

The Haunted House of Hess Road

an Appleton story

I hardly ever invited school friends over to my house. The main reason for this is probably that the idea just never occurred to me. I tended to keep my school and home lives separate, and was largely content to live a solitary existence outside school hours.

The woods behind our house flooded every spring and became a swamp; I could spend hours alone out there, crouched upon a tussock of grass, peering into the water at the curious creatures going about their strange little lives. In autumn the secluded hedgerows and woodlots came alive at dusk, and I spent many evenings prowling along the edges of fields, watching and listening as the small nighttime creatures began to rustle among the fallen leaves and branches.

And, of course, during summer vacation the very mention of school was anathema. I kept it far from my mind, and busied myself with bicycle riding, book reading, and exploring the farmland around Appleton—all activities that I could enjoy in solitude. And when I did wish for company—say, for a fishing expedition to Keg Creek or a free-booting cruise through Russell Farms' orchards—there were usually a couple of neighborhood kids available within biking distance.

But I think there was another reason, one that I probably didn't understand at first. My parents, based on the occasional glimpses they got, didn't always approve of my friends. A few were seen as not quite respectable enough, not quite "nice" enough. After one or two awkward incidents, and acting I believe with the best intentions, my parents quietly discouraged me from inviting certain kids over anymore.

To be fair, I don't think they understood my own social position. Later, in high school when the pecking order was more visible, my place at the bottom of the social ladder was obvious. The swaggering cliques that ruled the hallways had no use for me, and were not coy about expressing their scorn and disdain. And let's be honest, the feelings were mutual.

But back in elementary school we were all pretty much a bunch of grubby kids stumbling towards adolescence together. Any sense of class distinction was very subtle. Nevertheless, there was a divide; and it may have seemed to my parents that too often I chose my friends from the wrong side. I don't blame them for their concern; and they couldn't know that the other "side," for the most part, didn't want me.

As for myself, there was never any doubt about it: the misfits, outcasts and ne'er-do-wells were my people. I have always felt far more at home among the Huckleberry Finns of the world than among the model citizens.

And when I look back now over the long years, I can say without hesitation that those grade school and junior high pals, rough-hewn though they might have been, were the best friends I've ever had. They were honest and loyal, and never once gave me reason to regret our acquaintance. I was not worthy of them.

If these opening paragraphs are my clumsy attempt to explain some things that I didn't know how to explain when we were boys, then the rest of the story is simply my tribute to them: the boys I knew, and the friends we were. They may not remember it quite as I wrote it. For the sake of simplicity, I combined a few separate occasions into one adventure-filled day. It all happened; just maybe not all at the same time.

I recall a Saturday, sometime in the mid-1970s, when a couple of friends arranged to come over. Our big plan for the day was to make an excursion to the haunted house of Hess Road.

Every neighborhood should have its own haunted house, and we had one in Appleton during my boyhood. It stood on the east side of the road, just across from the current Post Office: a small two-story weathered-grey house and the nearby tumbled-down remains of a barn.

But first we spent some time at the treehouse. My father had built us kids a treehouse in a hedgerow that ran through the abandoned and overgrown farm fields next to our property. At that time the "woods," as we always called it, was still largely in the sapling stage: not much more than a brushy field dotted with young scrub trees and briar patches. The hedgerow was a fence line of mature trees with a small drainage ditch running the length of it, one of several fence lines that criss-crossed the old fields.

My father built the treehouse in one of these larger trees. It was nothing fancy, just a small wooden platform nestled in the crook between a couple of branches about ten feet up. A few boards hammered into the trunk of the tree served as a ladder. The whole thing was topped by a flat roof, made of corrugated green plastic left over from a rabbit hutch.

On this particular day there were three of us play-acting at something like pirates or Old West outlaws, or maybe just miscellaneous ruffians. We dragged an old brown snowsuit out of the basement, fastened it to a cross-piece, scarecrow-style, and nailed it to the back of the tree. It stood as a warning to any invaders that we were desperate fellows who would stick at nothing to defend our territory. I don't know who we were posting the warning for—there was nothing in that direction but weeds, trees and brush for the next half mile.

