

## **Adverse Possessions**

The True Story of Robert E. Harrill  
"The Fort Fisher Hermit"

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### **Dedication**

This material is dedicated to George Edward Harrill, the son of Robert E. Harrill- "The Fort Fisher Hermit". Through his persistence, determination and unwavering support, the Hermit Society and the thousands of friends of the hermit have continued, against all odds, to spread the incredible story of one of North Carolina's most fascinating individuals, and to uncover the truth of his father's untimely death.

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*"The shepherd or the beggar in his red cloak little knows what a charm he gives to the wide landscape that charms you on the mountain-top and whereof he makes the most agreeable feature, and I no more the part my individuality plays in the All...but the finished man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

*"The Federal government has grown stale, wasteful, inefficient, bureaucratic, and is failing the American people. Rock 'em, sock 'em, shake 'em-up changes are what the American people want".*

Al Gore

*"There are the beginnings of a peaceful revolution and it will continue. Of that I am sure. And as it moves forward each day, we can feel confident that it will be the American citizen, as it was in 1776, who will save our blessed land."*

Martin L. Gross, [A call for Revolution](#)

*"I have found out a way to live without what is commonly called employment or industry, attractive or otherwise. Indeed my steadiest employment if such it can be called, is to keep myself at the top of my condition, and ready for whatever may turn up in heaven or on earth..."*

Henry D. Thoreau

Each time I think of closing my work because I seemed to have reached a dead-end, something else shows up, such as this note I found in my mailbox in August of 1993...

*"Mr. Edwards,  
...we would like to tell you what we know & and have been  
holding inside for 20 years"*

## Preface

I met the hermit when I was a skinny, accident-prone 8 or 9 years old. My family used to visit the Carolina Beach and Kure Beach area, like many North and South Carolinians all through child- and adulthood. Long before acquiring a license, my father would drive us the 4 hours from Salisbury to spend a week at the ocean, fishing, crabbing, or just exploring the area, often getting serious cases of sunburn, and usually getting the family car stuck in the sand on several occasions. Many of our visits had pleasant, unforgettable surprises for us. Some of those memories pop right out of my childhood memory-file each time I visit the area. I can still see my sister's facial expressions when my grandmother would fry up eels that we would catch in the inlet...and years later, on break from college, Carolina Beach and the board-walk was the place to be when the Azalea Festival was going on in nearby Wilmington.

The beach trips were the high-point of my life each year. One summer, I was nearly successful in taking the beach home, until a tire blew out on our old "Woody", and my sand was dumped out at the roadside. As we grew older, the experiences grew to form us into what we are today. One of my most favorite places has always been the Fort Fisher area, because as kids, we used to imagine that the old fort that once stood here, was ours. We used to spend hours exploring the shoreline for presents from the sea-god, or jamming sticks between the coquina rocks at low tide, searching for stone crabs and fossils. I still have a scar on my leg, where I slipped off the slimy rocks into the water one summer, and the razor-sharp shells sliced the skin below my bathing suit. As I learned the true story of the War Between the States, I had a deep appreciation for the many lives that were lost there, in the South's desperate struggle for independence. Occasionally, we would find artifacts from the great battle that took place - the largest land/sea battle in the history of the world up until WWII. Back in the 1950's, before the State designated the area as a protected historical site, you could dig in the sand and find cannon balls, bullets, sometimes even parts of guns or knives. When the tides were low, you could see the boiler of one of several blockade runners that was sunk during the war, sticking right out of the surf.

Many years before, there used to be an inlet to the Cape Fear River just beyond the Fort. It was called New Inlet, and was formed when the Atlantic broke through during a terrible week-long hurricane in the 1760's. For over a hundred years, ships plied the channel to reach the port of Wilmington, some twenty miles up river. During the War Between the States, the blockade runners brought precious supplies to Wilmington from Confederate-friendly countries and nearby islands, which were then transported by a massive railroad system to other Southern States, in the futile efforts to hold off the invasion from the North.

After the war, the victorious Federal Government sealed off the inlet by what many consider to be one of the wonders of the world. "The Rocks", as it is called, is a massive stone wall that stretches from Battery Bucannon, which was a cannon-topped fortification facing the river, to Zeke's Island. Hundreds of "freed" slaves provided most of the labor for the enormous task at hand. The reason which was given by the Government, for the closing of the inlet, was to produce more river flow to the main river channel by Bald Head Island and Southport, but most of us Southerners believe that the Government just didn't want to have to go through such an enormous battle, involving 70 ships and thousands of troops, to close off the Port of Wilmington, if the need ever arose again.

In the summer of 1955, an old man appeared in the area. He was 62 years old, had no family or friends, and from what the local magistrate said, when the old man appeared before him in court on a charge of vagrancy-he had "...no visible means of support". The old man stood alone before the Judge and told him simply, *"No visible means of support....? I own a home in Shelby...and I make a good living here acting as a tour guide-I can teach anybody who asks me how to catch a mess of fish, just give me a few hours to catch the tides right....as for no visible means of support...what about all these tourists around here...do they have any visible means of support? Maybe you should lock them all up, too?!"* After a brief recess, the Magistrate, being a reasonable individual, said the man was free to go- with the stipulation that he purchase a Special Privilege License from the town. This was the first recorded documentation of the arrival of Robert E. Harrill to Fort Fisher, and what many feel was the first introduction to the area of "Common Sense".

1  
In The Beginning

Robert Harrill was born on "groundhog day" in 1893. He grew up in a tiny wooden cabin in the foothills to the mountains just South of the boarder of the two Carolinas-in a little town called Gaffney. His mother and two of his brothers died when he was a young boy from an outbreak of typhoid fever, and his father later remarried to a woman, Robert said, "...*was the tyrant in our family*".

Growing up with a new mother was difficult in many ways. She, unlike his first mother, was very strict, as were some of his new relatives, and Robert was often beaten, teased, and verbally abused. Small in stature, he often escaped from the torment by running away. Eventually, he moved in with relatives on his father's side, who seemed to provide more understanding and security, but he soon felt the need again to get away with his thoughts, and took long walks in the woods and fields nearby. He found solitude by the gurgling streams and still lakes, and learned to appreciate the quiet times with Nature, while listening to the voices in his head.

Through the years, Robert worked many jobs-including a laborer in the cotton mills, a water-boy in the great depression, and even fulfilled many a young mind's fantasy of working in the Barnum and Bailey Circus. He, however, was never satisfied working for others who often failed to appreciate his independence and straight-talking honesty. He settled down long enough, from time to time, to make ends meet. Running a small printing operation while living in a dormitory at boarding school helped him to pay his tuition. Years later, he owned a watch repair shop in Shelby, and afterwards, he said, "...*was a linotypist for over twenty years...*". Robert always had vivid dreams of how to make money. His ideas often failed, but never the one to give up, he always thought of something else.

Robert married Katie Hamrick, his high school sweetheart, while living in Boiling Springs, NC and eventually they brought forth five children-Alvin, Boge, Edward, Luther, and Nelli Kate. They eventually lived in a cabin which Robert had built with his bare hands. Being way before modern conveniences, the great outdoors was their only bathroom and a small fireplace gave them their only heat. It was also a time when open windows were the only air-conditioning-when the songs of crickets, bullfrogs, and an occasional lonely hoot-owl would lull you to sleep. The clean air smelled of honeysuckle in the Spring, and burning hickory wood in the Winter. Nelli Kate, their only daughter, was very tiny when she was born, and failed to survive childhood. Her death disturbed her family very deeply. Life was always a struggle for the Harrills, and was compounded by Robert's growing up within an abusive family. Many times, he called his relatives "*a bunch of tyrants*". Furthermore, some of his family members were extremely religious, and the literal interpretation of many passages in the Bible concerning original sin and the Biblical authority of parents over their children, allowing for abuse, may have caused irreparable damage to his ego and well-being throughout the majority of his life.

Before the cabin, the family lived in a Model-T that had been converted into a bus-possibly the world's first "Winnabago". They lived the gypsy life and pattered over the hills and valleys in their motor-home. Robert would often arrive in a town and set up a table on the sidewalk and sell jewelry, trinkets, or other hand-made articles to feed the family. In one of his letters to his sister, he said, "...*when things got tight, I would even sell dog-collars for a few bucks...*". They often visited the high country around Chimney Rock-his second favorite place in the world. The mountains always seemed to give him inspiration in times of concern or personal disappointment.

The Model-T also traveled several hundred miles to the coast, to Ft. Fisher. Edward recalled, on the way one summer, the bus ran over a possum crossing the road. That evening, his father built a big fire for dinner, and tossed in the animal, "...*hair and all!*". The family loved to vacation at the beach because of the abundance of seafood which Robert caught. They could scarcely afford to buy any from a market. One day, Edward got extremely sunburned. Kate took him to the Doctor at Carolina Beach, who accused Robert of being neglectful. That stirred up profuse anger and resentment, and he declined to consider that he had been anything other than a "normal" parent. Had he not rushed Edward to the Doctor several years earlier when he got a bean stuck up his nose? However, by that time, the "tyrant" in him was well developed.

He often talked about the lack of "common sense" in the world. While attending Boiling Springs High School, which later became Gardner Webb Jr. College, he expressed a deep interest in religion and indicated he had thought of studying to become a minister. However, during one of his classes, he had an argument with one of his professors about evolution, and he was expelled from school. Apparently, he never had the desire to go back. Throughout the years, he continued to question authority on earth *and* in heaven.

In 1935, Alvin was 21, married, expecting his first child, and could not find work. He was living in a tiny home with his in-laws, and had grown extremely despondent not being able to provide for his growing family. One afternoon, Edward recalled, neighbors notified Katie and Robert that there had been an accident. Alvin had thrown himself off a nearby railroad trestle in an attempt to end his desperation. Katie ran to the spot and found him at the bottom of the ravine. Alvin had survived the fall, and was attempting to climb the steep hill and give it a second shot, but broken bones prevented the subsequent attempt. Alvin later died in Katie's arms in the hospital.

## 2

### Life At Home

The family grew further and further apart. Katie's family was attempting to pull her away from Robert, and had him involuntarily confined in a hospital for "observation". Edward recalled men in white coats storming their home one evening while they were having dinner, and dragging Robert screaming and kicking, out the door.

