objectivity. What made it even harder is we weren’t able to give them any answers.”

Out of a need to document the events that occurred in the Deltona home, and perhaps as a way to deal with the disappointment of not being able to come up with any answers, Dusty wrote a book about the DBPRG’s experiences there. If the book hasn’t managed to entirely exorcise the frustration Dusty still carries over the haunting, at least she’s been able to turn it into a story—and quite a story at that.