

Miami Poltergeist

The Miami Poltergeist is a 1960s episode in which Florida-themed souvenir items were seen repeatedly falling from warehouse shelves without apparent cause. It was clear that the focus of the disturbances was a 19-year old shipping clerk named Julio Vasquez, a Cuban refugee, but also that he was not the direct cause, since he was often nowhere nearby. No evidence of trickery in the form of threads or other apparatus was ever discovered. The episode is notable for its relatively undramatic nature and the frequency of observed incidents, as described by a number of competent witnesses. It was investigated by paranormal investigators William Roll and Gaither Pratt over a period of days: the following summary is based on chapters in Roll's 1972 book *The Poltergeist*.

Scene

The incidents occurred in December 1966 and January 1967 at the premises of Tropication Arts, a wholesaler of Florida-themed novelty items owned by businessman Alvin Laubheim. The items – beer mugs, drinks glasses, alligator ashtrays and the like – were stacked on warehouse shelves along one side of the room and on three standalone racks in the centre. The other furniture consisted of tables where the merchandise was wrapped prior to shipping.

The Disturbances

In December 1966 there was an unusually high incidence of breakages caused by items falling off shelves into the aisle. Laubheim blamed carelessness on the part of the two shipping clerks, Julio Vasquez and Curt Hagemeyer, an older man. On January 12, he showed them how to place the glasses on the shelf in such a way that they could not fall off, at least eight inches from the edge. As he walked away one of them fell to the ground; neither of the employees was closer than 15 feet.

After this, items started falling thick and fast, Laubheim told investigator William Roll a few days later.

From then on, everything started to happen – boxes came down – a box of about a hundred back-scratchers turned over and fell with a terrific clatter over on the other side of the room and then we realized that there was something definitely wrong around here... And for three days we picked things up off the floor as fast as they would fall down. It was going on all day – quite violently – but not hurting anything, but things would fall to the floor.^[1]

Witnesses of the phenomena stated they several times saw objects start to move – on their own and with no one nearby. A female employee said she was talking to Julio and was panicked when she saw a big cardboard carton start to move by itself, and then fall down.

Attempts were later made to encourage the phenomenon by placing 'decoy' objects in places that had been involved in earlier events. In one instance, a coca-cola bottle was placed on a shelf, and five minutes later crashed into the aisle, a witness confirming that no one had been near at the time.

Testimony

Glen Lewis

On Friday January 13, Laubheim's partner Glen Lewis came in, having been notified about the breakages. He was not present in the building as often as Laubheim, and was sceptical, having until then noticed nothing out of the ordinary. He now realized the extent of the problem, observing items that dropped from the shelves immediately after he had placed them there. Tumblers and ashtrays fell off and broke, and leather packages kept falling off even after he had replaced them.

The disturbances reached a peak on Monday January 23, beginning from the moment the business opened in the morning. A total of 52 separate incidents were logged. Lewis was particularly concerned about a box of tall drinks glasses, and had inserted one side of the cardboard lid into the other so that it could not open. Laubheim says: 'The next thing we knew, there was a terrific crash on the other side of the room and the whole box was lying upside down with all the glasses broken.'^[2] The glasses would have to have crossed his line of vision to break where they did, but he saw nothing. The box, weighing 15 pounds, had moved 24 feet.

William Drucker

William Drucker, the firm's insurance agent, visited on January 13. He was shown the breakages and examined the shelves to see if they vibrated. However, the shelves were strong, and he could not see how anything but a strong tremor would cause an object to be displaced. Having spent more than an hour in the warehouse he was on his way out when he heard a 'thud'. He turned and established quickly where everyone in the room had been. He then found two boxes tied together out in the middle of the aisle. There was no sign of floor tremors, the boxes were at least 17 feet away from Julio, and he had checked the shelves beforehand. He concluded that Julio could not have caused this event.

Police

Laubheim's instinct was to keep the affair quiet: this was peak season for sales and it might hurt business if it became known. But the breakages were being witnessed by delivery men and other people coming in and out, and word got around. Also, other staff were disturbed by it, and the constant breaking glass constituted a health hazard.

So on Saturday January 14, Laubheim called the police. Patrolman William Killin arrived, finding Laubheim with Julio; he crossed the storage area alone, leaving the other two standing by the entrance. He looked around and walked back. When he had reached the entrance he turned round, and just then he saw a glass fall to the floor and break. While Killin waited for backup, several other breakages occurred, although he did not observe them directly. Looking into the room from the front, with the two employees standing beside him, he saw two boxes placed on the floor under a shelving rack topple over and fall into the aisle.

