

## MIRACLE AT LAKE OPEONGO

I spent four joyous summers of my youth working as a fish and wildlife technician in Algonquin Park, Ontario. My jobs involved working with research scientists who were studying the ways of animals. It was paradise for a young man interested in bugs and toads, and how the natural world worked. It also proved to be a good opportunity to grow up fast. This was in part because it was near the town of Walden.

Of Polish, French and Irish ancestry, along with a drop of Cree, the Waldenites were a unique blend. They worked mainly in the nearby lumber mill (when it operated), or manned the live-bait business (when it didn't). Some cooked for or guided (or some would say misguided) campers and tourists, up from New York or New Jersey.

Take Madge, our camp cook, for example. She'd lived all her life in Walden. At 275 pounds, she walked like a linebacker. The varnished floors of the mess hall creaked when she lugged out steaming racks of steaks from the kitchen. She had long, frizzled hair going all directions, sort of like Medusa, and was missing several teeth at the front and sides. But my God, the woman could cook! Without blinking an eye, she sizzled steaks as thick as your leg one minute, and turned out raspberry rhubarb pies as fluffy as a cloud the next.

I was terrified of her. Once, I summoned up the nerve to ask where she learned to cook like that. "Never thought about it," she replied, ripping the cap off a beer bottle with her teeth and downing three-quarters of the contents in one gulp.

This particular summer, Madge had inherited Fritz as a kitchen apprentice. The crew at the station was unexpectedly large during the early part of the season, and extra help was essential. Fritz was a gracefully tall man, believed to be from somewhere in Bavaria, although no one knew for sure.

There were few who managed to transcend the gaping crevice dividing the research scientists from the Waldenites. During my summers as a wildlife technician, I was lucky enough to get glimpses of a couple of these rare birds, not only experts in various fields of biology but also able to spin a yarn and drain a bottle of whiskey as

effortlessly as any Waldenite. Each was unconventional, unpredictable and offbeat to a fault. One of them was Clayton Hunt. Of medium height, slightly stocky, and at all times sporting a glimmer of a sardonic smile, he wore a brushcut long after brushcuts had gone out of style. Such men never care much for fashion.

I had heard stories. According to Jack Pigeon, the crusty old cook at the Wildlife Research Station, for example, Clayton was at the lodge at the Lake of Two Rivers one evening. Among other things, I'm sure, he had been pointed out as a notable authority on wildlife. It also happened that two elderly ladies, New Jerseyites who were guests of the lodge, were keen, at some point during their stay, to spot some wildlife—bears in particular (from a safe distance, of course).

It was past 10 o'clock and Clayton, settled comfortably at the bar, was well into a bottle of scotch. But not for long. The lodge operator, eager to fulfill the request of the elderly guests, approached him, raising the issue of some outstanding loan.

And so it was that Clayton agreed to show the two ladies a bear.

“When would be convenient?” one of them had chirped.

“Right now,” said Clayton, gulping back the last of the bottle's contents, causing the ladies to step back and gasp.

Ignoring their protests, he crammed the women into the back seat of his car and off they rattled into the dark and rain, down the highway six miles to the local garbage dump.

“There,” he exclaimed, not even stopping the engine. “A bear.”

“Where?” cried the ladies. “Bear? Where?”

Clayton gestured through the rain dripping down the windshield, toward a dark shape just visible among the cans and bottles and boxes. The ladies giggled. One of them thrust a Brownie camera into his hands. “We would like a photograph of the bear, please!”

Hunt grumbled his way out of the car and returned less than a minute later. He thrust the Brownie back into the hands of the ladies in the back.

“Could you get a little... nearer?” they cried. Clayton was dripping and had already started the engine.

He sighed, turned off the engine and clambered out of the car, clutching the Brownie. He returned even quicker this time, wrenching open the door and plunging back into the front seat, bringing with him a torrent of water. The engine roared into motion and the car began to creak backwards into the dark.

“Nearer!” the ladies cried in unison from the safety of the back seat. “Nearer, please!”

The engine went silent again. There was a long sigh. Hunt appeared to be meditating. Perhaps it was in memory of the fifth of scotch that still had several ounces left back at the lodge.

Mumbling something that was probably known as well in New Jersey as it was in Walden, Clayton threw open the door and stormed off once again toward the garbage pit.

Thirty seconds later, there was a flash. In that one five-hundredth of a second, the two visitors from America saw, frozen in time, the image of a huge black bear rearing over a poised photographer, the camera lens no more than six inches from the bear’s enraged nose. One of the ladies told a reporter from the Huntsville Record the next day that just before the flash, she thought she could make out their guide kicking the bear in its hindquarters.

The following morning, Hunt woke up with more than a hangover. And later, at the Huntsville General Hospital, an hour’s drive away, he was treated for a double fracture in his right arm, as well as for severe cuts and abrasions in various other areas.

And I think that’s all you need to know about Clayton Hunt and Madge and Fritz if you want to understand the miracle that took place at the summer’s end party in the dining hall at Opeongo Lake that fair August.

By early June, as happened every summer, whispers recalling episodes of last year’s Lake Opeongo party began to surface. By late July, most of last year’s stories had been disavowed by the perpetrators, and by August, speculation of what may be in store for the upcoming party reached a fever pitch.

Everyone would be there: the wildlife biologists who were on good terms with the fish biologists, the fish biologists who were on good terms with the wildlife biologists, and all of the able-bodied people of Walden. In fact, one could even expect to see the odd straggler from the hamlet of Barry's Bay, over thirty miles to the east. The only people not drawn to attend were campers and any official of the government above the level of station director. Accordingly, station director Mr. Duncan made an appearance, only on the grounds that "someone needs to keep you guys in line." Even then, he came armed with his wife, his six children and a bottle of rye.