However, several weeks later, Robert returned home. The doctors had diagnosed him with "paranoid schizophrenia"...possibly because he often had the voices in his head, "*...telling me how bad I was...*". Today, we know this is not uncommon of children coming from dysfunctional families. Through the years, Robert was admitted/ committed on at least three occasions. Often, he had said in his letters, it was Katie's parents, who had money and political power in the county, who had him locked up in their attempts to break up the family. They never felt Robert was good enough for her.

In Robert's last stay in the hospital he attended to several other patients who, he said, "*really needed to be there...*". He helped many of the patients himself, offering understanding and a helping hand. He said that he felt the staff was terribly backed-up and over-worked, so he jumped in to assist. Although he, himself, was a "patient", his humanitarian instincts took over, and he cared for others less fortunate and nursed them back to health. He began to find his calling in life, attempting to find out what made people "sick". Reflecting on his last stay, he wrote, "*...many people are sick and will remain so because they feel no one cares for them or loves them. I cared for many of them, and we all got better together...*". One evening, after dinner, he made a key out of a kitchen spoon, and he and several others escaped into the night. No attempt was made to find him. Officials later indicated that he had been too much trouble and did not want him back again!

He hitched a ride to Spruce Pine to listen to a lecture by Dr. William Marcus Taylor-a famous Psychologist, because of a pamphlet he had found while confined. Dr. Taylor was giving a talk on the importance of "Bio-Psychology-the internal connection of the body and the mind. This attitude was very controversial at that time. Within the last few years, however, Western medical science has indicated a direct link of a positive/healthy mental attitude contributing to a healthy body. Eastern religions have indicated this for centuries. Dr. Taylor, although ordained in the Christian ministry, and serving in many regions of the world as a Missionary, later converted into the Unitarian Ministry. He was called to serve as a Minister at the All Souls Church in Chattanooga, TN. for many years. His writings and teachings dealt with the necessity of each of us to look within ourselves for strength and guidance, and the belief that we all can accomplish anything that we desire if only we truly want them bad enough. He offered information on his correspondence courses in Bio-Psychology to those in the auditorium. Robert saw an opportunity to learn about himself and others and to finally earn a degree. He enrolled that day, and continued his correspondence courses off and on for nearly 20 years. Through his studies, Robert found an incredible inner-strength and vitality. He developed a more positive self-image and learned to debate any subject with unnatural insight and reflection. He was dedicated to speaking his mind, no matter if he found anyone else to agree with him or not. Robert and Dr. Taylor agreed on numerous

topics, possibly because of the Unitarian-Universalist belief in the inherent worth and dignity of everyone-which Robert also believed. That tenet always gave Robert a great deal of self-worth and a feeling of importance. It also helped relieve some of the guilt of his childhood, and it reassured him to finally have the acceptance of someone of worldly knowledge and authority.

Still, with Robert's renewed spirit, the family was drifting apart. Eventually Katie answered an ad in the newspaper for a house-keeper, placed by a prosperous widower in White, Pa. named John Ferguson. She traveled to meet the gentleman and discussed the position. In a few days, she returned South and talked over the offer with her family and her husband. Robert later found letters from the man who, he felt, was taking his wife. He accused him of "wife-stealing". He also suspected that he may have taken advantage of Katie's problems at home, and offered him other consideration. In a letter to him, Robert said, "*You leave my wife alone or I will have you both arrested. I may sue you anyway. You are causing me and my boys no end of trouble.....I was a poor boy married into a family that thought they were richer and better than me...But I have worked hard and made good in business...and her people have broke me up twice and framed and railroaded me to the asylum...and now you are trying to take my wife; the only woman I love, ever did love, and looks like the only woman I ever will love...My wife was, and I hope still is a good woman, but her folks have made it so hard on her that she lost her head. I will make you boil when my lawyer gets after you...*". However, with well wishes from her parents, within a short time, Kate packed her bags and the kids and headed North, leaving Robert behind.

Katie and Robert corresponded often. For a time, she had thoughts of eventually getting back together. Unfortunately, however, the split had not settled well with Robert and he was hurt and bitter, and blamed everyone-Katie, her family, his family, the wealthy, the politicians, the legal system, everyone-but himself. After several years of separation, they agreed on a divorce. Katie remarried and became Mrs. John Ferguson. Robert took up house-keeping on his own, tending to a flock of chickens and goats at his cabin in the woods, and opened a watch repair shop in nearby Shelby.

### 3

#### A New Beginning

Robert got further and further behind, minding the store and taking care of his animals. His health was not good, and he lived off and on with his sister Mae, near Charlotte.

After reading one of Dr. Taylor's passages Robert may have renewed his desire to express his independence. It described, "*...rebirth, though being reborn symbolically for the recognition and reclamation of one's detached segmental cravings, which have been transferred to others, and through the subjugation of them to the will of the individual...*". Robert realized it was time to leave his old life behind, and become *re-born*. He learned to control his self-doubt and his "fear patterns". Dr. Taylor assured him, "*Fear-with the right understanding of life-can be changed into faith in yourself, faith in others, faith in your present and in your future. Old patterns can be annihilated and new ones can be born and they can grow, and you can reap the harvest in rich living of the soul...*".

Robert wrote his sister on July 12, 1955. "*I'm hitching down to Carolina Beach today to see how it is down there. Since I haven't had a chance to get there in the last 28 years, I figure this might be my only chance for the next 28 years...and as soon as I know my schedule, I'll write you...if I should run into any chance to go into the novelty business or Taylor's work, I might consider opening a shop there. Wouldn't it be fine if we could combine two small shops, one of mountain craft at Chimney Rock, and a seaside novelties at Carolina Beach, so we could live and work from the bottom to the top? Love, Robert*".

The next bit of information recovered is a post card addressed to Mae from Robert, postmarked Carolina

Beach on September 14, 1955. *"Tell any of my people and friends who have written that their letters have gone astray..."*, and that she should come and stay in a hotel at Carolina Beach, and visit him, *"...in the jungles of Fort Fisher"*. While at the beach, he put to use his skills as a fisherman and guide, and assisted the visitors in the area to find good spots for catching all the fish or gathering all the fresh oysters and clams they could eat. Originally, he lived among the wind-swept "scrub oaks" at a desolate stretch near the end of the island, but the mosquitoes feasted on him night and day. After someone stole a mosquito net, which had been given to him by a Boy Scout leader, he would climb the "radar tower"-an army observation tower-to get away from the biting swarms of flying insects. (The tower had originally been built to watch for submarines and observe anti-aircraft target practice held nearby at an extension of Camp Davis. The main base was located near Hampstead.) He would climb the tower at night, lugging his 40 lb. suitcase that held all of his personal belongings. The Army Corps of Engineers tore down the tower the next year, as they did other towers in the area. They also dynamited the Cape Fear Lighthouse on nearby Bald Head Island, simply because it was unused and cost money to maintain. There is a similar observation tower still standing in Southport, which is listed for sale-along with a small pilot house for a mere \$200,000! Currently, the only remains of the tower, Robert had visited, are two of the concrete pillars used to secure it in the sand near the sea-wall at Ft. Fisher.

Robert always had a marvelous gift of gab, and many of the locals immediately took to him. Several individuals and some Boy Scouts gave him a tent and other articles. For awhile, he continued to live in the vicinity of the present-day Ft. Fisher Historical Museum. Unfortunately, on his first summer, he had run-ins with the local law enforcement, and was arrested for vagrancy. They surprised him one evening after he had words with a local a real estate woman who happened onto him on the beach. He was searching for crickets, grasshoppers and worms for a baby bird that he had found, and inadvertently asked her, *"...do you have anything that will wiggle?"*.

He used his wit and humor, and told the Judge that he perhaps should lock-up all the tourists in the area, because it appeared to him that they were all vagrants, as well! The Magistrate let him go-with the order for him to purchase a Special Privilege License because he was charging money as a "fishing-guide". He had no money to invest in a license, so he never made an attempt to procure one.

He wrote a letter to Governor Hodges, which was dated four days later, where he criticized the local authorities with trying to force him to buy the Privilege License. He explained, *"I am good enough of a fishing guide that I can guarantee a small party a good mess of seafood or no pay-and I never miss. Sometimes, the expert lady cooks from Carolina Beach stop by and watch me when I do the camp cooking...well, I'm just a natural experimenter, and sometimes the men in my party eat so much they look like they might be pregnant. Just give me 24 hours to catch the tides at the right levels, and I can guarantee any party a successful beach trip..."*. He was also a natural philosopher, *"The psychological effect of having each member of the party help catch, gather, or cook the seafood, is what makes them feel like it was the best beach trip they ever had in their lives..."*

Robert's early desires gave no indications that he was destined to become a "hermit". He knew that he could make a living at the beach and could get good money for what he loved to do. Unfortunately, the local authorities did little to protect him from the "hoodlums and thieves" stealing what little possessions he had, so, often he toted them along. On one occasion, someone stole several important articles given to him-including, *"...my army tent a scoutmaster gave me...shoes, crab net, flashlight...(and) my drill that I used to drill holes in sea shells to make novelties..."*.

Initially, life was horrendous for Robert in the jungles of Ft. Fisher. Hurricane lone, *"...blew my tent into the next county!"*, and when in jail, after several days without food, he took ill. His brother was summoned by the Traveler's Aid group in Wilmington to come and get him. Robert wrote another strong letter, afterwards, to the Sheriff, *"You folks starved me so much in jail, and after that gave me so little time to pack at Ft. Fisher, I was forced to set a jar of apple fruit containing about half-water in the top of my suitcase...you wouldn't allow me one minute to find a lid...rushing me in and out of the courthouse, far beyond my natural tempo and carrying heavier packages than I was strong enough to carry in such a manner, forced me to forget about the fruit...and I ruined two of my shirts and my only good suit"*. Robert was furious at the Traveler's Aid group who, against his wishes, "assisted" him (possibly at the insistence of the Sheriff) back to Charlotte- *"She was violating the fundamental principle of the Traveler's Aid...by sending me where I did not need to be..."*.

In the summer of 1956, Robert was back at the beach. He was keen enough by that time to know that he

should keep out of site from the law and some of the "hoodlums" who kept harassing him. He said he felt many of the towns people were jealous of him, and that, "...nobody wanted an honest man around here". He was willing and able to work for a living, unlike some of the thieves who stole from him, and he was determined to stay.

That summer, he discovered an abandoned WWII bunker, a 9'X15' concrete structure that used to house artillery ammunition for Camp Davis. After surveying the area for other suitable dwellings, he moved in. For the next 16 years, the bunker became the home of Robert E. Harrill. (The Hermit Society later applied for nomination of the bunker to the National Historical Register, but was turned down).

