



## Firebug Poltergeists

A poltergeist is said to be a sort of prankster entity, after the German word for a “noisy” (*poltern*) “spirit” (*geist*). Poltergeist phenomena include mysteriously thrown objects, strange noises, or unusual fires (Nickell 1995, 79). Those who promote belief in poltergeists often attribute the effects—fiery or otherwise—to the repressed hostilities of a child or other person in the vicinity, which are somehow manifested as kinetic energy, supposedly a psychic force (Fodor 1968, 51). Skeptics have a simpler explanation: they are the cunning pranks of a mischievous youth or disturbed adult. I have therefore attributed cases having such a *modus operandi* to what I call the “poltergeist-faking syndrome” (Nickell 2012, 331; Bartholomew and Nickell 2015, 129, 136–137).

An early example occurred in 858 CE near the German town of Bingen, located on the scenic Rhine River (along which, in 2002, I conducted several investigations<sup>1</sup>). There is too little evidence to indicate more than a cursory explanation for such a case at this remove, but it contained familiar elements: A farmhouse was assailed by showers of stones, crops were set ablaze after they were harvested, and the poltergeist even developed a voice (the source apparently hidden) that denounced the farmer for a variety of sins. Related in the Frankish chronicles

*The Annales of Fulda*, the case eventually ended as suddenly as it began (McCabe 1849, 2, 73; Wilson 2009, 83–84).

Although in this case fire was only one of the phenomena, in some poltergeist outbreaks it is the sole agent of disturbance. Here is a look at some notable historical examples I have investigated, albeit necessarily as very cold cases.

### Bladenboro Fire Poltergeist

This important case transpired in 1932 and went unsolved until 2016, when reporter Jimmy Tomlin engaged my interest with some news clippings (“Blazes” 1932; Bridger 1932; “Mysterious” 1932; “Very Puzzling” 1932; and others listed in Tomlin 2016). The outbreaks occurred in a house on Elm Street in the small town of Bladenboro, North Carolina. Police and others, including fire experts, were baffled by the fires that occurred over three days in the home of an elderly couple, Council H. Williamson and his wife, Lydia, together with their daughter Katie, aged about twenty-one.

Beginning on January 30 with a burning curtain and window shade in the dining room and continuing the following day with a set of bedclothes, a stack of papers stored in a closet, and a hanging pair of trousers, the rash of what would come to be twenty mysterious fires ended about noon on February 1. Soon, however, the fiery case went

cold and, according to Tomlin’s article for *Atlas Obscura*, remained unsolved (Tomlin 2016)—until I came to provide the probable solution.

An account of the Bladenboro case was offered by the notorious mystery-mongering writer Vincent H. Gaddis (1967, 188–189). However, relying on an earlier doubtful source, itself written a quarter century after the events, Gaddis makes serious errors. Many modern accounts of the Bladenboro fires, clearly copying Gaddis, repeat the misinformation, which helps make the case seem inexplicable. For example, Gaddis claims the fires continued in the house even after the Williamsons briefly moved out, and he imagines an elaborate scenario involving police, electricians, and arson and gas company experts being plagued by the further outbreak. In fact, volunteer guards having patrolled the bungalow through the night while the family stayed with friends, no further incidents occurred (“Very Puzzling” 1932).

Taking on the case, I soon saw from contemporary news sources that it was consistent with the hypothesis of the poltergeist-faking syndrome. Not only were the reported incidents attributable to a person in the house, but in fact they seemed to indicate the Williamsons’ daughter.

Corroboratively, the first fire, involving the dining room shade and curtain,

had begun “starting from the bottom of the shade” (Bridger 1932)—just where a person could easily reach. While fire attacked several articles of clothing, only in a single instance was one being worn and that was the dress of the daughter herself—further making her our suspect. And it seems that she was present—if perhaps surreptitiously so—for the other incidents as well.

