

Module 1 Writing Project – Final Draft

CBurghardt PW 6005

3, May 2014

The Transformation of Shame in a Town's Absolution: The Donnelly Massacre

Farewell we meet no more on this side of heaven. The heartfelt parting scene is o'er; the last sad look is given. May their souls rest in peace. ~Verse written by Patrick Donnelly for original Donnelly tombstone.

Today if you take a drive down the Roman Line north of St. Patrick's Cemetery outside of Lucan, Ontario, the gravel road leads out of town toward a succession of commodity farms, rural homesteads, and pastures of grazing cattle. There's no hint of the tragedy that occurred on this road more than 130 years ago; the view is serene and the air is fresh. The passage of time has transformed the rugged dirt path into well-travelled county road. Great expanses of fertile farmlands have replaced forest groves that once dotted the rural landscape. Summer breezes, burgeoning crops and the sweet smell of freshly cut alfalfa grasses drift across the landscape reminiscent of the early days when newly arrived settlers would cultivate the soil, plant corn and bale acres of hay for their livestock.

Often I take the horse out for a ride along the shoulder of the Roman Line as we make for the abandoned rail-line trail. A leisurely ride on a warm summer's eve begins like many others. As the last vestiges of a hot, muggy day give way to a welcome breeze and the song of cicadas, we pick up a brisk trot. Before long, we've crossed Fallon line and my horse begins to sweat. He's edgy. Maybe it's the warm night, there could be small animal hiding in a thicket ahead or perhaps it's the anxiety that creeps in every time we pass the Donnelly Homestead. Does he sense it too?

There's a voice in my head that implores me, *don't forget us, pass by, but don't forget*. I mutter out loud, *don't worry, I won't*. As we turn for home, I shake my head. Am I talking to myself to allay apprehension or do I just feel guilty? I think it's a bit of both. My horse seems to be in better spirits. His ears are perked forward and I feel relieved. What I do know is that I passed by where a family died a tortuous death. While I can't bring them justice, I can honour their memory by educating others about the truth of what happened.

Clouds were full and ominous and the wind seemed particularly fierce the cold morning of January 15, 1880. The Donnelly sons were attending a winter wedding that morning at the Keefe farm. They were good friends to the Keefe family and looked forward to the festivities. The Donnellys escaped the brisk, biting air and entered the warmth of the Keefe barn where fiddle music played, liquor flowed and villagers danced in celebration. As jubilant partygoers exalted in the excess of food and drink, they were interrupted by news that Biddulph Peace Society member Patrick Ryder's barn and outbuildings burnt to the ground. Rumors flew, surely fueled by the wind and the flames, and soon enough the Donnellys were accused of setting the fire to intimidate the society members. Ryder claimed Johannah Donnelly had told Mrs. Whalen not to worry about it, "Don't be afraid. The fire will not spread over here, for we noted the direction of the wind before it was set!"¹

After hearing Ryder relay the rumor, William Casey, a Peace Society member and magistrate issued a warrant for the arrest of James and Johannah Donnelly for aiding and

¹ McKeowan (14).

abetting arson. The Donnellys posted bail and returned home. A trial date was set for February 4, 1880. Curiously enough, the trial was postponed three times because the prosecution insisted it needed more time to prepare the case and collect evidence. When it became clear the Donnelly's would likely win the case, the Peace Society decided to take the matter into their own hands and exact their own brand of justice, (or so the story goes).

More than two weeks passed and it's now the eve of the Donnelly trial, February 3, 1880. James Donnelly, his son Tom, and the neighbour boy Johnny O'Connor, arrive at the homestead. Johnny's going to take care of the farm tomorrow while the Donnellys attend the arson trial five kilometres away in Granton. After supper, John Donnelly heads over to his brother William's home in Whalen Corners to pick up a cutter (a horse-drawn sled), for their trip to Granton in the morning. Darkness falls, the flames in the fireplace flicker down to ebbing coals and the Donnellys retire to their sleeping quarters. James shares a bed with young Johnny, niece Bridget sleeps with Johannah, and Tom retires to a bedroom next to the kitchen.

Shortly after 12:30 a.m. on the morning of February 4, 1880, the rampage began. Forty men, liquored up and full of vengeful thoughts, set out from their clandestine meeting place (the Cedar Swamp Schoolhouse), on their way to the Donnelly homestead. Dressed in various disguises and equipped with farm tools, rifles and clubs, the vigilante group was on a mission with a terrifying intent.

The vigilante mob arrives at the Donnelly farmhouse and immediately dispatches members of the group to take positions around the homestead to prevent escape. The

house is dark; the only sound comes from the snoring slumber of its occupants. Constable James Carroll creeps into kitchen and sees Tom Donnelly asleep in bed.

