

Chapter Thirteen: What Really Happened at Gore Orphanage

By Bill Ellis

There is this place. . . it's kind of close to my town and it's called "Gore Orphanage" and it was back in the 1800s I believe. It was an old building, all that's left is the foundation now, but, uh, it was an old guy who ran it, Old Man Gore, they called him. He was a mean guy and all the kids in there they were really deprived I know that. . . the place caught on fire. The old man Gore he got away and he left all the kids in there to burn to death. OK. I guess they screamed and all they did was make a hell of a lot of noise and, uh, they all burned, that's all. And all that's left now is the foundation and supposedly if you go back there at night now, you can still hear the screams of the kids burning in the building.

This legend, in one form or another, is familiar to most teenagers in the Greater Cleveland area. Some versions blame the fire on villainous adults like Old Man Gore, malicious custodians, or greedy owners who collect the burnt orphans' insurance; others simply link the mysterious screams to an accidental fire. Other elements drop freely in and out. Some more creative informants elaborate on the supernatural phenomena said to be witnessed on the site: the smell of smoke, the roar of flames, the flickering of the orphans' ghosts as, covered with flames, they race desperately through the woods. And, of course, the rag-tag crew of adolescents' boogies also congregates there: the Headless Motorcycle Man, the Hook Man, the shotgun-toting farmer trying to kill kids, even Big Foot.

The legend is in essence an accurate recounting of one of the worst school disasters in the history of the United States, the Lake View Public School fire of 1908, in which 176 elementary school children and teachers were killed. The contemporary legend, as it turns out, combines elements from urban residents' oral accounts of the real fire with rural traditions circulating at least since the turn of the century about a spooky house where small children also died a tragic death. Gore Orphanage, then, transports urban fears to a rural setting and, by doing so, exorcises them from the urban and suburban worlds of the teenagers.

Legend-Tripping and the Swift Mansion

The site identified as Gore Orphanage is one of the focal points in north central Ohio for a popular adolescent rite of rebellion—a legend-trip. Everywhere across Ohio, teenagers gather together, tell spooky stories about a local site, and then travel by car to see the place for themselves. The destinations of these legend-trips are invariably rural, however, and most are located along sparsely populated roads. Those in or near major cities appeared in undeveloped parks or along rural-seeming streets. The stories attached to these sites vary widely but fall into three general categories.

By far the most popular one involves persons who died violent or accidental deaths and who haunt the place of their deaths (motif E411.1O). A second popular subject was the haunted graveyard, with the common motif being the return of the dead to punish those who disturb graves (E235). A third type of site features uncanny persons or creatures, some supernatural, some merely bizarre or eccentric. Witches, werewolves, zombies, and ghouls lurk around some places; but the more popular threats are maniacs and escaped mental patients who prowl around "parking" roads, looking for unwary carloads of teenagers to liquidate.

What really occurred is more complicated than most participants realize. Local historians over and over have debunked the legend, explaining that no such fire ever occurred at the site the teenagers visit. Nevertheless, several factors made the Lorain County countryside an appropriate place to relocate the fire. First the atmospheric name suggests not only a gathering of children already touched by death (orphans) but also the blood and gore of the disaster itself.

Although historians point out that there never was such a place as Gore Orphanage, Gore Orphanage Road does exist. It extends nearly the length of Lorain County, from its southern boundary almost to Lake Erie, losing itself in the outskirts of the small town of Vermilion. For most of its length, it is a typical Midwestern

country road: flat, straight, sparsely inhabited, uneventful. The romantic name, however, records no local memories of gruesome events, or even of any Old Man Gore. Rather, the road was originally laid out along the boundary line dividing Lorain County from its western neighbor, Huron County. When a surveying error was discovered, a thin strip of land resembling the gore of a dress had to be annexed to Lorain. The route then became known as Gore Road.

