

The Tree Scouts by Max Millard



The Tree Scouts, 1962. Left to right.: Steve Quimby, Peter Millard (junior member), Dennis Hawkes, Jimmy Quimby, Max Millard

In 1958, when I was 8 years old, my family moved from New Hampshire to the small town of Windham, Maine. One of my 3rd-grade classmates was a neighbor named Steve Quimby. We became friends right away, and soon I was invited to join his club, the Tree Scouts. The only other members were Steve's older brother Jimmy and their cousin Dennis Hawkes.

The original Tree Scouts were started by Steve's father when he was a kid. We copied the name. Jimmy thought the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts were stupid. The Tree Scouts made up their own rules.

We built a cabin on the Hawkes's land at the edge of the woods. We cut down the logs and hatcheded the ends to make them fit together, using as our model a picture of Abe Lincoln's log cabin. We got a wooden platform for the floor and smeared creosote on the walls to protect the logs against rotting. We spent many nights sleeping there.

Unfortunately, there were a few insects trapped inside the logs which made a shrill-pitched whistle all through the night. Apart from that, it was a great getaway for us. It gave us a place to smoke, swear and look at girly magazines.

Unfortunately, my preoccupation with fire almost brought an end to our weeks of hard work. I got quite a thrill out of throwing flaming matches onto the field watching the hungry flames lick away at the dry autumn grass in a circular pattern. Sometimes I would throw down a match and let it burn for a while before stomping it out. One day my recklessness got out of hand. I waited too long, and upon turning around I discovered that the fire was too big to handle. I called to my three companions for help. We furiously dug trenches to contain the fire, and beat on the flames with shovels. Two boys ran to the cabin to get the platform, and flung it on the flaming mass. The dry juniper bushes lay only about six feet away, and the edge of the forest was just beyond. It was a terrifying ordeal, but we finally managed to extinguish the fire, then lay down, exhausted.

In the summertime, the Tree Scouts would sleep out under the stars in our sleeping bags. We would sneak into the Hawkes's garden and raid it of strawberries peas, corn and anything else that was ripe. Each boy would go after a different item. Then we'd build a fire and roast corn on

it, keeping the husk intact to seal in the moisture. Seldom have I tasted corn that was so delicious.

In those days the Hawkes grew a lot of apples, which they sold by the bushel. The ones that fell to the ground were gathered in baskets and taken to the cider mill downhill from the farm, where they were crushed into cider. Steve and I would sometimes go to the mill, turn the handle, and drink cider directly from the spout like a garden hose, letting most of it run onto the ground.

Every fall, the Hawkes and Quimbys grew more tomatoes than they could eat or sell. So the Tree Scouts would have a tomato fight. Tomatoes would soon be splattered all over our clothing, so that we resembled bloody actors from a third-rate horror movie. We would dodge flying tomatoes by hiding in the bushes or making alliances to gang up on others.

Rainy afternoons were never dull for the Tree Scouts. We'd go to a house where our parents weren't home and make crank calls by dialing random numbers. Sometimes we'd look in the phone book for a family whose last name was Lord. Then we'd call and ask, "Is this the Lord's residence?" If they said yes, we'd say, "Then let us pray."

One of the favorite tricks I did with Steve was pulling a handbag. We'd place an old empty handbag in the middle of the road with a fishing line attached to it, then hide out of sight. When a car would stop to check to see if there was any money inside, we'd pull the bag quickly, then run away laughing.

Back in junior high, Steve and I both started smoking cigarettes, although we later gave up the habit. Both Steve's mother and my father were smokers, and we'd take turns stealing cigarettes from them, then share them. Steve would take one or two at a time from his mother's purse. My dad always kept several packs on a bookshelf in the kitchen.

I'd push one of the packs behind the books, and if he didn't notice it within a week or two, I'd take the whole pack.

We would sometimes go to smoke in the Hawkes's barn because you could stack up the bales of hay like building blocks and construct a house big enough for two of us to fit in. We'd sit there at night with a flashlight and smoke. Of all the places in town, that was probably the most dangerous to do that. But we were careful, and never had an accident.

In winter, we all went sledding, standing up straight on our toboggans and holding the guiding rope, in imitation of Sergeant Preston of the Yukon, a popular TV show of the time. We'd construct big wedge-shaped snow jumps, but it was nearly impossible to remain standing.

After I moved to California in 1980, I lost contact with Steve for many years, but I kept in touch with his cousin Jim Hawkes and often asked about Steve. When I flew into the Portland Jetport for a visit to Maine in 2016, Jim met me at the exit. He was accompanied by a tall, large man who looked vaguely familiar. It was Steve Quimby! We had a great reunion, and went out to dinner that night, and later met twice more during my visit.

That was the last time I saw Steve. He died last September at the age of 73. But hearing of his passing jogged my memory about what a wonderful friend he was. I remembered him for 64 years and I'm sure I will never forget him.