Hemingway Adventure

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Photographs by Basil Pao

Published by Phoenix

Extract

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PHOENIX

CHICAGO/ MICHIGAN

It's mid-afternoon UK time. British Airways Flight 299 is taking me from London to Chicago on the first lap of the Hemingway trail which will, all being well, lead me across the globe from Europe to America and Africa to the Caribbean. We're passing over southern Greenland.

Through breaks in the cloud I can see the polished white tablecloth of glaciers draped over the black spines of mountain ranges. There's a tiny village far below. Find myself wishing Hemingway had been in Greenland, then I'd have to stop and investigate. Unlikely though, he didn't like cold weather. Perhaps that's why he left Chicago. The cluster of houses slips out of sight and ahead there is only ocean and ice.

One of a party of sixth grade schoolchildren is pointing at a photograph of a beatific child with long blond hair and a flowing white dress. 'Who's that girl?'

Her teacher answers patiently. 'That's Ernest Hemingway.'

Number 339 Oak Park Avenue, the birthplace of one of the most uncompromisingly masculine writers of the twentieth century, holds quite a few surprises. Apart from young Ernest in pretty dresses there is the revelation that his voluptuous mother Grace was a songwriter and his craggily handsome father, Clarence, was an amateur taxidermist. But for me, on this very first day of my journey into Hemingway's world, nothing can quite compete with the discovery that Ernest acquired his name and a considerable number of his genes from a man born in Sheffield, England. My own home town.

I owe this frisson of affinity to a man called Ernest Hall who left Sheffield in the mid-nineteenth century to seek his fortune in the United States. He fought in the Civil War and was wounded at Warrensburg, Missouri. He married the daughter of an English sea-captain, and in 1872 they in turn had a daughter, Grace. When she married Clarence Hemingway in 1896 they moved into Hall's house where four of their children were born. The second of them, and the first boy, was given his grandfather's name.

Whilst I get the impression that Hemingway heartily disliked being called Ernest, it's also clear that he was fond of his grandfather who read him stories and instilled in him the importance of manly virtues and outdoor pursuits. Ernest Hall died when Ernest was six, and it was by all accounts a considerable loss. The reason I know all this is that, thanks to the efforts of the Hemingway Foundation of Oak Park,

Grandfather Hall's house lives on and I can stand today, surrounded by American schoolchildren, in the very room in which Ernest Hemingway first drew breath.

It's a rather fussy little room, full of frills and lace, but I'm told it has a profound effect on people. A man from Belarus broke down in tears when he saw it, and an Israeli Hemingway scholar who described herself as 'not a goose bumps type of person' was deeply moved by the thought that, as she put it, 'This is where American literature was changed for ever.'

Maybe this is why there is a living author currently at work in the turreted attic of the house. His name is William Hazelgrove and he's working on a book called *Hemingway's Attic*. It's a bit of a shock to find him there in the gloom.

'I came here to find the ghost of a man who did not grow up on television, a man for whom commerce was a necessary stream, not the flood we find ourselves in now.'

I'm not sure I can take this. Another writer looking for Hemingway, and it's only my first day.

Hemingway was born in the dying months of the nineteenth century and the first sounds he would have heard outside would have been of horses' hooves and not the soft swish of traffic that is pretty much constant today. Inside, he would have become used to the sound of his musically gifted mother composing away in the parlour. She wrote songs like 'Lovely Walloona', a paean to the family retreat on Walloon Lake in north Michigan.

Oh! Lovely Walloona, fairest of all the inland seas,
Oh! Lovely Walloona, ... thy laughing ripples kiss the shore

Hemingway inherited neither his mother's literary style, nor her musical talent. However, his father's and his grandfather's love of nature permeates his birthplace as it permeated his life. There was nothing sentimental about this. Love of

animals was not incompatible with hunting and killing them.

'Ernest was taught to shoot by Pa when two and a half and when four, could handle a pistol,' wrote Grace Hemingway on the back of one family photograph. In another, angelic Ernest stands at the end of a happy family group, looking the picture of innocence, hair cut in bangs and dressed like Lord Fauntleroy. You have to look quite carefully to make out the double-barrelled rifle nestling by his side.

As we leave, a group of Hemingway fans from China arrives. They're a little late and they shift around awkwardly at the door, all in dark suits like mourners at a funeral. Two departing visitors are enquiring about the recent announcement of a new range of furniture to be called The Ernest Hemingway Collection, which will include such best-selling lines as the Sun Valley Cocktail Table and the Kilimanjaro Bedside Chest.

It seems it was not just a nine-and-a-half pound boy that was born at 339 Oak Park Avenue, but an industry and, quite possibly, a religion.

Clutching my Hemingway-signed mug I step out into the leafy neighbourhood which he is said to have described as one of wide lawns and narrow minds. The wide lawns may still be there but Oak Park nowadays guards a zealously liberal reputation.

