

The Wild Man

“We’re going on a field trip,” our teacher told us just before classes should have started. His announcement would lead to quite an adventure before that day was over.

We were excited . . . none of us had done much schoolwork anyway since early May. We were happy to escape from our one-room country school into a warm sunny day in early June.

Later, we discovered that Robert Minchaud, on his first job, was struggling to teach his charges – almost two-dozen students scattered across eight grades. Evidently, he was overwhelmed preparing lesson-plans for each of the groups of two and three students who made up most of those grades.

The field trip would be on foot. Mr. Minchaud had chosen a few older students to be in front with him. The rest of the older kids would bring up the rear. We younger students were sandwiched in the middle.

Our destination was an old log cabin in the wilderness my older sister Carol and I had found the fall before while exploring the wilderness north of our farm. We had told our teacher that a strange looking wild man lived there. Mr. Minchaud probably didn’t believe us, but we must have aroused his curiosity.

The class set out heading northeast into the bush from our white clapboard schoolhouse. One of the oldest boys took the lead. Within half an hour, he had us lost. We stopped while Mr. Minchaud tried to figure out where we were.

That’s when my sister went over and spoke quietly to Mr. Minchaud. She was too young to be considered an ‘older’ student. But she had an ‘in’ with the teacher – in addition to being a student she was also the school janitor. Mr. Minchaud knew our farm was closer to the intended destination than any other farm in the area. Carol offered to lead the way. After all, we’d told him about it.

The previous fall, she and I had stumbled upon the cabin. It gave us quite a scare at the time. We’d burst through dense bushes into a large clearing. In the middle was the log cabin. A disheveled looking man was standing out front, staring right back at us. We froze. Frightened, we whirled around and ran back home. We didn’t tell anyone, not even our little sister. We would have been in trouble with our parents. They told us not to stray from our farm . . . we were warned about the dangers of wolves, coyotes, bears, and other wildlife. But they didn’t warn us about wild men! One day, Mr. Minchaud had invited the class to suggest possible field trips. My sister and I worked up enough nerve to tell him about the wild man and his log cabin in the wilderness.

Now, deep in the bush and concerned about us being lost, Mr. Minchaud told Carol to take the lead. At that point, we weren’t sure where we were going either but Carol and I had a better idea than anyone else.

Half an hour later, we came upon an old trail barely visible in the bush. It was overgrown with grass and bushes. Carol and I recognized it as the one we’d found the previous fall. We began following it northward. The faint trail seemed to go on for miles. Then suddenly there it was . . . the clearing and the small log cabin. Some of the little kids became frightened.

The place looked spooky. One front corner of the weathered cabin faced us. It had a large porch. Rough-hewn steps led down to our right, ending at a flat area covered in wood shavings. Behind the cabin were scattered rusted metal shapes and other items made of faded wood we didn't recognize. A lazy spiral of smoke curled up from a stone chimney above the roof. On the far side of the cabin, short lengths of logs had been thrown into a huge woodpile almost as high as the cabin, waiting to be split. Beside it was a double-bitted axe stuck into a sturdy chopping block. A row of neatly stacked split firewood four feet high lined the far side of the cabin.

One of the younger children cried out and pointed. A short skinny man was sitting at the bottom of the rough-hewn steps. He wore clothing made from hides. On his feet were calf-length moccasins. An old grey wide-brimmed hat angled down over his forehead.

The wild man! From beneath his hat flowed long grey unkept hair. His beard was even longer, but lighter grey. He kept looking down at his hands held at his waist. In one hand was a small shiny knife. The other held a block of wood with something protruding.

We watched him glance repeatedly our way. He squinted each time . . . and then he shrugged . . . and smiled brightly . . . easily.

We all drew back a little, nervously . . . even Mr. Minchaud.

The man waved impatiently for us to approach.

"C'mon," he said, his voice was a muffled growl. "It's okay."

All of us moved forward gingerly. The bigger kids were in front. In retrospect, it's likely we were more unsettling to him than he was to us . . . living in seclusion all by himself and then suddenly being descended upon by a horde of rambunctious, chattering school kids. Well . . . upon seeing him the chattering came to an abrupt halt.

Before letting us approach, Mr. Minchaud gathered us and said quietly that we were not to call this unusual person a wild man. He was a hermit and seemed to be civilized enough. We moved a bit closer, but stayed well back from the 'hermit' and his cabin. We felt much easier when our teacher walked over and sat beside him on the steps. Mr. Minchaud asked the strange looking man about his home, his carving, if he enjoyed living alone and what his daily life was like. Mr. Minchaud did almost all the talking. The man said little. Most of his responses were single words, grunts or shakes of his head. It was clear, those first words he spoke when we'd arrived were about as talkative as he was going to get.

