

Bill's Journey ~ The Shack

THE SHACK

The Wilhelms were my favorite people from the time I can first remember. Uncle Dick was a childhood friend of my dad from Hicksville, New York. Aunt Betty was a sweet woman who was always nice to me. Their three kids, cousins Richie, Carl and Carol were also high on the list.

My parents and Dick and Betty frequently got together on weekends to play small-stakes poker. They had such fun that I couldn't wait to grow big enough to be invited to sit and play. Jan, of course, achieved this honor before me.

Sometimes there would be other couples but the four were the hard core. My idea today of a good time is sitting and playing cards with friends and family. We no longer smoke and seldom drink, but I am joyful when at play.

The Wilhelms owned a house in Baldwin Harbor, Long Island,



The sixth member of the Wilhelm family was Ginger Boo. I loved that dog to distraction and enjoyed his company every time I visited the Wilhelms. In this photo (photographer unknown) we're perched on the bank of the canal. The barn-like garage over my left shoulder was where Carl built his airplanes and practiced his trombone. We sometimes made a fire and baked potatoes in the coals on the sandy patch just behind me. The house is seen in the rear of the photo. I spent many a night here when my folks needed a sitter.

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New York. The house had lots of room compared to our apartment in Brooklyn and it was on a canal! They had a dog named Gingerboo, Carl owned a boat, and there were some good climbing trees in the vacant lot next door.

The three Wilhelm offspring were all older than me. They were talented. At a certain point in my story Richie had already left home. He was a fun, boisterous, beefy, hard-drinking oil-field worker employed in Saudi Arabia. Pretty, blond Carol was Jan's friend. Carl played the trombone and flew model airplanes with real gas engines. I admired them from a distance and kept close to Aunt Betty's warmth. I loved watching Carl make improvements to his little boat and build his airplanes.

Man oh man did they have a lot going for them! One of the really good things was the Shack. Dick had bought it, for very little money; an old one room shanty in the mountains of the Catskill State Park in New York. It was run-down, unpainted and had no electricity or plumbing.



The shack was plain but homey in the warm light of kerosene lamps. We three high school boys in 1953 had cots which took up most of the interior space outside of the kitchen area. This photo shows Finn with his arms crossed and me without my glasses.

I spoke to Cathy Schmidt on the telephone in 2007 and she told me that she and Finn married after high school and divorced after a decade and three kids. Finn was an alcoholic and died in a plane crash when he was thirty-five years old. Like me she lost contact with Evelyn Soper and John Ruggiero after graduation.



1953. I spent a week at the shack with my good friends Finn Andresen and John Ruggiero. A second window is hidden behind the big lilac bush so the shack is a little larger than the photo suggests. John and I are on the porch.

There was an outhouse with a bees' nest in the pit. It was real country with no near by neighbors, located on a barely passable dirt road. Other wonderful features included a nearby waterfall and deep mountain woods.

My parents and sister went there with the Wilhelms during my summer-long stays at Camp Grant for Boys and, later, at Ten-Mile-River Boy Scout Camp.

I finally got to go there when I was fifteen or sixteen. My best friends, Johnny Ruggiero and Finn Andresen, from Farmingdale, and I spent a happy week at the shack being frontiersmen.

Then, without warning, high school was over and I found myself to be a desperately poor freshman student at Hofstra

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College. Spring break 1956. Where to go? What to do for two weeks? No money and few resources. Lightning struck in my brain. Maybe Aunt Betty and Uncle Dick would let me and a couple of friends stay at the Shack for a wintry holiday, as they had loaned it to me the summer of 1953, to use with my high school chums Finn Andresen and John Ruggerio.

Dick and Betty were agreeable and I went with two friends from college. We thought it would be a great adventure and one of them had a car for the one-hundred-fifty mile drive to Spruceton Valley. Afterwards I wrote a short story based on that trip. I kept the story in a drawer for more than a half century. I'll share it with you.

THE SHACK

A short Story By William T. Serle, Jr.

