

Once upon a midnight dreary

Police find hobgoblins come early in Hills

By KATIE KERWIN

It was a dark and stormy night. West Bloomfield Police Officer Greg Garwood, out on routine patrol, noticed a late-model station wagon parked at the Speedway gas station, at Haggerty and 14 Mile, at about 2:45 a.m. last Tuesday.

A few minutes later, he radioed urgently for help. All he would tell the dispatcher was "We have an extremely strange situation out here."

He didn't want to tell her he had just discovered four graves — one still open — in the basement of the vacant farmhouse across the road.

"I thought, 'We may have just discovered something terribly gruesome,'" Garwood said. "If so, it's probably in progress, because of the unfilled grave."

AT THE GAS STATION, he had checked the empty car and found the engine warm. The windshield was dry, although it had been raining all eve-

ning. Garwood checked the gas station and found it secure.

Across the street is a vacant farmhouse, its doors and windows boarded up.

"It's totally isolated," Garwood said. "There's not another house within half a mile."

A car stood in the gravel driveway, its engine still warm. No one was in sight.

Garwood radioed for fellow officer Ron Reynolds.

"It looked like the occupants of the cars had to be around somewhere," Garwood said. The patrolmen approached the house through the deserted yard. They discovered that the ground floor entrance was sealed. But the steps to a cellar door had been cleared of debris.

The cellar door was unlocked.

ENTERING THE BASEMENT stealthily, the pair separated to explore the gloomy space.

"I cast my light about the next

room," Garwood said. "I saw nothing except a shovel stuck into a mound of dirt."

"Closer examination showed that the dirt was from an exposed grave," he continued. "There were three covered graves next to it."

Horrified, Garwood summoned Reynolds and showed him the graves.

"I heard him gulp and we agreed to retreat and call for back-up," Garwood said.

After radioing for assistance, the patrolmen crouched behind trees, watching the house. Two more West Bloomfield units arrived, followed by two Farmington Hills and an Orchard Lake police car.

The officers surrounded the house. They were hiding behind their cars with their guns drawn and aimed at the house.

Bookie West Bloomfield Officer Jean McBride was staked at the back of the house, with Garwood. She began considering the possibility that a suspect had fled the house, taking refuge up a

tree in the back. Ms. McBride glanced uneasily up at the tree behind which she was hidden.

"She very casually put a hand to her gun," Garwood recounted. "Then all of a sudden, she drew it and looked up."

But Garwood wasn't laughing. "I was listening very keenly for some rustlings of leaves myself."

Garwood, Sergeant Greg Roberts and Officer Michael Madigan crept back into the building.

"The three of us went in, guns drawn," Garwood said. "The wind started to rise and the floorboards above started to creak."

The officers passed through the first dark basement room to the location of the graves.

"Officer Madigan discovered a pyramid of rocks in the corner," Garwood continued. "Mike whispered 'Altar,' because it looked like some barbaric, ritualistic type of altar."

The men noticed an electric wire running along the ceiling to a crude spotlight focused on the grave site.

"In some of these grisly-type crimes, these kooks will take pictures," Garwood said.

APPROACHING THE open grave gingerly, the officers discovered it was empty. They then moved toward the rickety stairs.

"As we stepped on, the stairs began swaying back and forth," Garwood said. "One by one, we went upstairs, almost tripping over a pile of ropes at the top."

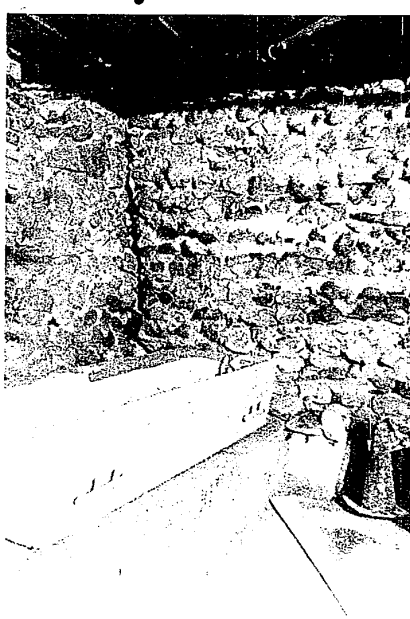
The cords, some cut in shorter strands, further alarmed the police. "It sure looked like they would be good for whoever was doing this to tie people up with," he said. "The two rooms to the right were packed with loose boards and boxes."

