

Incident at Drowning Creek

Life Experiences – Literary Arts

by John Shell

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The day started out innocently enough, and with the promise of a great weekend ahead. It was 1969 and I was in my sophomore year at UVA. It was Friday, and the start of Spring Break. It had been a difficult semester, but I had found an enjoyable and welcome escape in the Outing Club. After studying hard during the week days, I would join the Outing Club for a weekend of camping, hiking, canoeing, or rock climbing in the scenic areas near Charlottesville. This weekend I would be joining them in the mountains of West Virginia at Seneca Rocks.

There was a slight hitch, however. All the Outing Club members with cars had finished their exams early and were already there. With few other options, I decided I could hitchhike. Two other campers were going to join me – my friend Tim, a classmate, and Elsa, a member of the Mary Washington College Outing Club who had gotten a ride with a friend to Charlottesville, and who had just arrived that morning.

We had our backpacks ready, and on this crisp, clear morning we were excited and confident as we hiked out to the main road to start our adventure. Lots of people hitchhiked we told ourselves and we should have little trouble catching rides. We had little idea of the situation we would find ourselves in before the day was over.

The trip started out well. We quickly got a ride out of Charlottesville heading west. A couple of more rides got us deeper into the mountains. But then our progress came to a halt. We were standing by a cow pasture on a country road with what seemed like

very little traffic. Three hitchhiking strangers with large backpacks might have seemed a little intimidating for the local country folk, who mainly just stared at us as they went by. We waited. As the afternoon wore on, our enthusiasm began to wane and although our plans to reach Seneca Rocks before nightfall looked in doubt, we were still hopeful.

Then, late in the afternoon, we got a break. An old red pickup truck stopped and offered us a ride. The driver said he could take us another 50 miles or so but that was as far as he was going. Glad to be moving again at last, we threw our packs into the back of the pickup and all three of us squeezed into the front seat. The driver, a man in his forties with a heavy mountain accent, was quite talkative, asking about our plans and where we were going, and telling us about himself. He said his name was Morton Morris and that he was born and raised in the mountains and worked odd jobs for other people in his community. He mentioned that he had seldom seen many hitchhikers in this part of the mountains but that he, unlike others around these parts, was not afraid of strangers.

By the time we got to the small town where Mr. Morris lived, it was already getting dark, and a definite chill was setting in as the sun set. The four of us discussed what we should do next. With nightfall there would be few cars on the road and our chances of getting rides slim. We said we were prepared, if necessary, to camp out over night, and Mr. Morris said he knew a perfect place just out of town where no one would care if we camped for the night. He pulled into a large open field, backed by thick woodlands.

He said the place was sometimes used for outdoor events, church picnics, and even a wedding had occurred here once. He called it Drowning Creek, after the large stream that ran along the edge of field. He said he would check on us in the morning and left.

Tired and hungry, we set up our small tents in the open field, made a fire, and heated up some food from our packs. With the mountain air quickly getting cooler, we gathered more firewood from the forest and made the fire a little bigger as we sat closer. Elsa had set up her little tube tent, which was open at both ends, and went to bed early. Tim and I sat up talking about school and future plans, not wanting to leave the warmth of the fire.

About 11 PM. we were getting ready to crawl into our tents when a truck came speeding down the dirt road into the campground and skid to a halt. It was Morton Morris.

“Hot Coffee! Hot Coffee! I brung ye some hot coffee!” He shouted.

As he got out of the truck, we could tell something was amiss. Morton Morris was staggering, spilling half the coffee before he could hand it to us. And he was very agitated.

“And I come to warn ye!”

His hands freed of coffee cups, he reached back into his truck and pulled out a rifle. Tim and I stood frozen by the fire. Elsa, now awake, got out of her tent and retreated into the darkness.

“I come to warn ye!” he said again as he staggered around the edge of the fire, his rifle waving about in our direction.

“I was at the bar and a couple of guys there said they was goin ta come out here and knock you boys in the head and get the girl! But I’ve come to protect ye!”

