

HAUNTERS  
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There's a grey, run-down, cloth-shrouded farm building in Southern California with screams blossoming from inside its facade and an open door. Down its twisted hallways, a man with a broken jaw and lolling tongue lurches out of your sight. A young boy sits on the bottom mattress of a blood-smeared bunk bed, behind a curtain, motionless, ready to scare. Family portraits and unassuming painted landscapes hang on farmhouse walls. You are beckoned by a gaunt man in a labcoat, who invites you into a child's playroom with one wall consumed by a sickly black ooze rimmed with human teeth. The ooze adheres a curtain to the wall. The only way though is to go through that curtain.

Finding your way is disorienting, as the walls are pitch black and the human screams and the buzz of machinery that bounce from wall to wall seem sourceless. The rooms you walk through are a menagerie of gore - a twisted and deformed doctor busy spooling the intestines out of a body on his table; a wall of caged, malformed heads with gnashing jaws, blood everywhere.

This is a walk through of Knott's Scary Farm's haunted house set-up this year. The seasonal haunted house is a maze and takes about half an hour to get through. It is impressively popular. Online reviews rave about the authenticity of the props, the lighting, the actors, the scares.

In the modern American tradition, Halloween is a one-day children's holiday. It settles somewhere on the spectrum of harmlessly goofy and legitimately frightening, according to how you celebrate it and who you speak to. There is an unspoken rule that says -- if you're not a child (roughly under the age of sixteen), you don't go trick-or-treating, and you don't celebrate Halloween with real emotional investment. The older crowd switches roles with the children, swapping their night out and their costumes for a night sitting in watching movies and handing out candy at the door.

Recent years have seen greater investments in spooky pop culture due to the influence of the zombie fad. Zombies have been around in writing and cinema for centuries, but really

started dragging themselves into the public eye in 2010 when the first episode of The Walking Dead aired on AMC. Since then, scariness has found a place for itself in pop culture in a way that hasn't happened in decades. The fall season premiere of TWD set a new viewing record, not for the first time: 17.3 million viewers, without counting DVR recordings. 2.5 million more adults under fifty watched it than Sunday-night football. Americans love a good zombie.

But despite the zombie takeover in 2010, there is a preexisting group that deals with zombies from dawn to dusk. Members of the group will gladly show you pictures: family tables scattered with hand-made body parts; and their garages, packed to the brim with masks, buckets of blood, and half-built witches. They are a niche community scattered across the US and UK, united on the Internet, dedicated to the Halloween spirit and the business of a scare. They call themselves haunters.

A lot of what haunters do has to do with the haunted house industry. Many people have gone into making their own haunts - whether it's in their house, their garage, or another building they bought just for haunting. Similar to the zombie-culture takeover, the American haunting scene has seen a rise in extreme haunted houses. Some of the most frightening experiences include sensory deprivation, full-on contact in which you are picked up and carried off, simulated drowning, being forced to drink fake urine, and being covered in cockroaches.

The experience can last anywhere from an hour to seven hours, in the case of the McKamey Manor in San Diego. Guests are required to sign waivers beforehand, and most haunted houses have a safeword that allows you to leave the experience at any time.

These are extreme cases, though. Haunters generally deal with much less wild fair - private-owned haunts generally avoid full contact and want to minimize the legal/safety risks to their clients, so they stick to classic scares.

Jim Warfield is the owner and creator of the Raven's Grin Inn in Mount Carroll, Illinois, a haunt that stays active all year. Warfield has had an intense interest in haunting since childhood. "I had childhood haunt in my parents basement and coal bin. Just like Timmy McVeigh," he adds, with some cheek.

"I was in the JCs doing their haunts. I was always in the local Halloween parades and costume contests.." When it came down to buying his first real fixer upper for a haunt, there was a building in town that was rumored to be haunted. Naturally, Warfield did what it took to get the building that would later become the Raven's Grin Inn. The year was 1987 and there was a run-down, white-shingled two-story house in an otherwise empty lot. The left face of the house sported two tall, skinny doors, one of which had been removed and boarded up, but the outline of the frame remained, standing like the ghost of a door. The second door had its in-frame glass shattered. The shades were lowered in most of the long, thin windows. Warfield describes it as the "house of his wildest dreams."