#### 4

### Problems With The Government

In the mid-summer, the US Government began taking 1,077 acres of land within a five-mile radius of Sunny Point Military Arsenal, located across the Cape Fear River, as a "buffer zone"- which prohibited anyone from living in the area. The Army seized the land and removed countless numbers of families from their homes on both sides of the river, including land held for many generations, and began attempts to remove Robert. They insisted that he was on Government property. Robert pointed to a 1929 Chevrolet that he had recently acquired from a local car dealer, and said he was, "...actually living in the car...camping...and could leave anytime I wanted to..". He recalled, "*They came out here every 30 days with an eviction notice...*".

Several years later, in a local newspaper article, *he said, "...when the Army finally brought me into court...the Federal Judge ruled that the sand strip on which I camp, was formed after the original maps of the area were drawn, making the tract a separate piece of Government-owned property, which became mine by rights of 'Homestead Law'.*" In actuality, a lawyer-friend of his, possibly with the assistance of Dr. Stanley South (a State archeologist, who had surveyed the remains of Ft. Fisher), established that the buffer-zone was several hundred yards from the camp, and that, in fact, the bunker rested smack-dab in the middle of what used to be the old channel of New Inlet, where blockade runners skirted Federal ships in the War Between the States. Over the years, since the Corps of Engineers built "The Rocks", closing New Inlet in the late 1800's, Nature had built up the land, and it had remained un-deeded and unclaimed until now.

His re-birth was apparent in a letter to his sister, "*Dear Mae, you should have been here one day this week and helped me enjoy the one and only perfect seaside vacation day I have had in 27 years. Old days, like 25-30 years ago. Started at sunup, weather perfect, was not too tired to work in the sound for seafood, and not too hungry to go before breakfast-which I had at 10-11:00. On this 3hr round, I got plenty of clams, oysters, crabs, and one large prize soft-shelled crab! I got an old shrimp net about 50 feet long and 5 ft high for helping some of the other fellows work. It takes at least 3 fellows to operate it. I can at least go behind it and carry the sack...*".

Hurricane Diane came with a vengeance out of the South on September 26, 1956. Robert climbed to the top of the bunker as the mighty Cape Fear River and the Atlantic Ocean met at his doorstep. After battling the winds and the rain and rising tide for hours, he fled the bunker and took shelter at the Red Cross Shelter in Wilmington.

#### 5

### The Reunion

Some days after the storm, a professional trucker from Ohio, found an article about the Hurricane in the Wilmington paper. He took the article to a friend when he got home. The friend was George Edward Harrill. The article in the paper told of an old man living in a concrete bunker at Ft. Fisher. The more Edward read, the more he realized it was his father, who he hadn't seen in more than five years. He immediately packed up his car and headed South. Two nights later, he arrived at the bunker, located 1/2 mile off the sandy road near the end of highway 421. It was pitch dark, but he saw a fire down by the bunker. As he continued down the road, he saw

a man. Edward stopped the car and reached in the back seat and took out his guitar. Getting out of the car, he began strumming and singing a song he and his dad used to sing together many years before- "Silver Hair'd Daddy". Within a few minutes, from the security of the fire, Robert recognized the song, and his son. It was a warm, but awkward, reunion. Edward was extremely concerned with what had become of his father's life. Edward later said, *"I cried like a baby when I saw him like that-living like an animal! I reached in my pocket and offered him some money. Dad turned away and walked to the bunker. In a minute or two, he returned and held out a wad of his own money that would choke a horse(!)- donations people had given him. I'll never forget him standing there waving his finger at me-it wasn't the first time he had waved his finger at me- 'Don't you dare feel sorry for me living here with Nature, free as a bird! You're up there, killing yourself, raising a family of nine kids, working for the millionaires, and for what(?)...sooner or later, when you get old or sick, they'll just kick you out, and then where will you be? Bring your family down here to live with me, and be free!"*

Edward later said, *"After spending three days with him, I drove back...When I got home...I wrote him a long letter. I addressed it to Robert E. Harrill, 'The Ft. Fisher Hermit'-that's where he got the name. He kept it for the rest of his life, and did quite well with it..."*

Many years later, Edward wrote of the experience of finding his father, *"Now, I could have simply laughed, ridiculed or just felt deeply amused at this very strange, curious and odd person living there like that, but, you see, this man was my Father ;and, it is hard to understand why I felt so shocked, surprised and disturbed to find him there like that, because he had indeed lived his whole life a lot in that order, but to me, he now had reached the ultimate in low-living standards..."*

## 6

### "The Wild Man"

Shortly after Robert came to Ft. Fisher, he felt that he was not alone in the jungles after his daily visitors had gone. He felt that someone was watching him from the distance. One day, he noticed some movement in the bushes. He pretended not to notice, but his Bio-Psychology again came into play. He placed a bit of food on a nearby log. Later, when he went back, it had disappeared. More and more food was left on the log. One day, as Robert-himself sat eating on the log, a man appeared from the underbrush, and stood before him. Robert asked the man's name and he said "Empy". Empy had lived in the wild away from society for some time, watching Robert. He had left his family, and had indicated that he was wanted by the authorities. He had apparently suffered from the affects of a sun-stroke and was somewhat mentally dysfunctional. The sun had also produced a severe skin cancer on his face. Empy wore a handkerchief to hide the disfigurement. Visitors said he sometimes would jump out at them in the darkness of night and yell or growl at them to scare them away. They called him "The Wild Man".

As things would have it, Empy and Robert soon became good friends, and shared jokes, tall tales, and many meals by the firelight. They had both, apparently, come from dysfunctional families, and did not fit in well with the rules of society. Therefore, they bonded with the Society of Nature, and assisted each other in living off the land. Empy became Robert's Bio-Psychology student, and they attempted to write and talk about the evils of society that they both had left far behind. They shared their attitudes of society's downfall due to family abuse, greed, prejudice, corruption in Government, social injustice, dishonest law-enforcement, and spoke of the need for compassion and love. Too often, however, outsiders would come in and try to destroy their world of serenity in the salt-marsh. One evening, the Hermit recalled, some men from town came to the bunker with liquor and women, and wanted to use the bunker for "love-making". *"A man laid this over-weight woman right down on my cot..."*, he said, *"...and squashed it flatter'n a flounder!"*

Robert began keeping a guest register, asking each person to "sign in", and soon logged in visitors by the hundreds. He made notes in his guest register of the date, the tides, and placed symbols beside the names of friends or "questionable" individuals. Empy, however, remained out of sight during the day, and returned in the evenings so they could make conversation about the day's events after all the visitors had left. They wrote jokes about society on scratch paper, and referred to themselves as "Sea Bob" and "Captain Empy". One entry details Robert's feeling about living in the wild, *"Sea Bob learned to accept the mosquitoes, biting flies, ticks, and*

*the thugs, as a price he had to pay for his independence".*

On one visit to the grocery at Carolina Beach (the A&P, now the Sea Merchant), a real estate broker, working for a local land-owner, accosted Robert. He threatened to beat him up if he ever walked across the owner's property again. Later, he wrote a letter to Mae to prepare her for a possible visit from the landowner's agent, *"If the real estate people come to Charlotte, you tell them the white people tried to push the Indians into the Pacific, you are trying to push Robert into the Atlantic: if you fool around here, somebody will push you into bankruptcy!"* At 5' 4", and 145 lbs., this 63 year-old hermit, was pretty darn feisty!

In the bitter Winter of '57, he again wrote Mae, asking her to bring him some of the warm clothes he had left at her home. She, apparently, later drove down, but couldn't find him, and drove back to Charlotte. Upon returning, she sat down and apologized in a letter. He wrote her back, stating, *"Recently, when you drove all the way, 200 miles-400 miles round trip to see me, and bring my clothes, get 1/4 mile of me and take the clothes back without seeing me, and me in my shirt-sleeves in Winter-literally freezing...how could you miss it?!"*

God, he felt, had driven him to the ocean to test him. To Mae, *"I haven't told you the real danger I've been in the three months last summer, and the four months here this last summer, fall, and winter...the ocean and beach...they represent and impart to me strength, life, power, and freedom from fear...! Grandfather and rude uncles were too stern and cruel and beat me up unmercifully at too tender age as a child. I found refuge and peace and a chance to grow a little by constantly slipping off wading, playing, fishing and swimming in branches, creeks, rivers and lakes. I then lived in unreason, misunderstanding, and continual fear until I would throw myself upon the ground in the fields anywhere, and cry out my loneliness..."*

Dr. Taylor's letters kept him going and gave him a purpose in life. *"Place your energies in the proper places so that we can get the most in return...that is the work of every human being at all times. True living is identified with service to humanity..."*

## 7

### The Tyrants

Many visitors and reporters asked Robert why he became a "hermit". He often replied that he didn't come there to be a hermit-he wasn't a true hermit, but, *"I know a whole family of hermits-millionaire hermits that live in a big mansion and don't speak to each other. Those people are hermits...!"* He indicated he was speaking of his wife's family.

As usual, he took advantage of each opportunity that came his way..., *"I absorbed enough Barnum and Bailey showmanship to help me pick up my first real clue about two years ago, when the High School kids from Carolina Beach and Wilmington began coming down here inquiring about the 'Ft. Fisher Hermit'. Before that, I never thought about being a hermit. That was it! I told Mr. Dugan, if a hermit was what this section needed and wanted, I would start immediately doing scientific research on 'hermits', and I'd become one. One of the reasons I came here was to leave my children and grandchildren their proper heritage, but providence changed it to a 'hermitage by the sea...'"*

He added, *"I am here for the announced avowed purpose of writing a book...I'm going to call it 'A Tyrant in Every Home', about my family and those tyrants...that is what is ruining America...that and prejudice..."* (The phrase dysfunctional was not used at that time.) *"This trait, is passed down from generation to generation... children blocked by a tyrannical parent, mother or father, has a tendency to marry either a tyrant who will boss them, or a weakling they themselves can tyrannize over...now, I will have to write the book or be a 'rotten egg'."*

Through his continuing correspondence work with Dr. Taylor, Robert had learned the reason for the voices in his head and had cast them out. He understood the importance of warning the whole world about the causes and results of family abuse, and he felt Ft. Fisher was a prime location to write about it.