The police proceeded down the cobweb-draped hall to the dining room. There, they found a coffin with its lid pried apart. The splintered wood revealed the satin lining and pillow within.

"I was wondering, 'Christ, do we have grave robbers?'" Garwood recalled.

Moving on to the living room, the police played their flashlights around the musty room. The words "Farmington Area Jaycees" almost leaped out at them.

"Stacked along the walls, were freshly-painted signs advertising the haunt-



Slowly, they turned. And they came upon a coffin with its lid pried apart. "I was wondering, do we have grave robbers?"

— West Bloomfield Patrolman Greg Garwood.
(Photo by Gary Wettig)

ed house we were standing in," Garwood said ruefully.

"We just screamed with laughter. I couldn't stand up."

The men inside summoned the five officers waiting outside. "We told them, 'Hey, you've got to come in and see this.'"

"It's hilarious now, but at the time, I'm sure they were dead serious," said Sergeant Robert Scott of West Bloom-

field police.

Garwood admitted that while the idea of a juvenile prank crossed his mind, part of him thought they might have stumbled across a bizarre murder cult.

"A Halloween stunt didn't occur to me," Reynolds, he said, hadn't even thought of it as a prank.

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The officers surrounded the house. They were hiding behind their cars with their guns drawn and aimed at the house. "We made all the classic move-

ments," said West Bloomfield Patrolman Greg Garwood. (Photo by Gary Wettig)

Ricky the Clown recalls days of fun and laughter

By CRAIG PIECHURA

"Schnozzola" is funny. "Nose" isn't, says Irvin Romig of Southfield. Standing up isn't funny. Falling down is.

Romig — known professionally as "Ricky the Clown" — will offer other insights into childhood when he appears Sunday at Southfield's Burgh Museum.

Romig's personal collection of circus pictures and clown memorabilia is on display at the museum, on Berg and Civic Center Drive.

The pratfalls of a clown are a guaranteed laugh-getter, but all that falling down can get you down, Romig says.

"I had a lot of back trouble from the flops," Romig says. "It got so that the chiropractor knew me like his brother."

His clown props on display demonstrate how many clown routines are based on pain. There's a sword, a slapstick, a stomach pump, boxing gloves, giant scissors usually applied to someone's neck and a doctor bag to cure what ails you.

If you're in your 20s or 30s you probably were one of the faithful "Lulus" who watched Ricky, his donkey, Bambino, and his trained llama, Fonda, on Channel 7 locally.

He was on TV from 1953 to 1964, hosting shows called "Tip Top Fun" and "The Ricky the Clown Show" in the '50s and later subbing for ailing kiddie TV hosts Johnny Ginger, Sooty Sales and Sagebrush Shorty.

When he started for WXYZ in 1953, Ricky was paid \$100 a week, plus \$25 expense money for his Sicilian donkey. But says it gave him big exposure for other jobs. It must have. He had to bring his donkey up in an elevator to WXYZ's old studio high atop the Maccabees building.

Guest hosting is how Romig happened to become a Southfield resident. Romig explains that kiddie host Johnny Ginger called in sick many times at the last minute complaining of a migraine headache. That sent the director scrambling to call Ricky who had to dash over to the station to fill in as host of the kiddie cartoon show.

FINALLY, Romig decided it'd be a lot less hectic if moved out of Troy and into a home just down the street from WXYZ-TV's then-new Broadcast House.

You can't miss Romig's home on 10 Mile. A wooden likeness of his Ricky the Clown alter-ego serves as a mailbox advertising that Romig can be hired for parties.

Back in Ricky's heyday, television was live and Romig tells of tricks played on him by stagehands.

There's the time Ricky the Clown was supposed to take a bite out of a Hostess Twinkie and found the stagehands had substituted a wooden Twinkie for the real one. Rickie outfoxed everybody by bringing the Twinkie up to his lips and then telling his young audience he just remembered he hadn't eaten his dinner yet and would save that yummy Twinkie for dessert.

Today, Romig mainly works Bar Mitzvahs, birthday parties and conventions. February is always a good month, he explains, because of all the blue and gold Cub Scout banquets.

