

THE BURGESS HAUNTING

Over the course of the second week of January 1935, tales of mysterious, other-worldly, goings-on at an isolated North Burgess Township¹ farm began to spread like ripples from a stone dropped in a tranquil pond. By the end of the week there were headlines in the Ottawa, Montreal, and Toronto newspapers, and on Sunday January 13th the story exploded when CBC Toronto broadcast a report of the unexplained phenomena. Picked up by radio stations and print media across Canada and the United States the strange events in Burgess were soon a topic of discussion in every household on the continent.

On Friday January 11th, neighbors, followed by curious visitors from Perth and as far away as Ottawa, Brockville, and Kingston, had begun arriving in droves at the *“four-room log cabin on a windswept hill”*² north of Narrows Lock Road, near the foot of Black Lake, about 15 miles south of Perth³. Grapevine gossip and media accounts of paranormal activity at the farm, *“attracted hundreds of people to the scene, day and night, particularly on Sunday [January 13th] when upwards of 100 autos drove there while many others used sleighs and cutters, and some walked in spite of the cold stormy day”*.⁴

John Quinn, with his wife, and two sons Michael (11) and Stanley (13), had lived on the farm since moving from Detroit in 1932, but it was not until the first few days of 1935 that strange events had begun to occur. A beef had been butchered and the winter’s meat stored in a closed barrel but, in the first week of January, pieces were found strewn around the barn floor. Then, as the clock approached midnight on Wednesday January 9th a windowpane at the house shattered. Quinn told reporters that he had got up and looked all around the house, saw no one, and had not thought the broken window particularly unusual until the incident was repeated the following night and a large rock fell on the cabin roof. Then, he said, through the night of Friday and into Saturday afternoon, January 11-12th, things truly *“started slinging around”*.⁵

Cookstove lids danced in the air. Sticks of firewood leapt out of the kitchen woodbox. The teapot jumped off the stove into the woodbox. A mirror was smashed when it fell off the wall. Three flat-irons ‘walked’ down the stairs one step at a time. Dishes pranced around the kitchen tabletop. A monkey-wrench, hanging on a nail, spun several times, then ‘flew’ out one window and back into the house through another window. A foot-long beef bone returned to the house several times after it had been thrown out. A small stone fell at the foot of one visitor, and another was struck on the back of the head by a clothes pin. *“There were 10 windows in the house and every pane in every window was broken”*.⁶

¹ The Township of North Burgess became part of Tay Valley Township with the municipal amalgamations of 1998.

² The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (NY), January 23, 1935.

³ Further described as located in North Burgess Township between the 4th and 5th concessions, on what is familiarly known as ‘The Island’, the former Henry White homestead,

⁴ *Perth Courier*, January 18, 1935.

⁵ *Perth Courier*, January 18, 1935.

⁶ *Windsor Star*, January 14, 1935.

The Quinn's said they could offer no explanation, and "*near neighbors, prominent citizens of Burgess and Perth emphatically claimed that they were eyewitnesses to one or more of the occurrences*".⁷ Even those who did not witness an occurrence were convinced that the home had been "*under some strange, indescribable spell*",⁸ when they surveyed the damage done.

Andrew Burke, a neighboring farmer, said he had seen the windows break and the stones drop with a queer thud, as if there were no human forces behind them, just inside the windowsill. He said dishes had jumped and the bone, thrown out of the house time and time again, had each time returned to the house in some mysterious manner. Apparently, no one had been near the objects affected, he said.

William Cordick⁹, another neighbor, said he had been there when three flat-irons had come down the staircase one step at a time. Just like someone walking. Mr. Cordick was considerably perturbed.

Rev. Father [Walter E.] Whelan [1892-1948], whose parish¹⁰ includes the Quinn home, said he had been there when he had heard a window shattered and had seen one of the stones. From what he had been told by his parishioners, Father Whelan said, he had no explanations to offer.¹¹

The stones, it was said, were common field stones, some dry, others with ice on them, but by the time police and journalists reached the site, souvenir hunters had carried them all away.

When a reporter representing the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* paid a visit to the Quinn home that weekend he found,

... the house in a deplorable condition. Pillows were jammed into the broken panes to keep out the biting northern blasts and the land around the house was tracked and crushed from the hundreds of feet that have prowled and gaped around it during the period since the mysterious happenings began.¹²

On Saturday afternoon, Inspector Sidney Oliver and Sergeant Harry Storey of the Ontario Provincial Police detachment at Perth arrived at the Quinn farm to investigate. Nothing unusual happened during their visit, but after they left, at about 5:00 p.m., a piece of firewood came from no one knew where and landed with a thump in the middle of the kitchen floor. Inspector Oliver returned and, joined by reporters from the *Ottawa Citizen* and *Windsor Star*, as well as two young men from nearby farms, Howard Traynor and Michael J. Norwood,

⁷ *Perth Courier*, January 18, 1935.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ The Cordick farm was located at Burgess C-2/L-11.

¹⁰ St. Bridget's, Stanleyville.

¹¹ *Perth Courier*, January 18, 1935.

¹² The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (NY), January 23, 1935.

... huddled in the meager warmth of the kitchen stove ... [although] when daybreak arrived there was little to show for the long watch other than cramped limbs and a gnawing hunger.¹³

Throughout the evening people came and went. Men and women huddled around the stoves in the two downstairs rooms. Between ten and twelve o'clock there were never fewer than 25 people in the house, all talking in whispers and looking at broken crockery and the shattered mirror and the broken monkey-wrench ... The room was lighted by a kerosene lamp. The men were in small groups all talking in low voices as at a funeral.

