

## A Case Study of the West Pittston 'Haunted' House

*Rapes by a demon, stench, screams,  
hoofbeats, ghostly glows, moving objects,  
exorcisms—this 'demon-haunting' case  
had everything. Did any of it really  
happen?*

Paul Kurtz

**T**he news that demons had invaded a house in West Pittston, Pennsylvania, first appeared in an Associated Press report on August 18, 1986. The house at 330-332 Chase Street in this small mining town just outside of Scranton is occupied by Jack and Janet Smurl and their four children: Dawn, 17, Heather, 14, and Karen and Shannon, 8-year-old twins. Mr. Smurl, 44, is production manager for the Topps Chewing Gum Company. The other side of the duplex is occupied by Jack's elderly parents. After the story broke, hordes of newspaper, magazine, radio, and television reporters from far and wide descended on West Pittston to give daily accounts of what was happening.

According to the Smurls, the "strange goings-on" in the house began eighteen months earlier. (In a later news account they extended this to five years.) There were rappings on the walls, objects disappeared or moved around, and a "foul stench" often permeated the house. They claimed they were being terrorized by demons.

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In January 1986, and again in August, the Smurls had invited Ed and Lorraine Warren of Monroe, Connecticut, to investigate the house. The Warrens figured prominently in the "Amityville Horror" and other "demon possession" cases. Ed Warren claims to be a "demonologist"—there are only six or seven in the United States—and Lorraine is a medium. The Warrens maintain that demons do exist and that several are present in the Smurl house. Indeed, it was apparently at the behest of the Warrens that the Smurl family first released their story to the press about these ghostly manifestations.

The Associated Press story of August 18 reported the following events: "The Smurls said they have smelled the stench of smoke and rotten meat, heard pig grunts, hoofbeats, and blood-curdling screams and moans. Doors have opened and shut, lights have gone on and off, formless ghostly glows have traveled before them, and the television set has shot across the room. Even the family dog, a 75-pound German shepherd, has been slammed against the wall while [Jack] Smurl said he stood nearby." Mr. Smurl was also quoted as saying, "Sometimes when I say my rosary it drags me from my knees and tries to beat me into submission."

The Warrens were instrumental in having at least two exorcisms performed by a former Roman Catholic priest, a friend of theirs from Connecticut. (This apparently did not have the sanction of the church.) Moreover, two psychics welcomed to the house claimed that the house was being haunted because a murder had once taken place there.

Once the story appeared, the CSICOP office received many calls from the media and the public asking if we knew what was really going on. With some reluctance, we decided to try to find out. I phoned the Smurl house and told Mrs. Smurl that we wanted to send a team to investigate. She said she would get back to me. When I didn't hear from her, I phoned again and repeated my request. Again she said she would get back to me, but again I waited in vain for her call.

Meanwhile, we enlisted the help of two CSICOP scientific consultants in Pennsylvania: Richard Busch, chairman of the Paranormal Investigating Committee of Pittsburgh, and Milton Rothman, a professor emeritus of physics at Trenton State College now living in Philadelphia. Busch contacted the Smurls by phone and after several conversations they agreed to allow him and Rothman to come to the house. But when they arrived they were denied admittance by Ed Warren and the Smurls. Warren began a dispute about their credentials, and the Smurls eventually called the police. The house was thus closed to independent scientific investigators.

On an ABC-affiliate television show in Buffalo, while I debated her via telephone, Mrs. Smurl complained that she had called the CSICOP offices last year and that we had advised her to have members of her family visit a psychiatrist and that perhaps the family had been watching too many late-night horror movies. Although this sounds like good advice, we have no record of having received such a call. We do receive scores of such calls every year, but because our resources are limited, we cannot investigate all of them.

## Demons Haunt Pennsylvania Family

**KEAT BETTMAN, The Post-**  
 Dispatch Staff Writer  
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Associated Press

It's an ordinary-looking house, yet Janet and Jack Smurl, foreground, say demons have attacked them. Jack Smurl's father, John, stands behind them.



## Gossip possesses town with 'haunted' house



**BUILD NEWS CONFERENCE** — Janet and Jack Smurl, Wash., D.C., told a news conference Tuesday, at which a statement was read declaring a manifestation of demonic possession with the media.