"I had zero money. The old house had been severely neglected-- it was ready to be bull-dozed-- but I found a couple of local people who didn't want to see that happen. They financed me and I have been working in and on this house now for the last 27 years."

He thinks back to the first people he talked to about the possibility of buying it - the folks who had originally warned him against it, which had the opposite effect. "The first four elderly people I talked to about buying it told me I shouldn't buy it because it was haunted. Makes me a pretty lazy guy, buying a haunted house to make it into a haunted house."

The modern building has a fresh coat of paint and some new features, including a spire. The front yard is littered with antique car parts and that second door is still gone, but hidden much better.

The face of the Raven's Grin Inn is ever-changing, as their tours run year-round, which is unique for a haunted house. During the off season, it is more of a house of oddities. Guests don't need a reservation, but the website encourages customers to read their safety advisories:

"You will experience low visibility, special effects, sudden actions, damp or wet conditions and an overall physically demanding environment." The haunt lists no-go conditions: mental illness, intoxication, injured, taking medication... the qualifiers roll on. This became necessary when haunting got serious, and popular - the risks in haunted houses were getting higher and higher, and safety/comfort became an issue. Every big haunt has a statement of terms and conditions in an attempt to warn the faint of heart or at risk away.

HalloweenForum, like many of its sister forums, is a workspace for people who are building a haunt from scratch, similar to Warfield. The community is virtually entirely do-it-yourself; members will post issues or questions they're having, recipes that worked, props that got screams. The Halloween Props subthread is constantly moving: "Custom life-size tombstones", "Its ALIVE!! Test of my Halloween dragon puppet", "Cemetery Pillars: On a budget". Haunters make absolutely everything available in the imagination - there are detailed tutorials on animatronics, lighting, how to carve tombstones, tutorials for spiders as big as your house.

Do-it-yourself culture has a special place in the hearts of haunters, because their interests are niche enough to make supplies very hard to find off-season. Stores like Spirit Halloween only pop up in certain areas, and only a month and a half prior to Halloween. Although their stock is available online year round, many haunters find the prices and quality disagreeable, compared to what they could make themselves. There are lots of other stores that sell animatronics, static props, masks, and spooky details, but they are online-only and can get expensive - the 'Talkin' Rockin' Skeleton' prop from Frightprops, a skeleton that sits in a rocking chair and sings, costs \$1129, not including shipping. Similarly, a static prop of a frozen corpse from The Horror Dome runs for \$500 ("Extremely life like! GREAT FOR MEAT LOCKER!"), not including shipping. If you're on a budget, the only way to get a good prop is to get on a forum, write up a list for the hardware store, roll up your sleeves, and do it yourself.

One of the biggest projects in the haunt industry- and a large topic of conversation on the forums- is the art of corpsing.

Corpsing is the act of re-building a skeleton to make it look more like a realistic decomposing body. Skin, tendons, and hair detailing are added to bulk up what may be an otherwise unconvincing skeleton. In the haunt world, a good skeleton is notoriously expensive and difficult to find -- one of the most popular models is called a "Bucky" skeleton. Bucky skeletons are life size (they stand at 5'6"), detailed, and well-articulated, but they run anywhere from \$125 to \$225 online and are rarely found in stores. Spending over \$100 on a skeleton isn't realistic, because there's a good chance that you need more than one. When fall season rolls around, the forums are brimming with threads that track cheap, poseable skeletons in stores like

Walgreens and Walmart to let others know when stores are stocking the best skeletons. HalloweenForum user ryanlamprecht posted a skeleton concern back in September: "As of yesterday, Walgreens only had their Halloween candy on the shelves. I'm finding a lot of similar skeletons at Walmart, Target, etc... but they are \$50 now. Are the days of the awesome \$30 skeletons gone?"

Cheap skeletons are a good way to go, but they can always use DIY improvement before they get used around the house or put in a haunt. Corpsing is the way to improve a cheaper skeleton without having to buy an anatomically correct model online. Cheaper skeletons tend to come with bad joints or immovable parts, anatomical abnormalities, jagged warped plastic, and bad antiquing, or no antiquing at all. One on-a-budget way to corpse with a sturdy skeleton is to wrap the parts you want to detail in plastic wrap- tightly- and then heat the plastic with a heat gun until it begins to melt. This is an effective technique on ribs, as the plastic will melt and form holes in certain areas, as decaying skin would do. Once the plastic wrap is adhered and melted to the bones, you apply a variety of paints (grey, brown, and green are popular) to it to antique it. While the paint dries, take a paper towel and lightly pat away and smear some of the colors to mix them and make the coloration more realistic - good rot colors are dull, sickly, and merge with one another. The end result is a much more realistic skeleton with rotting, ragged patches of skin.