Again and again in such poltergeist cases having sufficient activity, we observe that incidents tend to center on a particular suspect—or, rarely, suspects, as occurred for instance after fiery disturbances in a North Dakota rural schoolroom in 1944. Four pupils would come to admit they had been responsible, using matches. They lit and hurled lumps of coal, set fire to curtains and a wall map, and otherwise wreaked havoc over several days. They finally confessed that they and others had found their teacher—and then their parents and authorities—so gullible that they could not resist the mischief, and they thrived on the resulting excitement and publicity (Christopher 1970, 146–149).

The Bladenboro case is tame by comparison. Although the evidence for a probable explanation is not as detailed as desirable, it is nevertheless sufficient to demonstrate that the events are explainable by simple human agency and that that hypothesis wins easily over any invoking the paranormal. It follows the rule of Occam’s razor, that the hypothesis with the fewest assumptions is to be preferred. It is simply not necessary to suggest that a spirit may have somehow sparked (so to speak) combustion, when someone with matches is all that would have been required.

#### Flatrock ‘Haunting’

Another case—a reputed “haunting” that was really of the fire-poltergeist genre—took place in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador in 1954. (I learned of the case on a tour of the province that began with my participating in an episode of the popular TV series *MonsterQuest* [Nickell 2009] and took me to additional sites, including the ancient Viking settlement of L’Ance aux Meadows [Nickell 2016].)

The site of the mid-November outbreak had been the home of a Mike Parsons at Flatrock, north of Carbonear, on Conception Bay. According to a Canadian Press news report of December 11, 1954:

Over a two-week period the five members of the family were alarmed when the following incidents occurred at intervals of two or three days. A dictionary burst into flames for no apparent reason. A sack of sugar ignited of its own accord. A box of religious literature, stowed in an upstairs bureau, turned into a bonfire. A blaze appeared under the eaves of the house. The floorboards in one room of the house flared up. Finally, a doll was consumed in flames. (quoted in Butts 2010, 180)

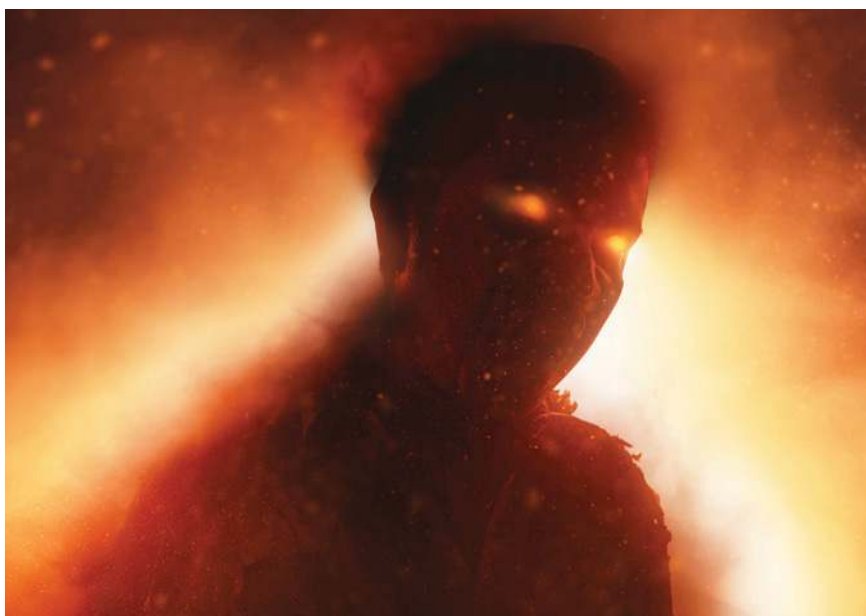
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A reporter touring the home was shown “the telling evidence of unnatural goings on”—as one ghost raconteur phrased it (Butts 2010, 181). An investigation was conducted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, but officers could find no explanation for the mysterious flames. They so informed the Attorney General who had no comment. Then in just two weeks, the excitement was over, and the strange case faded into obscurity.

The old accounts lack details that could provide useful clues to the actual source—now generally referred to as a *poltergeist*, although that term was not used in the news stories of the time. Instead, they refer to “mysterious fires,” a “rash of flames,” and the like.

