

NormalcyMag

Exploring American Culture



The Myths That Spring Us
Things That Invite People To
Their Deeds of Humanity

\$1^{.00}
Suggested Retail
Price or Donation

Volume 2 Number 2
April 2018

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NormalcyMag

The CEPIA CLUB LLC

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www.normalcymag.com

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P.O. Box 60
Osceola, WI 54020

Distribution: Unlimited free digital download.
Limited print available (\$1/copy).

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Cover Art:

"Look the Hell OUT! A Run Away Buzz Buggy Rabbit"

Background: An untitled painting by Dan Osborne
Bunny Car Prop: Provided by Superjunk
Plant: Provided by Ma Krenz
Photo: Done by Tim Krenz

Editor's Standard

Welcome back to NormalcyMag!

As always, we attempt to present a refreshing, thoughtful, and positive exploration of the great middle of the American culture. The premise of our magazine remains the same. So much of today's living and its basic meaning get lost and obscured in harsh definitions of extremes, almost always imposed on the perceptions and perspectives of people, and always in the expectations coming from outside pressures. Our magazine believes that most people want to live somewhere beyond the extremes—those extremes that really benefit only a few who exploit them. Most people, we contend, want life somewhere in the calm, steady and reassuring places. We call those special places “normalcy,” where everyone may reflect inward and act outward for creating healthier thought and better living.

We themed this issue of NormalcyMag “The Myths That Spring Us: Things That Invite People To Their Deeds of Humanity.” Repeating our “green” cover from last April, the title suggests something beyond the word play of “spring.” When stories, experiences, and songs return meaning upon recalling them, they may all carry us forward in our very human empathy toward others.

In this issue, J.D. Schloss provides a great and bizarre piece of fiction in “Story,” a selection that delivers entertainment and vision of what the late Pi KIELTY might have referred to as “alternative realism and the auto-horrific.” J.D., I think, delivers magnificently on the challenge I put to him. I think readers will greatly enjoy it.

In “Versing,” we have two selections. Davey Shoves, who appeared last issue anonymously under Superjunk, provides another “checklist” for showing values in a different way. Our great friend, the songwriter, musician and poet, LEROY, makes his first appearance in our pages. His lovely ditty about the season in transition contributes a song of hope and affection. My own contribution in “Sub Terra Vita” relates a story of my life, and reveals rather personal things. I hope readers react well to it. And finally, my “Low Adventures” continue with Part 6 of trekking the Superior Hiking Trail.

As for the administrative things, we consider the layout a work in progress every issue, while keeping the big things consistent. Finally, I happily announce the addition of two permanent staff. Derek Shores, now listed as Assistant Editor for the first time, has give awesome help and input for the past two years of planning and producing this magazine. He helps greatly with a keen eye for copy editing the selections and in creative planning. Also, long-time contributor J.D. Schloss, now listed as Associate Editor, has primary responsibility for review of contributions and selections of material for publication. I have immense gratitude for both Derek and J.D. as dear personal friends and collaborators. Welcome, both of you!

Finally, as always with our magazine, I give the admonishment: Please read with open mind!

Sincerely,
Tim Krenz
Publisher & Editor



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The Cepia Club LLC

Sub Terra Vita Chronicle #51

Easter Egg Mystery Hunt and Mr. "Solemnist Holmes"

By Tim Krenz

I love Easter. As a young man fighting a monster of my own development, and another one I did not create, Easter brought me peace. The three days from Good Friday to Sunday night meant greening grass, no snow, my personal and secreted god, baseball, and baskets full of candy. With the new season, the hopes for a team's success to the World Series, the possibilities exist every year that newness might bring better times. And even when the snow and cold linger, teams can play ball after shoveling the fields, a good spirit of expectant relief surfaces, and the Easter bunny may still one day show up.

On the hard side, the monster I did not create took harsh, bewildering forms as a younger man. Since growing into a horrific mental disorder from ages 16 to 17, my mind afflicted between two worlds, caught partially in the surreal even at my most lucid moments. Sometimes when a young adult, my existence consumed itself in the non-existential realm of a subreal, an encompassing psychosis on planes where parallel lines intersect and light fears to enter. Until a complete change and firm decision in my late twenties, my body had also absorbed the addiction to drugs and drink that it phemed in order to escape the Hades of my absent soul. Spirits wander in "flixxed" modes of living death when *schizo-afetiva* runs out of control. By the end of active addiction, I lived a wrong life for too long a time.