(Mike Szymanski)

## Smurls Appeal to Media For Break; 'Please Pray'

House haunted, Pennsylvania family says

Statue of Christ is present in Smurl home

We invariably ask that the caller send us a letter giving all the facts. (This gives the person the opportunity to take a long, hard look at the situation.) We have no letter on file from the Smurls. In any case, Mrs. Smurl was now adamant in refusing to allow anyone from CSICOP to enter the house. (This was reminiscent of the barring of a similar CSICOP team led by James Randi from the house of the "Columbus Poltergeist" in 1984. See *SI*, Spring 1985.) Mrs. Smurl said the family wanted only peace and quiet.

The Smurls had given sensational reports to the press almost every day, but now that a team of skeptics had arrived they abruptly closed the door to further inquiry and even refused to admit any "unsympathetic" members of the press, many of whom were now highly skeptical of the Smurls' claims.

I nevertheless continued my investigation by phone and spoke to several reporters who had been on the scene, including Jim Collins of the *Scranton Times*, Tom Opdyke, a staff writer from the *Allentown Morning Call* who was doing stories for the *New York Daily News* and *USA Today*, Charles Feldman and Nancy Lane of Cable News Network, and Joseph Marusak of the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*.

I also spoke to Jack Smurl's mother, Mary, who lives in the adjoining duplex. Although she had been told to refer all calls to her daughter-in-law, she spoke to me for about 25 minutes. She said that at first there were strange rappings on the wall of her bedroom, which was adjacent to the bedroom of Jack and Janet Smurl and near to that of the two older Smurl children. Historically, teenagers have been involved in poltergeist cases, and I immediately wondered whether Dawn, 17, or Heather, 14, could be responsible for the rappings. Mary Smurl said that one weekend the "presence" even followed the family to New Jersey. She said that the ghost began making noise in the television set, which was turned off and positioned against the wall in her bedroom. She said it was difficult to tell for certain whether the rappings came from the television or from the wall, but that they, in fact, *may* have come from the wall. The bedrooms of the Smurls and Dawn and the other grandchildren were nearby. Was it a demon or a more earthly person rapping on the wall?

Several reporters talked to Dawn, who gave many different accounts of her experiences. Although she didn't mention it when she talked to CBS News, she told Charles Feldman of CNN and Jan Gehorsam of the Associated Press in Philadelphia that she was "attacked and bruised" by the demon while taking a shower. She told Jim Collins of the *Scranton Times* that the ghost moved her lipstick from one side of the dressing table to the other, and her grandmother told me that Dawn reported to her that the demon had taken her earrings and her jeans. These statements fit the pattern of a teenager playing tricks to attract attention. Nevertheless, all the members of the family claimed to believe the house is haunted. Even one of the eight-year-old twins claimed that she had been hurled out of bed by a demon, and the *National Enquirer* ran a photo in which Shannon reenacted the "ordeal" wherein a "vicious demon hurled [her] down a flight of stairs."



### Amityville Revisited

Of course special cause for suspicion in this affair was the presence of Ed and Lorraine Warren. They have been involved in many demon-possession cases, including the "Amityville Horror," which has been admitted by its perpetrators to have been a hoax, although the Warrens still maintain that it was "genuine." The facts of the Amityville case are as follows.

In 1974, Ronald De Feo murdered his father, mother, and four siblings in the Amityville house and claimed that evil spirits made him do it. This story received considerable press coverage. Sometime later, after De Feo was indicted for murder, the De Feo house was purchased by George and Kathy Lutz. They fled from the house "in terror" after living there only 28 days amid reported rappings, foul stench, fly infestation, and the presence of demonic forces. The Lutzes' story was eventually told in Jay Anson's best-seller, *The Amityville Horror*, published by Prentice-Hall and later in paperback by Bantam Books. Shortly after the Lutzes vacated the house, the Warrens conducted a séance, which was covered by New York's Channel 5 TV. Interestingly, although Mark Scott, the anchorman who filmed the sequence, firmly denied that anything paranormal had occurred, the Warrens insist to this day that the house was possessed by demons.

