



# ARTIFACTS

A Journal of Undergraduate Writing

## The Cropsey Maniac

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**Meredith Vitale is from Eureka, MO and is studying now English at Vanderbilt University. She picked this topic, in Spring 2014, when she took a Folklore class with Professor Roth. She chose to do her final project on the Cropsey Maniac after working as a counselor at a residential camp the previous summer and observing how campers, especially those 11-14 years old, were willing to suspend their disbelief and take part in the dissemination of ghost stories.**

The story of the Cropsey Maniac exemplifies a legend used at summer camp to reinforce what is expected of the group. The Cropsey legend is local to New York, and often New York City children are sent to camp during the summer as a way to experience nature away from modern city life. In a strange environment with new peers and unusual authority figures, campers may feel insecure at first. The legend of Cropsey is commonly told at camps to build solidarity in a newly formed community, i. e. summer camp, by uniting a group of individuals under common knowledge and the threat of an outsider. Legends heard at camp, during a critical time in a child's development, are carried on with the child into adulthood and remain as a part of their perspective and understanding of life.

The initial purpose of summer camping was to allow children to express themselves outside of urban boundaries and use recreation as a means of socialization. The summer camp movement arose at the turn of the 20th century in response to industrialization in the U.S. and heavy migration from rural areas to urban cities (Smith, 2006). There were anxieties surrounding the unknown effects that growing up in an urban environment might have on a child's development. The contrast of nature and camping to life in the city also provided an interesting way for children to break from everyday life and grow socially, without being subjected to the will of parents and teachers. Camp life lacks traditional authority figures for children and provides an outlet to understand life away from home.

The rising middle class family, residing in urban and later suburban areas, had more disposable income than ever before. This provided the right conditions for parents to seek ways to improve and enhance the development of their children. The middle class began to envision nature as a "sanctuary" away from the manufactured world that was the city (Smith, 2006). Children would also be away from modern conveniences of city life and would build character while being forced to "rough it" in nature. Adolescent energy and curiosity were given new life in the new setting, but with more independence,

children would be forced to take more responsibility for their actions as well. Exposure to an unfamiliar group in an unfamiliar environment away from the comforts of home could cause problems for campers (Smith, 2006). However, solving these problems without the help of traditional authority figures was intrinsically valuable for children and their self-esteem and self-worth. Ideally, summer camp would begin to prepare children for the real world.

Residential institutions such as summer camps bring together individual children, typically around the same age and from similar backgrounds, and lead them collectively on a formally administered schedule. Unlike a seven-hour school day, children at camp are in contact with other campers and adults for 24 hours a day. Camp counselors, most typically people in their late teens and early 20's on their own summer vacations from school, are the adult authority figures for campers. Away from mainstream society, summer camp acts as a "framed reality"; through daily activities, counselors set "models of" as well as "models for" larger cultural patterns (Mechling, 1995). Occasions such as meals, assemblies, and special events serve as ritualized socialization and establish the campers as a group. Storytelling and legends offer counselors the opportunity to bond with the campers in a more informal setting which aids them in coming together with campers as a unified group.

A camp legend demands an interesting balance of ideas. Campers must suspend disbelief and become engrossed in the legend in order for it to effectively build *communitas*. If campers accept the legend and its events as real, they will fear for their personal safety and feel unsafe at camp but if they discover the legend to be false, they will feel tricked and alienate themselves from the counselors (Ellis, 1981). Counselors are in charge of the well being of the group of children and need to be able to effectively lead them. These young counselors are not typically used to this type of authority in their everyday life and storytelling, in the way of the mock-ordeal, can be used as a tool to gain respect as leaders.

Absent from the guidance of traditional authority figures, campfire stories and legends allows children to experiment with otherwise terrifying ideas or scenarios in a safe setting (Mechling, 1995). Counselors act out these stories for an audience of campers, for the benefit of campers sharing a common experience and counselors gaining status as leaders. In "The Camp Mock-Ordeal Theater as Life", Ellis (1981) refers to the camp mock-ordeal in a three step process, in which (1) newcomers are told about a reputed local legend, (2) the group somehow invokes the supernatural by prescribed rituals, and (3) returning to "safety", the group discusses the legend and what might have actually occurred. The dissemination of the legend acts as a sort of initiation for new campers.

Ellis (1981) emphasizes the importance of initiation for *communitas* to be formed and the group to be united against any reputed or unknown dangers of the wilderness. Much like a legend trip, consciously dramatized, staged action for an overly accepting audience enables campers to challenge and confront the idea of supernatural beings and return to safety when the event is over.

A perennial story in New York summer camps is the Cropsey Maniac legend, a story about a respected member of the community who becomes insane with desire to avenge an accidental death of his family and stalks the outskirts of the camp property. Haring and Breselerman (1977) collected variants from New York City informants about the Cropsey Maniac, which is consistently a New York State story that is transmitted at summer camps. In addition to summer camp, some of Haring and Breselerman's

informants first hear the Cropsey legend at a residential school. Haring and Breselerman found each variant was localized to where the informant first heard it.

While there are different details specific to the several variants, the plot of the Cropsey legend remains relatively consistent. In the variants collected by Haring and Breselerman, George Cropsey is always a respected adult male who goes insane after the accidental death(s) of his family member(s) and becomes the Cropsey Maniac. Most variants involve the accidental death of his children and often an irresponsible camper starting a fire is the indirect cause of these deaths. After disappearing for several weeks, the Cropsey Maniac returns to take his revenge on the camp. Campers begin showing up murdered and Cropsey leaves behind messages, like burning “Cropsey” onto the arm of one of his victims and starting small fires in the woods, to make campers aware of his presence.