Yet, when young, Easter always gave me hopes, though quite brief. For a long time now, I arrest the addiction's active imprisonment, and I know that but few can understand how much a day means for that cause. In this recaptured life, I find a super-real of peace almost everyday. Like everyone, I need the promise of Easter,

spring, and growth. Without that, the living death in all its monstrosity rules, and we all might wander in the voids and nothingness. To make it, personally, I need to live the gifts. One particular Easter Sunday a long time ago represents the best that the gifts can give me.

When still young, and in university, studying for a career I would never enter, I came to the Farm where my parents retired three years previously. I went there to get away from the drugs and the drinks. I needed to clear my head, do my laundry, do school work without distraction, eat the Sunday holiday dinner, and go back to school. I left my girlfriend working the weekend at her job. Escaping the fun-'n-unreal of a party city meant I could hold until the end of the term in late May. Just a few days away would rest me enough.

During my teen years, I started using drugs only after the onset of my illness. I lived high after that, and still got decent enough grades in college to graduate quick. I under-performed, but still made some honorable credit. I did not yet recognize the addiction that would consume my life, or that the disorder could alter my identity from college kid to the repellent eccentricity of a "Sherlock Holmes on rocket espresso." In time, all that would kill most of my future, leaving me bereft of faith. I had this Easter to delay the inevitable consumption of my reality, one year away.

Something happened that memorable Easter weekend, something of joy, warmth, and happiness. Later, when I needed and wanted to find the help to completely arrest the addiction to drugs and alcohol, that Easter Sunday represented all that any god could offer me at that point in life.

That Saturday afternoon, the day before Easter, relatively warm for that April, I caught the baseball game on television (I think) in the Farmhouse's back porch. The Twins defended their last World Series title, and while watching, I found in a basket on the table a bunch of plastic, pastel-colored, hollow eggs. They looked like the kind that came with candy in previous years, useful as a part functional decoration and partly as a treat. I looked at them for a while. I never really knew my parents Farm as a home since I spent so little time on that property after my parents bought it for retirement. April that weekend gave warmer temps and we had a snow free yard after such a big winter that began with the "Halloween Blizzard of the Century." This particular Easter weekend gave me a good wave and a pleasant vibe. On that Saturday, I resolved to have some fun, without the harshness of drugs and the stupor of drink. Could I manage to do it?

I took a clipboard from my school backpack. Drawing sheets of paper, I folded and carefully tore them into narrow and long slips. I counted out eleven of the plastic eggs, of various soft colors—reddish, bluish, yellowish, greenish, and even one purplish. They represented all the mad capped "bokking bunny" colors of Easter. I also found some masking tape. I took a walk around the five acre yard and the buildings near the house making notes on my clipboard. All the while I put together a reverse puzzle. Like some Sherlock Holmes preemptively creating a game, I wanted a game to get confused with a mystery, like in a joke where the punch line comes first.

When my father retired my senior year in high school, my parents bought the farm and built a rather modest yet comfortable house. The Farm had no animals, as mother would not allow them, but my parents grew crops of either corn or soybeans on the spread of the flats east of Dresser, Wisconsin. Still only eight miles from where I

grew up in Osceola, I felt the stranger on this land. It nonetheless provided some interesting places. Like most crop growing farms, it had few fences. With the road to the north, the line of small pine trees to the east of the house, and the various machines and buildings on the west of the yard, I found the hideaways for an unconventional Easter egg hunt. Although I always disappointed and failed my father's attempts to turn me into a dirt farmer, I knew the names of what I saw, and I could describe them in parables.

Inside again, I wrote on the slips of paper five clues for each of two teams, a total of ten clues folded inside ten plastic eggs, each sealed with tape, and marked, "Team A" or "Team B," #s 1-5. I put chocolate in a big pastel purplish plastic egg, and labeled it, "Winner" on the tape outside.

Saturday night passed. I felt giddy about my experiment in human sociology. Sunday morning, while my parents attended church, I took the eggs and the notes and my rough map, and I carefully placed the eleven eggs in their appointed places. One clue would lead to the next clue for each team, in a very ordered and sequential way, except clue #5 for both teams read the same, to the last egg, #6. The first group to the one purple egg prize with chocolate would win.