In 1977, the Amityville house was sold to Jim and Barbara Cromarty, who claimed that nothing unusual ever happened. Because they were continually inundated by curious onlookers intruding on their privacy, they sued Jay Anson, the Lutzes, and the publishers of the book for damages. They were awarded a sum reportedly in the six figures. William Weber, the defense lawyer in the De Feo murder case, also sued the Lutzes, claiming that together they had "created this horror story over many bottles of wine . . ." and that the Lutzes had reneged on their agreement to collaborate with him on the book. "We were really creating something the public would want to hear about. If the public is gullible enough to believe the story, so be it," he said.

According to the official trial transcript, Judge Jack Weinstein, who presided in the Weber lawsuit, said, "The evidence shows fairly clearly that the Lutzes during this entire period were considering and acting with the thought of having a book published." The priest, Father Ralph Pecararo ("Father Mancuso," in the book), also sued the Lutzes and Prentice-Hall for invasion of privacy and distortion of his involvement in the case. He received an out-of-court settlement. The police department denied that the Lutzes had ever called for help, as they claim. Far from being a "true story," the Amityville Horror turned out to be fiction, pure and simple.

The Warrens acted as "demonology advisors" for *Amityville II*, a "prequel" to the "Amityville Horror" movie, which made millions at the box-office. The Warrens promoted the story and never denied or discredited any part of it.

The Warrens' role in the West Pittston affair suggests a possible replay of the Amityville scenario. They alone had privileged access to the Smurl house. According to the Associated Press, Warren maintained that when he entered the master bedroom he "invoked the name of Jesus and commanded the spirit to reveal its identity. 'Within seconds the room turned icy cold,' Warren said. . . . 'There was a foul stench, I would describe it as rotting flesh. Objects on the bureau started to move and then in front of the bureau gossamer threads, a mucouslike, smoky-type substance, whirled and materialized on the mirror, spelling out filthy obscenities, telling me in no uncertain terms to get out of the house.' "

How credible is the Warrens' testimony? They claim that they have captured these paranormal events on audio- and video-tapes, but they have thus far refused to release them for examination. When asked by a CNN reporter where the tapes were, Warren said he had loaned them to a TV company but didn't remember its name. When I appeared with Ed and Lorraine Warren on "A.M. Philadelphia" (ABC-TV), I repeatedly asked Warren for copies of these tapes. His only response was that they would be released in time, but only to the Roman Catholic church. However, the Scranton Diocese has been reluctant to talk about the case. Although it had invited Father Alphonsus Trabold of St. Bonaventure University to investigate, he had not visited the house; nor had the church seen or heard the Warrens' tapes. Father Trabold was cautious in discussing the case with the press, but speculated that such events might be due to "psychokinesis" or a psychiatric condition. The psychokinetic explanation is often appealed to by parapsychologists. It is highly controversial, for skeptical scientists have been unable to corroborate the existence of psychokinetic phenomena in general or to determine its presence in so-called poltergeist cases. The psychiatric explanation, however, seems more relevant to the Smurl case.

## **Demons or Delusions?**

An interesting feature of this story is the role of Jack Smurl, and especially his statement, quoted in the *New York Daily News* (August 24), that "at least

a dozen times it, or whatever you want to call this grotesque woman, has had intercourse with me in bed. I was awake, but I was immobile." I was able to question Smurl when he and his wife participated in the "A.M. Philadelphia" program by telephone. He claimed that the report was accurate, that the demon (Succubus) had many times stood at the foot of the bed before raping him. He said that the events in the house were so bad that "one could almost feel like committing suicide."

The question that immediately came to mind was whether Mr. Smurl was suffering from delusions. Did he really believe what he said, or was he making it up? I had been told by a CNN reporter that Smurl had undergone brain surgery three years ago to relieve "water on the brain." When I questioned him, Smurl confirmed this, though he maintained that his physician, Dr. William A. Black, Jr., of Scranton, said that this was not the cause of his present "paranormal" experiences—which he again insisted were genuine.

I then enlisted the aid of Stephen Barrett, a psychiatrist, and Robert Gordon, a psychologist, both from Allentown, who offered to provide psychiatric examination and diagnoses of Mr. Smurl and other members of the family. The results would of course be confidential. But the Smurls declined the offer, saying that neither Jack Smurl nor any other member of the family was in need of psychiatric treatment.