Other methods include using cloth and latex instead of plastic wrap for a fuller, bulkier affect, and adding scraps of hair. HalloweenForum user ptbounce, who has a user icon featuring Freddie Kreuger, posted their first attempt at corpsing a plain white skeleton they picked up from Walgreens. The post features a picture of a skeleton propped up in a backyard at sundown. Against the dark of the fence and the trees in the background, the camera's flash bounces off the depths of the eyesockets and the roundest part of the skull, but the rest of the body is corpsed with yellow-brown cheesecloth to give the appearance of waxy skin.

"My supplies are:

1. Cheesecloth
2. Spray adhesive
3. MinWax, Stain and Polyurthane, Classic Oak

Did this last night. Should I go with one more application of cheesecloth?"

The first reply, from user FearingtonHouse, gave some suggestions to help the skeleton along.

"Nice! Yes, I would add more layers...maybe on the head too.

A trick with the mouth is that you can add some shredded cheese cloth "skin" between the face and jaw.. I like the stain that you used. I tend to go a little darker (Mahogany), but then I drybrush on an off-white paint for contrast. Another quick/cheap thing...cut a few dozen strands of long wig hair, spray paint it flat black if it's not a good/scary color...and glue that on the head in a random/scary fashion. Creep city. Lol. All this said, if you left it just like you have it...it looks great and will surely scare people."

ptbounce left with this advice amidst some other helpful words from users and returned a week later with another picture featuring two skeletons, both corpsed with cheesecloth for a yellow, sallow tinge and antiquing stains on the skulls.

"Got a second skeleton done," ptbounce posts. "Puts me way ahead of schedule."

Corpsing is versatile in that it can be applied to a lot of items and produce scares virtually on its own. A chair corpsed to look as if it has shreds of human skin for padding is perfectly easy to do and very eerie, and may make a guest think twice about sitting down.

HF user Skeptic posted a thread showcasing a corpsed encyclopedia-turned-necromicon outfitted with leathery skin and an eye.

The eye, made from half of a ping pong ball, thin threads of red yarn for veins, and a printed iris, sits in clay eyelids in the middle of a thick layer of reddened flesh on the cover of the book.

"I got the book at a garage sale for 2 bucks and I'm sure the whole project comes in under \$5," said Skeptic.

The thread received praise and multitudes of users wanted to try the method out. "That turned out fantastic!! I need to research the corpsing effect.. I have no clue what kind of plastic to use," replies StanFam3.

It turns out that Skeptic pulled his method from a Youtube tutorial by a haunt professional named Allen Hopps of Stiltbeast Studios. Allen is gifted with a warm and humorous nature that compliments his haunt work. He is an actor, sculptor, and designer based out of Texas and has made a home business out of haunting.

"Haunting is serious to me. It is a huge part of my life; it is how I choose to spend my time as well as how I choose to provide for myself and my family. I also truly feel that I am doing good work. I really feel like this is what I am supposed to be doing in the world," says Hopps. His largest internet presence comes from his Youtube channel, where he posts crafting updates and tutorials for DIY haunting. Known for doing on-the-cheap projects that result in professional-quality props, Hopps has garnered a following outside his main business endeavors.

Stiltbeast Studios produces props such as masks as well as full-on custom haunt design, but specializes in training haunted house actors.

Hopps describes the haunted house community 'very diverse', but overall split into two major groups, with a few shades of grey. "The first group went to a haunted house once and they saw several hundred people in line. In their mind, they saw twenty dollar bills floating over everyone's heads, and they thought: I can do this and make a ton of money. In reality, it's a struggle to get by in haunting and there is a huge cost in overhead. Those are not my tribe-- I work for them and with them but they are the minority," says Hopps.

"The second group is people who are driven to create: lighting designers, sound designers, sculptors, costumers, carpenters, actors, and prop makers. The sense of accomplishment at the end of the day when you can see your work is huge." says Hopps.

