

Passing It On

(The Hermit of Hyde Hall)

In the wartime summers of 1942, 43 and 44 my mother was concerned that there was little to keep me occupied and out of harm's way on our farm, and gasoline rationing ruled out being driven to my friends' homes in the far-off suburbs of Baltimore. And so I was packed off to Camp Hyde Bay, on the shores of Otsego Lake - named Glimmerglass by native son James Fenimore Cooper - not far from Cooperstown, New York. Camp Hyde Bay proved to be a true lifetime experience for me: I loved every moment of it and I have the happiest memories of my days as a camper there. Some years later, when I was in college, I returned to Hyde Bay for two summers as a counselor, and that was great fun, too.

There was nothing fancy about Hyde Bay. It was the creation of a wonderful school master named Herbert Pickett (aka The Director) who had a very clear understanding of what it takes for boys to have fun, but was also extremely tightfisted with the resources. We slept in six-man Army tents on wooden platforms with kerosene lanterns and no electricity. The sanitary facilities were distinctly primitive: outhouses (known to us as "cuckoos") on the wooded hillside behind the tents, and a handful of buildings that were just short of ramshackled. But the staff were all nice people, there was good food, very little regimen, little or no whistle-blown scheduling of required events, and a prevailing commitment to boys having a good time with a minimum of supervision.

There was one tradition in particular which left a lasting mark on me: the counselors all delighted in scaring the campers with tales of ghosts, mystery, and frightening things that lived in the woods, both natural and supernatural. The boys were entirely willing participants in this tradition; boys like being scared (at least, up to a point). The titillation of terror, it has been called. Spooky stories are a part of most boys' camp experiences, but they were carried to something of an extreme at Hyde Bay, as the counselors worked to outdo one another in their invention of nighttime threats to scare the youths in their charge out of their wits. Woe to the boy

who left his tent in the night to go to the Cuckoos in response to a call of nature! The consequence of this was a perimeter of browned grass and weeds around each tent, as I recall.

And when my turn came as a counselor, I gave as good as I had gotten to the boys in my charge. Many of the counselors had been campers at Hyde Bay in their earlier years and relished scaring these youths as they had themselves been scared. And so the lore was passed on. It never occurred to us to stop and think about what we might be doing to these boys, beyond passing along a manly tradition that wasn't likely to hurt them: it hadn't hurt us, in our day... had it?

The camp was situated on a fine bay - Hyde Bay - at the north end of Otsego Lake. Directly across the bay from the camp a long wooded peninsula - Clarke's Point - projected out into the water. And on that peninsula there was a single magnificent structure, surrounded by forest: a very large, very old, very empty, very spooky looking mansion. A true mansion... the real thing. This was Hyde Hall. It was the first thing you saw in the morning when you left your tent to greet a new day, and it was the last thing you saw as the evening sun slipped behind the horizon. There it sat, about a half mile across the water, brooding ominously in a distinctly threatening way. How many boys' camps come equipped with their own ghostly mansion just across the lake? It naturally became the focal point of the scary stories that were unloaded upon us as boys, and which we passed along with interest to new generations of campers when we became counselors.

Hyde Hall was quite a remarkable structure, haunted or not. It was built by a British aristocrat named George Clarke who inherited claim to a massive colonial holding of some two hundred thousand acres of upstate New York wilderness. Construction began in 1817, when this was the deepest, wild virgin forest, far from the nearest outposts of civilization. and years before James Fenimore Cooper set the first of his Leatherstocking novels in these environs. The finest Italian artisans and stonemasons were brought from Europe to create and decorate in exquisite detail a classic country home: a fifty room structure of grey native limestone.

But we boys knew none of this. What we knew was that Hyde Hall was empty, crumbling, abandoned, and the lair of The Hermit who was dedicated to the nighttime capture and gruesome dismembering of innocent boys from Mr. Pickett's camp just across the lake... boys whose very existence so close to his haunts drove the maddened fiend to indescribable tortures and deaths for these loathsome adolescent intruders. Night after night we heard ever more terrifying tales of The Hermit's ghastly raids in and around our camp... of boys gone missing... of grisly remains found nearby... sometimes down one of the Cuckoos up on the hill. And for many of us - certainly, for me - Hyde Hall became the epitome of everything that can terrify a young boy. Just to look at it across the bay, even on a bright sunny day, scared me stiff. And in the nighttime, when sleep finally came, Hyde Hall was the central terrifying force in my nightmares.

