



A Westmount Ghost Story: The Sissons Lane cottage

Description

A tale of a haunted farm house that once stood on what would become Saint Catherine Street West

By **Michael Walsh**

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Halloween – an annual celebration of ghosts and goblins. It is also a time to celebrate the beauty of autumn with pumpkins and hay stacks of all sizes decorating stairways and outdoor patios. Some of these are carved into elaborate ghostly faces; others are surrounded by effigies of witches placed along gardens transformed into storied graveyards.

This is also time one shares ghost stories – some purely fictional, and others passed down, over the years, from previous generations.

Interestingly, the City of Westmount, has its own unique ghost story documented in a painting and an associated letter, both currently stored in the city's archives. With Halloween quickly approaching, let us become acquainted with this story that forms a portion of Westmount's historical fabric.

Interestingly, the City of Westmount, has its own unique ghost story documented in a painting and an associated letter, both currently stored in the city's archives.

The story occurred on a plot of land named **Sissons Lane**; today incorporated into Saint Catherine Street. To place the lane's location in today's context, one must trace the development of Saint Catherine Street. Prior to 1801, the street (named chemin Saint-Jacques) traversed Westmount and terminated at Clarke Avenue.

Saint Catherine's street's continuation to Metcalfe Avenue was a narrow unpaved lane known as Little Saint Antoine



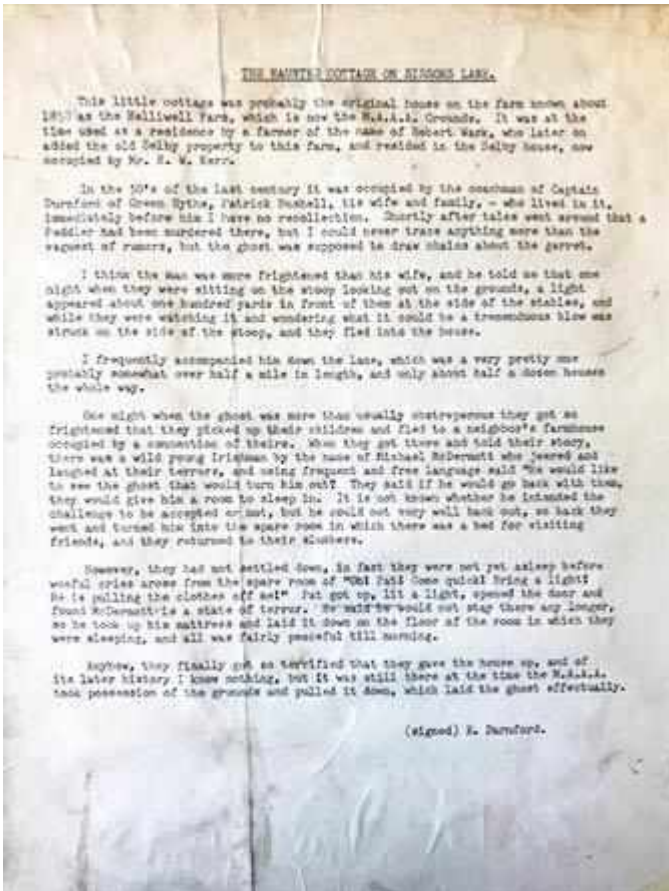
Road or Sissons Lane, opened in 1877, and ending in a toll gate at Cross Road. (Although Cross Road disappeared from the municipal map there is a lane, off Ingleside Avenue, that is referred to as Cross Lane).

“That the road inspector... to put the continuation of St. Catherine Street from the City limits... (to) the corner of the Little Saint Antoine Road or Sissons Lane in a passable condition for pedestrians...”

– Council Minutes, December 7, 1874

As such, the street was extended in 1880, known as “the continuation of Saint Catherine Street” with the required land expropriated from Wood, Clarke, Olivier avenues as well as Sissons Lane. By 1883 the road was macadamized, and one year later, the city renamed Sissons Lane to Saint Catherine West.