The cabin looked out on the winter forest through empty, black eyes. The stillness in the air was so intense that the frozen rocks and trees seemed about to shatter. Snow drifted from the white sky gently, coating each branch and twig. The world abided in porcelain grandeur with no movement other than falling snow.

Although it could not be seen, an unpaved road passed in front of the cabin. In summer it was no more than two ruts with a ridge of mountain grass running between, barely passable by cars. In snow time it could be traversed only on foot.

A quarter of mile down this road three young men moved towards the cabin. They wore snow shoes, which combined with their bulky winter clothes and back packs, gave them an otherworldly appearance as they moved across the white earth. Shuffling along in silence, they concentrated on manipulating the cumbersome, unfamiliar webs. As the cabin was sighted they cheered and quickened their pace till their breath came in short, white explosions and their faces were flushed.

In a short time the lonely aspect of the cabin was changed to one of life and laughter. They attacked the job of putting the place in order and settled themselves for a one-week stay.

The Shack, as it was affectionately called, was owned by Fritz Witcomb's uncle Dick. It had one large room, with an area set aside for cooking and eating and the rest devoted to four iron cots, a potbellied stove and a rustic table with two benches and mismatched chairs. The place was used for occasional hunting trips and periodic escapes from the routine of daily life. Fritz and two Hofstra College chums were on a spring-

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break camping-trip.

Rough and unpainted, it was homey in a simple pastoral manner. A deer skin covered a small round table on which was placed a kerosene lamp and a large glass ash-tray. On the walls, shelves held arrowheads, pine cones, and bird nests. Tacked on the walls were poems, cartoons, pictures, and photographs. Bits collected and saved over the years by people who had loved and used the shack.

Fritz's classmates, Ed Mental and Bob Schmitt, were addressed as Ed and Schmitt. In the early winter afternoon, as they sat down to their first meal, Ed, a tall and gaunt fellow with short black hair wore heavy, plastic-rimmed glasses, said, "Man I'm hungry! Let's taste some of Schmitt's slop and see if he's a chef."

The three attacked their plates as if starved. The forks rose full and lowered empty for less than five minutes before their plates were empty and their hungers satisfied. They pushed the plates away and pulled in large cups of sweet, black coffee. Schmitt and Ed lit cigarettes while Fritz produced a small straight pipe which he filled and lit. They leaned back to enjoy coffee and talk.

"What's left to be done?" Ed asked. "We have a fire and plenty of wood and the place is reasonably clean." He had a high pitched voice that seemed to squeak.

Schmitt, had turned his chair to straddle it answered, "We have to fill the water buckets with snow. The mattresses seem damp. How about hanging them over the stove from the rafters for a while?" He paused for a long and noisy sip of coffee, then continued, "How are we going to divide the work? I'm willing to wash first but I don't want to do it all the time."

"Okay," Fritz said, "You cooked this time and you're going to wash up. Cook washes up and the other two dry the dishes and fetch water."

"I cooked tonight and I'll wash up, said Ed. How about you doing breakfast Fritz?"

"Okay," Fritz agreed. "I'll get water now Schmitt if you'll dry the dishes."

It was almost nine o'clock by the time they washed up and hung the mattresses over the stove. They were thoroughly tired. They put the now warm mattresses on their cots, spread sleeping bags and slipped into their beds. They lay with their arms and chests hanging over the beds to play a game of hearts on the floor between them.

The shack was full of shadows and only the area where they were playing cards was illuminated by the kerosene lamp. "Spades. Trey. Eight. Queen of spades." Much laughter. The play went rapidly with Schmitt doing most of the winning.

"How about going to town in the morning," Schmitt suggested. "We need some more food and Fritz needs to get his lawn mowed."

"All righty," Fritz grinned passing his hand over his overlong brown hair. He asked,

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“Say. Do you guys know how to ski?” The others shook their heads. “Me neither but it sure looks like fun. I was thinking that we might exchange the clod hoppers,” meaning the snow shoes. “The rent’ll be the same and with our athletic prowess we should master the art in a half hour.”