The early afternoon, the rest of my family came to spend Easter Sunday. Four of my five older sisters (one of them lived far away), and their families—their husbands, with my young nephews and nieces—and my older brother, and I always celebrated holidays with our parents. With me so much younger than my other siblings, I normally remained the solemn one about my fate or some issue, more serious and concerned in my outlook. Not today. Today, I would bring the fun.

Mother watched over the meal of turkey, ham, and

“fixins” with pies in the kitchen, as everyone else gathered outside on the back patio. I announced the Easter egg hunt challenge. Everyone, including my dad, divided themselves into two teams, six or seven people each. I explained the rules, and that everything would take place within the acreage of the area around the house. After they mulled and chewed the first clue I gave each team on another slip of paper, I announced in my best way, “The Game's afoot! Go!”

The game, the Great Easter Egg Hunt, wildly took form. First clues solved by each team within several seconds, they ran in different directions. For my sisters and brothers-in-law, mostly in their late twenties and early to thirties, they ran, hobbled, stumbled, and flitted in their groupings to get to the first egg with their next clue before the other team found theirs. The children scampered after them. Only my fleet-in-the-feet brother, ten years my senior, outran everyone. Of course, when they reached the place which they thought the coded rhyming phrase described, they had to look about for the pastel-colored plastic eggs. Looking under the first wood pile, or under the tractor seat, or under the bin hood of the corn planter took its precious time for the first few clues in succession. It took valuable time when each team went the wrong way once or twice, misreading the clue. Then once finding the clue, they broke the seals of the eggs, opened them, and read the next coded clue for the next egg.

“Whither the rhyme of 'cocaine bank' in the back.” One team's clue read. “Propane tank!” my brother-in-law yelled in deciphering the code. “To the back yard!” The clues became progressively harder as each team got to the next one. A four- or five-acre game boundary becomes a lot of ground for people to cover. As the teams vaulted to the next places, completely across the grounds and in and around the buildings, they crossed each others paths several times during the play. To the



far ends of their endurance, the less fleet of speed, the nephews and nieces and their short legs, and my athlete brother, “Mr. Slick Mercury” himself, laughed, joked, held other teams up, physically and verbally, all in order to gain the vital edge of time.

Both teams reached their fifth sealed egg and clue approximately at the same time, in two places far removed but equidistant to the final prize, the purple plastic egg! Now came the time of truth. Both teams read the final clue, the witted and the quick would win. Toward the last egg, one team got an edge and ran. All the tripping and stumbling crowd came. They got to the final egg first and won the PRIZE and the chocolate! The game at a close, no longer a'foot, the memory of that grand day and that grand hunt in that grand game, came to a close. I have never forgotten the joy and the laughter in everyone, including myself, the solemn one.

The rest of that Easter Sunday passed, with baseball,

warm sun, family dinner, then night. All through the afternoon and until they went to their own homes, everyone talked about the fun time playing the egg hunt. I had my hit idea, and I did it on a couple more Easter celebrations, too.

That evening, I drove the two hours back to my apartment. My girlfriend stayed with me, like always, off and on for a couple of more years. The inner workings of the disorder combined with the addiction to hard drugs, mild drugs, and all non-prescribed drugs (and alcohol), would meet the explosion in my life, my mind, my body and my spirit within one year. Even graduating from university with a degree offered no hope.

In the future, several years after coming out of the

worse effects of a multi-year breakdown, I would find that first day clean, dry and in recovery from the addiction. I did so every day by making that choice to live a good and freer life. I do not dwell on the bad time of my youth from the disorder, but I embrace the joy. It also gives me relief most of the time from persistent symptoms of the “affect-shiza.”

Like the joy I found in giving smiles and good things and happiness to family on that particular Easter Sunday, I find some peace of my very own. The things given by love gave me a life eventually. I learned that by sharing concern and empathy, back and forth with others, I find some good magic that works everyday. In that, I found what I struggled so long to find before in pain and youth: a happier life free, today.



Story

Journeyman

By J.D. Schloss

Doughboy Springfield, all 339 pounds of him, stuffed into pajamas emblazoned with smiley face baseballs and bats inscribed with the word “Slugger,” looked at the handlebar mustachioed, porcine visage staring back at him in the bathroom mirror, smiled and said, “Here we go again.”

