

I promised my children I would never tell this story. It was a magical, yet frightening, experience to be a secret between the three of us. Not even my wife, Hannah, knew about it. But, alas, my children have grown up and I'm sure they have told the story to their children. Don't worry it's not a bad story unless, of course, you consider an army of snowmen to be bad.

There is an old folk story in my village of Braemar about the Army of Snowmen. From generation to generation as far back as anyone can remember, the army of snowmen tale has been told to the children of Braemar. Sometimes, it's told at Halloween when the clocks change and it gets darker and spookier early. Sometimes it's told in the dead of winter, after a blizzard where an army of snowman roaming the fields seems possible. I heard it from my father at an early age when he would tuck me in at night with a bed time story.

Braemar is a little village of six hundred inhabitants nestled in the rural community of Southwestern Ontario. Founded by Angus Mackay in 1797, because the hilltop overlooking the barren plains, with only a meandering flowing through it, reminded him of his beloved home back in Scotland. This was a rarity back in the early settlers' time as most of the area was still covered with forest. It was not uncommon for bears, wolves and cougars to be wandering the forests.

Braemar still emits the same familiarity for any Scotsman. From the Piper's Paradise restaurant, to the streets named after early village settlers, to the Thay River Angus Mackay saw so long ago, Braemar has never lost its Scottish charm.

The legend has it; it was the village founder, Angus Mackay, who first saw the Army of Killer Snowman. He staked out his land on the plain he had seen from the top of the hill, one kilometre away, and began clearing the land. It was his first winter in Braemar while on the plain that he saw it.

In the coldness of January, Angus went out one early morning (early settlers never slept) to hunt. He was going to walk across the plain to get the forest that would eventually become my hometown. As he descended down the bank from his little house to the plain, he noticed a group of moving objects the size of people about half a kilometre away. He knew it could not be people as no one lived within five kilometres of him. As well

the amount of objects moving was greater than the population of the new formed county of Zorra.

Angus first thought they were some sort of pack of animals. If he was lucky he could take out three or four which would last him for the next month for food. He ran as fast as he could, about two hundred metres, and dropped to his stomach behind a snowdrift to examine the situation.

To his surprise, and disappointment, they were made not of out flesh but snow. They were not animals but rather snowmen! And these snowmen were alive! He shook his head a few times to try and clear his senses but it did not work. Neither did rubbing his eyes in astonishment. There were living snowmen on his plain.

Angus debated his next step. His initial instinct was to charge them and kill as many as he could. But there were at least fifty of them and how does one go about killing a snowman? He could run for help but help was five kilometres down the road. He could run back to his home but did he really want to expose himself from his cover? Besides, his wife, Betty, was pregnant in the house with their first born, Donald. Angus concluded his best course of action was to do - nothing. Stay hidden and observe and that's precisely what he did do.

The snowmen were not the types of snowmen we are accustomed to today. They did not wear a top hat but they did have two eyes made of a coal, a carrot for a nose and a scarf around their neck. Their arms were not made of the traditional sticks but were indeed made of snow. The snowman came in all different heights with all them at least six feet high. Some had long carrots, some had short carrots, some had thick coal eyes, some had small beady eyes, most had black scarves, a few had maroon one and one had a red scarf. Most disturbing was the fact they were all armed. Every snowman had its own spear complete with an iced tip.

The snowmen with black scarves sat around in circles, apparently talking, but Angus couldn't make out the sounds. The maroon scarfed snowmen were standing around a tree stump, examining some sort of map. The red scarfed snowman was off to the right, alone, looking up at the forest on the hill.

Angus thought that maybe the snowmen were lost travellers. They seemed quiet and reserved and – friendly. He was about to stand up and approach the snowman when one of the black scarfed ones stood up and looked off to the east.