His simple solutions to life were expressed over and over to those who found him at his Hermitage. *"I recommend that each day or each opportunity, we do some of what we felt we should do, but were afraid to do; not enough to shock or discourage us if we failed, but enough to continually convince ourselves we could safely do it..."* He gave an example of his walking across the railroad trestle, where his son Luther had taken his life in 1935, going further and further each time until he could walk to the other side,

Robert loved animals and animals loved the hermit. Maybe it was because he took them all in and they

became his family. Much of the time, he had to hunt for his food just as they did. Sometimes they all hunted together. At one time, because of the many wild dogs, cats, raccoons and skunks living there, the authorities referred to his camp as the "Unofficial New Hanover County Dog Pound". He often sold some of the offspring of his flock for a few dollars when money was tight, or it became too large to handle. January and February were usually bitterly cold, with the winds sweeping over miles of frigid water in all directions. Robert and his animals survived very well, huddled together in the bunker for warmth.

## 8

### "The School of Common Sense"

In many of the articles written about Robert, he insisted that the world had forgotten all about "Common Sense", and said that if he ever made any money from his book, "*A Tyrant in Every Home*", and if he could pay his expenses, he was going to open a school to teach people common sense. *"My simple formula has been published in medical journals (possibly Dr. Taylor's journals). The ocean is a hard taskmaster, most difficult and sometimes impossible-always holding a 'Davy Jones Locker' at the bottom for the unfortunate. But, the ocean gives me...not only strength...but life and wisdom.."*

He often indicated the necessity for "reason" in his liberal views on religion-possibly from his personal studies or Dr. Taylor's, and his own continuing search for spirituality. He did not gain such insight, certainly, from some of the dogmatic views of his family. Many authorities feel today, that telling children they are born of sin-not love, into a world of Evil-not joy and opportunity, may indeed give them not only life-long guilt, but, in fact, may put voices in their heads telling them how "bad" they are. Many, who burden themselves with believing the constant accusations of being lowly sinners, the fear of eternal damnation may eventually drive them over the edge. Luckily, Robert was strong enough and determined enough not to give in.

By 1958, the area was buzzing with interest in "The Ft. Fisher Hermit". Countless newspaper articles had been written about the "Psychologist in the Pill Box". Malcolm Fowler, from the Raleigh News and Observer interviewed him and later asked his readers, *"How would you like to be happy, healthy, and have no worries...little responsibilities? Robert Harrill is a little man with big ideas-some of them downright amazing. The sun and the sea and the ever-blowing sand have tanned and toughened his skin. A short graying beard frames his face, and twinkling eyes, lend him a somewhat Hemingwayish appearance..."*. It was not unusual to find dozens of people of all ages sitting around listening to what was on the Hermit's mind. Robert kept up with the local and national news by the newspapers and magazines friends left for him. Someone had also given him a transistor radio, but it was later stolen. Edward said that on his yearly visits to his father, often he would have to momentarily excuse himself from his guests and from his philosophy sessions and take an over-flowing frying pan, which collected donations, and empty it inside the bunker. Later he would always return with 91cents in the pan-to "prime the pump" so-to-speak.

Eventually, the weather, salt-air, and storms took their toll on the automobile. He had once talked of driving the old Chevrolet in parades-perhaps as a hermit float. Most of the time, however, it served as an excellent back-drop for "jungle pictures". After several years, *"I started living in the bunker, after a hurricane blew the roof off..."*.

The crowds had become so big that he wrote a letter to the Governor asking him to pave the road to his bunker, to help the tourists find him, and so they wouldn't get stuck in the sand. The Department of Transportation even considered putting Robert's picture on the NC Tourism brochures because he had become the 2nd largest tourist attraction in the area-next to the USS North Carolina Battleship!

## 9

### Reverend Vaughn

One day, in the summer of 1965, a long-haired gentleman appeared at the property. The man had blasted down the sandy road riding a Harley motorcycle, with a woman on the back. He introduced himself as the Reverend and Mrs. Billy Vaughn. They inquired if they could stay and visit at the camp, and the hermit directed them to park their camper on an adjoining piece of land behind the bunker. The hermit seemed to enjoy the company and within a short time, the two men decided to team up and spread the Gospel around the beach. The two Reverends set up shop in the shadows of Kure Beach Pier. Reverend Vaughn taught that ol' time religion, and Reverend Harrill was said to have more of a "new age" twist on it. Most think Robert's sermons were a mix of Unitarianism and Humanism- certainly a more "common sense" approach to religion.

The crowds around the beach enjoyed the festive atmosphere of the "Sea-side Church of What's Happening Now", as one local called it, until one day, there was turmoil on the mount. It seemed inevitable that two different trains of thought from one podium might cause a conflict, especially when it came time to divide up proceeds from the offering plate.

About that time, Reverend Vaughn's wife, who was many months pregnant, suddenly decided it was time to bring forth a baby. During the speedy trip to the hospital in Wilmington, the back tire of the Harley picked up a nail. Unfortunately, there was no time to mend the flat, so he continued straight to the hospital. He ran inside inquiring which room he could use to deliver the baby without the assistance of medical personnel. The staff reluctantly refused to allow him to do an unassisted delivery, and things went down-hill after that. Apparently, the authorities were called to assist, possibly to hold back the crowds! After the baby was delivered, the family ran for the Harley, and made a hasty-but jarring get-away.

Well, with all the excitement and the unusual circumstances with the church and all, things finally got the best of Robert, and he asked the family to move on. However, Rev. Vaughn liked living a life of independence at the hermitage, and promptly refused to leave. That evening, under the cover of darkness, Robert sneaked over to the camper and took the lug-nuts off the wheels.

The following morning, Rev. Vaughn accused Robert of being a thief and threatened to call the police. Well, one thing led to another, and Robert again found himself in front of the Judge. When asked if he had, in fact, removed the nuts, the hermit smiled shyly, took off his straw hat, and there they were. The Judge found the hermit guilty, but decided not to fine him or put him in jail if he would give them back. He agreed to obey the Judge's orders if the Rev. Vaughn and family would pack up and leave. Each party agreed to the terms of the hearing, and the Vaughn's rode off into the sunset.

## 10

### Hermit Invites Khrushchev

Wanting to spread the beauty of the Ft. Fisher area and give a "behind-the-scenes look" at the American people to the world, Robert put his fingers to work at his typewriter inside the bunker. "**Ft. Fisher, NC-Premier Khrushchev has been invited to Historical Fort Fisher...**", the letter began, "...the last bastion of the Confederate forces in the Civil War...when it required 10,000 Northern troops to capture nineteen hundred Southern soldiers. The Northern Armada was the largest military concentration ever amassed and landed in the history of the world up to that date...You are cordially invited to Kure Beach and Fort Fisher to meet the Ft. Fisher Hermit, who says, 'I never really knew the American people myself until I became a hermit'...the American people kept themselves hidden from me through repression before I became a hermit. Here in the free outdoor wilds of Fort Fisher, they emphatically and freely express themselves...Through my last five years efforts here in the Jungles of Fort Fisher for the rights of the common people to wholesome recreation, unmolested by hoodlums, this beautiful and easily accessible jungle vacationland is rapidly becoming 'The Partyland of the Atlantic Coast'. ...When I came down to Fort Fisher...I found the jungles thoroughly uncivilized, dominated chiefly by hoodlums all the way down from millionaires to crooked law officers, thieves, thugs, and robbers...it was truly the bad lands of North Carolina. This section is now becoming civilized and is safe enough night and day for family picnics, but I am still hoping that some of our new African or Asian friends will send some missionaries from over there to help finish the job...".

The invitation must have gotten results, because some time later, locals recall, a black limousine filled with

Russians was said to have been reported stuck in the sand near the bunker. Even though this story may, at first, seem far-fetched, in the 1960's, there was serious discussion and several newspaper articles written promoting Bald Head Island (a short few miles away) the World-wide headquarters for the United Nations!

## 11

### Hermit Eradication Program

Beginning in the 60's, a file was put together at the State level which held letters from various factions wanting to continue efforts to remove the hermit from his home. One letter was sent from the State Capital, at the request of the Attorney General, to find an individual to take personal responsibility for removing the hermit from "State-owned" land. The man they chose was Stanley South.

After meeting and getting to know Robert, Mr. South, who was a State Archaeologist, decided to investigate the local maps, and do a survey of the area. He discovered that the hermit wasn't on anyone's land, private, State, nor the Federal Government's. The land where he lived was "...on the silted-in channel of New Inlet". Robert met Mr. South, and invited him to come back and visit and bring his family. He did, and they shared conversation and genuine fellowship. Stanley told Robert of the State's desire to have him removed, but insured him that he would not take part in such an action. He told Robert, however, that if he lost his job because of his refusal to participate, that he might have to move into the bunker with him. The hermit seemed delighted at the idea at the time, and they laughed at the prospects.

Later, Mr. South sent a letter back to his supervisor, giving 10 reasons he was not going to be the "instrument" to eject the hermit from his land. In addition, he wrote, "...In summary, it seems that it comes down to a question of who wants him out. As you say, it is not customary for a hermit to live on historic site property, but for that matter hermits are not customary, and a friendly tourist-attracting hermit is even a rarer phenomenon. What historic site in the country can boast of an authentic hermit?"

He offered a suggestion, "*There is another hermit living in the area, he says, and is known as "The Wild Man", because of his typically antisocial behavior. This other hermit is seldom seen by man, and runs into the swamps when seen, not being sociable and popular as is the Fort Fisher Hermit. If the Fort Fisher Hermit is evicted, the question might be raised as to the disposition of "The Wild Man". Perhaps a pack of bloodhounds could be used with the National Guard to flush him out and have him shot for daring to be different! ...as you can see, I am no person to get to evict anyone from anywhere. I value human rights of freedom too highly...I respect the hermit's desire to take a bare living from the sea and his wish to live alone, and be a friend to nature and to man...*".

Another letter in the file was from Hugh Morton, a local wealthy landowner. In his letter, dated March 19, 1965, Mr. Morton gave Robert 15 days to vacate "his" property. The 15 days started on the 18th, a day before the letter was actually written. Knowing Robert's contempt for wealthy landowners, I can imagine what Robert did with it...

When the Historical Museum was dedicated, near the site where Robert originally lived, there were several dignitaries in attendance. One of the most notable was Robert Harrill, sitting among the crowd his finest attire, a perfect picture of non-conformity in his ragged shorts and old straw hat!