Doughboy’s given name, this time around, was Buster. Over the past year he had many nicknames: Dinner Bell, Shanty, and Buttercream were just a few. Most of these came from his softball teammates. Nobody called him Buster. Hell, his doting mother called him Dobosh, after the Hungarian chocolate buttercream layered torte he couldn’t get enough of. Doughboy though was the one that stuck, and he embraced the moniker in his good-natured way.

Buster was a firm believer in the afterlife, eternal return, and déjà vu. Or, perhaps, it was an enduring faith in a disordered, incomplete version of the hero’s journey. A kind of Hero Interuptus, if you will. Call it a rich inner-life, madness, a gift, or a curse, call it whatever you wish, but Doughboy knew something strange and beautiful and disturbing was about to happen. Most of the time his thought life was a jumble of disjointed memories, spanning centuries, which would flash through his mind triggered by random occurrences. He had few memories of any kind of childhood. What he was certain of however was that he had lived forever, and weird, weird shit was his fate.

It happened every spring and always right around Opening Day. Buster knew the common element of his time travel

was the beginning of baseball season. His name always changed and his circumstances were wild and varied each of the “years” he traveled through time. He also knew it was inevitable that moving from one “year” to the next involved some pretty large-scale ignominy. His insights on the subject were accurate, but connections between them were beyond his grasp.

“Dobosh, dinner’s on. It’s your favorite... salty turkey legs,” his mother called in her singsong voice.

“Be right down, Mama,” Doughboy replied.

Doughboy took one last look in the mirror, winked, and turned to go downstairs.

“Good evening, my sweet Dobosh. How was your afternoon nap?” Mrs. Springfield uncovered a silver platter revealing a veritable rafter of tom and hen legs. “Tuck in, baby boy, or you won’t have strength to hit that softball.”

Buster didn’t need any encouragement. He already had a leg in each hand and was alternating bites, one from the left paw, one from the right, in rapid fire succession like a boxer raining blows on the speed bag. Buster was about thirty bites into his repast when he came up for air, rested his game bird filled mitts on the table and said, “Mama, were our ancestors Vikings?”

“Oh, Dobosh, I do declare. You’ve got such an imagination. You know our people come from the hollers here in Kentucky.”

Fully engaged in Berserking fantasy, Buster didn’t hear his mother’s reply. Foulest Asger was his name. Foulest Asger, plundering villages, romping on many a long- haired shield maiden’s belly, roaming the high seas and swinging his bloodstained battleaxe all while singing songs of glory.

Hallucination or long distant memory, what mattered was that it was real to Buster. The more recent reality was this: some “years” previous, Buster was incarnated as one Raymont Mayflower. Mayflower, like Buster, had sprung out of nowhere, waking up sprawled on the floor of a Greyhound bus station, with no idea who he was or how he got there. Loaded to the gills on Senator’s Club Gin, sweat pouring off him, he could barely see for the darkness. The smell was terrible. Raymont felt as if he was boiling alive in a cauldron of bile. It reeked of vinegar, rotten apples, and warm feta cheese. He put his hands to his ears in an attempt to stop the jack-hammering in his brain only to find that his head was the size of a medicine ball and instead of flesh, bone, or hair, he felt plastic and fur. His ears were huge as well, sprouting into foot long points alongside his oversized head. Raymont began to scream.

“Mommy, why is the Easter Bunny howling? Why is he on the floor? Is he hurt? Why is he wearing a dirty coat? Where are his paws?”

“Honey, that’s not the Easter Bunny,” the woman said, pulling her four-year old daughter, Daisy, close to her hip.

They were at the bus station to use the restroom after spending the morning hunting Easter eggs in the park across the street. “That man is sick and scared. I want you to sit down while I help him.”

Several days later, Raymont woke up in a hospital bed to find the woman and her daughter smiling at him.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Raymont,” the woman said. “The doctors said you should be able to leave the hospital tomorrow or Saturday. I took the liberty of throwing that awful, vomit crusted bunny head you were wearing in the trash. And that oilskin greatcoat of yours, woo wee, I never seen such a nasty thing. It’s gone too. You don’t need it down here, child.” Raymont had no idea what she was talking about. “Here’s everything that was in the coat,” she said, handing Raymont a small blue canvas bag.