In the fullness of time I was back at Hyde Bay as a counselor, and I took the greatest delight in passing on all the tales of The Hermit which had terrified me as a boy, embellishing them with ghoulish new detail and inventing whole new chapters in the saga. Night after night we laid it on thick, and night after night the boys came back for more. Most of our tales focused on The Hermit, but when creative invention began to run low, we introduced a new horror... Great Hairy Sleeping Apes: enormous boy-eating monsters who slept through daylight hours in their haunt in the creepy woods at the head of nearby Shadow Brook, and came out at dusk in search of their prey. The Apes worked well with the boys, but the monster of choice remained the Hermit, lurking at Hyde Hall just across the lake.

I was now enrolled in a fine university where I had just finished my sophomore year. My education was well-started, I had seen a little of the world and, one would have thought, had matured beyond childish fears. One day I was happily engaged with my friend Bob Russell in inventing new chapters of the Hyde Hall Hermit legend for telling that night. Bob and I had been campers together years before. We had both endured years of Hermit-based terror. As we talked, we looked across Hyde Bay at Hyde Hall for what must have been the thousandth time and we were both struck

with the same thought: “After all these years, let’s go over there and check that place out! What is it really like?”

The Director was away for the afternoon and it seemed an opportunity not to be missed. So with a third boy, also a veteran of many years of Hermit terror, we took a camp canoe and paddled sneakily over to Hyde Hall, using a devious route along the lake shore so that no one could see what we were up to. (I cannot recall the name of the third boy: it may have been Blaise DeSibour, Bob Russell’s close companion).

We beached our canoe on the shore below Hyde Hall at a spot well screened from view and crept up the hill, hiding behind trees as we went. We were sure there had to be some kind of a caretaker in this grand property and we were anxious to avoid any untoward encounter. But we made it right up to the house without being discovered and peered into the grand windows where we could dimly make out large rooms, walls covered with paintings, and every piece of furniture draped over with white sheets. It was a scene straight from every ghost movie we had ever seen. This was SPOOKY! There was no sign of human habitation: only the ghostly white sheets barely visible in dark rooms everywhere we looked.

And as we crept from window to window, around the side of the house and from one wing to the next, we gradually became aware of a remarkable transformation: we were scared. All the years of Hermit tales heard as boys and told as counselors came flooding back over us. Gone were all thoughts of encountering a caretaker - more and more we all felt the same unspoken feeling: “This is scary!” It was a perfectly amazing thing: three physically fit, strapping young men of twenty on a bright, sunny afternoon coming apart with the same childish fears. We faked totally false bravado as we crept around Hyde Hall from wing to wing, but the slightest unexpected sign would have sent all three of us fleeing at a dead run. The shadows were lengthening. The Hermit was more real than he had ever been before. And finally, one of us spoke what we were all thinking: “Let’s get out of here!”

With unseemly haste we slunk away from the great house, down toward the shore where we had stashed our canoe. And halfway back to the lake we made an astounding discovery. There, recessed into the hillside, was an underground cave or cavern, its entrance barred with a rusty wrought iron gate. Even though we were in a very real hurry to put Hyde Hall behind us, this demanded investigation. And, wonder of wonders, peering through the iron gate we saw... tombs!...burial niches stacked like bureau drawers on either side of the cave and along its rear wall. This was a mausoleum! This was the very apotheosis of spookiness. Bob Russell tested the iron gate: it was unlocked. It opened with difficulty, making a creaky sound just like the introduction to the oldtime radio terror program The Inner Sanctum! We were transfixed. There was but a single thought in our three minds: which of us was going to go inside and check this horror out?

Somehow, I was selected: it was two against one. They easily overcame my craven objections. I put a single foot through the doorway, and then another, and then I was inside the tomb. Though it was a warm day, it was very cool - almost cold inside. It smelled incredibly musty. There was very little light inside the tomb. From the gateway Bob and Blaise kept asking me what I could see. I could barely make out the names on the graves on all three sides of the grotto: they were all Clarkes. It was truly scary.