At about midday, two other patrolmen arrived accompanied by a police sergeant. Howard Brookes, a professional magician friend to whom Laubheim had appealed for help, also turned up, accompanied by a friend. Eight observers were now present, each visible to the others. Now a box containing address books fell into an aisle, its position having been observed at six to eight inches from the edge of the shelf. The police tested the shelves to see if vibrations could have caused the objects to shift, shaking each of the shelves in turn, but nothing fell.

Susy Smith

On the previous Thursday employees of the firm phoned a radio station during an interview by Susy Smith, a writer of popular parapsychological books, to describe the disturbances. Smith visited the next day and recorded incidents that took place when she was there. In the afternoon Laubheim came in with a newspaper reporter and demonstrated how beer mugs had been falling off shelves. He placed one on its side on the top shelf: about five minute later a loud noise was heard and the mug was found several feet away. Susy Smith had been standing nearby and observed that no one else was near. The mug could not simply have fallen; it would have to have flown through the air to reach this position. It was replaced and propped against a box so that it couldn't fall off. A few minutes later it fell down onto the floor and broke; no one was nearby.

Sinclair Buntin

Sinclair Buntin, a pilot at Eastern Airlines, visited on January 17 at the suggestion of Susy Smith. He witnessed several events, such as boxes falling into the aisles when no one was in the vicinity and no devices that could have caused them to move, such as strings or wires, could be found. Buntin also observed an object in motion, a box falling only 15 feet away, when no one was nearby. He stated that it fell at an unnatural angle, about a 30-degree angle away from the shelf. He put everything back in the box and replaced it on the shelf, yet a few minutes later it fell again while he was seven feet away.

Howard Brookes

Brookes the magician first arrived on January 14, but did not observe anything himself at that time, and remained sceptical. He returned few days later, and found himself with an off-duty policeman and his wife, each standing at one end of an aisle. Two cartons – about eight by 10 inches and three inches thick, about two pounds in weight, dropped to the floor. Brookes saw them drop, when nobody was in the area. The police officer and his wife also saw the boxes fall: they came out as a pair, one on top of the other, and remained so when they landed, with no sign of trickery.

Investigation by Roll and Pratt

Parapsychologist William Roll was alerted to the case by Susy Smith and visited on January 19. At first he did not observe anything, which might have been taken to indicate that the 'poltergeist' did not want to take the risk of being caught by an expert. On the other hand, he pointed out, the presence of two police officers and a magician had not previously acted as a deterrent.

On one occasion, on January 26, Roll had Smith place an alligator ashtray on the second shelf in one of the most active areas in the room. Julio placed a cowbell that had been involved in earlier incidents in front of it. Roll checked both objects to see whether there were any attachments or other elements that might be used to simulate an incident; there were none. In the afternoon an altercation broke out between Julio and a female staff member, Miss Rambisz, over an attempt by his girlfriend's father to exorcise the 'ghost'. Rambisz was against this 'voodoo' on the grounds that it would spoil the investigation.

Roll says:

I was looking at Julio, who was just about to reply to Miss Rambisz when the alligator ashtray crashed to the floor behind him... The cowbell remained in place, so the ashtray either must have moved over or around it. I could discover no way in which Julio or anyone else could have produced this event normally. I had Julio and the others under observation and had examined the target area myself. No one had been near it since my last examination.

Roll adds that Julio seemed tense and angry during the exchange with Miss Rambisz, who he believed was showing disrespect to his future father-in-law. Some twenty minutes later, Roll says, he asked Julio how he felt. Julio replied: 'I feel happy: that thing [the breakage] makes me feel happy; I don't know why.'

Roll left briefly but returned on January 25 and stayed until February 1, accompanied for part of the time by his colleague Gaither Pratt, who had been with him in previous similar investigations. The two men carried out a number of experimental actions: they positioned an object on a shelf, then later heard a loud noise and found it had fallen off. They were often surprised that glass objects failed to break.

During his final two days at the site, Roll logged a total of 28 incidents, in 13 of which he was present and in a position to be sure that trickery was not the cause. In many of the other 15 cases he interviewed witnesses immediately afterwards, and in ten of these, Julio was said not to be near enough to have been able to cause them.

Roll speculated that a magician might use some chemical or device that would disappear from sight, such as dry ice (frozen carbon dioxide). An ashtray might be positioned over the edge of a shelf and the substance placed in it in such a way as to stop it falling: once the substance has dissolved the ashtray will fall, when no one else is around. However, experiment showed that the ice emitted vapours and did not completely dissolve; substantial traces were found amid the broken glass – none of which occurred with the actual events.