“Well, thank you kindly, Ma’am,” Raymont said. He found the lever and raised the bed until he was sitting up, eye level with the woman. He reached into the bag and pulled out a wooden drumstick, dumbly stared at it, laid it down on the bed, as a fleeting memory surfaced and he heard music. He dipped his arm back into the bag and retrieved a worn leather billfold. He opened it to find it empty, save a Louisiana ID card identifying him as Raymont Delfino Mayflower, DOB 4/1/19. “So that’s why she’s calling me Raymont,” he thought to himself and smiled. The next item he discovered was a worn copy of Frans Bengtsson’s Viking adventure novel, *The Long Ships*. Raymont had a vague idea he’d been reading the book at some point. A strange sadness overtook him and he felt tears welling up as he plunged his hand back into the bag to find the matching drumstick.

The next “year” Raymont got sober and found steady work as house drummer at World of the Satisfyin’ Boogie Palace. He’d go to church with Daisy and her mother each Sunday and spend the rest of the week in Audubon Park reading before heading to the Boogie Palace. Life was good and as the anniversary of his Easter humiliation came closer, Raymont began having flashbacks and premonitions. As disconcerting as these were, he mostly felt comforted by them. It wasn’t necessarily a faith built from weekly church attendance, or in a God, but rather a faith that through impermanence and disgrace he would always be taken care of. He knew that as Spring Training drew to a close his time in New Orleans was ending.

Easter Sunday, Raymont was lounging on the grass, reading Lawrence Ritter’s baseball interviews, *The Glory of Their Times*. Over the last year, he’d read and reread the Viking adventure novel that was so inexplicably in his possession when he appeared in New Orleans and, upon awakening each morning, took the book from his nightstand and savored the inscription: “*Show ‘em you love ‘em...always.*” These were the words he lived by, and so he took out his pen and wrote that same message on the inside cover of the Ritter tome. And then he was gone.

Chauncey Gosling woke up in excruciating pain to find his right hand submerged in a deep fat fryer, the hand indistinguishable from the funnel cakes he was in charge of coating with powdered sugar at the Bug County Renaissance Fair. The hot grease burning the glove, part of the Royal Musketeer uniform he wore, was fusing into the skin of his hand. The surgeon later told him he’d never regain use of his french-fried hand when he woke up again in the hospital. She told him to lay off the angel dust and maybe start paying more attention to the book he was reading. Like Raymont,

Chauncey was flummoxed. He had no idea about angel dust or any damn book. Chauncey asked a nurse what the doctor meant and she presented him with an anthology of poetry by Hafiz. He opened the book and read the inscription, *“Show ‘em you love ‘em...always.”*

Nearly a year later, Chauncey Gosling had eleven months clean and was writing poetry (with his left hand now). He walked off the stage to a standing ovation at Hack’s Coffee after doing his first public reading...and disappeared into the night.

Buster Springfield, Chauncey Gosling, and Raymont Mayflower were just three of the names of a man that had been appearing, intoxicated and humiliated, out of nowhere, in the spring, only to vanish the following spring, sober, and leaving an indelible impact on the people’s lives he touched. This had been going on since the beginning of organized baseball. Given the vivid flashbacks the man experienced, I’d venture to guess he’s been around much longer...perhaps since the beginning of time.

This brings us back to the little dining room in Kentucky where Buster has returned from his fantasy flight and realizes that at any moment he may vanish, never to see his mother again. “Mama, I want to thank you,” he said.

“Whatever for, my sweet man?” his mom replied.

“I was a mess. 400 pounds, half dead, and I showed up with nothing but crazy and you took me in.”


“Oh, Dobosh. I don’t understand this business about you just ‘showing up.’ You’ve always been my little big man.”

“I’m sorry, Mama. I don’t want to worry you.” While his mother knew her Dobosh since he was born, his memory only reached back to the previous spring when he suddenly appeared here, 75 pounds heavier and “waking up” to find he’d had a heart attack while atop a prostitute. It was a miracle that her screams were heard underneath his bulk. The cops had to break down the door and restrain the woman from attacking him once they’d resuscitated him. He, of course, had no recollection of how he came to be in that motel room. Two days later he woke up in the hospital, a tiny woman with a beehive haircut smothering him with kisses and calling him her sweet Dobosh.

Over the course of the year, Buster slowly lost some weight and achieved his goal of cracking the starting lineup on the church softball team.

“Mama, I might be late coming home tonight. Don’t wait up for me. And... one more thing,” Buster felt his eyes begin to water; “I want to thank you for always showing me you love me.”

“My sweet Dobosh. You get your uniform on and go hit that ball out of the park for me.”

“Count on it, Mama.” 