He also works a handful of small circuses in the

state, including the Macomb County Sheriffs Circus, the Lansing Hospitalier Circus and the Shrine circus in Flint.

In the past Romig spent 20 years with the Shrine Circus and traveled with the Ringling Bros. Circus from 1949-51. He even had a part in the movie "The Greatest Show on Earth."

To mix a few circus metaphors, it could be said that while Romig wasn't exactly born in a suitcase, he does have circus sawdust in his shoes. Big, black clown shoes, to boot.

His mother, Elizabeth, was a wire walker and one of the bareback riding Roomeys. His father, Carl, was a performing cowboy and animal trainer. The couple joined forces in marriage to produce a small circus called "Romig and Rooney" and a family. It wasn't long after Irvin was born before he was doing stunts like standing up on the back of a horse and riding around the ring.

BUT IT WASN'T the greatest job on earth for a youngster, Romig recalls.

"It was too much work with my dad," Romig says. "When I was young I had to work so hard — as a truck driver, the groom (for horses), the assistant in the act. And then you had to help put the riggings up in every town."

Many people regard circus people as drifters and troublemakers, Romig says, which is far from accurate.

"Whenever you had trouble it was not the circus performers who caused it, but some roustabout who helped put up the tent. But the next day in the newspaper it would say 'Circus man arrested.'"

"A man who works in a factory might get in a fight and you wouldn't hear people say 'Get that factory out of town' but let one thing happen around the circus and they'd run you out of town on a rail."

Asked how today's circus compares to the circus he and his parents were a part of, Romig says they've tamed the Big Top and added a lot more glitter.

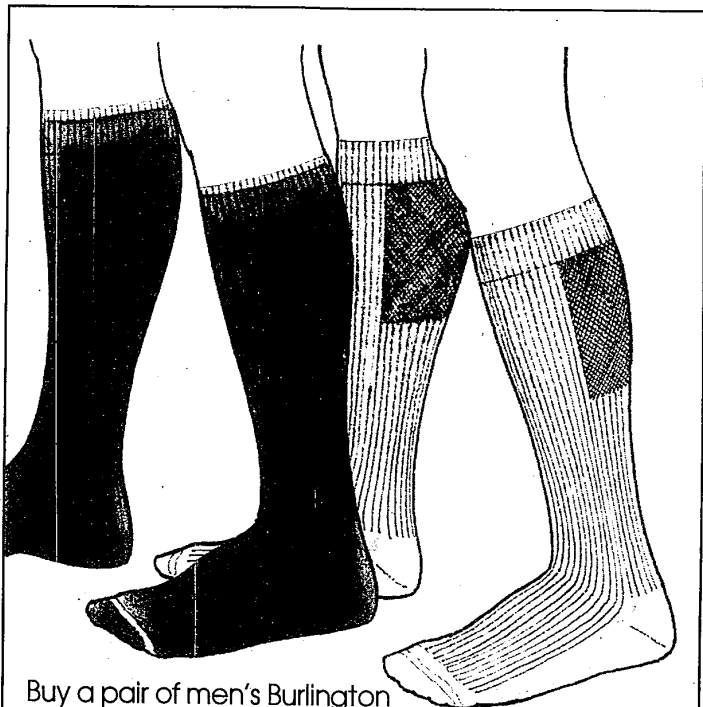
"They had more wild things in those days, he says. There were stallions and Roman chariot races around the ring. Today, it's more like a musical show with so many dancing girls in skimpy costumes."

"Now that's fine for the daddies but the kids don't care for that. I always thought the circus was for kids."

Romig says his act is geared toward youngsters and for that reason he has always tried to lead a good example for impressionable youth. His sentiments echo the creed of Clayton Moore, who played the Lone Ranger on TV.

"When I was on TV I was considered a square," he says, drawing an imaginary box in the air. "But I'd been brought up going to church and reciting the Golden Rule. That's been my luck in life. Sunday I never miss church. I'm no Holy Joe but when you're a kiddie performer I feel you'd better toe the line and follow what you represent. And if you don't represent that, you don't belong there."

At the age of 59, Romig says he has no regrets but one reservation. He teaches clowning at Oakland Community College Monday and Wednesday nights and some of his graduates are underbidding him for clown gigs.



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