Roll confirmed that some objects that fell to the floor had apparently gone round or over an object standing in its path. In one instance, Julio was placing an object at floor level when a drinks glass fell from the shelves behind him. (Roll observed Julio from five feet away and saw that he had no contact with the shelf and that both his hands were occupied. No one else was anywhere near to have thrown the glass.) Previously Roll had placed notebooks and other objects in front of the glass. However, these were undisturbed, so the glass would have to have risen into the air at least two inches on its way to the floor.

Bogus Fraud Accusation

On the night of January 30, a breakin at the warehouse occurred in which a few valuables were stolen. All the evidence pointed to Julio, but the owners did not press charges.

However, a police sergeant subsequently told reporters that Julio had confessed to the breakin, also that he had caused the incidents in the warehouse by trickery. Roll writes:

This supposedly was done by a system of threads and by perching the items at the edges of the shelves so that vibrations from jets passing overhead caused them to fall. I later learned from Susy Smith that the officer never examined the warehouse. However, Al Laubheim arranged a meeting with him and Julio in his office the morning after the newspaper article appeared. Julio told the detective that he was lying and that he, Julio, had not confessed to having caused the disturbances fraudulently. Laubheim said that the sergeant did not deny the accusation and only became red in the face.

Julio's Personality

William Roll held that poltergeist episodes could be accounted for as psychokinetic activity triggered by internal tensions that resulted from repressed anger. He coined the term 'recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis' (RSPK) to describe this

process.

In his report on the Miami disturbances, Roll notes that the occasion when Julio had stated that the breakages made him feel 'happy, I don't know why' was not his only comment of the kind. During a lull in the activity on an earlier visit by Roll, Julio said, 'Now I am nervous because nothing happens.' After a series of four incidents on the 27th Julio looked unusually cheerful, and said, 'I feel good. I really... miss it when something doesn't happen'.^[5]

Psychological testing of Julio found evidence of 'anger, rebellion, a feeling of not being part of the social environment...'^[4] Gertrude Schmeidler, a psychologist and parapsychologist, speculated that Julio channelled these feelings as resentment towards his boss Laubheim, as a despised father-figure, unconsciously expressing them through 'dissociated (poltergeist) aggression' against Laubheim's possessions. A second psychologist noted 'the many examples of aggressive feelings and impulses which are disturbing and unacceptable to him'.

He prevents the direct expression of these feelings. Indeed, he not only controls the expression of aggressive impulses which at base could be sadistic and quite destructive, but he also feels it necessary to even control impulses of a more assertive, as distinct from aggressive nature... There is little self-understanding in relation to these feelings and there may very likely be a sense of personal detachment from them. Since they cannot be expressed or acted upon in any direct way, they are a source of difficulty to him. The feelings themselves remain internal and diffuse. The outward behaviour would typically be socially very conventional.^[5]

Circumstances in Julio's life at this time confirmed his disturbed state. Julio said that in the months preceding the warehouse breakages, he had suffered severe nightmares in which he was killed, sometimes even seeing himself at his funeral. His stepmother tried to get him to leave the family home and in December he did so, ten days before the incidents began.

At the end of January he was suspected of having committed the breakin (above), which Roll speculates arose from feelings of guilt that resulted from his anger and that found expression as a bid to receive punishment. Days later he walked off with a ring from a jewellers' store, which led to six months imprisonment. On his release Roll offered help with his education in return for allowing himself to be studied, but he chose instead to remain in Miami, changing jobs frequently. According to Roll, reports would sometimes filter back about moving objects. He married and had a daughter. In 1969, he was shot and seriously wounded when he tried to obstruct gunmen robbing the gas station he was working. Roll writes:

After this encounter, wherein Julio nearly succeeded in getting himself killed, apparently both his psychical and his physical life settled down. In the meantime, Susy Smith left Miami, and it was more difficult for me to keep in touch with Julio.^[6]

Roll acknowledges that Julio's psychological state does not explain how or why he could unconsciously generate RSPK when other people who exhibit symptoms of repressed anger do not. He sought other potential differences, but EEG and physical tests of Julio revealed no abnormality.

Robert McLuhan

Source

William Roll, *The Poltergeist* (New York: Signet, 1972)

References

Footnotes

1. ^ Roll, *The Poltergeist*, 119.
2. ^ 120.
3. ^ 69.
4. ^ 170.
5. ^ 171-2.
6. ^ 174.