With as much haste and dexterity as he can muster, Carroll slips a pair of handcuffs on the sleeping man. Tom Donnelly wakes up, starts thrashing around frantically with his bound hands. Carroll tells Tom Donnelly he's there to serve a warrant but can't seem to produce it when asked. "All right," proclaims Tom. "Read me the warrant!" He demands.

"There's lots of time for that," Carroll falters and immediately lets out a shout, signally the mob to mobilize.

By this time James, Johannah and Bridget Donnelly wake up, light some candles and ignite the woodstove. Carroll and Tom Donnelly begin shouting at each other, the argument heats up and Tom makes for the front door where a pitchfork plunges into his stomach by the hand of Thomas Ryder. The commotion escalates as the rest of the mob storms into the house. James Mayer Sr. clubs James to death; Timothy Toohey and Patrick Quigley grab Tom Donnelly and drag him back inside where James Toohey finishes him off with a spade to the head. Meanwhile, Johannah Donnelly starts shrieking, "A moment to pray,"² she begs.

James Carroll offers no mercy, "Pray, you bitch,"³ Carroll mocks. "You've prayed too long already." And with that he beats Johannah as she desperately tries to crawl out the front door. Bridget runs upstairs to an upper bedroom where she is later

² Fazakas (247)

³ Fazakas (247)

beaten and left to die as the perpetrators set fire to the home. During the entire slaughter James Donnelly's little dog is yelping feverishly. In a final act of terror, a mob member with deliberate malice, promptly walks over to the dog and clubs it over the head. John Purtell then takes his axe and chops off the dog's head and kicks across the floor.

While this grisly scene is enacted, young Johnny O'Connor is hiding under James Donnelly's bed. Peering out from his hiding spot he sees a few familiar faces, hears the scuffle of handcuffs dragging on the floor, the sound of savage beatings and wailing victims. At one point O'Connor makes eye contact with Carroll, freezes and the two gaze at each other for a moment. Carroll seems to dismiss the presence of the young boy and goes about his torture. Under the bed, O'Connor hears the sound of coal oil being poured on the blanket above him. A flame is struck and the Donnelly homestead is consumed by fire.

Terrified and coughing from the thick acrid smoke consuming the house, Johnny O'Connor abandons the cloak of his hiding space and stumbles into the kitchen where he trips over Johanna's body and sees the severed head of James Donnelly's little dog near the stove. O'Connor leaps out the front door, runs down the laneway toward the neighbouring farm of Patrick Whalen. But the calamity isn't over yet. Young Johnny reaches safety and is harboured by the Whalens and as he is being comforted, yet another attack occurs. The mob arrives at the home of William Donnelly, knocks on the door and shoots John Donnelly twice in the open doorway. Thinking they had got their man (they intended to kill William Donnelly), they take a few moments to compose themselves outside and leave. During their brief pause, William Donnelly is able to peer from a

darkened window to identify James Carroll, John Kennedy, Martin McLaughlin, Mike Heenan, William Carrol and Patrick Ryder, Jr.

The massacre has come to an end and now the finality of the horror beckons as the crisp morning dawn casts its first morning rays on the ashes of the Donnelly homestead. The news spreads quickly. Sometime during the early morning hours, looters come. They pluck skull fragments and bone chips from the smoldering ash. By the time the Coroner arrives, there's not much left of the human remains. Copious amounts of blood lay spilt on the steps of the front entrance.

The massacre of the Donnellys claimed five family members. James Sr., Johannah, Tom, John, and Bridget perished in the rampage. Jenny, William, Patrick, Robert and Michael were not present at the homestead the night of February and so were spared death, at least for a while.

Time has a way of healing wounds, maybe even burying them. But are they ever really forgotten? The facts aren't to rest with the graves of five murder victims. The truth is scratching the surface and it's time for the story to erupt once again. But this time, the voice is coming from a new generation of townspeople not afraid to speak about the impact of our local history. A brutal mass murder isn't something to be proud of and for the township of Lucan-Biddulph, it's been a regretful subject many years. But people change, they mellow, they begin to seek redemption by gently probing sensitive issues. Locals have been long reluctant to mention the "Donnelly" name. Now they're coming together to offer their insight about the slayings in the hope of unearthing the perils endured by a hardworking Irish family and the sins they committed.