An elderly man offers to show me around.

'I'm a socialist,' he declares proudly. 'My wife has twice shaken hands with Paul Robeson.'

The light is fading as we walk down to the end of Oak Park Avenue. A war memorial which bears Hemingway's name stands in a postage stamp of greenery they call Scoville Street Park.

'That's so crazy,' mutters my grey-haired guide. 'They should rename it Hemingway Park.'

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Chicago O'Hare. The busiest airport in the world. It doesn't have a lot to do with Hemingway but it's the quickest way to get to north Michigan, which has a lot to do with Hemingway.

He never wrote much about Chicago but he wrote an awful lot about the life and adventures he had during eighteen years of summer vacations at Walloon Lake.

By midday, I've negotiated the long slow check-in lines that are the price we pay for high-speed travel and am twenty-five thousand feet above the grey-green surface of Lake Michigan. The Hemingway family would have taken one of the lake steamers that ran out of Chicago and reached Harbor Springs in thirty-two hours. Today, by jet and rented car, I'm there in four.

Harbor Springs, on the north shore of Little Traverse Bay, is a well-heeled and exclusive small town and the jetty at which lake steamers like *Manitou* or *City of Charlevoix* would have tied up is now occupied by dazzling white private yachts. The old station building from which the Hemingways and all their baggage would have been loaded aboard the train is still there. Except that there is no railway attached to it. And it sells women's clothing.

Looking inside, I have a momentary panic that I've stumbled upon a coven of transvestite train-drivers and that someone looking frighteningly like John Cleese might emerge from the back office, wiping greasy hands on a matching Donna Karan two-piece. This disturbing fantasy is not helped by the fact that the Depot boutique has, alongside the racks of dresses, a perfectly preserved ticket-office, complete with ironwork grille, wooden floor and wood-burning stove.

The railway and the Lake Michigan steamer service enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. In their pre-war heyday they advertised together: 'Upper Michigan – the Charmed Land Of

Hiawatha', 'The Northland's Blue Lakes – Far From Heat And Hay Fever'. But they couldn't fight aeroplanes and automobiles. Once one died, so did the other and the only way to Walloon Lake now is to take the highway through Petoskey, like everyone else.

Petoskey, ten miles around the bay, is the opposite of Harbor Springs. It has railway tracks but no station. The tracks don't lead anywhere but they're relics of a past which Petoskey knows is good for business. Not for nothing was it voted sixteenth Most Beautiful Small Town in America. We're on a BBC budget so we turn our backs reluctantly on the white columns and elegant terraces of the Perry Hotel and put in at the local Best Western.

A television in the lobby is permanently tuned to the weather. A girl with a back-pack is enthusing to the boy at reception.

'You know, I got to see that fantastic sunrise this morning!'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah, they replayed it on the Weather Channel.'

We've finally reached the shores of Walloon Lake. A raw and strengthening wind is funnelling down its eight-mile length straight into our faces. This would have been the last lap of the Hemingways' summer odyssey.

Here at Walloon Village they would have unloaded everything from the train that ran from Petoskey onto the steamer that plied the lake.

I unload myself into a tiny aluminium dinghy captained by Strat Peaslee, in his eighties, short, with neatly trimmed silver hair just visible between a jauntily angled nautical cap and the upturned collar of a thick plaid jacket.

Strat's family were summer vacationers here – 'fudgies, they

called us' – and he remembers the Hemingways. Dr Hemingway was 'a big man, a hunter'. He once took a bee out of Strat's ear.

Strat laughs at the memory. 'He never charged.'

His father was with him, suddenly, in deserted orchards and in new-plowed fields, in thickets, on small hills, or when going through dead grass, whenever splitting wood or hauling water, by grist mills, cider mills and dams and always with open fires.

'Fathers and Sons'

Six miles from the village, on the eastern shore of the western finger of the lake, Strat points to an unassuming green and white cabin set above a narrow beach backed onto a tall screen of pine and hemlock trees. This began life as a twenty- by forty-foot cottage, built in two and a half months, between September and November 1899, and christened by Grace Hemingway 'Windemere', after a location in a novel by Sir Walter Scott. It was gradually enlarged over the years as the Hemingway clan itself was enlarged but it is nowhere near as grand and showy as some of the mansions built around the lake since.

It's still in the family, owned by Hemingway's nephew, Ernie Mainland, who runs an insurance business in Petoskey.

There's no one there today. The jetties have been pulled up, the storm windows are in place and the house has been closed ahead of the long, hard winter when the lake will be ice-bound for six months. I'm quite glad to see it this way. In the silence I can indulge my imagination, try and feel the truth of the many stories that Hemingway wrote about his alter ego, Nick Adams, and how he learned lessons in life among the shores and the streams and the dark woods that surround the lake.

