

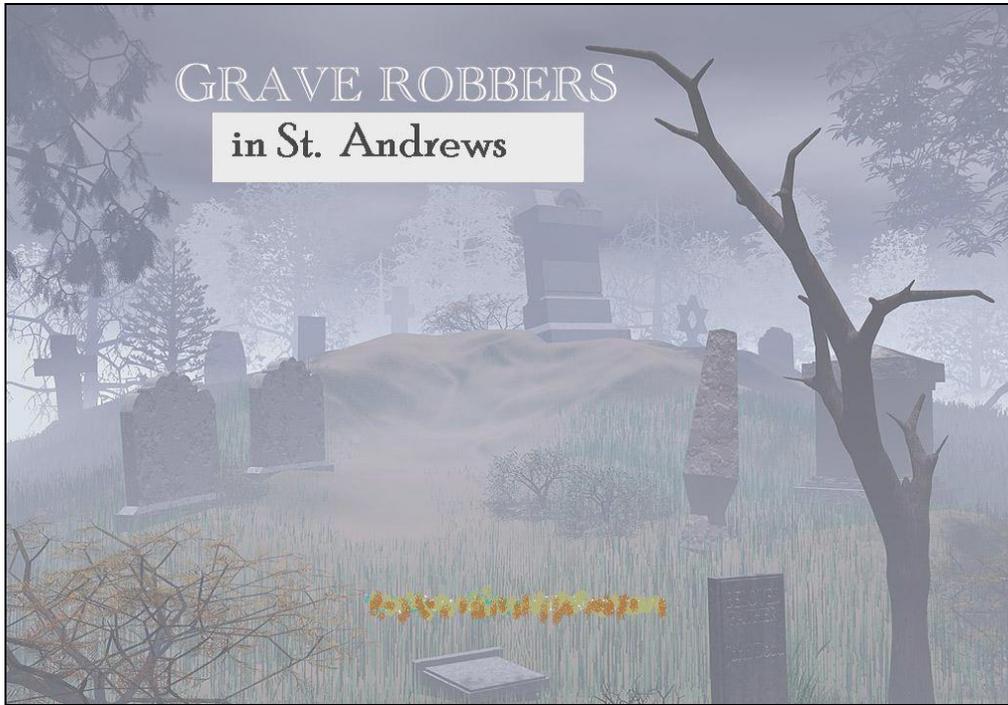
Cornwall Township Historical Society

Newsletter December 2013

www.cornwalltwphistorical.ca

Editor: Don McIntosh

The Legend of St. Andrews Grave Robbers



Editor's Note: Amazing stories never get old. This one happened over 130 years ago but it's still worth telling. It's about the legend of the grave robbers who paid a visit to St. Andrews cemetery. The article is written by former St. Andrews resident Ann Jackson (McLaughlin) as told to her by her father the late Felix McLaughlin.

Grave Robbing Extraordinaire

The Grave Robbing of Jane McLaughlin (Burton)

From St. Andrews West Cemetery, January 1876

As a youngin' I first heard this story a few different times from my father Felix McLaughlin. My father was such a great story teller, that I wondered at first if this was another of his tales to regale us kids and keep us quiet for a few minutes. As I grew older though, I was able to perceive the quiet reflective change in Dad as he journeyed back reliving his memories of being told the story by his father. There is that quiet hush that happens during storytelling when it seems a person's eyes glaze over, and they

are reliving the experience and describing to you what is going on around them as if they were once again there. My most cherished moments were when my dad would gather with his sister and cousins and they would discuss times gone by. One would say something that jogged the memory of another, which in turn would evoke another memory and more discussion. I would do my best to blend in to the furniture at that point, trying to write what they were saying as fast as I could, and enjoy past events through their eyes. The following was indeed a

story that needed to be recorded in the family history that I was gathering.

December 31, 1875

It had been a warm fall and winter so far; one of those autumns where you had a chance to get around to most of those jobs that you always meant to but usually never quite did. For the McLaughlin clan, it was an evening to pause to mark the end of the year. Their mother, Mary Prince, had died 5 years before, but most of her children were all thriving with young families of their own. The oldest, Ann, had passed away a couple years before Mary's death, as the result of her clothes catching on fire while rendering lard, so Felix senior lived on the family farm with son Felix Jr. James was out in the Dakotas, establishing his future as an Indian Agent. Charles had a pair of young teenagers, Felix and John had married in early summer just before their mother passed away so their houses were filled with young children. Jane had four children and was expecting to deliver again at any time.

Charles and Felix gathered in the evening to celebrate the beginning of a new year with music, laughter and the chance to visit neighbours up the 8th concession. There came an unexpected knock at the door of the house only to inform the McLaughlin brothers that their sister Jane was experiencing difficulty in childbirth and not likely to survive. They hurried immediately to the house, only to find that a baby boy had been born but that Jane had died from complications while trying to deliver a second baby boy, twin to the first. There was much anguish then on the first day of January, 1876 as Jane's husband, Benjamin Burton, their children, and the McLaughlin family prepared for the funeral of Jane and baby

Burton, and the prospect of raising a newborn, William, without his mother.

