

Nearly Died

The Hemlock Incident

By Michael Alfred Francis Breiding

31 January 1969

Back to 1969. Somehow we ended up at the Shire School which was a "free school" located in a warehouse in SOMA.

It was here we met Gene Young who became one of my role model heroes. I wanted be just like him. Cool, calm, collected. And smart. He was a airlines electronics trouble shooter. Cool! I wanna do that! And he had a 1968 Camaro to run around in which I thought was a really cool car.

One day at the Shire School "Teacher" Gene decided it would be educational to take the 4 of us on a trip over to Marin County and explore the woods there. We drove over to Samuel P Taylor SP and pulled in at the gate for the access road for Kent Lake, a reservoir which supplies drinking water to Marin County. The woods were lush and thick with small tributaries feeding into the main stem of the creek from the lake.



Eugene (Gene) Young by Bill Breiding

At some point we came across a plant we all knew from home - Queen Ann's Lace. We told Gene it was in the carrot family and it

had a sweet tasting, carrot like root which we had eaten before. The plants we had found here at the Park were much, much larger than the plants we had back home. But we attributed that to the fact they were growing in California. Why, I don't know.

We wrestled several of the plants out of the ground and began munching away on the sweet, tasty roots. We all had some, except Gene.

Shortly after that we all piled back into Gene's 1968 Camaro and started the drive back to SF. At some point I told Gene I was feeling sick and felt sure I was going to throw up. Gene found a gas station and I got out of the car and headed to the bathroom. I never made it. I fell to the ground and became convulsively ill. The last thing I remember was literally being thrown into an ambulance.

I am now unsure of the time line, but some time later I regained consciousness. As my eyes focused and I became somewhat aware of my surroundings, I felt a sharp pain "down there". My hand went to my privates and to my horror I found there was some sort of tube going up inside of me. At that point in my life I had never heard of a catheter.

I looked around and to my left there was a glass room. Inside of it was my brother Wayne lying in bed. This was a bizarre scene and it frightened me. I was to find out later this was an isolation unit he had been

put in because he had contracted a staph infection.

At some point a nurse came by and I uttered the usual question: "Where am I?" She told me we were in the hospital. She said the plant we had eaten had poisoned us and we had been made quite sick. Quite sick meant being in a coma for 24 hours and nearly dying.

Brothers Sutton and William had apparently eaten smaller amounts of the plant and were kept overnight and released. Fortunately for all of us, Gene had eaten none. If he had, there would have been a good chance he would have suffered the same reaction - while driving. And that might have been the end for all of us.

Apparently when we got to the hospital no one was sure what to do. As I understand it Gene told them about the plant we had eaten which was the suspected culprit for this nasty turn of events. At that point Gene went back to the site with a botanist from UC Berkeley who collected and identified the plant as Poison Hemlock (*Cicuta virosa*) which was known to be quite toxic even in very small amounts.

Knowing the identity of the plant did not help us as the required treatment for the toxin was at the time unknown. The toxic alkaloid had to be isolated and identified and then a treatment regimen devised to try to save us. The end results of this were complete transfusions for my brother Wayne and me and being continuously medicated with dilantin and phenobarbital. It was thought the transfusion would clear the toxin from our systems and the drugs would help control the violent convulsions we had been experiencing. The big fear was brain damage. So to this day I have had a handy excuse for every stupid thing I have done.

Eventually mom, Suzi, Sutton and Gene came to visit along with other folks. It is all

kind of foggy now. But it must have been an awful experience for mom to go through not knowing whether two of her sons were going to live or die or be permanently impaired or even comatose.

This incident was picked up by the wire services and reported in the press nationally. A pal from back in Morgantown saw it and assumed I was dead - until I showed up on his doorstep in the summer of 1973.



I am not certain my brother Wayne came away completely unscathed from this incident and it may have played a role in why he has ended up the way he has. In 1973 the journal "California Medicine" contained a 5 page article written by two MDs. The article entitled "Accidental Ingestion of Water Hemlock: Report of Two Patients with Acute and Chronic Effects" recounted the entire drama from a medical stand point. With that Wayne and I got our 15 minutes of fame. The complete blood transfusion story was told to me by I know not whom and there is no mention of this in the article.

Excerpted from Portable Storage #3
Edited by William Breiding
Published February 21, 2020