Versing

to give a flower check list

By Davey Shoves

Materials

1. chisel
2. block of wood
3. pencil
4. work surface
5. small hand saw
6. band aid
7. boombox
8. mallet

Steps

1. make four angle cuts with hand saw from top within two inches of bottom of wood block
2. strike mallet against chisel repeatedly in center of block creating vessel of vase
3. scoop out wood chunks
4. use chisel cutting deep lines in base of vase to represent struggle of existence
5. cut off tip of finger making cuts to represent struggle of existence
6. turn down boom box
7. grab pencil
8. write down emergency room address
9. apply band aid
10. grab half finished vase
11. stop at water spigot
12. pluck zinnia from neighbor's garden
13. drop stem of flower in vase
14. drive to emergency room
15. give flower to third person you see
16. smile

Davey Shoves writes and works from near the Apple River, outside of Amery, WI.

Winter Drug On Song *(to a boot-stompin' Charlie Parr-ish feel):*

Lyrics by LEROY

Anytime, the right time?
Anytime, right now!
How do you walk past these streets,
 when the snow is ten foot deep?
"It's wintertime," I pantomime
 —a monotone response. Not livin' in my head,
 and now I'm feelin' like I'm dead.
It's wintertime, and I'm. . .
 I'm feeling fine, but I'll tell ya it's not right.

Soon it's oh so spring,
 and I can hear those bluebirds sing.
'Cause in the winter time,
 I'm feelin' like I don't know who we are.

If I feel too blue, I know that I can go see you,
And in the summertime,
 we can drive a line, right to our secret spot.

LEROY writes and performs songs, poetry, and stories from rural Wisconsin.

Low Adventures: Trekking the Superior Hiking Trail

Part 6: Winter Camping and the Mustard Man

By Tim Krenz

In the middle of January 2004, my friend Craig Mueller called me on the phone. We had not done a trip to the Superior Hiking Trail in northeast Minnesota since the previous June. We both felt tormented that fall that our quest to hike the entire trail had not gone farther in our two years and 4 trips so far. On the phone that cold, snowy winter day, however, Craig repeated his now-infamous phrase, “Tim, I’ve been thinking. . .” When he says those words, I usually get talked into something that sounds nicer in theory than the way it turns out in practice.

I braced myself for what came next. “Let’s go winter camping up on the S.H.i.T next month!” Seriously, winter camping? In northern Minnesota—by Lake Superior? It did not take me long to answer. “Sure,” I said. And we started to plan our next low-scale adventure to the Superior Hiking Trail, which we always reduced to a one acronym word: “the Shit.”

I always give Craig great credit. As a civil engineer by profession, he works out solutions to problems and obstacles. We would get snow shoes from his dad. Then, Craig ordered online some search and rescue harnesses, which we would wear to drag simple children’s snow sleds carrying our gear. He also planned menus, as usual. He figured out the transportation schedules and arrangements and any temporary lodging.

We planned our trip for the last weekend in February, from Friday the 27th to Sunday, Leap Day, the 29th. Craig made plans, good ones, too. And he always planned for simplicity with appropriate details. In fact, just to make sure I could handle pulling a sled on snow shoes, two weekends before our trip, on his family’s visit

to his parents house in Wisconsin, he had me test the shoes, the harness, and a plastic sled filled with split firewood. I felt comfortable enough to do this, even though Craig, like a Russian winter Olympic judge, thought my technique and form needed some improvement.

Came the Friday for the trip, Craig and I rendezvoused in North Branch, MN, around 5 P.M. We arrived at our motel in Silver Bay, MN, north of Duluth and within sight of the big lake, three and a half hours later. The trips north always passed uneventfully, though I always forgot that we had gear in the open bed of his little green truck. As Craig drove, I would dump the coffee and grounds from my travel mug out the window. Unfortunately, I usually found some coffee and grounds on my pack when unloading at our destinations.

As at home in Wisconsin, the north shore of Minnesota had cold temperatures, but a lot more snow. Lake effects and winds did that. The weather the night we arrived at the empty motel felt a cold freezing though without the damp. The motel really did leave the light on for us, however, having turned up the heat in our room—their only guests that night. Starting in the spring in this trendy town, the motel would have a full house all the time. The motel, designed in late 1970s interior modern Soviet concrete style, nonetheless served our purpose. In the room, we watched a favorite Clint Eastwood movie of mine, sorted through my gear to figure out what weighed so much, tied our packs and bags to the sleds with nylon ropes, and went to our beds. I finally fell asleep by 11 o’clock.

