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The Pork n Beans Sandwich

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I turned thirteen in August 1959. When fall came to Carolina Beach it was still warm. In October only a few hearty surf fishermen were hanging out at the beach where just a few months ago sun bathers and swimmers clogged the sand and roads. On a lovely Saturday morning my buddy, Roy Johnson, and I decided to go down to Fort Fisher to explore around and see if we could find the hermit. Yes, that's right, there was, what we had heard was a spooky old hermit living in an abandoned army pill box somewhere near the end of highway 421 at Fort Fisher. It was to be a grand adventure.

We filled our canteens and put some cheese sandwiches in my old surplus army pack then took off on the hike. It was about five miles from my house on Cape Fear Boulevard south to the old confederate fort. In those days there was no building south of the Air Force radar station just below Kure Beach. Everything was sea oats on the dunes, water oaks just behind the dunes, and grape vines further off the ocean. Where the old battlements of the fort were a dirt air strip, build during World War Two, cut perpendicular through the mounds. Punky Kure to land his Piper Cub there. He used the plane to spot menhaden for the fish boats off shore.

The monument, erected by the Daughters of the Confederacy, was there in the middle of a mowed one acre lot with a flag pole next to it where old glory waved in the sea breeze.

Even at thirteen I understood the implication of the scene. Just under some scrub oaks pock marks dotted the landscape where people had been digging for Civil War artifacts.

Today there are large boulders piled up along the ocean face of the monument to prevent the sea from washing it away but then the ocean was several hundred feet away even at high tide. As time and tide have worked their magic, and through the benefit of aged wisdom, it seems that the greatest threat to the old fort is not erosion but the thoroughly established mythology of the new comers, the prodigy of the victors in the great unpleasantness. In a way the modern development of the Fort Fisher area can be blamed squarely on the development of air conditioning. Whatever the cause of the modern changes, millions of dollars have been made by a few in the second fall of the world's most secure fort. But, I digress.

Near the end of highway 421 there was an "S" turn. At the last part of the turn, a hard ninety degree turn to the right led straight to the rocks at the river. From that point a dirt road continued straight into a low forest then out into a large marsh. It seemed like the logical place for Roy and me to start looking for the hermit. Part of this road still can be walked but one must enter it through the nature trail that is accessible at the aquarium. We walked to the end of the straightaway where the sandy road curved gently to the right where we saw the top of the old pill box sticking out above the sea oats.

A thin spiral of white smoke lazily lifted from the fire pit a few feet from the entrance to the old machine gun bunker then sped off to the west as it came under the influence of the sea



breeze. Standing in the doorway we could see the figure of a little man wearing ragged old shorts and a straw hat with long frayed edges. He had a bushy speckled gray beard that reminded me of Gabby Hayes, Roy Rogers' sidekick. His skin was like leather, dark tan from the sun, and dirty. According to my memory there was no fat on his hunched over frame. He wore an old pair of high top black and white Keds, untied. He said, "howdee," and so did we.

Roy and I introduced ourselves and told him we lived at Carolina Beach. He told us nothing of himself. He just motioned to the sand dunes over near the beach and said, "it's beautiful ain't it." There was talk of the pill box and he showed us an old leaky skiff someone had given him then I said, "what's your name." He said, "why, I'm Robert Harrill, the Fort Fisher hermit." After the introductions he told us that he had an idea for a fish camp to be built on the site. He told us a long story about working in Columbus, Ohio as a newspaper reporter. His fascination with newspapers was apparent after Roy and I took a look inside his bunker. There were huge piles of old papers everywhere. I didn't question it then but now I wonder where he got the money to purchase the papers.

In reality, while it appeared that Robert Harrill had dropped out of society, many people have spoken about how they helped the old man. I remember my dad saying that he

picked the hermit up one morning near Christmas and dropped him off near a house down on Myrtle Grove Sound, so that he could take his annual bath. I have actually heard of several people who did that. I think that just as he relied on the generosity of visitors he also gave generously to people who stopped by to see him.

He told us that although he rented the boat out, he would let us use it anytime we wanted for free. Roy and I were delighted to hear this and told him that we would like to take the old skiff out. After a few moments of rattling around in the machine gun nest, he immersed with a pair of oars. He filled an old mayonnaise jar with brackish water from a hole he had dug for drinking water, and told us never to go out on the water without water to drink. Roy and I shoved off and paddled and poled through the shallow marsh channel out into the bay.

We made our way over to Zeek's Island and there on a mild sunny afternoon we beached the skiff, sat on the shore and ate our cheese sandwiches with a nice breeze blowing from off toward Southport. I had experience digging clams with my toes from being on Ocracoke with my grandparents. I decided to try for clams here at our landing.

In just a few moments I had caught 4 or 5 big chowders and Roy decided he wanted to catch some too. I cracked a small clam with one of the big chowder clams and showed Roy how to get the meat out. These clams were very good but as I think about it they were probably polluted by the river water. In a little while we probably caught 50 or 60 clams of all sizes and deposited them in the bottom of the old boat.

For the next hour or so we rowed the boat back to the hermit's base camp and upon arrival proudly gave him the catch. He seemed excited to have these shell fish and thanked us for the gift. He built up his fire and we sat around it eating steamed chowder clams and listening to the old man tell tall tales about his time at Ft. Fisher.

He said, "I'm not the real hermit, you know." He went on to explain about old Zeek, the man for whom the island was named. He said, "now there was a real hermit." He told us about meeting Zeek many years ago when Robert had first moved into the pill box. The meeting was purely by chance because Zeek avoided people. Robert said that on a cold winter day he had been exploring the island when he happened into Zeek's camp over on the far back side near the marsh that lead over to the closest point on Baldhead Island. He said they talked for a few minutes (I can't remember what Robert said here) and Zeek told him that he had to take a leak. Zeek disappeared into the marsh and Robert said he never saw Zeek again. Of course the old hermit's story had Roy and me spellbound. By the time this tale was over the sun had sunk very near the trees and Roy and I knew it was time to head home.

Robert said, "boys, would you like a sandwich before you go?"

Roy and I looked at each other and said, "what, cha got?"

He said, "I make the best pork n bean sandwiches anywhere around."

Reluctantly, we allowed the old hermit to fix us his special pork n bean sandwich. The bread was moldy and the Van Camp pork n beans had been open for a while. He took a

dirty spoon and spread the beans onto the bread. Then he produced a shaker of garlic powder and gave the sandwiches a healthy (perhaps the wrong word) dose. He slapped another slice of bread on top and handed them to us. With great reluctance I took my sandwich. I took a bite, just to be polite. Holy mackerel! It was good. Roy ate his with gusto. I managed to most of mine down but I had to apologize for being filled up on clams.

By the time Roy and I left the hermit to walk back home, the cold night was full upon the earth. The sky was full of stars and there was no moon. When we got to the middle of the big "S" curve, something big tore off thorough the thick brush. Whatever we had scared had scared us even more. Roy and I looked like two cartoon characters trying to run. My feet started running before the rest of my body knew anything about it. The result was that for a short time I was leaning backwards at full run but finally the top half of my body caught up with my feet and I was running as hard as I could. We ran like this, at full tilt, for about a mile. When we finally stopped, I realized that I didn't have my pack. There was no way that I would be going back to get it that night.

Note:

There are a few articles about Robert Harrill available on the internet. The photo at the beginning of this story was found at :

http://www.hearshill.freesevers.com/the_hermit_story.htm.

Another site that offers pictures and a documentary can be found at:

<http://thefortfisherhermit.com/>.