He has worked for years to train actors in the best ways to draw true yet safe fear out of people in a controlled environment without compromising themselves. He has multiple clips from each training lesson up on his Youtube channel, and each one is packed with helpful tidbits – some topics featured are the right techniques for growling/screaming so that the actor doesn't hurt their vocal chords, and convincing zombie movement. Despite his funny nature, he takes the physical and psychological repercussions of scaring into serious consideration and recognizes the curious intimacy of making someone afraid without even showing your face.

"It's a great way to interact in a very intimate way with strangers. I know the things I build, the actors I train, and even the characters I portray get into the heads of the guests and affect them. The haunted house can act as a huge release of tension for people. Running from monsters is something that is missing from our lives. Society and the safety of our modern world has taken that away from people. I am all about bringing that excitement back."

Cole Gilbert, a haunter from Utah who goes by UnOrthodOx on Halloweenforum, joined in 2007 and has been a site moderator for years. Gilbert is active on the site every day and is consistently warm and helpful in getting people to fix problems and comes up with ideas. He and his family also do their own haunt every year - their running theme since 2010 has been 'the harvest'. 2014'S harvest featured intimidating, leaned archways of tall corn that the visitor walks through, lit by jack-o-lanterns placed on the ground.

"I average about 2 hours each weekend working on my actual haunt. November/December is mostly spent cleaning up, organizing, and researching for the following year. The rest of the year is spent building. I try to sculpt at least one new thing each year," says Gilbert. Their haunt is safeguarded by a lucky skeleton, Fred, who has made more than one foray onto Gilbert's personal blog. Fred was bought in 2007 and his introduction to the family has an old picture of him hanging meekly by a hook in his skull, some of his fingers hyperextended and twisted oddly, his lower spine bending forward out from the back of his plastic ribs with unrealistic zeal.

"At the time, he represented the most significant single investment in Halloween we had ever even thought of," reads his introduction. Gilbert accidentally discovered Fred's appeal when working on propping him up a year later.



"Some of the neighborhood kids screamed and cried at the sight of him.... my niece however danced around holding his hand, singing 'Happy Birthday'." Fred had the scare factor. He was appropriately corpsed and put to work in the haunt that year. His signature photo from 2008 is intimidating. It's taken in the dark of a yard with the lights of a house in the distance; the only other light is the rich blood-red illumination from within Fred's ribcage- a luminous glow that lights up his ribs all the way to his grin. The light is just visible from between strips of charred, tattered skin. He is impaled high, above the average man's head, and he looks right out over a sea of skulls on pikes that fill the yard in front of the house.

Fred has enjoyed some use in every haunt since he was bought, and was part of 2014's harvest set up. Gilbert works year-round to get the display ready - building new props and existing old ones, brainstorming new ideas, taking inventory from the prior year.

"I've always liked it as a hobby, an escape from the day to day. Why add the stress of making money to it? I'm often told that when I do sell things, I sell them way too cheaply. Better to sell it swiftly and move on with no stressing about making a buck, I say," says Gilbert. He sees himself continuing to engage in haunting for the foreseeable future and feels no pressure to monetize or change it. "With the kids still in the house and interested, I can keep doing this walk through as we've done. When they grow and move, I could see myself getting into one of the light programming, or more animatronic displays."

Although Gilbert has been hired as a consultant, designed haunts, built props on commission, and sold some of his work to professionals, his greatest pride lays in the community event he's hosted five years running: The Harvest Party, which brings together a swarm of neighbors to help carve the host of pumpkins he uses for his displays in a kid-safe environment. "Without any reservation, my greatest achievement is bringing my neighborhood together each year. Kids come carve pumpkins and place them in the yard, and everyone gets to see it all lit up with no music or scares the night before Halloween. I've been asked many times by my own neighbors how we manage to get so many people to participate. There's some kind of magic to it." He features pictures from each event on his blog: children carving pumpkins set up on picnic tables, families together in lush yards, and the richly illuminated result of tens of pumpkins all lit at once, each one's unique face glowing in the night.

“Like farmers, we prep for the next harvest of screams- so much planning and all for a few nights of fun,” says Hopps. “The community is insane for the amount of work they do for the holiday, and I am happy to count myself among them.”