## 12

### The Kidnapping

One evening, after running some errands and putting a letter in the mail to Mae, he was kidnapped, "...by two carloads of hoodlums from Kure Beach, where I had gone from Fort Fisher to buy some groceries...". Two men offered to give Robert a ride. In the letter, he later describes what happened. "*I was kidnapped and robbed of \$20 one night about three weeks ago by two bully hoodlums. They tried to break my*

neck the first lick with some Japanese acrobatic wrestling stunt, but failed because they didn't have enough room in the car. Then they drove very slowly for 3 miles and tried to choke me to death...I was still alive by the aid of a Divine Providence and they became so baffled they pulled two guns on me...and took \$20. They felt they couldn't afford to leave me alive because I knew one of the fellows well for nearly two years. But everything went so wrong for them, that the big 225 pound idiot-gunman got mad at his buddy and drew the rifle on him! At that instant, I jumped out and went through the jungles so quickly they didn't know whether I went straight up or straight down...".

Their getaway car got stuck in the sand, and before they could dig free, Robert had called the local Police from the nearby Air Force Base, and they were taken to jail. In the widely-publicized court case which followed, the kidnapping charges were dropped, and only the robbery charge stuck. They were sentenced to only two years, the hermit said, "...working on the roads". It is doubtful that they actually served out their sentence.

## 13

### Further Developments

The crowds kept getting larger at the bunker, and a story circulated that Life Magazine was going to do a front-page story on Robert. When asked about the rumor, Robert confirmed the visit, but said they refused to print what he wanted to say, and therefore, he refused to sign the release. A short piece of 8mm film has been found taken of Robert at the bunker, and on his homemade kitchen table is what appears to be a Life Magazine with his picture on the cover...although most of us now believe it may have been a "faux-version".

In June of 1967, a group of developers purchased land from nearby landowners, including Hugh Morton- who "quit-claimed" untitled property near the bunker. There were plans going on that Robert had not been aware of. The following summer, the bulldozers could be heard, not far from the bunker, cutting in roads. Within a short time, he told visitors, "*I can't understand while they're building new roads out there, when I can't even get them to fix mine!*". On July 30, 1968, an article appeared in the "New Hanover Sun", where Robert remarks, "*Take this beach out there..a bunch of fascist robber-barons are conspiring to take that beach away from the people of North Carolina...*". He had found out that plans for a development were in the works, which was going to stretch from the ocean to the river. His home and the 60 acres he claimed was in the middle.

Elsewhere in the article, he expressed some of his "hermit philosophy"- many of the comments he told visitors over and over:

### Hermit Philosophy

On welfare- "*I really feel for the poor people in this country, the Welfare Department will keep you in perfect misery...one member of the family should be made to work, so the children will have an example. You can't have people just sitting around doing nothing...*".

On population control- "*Another problem facing us is overpopulation...it may be too late for underdeveloped countries...that is what makes China so mean...there are so many people over there...back in the 40's, a woman fought to promote birth control, wouldn't it be a wonderful place if we'd listened back then?*"

On society- "*Civilization has been unkind to men with different ideas which were not widely accepted in their own day. The early Christians were crucified and burned...Socrates was made to drink poison...Joan of Arc was burned at the stake...Jonathan Swift wrote critical material about politicians of his day and had to spend his last years in exile...Henry Thoreau was thought a lunatic in his day for wanting to go off to Walden Pond and meditate...(and) John Scopes was tried in a Tennessee court for teaching evolution according to Charles Darwin...*".

On his purpose at Ft. Fisher- "*I came here to write a book on humanity...I didn't come here to be a hermit...I'm here for the same reason Dr. Schweitzer went to Africa...there's no difference in our goals. His was medicine and missionary work...mine is psychology.*"

On life at Ft. Fisher- "*I'd be the happiest man in the world if I could get rid of the freeloaders, thieves, highway robbers, prostitutes, alcoholics...and the crooked politicians.*"

On religion, "*I'm a Baptist, and hate to leave the Baptists because they're going to need help. They're*

*selfish, stingy, greedy, narrow-minded, and damn prejudice...I've studied 319 religions of the world trying to find one fit to believe,...I found the Unitarians, the only one fit to believe...".*

*On freeloaders- "The biggest freeloaders are our 400 or 500 Congressmen and senators..."*

*On life- "The folks on this old globe live too doggone fast. They should slow down and live, ...and learn to relax."*

*On obeying the law- "My great-grandmother taught her slaves to read, and it was against the law. Think about that...my great-grandmother was an advocate of civil disobedience..."*

*On humanity- "Humanity is on the downgrade...there are a hundred eighty-five million people in this country. Half of them are freeloaders, crooks and gangsters, and the other half are suckers...I'm a sucker, that's why I'm so poor..."*

*On hermits- "My first research work turned up the facts that hermits are basically sick people, but I had gotten well before I became a hermit. Hermits are hermits at home before they hit the jungles. Everybody ought to be a hermit a few minutes to an hour or so every 24 hours, to study, meditate and commune with their creator...millions of people want to do just what I'm doing, but since it is so much easier thought of than done, they subconsciously elect me to represent them, that's why I'm successful..."*

*On living with nature-"While I have been the happiest man in the world here, reaching for my goal, life has been so unbearable at times that I felt like I couldn't exist another 24 hours, that I would pack my suitcase and leave all else I had...one night, up at the tower after the storms in '55 without insect spray, and walking the beach all night fighting mosquitoes, I felt I couldn't hold consciousness another 15 minutes; about 4 am, I felt like walking toward Charlotte. I resolved not to be a quitter and prayed..."*

*On drinking- "It's a sure sign of a disturbed personality when a person drinks whisky straight from the bottle...as many do that come here late at night..." (Earlier in his life, he drank very little, but Edward said, "He thought of it often...")*

*On receiving visitors- "I don't discourage company coming here, but I don't like them smashing up my gear..."*

*On recycling- "Some people call my place a junk-yard...just things I find washed up on the beach...I can't believe that people throw such good things away..."*

The hermit had become a master of survival; dealing with the biting insects by making a preparation of several ingredients including used motor oil; digging a shallow well for fresh water; harvesting fresh oysters, clams, and crabs from the bay; growing a garden of potatoes, onions, and other vegetables to supplement natural vegetation; and overcoming the demons and fears forced into his head at an early age. He had finally become a success-not only in his own mind, but in the minds of thousands of visitors who came back to see him year after year. To them, he stood as a symbol of strength, courage, and the ultimate figure of independence. He had found his ticket to life, and those who visited him paid the price of admission with donations in his frying-pan.

As the bulldozers got closer, he became concerned that there would be renewed efforts to remove him from his land. Within the last few months, there had been more robberies and beatings. In one report, five men surprised him in the middle of the night, robbed and beat him, and drug him several hundred yards to the ocean. He again escaped to call the Sheriff. It is doubtful that there were ever any investigations. The Sheriff's Department had enough internal problems going on to bother with protecting a hermit.

When property lines were being staked out, he continued to receive threats. Robert told a reporter that a man driving one of the bulldozers told him that he was going to push him *and* his home into the ocean if he didn't get out...

The State found out that the developers were destroying some of the remaining mounds from the Fort, and presented them with a court order to stop. On June 27, an article in the local newspaper said that the Attorney General's office was preparing to file a petition of condemnation against the developers who were building a development called "Ramsgate", at Fort Fisher. The State filed a suite for taking of the land, on June 28. The suit named 11 persons who, *"...are the only persons, firms, or corporations whom the State of North Carolina is informed and believes may have or clam to have an interest in said land..."*. Robert's name was not one of them-even though he had lived there adversely for 13 years!

Things quieted down somewhat after that. Deals and negotiations were going on in private, not in the open, where Robert could keep an eye on them. The Hermit business was snowballing, and Robert was king of the hill, once again. Money was pouring in faster than he could possibly spend it, and he buried most of it, in and around the bunker. He may have sent some to his sister and family. At one time he had an account at a local bank, but he accused the bank president of stealing from him, and cashed-out. Edward said he had money stashed everywhere, and saw many personal checks from guests who had no folding money. When Robert went to town, he carried neat rolls of \$5, \$10, or \$20. He hitch-hiked most of the time and people were usually glad to give him a ride. However, he had been known to acquire a bit of a "fragrance", from time to time, and it probably necessitated them to keep the windows down. Often people would invite him over to take a bath at their homes, but usually he would take a bar of soap and run into the ocean. Once, a friend offered him a hot bath, and an hour later, she found he had fallen asleep in the tub wearing nothing but his straw hat. At night, he would travel through the woods for security. Because of the many threats against him, he often stayed close to the bunker after dark.

One of the deputies from the New Hanover County Sheriff's Department, Fred Pickler, became good friends with Robert. He would sometimes camp out with him at the bunker. He had become very interested in Robert's life and philosophy, and would often record conversations on a tape recorder by the campfire. One night, as Robert slept in the bunker and the deputy in his tent, a car drove up. Several men got out in the darkness and yelled for the hermit. The deputy awoke as one of them said, "There he is in a tent!". The deputy waited for them silently inside. When they jerked open the flaps, they came nose-to-barrel with a .45 automatic. The deputy said that after firing several shots over their heads, they made a very hasty departure!

## 14

### The Aquarium

Back in 1956 Robert had sent requests to the United States Fish Commission, in Washington, for information, "...to establish a chain of aquariums and fish ponds for public exhibition...". He felt that it may have been possible to take living creatures from the sea, and through a system of pipes and pumps, fill a chain of salt-water aquariums in other parts of the state. He received a positive response from the Superior Inventions Company, who encouraged his idea and offered professional assistance. (This was a time when swimming pools were the new craze.) The hermit was a man way before his time...even predicting, in the 30's, with the continuing downfall of morality, that by the 1980's, women would be wearing only "strings" to the beach...and most of the world would, by then, "be crazy".

Many of his predictions came true. In June of 1971, the State may of heard of his idea and announced its plans to open a multi-million dollar research center, later becoming the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher. They proposed building huge tanks in which to display ocean life. The facility should also serve as a laboratory, to study and possibly breed sea animals.

Eventually, the State, through "legal methods", took the land from the developers. However, immediately, the developers began a suit with the State for the value of the property they had acquired.