The next morning we met up with Craig’s co-worker

who worked alone in the company's Duluth office. Craig arranged to shuttle the truck to the end of the section we would walk and camp. I bought the breakfast as my contribution. Vaguely, I remember something about an asparagus omelet at a fritzzy bistro in Tofte, MN. Craig's co-worker chose the restaurant. Less vaguely, I remember something about one of us ordering two slices of maple-cured bacon, an addition that alone cost seven bucks. Well, since Craig and I usually ate cold, cooked bacon and precooked boiled eggs for breakfast when camping, we lived it up! Of course, we appreciated the ride. All things considered, an alternative arrangement would have cost more than two very expensive pieces of bacon. As for its taste, texture, and quality, it tasted like simple, store bought bacon, from a grocery chain store.

After leaving me with the gear at the Britton park parking lot, the other guys shuttled the car up to the Oberg Mountain lot. When they returned to the starting point, full of Saturday morning revelers, skiers, and children sledding, Craig and I got ready to go after we said thank you and bye to the co-worker. With our canvas and rope harnesses belted around our shoulders and waists, we tied the sleds by ropes to the loops in the backs, slipped on our snow shoes, and headed north into the woods. At the very start, we had to dodge sledders and cross-country skiers coming down the hill trails.

Happily, Craig and I saw that some other snow shoers had proceeded us up the main trail which made it easier to traverse. Using my ski poles, I found the balanced walking a good going, once we left the people behind us in the park. Whereas the Superior Hiking Trail used blue, green and white "sunrise horizon" trail markers nailed to trees to mark the path, the designated snow shoe trail used metal silver diamond shaped signs. We checked the maps on the wood post one last time and then started following the markers up the steep hill.

Up the hills, between the thick old growth trees and the

younger growth beneath the canopy, the sleds would slide around the tree trunks when we took turns or corners. Going downhill required some extra pretty good special adaptations to technique and form. As I became more proficient pulling my orange sled filled with gear, Craig's narrower sled kept tipping over, causing him some expletive frustrations. We both learned to let the sleds down ahead of us, guiding with the ropes that twisted around our bodies, to prevent entanglement or tipping on the downhill walk.

After crossing the ski trail a second time, the fresh tracks that guided us so far gave way to older tracks. Covered by the last snow fall, we could still follow those older tracks by the deep indentations in the snow. We came to a small river or creek with a high embankment. Once we removed our snow shoes, we had to carry our sleds and gear by hand across a tricky bridge, too narrow to snow



The author, above, rests after he and Craig dug out the campsite along an unused spur of the ski trail through the forest. Note the snow shoes at left, used to remove the snow, due to have lost part of a collapsible snow shovel. Also, note the equipment tied to the simple children's sled. Both the author and Craig had considerable problems with keeping the sleds upright, due to their top heavy loading. (Photo by Craig Mueller).

shoe, but through deep, powdery snow that came up above our knees. Above the bridge on a small hill, we rested from the toil. We crossed the groomed ski trail again, or one of its branches, and started up a high hill, one with a great deal of thickets and leafless underbrush. We lost the trail at that point. Someone, we could see, had cut away from a path and bushwhacked, back toward the ski trail. It looked like a doubtful direction. We tried to find trail blazes, but we found none.

Craig said that we should go back down to the ski trail and head to the northeast toward Mount Oberg. We took off our snow shoes, strapped them to the sleds and walked along the ski trail in our boots. Walking two and half miles, using the side of the ski trail, I tried not to ruin the classical cross country ski grooves. We saw only a total of three or four skate skiers this far away from the cars. The winter forest, with little wind, had the quiet of a weekday church, with the occasional bird in the belfry. The day, as the sunshine warmed the air, felt warmer than expected. We had walked a total of four hours since starting. At 2 P.M., we came to an unplowed and ungroomed spur of the trail. We walked far down it, post-holing the deep snow when we could have easily put our snow shoes back on our feet. At the dead end of the spur we found an area that suited our needs well.

On one of those times that Craig's tipsy sled turned over, he managed to lose the handle to a miniature, collapsible, red snow shovel. My sister had given it to me for Christmas. The shovel useless without the missing piece, we dug out a campsite on the edge of the trail under some trees using the broad ends of our snow shoes. While he put up his big, blue "Hilton of the forest"-tent, I used my trusty hatchet to chop through the limbs and branches of a downed dead oak tree across the trail. Craig, as always, criticized and disparaged my hatchet and how long it took me to chip away at the tree.