We filled a lunch box with peanut-butter sandwiches, tied it to a string and pulled it up to the treehouse. I even mixed for us our own special brew, in the tradition of the classic pirate's keg of rum. It consisted of water, food coloring, and a few random ingredients stolen from my mother's baking cupboard. This vile concoction was shaken together in a plastic jug, then hauled up to the platform and passed around.

"Drink up, boys!" I cried, and we each took a hearty swig.

The taste was indescribable and lingered long. In fact, even now, on days when I'm not feeling well, I fancy I can still taste it. None of us opted for a second round, and the jug was unceremoniously jettisoned from the tree house. We simply flung it skyward in a sweeping arc over the branches, where it landed some 15 yards away in a thick clump of brush. It was forgotten, and for all I know is probably still lying there.

The treehouse was basic but served us admirably, and we enjoyed it very much . . . for a while. There was one thing that my father hadn't noticed when choosing a tree in which to construct the platform: the poison ivy. There were masses of it growing throughout the field, innumerable vines and tendrils clinging to the trunk and branches of every tree—including our treehouse tree.

"Leaflets three - Let it be" didn't do much good in our case—it was everywhere. Soon we were all sporting a fine rash and going through a bottle a week of Calamine Lotion.

So the poor treehouse was "condemned" and abandoned, to be eventually torn down. Today nothing of it remains but a broken scrap of faded green corrugated plastic, half buried in the muck at the base of the old tree.

After the treehouse it was time for our main adventure of the day—the haunted house. We trekked cross-country through the woods parallel to West Somerset Road. The road would have been easier walking, but not as much fun as exploring our way through the brush and stands of young trees, a wilderness in our imagination.

At length we reached the east branch of Keg Creek where it ran through the fields behind the haunted house. The wandering stream was here tamed into a large straight-running ditch. We crossed the creek over an old bridge of rusty metal girders. I suppose they had once been clad with wooden planks so farm equipment could cross over.

Near the creek were a couple of junked cars that we investigated. I think they were early 1950s models, so they couldn't have been much more than 20 or so years old. But they had been sitting there a while: weeds sprouted through the rusted-out floors and the tires were cracked and dry-rotted. The interiors buzzed with horseflies and had that distinctive smell of old vinyl baking in the sun.

Behind the house and barn were a few small outbuildings: a chicken coop, a tool shed or workshop of some kind, and an outhouse. These were falling apart and covered with tangles of wild grape vines. We gave each of them a look inside, but previous youthful explorers had picked them clean long before we came along.

The barn was next. It had collapsed some years previously, leaving only a sort of crawl space beneath the jumble of fallen timbers. We could see a few pieces of old farm implements back in the shadows, but none of us was daring enough to creep in there for a closer look.

Having explored our fill of the barn and sheds, it was time to summon our courage and approach the haunted house. We had been aware of it the entire time, but had tried to avoid looking too closely in that direction. We were saving the best for last.

Though two stories tall, it was not a very large house. Still, it seemed to brood over us with an ominous presence. The empty upstairs windows were like eyes peering balefully down at us.

We made our cautious way through the back yard. There was nothing scenic or romantic about the place. The yard was overgrown with matted clumps of weeds, and littered with tree branches and bits

of miscellaneous junk. The house itself was half-hidden by shrubs and pine trees of various size and age.

The tricky part was finding who among us was brave enough to lead the way. We hesitated, crouching behind a protective cluster of wild rose bushes, each one trying to goad the other into action.

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Go ahead!”

“You first.”

“You said you were going first!”

“No I didn’t. I said I’d go first if you went first.”

“How can we both go first, moron?”

“Jeez, alright, c’mon! We’ll all go together.”

In the end we crept forward in a huddled group, ready to flee at the slightest sound or movement from the house. The back door was open wide and we could see through the building to the front windows.

The door opened into a small kitchen, but directly in front of it were the steps leading down into the cellar. This was a low-ceilinged space with a dirt floor. It was damp and dark and smelled bad. A couple of small windows at ground level were choked with weeds and only let in a dim light.