One year, after he'd quarrelled with his mother yet again, Hemingway stayed up here at the end of the season, and after the house was shut up for the winter he went to live with friends in nearby Horton Bay.

One of Hemingway's earliest, boldest and most controversial short stories was written from his Horton Bay experiences. It's called 'Up in Michigan' and its clinical description of the sexual act led Gertrude Stein to deem it unpublishable, his big sister Marcelline to describe it as 'a vulgar, sordid tale' and Bill Smith, one of Ernest's buddies, to suggest he write a sequel called 'Even Further Up in Michigan'.

'Horton's Bay, the town, was only five houses on the main road between Boyne City and Charlevoix,' wrote Hemingway, recalling it from a cold and draughty apartment in Paris, in 1922.

Seventy-six years on it pretty much matches his description. The two-lane blacktop from Charlevoix bridges Horton Creek and curves right, past the 'general store and post office with a high false front' and the 117-year-old Red Fox Inn, close by a grove of basswood and maple trees, old enough for Ernest to have walked beneath them.

We push open the door of the inn to find ourselves in a big front room on whose tables is arranged a dusty selection of Hemingwayana. There is no one there except a boy of maybe nine or ten, who, on seeing us, snaps into a terrific sales spiel covering all the Hemingway connections with Horton Bay and the relevant books in which we might find them – including 'Up in Michigan'. It doesn't come as a complete surprise to find out the boy's name is Ernest. Or that his father, Jim Hartwell, is the son of Vol Hartwell, who taught Hemingway to fish.

The Horton Bay Store next door has a nostalgic Norman Rockwell feel to it – the sort of place where they make TV ads for processed food – and as Betty Kelly makes us coffee I admire her collection of Hemingway photographs and newspaper cuttings. One of them, from the *Detroit News*, reports

the return of Hemingway the famous writer to the area in the late forties. He told the paper that no, he wouldn't be visiting Horton Bay. He said it would spoil his memories of the place.

Tonight we eat in a fine restaurant called Andante in Petoskey, whose chef, John Sheets, not only serves excellent fish but catches what he cooks. He agrees to take me out tomorrow for a fishing lesson on Horton Creek.

Before going back to our hotel I take a walk up to the corner of State and Woodland to look at the rooming house where Hemingway stayed in the winter of 1919 and from there I retrace his steps down to the same public library on Mitchell Street where he went most days to read the newspapers. The moon is full and the air is cold, and I feel myself in danger of entering a young Hemingway time warp. Turn in to the Park Garden Café for a night-cap and a dose of present-day reality. Order a beer and settle myself down at the bar. The barman nods approvingly. 'Second seat from the end. That was Hemingway's favourite.'

A scintillating late autumn morning. I'm in a canoe moored up amongst auburn reed beds on the marshy banks of Horton Creek. The wind ruffles stands of aspen sending the sunlight scattering. A dragon-fly settles momentarily on the end of my paddle, ripples spread from an almost imperceptible movement in the water. A soft and seductive sense of timelessness prevails.

Twenty minutes earlier our camera boat overturned, plunging our director, cameraman and his assistant into eighteen inches of water. We're not talking *Titanic* here, but they were in well above their knees and all the footage we've shot so far today has gone soggy.

So, whilst they're off drying out the equipment I'm left, with

John Sheets, chef and fishing mentor, thinking about life and why, despite the undoubted beauty of this place, I'm feeling oddly regretful. For what? Well, not catching a fish for one thing. Although fish are shy in the bright sunlight we have seen a couple of fair-sized steelheads emerge from the shadows but they swam past the bait with almost contemptuous disdain.

The twenty-year-old Hemingway caught sixty-four trout in one day here. Mindful of this I think I tried too hard. I rushed the line into the water, I tugged too sharply, I forgot the loose, controlled sweep of arm and rod and at one point my line stuck somewhere behind John's ear, hooked into the back of his shirt. I find myself guiltily hoping that the film will have been damaged beyond repair by the muddy waters of Horton Creek.

There's also a larger, deeper regret and I think it's to do with that old cliché, lost childhood. Horton Creek remains as it was when Hemingway learnt to fish here, an unspoiled backwater. Its peacefulness and my present enforced inertia remind me, suddenly and quite poignantly, of being very young again, of spending seemingly endless days crouched by the side of a pond in Sheffield collecting stickleback and frog-spawn in a jam jar.

It's ironic that this rush round the world to recapture the spirit of Hemingway should have stirred such an acute memory of days when there was no rush at all.

There's a shout from the bank. The crew return with camera intact, film saved and ready for work. The reverie's over.

Actually, I have a feeling that what brought it on was not so much to do with Horton Creek as waking up this morning and realising that, back in England, my eldest son had turned thirty.

Later. Expedition over. All the fish in Horton Creek are still there.

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