Yes, I admitted, after whacking with a relatively dull ax head for far too long, I could see the logic of a folding camp saw.

We stowed the gear inside the tent or outside the door under the cover of the rain fly vestibule. We had unrolled sleeping bags and the self-inflating mattress pads (I used an over-sized pad I borrowed from Craig's dad). Chores done, we built a fire in front of the tent, putting a good base of wood down on the snow. On top of that base, we built the little kindling tee-pee. We never, ever used accelerant to build fires when camping. Using paper as tinder, the wood kindling took flame just fine. We ended up with a very good and hot campfire. We fed the fire by pushing the long limbs of oak and other minor scraps we found into the flames as the ends burned away. The fire melted the deep snow around our ring, to expose a wet and dirty forest floor.

Craig had also brought a 20 pound bag of dried oak lumber scraps, the remains of his project when he built some very nicely done book shelves for the condo in St. Paul. (Those rather large and handsome shelves made three or four moves with Craig's family over the years.

They now stand in his basement in Washington state, where I have some books hidden behind Craig and Jen's for when I visit).

We sat around the fire, my insulated wind pants soaked on the backside from sitting on snow. We remained there for the rest of the day and early evening, watching the fire which illuminated our campsite well. The partly cloudy sky glowed with the heavens, and it gave the snowy woods its bright aura of comfort and ease as the air around our site became much colder. Craig cooked supper, a very good one, in fact. He roasted some pre-cooked carrots and potatoes wrapped in foil, done “hobo style.” On some sticks we sharpened, the venison-pork bratwursts flamed and sizzled over the oak heat. Craig had shot the deer that made our meal the previous autumn at his dad's cabin in Wisconsin. The butcher processed them perfectly, and when cooked thoroughly, we put them on buns. And then I asked Craig if he brought any mustard.

“I didn't bring any damn mustard,” he retorted.

“What? Why not?” I responded. From that trip, mustard and other condiments became my responsibility. Craig always reminded me about it on trips, too, once we reached the far reaches of the woods. I would often forget the mustard, sometimes deliberately.

Melting snow in our mess kits set near the hot fire, for water to drink that night and for the next day, we learned a valuable lesson. In using old snow in the woods for melted drinking water, we realized that snow if not freshly fallen collected the debris of the forest—little pine cones, needles, twigs, sap, dirt and who knows what animal particles. The water tasted awful, even if one strained it through a clean cloth or a sock. In fact, water filtered through a dirty sock would have tasted much better.

Craig called his wife and daughter from his cell phone around 7 o'clock. I called home, briefly, to say hello to my girlfriend, who I met almost one exactly one year previously. In the tent by 8 P.M., Craig fell asleep immediately. I read a paperback copy of Melville's “Moby Dick” which I bought for the trip and started the night before in the motel. I fell asleep, too, exhausted, by 9 o'clock. I slept sound, in the cocoon of warmth of my sleeping pad and bag and with my fleece blanket wrapped around me.

The next morning, we woke at 6 A.M. It took both of us almost two hours to summon the gumption to exit the cocoons of warmth and challenge the cold, wet air. Our respiration at night had made the tent's interior damp. Craig checked the temps outside on the thermometer he found one previous backpacking trip. It read just under twenty degrees (F). We packed up our camp, expeditiously, then loaded and secured our sleds, and headed up the spur. Not far from the campsite, we saw signs of animals: Large footprints and fresh wolf or coyote scat. It looked funny, those long scraggly lines of pooh with mouse fur or something stuck into it. We turned right on the main ski trail, and we reached Oberg Mountain parking lot by 9 A.M. after a very short walk, again without wearing our snow shoes.

On the drive south, we stopped for coffee at the same high-bistro in Tofte, and we ate a hearty breakfast further down the road at Betty's Pies near Two Harbors. The drive home passed uneventfully. By this time, at the end of the winter camping trip to “the Shit”, we had completed a mere 44.8 miles in five weekends. Big chunks of trail remained. We would do some challenging hikes, some of them on extended trips. And as side note to this winter trip, later that year of 2004, at Christmas time, Craig and his family made me a present of a new collapsible, miniaturized red snow shovel. I treasure it still.





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