We tip-toed down and peered into the gloom, but all we could see were a few broken pieces of plumbing. The cellar was altogether too creepy, even for us, and we weren’t about to go poking around in the darkest corners. After only a brief glimpse we headed quickly back up the stairs.

We spent little time in the kitchen as well. The plaster had fallen from the walls and ceiling, and the old stove and sink were black with grime. Everything about the room seemed moldy and dirty. I tried to avoid touching anything.

There were a couple of other rooms, both empty of furniture. I remember a damp pile of yellowing Buffalo newspapers in one. There was also a scattering of poker chips and betting slips strewn across the bare wooden floor. I suspected that if the house was haunted by anything, it was some previous tenant’s gambling debts.

Now it was time for the true test of our bravery. We approached the stairs leading to the second floor, and ascended slowly in single file. The crooked and broken steps creaked beneath our timid feet. The first two of us made it to the top, while the third hesitated about halfway up. He was afraid to climb the last few steps, but also afraid of what might be creeping up behind him from the first floor.

I had just started snooping around one of the small front rooms when I thought I heard a slight sound from outside. I shot a startled glance through a broken window pane, and my heart gave a great leap of fear. A man was walking into the front yard from the road.

“Somebody’s coming!” I hissed and bolted for the stairs.

My companions were struck frozen with terror. The first one looked around wildly for a place to hide. The other, still lingering on the stairs, didn't know whether to run up or down. I settled that decision for him by leaping down the top steps and barreling solidly into him. We grappled and teetered for a moment until the third of our party, now hot on my heels, bumped into both of us.

Stealth was abandoned. With a tremendous clatter we descended the stairs and ran through the house. We suffered a brief Three Stooges moment as each of us tried to be first out the back door. Visions of ax-wielding maniacs filled our heads and lent speed to our feet. We scrambled willy-nilly through the trees and brambles, leaping like spooked deer over clumps of wild grass and pieces of old farm junk.

Not until we reached the relative safety of the heavy brush next to the creek did we stop. With gasping breath and fluttering hearts we peered back towards the house, half-expecting to see a frightful ghoul lumbering through the trees after us.

But all was quiet. The house stood silent and still, its empty windows gazing blankly out at us. I don't know whatever became of the man I'd seen. It seems very likely that, upon hearing the sudden eruption of noise from within the house, he also took to his heels and was still running in the opposite direction.

After convincing each other that the coast was clear, we followed the creek out to the road and headed straight for Strong's Store. Within a few minutes we were sprawled across the front steps, fortifying ourselves with root beer and candy bars, and talking over the day's events with many a ribbing and shout of laughter.

A few years later the property was sold, and the new owner had the Newfane fire department come out and burn all the buildings to the ground. The old cars were hauled away. Nothing remained but some miscellaneous trash and the scorched foundation stones of the house and barn.

In 2018 I walked back into the area for the first time in many years. It was all very overgrown now with scrub trees and dense thickets of thorny brush and brambles. Someone had made a lane through the undergrowth and cut some firewood, but most of it looked like it hadn't been disturbed since the day the house and barn were burned.

I walked around the foundation of the house as best I could through the overhanging bushes. The cellar hole was filled-in with rubbish and had a foot of stagnant water standing in it. A scattering of half-buried bricks marked where the chimney had once stood. There wasn't much of interest to look at. I couldn't really recognize it anymore as the place I had explored in my boyhood.

I made my way back to the creek, out of the trees and into the sunlight. This area had been cleared several years ago. The old girder bridge was long gone, so I jumped across the creek, not quite making it. Ah well, a couple of wet feet wouldn't hurt me. I poured some water out of my boots and started across the cleared space, but something made me stop in my tracks.

I paused a moment and glanced around. Yes, there it was again.

So the place was haunted after all. But not by any spooks or hobgoblins. I looked one last time at the nondescript mass of trees and bushes and the slow-moving creek. Everything around me was quiet and

still—but I knew there was something here, something that still lingered, that still endured despite the long passing of time.

And I smiled. I knew what it was: an echo of boyish laughter, the spirit of adventure, and the memories of old friends.