

Heritage Museum

four Donnellys were killed. He heard Bridget chased down before the killers torched the home and fled into the dark.

The posse carelessly left witnesses — young O'Connor and Will Donnelly — at their two murder scenes, potentially sealing their own fates.

But that would turn out not to be a problem, as locals closed ranks around the accused and frustrated efforts to bring them to justice.

The massacre sent shockwaves across North America, but area residents for many years resisted talking about it.

When London author Orlo Miller, who first wrote about the massacre in the 1960s, was researching his book *The Donnellys Must Die*, tension in the town was still so high, he reportedly had death threats.

"That's the way (some residents) have been raised," said lifelong Lucan resident Muriel Culbert. "Don't talk about it."

But if Mayor Tom McLaughlin is any sign, the area's tight grip on the ugliest chapter in its history has loosened.

"The community has changed a lot," said McLaughlin, himself descended from a suspected Donnelly killer.

"A lot of people don't have ties to it anymore . . . so there's not nearly the reluctance to talk about it.

"(I'm) not saying that it was a proud moment, but it is a part of our history."

Not to mention a contemporary tourism opportunity.

That's one reason why Culbert and others with Lucan Area Heritage are raising money to build a museum commemorating the massacre on the Roman Line, so-called after the 1800s influx of poor Irish Catholics to the area, when it was Ontario's frontier.

Today, the fundraisers are about half-way to their \$950,000 goal for the museum.

"It's time for Lucan to be able to give its history without any problems," Culbert, 76, said. "There are three new books out this year.

"That doesn't tell you the story's dying."

Reminders of the Donnelly massacre abound, even without tourism signs to guide visitors. An old brick schoolhouse where the mob met before the killings still stands. So does St. Patrick's church in Lucan, the focal point then and now for area Catholics.

In the church cemetery, protruding from the January snow, is a granite headstone for the slain Donnellys, some edges chipped off by souvenir seekers. Flowers and Beanie Babies lay at its base.

The original grave marker, a stark black monument with the word "murdered" next to each victim's name, became an unwanted magnet for the curious and was dismantled and replaced in the mid-1960s.

London
150
~years~

McLaughlin, it's a mystery the story hasn't caught fire with more Canadians.

"If it was in the

United States, it would be a huge attraction," McLaughlin said.

"(We can) tell the stories, not only with sensitivities to the families involved, but also to the Donnellys."

Six men, all members of the area's self-styled Vigilance Committee, were committed to trial in the deaths: James Carroll, the constable, Thomas Ryder, John Purtell, John Kennedy, James Ryder and Martin McLaughlin.

Carroll's first trial at the old Middlesex County courthouse in London ended in a hung jury. Then, in a retrial Feb. 2, 1881, almost one year after the murders, Carroll was found not guilty and the other accused were discharged,

their freedom celebrated with a night of partying in Lucan.

"It was a very sensational trial," Doty said.

But for a long time it was forgotten, or at least ignored.

Save for a widely-dismissed potboiler by Thomas P. Kelley, it was the late Miller who first delved into the Donnelly massacre, 80 years afterward.

But if Miller brought the Donnellys back from the dead, it was London playwright James Reaney who breathed new life into them through a trilogy of plays he wrote.

