Maine Song and Story Sampler

6-5-1957

Breakfast in Hell

Thomas MacLeod

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Recommended Citation

Story: "Breakfast in Hell"
Storyteller: Thomas MacLeod
Town: Events take place on Spednic Lake (near Vanceboro, ME); recorded in Baring, ME
NA 57.1 CD 44 Track 3
Collector: Sandy Ives
Date: June 5, 1957
Motif: Very similar to Q221.4.2 (Man - Sam Hall, see below - vows to recover loose boat or go to hell trying). More generally, fits Q221.3 (Blasphemy punished) and Q558.4 (Blasphemer stricken dead).

The origins of this story are difficult to pin down. Sayings that relate hell and breakfast are old and widespread enough to suggest that the utterance central to this story was once in common usage and has been lost over time. For other examples of this relation, see General William Tecumsah Sherman's famous comment on reporters, "I hate newspapermen... If I killed them all there would be news from Hell before breakfast." Or the saying "from Hell to breakfast," which refers to a great distance. In the story heard here, the central character, when faced with a logjam early in the morning, claims he will break the jam or eat his breakfast in Hell and is subsequently killed when the jam breaks. This basic story is also connected with the deaths of two other men in the region: one was Sam Hall who died on Sysladobsis Lake in Maine; the other was Sandy Gray who died on the Musquash River in west central Ontario. (In the archives, NA256 and NA260 contain similar stories explaining the name of Coffin Point on West Grand Lake. There are likely others as well that have just not been identified as such yet.)

The story of Sam Hall explains the naming of Hell-before-Breakfast Cove (a name lost to time) on Sysladobsis Lake, not far from Spednic Lake in eastern Maine. In this account, Hall and others were stripping bark for a tannery in Princeton, ME. They had a fleet of small boats on the lake for storing and transporting the bark. One morning, while they were preparing breakfast, one of the boats broke loose and floated away. Hall went into the lake after it, calling to his companions that he would "fetch back that boat or go to Hell before breakfast!" Unique to this telling is the report of direct supernatural involvement. Spectators reported that the skies darkened over Hall and a strange shape rose from the bottom of the lake. When the view cleared, Hall was gone.

The version of the story that comes from Ontario is more widely documented and tells the story of Sandy Gray's death in a logjam. The story is basically the same as the one heard here, but with one extra detail. In Gray's case, the jam formed overnight Saturday and he set out to break it Sunday morning, which was completely outside the tradition of woodsmen and river drivers. As with MacLeaod's tale and the account of Sam Hall, the death of Sandy Gray probably has some truth behind it. Sandy Gray Falls, located on Musquash River just west of Gray Lake, was named for the driver after he died there. Accounts from early in the twentieth century claimed there was a grave just a mile from the falls where his body was pulled from the river, and some claim the area is haunted by his ghost. The legend of Sandy Gray has even been immortalized recently by singer-songwriter Slaid Cleaves in his song "Breakfast in Hell."

In short, then, the story told here is not completely unique, but because it has only rarely been collected it is difficult to determine where it came from and how far it spread. It is entirely possible that the story is unique to the northeastern United States and Maritime provinces of Canada. All that remain are a few notes to help clarify MacLeod's story. It is not clear where the "North Brook Chain of Lakes" name comes

from. Spednic Lake is part of the Chiputneticook Lakes (also East Grand, North Lake, Mud Lake, and Palfrey Lake) which straddle the Maine/New Brunswick border. The name ("Chiputneticook") came from a Maliseet word, but the meaning is not known. The lake system forms the headwaters of the St. Croix River. Vanceboro Dam has made Palfrey and Spednic, once separate lakes, into a hydrologically and ecologically combined lake. Spednic is now best known for bass fishing.

Transcript:

MacLeod: There was another drive, it comes into Spednic Lake is what they call it, it's a chain of lakes called North Brook. And there's a nasty little place on it, they call it "The Winding Stairs." It was very steep and winding around like that [demonstrating]. There was a jam of logs jammed up on it one morning, this was just a young fellow, went out before breakfast and started that jam. Somebody said, "Be careful!" They called to him and one of the boys said, "Be careful!" "Oh," he said, "I'm alright." He said, "I'll take that off of there or I'll eat my breakfast in Hell." He possibly ate his breakfast in Hell. When that thing broke he went in and we never saw him for two days before we found his body.

Ives: That happened up here you said?

MacLeod: That happened up in Spednic Lake region, up in that country there. It's what they call the North Brook Chain of Lakes. It's up in that country there that happened.

Sources: Skinner, Charles M. *American Myths and Legends: Vol. 2*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1903, 230-31; Shaw, Marlow Alexander. *The Happy Islands: Stories and Sketches of the Georgian Bay*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1926, 57-60; Barry, James P. *Georgian Bay: The Sixth Great Lake*. Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1968, 86, 176; Floren, Russell; Gutsche, Andrea; & Chisholm, Barbara. *Ghosts of the Bay: A Guide to the History of Georgian Bay*. Toronto: Lynx Images, 1994, 74; & MacLeod, Cameron. "The Ghost of Sandy Gray," *Mer Douce* 2 (Oct.-Nov. 1922), 4-7.