For years, townspeople kept silent in Lucan-Biddulph. The murderous rampage that consumed the Donnelly family over a century ago was unspeakable. Indeed a horrible crime was committed, of that there is no doubt. Despite our acknowledgement of perhaps an unsavoury element in our local history, some of us in Lucan-Biddulph are embarrassed. Is it all the attention the tragedy has garnered? Or perhaps that it overshadows the greater accomplishments of our thriving community? Maybe it's because the question of whether justice was ever served, still lingers. Whatever the reason, the resurgence of historical accounts ebb and flow as tales are told, rumours circulate, and ancestors are remembered. One thing is for certain, the more time passes, the more we look back anxious to define our heritage and how it shapes us as a people.

On a cold winter's night, five members of the Donnelly family were murdered on their rural homestead by a self-appointed vigilance committee. Evidence was gathered, witnesses interviewed and charges were laid. But convictions never came. Haunted by the fractious behaviour of feuding neighbours; families diverted their focus to agricultural pursuits, economic gains offered by the introduction of rail lines, and the promise of a booming rural district. But as with many criminal events, curiosity cannot be easily suppressed and will emerge to fuel an exploration of greed, jealousy, and rage. Even if the descendants of the accused perpetrators want to forget, many local scholars and historians persevere. A desire to research the basis for what prompted the massacre exists. It is a painful exercise but one that seeks to transform shame into pride.

Despite the fact that a crime was committed where the known aggressors lived within a mere three or four kilometres of one another and the incident was observed by an eye witness; the accused murderers were never convicted. Trials were dismissed amidst

the fear of revolt. Later, concern over possible reprisals evolved into a desire to abandon the past and look to a brighter future.

In addition to the historical accounts of aggression comes the perspective of tolerance, enlightenment and economic prosperity. A new generation of Lucan-Biddulph residents talks about the impact the Donnelly tragedy has on our own opinions about history, its value and what it teaches us as a people. Without casting aspersions on descendants of those responsible for the Donnelly murders, we can get beyond the gruesome details and put shame and embarrassment to rest. Resolution of this inner conflict is evident in our frank discussions about what is inherently good about people, our town and the benefit of its rural roots. It's an absolution in a society that realizes justice may not have prevailed in 1880, but accountability is apparent now in the form of recognition.

Perhaps one of the most pivotal revelations brought forward in the Donnelly massacre was the result of role played by one person, Johnny O'Connor. He was a thirteen-year-old boy who was spending the night at the Donnelly homestead the night of the murders. He was the only surviving eyewitness to the Donnelly murders and became the key witness in the trial of James Carroll. Suspiciously, just before the first court date O'Connor's family home was burned. For the entire year leading up to the second trial his family was under police protection. O'Connor testimony at a coroner's inquest provided the basis for bringing the accused to trial. Without O'Connor's story, much more insidious speculation, blame, and derogatory denouncements would have been heaped on the Donnelly family.

James Carroll, the self-appointed town constable, was born in Canada but his family was originally from Ireland. He moved to Lucan-Biddulph in 1878 and lived with his uncle, James Maher. Of course Carroll learned to hate the Donnelly family. Carroll joined Father John Connolly's Peace Society and was the leader of the Vigilance Committee. Soon he became a constable whose primary goal was to rid the community of the Donnellys. James Carroll allegedly dictated the activities of the mob responsible for killing the Donnellys and was arrested for the crime. His first trial ended in a hung jury, but he was declared not guilty at the second.

It's 2014. The township of Lucan-Biddulph is nestled amidst a rural Southwestern Ontario countryside characterized by an abundance of working dairy producers, cash crop operations, and standardbred horse racing farms. It's a small community but a proud one. Residents are hard-working, serious folk dedicated to raising their children in a wholesome environment. Lucan's notorious history is one that some locals don't want to forget. There's a museum dedicated to the early inhabitants of the town. It offers artifacts, historical records, eye-witness accounts and ghost stories about the tragedy surrounding the Donnelly family who was massacred February 4, 1880 by a town Vigilance Committee. There's a feeling here that the townspeople share. We want to preserve the pristine rural connection we enjoy while also encouraging a stimulating and honest reflection on the significance of our ancestors, their behaviour and the consequences of conflict.

Now says former Lucan-Biddulph Mayor Tom McLaughlin, "It's time we started talking about it. And I have a right to say that because of the family connection."

McLaughlin's great-grandfather, Martin McLaughlin, was one of the vigilantes charged with murdering the five Donnelly family members. He says the event was an unfortunate tragedy but one that he hopes museum visitors will interpret as a violent incident within the context of a harsh frontier existence. "There's the story you can read in the multitudes of sensationalist books written on the subject of the Donnellys but the real story is how we've become better people because of it," McLaughlin muses.