A deer approached them from the east. A deer's natural instinct is to run away at the first sign of movement however the deer did not consider the snowmen as a danger. It considered them as snow blowing across the plain. The deer approached closer and closer. The red scarfed one, who was obviously the leader, stood up and said something to the maroon ones. They in turn said something to the black scarfed ones. The black ones stood up and stood in a semicircle formation. Slowly the deer moved into the semicircle and when it did, the top of the circle sealed shut and the snowmen attacked the deer. There was a loud growl as the snowmen attacked the deer. Within seconds the deer was dead.

Being a hunter, this behaviour did not surprise Angus. Everyone needs to eat to survive. However after the attack the black scarfed snowmen went back to the socialising, the maroon scarfed snowmen went back to their map on the stump and the red scarfed one went back to looking at the scenery. They left the deer dead and untouched. They were not going to eat it. They simply killed it because they saw it.

Angus became scared. He knew that if he were spotted he would have the same fate as the deer. He realised these snowmen were not friendly at all but in fact an army – an army of snowmen. The black scarfed ones were the foot soldiers, the maroon ones were officers and the red one was the commander. He tried to lay motionless behind his drift waiting for the army to leave but his body was shaking too much from the terror.

After the maroon soldiers determined the next course of action and told the commander, all the snowmen walked down to the river. One broke a hole in the ice the width of a snowman. One by one they jumped into the river through the hole, only going down as far as their shoulders. Two snowmen would help pull them out of the water. Angus didn't understand until he saw one snowman punch the other in the stomach – as a test. When its hand hit the stomach it produced a tin sound. They were freezing their snow to make armour. They had turned their snowball bodies into hard protective iceball bodies.

After all the snowmen, including the commander, had armour, they stood in formation and marched into the east forest, leaving the deer behind. Angus waited an hour

before he was certain the army of snowmen was gone. He then ran back to the house as fast as possible, tripping a few times on the way, to tell his wife all about it.

Angus was so scared he boarded up the house and left the perfectly edible deer on the plain until the spring.

From season to season, year to year, and decade to decade, the story has been passed down to future generations. Over the years the army of snowmen have been spotted around Braemar. All of these such occasions saw the army of snowmen along the Thay River, replenishing their armour in the early morning. Some eager Braemartonians have searched for the army only to come up empty. At least once, usually when they are young, the next generation of Braemartonians spend a winter looking for the army. Myself included.

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I was watching television when my children ran into the house.

"Dad! Dad! You have to come with us!"

I muted my program but was still watching it.

"Why, is there something wrong?"

"We saw the Army of the Snowmen!"

I turned off the television and walked to the back door.

"You saw what?"

"The Army of the Snowmen!"

"Just like in the legend." My son, Nathan added.

"Where?"

"At the bumps." My daughter, Samantha replied.

The bumps are a popular tobogganing spot in Braemar. It is located out back of our house, past the park, the little forest and the train tracks. It's on a hilly plain overlooking the Thay River. I had spent many a times sledding there when I was my children's ages.

"The bumps out back?"

"YES!" They both replied.

"Hurry get your jacket."

I obeyed my children and put on my winter clothes. It was a P.A. day so the kids didn't have to go to school. I had some holiday time left over so I took the day off so that the kids didn't have to go to the sitters. My wife Hannah did not have holiday time to burn

so she was at work. The kids, wanting to make the most of the fresh snowfall from the night before and their P.A day, got up at sunrise and went to the bumps tobogganing.

My children ran ahead of me through the park. I tried to keep up but I was in worse shape than I had thought. Nathan, my youngest, turned around and yelled at me.

"Come on dad. Before they leave."

We crossed the park and went through the forest. Samantha ripped her jacket on a branch from running too fast. On the edge of the other side of the forest, where they had stashed their toboggans, we stopped. Samantha whispered.

"There just down past the rail-trail. We have to be quiet."

We moved slowly across the flat rail-trail to a little bank. Each of us peeked our head over the bank and looked down onto the plain and the river. There, at the bottom of the plain beside the Thay river was an army of snowmen! They looked exactly as described in the legend.