As given by the accounts, the household consisted of Parsons, his wife, their daughter, a granddaughter, and Uncle Jim. The two men were milking cows during one incident and so are alibied, and Mrs. Parsons seems an unlikely poltergeist—statistically on account of age. That leaves only the daughter (presumably the mother of the grandchild), who was in the kitchen with her mother during at least one incident (involving a burning sack of sugar), and the granddaughter, about whom nothing was related. She appears to have been an adolescent, and so a possible suspect, but the matter is largely academic at this point.<sup>2</sup>

My old friend, John Robert Colombo—the erudite Toronto author,



editor, and poet—includes this case in his book *Mysterious Canada* (Colombo 1988, 5). He describes the pyromaniac poltergeist phenomenon as one “familiar to the curious ... the frightening one of mysterious fires which break out unexpectedly for no known reason.” But not knowing the motivation in this case—such as the need for attention or resentment of strict, religious parents—should not keep us from seeing that it was the work of a secretive and opportunistic *person* and is not fundamentally mysterious after all.

Such mystery as there is with fire poltergeists seems largely attributable to their rarity. As D. Scott Rogo (1979, 176) acknowledges, “We simply do not have the type of detailed data on them that we possess on more conventional cases.”

#### **‘Voodoo’ Fires of Alabama**

This next example—solved at the time—helps illuminate the preceding cases. And some minor puzzles it presents are ones I believe we can solve even at this late date.

The case was reported by the Associated Press and carried in an Alabama newspaper, *The Gadsden Times*, on Monday, September 15, 1958. The headline read, “Mystery Fires Cause Negro to Move Again.” Thus continued what D. Scott Rogo called, in his *The Poltergeist Experience* (Rogo 1979, 165), “one of the most bizarre poltergeist outbreaks ever recorded.”

The site was the Talladega, Alabama, cabin home of Calvin Tuck, thirty-two, his wife, and six children (ranging in age from six months to nine years). The fires had begun on August 25, with three small blazes. When they continued the next day, Tuck called the fire department, and on August 28, before reporters, spectators, firemen, and police, no fewer than seventeen separate blazes burst forth. As the horror continued, the family moved to a second home (that of Tuck’s brother) and then, on September 2, to a third (that of his father)—leaving fire damage in their wake each time.

By then, several fire officials and police were investigating what some of the former thought had some freakish ex-

planation and what the latter were convinced was the work of a clever arsonist. Several of the fire investigators agreed with the police. Rogo (1979, 167) states that “household items failed to show any telltale signs such as chemical residue,” but another source (Taylor 2002) cites an Alabama State Toxicology lab report that mentioned finding traces of phosphorous. This was apparently dismissed out of hand, because the question arose, who in the family would have known how to obtain and use (e.g., to emulsify and spray) the chemical?

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During the affair, Calvin Tuck consulted an “herb doctor” (a voodoo practitioner) who provided Tuck with a magic spell and instructions for making a “medicine” that would purportedly serve as an antidote to the fire. Not surprisingly, it did not work, but it led to the case being dubbed “The Voodoo Fires of Alabama” (Rogo 1979, 166, 168). As Talladega Fire Chief W.C. Holmes pointedly observed: “There’s no such thing as magic fires. ... Those fires are being caused by something or somebody.” He suspected the latter.

Then, on September 22, police at Anniston announced that the case was solved. Nine-year-old Calvin Tuck Jr. had admitted he was the culprit. The boy confessed that he had used matches to set the blazes, and two of his younger

siblings corroborated his statement, having known what Calvin Jr. was doing. Thus, the four-week rampage that had resulted in some fifty-two blazes came to an end—a fact that underscores the truth of the confession. Young Calvin’s motive had been to cause his family to return to Birmingham, from which they had moved and where all his friends still lived (Rogo 1979, 167; Taylor 2002).

Nevertheless, some of the staunch believers in the reality of poltergeists in general and in the Alabama fire poltergeist in particular, would have none of this. D. Scott Rogo (1979, 167–168) argued that confessions in such cases were not uncommon but should not be believed when they could not explain the unexplainable. Troy Taylor (2002) echoes this view, only grudgingly accepting the possibility that the confession could be genuine. He and Rogo each attempt to unsolve the mystery.