Meanwhile, the hermit maintained his hermit business, not only posing for pictures and home movies, but writing poetry and signing autographs-asking for a "donation" from 10 cents to a dollar. Many requested him to write his favorite poem, which he said he must have done a hundred times; *"Everybody loves a lover, Everybody loves me; Come let's have a little fun, down beside the sea."*

Many people wrote to him when they got back home (he maintained a Post Office box in Carolina Beach), thanking him for such a wonderful experience at the beach. His registers confirmed that he had visitors from all 50 states, and over 20 foreign countries, and filled several volumes of books. Unfortunately, only one has been recovered, and was donated to the Cape Fear Museum by the family. Others may have been stolen, or possibly burned up in one of several fires in the bunker.

His Bio-Psychology studies also continued, but he had little time to write. *"People visited me from sun-up to sun-down...working me nearly to death..."*. The thousands that visited did not realize that it was they who were

being studied. He shared his philosophy with all who attended his "School of Common Sense" on the salt-marsh. There were no walls or ceilings in his class, only the trees, the water, and the sky above. "Students" of all ages sat on chairs of concrete, upturned crates, rusting buckets, or the sandy ground at his feet. What a perfect environment for learning about Nature and each other. One of the poems that he distributed-for 10 cents-expressed his viewpoint on religion...

#### The God I Know

*"The God I know is a God close by,  
not seated on a throne in a far-off sky,  
But here on this earth, reflected in trees,  
in mountains, in flowers, in sweet summer breeze,  
In ocean's grandeur, in plain's delight,  
In noontide glare, and in stilly night,  
In children's prattle, in manhood's prime.  
Since the birth of worlds until end of time.  
For the God I know with a thought that's free,  
Is the God of love, found in you and me."  
by Carleton Everett Knox*

In the summer of 1971, the hermit announced that, according to his guest register, he had 17,000 guests that came to see him within the past year. Not bad, for a hermit!

15

#### The End

Robert was asked many times why he didn't file a deed for the land that he had "squatted" on. He replied, *"If I had a deed to it, I'd have to pay taxes on it...how can I do that making \$3-5 a day in the winter and \$5-\$7 a day in the summer...?"* Finally, however in the summer of 1972, the word got around that Robert had decided to hitch-hike to Wilmington and file for a deed to the property to protect his claim. Suddenly, the attackers were back, and a series of threats were made against his life. The hermit told several close teenage friends that two men he knew had threatened him, and this time he was actually scared. The friends camped with him for several nights. Late at night as cars approached the bunker, they saw he was not alone, and turned back. After several days, the teens' parents refused to let them stay at the bunker. On the 3rd of June, Robert made the statement to some young boys that someone was going to have to take his place. The hermit had dozens of guests that day. As the sun lowered in the sky, a young girl from Fayetteville snapped a picture of her friend with Robert. When she went back to her car, she found that it had been broken into, and her purse had been stolen.

Meanwhile, the boys laughed at the opportunity of a life of independence, and that evening after several beers, drew straws at who was going to become "the Hermit". The following morning, they returned to the bunker to tell Robert the news. Although it was 10:00 in the morning, there was already a crowd at the bunker, and a Police car, and a Sheriff's car, ...and an ambulance.

An hour earlier, 5 boys from Benson had visited the hermit, and called out to him. He didn't answer. Usually, he always cheerfully greeted his guests. They walked over to the cement bunker and peered over two large plywood boards blocking the doorway. There, they found the lifeless body of Robert Harrill. He was covered with sand from head to toe. His legs were bloody from what appeared to be drag-marks. His wet clothing was nearly pulled from over his head and right arm. The strand of love-beads he proudly wore around his neck were gone. The ground around the bunker, according to a deputy, was all churned up, indicating a struggle. A nearly-new shoe was found stuck in the mud not far from the bunker. The sleeping bag cover he had slept in was lying bunched-up by the water, and there were drag marks-indicating the hermit had been

dragged from the water to the bunker, a distance of over 100 feet, and then literally tossed inside like a rag doll, where he would remain undiscovered until morning.

The word spread quickly about the hermit's death. The Police had to rope off the area to hold back the crowds. Dozens of friends drove or ran to the bunker, fighting to get a glimpse of their old friend. Many people were crying, other's shouting. Everyone was in a state of disbelief. The day before, the hermit had appeared to be the picture of health.

Afterwards, when the authorities left, many folks brought their shovels and began hunting for money. Within a few hours, the area looked as though it had been in a war zone. Most of the hermit's private possessions were taken as souvenirs. In the following morning's paper, the story spread through several states. The famous Ft. Fisher Hermit had been found dead. The obituary stated, "*According to (coroner) Smith, there were no cuts or bruises on the body and no apparent signs of foul play. Investigation into the death is continuing.*" Jessie Blanton, the investigating deputy from the Sheriff's Department stated, "*A big piece of plywood he used to block his door was still in place when the body was found.*" The Certificate of Death made it official, the cause of death was "senile defibrillation...", due to "arteriosilentic disease"....or in simple terms, a heart attack!

Most friends and family assumed that a full investigation was taking place. Newspapers throughout the South were full of hermit stories. After a few days, however, the stories died down, and so did the investigation. Fred Pickler, the Sheriff's Deputy who had known the hermit very well, and had taken the pictures of the body, the drag marks and other particulars, asked for an autopsy. Blanton told Pickler, "*He's dead...let him stay dead...there will be no autopsy.*"

Edward Harrill said, when the Sheriff's Department called him after his father's death, (as was indicated in the obituary) there were no signs of "foul play". He was told that if he wanted an autopsy, that he would have to pay for it. With nine kids, and working in a coal mine to support the family, Edward had no money for an "unnecessary" autopsy, so he took the word of the authorities.

On the day of his death, Robert's teenage friends gave the names to the authorities who Robert was frightened of. They were never questioned. To the authorities, Robert had still been a vagrant, unwanted, unloved, without friends or family...in short, a pain in the ass. Besides, what's to investigate in a "heart attack"?

## 16 The Questions

The body was taken to a local funeral home in Wilmington. It was a time when the Coroner and the Medical Examiner were separate individuals-the coroner was not a trained medical doctor, and the Medical Examiner, who was an MD, relied on the Coroner for information about circumstances surrounding most deaths. By the time Dr. Yue examined the body, according to his report, there was no sand, blood, or cuts on the body. According to the story from the Coroner and the Sheriff, Robert had a heart attack down by the water at approximately 11:00 at night, and simply *crawled* back to the bunker. No attempt was made to explain why the sleeping bag cover he slept in was found at the water's edge, or to explain why a nearly new shoe would be found stuck in the mud, or how large plywood boards were placed at the doorway by someone who just had a heart attack and couldn't even manage to walk, or how the ground around the bunker was torn up, or why the hermit's clothing was nearly pulled from his body...

Edward and Vergi Harrill drove down from Ohio and collected what was left of Robert's personal belongings. The bunker had caught fire the previous winter, and most everything inside had been destroyed. Souvenir hunters removed bits and pieces of what was left, including the remains of his rusted '29 Chevrolet. Edward and Vergi were given nearly \$1,300 which was dug from the sand on the floor of the bunker. The money was given to a local bank for holding. The final insult to the hermit was when State taxes were taken out of his remaining donations before being returned to the family.

Only a few scorched bills of paper money was ever found. Thousands of dollars-possibly 10's of thousands-according to Edward-had disappeared. Very possibly, some still lies under the sand within a short distance of the bunker.

Robert's body was transported to Shelby and given a proper burial by family and friends. The hermit was gone forever.

## 17

### The Hermit Society

In 1980- Harry Warren came to the new NC Aquarium, now standing on the land which the State took from the Westwind Corporation, part of which was hermit-land, and which the State finally settled with the developers for around \$1,000,000 (in 1970 dollars-when a new car cost \$2,500). Harry, who had known the Hermit for many years, meeting him as a small child, built a display about Robert's life, including a mock-up version of the bunker. A program was started called, "Living off the Land", honoring Robert's life with Nature.

As time passed, Harry heard hundreds of stories from people who had known him. He also heard horror stories of how the hermit died. Some of them indicated that Robert may have been tied up and drug around, or suffocated. Without an autopsy, they could only be "rumors".

In 1981, Fred Pickler returned to the area and contacted Edward. He told him that he had "a box of dynamite"-information and photos he had taken after his father's "mysterious" death. It didn't take long for it to hit the fan! Edward was furious and angry, and in a state of disbelief that he had not somehow scraped together money for an autopsy years earlier. His father had warned him many times about the "crooked law enforcement". He immediately began making phone calls and sent letters to various authorities throughout the State for assistance. Eventually he asked for help from the Federal Government. He wrote pleading letters to the Office of the Attorney General, Senator Jessie Helms, David Brinkley, and years later, to Janet Reno, and even the President of the United States. His letter writing continued for over 15 years. Edward stated to those he felt could help, *"I am convinced the Authorities down there will never tell the truth, some of them who could have told it are dead now. Will you help us clear this up?...or are we just a bunch of animals here in America...is this the U.S.A. or Russia, or don't it matter anymore?"* He received a typical reply from the US Department of Justice. *"We have carefully considered the information you furnished. The circumstances you describe do not indicate a violation of a federal statute. Therefore, we have no authority to take any action on this matter..."*. They suggested a private attorney. As usual, the buck had been passed.

In Wilmington, Edward threatened the local authorities with a lawsuit and later met with the District Attorney, John Smith. He accused the Sheriff of his involvement in a cover-up and told him that he had learned his father had been brutally and cruelly murdered, and he wouldn't give up until everyone involved was behind bars. Edward said that the Sheriff was visibly shaken and became so violent that, *"... he had to excuse himself from the room, and go and take a pill.."*. He was unable to find Coroner Smith. Several days after Edward returned to Ohio, he received a letter from the Coroner. It stated that, *"...although nine years had passed, and it is hard for me to recall, the body...had been turned over to Dr. Yue...it was his responsibility to determine the cause and mode of death. He examined the body and determined the cause of death..."*.