Arrangements were made, and on January 4, 1876, Jane Burton was laid to rest, holding her unnamed infant son. As the fall had been so mild, the ground was not frozen, so a grave was dug on the top of the hill in the cemetery just south of the church, and mother and son were interred. A sad day, indeed. Death still lingered at the door though, as the second twin, William, failed to thrive without his mother, likely having experienced trauma himself from the birth, and he passed away 2 weeks later on January 13th. Once again, the family made the heartbreaking journey to the cemetery, with the intention of digging the grave again and putting the second baby into its mother's arms. As they approached the grave though, there on the ground was a long white glove that Charles recognized immediately as that belonging to his dear sister Jane. The grave was dug immediately, and the casket was opened to find only the clothes remaining in the empty casket. Jane's body had been stolen.

Why would such a thing occur, you might wonder? The sentiment of the times was that it was not acceptable to leave one's body to scientific research. Medical students had to resort to drastic measures – that of robbing graves to find suitable cadavers in order to learn more about the human body. Either the students had to rob the graves or they paid certain individuals to find and deliver specimens. McGill University, and other colleges in Montreal were looking for a continuous supply of cadavers. Unsavory characters could receive 20 or 30 dollars for the procurement of a body in satisfactory condition.

The remains of Jane McLaughlin Burton would have been a most acceptable cadaver. Because of the cold conditions of the soil, there would have been minimal deterioration. In many circumstances usually in summer, families would set up people for grave watching. Someone would stay overnight in the cemetery for a few weeks until some decay would occur and the remains would no longer be suitable. In Jane's case, there would be no point, as her body would not soon deteriorate in cold ground. Clothes were never taken as this was considered to be stealing. That might seem contradictory to current day thinking of indignity to a human body, but those were different times.

Without hesitation, Charles made preparations for his team of horses and headed for Montreal to search for the body. He insisted on going with Benjamin Burton – supposedly as Benjamin had a liking for alcohol, and Charles was afraid that Benjamin might be “bought out” along the way. After searching for most of the day, Charles and Benjamin, accompanied by a police officer, finally found the body of Jane on a dissection table. They returned to Eastern Ontario and reported to the family that they had gotten there just in the nick of time and were able to bring the body back to the cemetery at St. Andrews. A huge indignity averted.

Fast Forward to 1985

Years later, after graduation from the University of Waterloo, I came across a story written by a local historian and history professor Royce MacGillivray who had written an article for the alumni magazine. The article was titled *So What Did You Do With the Body?* and investigated bodysnatching in Eastern Ontario around the turn of the century.

There was the documented newspaper story of a Cornwall Township farmer who was in Montreal looking for the remains of his wife that had been stolen from a cemetery. The date of the story in the Montreal Daily Witness was January 19, 1876, fitting perfectly with the story as it had been told to me.

From the MacGillivray article: “A part of the fascination of the subject is what it tells us about the contemporary attitudes to death, to the human body and to family ties. On 19 January 1876, the Montreal Daily Witness reported that a farmer near Cornwall Ontario complained to the Montreal chief of police,

“that the remains of his late wife had been stolen about a week previous from the churchyard in which they had been interred. The chief placed the case in the hands of Detective Lafon, and that officer in company with the farmer, searched several medical colleges and at length found the body on a dissecting table, cut up by students' knives. The farmer claimed the remains and they were given to the Dean of the Faculty, who was not, however, in the best of humor, complaining that the government was neglecting its duty in not providing subjects for the use of the college. The students of the college in question are subjected to great loss from these seizures, as they state that they pay from \$20 to \$30 for each subject.”

The discrepancy with the newspaper article above was that the body had been partially dissected in the medical school. When I asked my dad about this, he confidently added that the body likely had been partially dissected, but Charles would not have wanted to add shame to the whole family so he would have reported that they got there just in time.

So it was that Jane was removed again to the cemetery at the top of the hill in St. Andrews. If only the rocks and trees could speak to tell us what happened!

Ann Jackson,

Great grand daughter of Charles McLaughlin, who went searching for the body of his sister Jane in Montreal.

Don't forget our next regular meeting Tuesday November 26 at 7:30 pm. This is our last one before we adjourn during the cold winter months of January and February.

But once again the folks at the Lost Villages Historical Society have graciously invited us to their December potluck luncheon at the South Stormont Community Hall (beside OPP station). It starts at 11:30 am on Monday December 9th with a social time followed by lunch at 12:00 noon. This is a show and tell event so if you have any interesting memorabilia, bring it along with your favorite dish. A surprise entertainment feature awaits you!



At the October 23, 2013 meeting of South Stormont Council, awards were given to the three winners of our War of 1812 essay contest held this past June. Mayor Brian McGillis thanked the students for their superior work and also the CTHS for their efforts to keep history relevant in this

bicentennial celebration of

the War of 1812. In the photo L to R Mayor McGillis, Kaitlyn Cloutier, Kara MacDonald, Olivia McDonald, Sharon McCullough (contest chair) and president Ken McDonald.

The Glengarry Pioneer Museum is currently researching women's clothing from the 1840s time period. Specifically they would like to replicate what local farm woman would have worn as everyday wear.

Does anyone have any resources (paintings, early photographs, letters etc) that would help them with their query? If so, contact Chelsey MacPherson chelsey.macpherson@gmail.com or tel. 1-613-525-1822

Reminder

Are you annual dues paying member? For those paying your CTHS dues annually, please be advised that dues payment for the year 2014 must be received by Dec. 31, 2013. Annual fees for individual: \$5.00; family: \$8.00. To determine if you are an annual member, check the mailing label on the envelope this newsletter arrived in. If your name is followed by an (A), please remit dues ASAP to Margaret MacDonald, 17109 Valade Rd., St. Andrews W. ON K0C 2A0.

In 2014, the newsletter will be mailed only to paid-up annual (A), life (L) and honorary (H) members.