They all laughed. Ed and Schmitty agreed eagerly. “We can do the shopping while Fritz gets his hair cut and then go up to Twin Pines and make the exchange.”

They had left their car two miles down the road at which point the pavement ended and snow plows could penetrate no further.

The play went on for another hour, the game changing to casino.

“I don’t know about you guys,” Ed groaned, “but I’ve had it.” He hopped out of bed and put the cards on their shelf. He approached the stove. “Hey Fritz. How do you shut this thing down?”

Fritz got out of bed, looking very countrified with his long underwear and unruly hair. He snatched at the door and opened it. “Son of a bitch!” he yipped as he popped his outraged fingers into his mouth and looked ruefully at his companions who were laughing loudly.

The stove was filled with glowing coals and had a low blue flames hovering on top. He added a few logs and, more carefully this time, clanged the door shut. “Look here Ed. Reduce the draft by turning this flap in the chimney and close these ports in the doors to limit the fire’s air and make it burn more slowly.”

Ed picked up the lamp and blew the light out as he placed it on the table. The only sounds in the room were the crackling of the stove and the quiet breathing of three young men.

The morning was dark. Snow fell steadily and it was colder than the previous day. Heavy, snow-clouds cut off the tops of the mountains from view. Fritz and Schmitty had been up for an hour and by nine-thirty they had prepared a huge meal of eggs, sausage, and fried potatoes on the two burner Coleman camp stove.

The pot-bellied stove had gone out and they had woken up cold. Now the stove was sending out a pale warmth that promised a chill-chasing heat. Ed was still breathing deeply in his cocoon with only his hair peeking out of the blankets. They’d called him several times and he had responded with grunts and deep breathing. The cabin was filled with the rich aromas of sausage, damp wood, and kerosene.

Fritz and Schmitty stood over Ed. Schmitty said in a low and serious voice, “We’ll give you three.” They counted together, “One-Twooo-THREE!” They picked him up and, with Fritz at the head and Schmitty at the tail, rushed through the door to shake him out of his blankets into the hip deep snow.

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Ed woke rapidly. Swearing at the top of his lungs he threw snow in great handfuls at the two tricksters as they retreated indoors laughing, and slamming the door against the flying snowballs.

They were going too fast. The three youths sat in the front seat. The road was wide enough for only one car and the white country dipped and spun by. Snow was banked high on both sides of the road and they bobsledded and skidded from one side to the other. They felt no danger and the ride was vastly amusing.

"Hey Ed," Fritz shouted, try it this is way! That's right! Slide. Horay-yy! I'm a bird!" He stretched his arm out onto the frigid air and pretended it was a wing.

The back seat was piled high with groceries three sets of skis, ski poles and boots. They parked again where the snow plows had quit. about two miles from their porch.

It was four thirty and getting dark as they ended the final part of their journey on their rented equipment. They shuffled up one hill after another and soon began enjoying the downhill slides even though they had many falls. The groceries in their packs were taking a beating. It was fully dark when they finished the trek. The night was clear and cold with a sliver of moon giving them just enough light to keep on the trail. They wiped the snow from their skis on the porch and took them inside. Coats on pegs and skis in the corner farthest from the stove.

"Ye gods! I'm pooped," sighed Fritz as he lay in his bed smoking his pipe.

"Me too," Ed said. "I'm glad I don't have to cook. It's your turn Schmitty."

"Yeah. I know," Schmitty answered. "Steaks, peas and mashed potatoes." I'll start now if one of you guys would get me some water please. We need enough to wash up so bring lots of snow."

He padded into the kitchen in his stockings and began unpacking food from the packs.

Fritz looked at Ed and said, hopefully, "You go."

Ed looked at Fritz and said, "You go.

"Odds."

"Evens."

Ed swore mildly and raised himself to a sitting position. "What a life. I can't even take my shoes off for more than two minutes at a time." He laced up his slightly damp boots and went out with the white enamel water bucket.