The Donnelly Museum was erected about ten years ago and was the result of tiresome fundraising and promotional efforts on the part of the Lucan Heritage Committee. When talk of setting up permanent exhibitions in nearby London or Toronto was heard, McLaughlin says it was time the township took control. "We were bystanders in the telling of our own history and we realized sensitivities or not, it was our tale to tell," he proudly remembers. The museum now houses the largest collection of Donnelly artifacts including arrest-booking records from the Middlesex Gaol of the men charged in the deaths, original photographs of the family, and a pipe that's believed to have belonged to the matriarch of the family, Johannah Donnelly.

Back in 1847, the Donnelly homestead was situated on a 100-acre-parcel of forested land covered by groves of sugar maples, oak, elm, black walnut and a few wild cherry trees. The soil was a rich, fertile, clay loam made more luxuriant by the abundant forest growth. With good drainage and warm summer climates, James Donnelly was quick to clear the land owned by absentee landlord John Grace. The Donnellys were squatters. The fact that James Donnelly had no legal right to land didn't deter him from building a home on it or tilling the soil. The Donnelly homestead was located about seven

kilometres northeast of the village of Lucan on Lot 18, concession six (now known as the Roman Line).

Land acquisition was a contentious issue in Lucan-Biddulph during the mid 19th Century but it didn't just emerge with the Donnelly conflict. Land settlement in the area began years earlier with large number of black pioneers from Cincinnati, Ohio, and Boston. Hearing the news that Upper Canada had introduced legislation banning slavery, droves of free blacks arrived in the Lucan-Biddulph area where they established the Wilberforce settlement in 1829. The colony occupied land along the Ausable River close to what is now the town of Lucan. Settlers agreed to work for the Canada Company as surveyors. They built roadways, cut timber and cleared dense forests in preparation for farmsteads. The Canada Company offered to sell approximately 4000 acres of land to the settlers for approximately \$1.50 an acre but when they couldn't make the payments, the settlement declined and about five years later almost half of the black families gave up and returned to the U.S.

As the black pioneers were leaving the Wilberforce settlement, new Irish settlers were arriving. They too agreed to work for the Canada Company as surveyors but instead of cash, many of them accepted grants of land as payment. Some settlers did very well as a result. They sold chunks of their land to the Grand Trunk Railway for rail line development through the area. The land acquisition process was a flurry of activity. Soon after land purchases were made, farming enterprises began in earnest but not every landlord was a farmer. Some were investors, merchants, or absentee landowners like John Grace. For many ambitious families like the Donnellys, uninhabited tracts of land were

an open invitation for settlement. Squatting was a way of acquiring land by simply living on it.

As agriculture became a key focus of Lucan-Biddulph, so too did the expansion of the railway in the district. Land ownership was closely tied to proximity with the rail lines. Farmers knew they would be shipping their harvest by rail and would also rely on it for the delivery of seeds and supplies. Real estate ventures were based on speculation as to where rail lines would be laid. The fact that the Donnellys were squatters and were for a time able to circumvent the legal process of land acquisition, may have been a source of resentment for other settlers and certainly may have triggered many a feud in the community.

The Donnelly saga that came to a tumultuous and bloody close on a fateful night in February 1880 started with dream of hope and new beginnings. It is 1842, times are tough in Ireland; a famine is raging and it forces a barrage of Irish emigrants to flee the country in search of a better life. A hopeful and meagre Irish couple named James and Johannah Donnelly learn the Canada Company is leasing lands to Irish settlers, so James packs what little he owns, and embarks on a voyage to begin a new life in a country full of promise. Two years later his wife Johannah joins him with their two-year-old son James Jr. For a short time, James and Johannah live in the Forest City, (now known as London, Ontario). James yearns for the rural setting to which he was accustomed in Ireland and soon enough they head 25 kilometre north of the city where they finally settle in Lucan-Biddulph. Little do they know, in just under four decades their lives, so full of aspiration and desire, would be shattered. With no money and little resources at his disposal, James Donnelly decides to inhabit and clear some land on Roman Line.

In 1846 Johannah gives birth to a boy with a club foot. He's named William. A year later, their third son John Donnelly is born. He's named after Jim Donnelly's brother who had also claimed land in the township. As the years pass, the Donnelly clan blossoms. Patrick is born in 1849, Michael arrives in the fall of 1851, and Robert is born in 1853, followed by Thomas in August of 1854. In the fall of 1858 Johannah gives birth to the last of eight children. Christened "Jane" but widely known as Jenny, she was the only daughter.

