

Fort Worth haunted house has scared up a lot of attention

DAVID CASSTEVENS Star-Telegram Staff Writer

HALLOWEEN

***Cutting Edge has national rankings in a magazine and a travel guide -- and even a world record from Guinness.**

Oct. 22--The editor of Hauntworld magazine doesn't sound scary.

Scary is the low, raspy voice of the demon-possessed Linda Blair in *The Exorcist* or Jack Nicholson's "Heeeeeere's Johnny!" line in *The Shining*.

Larry Kirchner is a cheerful, pleasant-sounding man.

Each year, his St. Louis-based magazine, the haunt industry's leading trade publication, compiles a list of the nation's top 31 haunted house attractions -- one for each day in October.

Kirchner ranks the spooky places like college football teams.

No. 1 is the 13th Gate Haunted House in Baton Rouge.

Cutting Edge Haunted House in Fort Worth occupies the No. 14 spot.

Only one other Texas frightorium -- House of Torment in Austin -- holds a higher ranking, No. 5.

In another ranking, USA Travel Guide lists Cutting Edge as one of the 13 scariest haunted houses in the United States.

Cutting Edge lurks within the brick walls of a solemn building east of downtown. A former meatpacking plant, the ominous structure is made to appear even creepier by a 35-foot gargoyle that towers like some netherworld Kong above the rooftop.

The Halloween spook house (\$28.50 for adults) bills itself as if it were an IRS audit: "An Experience You Can Only Hope to Forget."

Last month, a stranger dressed in coat and tie appeared at 1701 E. Lancaster Ave.

The visitor may have felt a sense of foreboding, like Renfield standing at the door of Castle Dracula.

Invited inside, the Guinness World Records representative made his way along the narrow darkened walkways, a disorienting sound-filled maze that features 26 tableaux -- from a cemetery to an eerie swamp to a circus of crazed clowns. He dutifully pushed a rolling tape measure, like a home appraiser.

The attraction totaled 2,261.08 linear feet, start to finish, almost half a mile.

Its shaven-headed proprietor accepted a framed certificate from Guinness officially recognizing Cutting Edge as the "longest walk-through horror house" in the world.

Chain saws cut the ribbon that began the zombie celebration party.

The lure of fright

He sat in dim light, on the cemetery set, talking about the psychology of fright.

"I think people want to be kids," Todd James said. "A haunted house is like a roller coaster ride. People want be scared, but they want to feel safe at the same .Ã¢â¬â.Ã¢â¬â."

Suddenly, a deep, unearthly moaning drowned out his voice.

"Sorry," James said, laughing at the interruption. "They're testing props."

In three hours, a new audience -- up to 300 customers -- would start arriving, at twilight, ready to scream. Cutting Edge is part of a business that is faring well in this age of high-tech movies, video games and interactive entertainment. The haunted house industry generates up to \$500 million in ticket sales nationally, according to the Haunted House Association Web site.

Several other haunts dot the Dallas-Fort Worth landscape. Hangman's House of Horrors. Boneyard Haunted House. Zombie Manor. Thrillvania.

"It's very competitive, a lot like the movie industry," said James, who plans to transform the 200,000-square-foot building he bought five years ago into a film studio.

As a boy, he loved the State Fair of Texas. His mother worked at the event, in gaming. One day the 12-year-old from Mesquite was strolling through the fairgrounds when he spotted a

spectacle looming at the end of the midway. A haunted house. Fingers of fog crept from its foundation. Strange, chilling noises drew him in.

"It was," James remembered, "the coolest thing I had ever seen."

He eventually landed a job at the attraction as a masked actor.

Now 45, the man who has worked in live shows for Disney World and Six Flags Over Texas is celebrating his 20th year in the haunted house business. His attraction employs about 150 people. Almost half are cast members, who audition for their roles. Those hired are required to attend Boo U, a two-night training course.

"They learn our philosophy, how we scare," James said. "We're very high-startle."

'I really got him'

Cutting Edge's master of scary-monies led a visitor away from the cobwebs and headstones and into the inner sanctum of his office. Two dogs greeted him eagerly. "That's Shadow," he said, introducing an American shepherd. His eyes turned to a boxer. "And that's Boo."

James takes pride in the fact that his haunted attraction is officially the world's longest, for now.

But more gratifying is a number -- "1153" -- written on a dry erase board.

"That's how many people left early last year, because we scared them out," he said. "It's a record -- our best number ever."

To promote competition and excellence in the craft, James presents an annual award to one of his actors. Last year, the Cutting Edge boss was touring the haunted house as an observer, in the company of paying customers. One room is a sort of hospital set, with bodies stretched out on gurneys.

Just as James entered the area, the lights dimmed and went out.

When the lights flickered on, a figure dressed in a surgeon's mask and gown stood inches from a wide-eyed James.

The haunted house owner let out a cry and took a shambling step back.

"He almost fell down," cast member Anthony Littles gleefully recalled. "I really got him."

Littles received the 2008 "I Scared Todd" trophy.

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