

# Things That Go Bump In A Canadian Night

by Ronald Wolf

## Cornwall & Seaway Valley Tourism, Cornwall, ON

Prisons themselves are an extremely depressing place to be in. I'm not talking from experience, but prisons of yesteryear, where filled with agony, both the physical and mental types.

Anyone that they didn't know what to do with or children who were hard to handle were put in Jail. There were no hospitals or facilities for the aged or for those with special needs.

The Jailer would hire people off the street to guard the prisoners, when he wanted to have a day off; otherwise there were no guards. It wasn't until the early 1900's before they started separating men and women, children were sent to work houses and the "insane" were sent to hospitals. When these new regulations came into effect, then they hired guards. Guards were still untrained and certainly had no training in psychology. Remember, this was more than 140 years ago. There were no cries of the prisoners who could reach the sympathetic ears of the government.

The prisoners were considered lucky to survive another day only to live in almost inhuman conditions. For most inmates, they would die in prisons only to be buried nearby in unmarked graves. Their mental state might not have been the greatest upon entering prisons but one thing is for sure, if they did in fact leave with their lives, their mental state diminished only to have their anger fueled like a raging bonfire.

The District Courthouse and Gaol in Cornwall, ON, is one of the oldest public structures in Ontario and the fourth oldest in Canada. The gaol is a landmark and has been in use as a courthouse since 1833.

The first building was built in 1802. The small building was measured at 30 feet by 24 feet.

When the war of 1812 broke out the court house was used as barracks. This war time measure forced the courts to open in the local St. John's Church and neighborhood taverns.

In the winter of 1826 the building burned down making way to the second building which was built in 1833. It is the second building which has visitors of the past.

In 1833, a new court house and gaol was completed in the summer of 1833 at a total cost of 5,500 pounds (close to \$15 million in today's standards).

Over the next 169 years many renovations were added to the historic structure.

In 2002, the jail was closed and it is currently in the possession of Cornwall & Seaway Valley

Tourism. As of May 2005 tours are being offered to the history-interested public.

Barbara Matthews is the visitors services manager and Jail curator, for the past six years, who had experienced paranormal activity in the building.

"The first thing that happened to me was when I was walking down the hall to put the lights on and heard something like metal wheels on a trolley behind me. It kept getting louder and louder and closer and closer and when I turned around to look there was nothing there."

Unseen bodies could be heard whistling when no one was there; radios that would play music for 30 seconds and mysteriously turn off are just some of the experiences she had succumbed to over the years.

"There are more and more things happening all the time."

Although she does admit that she hasn't actually seen a spirit, she did hear cell doors slamming. Her desk is situated near the entrance and not in the jail itself. When the jail was visited by paranormal groups in the past and they did investigate the cell doors finding no evidence as to why the cell doors would slam.

Although the grounds are close to 200 years old, there were only five hangings there. The last hanging was in 1954. One year a fire broke out. Since the building was built on top of an army barrack, soldiers and animals perished in the flames. One part of the building was in fact built on top of a hanging yard where at least 200 bodies are laying.

Renay Dixon, visitor services assistant and tour guide of four years also works in the building that bumps in the night.

"When I was giving a tour, two other gentlemen we came across some really strong cigar smoke."

When she asked the men if they smelled the smoke "they looked at me as if I lost a couple of marbles."

There is a replica of the gallows in the jail and people would be taking pictures of the structure. "When they stepped in to the yard their digital cameras would stop working. Either their screens would freeze or their batteries would die," she stated.

Although she does believe the jail is haunted it doesn't make a difference when she goes to work. At times she does get the feeling the spirits doesn't want anyone in their jail.

Historic prisons are a great place not only for their history, but also for the things that go bump in a Canadian night.