Now that we have a set the scene in terms of the former lane’s location, the story begins:



Sisson’s Lane (obverse)
Image: courtesy of the City of Westmount

This little cottage was probably the original house on the farm known about 1850 as the Helliwell (sic.) Farm, which is now the M.A.A.A. Grounds. It was at the time used as a residence by a farmer of the name of Robert Wark, who later added the old Selby property to this farm, and resided in the Selby house, now occupied by Mr. R. W. Kerr.



In the 50s of the last century it was occupied by the coachman of Captain Durnford of Green Hythe, Patrick Bushell, his wife and family. Who lived in it immediately before him I have no recollection. Shortly after tales went around that a Peddler had been murdered there, but I could never trace anything more than the vaguest of rumours, but the ghost was supposed to draw chains about the garret.

I think the man was more frightened than his wife, and he told me that one night when they were sitting on the stoop looking out on the grounds, a light appeared about one hundred yards in front of them at the side of the stables, and while they were watching it and wondering what it could be a tremendous blow was struck on the side of the stoop, and they fled into the house.

I frequently accompanied him down the lane, which was a very pretty one probably somewhat over half a mile in length, and only about half a dozen houses the whole way.

One night when the ghost was more than usually obstreperous, they got so frightened that they picked up their children and fled to a neighbour's farmhouse occupied by a connection of theirs. When they got there and told their story, there was a wild young Irishman by the name of Michael McDermott who jeered and laughed at their terrors, and using frequent and free language said "He would like to see the ghost that would turn him out!" They said if he would go back with them they would give him a room to sleep in. It is not known whether he intended the challenge to be accepted or not, but he could not very well back out, so back they went and turned him into a spare room in which there was a bed for visiting friends, and they returned to their slumbers.

However, they had not settled down, in fact they were not yet asleep before woeful cries arose from their spare room of "Oh! Pat! Come quick! Bring a light! He is pulling the clothes off me!" Pat got up, lit a light, opened the door and found McDermott in a state of terror. He said he would not stay there any longer, so he took up his mattress and laid it down on the floor of the room in which they were sleeping, and all was fairly peaceful till morning.

Anyhow, they finally got so terrified that they gave the house up, and of its later history I know nothing, but it was still here at the time the M.A.A.A. took possession of the grounds and pulled it down, which laid the ghost effectually.

(signed) E. Durnford

Much like H. G. Wells' "time machine", the story reaches us from ages past. Whether it is fact or fiction – the reader is left to decide. The larger question is: how will readers, two centuries hence, interpret this story?

With that thought in mind, I wish you a very "Happy Halloween".

Feature image: Sisson's Lane sketch, courtesy of the City of Westmount

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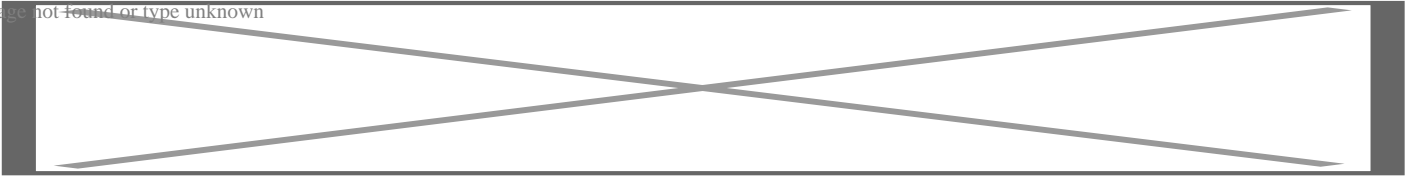
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Michael Walsh is a long-time Westmount resident. He is happily retired from nearly four decades in the field of higher education technology. A “professional student” by nature, his academic training, and publishing, include statistical methodology, mycology and animal psychology. During this period, he was also an officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. Prior to moving to Montreal, he was contracted by the Ontario Ministry of Education evaluating bilingual primary and secondary school programs. Today, he enjoys spending time with his (huge) Saint Bernard while discovering the city’s past and sharing stories of the majestic trees that grace the parks and streets. He can be contacted at michaeld2003@hotmail.com or through his blog [Westmount Overlooked](#)

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