As the hands of the clock standing beside a mysteriously broken jug on the kitchen bureau crept toward midnight, the small crowd grew a little tense, and sat or stood around saying little, waiting for they knew not what. Nothing happened and shortly after 12 o'clock Mrs. Quinn and her two sons went to bed. At one several others left the house. At 2:00 only half a dozen were left. Mr. Quinn went to bed.

Finally, Inspector Oliver and a companion were the only ones left in one of the downstairs rooms. Two neighbors of the Quinn family kept watch at the door. Outside the house the mercury slipped below zero [Fahrenheit], and the little house with broken windows was very cold. Still nothing happened.¹⁴



Left to Right: John Quinn, Mrs. Quinn, OPP Inspector Sydney Oliver, Sydney Quinn, OPP Sergeant Harry Story and Toronto Mail & Empire reporter, James Kinloch. (Photo courtesy of Perth Courier)

¹³ *Ottawa Citizen*, January 16, 1935.

¹⁴ *Perth Courier*, 18 January 1935.

The haunting was over. The curious crowds departed, the frenzy subsided, and the media soon lost interest. The *Toronto Mail & Empire* reported that it had,

*... sent a reporter to the Quinn farmhouse, but whether it is that ghosts don't like being where reporters are, or that this particular ghost was taking the night off, the newspaper man could not see or hear a thing. True, a lot of people don't believe in ghosts, but a lot of people don't believe in a lot of other things, and that doesn't prove anything.*¹⁵

For its part the *Toronto Globe* opined that,

*Hair raising stories are good especially if read in after-midnight silence, when nerves are jumpy and imagination keen [but] the most hard-boiled scoffer must be impressed when he hears and sees the family flat-irons walk leisurely but thumpingly down the stairs.*¹⁶



*The abandoned Quinn farmhouse in North Burgess Township as it appeared in 1967.
(Photo courtesy of Perth Courier)*

In February 1935, 12-year-old schoolboy, James Barr, of S.S. No.6 Darling & Lanark, summarized the Burgess Haunting in rhyme.

¹⁵ *Toronto Mail & Empire*, January 1935.

¹⁶ *Toronto Globe*, January 1935.

Quinn's Haunted House

Have you heard about the haunted house,
In Burgess Township to Perth quite close?
It is very exciting and very queer.
The talk of the country far and near.

The flat-irons came walking down the stairs,
Windowpanes broke and other affairs;
A beef-bone wouldn't stay outside the door,
It would come in and walk on the floor.

A wrench on the wall spun on a nail,
And the sound of low voices were heard in the dale,
Out of the wood-box wood jumped out
And all the people ran about.

The kettle and pans jumped off the stove,
And dishes and cups began to move;
Stones came in through the windowpanes
Till the blood danced faster in the veins.

Stones broke the windows without hurting the screen,
The strangest thing that ever was seen;
A mirror fell into many a piece,
Until the people called the police.

From all around the visitors came;
Right from Toronto came newspaper men,
And wherever you went they talked the most,
Of the haunted house and the Burgess Ghost.

Now these good-natured Irish Chaps,
May believe in ghosts and goblins perhaps.
But I can't believe them till I see them first,
These strange things, fourteen miles from Perth.

By the time James Barr penned his poem, the strange phenomena at the farmhouse were fading from public consciousness. Then, on the night of March 18, 1935, two months after those events had been front page news, the barn of the Quinns' near neighbor, Michael McParland, was burned to the ground.

The following day Constable Robert Wannell of the Perth OPP Detachment arrested 13-year-old Stanley Quinn and charged him with arson. When questioned, the boy had readily confessed to the crime and, at the same time, volunteered that he was responsible for staging the 'supernatural' onslaught on his family home in January. He also implicated his younger brother, Michael, as an accomplice.

As a minor, Stanley Quinn was placed in the custody of Children's Aid Society Inspector Joseph Henry Devlin (1877-1948) and detained in a Perth hotel room rather than a jail cell. A week later he was arraigned but remanded pending examination by an alienist (psychiatrist) at the Ontario Hospital at Kingston. At that point, Stanley Quinn and his story disappear into the Juvenile Court system where details of the proceedings were not publicly reported. The younger brother, Michael Quinn, does not seem to have been arrested.

How the Quinn brothers staged such complex illusions, with such skill that multiple eyewitnesses were completely fooled and hundreds more convinced of a supernatural presence, does not seem to have ever been publicly explained, and the Judge's immediate call for a psychiatric evaluation raises questions.

Did the judge suspect Stanley Quinn might be of diminished capacity and thus unreliable in his confessions? Both the ghost-show and the barn burning might well have been attention seeking by a disturbed teenage boy, but so might an admission to being their author, even if he was not in fact the perpetrator. Setting fire to a barn is simple enough, but surreptitiously making flat-irons walk down stairs, stove lids dance, and firewood leap about, all in real time in front of witnesses, would demand a much higher level of cunning than possessed by most 13-year-old boys.

On the other hand, if the Quinn brothers were not responsible, we are left to ponder who or what acted as the unseen hand? The full story and explanation of events at the Quinn farm on those cold nights in January 1935 remain a puzzle with missing pieces.

On New Year's Eve 1972, the long unoccupied Quinn house, by then used for many years by Wilbert Merkley to store hay, was burned to the ground. Arson was suspected and OPP investigators found footprints in the snow around the ruins, but no cause of the blaze was ever determined.

- *Ron W. Shaw (2022)*