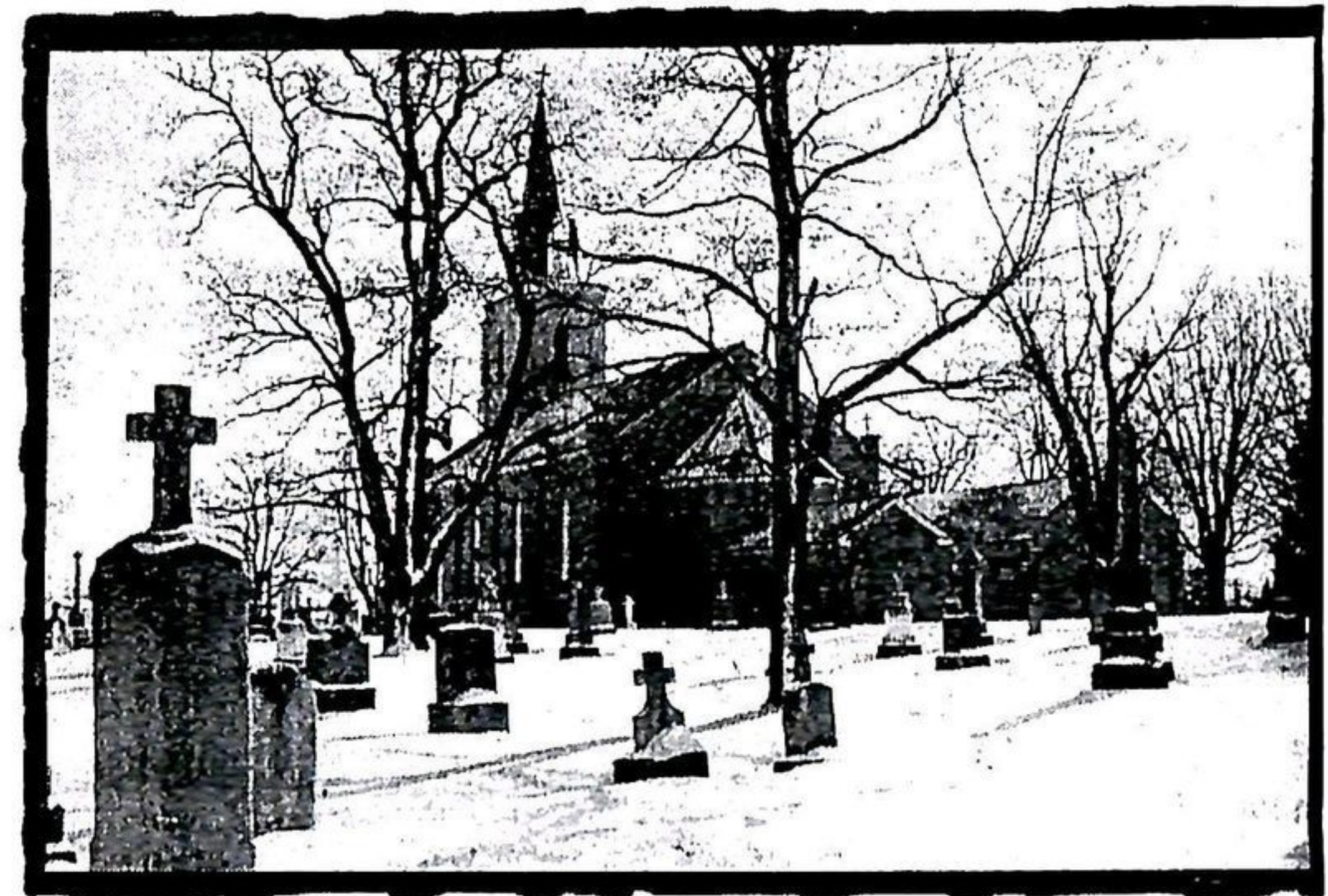
Reaney admits the Donnelly clan wasn't lily-white. James, the father, spent seven years in jail for murder. Son Michael was killed in a Waterford bar fight. But the anger they faced from fellow Catholics living in the area was unfair, said Reaney.

He said they were often blamed for things they never did, including arson charges James and Johannah were to face a day after their murders.

Reaney hopes the Donnelly story will stay alive until justice, as he sees it, is served.

"I want the (federal) Justice Department . . . to clear this up," he said.

"All these people were murdered. They were supposed to have justice made of it."



Photos by DAVE CHIDLEY The London Free Press

DEADLY QUIET: Snow carpets the cemetery next to St. Patrick's church where the Donnellys were buried. The focus of the rural area's immigrant Irish population in the late 1800s, it remains so today.