Dr. Gordon suggested in a prepared statement quoted in the *Times Leader* and elsewhere that the family may be suffering from "hysteria" similar to that prevalent during the Salem witch trials. A shared tension, he said, might cause mass hysteria, with shared symptoms, which could involve delusions or hallucinations. The family's strong religious beliefs in demonology, he speculated, might serve to bolster the delusional system of belief. Something terribly wrong may be going on in the family system, he said, that has nothing to do with demons. Interestingly, the Smurls are extremely religious. Jack Smurl has been quoted as saying that he attends mass daily, prays often, and says the rosary every night.

This case is one of the most bizarre on record. It does not involve the possession of a person by a diabolical force or being, which itself is very difficult to verify, but rather the appearance of inhuman forces (a "preternatural being," as the Warrens call it) and demons who allegedly assault their victims not only psychologically but physically. The *Scranton Times* of September 14 reported that the Warrens concluded that three spirits are present: " 'Patrick', a dead man who is afraid to face God for fear he will be punished for some unexplained act he has committed; 'Abigail', a dead old woman who is somewhat senile and confused [Is she the one that raped Jack?], and an unnamed devil with a putrid odor." To that list the Smurls add another, "a 'good spirit' who protects them and sometimes makes a room smell like roses."

For any of these demonological claims to be accepted, they must be corroborated by independent observers. Thus far, we have only the testimonies of the Smurls and/or the Warrens, unsubstantiated by any kind of

objective physical evidence. The presence of such beings is highly improbable. On the other hand, we are committed to the impartial examination of any such claims, however exaggerated or fanciful they might appear, particularly given the great public interest in the case. But we were denied the opportunity to examine the site or to freely question the claimants. We could only examine the available evidence and consider possible alternative explanations.

Early in the investigation, when I was interviewed by Cable News Network and the Associated Press, I said that *prima facie* the case had “all of the characteristics of a hoax,” that it included exaggeration if not outright fabrication, and that unfortunately it contained considerable “uncorroborated mish-mash.” Mrs. Smurl bitterly countered my remarks by saying that I had already made up my mind since I did not accept “supernatural explanations.” We had apparently reached an impasse. For when I expressed my desire to proceed with the inquiry the Smurls sought to block our investigation. They had concluded that the only explanation was demonological. The Smurls told newspaper reporter Joseph X. Flannery that when someone visits the house to check on the presence of spirits, “nothing happens.” They said that experts on the occult explained to them that demons and spirits of the deceased will avoid manifesting themselves when such investigators are present. How typical this is of the responses of believers to skeptical investigation!

### **Mine Shaft or “Gold Mine”?**

In spite of the obstacles, we decided to make still another attempt to get to the bottom of what was happening at 330-332 Chase Street. We offered to put the Smurls up in a hotel, all expenses paid, with a security guard to protect them, if they would vacate the house and allow us to spend some time in it. Again a firm refusal. Not willing to give up, I decided to send two members of the CSICOP staff to West Pittston to dig further into the facts.

On September 4, Barry Karr and Mary Beth Gehrman drove to West Pittston. Since we had heard that the area under the Smurls’ house was honeycombed with abandoned mine beds, we wanted to find out if this might explain some of the noises and the alleged movement of objects in the house. Our investigators visited the Wilkes-Barre Office of Surface Mining, where they pored over old mine maps. A spokesperson for the office denied that the abandoned and filled-in mine-shaft across the street or the seven layers of veins underneath the street could be responsible for the reported strange events. According to reporter Tom Opdyke, who had been in the house and in the basement, the Smurl house is badly settling. Moreover, a porch down the street and a garage on the next street had to be rebuilt after “caving in.” Such events apparently occur sporadically throughout the area.

Karr and Gehrman then questioned the Smurls’ neighbors. Some thought the mine veins could be responsible for the noises in the house—though those nearby claim that they do not hear similar sounds in their houses. One



skeptical neighbor pointed to a squirrel in the tree in front of the Smurls' house and said, "There's your demon!" Several others supported his theory, maintaining that many squirrels, raccoons, and skunks inhabit the area. On the whole, the neighbors treated the Smurl affair as a joke. Although one of the next-door neighbors, Debbie Watson, reported hearing screams in the Smurl house when no one was home and scratching noises at the screen of an upstairs window, others, including the woman in the duplex adjacent to the Watsons', were convinced that nothing strange was occurring.