The media got hold of the story, and new articles began appearing about the Hermit. Edward called the cemetery to make behind-the-scenes arrangements to exhume the body. Somehow, the news leaked out. Edward shuttered when he read in the morning paper about the pending autopsy. He felt that "higher-ups" had been tipped off, and the cover-up would now extend to the Chief Medical Examiner of the State of North Carolina! On October 24, 1984, the body was transported to Chapel Hill. There, Dr. Page Hudson conducted the autopsy at 3:00 in the afternoon. After removing Robert's suit and tie, he had to scrape away mold from the body, find shrunken organs, and prepare microscopic slides of tissue. When the verdict was out, the results were "inconclusive". There had been no broken bones, no stab wounds, no bullet holes-again, "no signs of foul play". However, the report further stated, *"No major defects in the great vessels are seen. The coronaries are found and moderately well preserved. There is minimal evidence of atherosclerosis in the coronary arteries and in the distal aorta. The valves generally appear to have been normal. No aortic calcific stenosis is seen."* In other words, his heart and circulatory system was in damn good condition-for a man 79 years old and had been underground for

nearly 12 years! It amazed those who were aware of the circumstances at Fort Fisher at the time, that the medical examiner was looking for things completely irrelevant to his death...was he asphyxiated?...were there marks left on his neck when his love beads were torn off?...did he have traces of salt-water in the lungs?...things like that-we will never know. The Sheriff's Department had conveniently thrown away all the hard evidence years before. It scares me to think of what power authorities have today to generate crime through "stings", to lie, falsify, withhold or even destroy evidence...as we have seen within the last few years with Waco, Ruby Ridge, OJ, Oklahoma City, and countless other horrors that don't make National news-or historical occurrences including religious passages and wars and deaths so twisted by time, we now consider them as "fact".

The SBI was called in at the insistence of the DA, because of Edward's continuing letters and calls, and a cursory investigation (a general inquiry) was begun. The agent later said the DA, John Smith, called them in, "...because the Sheriff's Department didn't want to mess with it...". Many months went by and Edward waited for news. Finally, he wrote a letter to the DA, "*Dear Sir, It has been nearly a year since I received this (previous letter telling of the SBI investigation) letter from you, and I well remember how happy I was for it. I felt sure we would now find out the truth about Dad's death and other facts we need to know...Mr. Register did call me some six months ago...and informed me that he was in the process of the investigation but that so far he had come up with nothing more than rumors. I asked him if he had questioned any of the possible suspects and he said they had moved off to Raleigh. I must say that it seems to me that a State investigation of any sincerity and thoroughness would surely encompass the city of Raleigh, or any other city in the State...*". Unfortunately, the SBI will not allow us to review the findings of the investigation, but we are attempting to have it released under the "Freedom of Information Act".

Gaile Welker became interested in Robert's story in 1979, when she read a newspaper article about the exhibit Harry Warren had put together at the Marine Resources Center(Aquarium). For several years, she researched his life, death, and family, but suddenly backed off in her research after asking many pointed questions to the Sheriff at Carolina Beach (H.G. Grohman). The next day, she recalled, she noticed a dark car parked across the street from her home in Greensboro. After several hours, the man finally came to her door, and asked her what she knew about Robert Harrill. She refused to answer many of his questions, but like you see in the movies, invited him inside. He appeared to be very nervous. After continuing to ask him who he was and exactly what he wanted, the man got up to leave. He said an acquaintance of hers had told him about her. She thought it highly suspicious that he didn't know the man had passed away. When she followed him to his car, she noticed a map of the State of North Carolina, with a dark line drawn to Greensboro-from Wilmington-and a map of the city of Greensboro. He had circled her street. "*He left very hastily when I got too insistent with my questions...*", she recalled, "*...he had on shiny black shoes like a policeman would wear...with a strange, un-matching Bermuda short outfit and wore glasses...*". Agent Curtis Register, of the SBI, later told her, his investigation led him to believe, "*...someone may have drug him around on the ground...his clothing was rolled up around his shoulder to indicate he may have been dragged in the sand...it is my opinion that someone was probably harassing the hermit and as a result he died of heart failure...*". Unfortunately, even after that conclusion, the DA stated in a letter to Edward Harrill that the case was closed because they, "*...could not find a specific individual...to warrant a criminal prosecution*". In other words, there may have been a murder, but they couldn't find the person, or persons who committed it, so that's it... (In 1991, I contacted the DA, now a Judge, and he declined to meet with me and discuss the death of Robert Harrill.) Gaile later produced an excellent short documentary film about the hermit, and still offers me assistance when possible, as a Director in the Hermit Society.

In the summer of 1983, after an article appeared in a Charlotte newspaper about the "mysterious" death of the hermit, Edward received a call from the writer, Joe Depriest. He had received an anonymous phone call giving him the names of two brothers whose last names began with a "B" from Carolina Beach, who- the caller indicated-killed the hermit at 11PM on June 3, 1972, by smothering him with a plastic bag. He immediately passed on the information to Edward. Edward contacted the authorities, and again, the authorities refused to investigate.

Edward attempted to persuade the Governor's Office to offer a \$5,000 reward for anyone furnishing information leading to a conviction in his father's death. He received a letter on February 20th from the Attorney Generals Office, signed by Max Bryan, "*The Bureau's findings were devoid of any evidence that your father died as a direct or indirect result of an illegal act. Therefore, we are unable to supply the Governor with sufficient*

*information for him to believe that a felony or infamous crime has been committed or that a reward in this matter would be in the best interest of justice."* Excuse me, but you don't need to *pay* on a reward, unless there is a *conviction*! What type of interests *is* the Attorney General's Office concerned with? Edward decided to offer his own personal reward of \$5,000.

Back in the late seventies, the Sheriff's Department had numerous internal problems, and there were several unsolved murders in the area. The Sheriff was nearly jailed for protecting one of his Deputies in a flagrant violation of the law. On the morning of February 14, 1978 Chief Deputy Jessie Blanton, the individual that had denied Fred Pickler's request for the original autopsy for the hermit, was found dead at his home. According to Coroner Smith and Sheriff H.G. Grohman, who found him, it was "a heart attack". In researching Certificates of Death in the Public Records around that time, the majority of deaths of older adults were due to "heart attacks". Within a couple days, the SBI received a "tip" and was called into the case. Six months later, the amended death certificate listed the death as "suicide" from an overdose of barbiturates. There was nothing in the media about the amended cause of death, and a definite pattern was coming to light.

In June of 1989, Harry Warren and other friends and family of Robert's collected donations and moved his body to Federal Point Cemetery in Carolina Beach in order that he would be close to the place he loved. His grave is within 100 feet of his old friend Emyp Hewett, "the Wild Man", where they can catch the shadows of the huge oak trees at sunset. His grave is always cared for and often has fresh flowers left by friends from the past.

During the winter of 1991, I began forming a group of individuals in an attempt to honor Robert, exchange stories and information, and attempt to force a full-fledged investigation. Numerous articles were written about a "cover-up". I met with the previous Sheriff, and recorded our conversation on tape. He admitted that he assisted in cleaning up the body of Robert Harrill. He also mentioned that the Coroner had just "passed away". I did not realize until several months later, researching microfilm in the local library, that the Coroner had died the evening Edward made statements on local TV, which was filmed at the Aquarium. Edward had said that he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that his father had been brutally and cruelly murdered, and he wasn't stopping until he found out who was responsible. The following day, we had the first gathering of "The Friends of The Fort Fisher Hermit", and packed the auditorium at the Aquarium. Those who attended signed a petition to Governor Jim Hunt to re-open the case. The SBI Director soon received a letter from the Governor. Within a short period of time, the New Hanover County Sheriff's Department started from scratch, trying to put the remains of their meager file together. One of the only letters in the file discussed photos and other documentation which one of the deputies had in his possession, and had refused to give them up. The Department was threatening him with jail. "*Why should I have given the remaining evidence to them...*", he later said, "*...it would have just disappeared again.*"

On what would have been Robert's 100th birthday, both the towns of Carolina Beach and Kure Beach proclaimed February 2, 1993 "Robert E. Harrill Day", in honor of his contributions to the local businesses and becoming the largest tourist attraction in the area-next to the USS North Carolina.

Months later, while researching microfilm for newspaper clippings, I found the obituary of the Coroner. There was no mention of the cause of death. Researching by the date of the obituary, I found his death certificate in the courthouse. My eyes stared at the document. Was it a mere coincidence that at approximately 8 PM, after the evening news about the *next day's* Hermit Fest and Edward's strong statements about his father's murder, that the Coroner would die of, "*a gunshot wound to head*"... ?

I later located Dr. Yue, who had moved from the area, and had a long conversation about the Hermit and the discrepancies in his report. I had previously sent him a copy of his original report and a picture of the body, to refresh his memory. Dr. Yue was concerned that the photo of the body did not match his report, and said that the body must have been cleaned up. I asked him if that was proper procedure. He indicated that it was "highly unusual". He said that all the information he received was taken from statements from the Coroner and the Sheriff. He was given no other names to contact referencing circumstances surrounding the death or any possible signs of foul play. In the space of his report indicating *who found the body* was typed "unknown spectator"; in the space for *last seen by* was also typed "unknown". Hundreds of thousands of newspaper readers throughout the State had known that *five boys* had found the body. Why had the Coroner not been given that information? *Numerous* threats had been made recently against his life because high-stakes rollers, including the State of North Carolina, wanted the hermit's property. There were numerous un-investigated reports

of beatings and robbings at the bunker within the previous two years. It is beyond belief that with all the law enforcement officers around that day, apparently no one attempted to do their job! It can only make one wonder who was actually involved?

## 18 New Information

For some time, I was at a dead end. Then, on August 4, 1993, I received a message in my mailbox. The note said that, "...we would like to tell you what we know & have been holding inside for 20 years...". (It was the teenagers who had spent the last several days with Robert.) I contacted the individuals and had long discussions about what had occurred a few days before Robert's death. They told me that Robert was afraid for his life. Two local individuals had made threats against him, their last names beginning with an "R" and "S". Although he had been threatened before, he had taken these threats seriously. She and a friend decided to stay with Robert for several days, camping out at the bunker. Several times, cars drove down the dark road late at night, but turned around when they saw a car. On the fourth night, the girls were told not to stay out at the bunker by their parents. The next morning, Robert was found dead. They said that they gave the names of the individuals to the police, and assumed they would be questioned. But, were never contacted again.

I met with several agents with the State Bureau of Investigation and gave them the information. Several times, I called them to find out the progress. In the meantime, I spoke with another individual who gave me another name, someone who had left the area shortly after the hermit's death and joined the Navy. Years later, he rejoined the community, and remains in the area. One local individual said he had often bragged of killing the hermit. I forwarded this additional name to the authorities. Several months later, I re-contacted the SBI. They said they had spoken with a couple individuals, but did not suspect them because, "...they are now well respected individuals in the community...".