Here are some of the arguments believers use to keep the mystery alive:

- Calvin Jr. was “often absent when the fires appeared” (Taylor 2002). However, for “absent” we should say “unseen” because the rambunctious and deliberately secretive child’s whereabouts were simply unknown. Magician Milbourne Christopher (1970, 157) sagely advises that “poltergeists” were commonly not where they said they were but instead where the mischief occurred.

- Calvin Jr. reportedly described using matches as well as placing smoldering rags so they would later burst into flames. If true, this could explain how two witnesses “saw a fire start literally in front of their eyes.” Taylor (2002) thought this technique too clever for a nine-year-old, but why? The boy was obviously very clever.

- Many of the fires seemed to ignite at or near the cabin’s ceiling, “out of the reach of a young child” (Rogo 1979, 164, 168). I suspect the boy had snuck upstairs where he put matches through spaces between floorboards.

- Dubious comments were made about the “color of the flames,” supposedly precluding matches (Rogo 1979, 168). However, the flame color would have been due to the composition of the burning material—not that of the match that lit it.

• Regarding the traces of phosphorous (supposedly unavailable to a boy), those would surely have come from the “kitchen matches” (the strike-anywhere type) of the era. Therefore, the traces of that chemical actually help corroborate Calvin Jr.’s story.

It seems obvious that believers in poltergeists are desperate to dismiss rational explanations, yet science has never authenticated a single such entity. We can see that poltergeists depend on a lack of knowledge for their very existence. Facts are a threat to them.

### Macomb Firebug

A look at one more case emphasizes the difference a confession makes. This outbreak took place in August 1948 on the farm of the Charles Willey family outside Macomb, Illinois. According to Vincent Gaddis (1967, 195), “No story of strange fires ever received more publicity.”

The blazes began by selectively attacking paper. Brown spots would appear on the home’s wallpaper, then spread and burst into flames. This phenomenon (reminiscent of that in the Alabama case) reportedly occurred on walls and ceilings. Fire also attacked shelf paper in a cupboard, newspapers stored in a box in the chicken house, and more newspapers found smoldering elsewhere on a shelf. Curtains and other cloths were attacked. Meanwhile the fires intensified, and the family fled to a vacant building nearby. Then on Saturday, August 14, their home burned, and the next day their first barn burned. Several fires sprang forth on the milkhouse walls on Tuesday, and on Thursday the second barn burned down (Gaddis 1967, 196–197; “Mystery Fires” 1948).

On August 30, the pyromania ceased. At the house where the family had moved, a deputy fire marshal had set a box of matches in view, placed in a certain position. Later, it had been moved, and one of the two children in the household, Willey’s thirteen-year-old niece, was nearby. An hour’s grilling by the deputy marshal and a state’s attorney yielded a confession from the very unhappy girl.

Named Wanet, she and her eight-year-old brother lived on the farm with their father, Arthur McNeil, who was Willey’s brother-in-law. He was divorced but had custody of the children, whom Mrs. Willey (their Aunt Lou) was helping to care for. The children’s mother resided in Bloomington.

Wanet wanted to be with her mother. She missed her and the pretty clothes she never had. A psychiatrist confirmed that the confession was genuine, explaining, “She’s a nice little kid caught in the middle of a broken home” (quoted in Gaddis 1967, 198).

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Things soon improved all around. The Wileys received insurance money for their home and barns. And Wanet was placed in the custody of her maternal grandmother, tying her more closely to her own mother. The “poltergeist” went away—lurking only in the minds of believers still intent on pseudoscientific explanations. ■

### Notes

1. See Nickell 2012, 33–34.
2. CFI Libraries Director Tim Binga greatly assisted with research in this area. The daughter’s name “Josephine” seems an error (or perhaps her

other name), based on family information listing her as Eileen, born December 19, 1913, and so about forty-two at the time of the incidents. (See “Michael Joseph Parsons” 2019.)

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