raging inferno had claimed the hotel, three homes, John Wilson's smithy, a tavern and a carpenter's shop. The three milliners were the only human casualties.

Rumours followed that the fire was a deliberate act, likely set to drive protestant James Small from this Catholic stronghold. A second fire, this one taking hold in Small's temporary residence two months later, seemed to confirm the suspicions and sent the man fleeing from town for good. The Adjala Council expressed outrage and disgust and they offered a $5,000 reward for the conviction of the guilty party. George C. Hughes, editor of the *Cardwell Sentinel*, was equally aghast, writing: "if he [the culprit] be found, Judge Lynch will adjudicate, and hell contains no corner hot enough for him thereafter." It was his belief, and that of many others, that the culprit deserved "neither mercy in this world nor in the world to come."

Many pinned the blame on the infamous Black Donnellys of Lucan, Ontario. The seven Donnelly brothers were known as bullies with a hatred for Protestants and a long list of assaults — and murders — to their credit. Yet no one would arrest them, so frightful was their reputation. It is well known that the Donnellys were close friends of James Feheley. It is also well known that the Donnellys occasionally visited Ballycroy for some rowdy fun. Perhaps inevitably, suspicion for the fire that destroyed Small's Hotel fell upon their shoulders, as it was known several of the clan had been in the vicinity around the time of the burning. Arson certainly

wouldn't have been out of character for these thugs.

In an effort to heal its wounds, the grieving village raised a headstone in memory of the deceased in the cemetery at St. James's Church in nearby Colgan. It reads: "To the memories of Mary A. Fanning, aged 32 years; Margaret H. Dakey, aged 24 years; and Bridget Burke, aged 28 years, who perished in the conflagration which, on April 29, 1875 destroyed the village of Ballycroy, this monument is erected by their afflicted relatives."

The guilty individuals were never found, and Ballycroy was never the same again. The destroyed businesses were never rebuilt, while others were shifted to Palgrave and Alliston, both of which, unlike Ballycroy, had recently been reached by the railroads. From a peak population of almost 400 in 1875, the town dwindled to 200 souls in 1881 and a mere 150 by 1900. Railways were the new lifeblood of the economy, and those towns that were unfortunate enough not to be linked were at a severe disadvantage.

The area's first business, the sawmill belonging to Samuel Beatty, was also the last. It continued to service the area even after Ballycroy had all but disappeared. The last owner was W. J. Francis, who purchased the mill in 1918 and continued its operation for another 20 years.

When the Orangeville Road (Highway 9) and the Toronto-north road (Highway 50) were straightened in the twentieth century so as to bypass Ballycroy entirely, the sleepy hamlet was turned into a virtual ghost town. The population subsequently dwindled to less than 50.

Some believe that the list of Ballycroy's misfortunes — and those of the Small family in particular — don't end here, however. On December 2, 1919, millionaire Ambrose Small, the nephew of former innkeeper James Small, disappeared in broad daylight from the streets of Toronto. He was at the height of his power and prestige at the time, without any debts or business concerns. But did he have enemies, perhaps some that dated back to his uncle's problems in Ballycroy? We'll never know, but the coincidence is tantalizing. Ambrose Small was never seen again.

Ballycroy's troubles are finally behind it. Today, it is a tranquil shadow of its former boisterous glory. In fact, it's hard to believe that this location was the scene of so much drama. Ironically, the road realignment that helped doom the community has helped preserve its remnants, protecting it from the kind of residential redevelopment that has seen so many pioneer villages destroyed. As a result, much remains to remind us of Ballycroy's past — both good and bad.

Opposite the former McClelland general store, recently rebuilt into a handsome residence, stands a weathered sign announcing Ballycroy. James Small's hotel was immediately to the right and traces of its foundations can be seen amidst a clump of trees. Farther to the right runs the old Orangeville Road, now overgrown by weeds. Less than 65 feet (20 metres) along the road, beside a private driveway, stands a workshop that was once an outbuilding of the notorious Feheley hotel.

Farther on, a careful search will reveal cement curbing and, in the fields alongside the road, several foundations. About 300 metres (325 yards) down this forlorn path is a lone surviving home standing back from the road, partially obscured by bushes.

Removed from the advance of civilization and surrounded by land with an almost timeless feel to it, Ballycroy is one of the best-preserved ghost towns in Central Ontario. It is not hard to lose yourself here; a walk down the old road feels like the distance is measured in years rather than miles. You will be transported back in history to an era when Ballycroy thrived, and you can almost sense the hopes and dreams of those who settled here — dreams that were ultimately shattered by religious violence and twists of fate.

The Ghosts of Ballycroy

Ballycroy, it seems, is not merely an abandoned village, but a real ghost town. Ghosts have been known to suddenly materialize before startled witnessed and then melt back, just as suddenly, into the silent shadows. Could the echoes of Ballycroy's violent past in fact be real — the shades of former villagers who have been unable to pass on to the afterlife and instead remain trapped in their former homesteads?

Among the hundreds of individuals who stayed in the rooms of James Small's ill-fated hotel were the three young women employed as milliners in the village hat factory. They were hard workers, kind and amiable, with full lives ahead of

them. Sadly, their futures were cut short by the flames that night in 1875.

The monument in honour of the three women that the villagers erected in a local cemetery was their way of putting their grief to rest. But, according to legend, rest was something that the three milliners could not find. The ghosts of Mary Fanning, Margaret Dakey and Bridget Burke began to haunt the site of their deaths, and some claim a dark ambiance surrounds the location of the former hotel. Their spirits are said to wander the area singly, so it is unknown how many of the girls remain restless in death. It could be just one, or perhaps all three.

Regardless of their number, appearances of the ghostly milliners are often preceded by the aroma of smoke and a patch of great warmth, residual energy left over from the devastating fire that cost them their lives.

Whereas the ghostly milliners were born of tragedy, no one is certain of the origins — or even identity — of another Ballycroy ghost. One of the few original buildings to remain in Ballycroy is the former McClelland general store and hotel, now lovingly restored as a private residence. The handsome two-storey structure, itself a relic of a bygone era, is home to an unidentified woman from the past who refuses to pass on to the other side.

Ballycroy resident and *de facto* town historian Dave Bond relates the tale:

"Some time ago an elderly woman was a guest in the old