Mr. Minchaud had us sit in a semi-circle in front of the steps to the hermit's porch so we could watch him carve. Mr. Minchaud sat beside him. We watched the strange man carve small shavings from a block of wood as we ate our lunch. He kept carving away, looking up occasionally, traces of a shy smile tickling the deep creases around his eyes and licking at the corners of his mouth, barely visible through his bushy moustache.

Finally, Mr. Minchaud asked the man if we could swim in the beaver pond. The early afternoon had become quite warm. We'd passed the pond just before arriving at the tiny log cabin. All the kids responded enthusiastically. Besides, they couldn't wait to get away from the hermit. The pond was about 200 yards from the cabin, barely visible through the dense trees and underbrush. The man looked up at Mr. Minchaud, shrugged his shoulders and nodded his head toward the pond.

We prepared to leave, feeling a mixture of relief and disappointment . . . sad about

leaving him alone . . . and curious about his life and the many, many carvings sitting around on his porch. We saw an impressive display of finely carved wildlife: a beaver, a moose, a pair of wolves with pups, a deer with a fawn, a hawk landing on a tree branch, a grouse with its tail feathers in a fan, and a black bear striding across a green base. All were carefully painted to faithfully represent the colors of live animals.

One of the boys called out from the edge of the clearing. He'd gone ahead and discovered a well-worn path through the trees to the pond. We followed and gathered at the edge. The pond was shaped in a rough oval, and about 500 feet across. A beaver dam had drawn a straight line on one end. Trees and bush grew right down to the water's edge. There was no beach . . . just mud at the end of the path. We found lots of animal footprints in the mud, and some human footprints, too.

Sitting beside the pond, the shade was cool and welcome. Two thirds of the kids went swimming. Mr. Minchaud told all of us to turn around and cover our eyes while each stripped to their underwear and got into the water. They were having great fun when one kid went under . . . she'd got out beyond her depth. Mr. Minchaud jumped in wearing all his clothes and carried her to shore. The swim was over.

When the swimmers got home later, it was hard to hide the fact they and their underwear had gone swimming in a muddy pond. Mr. Minchaud would get into a whole lot of trouble with the parents, mostly over permitting such improper behavior. That is, for allowing the kids to swim in their underwear . . . more unforgivable, evidently, than the fact one of the children 'had almost drowned', as we embellished the story later. We didn't understand at such young ages what that was all about.

Carol and I told our parents about the field trip, and why we'd been responsible for it. We got the stern worry-inspired admonition from our protective mother we'd expected . . . and deserved . . . perhaps.

A few days later, Dad would tell us over supper: "That's a very interesting man!"

Curious and concerned for our safety, Dad had made a trip to learn more about the hermit, until then unknown, inhabiting the wilderness a few miles north of our farm.

"He lives alone up there, you know . . . all by himself," Dad observed. "You should see his wood carvings! They're amazing . . . that man's very, very talented."

We learned the hermit's name was Anton Rumstead. Dad had spent several hours with him. He liked Mr. Rumstead and pronounced him to be a kindly man; not someone we needed to fear. Such compliments were not easily earned from our father.

Dad mentioned in a voice that conveyed his awe . . . and surprise . . . at seeing an almost finished carving discarded on the woodpile. Part of an antler had broken off a moose Mr. Rumstead had been carving. Instead of simply gluing the tiny piece back on, he'd thrown it away and started over. He seemed to be passionate about creating his carvings and the bases, all in one, from a single solid piece of wood, and doing in perfectly. Nothing else would do.

While telling us about Mr. Rumstead, Dad was holding gently in his farm-calloused hands an exquisitely carved black bear he'd brought back. He'd been given it as a gift while leaving, after sitting on Mr. Rumstead's porch with him for hours, exchanging few words . . . mostly listening to the quiet. The carving was four inches high and perfectly true to proportion. It was on a green-painted base. Dad turned the carving over. Mr.

Rumstead's name was neatly carved into the bottom of the base.

Months later, we learned that Mr. Rumstead ventured forth occasionally from his cabin to a tiny village for supplies. There, in the few hours of time he granted civilization, Anton Rumstead traded the pelts of animals he trapped during winter for supplies to last through until the world was granted its next brief audience.

He would also bring some of his carvings. The rumor was that someone had a standing order for all of the carvings he cared to part with. We never learned whom . . . but suspected the owner of the tiny general store/post office. Dad once saw a small pile of pelts left there by Mr. Rumstead after one of his trips to town. He was sure the value came nowhere near the cost of the supplies Mr. Rumstead stuffed into the huge pack he somehow managed to carry on his back, as he made his way home on foot to his log cabin in the woods.

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