

# Echoes of a Haunting

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In a recent lecture by Dr. Tim Barth to the ASUP, he touched upon the work of Father Alphonsus Trabold who was his parapsychology mentor at St. Bonaventure's University in New York and Alex Tanous, a gifted psychic and researcher. These two men collaborated on the Hinsdale (NY) haunting case in the 1970s which might serve as a classic investigation of its day.

In reviewing the book, *Echoes of a Haunting* by Clara Miller, the firsthand account of this extraordinary case, I came upon most of the problems I have identified in similar situations. The book, probably the best account of what happened in the house during the haunting, is a first person and rather folksy interpretation. It mirrors some common problems, the first being a topic that I often lectures on myself, the lack of a working lexicon in the study of the paranormal. Miller does a fairly good job of telling the story of her family, but lacks the basic knowledge of paranormal investigating to make it all that it could have been. For instance, she hates the word "haunting" and prefers the term "disturbed house," when talking about the physical property, which is as I will explain, the center of the phenomenon.

If you lack a standard lexicon, it is impossible to convey the facts in a case efficiently, so I found myself "interpreting" the terms used by the author. The facts are, for the most part, all there but often buried under interpersonal conflicts that had to be an integral part of the dynamics at hand. Having a house filled with teenagers and their friends can be stressful enough, while adding classic signs of both poltergeist and other paranormal occurrences on a daily basis over several years is bound to be disastrous. But again, the lack of a common language plays havoc in the telling of the story effectively. For instance, the author continues to refer to Fr. Trabold's activities in the house as an Exorcism, but the good father, who was well known in paranormal circles, never performed such a ritual in the house. Just to set the record straight, you can have a case of demonic possession of a *person*, where an Exorcism is possibly warranted, but houses can't be correctly identified as being possessed or exorcised. A house can however be *infested*, at which time you would perform a cleansing, which is found in the same section of the ritual as the prayers for Exorcism, but these are two different matters entirely.

While Fr. Trabold was a trained Exorcist, he would no more undertake the use of the Roman Ritual of Exorcism alone than he might attempt to negotiate a trek through the Himalayas without a fully prepared team of mountaineers. To be clear, anyone can suggest that an Exorcism is in order, but only the diocesan bishop can approve it after a careful investigation by experts who agree it is ecclesiastically a necessity, at which time a specially trained *team* is assembled to do the work.

What apparently happened in this case was a ritual house blessing (several times), a blessing of

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the family and in one case (although not identified as such) it sounds like Fr. Trabold and Alex Tanous undertook the Roman Ritual for a Cleansing, which is a bit more formal, but certainly not an exorcism! This is a perfect example of an author who is lacking the proper lexicon.

It should be noted that Fr. Trabold could undertake all of those matters without further supervision or direction by the diocese, but if there had been a real exorcism, I can guarantee that the documentation would be voluminous and easily located today.

That being said, the Hinsdale case is still a classic, for no other reason that there is a body of evidence and eyewitness accounts that suggests a half dozen or more separate paranormal situations, not to mention a full blown poltergeist, which is never really pinned down to one specific member of the family as its center, although three come to mind as I read the saga, all young, teenage girls! I suspect that both Fr. Trabold and Alex Tanous had given this serious consideration, although the documentation simply no longer exists and possibly the family did not wish to uncover that trail.

Before we begin to sound too superior in this matter, it is important to note that all of this activity was taking place in the early 1970s, long before any of our standardized tests or analytical technology existed; no tri-field meters, Mel Meters, non-contact thermometers or environmental gear, not even video recording existed back then and the number of trained “experts” were being counted as a relative handful, Tanous and Trabold among them. This is the era of simple observation and as we confirmed in this instance, notes, journals, film and audio has been lost, strayed or have been stolen. What little anecdotal evidence collected is very subjective; how “cold” is a cold spot, what is the viewer’s definition of an apparition dancing in the field, partially transparent, vs. the apparition of a fully formed teenage boy walking up a road, who simply vanishes from view? Interesting? Yes! Even tantalizing, but often reported in different language, from one witness to another, so it is difficult to quantify.

The truly interesting part of this saga is that evidence has been lost by otherwise prestigious organizations since the conclusion of the original case. Film shot by New York University for the ASPR has vanished. The ASPR, the most noteworthy institution of its kind, can’t recall any of this material. The Alex Tanous Foundation was the most helpful in my search, but the actual notes are no long around and we are left to several published notations from Tanous’ books to rely upon. If both he and Fr. Trabold had not mentioned the filming at Hinsdale for the ASPR, one might wonder if it ever really happened. Without the film, there is no real visual record of the conditions alluded to in Miller’s book.