## 19 The Psychic

Several times, I had considered seeking help from "beyond". On a number of occasions, I visited the bunker late at night with friends or alone, on his birth or death dates, expecting to hear voices in *my* head-hopefully Robert's. Unfortunately, the only noises I heard were the surf, crickets, frogs, the wind howling through the bunker, and an occasional owl. Luckily, I didn't see one of several ghosts that are said to walk the dunes in the vicinity, at midnight, on foggy nights.

I had heard of a Psychic who lived in the area and who many people thought would be worth a shot. I contacted her by phone, but she refused to meet with me because I had mentioned that there was concern of a cover-up by local authorities. She, from time to time, had been called into law-enforcement work, and knew many of the local officers in Brunswick and New Hanover County. She was concerned that she might cause ill-will if she became involved. Also, at the time, an investigative reporter was down from the Raleigh News and Observer doing an expose' on Robert's life and "mysterious" death. She had contacted the Physic and had, apparently, scared her off. (It turned out to be a great article-front page! She had contacted one of the boys who had found Robert (one was now dead). He said that there, apparently, had never been an investigation. If there had been, "...someone would have gotten in touch with us -wouldn't they?" The only other person who had contacted them had been Gaile Welker. In the article, the reporter was extremely critical of previous

"investigations".

The next year, I decided to try again with the Psychic, with assurances that I would protect her name, and this time, she agreed to meet. I had taken several personal effects of Robert's with me to assist her. We recorded our meeting. She felt that, in fact, Robert had been murdered, and indicated he very possibly had been suffocated by two men, at least one of whom was still in the area. She also gave me initials, two of them matched with current suspects. She has since left the area.

## 20

### New Petition

After the front-page article appeared in the Raleigh News and Observer, where the investigative reporter blasted the Sheriff's Department and said they had "botched" each of their four investigations, the Detective I had been in touch with said, "*Let the FBI investigate it...*". That was my next move...

On October 3, 1995, I received an anonymous letter in the mail, from Fayetteville, naming a Deputy from the New Hanover Sheriff's Department (whom I knew), who, the writer said, was responsible for the hermit's death. "*Sometimes when there is a fire and they are looking for the person who did it he is often right there looking at the building burn...\_\_\_\_\_ was familiar with the Fort Fisher area...associated with the police...no morals whatsoever...big, strong, capable of killing someone with bare hands-violent temper-needed money...crime expert...often patrolled the area looking for people digging civil war artifacts...*".

I met with the local FBI Director, Larry Boney, explained my research and investigation, and handed him the letter. The agent paid little attention to it and refused to have it checked for fingerprints or to have a writing expert look at it. He said that unless the death was on Government property, or unless there had, in fact, been a "murder", they would not participate in the investigation. The only positive thing he said was, "*I hope you're around if anything happens to me...*".

Each time our efforts produced any "evidence", nothing happened! Unfortunately, because the Certificate of Death still listed death from "natural causes", no one could be forced to get involved.

The following February, Edward and Vergi Harrill again drove down from Chattanooga, picked up a cousin in Shelby, and attended the annual "Hermit-fest". We held an informal gathering at the bunker. It was in honor of Robert's 100th birthday. I remember it being so bone-chilling cold, that we had to build a fire at the bunker in a discarded washing-machine tub to stay warm. It helped us to realize how fortunate we were to have heated homes and warm clothes...or a hot shower. I still cannot imagine what it would have been like living there for all those years with absolutely no modern conveniences. We had a good crowd at the Aquarium, and we collected several hundred names on a petition which was later sent to Dr. John Butts, now, the Chief Medical Examiner at Chapel Hill.

We had come to the conclusion that the only way to force an investigation from anyone was to have the cause of death amended. Surely, we had found enough statements, photos, and conflicting information to warrant the change. For over a year, we supplied the Medical Examiner's Office with petitions and information. Michael Garrett, an agent from the SBI assisted us in obtaining photographs and statements from numerous individuals in the area when he wasn't digging up marijuana plants. Dr. Butts did not return calls or answer my mail. Later, I discovered his e-mail address on the Internet. I e-mailed several individuals at his office asking them to remind Dr. Butts that I hadn't heard from him regarding the death of Robert E. Harrill who was murdered way back in 1972. Within a week, I had a *response...*

*"Mr. Edwards,*

*I have reviewed all of the materials that you have sent me concerning Mr. Harrill, as well as whatever additional information I could obtain. You have requested that I re-certify his death as due to a intentional killing, i.e. homicide. For me to do so would require strong objective evidence that, in fact, Mr. Harrill died of external violence caused by another individual.*

*Changing a death certificate from natural causes to homicide is not something that I can do simply upon the petition of a number of individuals, however large, who believe something might have happened that is otherwise undocumented. Although there may well be circumstances and/or observations from the time of Mr. Harrill's*

*death that are unexplained, there are none that unequivocally indicate that his death was unnatural. There are no objective documented observations of significant injury on his body at the time of his death, and Dr. Hudson's subsequent exhumation revealed no evidence of injury. While the latter was hampered somewhat by the length of time between the death and the examination, nonetheless, it effectively ruled out a large number of potential external causes including gunshot wounds, stabbing, beating and the like.*

*On that basis I feel it would be inappropriate for me to amend this death certificate..."*

And so it goes. Even though we have names of suspects, photographs, conflicting stories, omissions, lies, a very strong motive, and several dead bodies, we can find no responsible authority to conduct a proper investigation-and several individuals haven't even been questioned! Many individuals have been convicted and sentenced to prison (or death) with less circumstantial information. This country, as Edward stated, "*...is not truly headed straight to hell but is already there in great part...*".

## 21

### He made me think...

Throughout this endeavor, I have met many wonderfully strange, unique, and strongly-independent individuals. Hundreds of them knew and shared their thoughts and desires with Robert Harrill. Many of us learned of true independence through the visits to the bunker in the 16 years Robert called the deserted building home. As time goes on, *our* independence is being lost. Our remaining freedoms can be carried in a small box-which is subject to search and seizure at the whim of one individual. Our homes, personal property and even our children can be taken from us before being given the opportunity to "prove" our innocence in a jury trial of our peers. There is a way to regain some of our freedom, but unfortunately, there are many who are unaware of the rights of "fully informed juries". There is not one single human activity which now is not either prohibited, controlled, restricted, regulated, licensed and/or taxed! The Constitution, and *our* Bill of Rights have become daily targets. The hermit warned us of this many years ago, but he wasn't the first, and certainly not the last. Henry Thoreau wrote about it in his essay "Civil Disobedience", over a hundred years before. These two individuals had many similar characteristics, but they remained separate with their own successes and failures in their own personal quest for life and spirituality. I hope we are each as successful in reaching our goals and finding our "meaning of life".

Perhaps the persons responsible for Robert's death will never be brought to trial. However, if there is a God, he or she or it will take care of that situation when man refuses to do what is just. Unfortunately, many of us would rather them pay the price here on Mother Earth, where we can see justice for ourselves. Therefore, the Hermit Society will continue to offer **\$5,000** to anyone for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those involved in the death of Robert Harrill-*including a confession*.

We must continue to challenge authority when it over-reaches its boundaries, takes our constitutional guarantees and covers them with agendas in the mask of protecting us, most often, from ourselves. Yet, all too often refuses to allow us to protect ourselves. With a renewed interest in personal responsibility, why would we need but few laws or regulations? Self-sufficiency is not a goal of government. It continues to force dependency on ineffective programs, as we have seen with Native Americans, the poor, and minorities- destroying all self-worth and self-respect in its path. These programs now extend to the far reaches of the earth, enslaving millions as federal, state, and local taxes and thousands of government fees continue to eat away at our personal savings and investments.

Government education no longer "teaches a man how to fish", but demands that its subjects learn only those things which may produce more taxable income for the State. Generations of people have become dependent on hand-outs, effectively keeping them one level beyond starvation, and "in control". Why do they not teach one how to become independent and self-sustaining, like the hermit, and impress those poor and destitute with the importance of healthy living and population control? Truly, there is little "common sense" in

the world today. Can anyone with common sense wonder why there is so much crime, alcoholism, drug use, depression, and suicides when there is absence of independence, freedom and opportunity and such an enormous element of control? As thousands of *new* laws and regulations come into existence each year, is there any wonder why there are so many new "law breakers" straining our jails, prisons and court systems? Can we not understand why so many seek to escape from the reality of their meager existence by using any means possible-and often seek *shelter* in our jails and prisons from the madness of our society?!

We must reach out to others who share our need for independence, individuality, and common sense. Since the 1970's we have lost many of the freedoms that our ancestors fought to protect. The hermit lost his life in his efforts to tell the truth about those who have "authority" over us. His gravestone tells of his greatest accomplishment, "**He Made People Think**". Whether one agrees or disagrees with Robert's method of operation, it is very comforting to many of us that feel differently from (what the media and the government insist) "the majority". History seldom remembers those who are considered-in the society in which they live-to be "normal". It seems that another one of his predictions, that, "*...by the 1980's everyone would be crazy!*", has in many ways, finally come true.

As long as we have our free minds, a positive direction and faith in ourselves, we can make a difference in the world and to those around us-even if we are but one tiny voice in the wilderness...

### **Express Your Individuality**

For those of independent body and spirit, the Hermit Society has several items to help you in your quest: By purchasing these items, it helps to further promote the story and message of Robert Harrill- Please remit funds to M. F. Edwards, 341-11 S. College Rd. Suite 248, Wilmington, NC 28403 (Please include \$2.00 for postage and

handling)

Fort Fisher Hermit T-shirts (100% cotton, dark brown on natural, or black on gray-(M,L, XL)  
\$12.00

Sweat Shirts (M,L, XL) Black on gray-Allow 4 weeks for delivery  
\$26.00

Graduation Certificate from "The School of Common Sense" (Suitable for framing.)  
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## In Appreciation

Involving myself to such an extent in Robert Harrill's life, has enabled me to better appreciate the uniqueness of each individual, and the joys of leading a simple life surrounded by the wonders of Nature. It has given me tremendous insight into a way of life quite different from my own-of true independence-free from strangling coercion at each bend of life's adventurous path. I have learned the desperate need for individual responsibility and self-sufficiency, and have become much more tolerant of others and their viewpoints on humanity, society, and religion, and much *less* tolerant of unchecked authority. Hopefully, this book will inspire others to express their own individuality, to have faith in themselves, and to reverse the trend of the disappearance of "common sense" in the world today.

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