And as I started edging toward the door and safety, I could suddenly feel the ground crumbling beneath my feet. The old concrete floor was giving away under my weight! I was dropping down... down... into what? In panic I fell through the floor - only a few feet down, but down... I fell into a grave beneath the floor! In horror I dropped onto a coffin: a small coffin ... a child's coffin! With a shriek of terror I propelled myself up and out of that awful place. Bob and Blaise were already well ahead of me, on a dead run for the lake. No canoe in history has ever been paddled that hard and that fast as we desperately put the mausoleum, Hyde Hall, Clarke's Point and the Hermit as far behind us as we possibly could.

There were no scary stories for the campers that night: we three counselors were still in a state of shock.

At dinner about a week later, The Director clinked on his water glass for attention, rose, and spoke gravely to the assembled camp. He was an intimidating man even when he was in a good mood: he was clearly not in a good mood now! “Boys,” he said, “It has come to my attention that some of you have been trespassing at Hyde Hall and have seriously damaged the property. Now, we know who did these things, but we want to see if the guilty parties are men enough to admit what they have done and take the consequences of their actions.”

What a joke! We had expected better than this weary ploy from an experienced schoolmaster like The Director. Neither Bob, Blaise nor I gave a sign of guilt as we sat there in total innocence. And, of course, nothing happened. We never heard anything further from our awful trespass. But we had certainly had our fill of The Hermit and Hyde Hall! Our nighttime storytelling for the rest of the camp season was much blander stuff!

But wait, there’s more! This incident happened in the summer of 1953. The Camp closed forever in the 1970’s. In the late 1980’s someone had the idea for a reunion of old campers and counselors, and scores of us made the sentimental journey back to Hyde Bay. I was now in my early 50’s, and I eagerly made the trip. The campus was now a weedy field, rapidly returning to second growth woods. There was a big new State Park immediately next door, just across Shadow Brook. And across Hyde Bay, there was Hyde Hall, now on the National Register of historic sites, and open for tours under the sponsorship of civic-minded ladies from Cooperstown. Of course we went - all of us. We had all been fed, in our youth, a steady diet of tales of terror about the place. Here was the chance of a lifetime to inspect the premises with no question of trespass. And here is the perfectly amazing thing...

I can’t speak for others among the Hyde Bay alumni, but the fears of my boyhood were still very much alive! Terrors that I had long ago buried in my subconscious came flooding back. As we were shown from room to room by a friendly guide I could feel only a growing tension... a heavy, dark sense of foreboding. Docent ladies were actually serving tea on the terrace! How could such a thing be in this house of horror? Didn’t they know about

the dread legends that haunted this awful manse? I was totally unable to give polite attention to the well-intended ladies.

This was amazing: I was a grown man accompanied by a gaggle of friends of my youth... The sun was shining, the lake was a cheerful blue, the surrounding fields and forest were reassuringly green... the house was indeed historically interesting. But to me it brought back childhood fears that I would have thought were far beyond recall. To me, the house was gloomy and threatening and I was exquisitely uncomfortable in it. I looked nervously for any sign of a Hermit or, at least, a caretaker. I couldn't wait to get outside into the sun! And when I did, I skulked down the hill toward the lake and found the mausoleum, now securely locked. And, looking through the bars of the gate, I could see a solid floor.

I have visited Hyde Hall several times since that day. There is now a splendid opera company nearby that my wife and I attend every summer and I have several times taken the opportunity to return to the site of my youthful misadventures. The fears are not completely gone: fifty years later they still haunt me... not as intense as in earlier years, but still there. I find I can pay more attention to the interesting history of the house now, but Hyde Hall is still a scary place. These things go deep. Very, very deep.

Today, in my seventies, I wonder about those fears that were planted in me so many years ago, and which I so freely passed along to others. How much of a kindness was it, really, to share that tradition with the boys who gathered each evening, asking to be scared? Was it all innocent fun? I have suffered no lasting ill effects... have I?

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