James Donnelly Sr. was known to argue with his neighbours over land ownership. The feuding reached a crisis in 1857 when James murdered neighbour Patrick Farrell at a logging bee. Patrick Farrell got involved in a land dispute with the Donnellys. When the absentee landlord decided to sell off a portion of his property to Michael Maher who in turn was going to rent it to Farrell, James Donnelly said he had no intention of giving up the property he'd spent so much time clearing. After a debate in court, the Donnellys were able to purchase half of their original farm from owner John Grace. When Farrell and Donnelly met up at the logging bee, the two had been drinking and soon started arguing. The fight escalated to the point where Donnelly killed Farrell with a handspike. A warrant was issued for his arrest but Donnelly eluded capture for almost a year, dressing in women's clothing and posing as a female worker on the farm. He eventually turned himself in and was sent to the Kingston Penitentiary for seven years. He was not a large man, five feet, five inches tall with grey eyes and grey hair. Donnelly couldn't read or write but was vocal about defending the accusations and conflicts in which his family was often embroiled.

Shortly after James Sr. was sent to prison, hardship besieged the homestead. Times were tough; crop yields suffered, prices plummeted, and illness swept the household. Johannah Donnelly's resolve only hardened. She took control of the dismal situation and applied for a mortgage on the land so that she could keep the farm going in James' absence. She also leased out a portion of the homestead so that a school could be built on the Donnelly property. Commitment to family was a value Johannah held dearly. She was known to fiercely protect her children to the point where some villagers would accuse her of goading the boys into mischievous acts as a way of standing up for themselves. The impression of her harsh demeanor wasn't shared by all. Johannah Donnelly had a lazy eye and it gave her a rather macabre appearance. Despite this, many people fond of the Donnelly family looked past her façade and described her as a dedicated and pleasant lady.

As if land feuds weren't enough, perhaps religion stirred the pot of discontent as well. Well known leaders of the church may in fact have contributed to aggression rather than denouncing it on principle. Father John Connolly was the priest who served St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in Biddulph from 1879 to 1895. Right from his arrival, he and James Donnelly didn't see eye to eye. Connolly didn't approve of the Donnelly's warm reception to Protestants and tried to blame the family for any conflict. Connolly drafted an oath that he persuaded his parishioners to sign that promised an end to crime and misdeeds in the surrounding community. He created what was known as the Peace Society/Association in Biddulph. The idea was to generate a higher standard of conduct and provide a means for townspeople to resolve conflict. The reality was that the Peace Society was a masquerade for disillusioned rural residents through which they could

justify their ill-founded opinions. Connolly coaxed members of the society to agree to have their homes searched for stolen property. When the Donnellys didn't sign the pledge, the Vigilance Committee was formed as a splinter group.

William Donnelly was seen to be a leader of sorts. He tended to direct how the family handled business dealings or troubles with the law. William was responsible for getting the family involved in starting up a stagecoach business. He wasn't afraid of standing his ground and often was caught up in disputes with James Carroll and Father John Connolly, (both members of the Vigilance Committee). When his brother John was shot at William's home the night of the massacre, the murderers mistakenly assumed they had killed William. After his family died that night, William never stopped petitioning for justice and later became a constable in Glencoe. He pulled the five-caliber rifle slug out of the wall after it passed through his brother John. He kept the one-inch slug in his pocket till the day he died. He passed away in 1897.

As Patrick Donnelly grew older he decided to move to London to become a blacksmith and wagon maker. He didn't seem to get into as much trouble as his older brothers. Patrick maintained that one of the vigilantes, James Feeheley, confessed he'd taken part in the crime, but nothing ever came of the admission.

James Feeheley and his brother William were on friendly terms with the Donnellys but things changed when their father was in danger of losing his farm. James Carroll visited the Feeheley brothers two nights before the massacre and told them the Vigilance Committee would pay their father's mortgage debt if they agreed to spy on the Donnellys over the next couple of days. The Feeheley brothers betrayed the Donnellys

for money that never came. It's very likely the admission to Patrick was made out of remorse for the realization that they had in fact aided the vigilantes in their murderous mission. At the coroner's inquest, Feeheley testified that James Carroll foretold of the incident, "James Carroll told me that the society was going to put down the Donnellys one way or another; I don't know whether he said the Donnellys or Tom Donnelly; I don't remember which he told me first"⁴

The youngest of the Donnelly boys had many run-ins with the law, some of which occurred during his time as a stagecoach driver. Thomas Donnelly was charged a few times for assault and robbery. He was a brute. Tall, rugged and ominous, Tom exuded sheer will power and strength. The blond-haired, blue-eyed man certainly captured the eye of more than a few ladies. Despite his reputation for being a volatile and exuberant Irishman prone to get in many a fight, he was overpowered the night of February 4, 1880 and was murdered along with his parents.