"The snowman came in all different heights with all them at least six feet high. Some had long carrots, some had short carrots, some had thick coal eyes, some had small beady eyes, most had black scarves, a few had maroon one and one had a red scarf. Most disturbing was the fact they were all armed. Every snowman had its own spear complete with an iced tip."

I looked to my left to my two children who turned and smiled at me. We knew this was something special. We also knew this was dangerous but none of us cared. Hannah would have taken the kids back to the house immediately but not me. Maybe it was because I had told the story to my kids so many times or maybe because I had searched for the army when I was their age but it never occurred to me to leave. We stayed and watched.

The black scarfed snowmen were standing around socialising near the river, the red one was off to the left looking down the river, off in a memory. The maroon ones were circled around a black one. It appeared they were questioning it. A maroon officer went to the commander to relay the answers to the questions. The foot soldiers were summoned and they formed a semicircle around the questioned black scarfed one. The leader pointed at one foot soldier.

"What are they doing dad?" Nathan whispered.

"I think one of them is in trouble with the army. Maybe it went AWOL."

The selected foot soldier ran at the questioned black one with spear in hand. The questioned black one screamed in fear as the spear-running snowman stuck its weapon into the chest of the other. The questioned one dropped to the snow and the attacker pulled its spear, covered in white powder, out of the dead snowman. Calmly everyone went back to socialising.

We had just witnessed an execution of one of the snowmen. I looked at Samantha and Nathan and they looked at me. We were all pale with fear. I knew how Angus Mackay felt that morning so long ago.

"I think we should go." I whispered. They nodded in agreement. I turned around and to my horror one of the black scarfed snowmen was towering over me. It must have been a scout and had come down the rail-trail from the south. My kids screamed as it raised its spear, looking at my chest. For some reason all I could focus on was the angry expression of my attacker as I had never seen an angry snowman before. As the spear came down towards me, I rolled to my right onto Nathan. The snowman missed and stuck its spear into the bank. As it bent down to retrieve its weapon, I reached over, and with all my force, I pulled its nose off from its face. The snowman screamed and put its hands to its face, to the spot where the carrot should have been. I took the carrot and drove it as hard as possible into the chest of the snowman. Another scream but this time, the snowman fell to the ground, dead.

I turned around and saw the maroon officers each leading a group of snowmen in a charge. Some came directly up the hill at us, while others were flanking us to the north and south. There were trying to put us into a semicircle which would have been certain death for us.

"We have to go now!" I said to my kids.

"Run back to the house. Do not look back. I'll be right behind you."

Normally I would have to repeat something two or three times for my kids to listen to me, but I guess a near death experience enhances their listening skills as they ran into the forest - no questions asked. I followed but unlike the run down, I was keeping pace with my children. Terror is a great motivator.

"Leave the toboggans!" I shouted. "Run! Run!"

Midway through the forest I turned around to see the snowmen at the toboggans still charging. We ran through the forest (all of us ripping our winter coats on the branches), through the open park, into the back yard and up onto the deck. It wasn't until we were on the back deck that I looked back again. The army of snowmen had stopped their pursuit. They never left the forest.

We sat on the back deck steps, trying to catch our breath.

"Is everyone okay?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

Our faces did not return from the pale whiteness of certain death until after three cups of hot chocolate. However after we went into the house, I made sure to lock every door. None of us left home for the next two days until the Sunday.

On the Sunday we had recuperated enough to be able to go outside. We waited until the afternoon to go back to the bumps (as there was no way any of us were going in the morning). There we found the toboggans smashed beyond use. On the bank where I had killed the snowmen was - nothing. Not even a carrot. Down on the plain where the army of snowmen had executed one of their own for going AWOL was - nothing. It was as if they had never been there, that they didn't exist, but Samantha, Nathan and I - and now you, know different.