Fritz sat up and pulled his pack from under the bed. He fished out a pair of dry wool socks and his leather moccasins. They felt good going on his cold feet. His damp boots were leaning against the wall near the stove, tops spread to expose them to the

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drying heat.

"Want me to do anything Schmitty," Fritz asked as he sat at the table. "Here. I'll help you peel."

"Thanks," said Schmitty. "We need to put that wax stuff on the skis after dinner and we should fix our lunches tonight so we won't have to bother in the morning."

"I'm glad we got the skis. Tomorrow should be a lot of fun." They planned to go to the top end of the road and ski back. A long downhill run but not too steep.

"Yeah. We ought to leave early to give ourselves plenty of time to get up and back." Fritz had hiked up there before but was not sure how long it would take them on skis.

Ed came in and out several times bringing buckets of fresh, clean snow to melt. "Damn! It's cold out there. And probably full of wolves. If you want more water Schmitty you can go and get it yourself." He sat on his bed for a few minutes rubbing his hands together. "If you guys can work by candle light for a little while, I'll clean and refill the lamps." He set about this task.

Ed went to the table and gave the others two lit candles. He blew out the kerosene lamps and placed them on the floor, lighting a candle to work by. He dismantled and cleaned soot and dust from the glass chimneys and inserted a rusty funnel into the reservoir of the first. The kerosene was in a heavy, red, five-gallon can. He removed the cap from the sprout and slowly tilted the can over the funnel. The liquid leapt out and splattered over the candle. A yellow flame shot up and grabbed at Ed.

He dropped the can, smashing one lamp and knocking the other on the floor. There was a pool of fire on the floor which spread slowly as it was fed by the overturned can. The flames were low at the edges and piled up in the middle in the shape of a cone with a flared base. Thick black smoke filled the room.

"Holy hell! What happened!" shouted Fritz, who was by this time standing next to the door. Ed ran into the kitchen area and, almost knocking Schmitty over, grabbed a push-button can fire extinguisher kept near the stove. A thin spray flowed into the fire but had no visible effect. He threw the can across the room in frustration.

Fritz, standing behind Ed grabbed their jackets and flung them over Ed's shoulder at the fire hoping to smother the blaze. They retarded the flames for a moment. Then they too began to burn.

The fire began to roar. It was impossible to stop and grew fiercer each moment. Ed grabbed the coats from the fire and rushed to the now open door. He threw the blazing coats and leaped off the porch into the snow putting out the flames which accompanied him. The coats landed on a dead, winter bush and burned brightly.

Fritz and Schmitty stood inside, bewildered, not knowing what to do. The flames

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were almost to the rafters now. Fritz made a little rush at the fire, intending to get to the beds and use the bedding to smother the fire. It was too hot. He jumped back and ran outside grunting, "Come on Schmitt!"

Schmitty had to close the door in order to get around it and exit. The flames were bright red now and very hot and the choking smoke made it difficult to see. The door knob was gone and he couldn't get it open. He tried to shout but only coughed. He pounded on the door.

Ed and Fritz stood outside. "Where's Schmitty?" Fritz leaped to the porch and kicked the door open. Schmitty stumbled out coughing.

When he gained his breath the first thing he said was, "My shoes are inside.

None of the boys wore coats. Fritz had on a black sweater. He shivered. "Boy oh boy, what've we done? How am I going to tell my aunt and uncle? Oh God!"

Ed looked through a window and said hopefully, "It seems to be dying down. All the windows are closed. Maybe it'll smother itself."

"No. It's gone," said Schmitty. "Nothing will stop that fire now. My shoes are inside."

There was a light breeze and all three were cold. They were too preoccupied to feel it before. Then they remembered that the car was two miles away,

"We'll have to walk to the car and tell someone about it!" shivered Fritz.

"I haven't got any shoes," Schmitty reminded them.

"There's nothing we can do about it," said Ed. "Do your feet feel cold?"

"No."

"Well it won't take too long. You'll be all right."

They walked a few feet to the trail that was the only sign of the road under the snow and began their hike. They looked back to see if the fire was visible.