There was also a public school of sorts on Gore Road. In 1902, The Reverend John Sprunger, a Lutheran minister from Bern, Indiana, moved to the area, purchased several abandoned farms along Gore Road, and started the Light of Hope Orphanage. Supported by free will, non-sectarian contributions, the institution trained orphaned and destitute children to do agricultural work and housekeeping. It operated uneventfully for twelve years; after Sprunger's death it collapsed into bankruptcy and the children were resettled into other homes. One of the old dormitories may have burned--no records from the place survive--but historical sources agree that no catastrophe occurred there.

To find local traditions of tragedy--and the site of the legendary Gore Orphanage--one must pass the real orphanage's location on the heights above the Vermilion River. Travelling north, the road suddenly curves sharply right, then left, and plunges 150 feet down a ravine into what is locally known as Swift's (or Swiss) Hollow. There at the side of the road the daylight visitor finds a well-trampled footpath, liberally marked with empty beer cans, discarded plastic six-pack rings and condoms, and paper beer cases. Following these, one finds first a single sandstone column at the edge of the woods, still upright but carved all over with initials and graffiti.

A few yards further is the ruin of a Greek Revival house, the Swift Mansion. Zigzagged among the underbrush lie sandstone blocks of surprising size, including several fallen columns, the remains of a stone well, and extensive brickwork and stonework foundations. This is the spot, according to legend, where the children burned and their screams still do fill the air. Today, the Ohio Turnpike (Interstate 80) crosses the Vermilion River a mile and a quarter away. When the wind is right, the sound of trucks crossing the bridge is blown down the ravine, echoing and reechoing from the sides until it becomes a ghostly wail, scarcely recognizable as mechanical in origin.

This ruin, impressive by moonlight, has an equally impressive history. Built in 1840-42 by Joseph Swift, a wealthy Massachusetts farmer, the house was one of the most fashionable on Ohio's upper tier. It had fourteen rooms, including "two front rooms with parquet ceilings and floors colors." The front boasted French-style doorframes and four marble columns, made in Troy, New York, and shipped to the site by boat and oxcart. Surrounding the house were acres of lawns and an extensive ornamental garden, which gave the mansion its family name, "Rosedale," though neighboring farmers preferred to call it "Swift's Folly."

The Wilber Family: Beginnings of a Legend

Indeed, Swift proved unwise. The bottomland gave him rich harvests, but he invested his savings in worthless railroad stock and, penniless, was forced to sell his house and leave the area in 1865. Nicholas Wilber and his family, natives of New York, then occupied the house until the early years of this century. Contemporary records portray him as a "progressive citizen," a farmer and active politician. But oral history is unanimous in describing him as the leader of a group of Spiritualists and asserts that one of the great front rooms was specifically given over to seances. One local historian notes that "many wild and weird stories were told about the place during and after their occupancy."

This local tradition, tracing back perhaps before the turn of the century, is probably the most significant link between the ruined house and the Collinwood fire. The Wilbers allegedly were in the habit of calling the spirits of small children back to earth during their seances. Nicholas Wilber's son, Miller, had four children, aged two to eleven, who died during the course of seven days (January 13-19, 1893) at the height of a diphtheria epidemic. Residents insist that they died at the Swift Mansion and were buried there. The tragic deaths of these four children, tightly packed into a week of horror for their relatives, were vividly remembered by this tightly-knit farming community.

Nicholas Wilber died in 1901, and the house thereafter sat vacant. The deaths of the younger Wilber's children grew increasingly confused with rumors about the elder Wilber's experiments with the hereafter, providing the impetus for the supernatural legends surrounding the abandoned house. One local historian mentions "neglected children's graves" along the Vermilion River's edge and comments that "their spirits were said to appear frequently at the seances held in the house. This may have led to the belief that the house, after it was finally abandoned as a home, was haunted."

In any case, as early as 1905 teenagers seeking a taste of the supernatural began to haunt the house. In time, youngsters began to take their first automobiles to "Gore Road" (as it was then called) to see if they could get them up the steep ravine without stalling or negotiate the sharp curves at the top and bottom without crashing. This done, the next test of bravery was "to go into the Swift Mansion at night and prove that you weren't scared of the haunted house." One older resident, who recalled being taken to the "haunted house" in horse and buggy around 1908, gave this account:

You heard about the Wilburs [sic]?

They were the ones who had the seances?

