

A Note to Readers

The true crime empire continues to thrive because modern culture still offers no systematic and satisfying way to come to terms with human evil. The question posed here is fundamentally theological: is evil a supernatural power engaged in a timeless, cosmic struggle against the forces of Good, or do bad things just happen randomly in an amoral universe devoid of any larger meaning?

—KAREN HALTTUNEN, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*

This is a true story. It was written nearly forty years after the murder of the Robison family, and many of the people you will meet in these pages were deceased long before I began writing about them. Meticulous records of the case were kept by both the Michigan State Police and the Emmet County Sheriff's Office, including taped and written interviews of friends, family members, business associates, suspects, and others in the midst, and on the fringes, of the investigation.

In addition, the case was thoroughly covered by reporters working for the *New York Times*, United Press International, the Associated Press, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Detroit News*, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Petoskey News-Review*, the *Traverse City Record Eagle*, the *Harbor Light*, and other newspapers and magazines. Even the noir and titillating *True Detective* magazine published an in-depth article on the crime, with names disguised. Quoted material attributed to deceased persons or to persons still living whom I was unable to interview was obtained from these official reports and journalistic accounts.

Other sources I consulted include Michigan State Attorney General records, U.S. Army Military Intelligence records, crime scene photographs, investigative photographs, Freedom of Information Act filings, compilations of local history, personal interviews with year-round and summer residents of Good Hart, Harbor Springs, Charlevoix, and Petoskey, Michigan, and my own observations. Any errors of omission, history, fact, or judgment are mine.

When Evil Came to Good Hart: 10th Anniversary Edition

Mardi Link

https://www.press.umich.edu/9885711/when_evil_came_to_good_hart_10th_anniversary_edition

University of Michigan Press, 2018

A New Note to Readers

Fifty years have passed since Richard Robison, his wife Shirley, their four children Richard Jr., Gary, Randy, and Susan, walked the Lake Michigan coastline, skipping stones and enjoying time away from the city. Ten years have passed since the first edition of *When Evil Came to Good Hart* was published. I've since written two other books about mysterious cold cases in Michigan, and yet it is this case that inspires the most mail from readers, the most questions from law enforcement, the most urgent calls for a solution. Since the summer of 1968, a single question has reverberated throughout the village of Good Hart: "Who killed our summer people, and why?" For my thoughts on these issues, consult the new afterword in this 10th Anniversary Edition.

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A Stranger Comes to Town

Some say that the village of Good Hart, Michigan, is haunted. It is not haunted in the manner that most well-rooted places can become haunted. There is no ghost here that I have seen or felt the opaque presence of, no dark wraith or caped phantom dragging chains in the night or galloping through town on a mist-shrouded mount. No, this diminutive northern coastal town of well-tended cottages, ancient trees, Native American legends, and a clenched fist of locals is haunted by an answer that will not come.

In June 1968, a wealthy Detroit family, the Robisons, was slain here inside their summer cottage by an unknown assailant, who murdered them while they sat at their dining room table playing a game of double solitaire. Today the guilty person is a stranger still, officially at least. Forty years later Good Hart still asks, “Who killed our summer people, and why?”

The Robisons—Richard, Shirley, and their four children—came to Good Hart every summer to “find their bliss,” as the saying goes. And from all accounts, for a time they did find it. The family drove the 275 miles north as soon as school let out for the summer, and planned to spend the next three months at Blisswood, a private development of pine log and birch bark summer homes nestled in the protective dunes alongside Lake Michigan. Like countless other downstate families, the Robisons left behind the schedule of the city, replaced its grime with beach sand and its grit with carefree hunts for Petoskey stones. Every June, when they drove away from their home in a suburb of Detroit and headed north, they also left behind the crime of the city—or so they thought.

Today, fewer than five hundred people live in Good Hart year-round; most have grown weary of the endless questions about the Robisons that visitors bring with them. A brutal, unsolved murder is not what anyone would want his or her village to be known for, especially a village that

owes its livelihood to the hospitality it gives to strangers. If locals do talk, the one Robison they talk about first is Susan. She was Richard and Shirley's youngest child and only daughter—just seven years old when she was murdered.

That is the same age I was in July 1968, when I too traveled north with my parents and my brother, to visit for the first time what became our family's summer cottage. Though my own grandfather built the cottage and named it Bob-O-Link, he had not built it for my grandmother or for his own children, but for his sister, Meta.

My great-aunt was a private woman, nervous around groups larger than two or three, even if they were members of her own family. I think of her now as an odd woman—tiny, thin, proper, and tense, with the curious fate of being part of a jovial German family that liked to eat and drink and laugh and play endless games of cards. It was no wonder, then, that we had never been invited to her cottage, but on July 22, 1968, we were on our way north for a camping trip. Our route would take us within a half mile of Bob-O-Link, and we would be stopping by for the afternoon. I have a feeling that my father may have announced our visit to Meta, politely of course, rather than asking. Back then, my family and I were the strangers coming to town.

It was one of a handful of clear-sunshine days that arrive in northern Michigan every July, and I was wearing my bathing suit under my clothes as we headed north. Though I had never been to Bob-O-Link, the beach was already the stuff of Link family legend. Sand, white and fine-grained as icing sugar, squeaked under your bare feet when you walked. Water so clear you could watch schools of minnows swirl around your legs. Pine trees with giant cones, snake grass that you could break apart at each black-ringed segment then snap back together again, lowland pools of tadpoles and tiny toads. What more could a young girl on summer vacation possibly desire?

In the backseat of our black Ford Galaxy I could hear the familiar voice of Ernie Harwell on the radio, for my father was listening to a Tigers game on WJR. Next to him, my mother was going over the menu she had planned for our weeklong camping trip. Without warning, there was a break in Ernie's commentary, and the car radio crackled out news of the wicked crime. A father, a mother, three sons, and one daughter. All dead. All killed with guns, the newsman said. There was more to the report: the girl, the daughter, the sister, was seven years old. The same age as me. My dad turned off the radio, and it grew quiet inside our car. How does a seven-year-old girl come to understand that evil exists in this world? How does a whole town come to understand it?

* * *

In the summer of 2007 I visited Good Hart for the first time. By then I had been following the unsolved murders of the Robison family, unofficially and irregularly, for almost four decades. In my teens, I occasionally saw Susan in my dreams. In college, I looked up articles about the crime in *Reader's Index*. In my first job as a newspaper reporter, I learned how to read police reports and wondered about the details in the report on the Robisons.

On that first visit to Good Hart, a friend of a friend introduced me to Carolyn Sutherland, the owner of the town's oldest business, the Good Hart General Store. She was short, petite, sun-tanned already in May, with cropped hair that dared you to comment on its orangeness. And she was glowering at me through her firmly closed screen door.

"This is my friend," the woman I'd just met said, by way of introduction. "She's a writer and she's working on a book about Good Hart."

"A writer, huh?" Carolyn crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, can you spell 'Get lost?'"

"My computer has spell check for that," I fired back.

She squinted at me, arms crossed and leaning forward, showing no signs of easing up on the door. But she said, "Well, if you're a friend of Jeanne's, I guess you can't be all bad."

"Um, to tell you the truth, I really only met her five minutes ago."

Beside me, Jeanne Moore, the friend of a friend who was doing me a favor, cringed.

Then from behind the screen, a grin. The door swung open wide.

"All right, you'd better come in. Before people around here start filling your head with all sorts of crazy stuff."

And for the next year, people around there did fill my head with crazy stuff. With their stories of compassion and tragedy, resourcefulness and craftsmanship, beauty and ugliness.

Welcome, dear reader, to Good Hart.