Camp counselors protect their campers by blocking the cabin door and sleeping with hatchets. One counselor is able to injure Cropsey with his hatchet, but he escapes nevertheless. The authorities attempt to capture Cropsey but their efforts are futile. Despite being shot multiple times, Cropsey escapes the police siege and his body is never found. There is no evidence for Cropsey’s death and “strange voices” and “low, terrifying laughter” is still heard from the woods by campers in the years following the Cropsey’s last appearance.

The character of the Cropsey Maniac is a formally respected member of the community who goes insane and retreats to the woods. This background story shows campers that an average person, who would usually be trusted in a city setting, may not be trusted in unfamiliar places. This shows the uncertainty of what might lurk in nature and serves as a warning away from the unknown. The Cropsey Maniac also has the common motif of a mentally “insane” villain. The accidental death of Cropsey’s children caused by a fire set by campers also serves as a warning. It reminds campers that accidental death does happen and shows the danger of irresponsibility. In nature, fires can spread quickly and become out of control, but more importantly, cabin and camp structures are often made of wood and catch on fire. If children start campfires without supervision and something goes wrong, out in the wilderness there are no fire stations in close proximity and lives could be in danger. Counselors use this instance to stress the dangers of playing with fire.

Once Cropsey starts to take his revenge, the body of camper is found dead. It should be noted that this body is always found; this indicates that no one saw the murder take place because the camper was alone when they were killed. This implies the danger of wandering camp alone and encourages campers to stick together in groups. After the murder, the police search for Cropsey but are unable to find him. A counselor bravely protects their campers when Cropsey enters the cabin at night but Cropsey is still able to escape. The failure of the authorities juxtapose the success of the counselor is another message to the campers. It shows the people who protect the city are no match for the Cropsey Maniac who knows the lay of the woods. Only the brave counselor, in efforts to protect their campers, can effectively slow Cropsey down and even then the delay is only temporary.

Finally, there is a showdown between Cropsey and the police. Although Cropsey is shot multiple times, there are implications that he survives the classically mortal wounds. There are no suggestions in the different variants that Cropsey haunts the camp as a ghost, and this serves as an instance for campers to

believe Cropsey has some supernatural power. Ultimately, Cropsey's fate is uncertain; it is important for the Cropsey legend to be left open ended. Legends left without a conclusion can be extended into present activities year after year, as well as in the moment of the storytelling, with any unexpected noise or event being incorporated into the story (Ellis, 1981). This gives Cropsey life beyond the end of the legend and, for better or worse, allows campers to take the legend of Cropsey back home after camp ends.

The 1981 Slasher movie, *The Burning*, can be considered another variant of the Cropsey legend. Before the release of this film, the Cropsey legend was largely unknown outside of areas local to New York, as the legend had always been orally transmitted at various camps (Vos). Filmmakers Harvey and Bob Weinstein, who wrote and produced the film, are native New Yorkers and based the character Cropsy off of the legendary Cropsey Maniac. This movie takes place at fictional Camp Blackfoot and features the camp caretaker named "Cropsy", who is horribly burned by campers during a practical joke gone wrong. Cropsy later returns to the camp to take his revenge on the teens through gruesome murders. Cropsy targets promiscuous teens as his victims and goes after couples that have snuck away from camp. This film acts as a warning, much like the Cropsey legend, against the danger of fire, being alone on the campgrounds, and irresponsibility in general. The filmmakers are clearly aware of the Cropsey legend and its performance and purpose at camp, as the film ends with a new group of teenagers telling Cropsy's story around a campfire.

*Cropsey* is a 2009 documentary that examines the Cropsey legend and its relation to five missing children on Staten Island in the 1970-1980's. The documentarians are native to Staten Island, NY and recall hearing the Cropsey legend in their neighborhoods as children. Their variant of the Cropsey legend is localized to Staten Island, as Cropsey is said to reside in the tunnels under the abandoned Willowbrook Mental Institution on Staten Island, and lurk in the nighttime with an axe waiting to snatch away disobedient children. Several informants interviewed in this documentary remember first hearing some variant of the Cropsey legend at summer camp. In the interview of Dr. Bill Ellis in the *Cropsey* documentary, he suggests Cropsey was the generic term for maniac in New York State camps at the time and could easily be associated with any maniac kidnapping children off the street in this area. The film does not look for the historical origins of the urban legend, but rather, shows the power of a legend to spread ideas (Vos). *Cropsey* explores the belief in 1980's Staten Island that the Cropsey Maniac could represent a real person and the coming together of the community to search for the missing children and protect the other children from harm.

The Cropsey Maniac legend is evidence of the lasting impact of legends on children in particular. People recall the Cropsey legend into adulthood and apply its lessons to social interaction. This is best exhibited by the people of Staten Island in *Cropsey* (2009); they label the unknown kidnapper as "Cropsey" and are able to unite together as a community to prevent any further evil. Labeled as Cropsey, they recognize the threat of an outsider and the true members of the community are bonded together and uplifted with a greater sense of *communitas*. Just as in the legend, the authorities fail to protect against Cropsey and strength in numbers is the best defense for the Staten Islanders. As New Yorkers, the Cropsey legend provides a familiar meme the people use to understand a circumstance in which someone might kidnap a child; even though it might be incorrect, it gives them a way to cope with the situation and a way to defend against it. This relates back to an adolescent child's time at

summer camp, which seems to have a profound effect on their development, and legend and storytelling, in particular, is embedded into their social mores.

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**Part of Issue 11**, published in December 2014

**Topics: Culture, Life Writing**

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*Artifacts* is a refereed journal of undergraduate work in writing at The University of Missouri. The journal celebrates writing in all its forms by inviting student authors to submit projects composed across different genres and media.

*Artifacts* is sponsored by [The Campus Writing Program](#).

Published by the Campus Writing Program.

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