No, no, they were the ones that had the four children that died in four days.

Did they die in the house?

In their mother's arms. But not in the Orphanage. Mr. Wilbur helped them build that orphanage on the count of losing those children. And Mrs. Wilbur went insane over it, naturally . . . you know what she'd do. It's terrible, make you sick. She set the table three times a day and passed food to those kids just as if they were sitting there. Give you the creeps. An at night, she'd take the lamp, she'd light the lamp and she'd go up and say, "Time for bed, children come on." And go up the stairs with the lamp and put those kids to bed. And some people would go and watch it you know.

The orphanage, having acquired the Wilber fields, allowed the mansion to deteriorate, and when it in turn disbanded, the land was sold to Cleveland real estate speculators. Architectural historians visited the house but recorded that it had become sadly dilapidated. One noted, "it became the "Haunted House" and was regarded as fair game for all manner of vandalism. Roofs sagged, a column lay across the lawn, doors were torn from their hinges, walls were disfigured with names." In December 1923, just as efforts to purchase and restore the old house were beginning, it burned down, apparently through the work of a vandal or a careless drifter using the house for shelter. So the Swift Mansion was regarded as a place where children died and their spirits lurked, and it was destroyed by fire.

Still, some forty years passed before the site was renamed Gore Orphanage and it became the object of the present legend. The ruins of the mansion were stripped by residents but, according to at least one account, even the bricks carried with them memories of the place's uncanny past. One informant, familiar with the modern version, also recorded that his mother, who had visited the site earlier, associated the legends with the Wilbers: "they had five boys that died from diphtheria. And they buried them behind the fireplace in the house. The stones or the bricks that they used in the fireplace are now in the Tipton's house. . . . It's a new house and Mrs. Tipton's mother, she said that at first you could hear screams, sort of like they were right there. And all these kids in the whole family [the Wilbers?] were supposed to be psychic, you know, and be able to have all these weird occurrences and everything. They could bring the kids back after they died."

The Real Disaster

On March 4, 1908, in the Cleveland suburb of Collinwood (now incorporated into the East Cleveland inner city), 335 pupils between the ages of six and fourteen were in classes when the janitor noticed smoke coming from the basement, curling out from beneath the front stairwell. He sounded an alarm, and the children, well-trained in fire drills, began marching down the stairs toward the front exit. But by the time they had assembled, the front stairwell was blocked by flames. According to witnesses, the children at the front broke from the lines and tried "to fight their way back to the floor above, while those who were coming down shoved them mercilessly back into the flames below." Those who made it to the rear exit

found it locked. Outside rescuers unlocked it but found it opened inward, so it was impossible to move against the press of dozens of desperate bodies. When the door was finally broken down, one bystander said,

we thought that the work of getting the children out would be easy, but when we attempted to release the first one we found it was almost impossible to move them at all. We succeeded in saving a few who were near the top but that was all we could do. The fire swept through the hall, springing from one child to another, catching their hair and the dresses of the girls. Their cries were dreadful to hear.

The contemporary legend undoubtedly preserves details from the historical event. The status of the building as a public institution, the rapid spread of the fire, the trapping of many children inside are all details common to the real disaster but not typical of local legends like "Crybaby Lane." Further the presence of malicious arsonists--supervisors landowners, janitors, or "Old Man Gore"--arguably stems from the rumors that spread soon after the Collinwood fire that it had been set deliberately. In fact, the school's janitor, a German-American named Herter, was accused of setting the blaze (though he lost four children in the fire and was badly burned trying to rescue one), and for a time he was detained in protective custody to keep residents from lynching him.

The death toll, estimated at 176, devastated the community and left deep scars in the memories of those living in the Cleveland area. In particular, the uncertainty over the fire's cause left the survivors with mixed feelings of anger and anxiety over whether children were truly safe in public institutions. One editorialist summed up the emotions by saying that the disaster represented a base betrayal of childhood by its natural protectors. The children in the Collinwood school had been told that if they followed the rules of their fire drill, they would be safe in any emergency.