The night was beautiful. The moon was a pale glow above high, thin clouds. The landscape immediately around them was a luminous, pearly gray fading to black.

The walk was difficult. At each step they sunk to their thighs. Ed took the lead and tried to tramp the snow down for those behind him. Fritz came second and Schmitty followed, trying to keep in Fritz's footsteps. His feet were cold but they were all hot and sweaty due to the effort of walking in deep snow. They were still shaken and felt weak and helpless.

Fritz talked over his shoulder, "How did it happen Ed?"

"I was just about to pour the stuff into the lantern when some of it splashed on the candles. It burned me before I could move and I dropped the works. God it happened fast!"

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"Yeah, it sure did," said Schmitty. "It wasn't your fault Ed. We're all to blame. It could have happened to any of us. We should have known better than to fool with that stuff inside. It's lucky that we're all okay."

"Yeah. It sure was a close thing with you inside good buddy," said Fritz.

"Jesus, Fritz. What will your uncle do?" Ed said. "Will he be mad?"

"No. He won't be mad. He'll be sorry that it happened, of course, and scared of what might have happened but he won't be mad. He's really a great guy."

"Say. It won't set the woods on fire, will it?" Ed fretted, suddenly afraid.

"I don't think so," said Schmitty.

"No," declared Fritz. "There's too much snow. But The Shack is sure enough gone. It's a good thing that this didn't happen in the summer of fall when it's dry."

They had traveled quite a distance when they stopped to look back again. The boys saw a great glow from the fire rising above a snowy hill and black tree silhouettes.

"How much do you think the shack was worth Fritz?" asked Ed.

"I don't know. He paid five hundred dollars for it just after the war. It's on two acres. It's not the money value so much as the idea of having a place like that. You know. Out in the country."

"Yeah. It's a shame."

They made the car in less than an hour. They were as tired as they'd ever been in their young lives. They drove down the road slowly. There were several houses but they had to go several miles before they found one with lights and other signs of occupancy.

The large family was sympathetic towards the dirty, tired boys but there was nothing they could do. Five of the men, tall and lean, accompanied Ed and Schmitty back to the shack. They moved easily on skis and snow shoes while the boys floundered along. They wore jackets they had left in the car. Their feet were very cold and their legs ached. Schmitty was too tired to make the long cold trip again and stayed behind to sleep in the car.

The Shack was a yellow rectangle of flames without roof or walls. The iron stove still stood above the wreckage with a fire in it.

"Look," said Ed, there's the kitchen stove and the dish cabinet."

Fritz's front was hot and his back cold. One of the tall men threw a snowball at a little blaze in the crotch of the birch tree which stood next to The Shack. Fritz wanted to lie down on the snow and cry.

The End

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EPILOGUE - Now all these years later it makes me sad to remember this incident. The story written for my creative writing class pretty much describes what happened.

I told Uncle Dick about the fire in person. One of my friends gave me a lift to his house. The reason I remember the date so well is that Dick thought I was kidding. It was Sunday, April 1, 1956. April Fools Day. A rotten day for me and the Wilhelms. I was sick with shame and regret.

P.S. The Wilhelms got prosperous when Dick's sister passed away and left them a fortune. The shack was rebuilt better than before but I moved to Florida when the school term ended to be with my folks and I never got to see it.

My first car was a 1948 Hudson Hornet that set me back \$50.00. The year was 1958 and I was so happy with it. The smoke coming out of the exhaust pipes, the worn upholstery and sagging headliner were acceptable as was the rusted out floor by the front passenger set. I could deal with the Maypop tires and the need for frequent cans of oil. I bought tags, tires and thought I was set for life.



The tires cost about a hundred bucks for four. Twice what I'd paid for the car.

Everything was good until I hit my first bump - the drive-shaft fell out of its cradle and dragged on the road. I soon learned do deal with this by crawling under the car and boosting the thang back into its cradle.

I'd just gone to work for Shaw Brothers Oil company as a credit clerk. In retrospect I would have been better off taking public transit and taxis for the next fifty-five years! But the Hudson sure looked nice on the outside.