

THE SPOOKY SIDE OF AGING

Measles robbed me of what would have – should have – been my last trick-or-treating.

One's Halloween career starts as a toddler securely holding a parent's hand. Dressed in a cute costume, you're taken from house-to-house to be oohed and aahed over by your neighbors. And you haven't really a clue of what's going on.

A few years pass and you and your friends make the rounds – hopefully without your parents, and you're fully aware of the goal – treats.

And then the year comes when the look in your neighbors' eyes says that your candy quest – no matter the costume – is no longer “cute”. And they're starting to be concerned for your possible - tricks.

But I'd missed a Halloween and was *owed* one more go. So, off I went.

Starting early, I had a large territory to cover in mind. And just to be sure that I could carry all the booty home, I pulled my red wagon behind.

Determined not to miss a house, I walked up and down the streets in my suburban neighborhood ranging farther from home as it got later. But in the early going, I had plenty of company.

Hours along, I was tired. Yet not wanting to leave any doorbell unring, it got darker and darker – and colder and colder.

As it got later, however, I realized that I was not out so much for the candy, but to challenge a sense – which got stronger as I trudged – that this was my last trick-or-treating and that something in my life was being lost or at least changing. The ghost of my childhood moving on.

And then – and it was a sudden realization, I found myself quite a distance from home, at night - on the street – alone.

For the first time in my life, the world around me felt “scary”. It was the feeling of apprehension you get from any good horror film and why I'm not a fan of that genre. Worse, it was Halloween!



Alerted by the classic symptom of hairs rising on the back of my neck. Head up; eyes on patrol. I scurried for the safety of home. My wagon (not half so full of the *sugarplums* childish greed had imagined gathering) banging loudly behind in warning to anything that might have been hiding in wait.

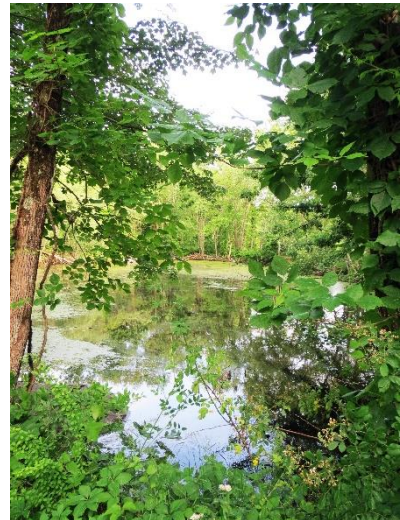
Could feeling scared in the world that night have been a true sign of aging?

This sense of unseen danger came again to me recently on a late afternoon walk in the woods of Cumberland, Rhode Island.



My wife and I found ourselves alone on the trails behind the Cumberland Public Library off Diamond Hill Road. Toward dusk, as we walked, the shadows grew longer and deeper.

It's a pretty woodland area with a pond and stream. Perfect for a nature walk. Ideal for enjoying seasonal colors, whichever the season.



But we weren't there for the exercise and the trees.

I had only a general idea of what we were looking for. No signs lead you to it along the paths. And sadly, such places may well



vanish entirely from popular knowledge with the decline of the local newspaper. For from my ancient pile of "want to sees" had emerged an excellent article by Kathleen Burge entitled "A haunting attraction in R.I." - saved from the December 5, 2007 edition of *The Boston Globe*.

According to this article, "deep in the woods" there's a plaque on some kind of stone monument at "the eeriest spot in town".

The place is known as Nine Men's Misery. (Now that's a provocative title.)

On March 26, 1676, a greatly outnumbered force of Plymouth Colony militia led by Captain Michael Pierce were ambushed and massacred along the nearby Blackstone River by Native American warriors fighting King Philip's War.

Nine English colonists escaped but were captured and taken prisoner. Their mutilated corpses found a day later in these Cumberland woods.

A pile of stones was raised above their mass grave. And a cairn has continuously marked the site ever since. It is believed to be the oldest war memorial in the United States.

The site has a history of ghostly disturbances following a number of documented desecrations. So, perhaps hoping to settle these spirits, the State of Rhode Island officially honored the place and its dead in 1928 by adding a bronze plaque:



“On this spot, where they were slain by the Indians, were buried the nine soldiers captured in Pierce’s Fight, March 26, 1676.”

Yet, according to the Globe rumors of haunting still abound.



As twilight settled on our visit, I felt again that same sense of danger and foreboding - that certain “scary” awareness that I’d first felt as the dark closed in around me at the end of my last trick-or-treating on that long ago Halloween.

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