Strangely, though, mention of the disaster in local histories is nearly impossible to find. None of the informants who knew the Gore Orphanage legend (the oldest of whom was born two generations after the disaster) consciously connected it with the Collinwood disaster, and none of the historians of Lorain County explained the legend by alluding to the real-life fire. It is as if the event were so horrible that it was deliberately blotted out of the area's history, only to emerge later--and somewhere else--in the form of legend.

At first, it seems strange that the story would be retold at the place called Gore Orphanage, which is some forty miles west of the Lake View School and in a rural setting. To be sure, the disaster's original site is now not only totally obliterated, the neighborhood itself has been absorbed by Cleveland's black community. Since the legend-trip is almost exclusively a white middle-class activity, these factors alone might have forced the disaster to "move" in adolescents' minds.

The final stage in the legend's development must have occurred in the late 1960s, as the growth of Cleveland drove white families, with their submerged memories of the school fire, away from the center city and into a growing complex of suburbs on every side. The Swift Hollow legend, already analogous to the Collinwood disaster, merged with the other story to form a stable entity: a public orphanage on the site where the Wilber children died; arson; a massive loss of life; screams; the return of the children's spirits. This site became popular and subsumed any other traditions in the West Cleveland area that would express anxieties of the original disaster.

Tellingly, though, a nearly identical legend circulates in the East Cleveland suburbs, connected with the United Methodist Children's Home in Berea, an institution still in operation:

Umm I-I think it's in '65, I'm not sure. It sounds, '65 sounds right. But it was, the night was really weird about the story. It was an orange, fiery sky, the whole sky was just orange. And umm--this orphanage caught on fire, arson and in this--they say the top room, there was--babies, just tons of babies in there, and it was really weird because, like the way the house caught on fire, and the babies screaming, you could hear it for miles. . . . And you could hear these babies screaming. . at the top of their lungs, this piercing screaming at the fire and it says every year whenever that umm, day of the fire, every year you can hear

these babies screaming in the wind. And supposedly the sky is that color.

Like the historian in Lorain County, the current employees of the Methodist Home are mystified by the story, since no fire or similar disaster ever occurred there. The lack of any similar legends in Ohio outside the Cleveland area demonstrates that these stories are independent transformations of the real disaster.

Conclusions

Although literal-minded historians might conclude that the Gore Orphanage legend is a collection of alcohol- or drug-induced visions and borrowings from other adolescent legends, in fact the Swift Mansion was the ideal place for urban history to resurface in oral tradition. Already associated with the tragic deaths of children and with the return of their screaming, restless ghosts, its secluded nature and the ominous sound of the road's name suited it well for the purpose. But by transforming a real fire into a legendary one, teenagers simultaneously changed history into archetype.

While some (correctly) insist on the story's essential truth, many others find it irrelevant whether Gore Orphanage really existed or whether anyone really died there--and many of them actually admit that the screams they hear are really caused by trucks crossing a bridge. Rather, adolescents are celebrating their fears of a death like those of the fictional orphans and the real Collinwood children. By locating the disaster in a remote place and recasting the victims as orphans, the legend-trippers can confront the threat of their own death and prove that they are not paralyzed by it. And, since authorities can prove that neither Gore Orphanage nor the Children's Home were sites of real disaster, participants can doubly protect themselves by admitting that the catastrophe celebrated is "not for real." At worst, adolescents leave fears behind in the night, returning by daylight to the city with its public schools and fire drills not so far different from those at Lake View.

Local legends and legend-trips help teenagers come to grips with this basic reality, turning elements of real-life horror into part of a ritual of orderly disorder. By carousing, flirting with danger, and testing their limits, to the tune of synthetic screams produced by I-80, West Cleveland adolescents reaffirm their ability to enjoy life even though it passes. The horror they name is fictitious, a ghostly howl in the midnight hours, but the horror they learn to face is the banal violence of daylight, the AP statistics of automobile accidents, disease, tragic fires, and explosions, and lives casually snuffed in the cause of national security. The fire drill bell needs to be tested every so often--just in case. So, too, does one's capacity to be human--to enjoy life in the face of death.

That's what really happens at Gore Orphanage.

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