A week after the massacre a coroner's inquest was held during which Johnny O'Connor relayed the terrifying ordeal. When Crown Attorney Charles Hutchinson asked if O'Connor knew the man who first came into the Donnelly house that fateful night, the boy had no trouble remembering the exact details and was emphatic in his answer.

Yes, it was James Carroll, the constable. I heard someone say, "Hit that fellow on the head and break his skull open!" Then someone hit him three or four times with the spade; I saw someone carrying a spade; one of them said, "Fetch the candle here," they were doing something to Tom; I peeped out and saw Thomas Ryder and John Purtell; I had known them well before; I know Carroll well; they

⁴ McKeowan (35).

were all standing around Tom: I saw one in women's clothes; some had their faces blackened; Carroll, Ryder, and Purtell, had not theirs blackened...⁵

But apparently the physical evidence, the eye-witness testimony and the first-hand confessions were not enough. Just shy of a year, 364 days after the murder it was recommended the accused be acquitted. James Carroll along with John Kennedy, Martin McLaughlin, Thomas, James and Patrick Ryder and John Purtell were set free. As the acquittal was read, William and his sister Jennie Donnelly collapsed in the courtroom. To this day, the Donnelly murders remain unsolved and justice – well, it is yet to be served.

I've known for a long time that elders in our town prefer to let the past be silent. They don't want to open up painful memories. As our town has grown, agricultural pursuits have blossomed and new generations are curious to understand the significance of who we are. Attitudes are shifting. A museum has been built, theatrical presentations are staged and townspeople have begun to speak more freely. I'm still surprised at the divide between generations. With all this progression, residents who've been here fifty years or more won't speak on the subject of the Donnellys.

There's one person who disagrees with this attitude. His name is Robert Salts. He lives on what was once the Donnelly homestead and has been there now for more than twenty-five years. He is an intriguing fellow with a rather unique approach to recounting the Donnelly saga. Salts offers homestead tours on his property that begin with an historical account of the events leading up to the massacre, a discussion about the Donnelly lifestyle, a closer look at the site where the murders occurred and a visit to the barn that was built by William and Patrick Donnelly in the 1880s. Salts lives in the third

⁵ McKeowan (22)

home built on the property which has enclosed part of the Donnelly house. He shows me pictures of some of the renovations. When drywall was installed, layers were peeled away to reveal the original doorframes and window casings. We walk across the yard to the spot where the first house stood. Its borders are marked by five large boulders. On the edge are two horse chestnut trees planted by Patrick Donnelly. They are the only two that survived of the five Patrick planted to commemorate his five lost family members.

Living on a property that witnessed such tragedy doesn't bother Salts, in fact, he believes it's fate. He's convinced his psychic ability has enabled him to see beyond the mere structure of the place. In addition to his role as an elementary school teacher for 25 years, Salts is also known as a professional trance clairvoyant, an ability he says has offered a more intimate connection with the Donnelly homestead. As he sits in his favourite chair in the sunroom overlooking the yard, the 70-year-old Salts, reflects on the things we can't always explain. He's a quirky guy, wears his glasses low on his nose, and peers over his rims when he talks. Very much a story-teller, the retired schoolteacher clearly enjoys educating people about the Donnelly tragedy. He wants people to appreciate history, to search for answers and to feel it too. I ask him if he's always been keen to explore historical roots or whether it's just the Donnelly saga that interests him.

"I've always enjoyed a particular affinity for history," Salts explains. "When I was very young, a family friend who acted as my mentor, instilled in me a passion for chronicling past events," he says.

Salts knows that part of learning is to avail ourselves to sensory experiences. That's why the homestead tours are so popular. Sometimes though, they can become tedious or annoying when people drive past his house incessantly or maybe even stop to

sit on his front lawn and set up a family picnic. In these situations Salts politely explains the farm is his private home and campgrounds can be found elsewhere.

“Things do go bump in the night here,” Salts claims. “I’ve become so accustomed to it that I don’t bother investigating anymore,” he says. “You know the boy in the movie, *The Sixth Sense*?” Salts asks. “I’m like him, I see dead people,” he matter of factly states. Often footsteps going up and down the stairs are heard when Salts knows there’s no one else in the house. Items are moved inexplicably. Voices are heard to calmly mutter, “You know this is my house,” and on occasion Salts has seen images of a man and woman dressed in black outfits gazing with stern expressions from his top floor windows.

Robert Salts takes out a tattered album filled with photographs; some are originals of the Donnelly family, and some are recent photos of the house. Salts pushes the album toward me and asks, “What do you see?”

Intrigued, I lean in for a closer look. There’s a photo of the sliding glass doors that frame the porch. Squinting, I peer at the photo and it’s unmistakable. There’s a hazy image of a tall man with light bushy hair wearing trousers, suspenders, a white shirt and a grim expression, gazing out over the yard. “Who is it?” I ask.