For me though, and indeed for all of us who had to return to Toronto in early September to begin another year of classes, there was a sense of melancholy about the summer's end party. The lucky fellows who had earned their stripes -- the technicians, the trappers, the cooks, the Waldenites -- would stay to witness the quietness and mystery of winter at frozen Lake Opeongo, while the rest of us would pack our bags and head back to the toil of the city.

At last the time came. It was a grand night for a party. Most of the mosquitoes and flies had spent out their lives. The evening air was crisp and fragrant with dying leaves, bracken and mushrooms. The full moon cast a warm glow upon everything in its path.

All the couches and tables -- even the piano in the dining hall -- had been pushed up against the walls to allow room for square dancing. There would be hot dogs and other treats, enough to satisfy at least fifty people.

I sat on the deep sofa, wedged solidly between Madge and three of Mr. Duncan's kids. Everyone was happy. Mr. Duncan was dancing with Mrs. Duncan. Fritz was dancing something between a square dance and a polka, singing loudly off-key in German, competing with Ray Conniff's orchestra playing in the background. He had found some soul mates from Barry's Bay, who knew how to polka the real way.

Fritz had also procured from somewhere, a three-foot-long Bavarian garlic sausage, and had promised to prepare it in the traditional Bavarian way that very evening. The sausage was gigantic. I had seen it coiled up in the fridge earlier that afternoon. It had the dimensions of a small python.

The trappers were dancing -- Jake and Doug and old Cliff in their boots and plaid jackets and torn pants. Bearded wildlife biologists and entomologists danced on the same floor with lumber cutters and cooks and back-yard mechanics from Walden. Not a dancer but greatly amused by it, Clayton Hunt sat on the couch beside Madge and watched the activity. After a while, I saw him get up and walk out through the kitchen, disappearing downstairs to the washroom.

A tinge of sobriety was hitting me... the wistfulness that comes with the end of summer, the end of rainy nights and endless four-hand cribbage games, the gritty camp coffee with condensed milk, and bumping along muddy logging roads telling the same jokes over and over again.

I was knocked out of my reverie when I felt the couch sink on one side of me. Clayton, scotch in hand, had seated himself. After a few sips, he leaned over and whispered into Madge's ear. She laughed, put down her tumbler of whiskey, and launched herself up and out of the sofa. "Not possible," she proclaimed as she lumbered toward the kitchen. "Not this cook!"

If I had been able to hear clearly what Clayton had said to Madge, I would have quickly figured out that he had not ended up in the washroom, as I had earlier thought. Instead, he'd slipped quietly into the kitchen, taken the pot full of at least fifty simmering hot dog wieners off the stove, and carefully creaked down the stairs to the cellar with it and Fritz's three-foot-long garlic sausage, whistling to himself all the while.

Once in the cellar and out of sight, he poured the wieners out of their original pot into another and dropped the enormous garlic sausage into the still hot water of the first. Chuckling all the way back up the stairs, he reached the kitchen and returned the pot to the stove-top. The gigantic floating sausage now bobbed in the pot, nearly filling it.

Clayton himself filled me in, shouting into my ear in order to be heard above the noise. He'd told Madge she'd left the wieners cooking too long, and that all fifty of them had congealed together into one massive wiener the size of her equally massive arm.

There was a scream from the kitchen. As we all rushed off the dance floor, streaming out of the dining hall in a great blur of whiskey and gin, we could hear someone cry out from the kitchen.

“Gruss Gott, eets a miracle!”

Madge’s scream had been more like a howl, I recalled later, a bit like the call of wolves under the full moon glinting off Lake Opeongo on a crisp August night.

I had never regarded Madge as a religious person but I knew that she could cuss all right and cuss she could and keep right up with the crustiest old trapper and even old Jack Pigeon any day of the week. But until the night of the summer’s end party, I had never heard any words come out of her mouth that I’d also heard in church. That evening, as we all rushed toward the kitchen, words from the Lamentations of Jeremiah and three chapters of the Book of Proverbs filled the air.

“What happened?” someone asked.

“Dunno,” laughed Clayton Hunt with a face so innocent it drew a few glances.

“Normally holds her liquor pretty good,” said someone from Walden.

“Burnt herself out, she done!”

“Could've bin the whiskey! ”

“Bin here too long! ” someone else chimed in.

There was Madge, slumped into the old wooden chair in the corner of the kitchen, just by the stove. Fritz had gotten there first. By the time everyone else had arrived, his huge hand was resting on her shoulder. She was weeping uncontrollably. When she finally looked up, her eyes were wide and every bit as sober as old Jeremiah's.

And then she set her eyes on Clayton.

There was a moment of recognition, that silent, split second where understanding begins to germinate and truth comes into focus. When the hearts of true friends beat in time. She paused to wipe the tears from her eyes and then began to issue a volley of words that definitely do not appear in Proverbs or Jeremiah or any other book of the

Bible. She continued...describing Clayton Hunt in terms that had only been heard on the final turn of late-night cribbage games.

But when she was halfway through characterizing Clayton and his ancestry, she broke down again. This time in laughter. Fritz threw back his head and laughed. The trappers, with great gusts from their bellies, laughed. The Walden guests joined in. The research scientists laughed. The ornithologists, the parasitologists, even the entomologists laughed. Soon the whole kitchen shook. The giant wiener shook in its pot.

The next day, I packed my bags, coaxed my ancient car into action, and rattled four hours back to the city. It was my last summer at Opeongo. The time had come for me to set out on a determined journey to establish myself in life.

I never saw Clayton Hunt or Madge or the others again. They and the Waldenites would be left to witness the wonder of frost art, icicles and animal tracks in the snow over the next winter. But whatever the course of our lives thereafter, none would forget the miracle that happened that late summer night in the kitchen at Lake Opeongo.