

UNLUCKY THIRTEEN:

A Survey of House Numbers in Port Hope

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Some years ago, on a dull Sunday afternoon in Toronto, my wife and I went for a drive through the old residential district of Rosedale. Many of the houses were Edwardian or Late Victorian and the vast majority were built before World War II. As we went down one street after another we noticed that houses with the number thirteen were rarely to be seen: eleven and fifteen were often side by side. In one instance the lot between 11 and 15 had been sold and a newer house built on it. Prominently displayed on its front door frame was its number: 11.5 !

This fear of the number thirteen has been widely recognized and even given a technical term: triskaidekaphobia - derived from Greek and Latin. As the late Carl Sagan (The Demon-Haunted World. Random House 1995, p.221) noted " many no-nonsense office buildings and hotels in America pass directly from the 12th to the 14th floors - why take chances?" And in the Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend(M.Leach, editor. Funk & Wagnell's 1972, p.651)it is said that "Since the 18th century in Anglo-Norman communities.....the number 13 is unlucky.....whether it is a date, the number of people at a table, or the number of a room."

The origin of this phobia is unknown but it is unquestionably ancient. Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (15th edition, 1995,p.1068) avers that the "superstition was confirmed in Christian countries by the Last Supper of Christ and the 12 Apostles", and in medieval times witch covens allegedly always had 13 members. However, it is pointed out that 13 was regarded as an unlucky number "even among the Romans, who held it as a sign of death and destruction."

One wonders whether or not preoccupation with progress and money-making, and perhaps some increase in rationality since World War II, has led to a decline in the 13 phobia. A report of a casual survey by Cecilia Nasmith in the Port Hope Evening Guide, November 13,1998, might suggest such a decline.

Some of her respondents expressed mild uneasiness, but all but one indicated that the date would not alter their plans or behaviour.

#### THE OCCURRENCE OF HOUSES NUMBERED THIRTEEN IN PORT HOPE

A total of 36 streets were checked. These comprised 22% of all streets listed on a recent town map. However, only residential streets were included in the sample and only those which began at or below number 11 and ended at or above number 15. Consequently, the sample comprised most if not all of the streets which met these conditions. The streets in the sample - or more exactly, the houses on them - were classed as built predominantly either before or after World War II. The streets in each category are listed on the last page, and the results of the survey are summarized below.

	HOUSE NUMBER 13 :		TOTAL STREETS
	PRESENT	ABSENT	
STREETS WITH HOUSES BEFORE WORLD WAR II	3	16	19
STREETS WITH HOUSES AFTER WORLD WAR II	15	2	17

Thus, on the older streets in Port Hope (19), houses designated number 13 rarely occurred. In contrast, in the newer areas, houses so designated occurred on 15 of the 17 street surveyed. This would appear to support the notion that there has been a decline, at least locally, in 'triskaidekaphobia'. This result probably does not reflect a general decline in superstition but only in its focus: for example, UFO's instead of unlucky numbers, ESP instead of ghosts.\*

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\*In addition to Carl Sagan cited at the outset, a number of scholars have examined currently prevalent superstitions. See, especially, Abell, G.O. & B. Singer (Editors) Science and the Paranormal, Scribner's 1981; Frazier, K. (Editor) Science Confronts the Paranormal, Prometheus 1986; and Shermer, M. Why People Believe Weird Things, Freeman 1997.



SAMPLE OF PORT HOPE STREETS WITH HOUSES BUILT PREDOMINANTLY BEFOR OR AFTER  
WORLD WAR II

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PRE - WAR STREETS

Baldwin  
Bedford  
Bloomsgrave  
\*Bramley North  
Bramley South  
\*Brown  
Elizabeth  
Harcourt  
Highland  
Hope North  
Hope South  
\*King North  
Little Hope  
Pine  
Seymour  
Sullivan  
Trafalgar  
Victoria  
William

POST - WAR STREETS

\*Arthur Mark  
\*Brunswick  
\*Burnham  
\*Centennial  
\*Crossley  
Deblaquire South  
\*Kelly  
\*Margaret  
\*McCaul  
\*Moore  
\*Orchard  
\*Peacock  
\*Pochon  
\*Quinlan  
Ravine  
\*Shortt  
\*Shuter

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A house numbered 13 occurs