Today, there is renewed interest in the case; at least one major production company wants to retell the story, even though the “story” is at this time one of anecdotal snippets and hearsay, which is

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not a good place to start in telling any “true story.” One could take the viewpoint that everything reported was somehow paranormal, including the giant number of automobile related accidents and breakdowns retold in the book. But the fact is that we are talking about a large family with limited resources who were forced to drive \$100 cars, so breakdowns, steering malfunctions, and loss of control by younger drivers could well be something other than paranormal.

It is always a good rule to follow the wisdom of the late author of the *Mothman Prophecies*, Howard Keel, who was the acknowledged master of the “fill,” in book writing. Keel could well take virtually any one of my training lessons and turn it into a full length book simply by the judicious addition of “fill.” In *Mothman*, he does this perfectly. The actual story of Pt. Pleasant and its dozen or so witnesses would make a routine paranormal report of about 50 pages, about the same length as a “Reveal” document by the ASUP today. But if you mix in the dubious folklore of Native America curses, the Men in Black, as well as the added UFO related stories and anecdotal pieces of the strange goings on in New York, you suddenly find yourself reading a 250 page book. In *Echoes of a Haunting*, Miller follows this concept, filling in the spaces between the real meat of the book, with down-home memories of friendly visits, neighborly get-togethers, sleepovers attended by local kids and the inclusion of even the most distant friend or long lost relative to stretch out the page count to 180.

To truly evaluate the case, you must first butcher the book, selecting the prime cuts from the bone, evaluating the “meat” of the story. Expectedly, that adds up to about one quarter of the book’s contents. Now you get to separate the various phenomenon, how many different apparitions are reported? What about poltergeist activity, can we narrow down who was at home for each event, thus narrowing things to one “focus” individual? Besides the obvious apparitions and poltergeist, what else is happening of a paranormal nature? In this case, there are plenty of oddities to go around and thankfully a pair of well trained observers present for much of the activity. But unfortunately, original notes are long gone and the formal report form did not yet exist, so we are forced to rebuild the case from what is left.

As stated previously, there is a good deal of conjecture that the physical area had a paranormal effect of automobiles, but the lack of real evidence, coupled with the relative age of the vehicles in question and the age of some of the drivers, the obvious effects of snow and ice covered roads, can only lead us to throw out all of that material as being other than paranormal... there goes half the book!

The poltergeist activity in the house was extensive, but no one ever verbalizes the obvious. I will add all of that up to the fact that it was 1973 and much of the poltergeist research was only in its formative stages then (remember the landmark Seaford Poltergeist was only a few years before this, in

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1959) and Bill Roll only began writing seriously about the phenomenon at Duke in the 70s. Rolls benchmark book *Poltergeists* was released in 1973, the same year as the Hinsdale case was unfolding. Nevertheless, it would be obvious to both Tanous and Fr. Trabold that some of the activity was similar in nature to other poltergeist cases. Trabold for one, an expert on Exorcism, would certainly be familiar with the similarities of poltergeist cases to early stage cases of demonic possession, but would naturally take a wait and see attitude, also knowing that a poltergeist has a relatively short existence.

The really interesting part of the Hinsdale case comes down to the obvious signs of a physical haunting! This is evident both inside and outside the house within the property lines of the original homestead. Easily, a good researcher today would be bogged down by the sheer number of different presences found at Hinsdale, by my quick count at least a dozen or more completely different apparitions, even before we start cataloguing the disembodied voices and distinct emotional feelings that had come and gone during the family's stay in the house.

You could expect that today, such a case would tie up the research team of any well trained group for a year, and that is with computers, databases and years of good training available today. In 1973 it would have been considered a life's work, if in fact anyone knew how back then. When the ASUP first introduced this kind of research, it was considered impossible by many, who were not prepared to spend days in a library or county clerks office. This is one of those cases where my mind wanders off to the perfect society, where a team could just move into the home and stay, with all their expenses paid by some unseen fund! You would have to be on scene 24/7 for months to do this kind of breakout case work.

