

The Darker Side: A Strange Disappearance

By Matthew Wilkinson



George William Silverthorn was the son of Joseph and Jane Silverthorn. Born in 1814 in Toronto Township, near the end of the War of 1812, George was raised on the family farm. He grew to become a respected member of the community, carrying on the strong legacy of the Silverthorn surname. George served as a Magistrate from 1843-1848, a fence viewer in 1846, and a Township Warden in 1849. In 1850 George headed to California, along with several neighbouring young men and a couple of his Silverthorn cousins, to seek his fortunes in the California Gold Rush. George returned to Toronto Township in early 1852. George married Louise Leonard in the Dixie Union Chapel in 1852. Louise was listed as a Native woman from the United States.

After the wedding ceremony, as was tradition, the bride and groom and their assembled guests returned to the Silverthorn home, Cherry Hill, for a reception and dinner. Guests gathered around the hearth in the drawing room, waiting for the wedding supper. At some point that evening there was a knock on the door, and the family recalled that a male voice asked: "Can I see George Silverthorn, please?" And this is where the mystery begins.

George excused himself and went to the door, where he spoke with the unseen visitor. At the same time the family continued their social gathering and dinner. After a short time, George stepped outside, closing the door behind him. After some time, when George had still not returned, his uncle Aaron Silverthorn wondered what was detaining him. As the new bride was becoming anxious, Joseph and Aaron went outside to look for George, but could not find him. They returned to the house, expecting to find George inside - but he was not there. The family was bewildered and disturbed by the turn of events, and the bride was distraught. What had happened to George?

Joseph, Aaron and their other sons, along with neighbours, searched the surrounding areas for days. They dragged a nearby swamp, searched through nearby forests, but no evidence of George was ever found.

The strange disappearance of George Silverthorn has never been conclusively solved. George's father, Joseph, never learned what became of his son during his lifetime. There are many rumours as to what happened: a business deal in California has gone bad, and others came north looking to collect from George and murdered him; someone came looking for George and dragged him unwillingly away from home and back to California for some unknown reason; George was already married to a woman from California and that family came looking for him and convinced him to abandon his new bride and return to California; someone with a score to settle from George's time as a local magistrate came looking for him when it was learned that he had returned to Toronto Township for his wedding and that George had met with foul play; someone looking to take over George's claims in California did away with George and then

travelled to California using George's name and identity - all legends, all unsubstantiated. Over time, as family and friends spoke of the mystery, the story changed and exaggerated to the point that the true facts are somewhat obscure and difficult to ascertain. What is beyond doubt is that George's disappearance became something of a family legend and the family puzzled over his fate for generations. It appears that no further knowledge of George's fate ever reached the family in historic Mississauga. One can only image the anguish of George's parents, Joseph and Jane Silverthorn.

But the story does not end there. A Dr. George William Silverthorn, physician, surfaced in 1853 in Shasta County, California. The surrounding community became known as Silverthorn's Ferry. Dr. George Silverthorn is listed as being married to a Louisa Lucy Leonardo (his bride in 1852 when married at Dixie Union Church was named Louise Leonard). They were married in Shasta, California in 1853. Too close, perhaps, to be a coincidence. Somehow, it appears, unbeknownst to the Silverthorn family, that Louise/Louisa (Lucy) went to California and reconnected with George - but did they actually marry twice? Why? Dr. George Silverthorn and his wife had five children: Rory (born 1855), George William (born 1858), Mary (born 1859), Tillie (born 1861), and Thorne Patrick (born 1863). When Dr. George died in 1894 (or 1895), his obituary listed his parents as Joseph and Jane Silverthorn of Toronto (township), Peel, Canada. Dr. George was buried in Silverthorn Family Cemetery in Shasta County, California. Lucy was buried beside him in 1910. In 1942 they were reinterred in the Central Valley Cemetery in Shasta.

So, it would appear that our George may not have truly disappeared. Rather he appears to have severed all ties with his family, rather abruptly, and never contacted them again during his lifetime. Unless, of course, the rumour of someone assuming his identity were true. We will likely never know the truth.

The story of the disappearance was recounted in a local newspaper in November of 1928:

A strange romance was woven into the fabric of the family history, when one of the sons wedded to a Miss (Leonard), daughter of another pioneer family of the district, disappeared on his wedding day. The wedding over, and while the guests yet thronged the house, there came a summons for the bridegroom. He answered the door, went outside and closed it behind him and was never heard of again, though search parties scoured the woods for days.