

Haunted By Hemingway

By

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The house in Ketchum, Idaho where Ernest Hemingway ended his life cannot be seen from anywhere legally drivable. It sits at the end of East Canyon Run off Warm Springs Road, surrounded by 13 acres of empty land. The neighbors don't allow traffic and the foundation can't figure out how to open the house to the public. When Ernest and Mary bought it for \$50,000 it was empty, and known locally as the Topping house, after the owner who built it. Hemingway's view was spectacular, but it has greatly changed from his last days. The other side of the Big Wood River is completely developed in the form of the Northwood subdivision. In 1961, it was empty save for a turn-a-round for the train, but the streets were in.

It's easy to see why he came here, to fish, hunt, and write. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was written in part at the Sun Valley Lodge in room 206 in the fall of 1939; *The Garden of Eden* in a cabin at the Ketchum Korral, known then as the McDonald Cabins, and *A Moveable Feast* at the last house. The town has a memorial to Hemingway that roosts above the golf course on Trail Creek up the road from Sun Valley. Hemingway is buried between two fir trees in the cemetery with his wife Mary and son Jack.

In the cold, dank Hurtgen Forest of Germany Ernest served during World War II as a correspondent for Collier's and others, with my father, Russell York, a medic with the 4th Engineer Combat Battalion. Dad said Ernie was a "gruff" man, who, during shelling from the Germans yelled cusswords at the enemy at the top of his lungs. Dad

earned a Silver Star for his efforts under fire at a stream crossing in the Hurtgen, and Ernie a bronze for starting the party in Paris two weeks early, before the end of the German occupation. Both took guts, but the former more so, despite the flair Hemingway displayed in the face of danger. He was drawn to the limelight and that was where it was. It was a fearful time even for the brave.

“People came with us to get involved in the war,” Dad said. “They got more than they bargained for this time. Hemingway included.”

“Say a prayer Ernie,” he told Hemingway as the bombs rained down on them. Both received concussions from the experience, dad vomited blood, but refused the Purple Heart because he didn’t want to worry my grandmother, who would have had to be notified.

So, I am haunted by Hemingway and grew up on these stories. Following in his footsteps is a natural course for an aspiring writer and avid outdoorsman. Perhaps the two go hand in hand? He hunted ducks on Silver Creek in Picabo, Idaho and fly-fished when he wasn’t holed up in a motel room, writing, in the 1930’s. It was a different time then, much more unspoiled. Sportsmen ate the fish they caught, whereas now nearly everything has to be catch-and-release out of necessity.

“No one who met Hemingway ever forgot him,” wrote Michael Reynolds in his biography of Hemingway’s last years. “He was the strange attractor around whose light all manner of men and women circled: movie stars, millionaires, cooks, crooks, bartenders, writers, soldiers.”¹ Dad was the latter and as candid as Ernest. They were brothers in arms.

¹ Reynolds, Michael *Hemingway, The Final Years, Ringing the Changes July to Early Winter 1940* W. W. Norton & Company New York 1999

“Most people are quiet in the world, and live in it tentatively, as if it is not theirs. Hemingway was its voracious consumer,” E.L Doctorow wrote reviewing *Islands in the Stream*. “People of every class were drawn to this behavior, and the boasting, charming or truculent boyishness of his ways, and to his ritual celebration of his appetites.”²

In the old days, a van from Averell Harriman’s *Sun Valley Lodge* met the train at Shoshone, Idaho 40 miles south of Ketchum, a town that really hasn’t changed much, unlike Ketchum. It’s a dismal desert burg with broken down shacks and abandoned shops. In short, it’s the antithesis of Sun Valley. I drove through and back once a week on my way fishing the Big Wood River and Silver Creek in Picabo, both Hemingway haunts. Hemingway was invited to Sun Valley and housed at the lodge in return for attaching his name to this, America’s first four season resort. And he gladly did so, but only in the summer, and in the fall for hunting. He retreated south for the harsh Idaho winters that draw so many to the slopes of Mt. Baldy, and the diminutive Dollar Mountain where the first ski chairlift was installed in 1939. Like today, celebrities did not reside on a year round basis.

It wasn’t until 1959 after being forced to abandon his beloved stronghold in Cuba, the Finca Vigia, that he bought the Warm Springs house. The lodge is impressive, and like Hemingway’s house, made of faux logs of concrete. It reminded me of the hotel in *The Shining* in some ways, but had the air of exclusivity complete with valet parking like the establishments in Beverly Hills. It’s that kind of place by design for the original clientele. Hemingway was more attached to Ketchum and its commoner appeal.

² E. L. Doctorow *Braver Than We Thought*, New York Times May 18, 1986

The doormen opened the door for me and I strode on in like a guest. I moved to the hall of stars to the right off the main lobby. Both walls were lined with black and white photos of guests from the 1930s and beyond. Hemingway's last letter was with them. He talked about bass fishing in the upper Mississippi in very nice handwriting that leaned left. It was written on my birthday, June 15. The letter contained his last written words.

The path to his yard followed the river from the Ketchum City Park on Warm Springs Road. I soon found myself in the front yard of some condos, where a dog protested my presence. The owner called him off. Continuing on up the east bank, I cast my fly into a few of the pools as I went upstream. The trail entered a vacant grove of towering cottonwoods, and eventually emerged into a side channel leading to the yards of more condos and mansions of the Northwood subdivision. I crossed the channel to an island and across a log into the thick woods of the west bank. I saw nothing but woods. No house yet.

I busted through the brambles of rose and downed branches. A deer bounded from my approach. I was in a side channel yet again with nothing in sight on East Canyon Run where the house was. I passed a pump house and then more floodplain woods. It was easy to see why it couldn't be seen from Highway 75. I soon regretted wearing sandals for this bushwhacking jaunt, but it was a hot day, and I didn't want the stifling heat of chest waders impeding my effort.

On a break, I looked up and there it was: the two upstairs windows of the final residence of Ernest Hemingway. Another side channel or possibly a spring creek tributary sat between the island and the steep hill leading up to the concrete house. There

was no activity from humans, which, in busy Ketchum was rare, and a final monument akin to the slab at the cemetery where visitors left coins and whiskey.

I snapped a few pictures, investigated the beaver ponds, and followed a path out to the main river noting where I was. There was an access trail across the river in Northwood subdivision, but no parking, so one still had to walk from the same park. It would be easier going to say the least. Turning back, the house on the hill was in full view. It was hard to imagine the despair that prompted Hemingway to kill himself at only 61 in such a magnificent setting. Often we fail to see the mountains when that's all there is. Maybe this what happened to him that morning? More likely, the aches and pains were too much to bear and a genetic predisposition took hold of him one last time.

I fished the pool in his honor and caught nothing.

I went back later that fall on the weekend of the first annual Ernest Hemingway Festival. After two days of presentations from Hemingway scholars and friends, I parked at the Ketchum Warm Springs Park, and walked the bike path to Northwood Drive and on to the fishing access trail barely visible between two mansions. I trod down the dog-crap strewn grassy path to the river fought so hard to obtain by city manager Jim Jacquet, who was also working on the effort to open the house to the public.

There, across the river sat the house where Hemingway spent his last days writing standing up at a desk perched atop a chest of drawers, occasionally staring at the spot where I stood. It was empty then, save for the cottonwoods. In death, we become a permanent part of all that has ever been or ever will be. The party was long over, and a

cold rain fell. Yellow leaves of aspen and cottonwood drifted past, riding on the waters of the Big Wood River.