Then he added:

“Sometimes people in the community don’t do right, but I fix ‘em. Sometimes I shoot their cattle.”

Tim and I just looked at each other. Even in the light of the campfire, Tim looked very white and was trembling. We were in trouble. I remember realizing that none of our family or friends knew where we were, we had no way of contacting anyone, and right now we were alone, except for Morton Morris. His gun continued to wave back and forth in our direction as he staggered about, sometimes stepping into the edge of

the fire. He continued to mumble about things that had happened in the community and how he helped them do right. We did not feel very safe.

After about an hour, we finally convinced Morton to go back to the bar and try to talk the others out of their plan. Unsteadily he got back into his truck and headed off into the darkness.

As soon as the truck's taillights were out of sight, Elsa came out of hiding. She said she had climbed a tree at the edge of the clearing, and heard everything. We were all scared. After a short discussion, we agreed we were no longer safe there. We quickly packed up everything, put out the fire, and headed into the forest. None of us had a flashlight and it was pitch black among the thick trees, so we stayed close together and felt our way deeper into the woods. When we thought we had gone far enough, we positioned ourselves behind a couple of large trees and Elsa set up her little tent and crawled inside with her sleeping bag. Tim and I posted ourselves at either end of the tent and waited and watched. I don't know if Elsa actually felt safe enough to sleep, but there was no way I was going to be able to sleep. We didn't talk, and in the pitch black, I couldn't tell if Tim fell asleep.

Then, about two o'clock in the morning we saw the headlights. We could see them clearly enough through the trees to count several sets of headlights, possibly as many as seven or eight, streaming into the park one right after another. I guess we

were not as deep into the woods as we thought. We could hear doors slamming, men shouting indistinctly, and then flashlights moving about. They were looking for us. Was this the gang from the bar that had come here to “knock us in the head and get the girl”? Or could it possibly be a search party organized by Mr. Morris to rescue us? There was no way to know for sure without showing ourselves, and there was no way we wanted to take that chance.

We got ready to run back further into the woods. Elsa was now wide awake and packing her tent. We discussed quietly whether it would be better to just leave everything we had so we could move faster or take our stuff so there would be no trace to follow. We finally agreed to take our gear and if necessary we could drop it later.

The lights began to play around the edge of the forested area we were in. Elsa was already moving deeper into the woods. For what seemed like an hour or more we continued to hear the shouting and the lights continued to search the area, sometimes entering into the edge of the woods. We stayed quiet and waited, ready to flee if they came any closer.

Finally the activity diminished. We heard engines start and after a while the vehicles began to leave. We watched the taillights as they faded off down the road. Elsa came back to find out what was happening.

I sat up all night listening and watching. I doubt if Tim or Elsa slept either. We could not be sure they would not come back or that maybe some had stayed at the campground waiting in the dark.

At the first hint of daylight we stole quietly out of the woods and were relieved to see that the campground was empty. With the hope that whoever had been looking for us the night before would not be up this early, we hiked out to the main road.

Just as the sun was rising, a young man who was taking classes at a community college in another town picked us up and as we got several miles down the road we felt we could finally relax a little. We were safe. Our final ride that morning was on a flat-bed 18 wheeler. Tim and Elsa rode in the cab with the driver and I hung on to the chains in the flatbed as we weaved around the mountain curves. Before noon we had joined our friends, and other than being a little tired, we were able to enjoy the rest of the weekend, knowing our friends would be giving us a ride home.

A few years ago my daughter asked me if I had ever done any hitchhiking when I was younger. I had not thought about this event in many years but as I began to recall the incident, the memory flooded back in vivid detail. Even today, I get a chill when I think of what could have happened. Hitchhiking has long gone out of favor, and most everyone has cell phones these days and many ways to communicate. But this story is still, perhaps, a cautionary tale, or an anecdote of reckless youth.

Recently I searched for information about Morton Morris and found out that he had died in 1996 at the age of 68.

Thank you Mr. Morris, for coming to warn us.