Salts smiles, “I believe it’s Tom”. He says he took the picture himself and no one else was home at the time. Odd? Yes, but that’s par for the course at the homestead. Salts recounts a few incidents that suggest he’s not alone in his habitation of the Donnelly house. “During the month of August in 1995, along with the footsteps emanating from the stairwell, I heard my name called three times. The voice was a soft but firm, masculine tone. The time noted was 1:29 a.m. on the clock radio. I didn’t respond nor get up to investigate as I knew there would be no one there,” Salts remembers.

“ On a number of occasions when I tell a tourist that there are three family members including myself living on the farm, he or she will ask then, ‘Who is the man who stuck his head out of the barn door for a moment when we drove in the laneway?’ My usual response is that the man is a ghost of someone who lived here. The tourist asks if I am kidding and I explain that I am not!” Salts exclaims.

You don’t have to take his word for it. Many others who’ve visited the farm have noticed the same thing with no prior provocation from Salts. Some people have expressed feelings of despair and pressure when they enter the barn. When they exit, the feelings dissipate the further they get from the structure. During my visit, I don’t tell him of my anxieties partly because I’m trying to stay detached and also because I’m embarrassed. I don’t see any apparitions, but I do get the feeling someone is watching me. Maybe the atmosphere is dragging me in. I see Salts’ hand is trembling. I wonder if he’s not feeling well. He notices I’m staring and explains he suffers from benign essential tremors – a kinetic disorder. Although he’s okay, he says we can’t stay in the barn too much longer because he becomes overwhelmed with the entities. The barn floor planks creak as we step over the landing. Salts tells me the flooring is original to the 1881 construction. I’m not sure whether it’s the age of the wood or my sense of sadness, but I wanted to get out of there quickly.

Touring the Donnelly farm causes me to ponder the origin of the town’s conflict with the Irish immigrant family. Clashes grew out of differences between the Donnelly clan and the religious convictions of opposing neighbours and religious leaders, land claims amidst burgeoning rural settlement and the harsh realities of newcomers adjusting

to a new life with their own particular hopes for advancement. All this culminated to a murderous clash with town vigilantes.

In 1939, the farm severed its Donnelly connection. Michael's only son James died a bachelor in 1938 and a year later his sister sold the homestead to Leo Harrigan. The Harrigans were among those who belonged to the Vigilance Committee. As Robert Salts tells it in his most authentic Irish brogue, "Aye, they got the land in the end, but they had to pay fer it, they did."

Even though the family was involved in its fair share of unscrupulous or aggressive activities, not all the accusations were based on fact, and many were unfounded. A day before James Donnelly was murdered he lamented on how his family was conveniently blamed as the cause for many a conflict. If he had been able to defend himself against the arson accusation, Donnelly would have learned the judge was planning on dismissing the case for lack of evidence. In fact, the Vigilance Committee members were on the hot seat. If no evidence was found, the judge was said to be considering new "false arrest" charges against the committee. They could have faced significant fines too. Maybe they got wind of the impending dismissal because the Donnellys didn't live to see it.

Least known of the murder victims was Bridget Donnelly (the niece of James and Johannah Donnelly). She was visiting from Ireland and was also killed on the night of the massacre. She was about thirty-five years old and had never married. Some historians debate what her true age was and say while some accounts indicate she was a young lady, the reality was she probably came to Canada to find a husband given her reputation in Ireland as a middle-aged spinster. William Donnelly probably listed her as much younger

on the death certificate in the hopes it would elicit a greater sense of culpability toward the accused.

The Toohey family lived along the Roman Line and was fierce enemies of the Donnellys. James Toohey hid Margaret Thompson (the girl William wanted to marry), from William Donnelly on the night that he tried to elope with her. James Toohey joined the Vigilance Committee and is said to have participated in the mob that murdered the Donnellys. James was nicknamed James `Spadey` Toohey because he used a spade to bash in Tom`s skull.

The great-granddaughter of James Toohey, one of the members of the Vigilance Society and purported to be among those who stormed the Donnelly homestead on February 4, 1880, shares her thoughts on this dark time in our history. Karen Toohey, (m.Filson), manages `Toohey & Sons`, a large-scale grain elevator located on Mitchell Line in Lucan. Karen is careful when she speaks of the historical tragedy. “It’s just one component in the greater history of our town,” she says.