I find it frustrating that we have all these apparitions floating about, with all the telltale evidence and clues surrounding them, yet no one has come up with just one name or even a relative time frame for their physical existence before death. We have obvious suicides, possible murders, drowning, unidentified bones, a missing graveyard and all sorts of spirit folk walking off to a barn that was no longer standing when these things were being manifested, yet we have no record of any name associated with them. Even given the time and place, that seems like some sloppy detective work, if any was really undertaken at all; in all honesty, the ASUP was one of the only groups with a research director with a Masters in Library Science and Research on staff, so we made it all look easy, but it was not!

Looking at how the ASUP does things today, the lack of an adequate floor plan of the house, an area map showing the house in relationship to the pond, woods, former barn site or vestiges of a previous house on the grounds is almost painful. Lack of first hand interviews of the residents, not to mention the lack of notes, reports, photos, etc. by the investigators is frustrating and the sheer number

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of reported psychics and researchers who go unnamed is mind boggling. If there were ever an argument for multiple, redundant back up files of case materials, this would be it!

Where today the gatekeeper is constantly vigilant to document who and what goes into and out of a case site, no one seemed to bother documenting the participants during major events in the house. No one writes down times of occurrences, at best all you have to work with is some vague reference to something happening, "in the evening," or "after bed time," etc. There are few environmental notations beyond the ambiguous "cold winter night," or "hot summer day!"

All and all, I have to report that Hinsdale, if even a fraction of the paranormal occurrences did actually occur, has to be considered one of the most haunted "modern" cases on record, such as the "record" appears to be. While the lack of documentation is frustrating, even the most anecdotal reports are tantalizing. One can only wish that the investigator's notes and reports would have survived their own passing.

The lack of information from ASPR and NYU is frustrating and brings the validity of their stature into question. How any organization could fund a film crew to document a case and then misplace the film is beyond my comprehension. Yes, material is often lost, strayed or stolen; cataclysmic disasters, fires and earthquakes occur and it for that reason that the ASUP has undertaken the multiple redundant file system at several locations to combat the loss of our most recent case files. We too have lost material over the years, mostly due to one major fire, which consumed paper files in New York, but honestly while things like that happen; it is frustrating to see it happen with such frequency, especially in research libraries.

Hinsdale as a benchmark may well be lost, which only raises the question of what the new documentary will be based upon. If it is based solely on the book by Clara Miller, it could not really be called a documentary, which by Webster's definition would have to be, "giving a factual representation in an artistic form." Producing a film based solely on that one book would not be a factual representation and the lack of original documentation makes the latter almost impossible. In order to work, someone will have to unearth other notes, documents or even film footage of the case recorded at the time of the occurrences. While no one claimed to have captured an apparition on film, even a few feet of film panning the geography of the area would be a start.

In the true consideration of archeology of course, 40 years is not a long time; foundations, lost graves, and the remnants of other structures should still be recoverable and while ghostly activity often ebbs and flows in cycles, access to the house itself may reveal more than some might think. While poltergeist activity would no longer exist, if indeed the "heart" of the house and grounds was so charged

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in 1973, it is reasonable to assume there is residue still there and once you fill the house with people again, you should have similar results. Note well that all of this activity happened in a house filled with teenagers! That is, I am certain, the key to all of the reported activity. Young minds are like fully charged batteries in a haunting case. If they exist, they will awaken with all of that power around them.

As for the possibility of possession in Hinsdale, I truly doubt it. Reports of Mesmerized teens notwithstanding, I have never seen a possession case where a subject's eye color could change, that would be an illusion and given the involvement of Fr. Trabold, I don't think it was an option. While admittedly the term exorcism is found in the remaining documents, there is nothing from Fr. Trabold or the diocese to suggest that was ever a possibility, so unless someone finds a letter signed by the Bishop of Buffalo, New York, so ordering such action, we have to assume that this is a case of mistaken vocabulary and nothing more. A cleansing perhaps, a blessing of the house and family, definitely, but not an exorcism!

So what we have in all fairness is one heck of a ghost story that lacks serious documentation, even though some of the most prestigious paranormal organizations of their day were involved, which if anything is the object lesson to be learned and one not lost on the ASUP, namely the need for the best possible investigative techniques and the most efficient way to save them for all time. If nothing else, that is the lesson to be learned from Hinsdale, which arguably may have been one of the most active hauntings in American History, yet it is relegated to the dust bin for lack of sustainable evidence. Hopefully, this will never happen again, if we all learn the lesson at hand!

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