Karr and Gehrman tried to visit the Smurl house, but were denied admission. They next questioned Steve Ellis, who had lived in the house for seventeen years before the Smurls bought it fourteen years ago. He reported that nothing strange had ever occurred there and doubted the Smurls' claims.

Our investigators also followed up the claim of an area resident, Bernard Radzvin, that the foul smell the Smurls reported was due to an inadequate sewer pipe. Although Street Commissioner Joseph Raiesky denied this was so, the neighbors insisted they had complained for about two years at town meetings about the foul odor emanating from the sewer. They also reported that a recent fire at a nearby lumber yard might account for some of the smells.

Some neighbors were quick to point out that, if the house is infested by demons, the Smurl children do not seem frightened but take it as great sport and are sometimes left alone in the house by their parents. Moreover, there is no police record that the Smurls have ever filed a complaint or called the department for help, although Mrs. Smurl maintains that they did.

Many residents of West Pittston were very skeptical of the Smurls' motives. Some believed that they had planned the affair from the beginning and that a film or book contract would probably turn up. How right they were about a movie deal! For on that very day (September 6) the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* reported that Jack Smurl had been negotiating with the Star Group, a Hollywood production company with which Ralph Lomma, a prominent Scranton businessman, was involved. Indeed, according to news accounts in several papers, Smurl has also met with Jason Miller, who played the part of the priest in *The Exorcist*. Miller, now living in Scranton, visited the Smurl house with his publicist, William McAndrew, shortly after the story broke. The reports were that Miller would direct the film. It would have a new twist, reported the Wilkes-Barre paper—for it would feature the many rapes of Jack Smurl by a demon!

Although the Smurls had refused to meet with them, Karr and Gehrman surprised them as they were returning from a trip to a grocery store. They were able to engage them in a brief conversation. Jack and Janet Smurl insisted that they were "telling the truth," that "the house is infested by demons," and that they are "very religious" people. Karr asked Jack Smurl if he had discussed a film contract with the Star Group as the press reported.

"No," Smurl said. "It is totally untrue. We have had over a dozen offers, but we are not interested in the money."

Karr persisted: "But did you meet with Lomma, Miller, and McAndrew?" "No," replied Jack, "*I did not.*"

Yet Bill McAndrew, in a story in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, said that he had attended a meeting with Smurl, Miller, and Lomma: "I don't believe in ghosts," he said, "but we were impressed with the decency and honesty of the Smurls." He later reported that the Hollywood film director William Friedkin was also interested in the Smurls' story. Ralph Lomma, president of the Star Group, confirmed that the company had been negotiating with Jack Smurl for exclusive rights to the family's tale of demonic possession. "We have had several discussions," he said. "We haven't signed anything yet, but we hope to. It's going to make a helluva movie when it's finally made."

As this magazine goes to press, two further facts have been reported that throw more light on the case. First, the Smurls issued a statement to the press four days before Halloween claiming that the demons had left their house. According to a UPI story, Janet Smurl said: "It's like a different home now. We are not afraid to go to sleep at night." The elimination of their problem "can only be credited to the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Michael, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who have answered our prayers," she said.

Second, St. Martin's Press announced on November 14, according to the Associated Press, that they have signed a book contract with the Smurls. A hardcover edition will be published first, followed sometime later by a paperback. The book is scheduled to be written by a local newspaper reporter working closely with the Smurls. The size of the advance was not revealed!

## Conclusion

Were the Smurls totally sincere in what they claim to have witnessed? Can normal physical and/or psychological explanations be given for the alleged phenomena? Were one or more members of the household engaged in a prank? Is Jack Smurl suffering from delusions, or is his story pure fabrication? The fact that the Smurls have signed a book contract raises serious questions about their motives. Whether or not a movie will ever be made about the Smurl house in West Pittston remains to be seen. This no doubt depends on the success of the book.

Our investigation of the Smurl case thus far points to several possible alternative explanations for what has allegedly been happening—without the need to invoke an occult or paranormal one. No doubt, however, a large segment of the public and of the media is far more fascinated by demons and ghosts than the possibility of a prank or a hoax. •