The family elevator business Karen oversees originated with her father Paul Toohey and has been responsible for solidifying the strong economic base for agricultural commodities in the local area. Toohey`s provides mass storage and drying services for corn, crusher soybeans, food-grade soybeans, soft red and white winter wheat. The storage capacity is 1,625,000 bushels with three pits receiving 20,000 bushels per hour and a grain drying capability of 2,500 bushels per hour at ten points moisture removal. Toohey`s also ships by truck using overhead bins, silo load-outs and front-end loader from flat storage.

Karen has a university degree in geophysics and is a soft-spoken, articulate woman. When you first meet her, she radiates an unmistakable feeling of empathy. Years of dealing with farmers of all shapes, sizes and disposition have made an indelible mark on Karen. She knows how to put you at ease and with a pleasant smile, genuine laugh and a twinkle in her eye, she talks about the importance of community, how proud she is of her four daughters, and the idyllic rural lifestyle made possible through an intimate connection with agriculture. “Living on a farm is a great advantage for children,” Karen reminisces. “As a child I was able to witness the cycle of life first hand; I could recognize bean sprouts and corn plants while other children would be content to stay indoors watching television.”

When the subject turns to village roots, tumultuous historical events and the importance of embracing our past, Karen doesn't miss a step. While she makes no apologies for the behaviour of her ancestors, she acknowledges the tragedy as an unfortunate time period wrought with opposing religious beliefs and the harsh realities of land settlement. “I have a relative that was on the brigade but it doesn't define me,” she admits. “The Donnelly tragedy happened, you can't disown it but there are so many other positive examples of Irish history we can enjoy,” Karen reminds me. You couldn't find a kinder or more compassionate person. Karen is the epitome of gentility. But then again, so is her father. Known for his sharp business sense and innovative farming practices mixed with the highest standards in customer service, earned him a position of high repute in the community.

Support for a greater awareness of township history is evident by the actions of Lucan-Biddulph town council members. Municipal administrators eagerly promote discussions of the Donnelly saga and work diligently to ensure funds are available for the museum's annual budget. Township Councillor Dave Manders is no exception. But not everyone on council has the same connection Manders does. His great-great-uncle was Martin McLaughlin. It doesn't seem to bother Manders in the least. He's proud of Lucan-Biddulph. "If the Donnelly massacre puts us on the map, then so be it," Manders says. "I believe it's very important to promote history and I don't think we pay enough attention to our heritage in general," Manders contends.

As I listen to Dave Manders speak about his family, his children, and his own childhood growing up in Lucan-Biddulph, there's no hint of reservation. Manders is confident, easy-going and has no trouble speaking about what was once thought to be a taboo subject in our town. He speaks quickly and without hesitation. Sometimes it's hard to keep up. There's definitely a passion he demonstrates in his tone. This forty-five-year-old father of two, is no doubt proud of his rural roots. He wants to make sure his boys feel the same way.

As we reflect on the Donnelly murders, Manders tells me a story about his escapades as a teenager. He says that he and his buddy Ron were thick as thieves. I laugh because I remember them vaguely in high school. Our paths didn't cross too often but I know the two were inseparable. He and Ron spent many a summer afternoon riding their bikes up and down the Roman Line. "We were on the hunt for beer bottles and there were a lot of them thrown along the ditch of Roman Line," Manders recalls. "Ron and I would

collect all the bottles we could carry, intent on cashing them in for some quick spending money. Every time we'd be on one of our beer bottle quests, tourists would pass by asking for directions to the homestead. We didn't even know where it was!" he laughs. Dave Manders admits he didn't really know much about the Donnelly story until about ten years ago. Maybe that has to do with relaxed attitudes, or the fact that just enough time has passed to bury old wounds. Now more than ever it's about getting the true facts out there Manders says. "We don't need to cater to the myths, it's about focusing on what really happened so that instead of shame, we feel pride,"

Sensitivity toward the town's tragic past has mellowed over the years. Residents aren't as cautious when asked to comment. Maybe it's because we represent a new generation of Lucan-Biddulph townspeople. Canada has come to be recognized as a nation of diplomacy and diversity. We've learned that to survive, it's necessary to embrace divergent culture. Those same ideals have found their way into our local beliefs. Nowadays, people are no longer looking to blame, but to respect the realities of history and to acknowledge there's something left to learn.

Bibliography

Fazakas, Ray. *In Search of the Donnellys*. Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 2012. 2nd rev. ed. Print.

The Donnelly Album. Willowdale: Firefly Books Ltd., 2002. Print.

McKeown, John. *A Donnelly Treatise: After the Massacre*. Guelph: John McKeowan, 2004. Print.

Salts, Robert J. *You Are Never Alone: Our Life on the Donnelly Homestead*. London: Robert J. Salts, 1996. 3rd ed. Print.