

**DISASTROUS ALTERNATIVES:
BOY SCOUT DISASTER STORIES AND LEGENDS
AND IMAGINING THE NATURAL WORLD**

SPENCER LINCOLN GREEN

Introduction

Hiking the Narrows in Zion National Park as an adolescent, I remember well the stories we shared of the flash flood that killed an entire Scout troop earlier that year or the year before. It was recent. The troop had been hiking up the Narrows just like we were, on a clear day, just like this was. Although they had taken all necessary precautions, the clear sky above them hid the fact that farther upstream a storm was adding large quantities of water into the canyon. Out of nowhere the flash flood came and killed the entire troop. Although we may have wondered why we hadn't heard about it at the time, or why we were allowed to hike the same area, we did not challenge the veracity of the tale since someone had read, or had heard from someone who had read, the news article or seen it on TV. This was news, not legend we were sharing. The similarities between the ill-fated troop and ours gave it an ominous reality. Just like us, the Scout troop had come from Northern Utah and just like us, they had walked past these narrow sandstone canyons with the detritus of past flash floods as living proof that the stories were true. On another trip, a Scout cuts a green branch to roast a hot dog. Another Scout warns him that green branches have poisons that can seep into the hot dog when it gets hot. The Scout abandons his green branch to find one less likely to kill him.

Scouting legends such as these do more than exert social control on Scouts liable to damage local trees or get themselves into danger in the outdoors; they express deeply felt fears and values in how humans relate to the outdoors: the scene and subject of many of these fearsome tales. Jay Mechling suggests that campfire legends and lore, with their thematic obsessions with death and disaster, meet the psychic needs of those who share them. Beyond the obsession with death and injury we see here, Mechling notes a preoccupation with sexuality and resistance to authority (1980, 43). These are the taboos against which children's folklore often pokes and prods, looking for a way to handle these serious issues about which they are aware, but unable to talk openly for fear of censure.

Mechling describes these camps as an "exaggerated male group experience" for pubescent boys seeking to differentiate themselves "from the other gender" (1980, 45, 47). While I did not observe nor recall explicit needs to differentiate from the other gender in the present legends, there is an intense masculinity at work, and young boys seeking to differentiate themselves from their urban lives and the authority figures who dominate it become their own authority figures in a frontier or wilderness setting which hearkens to past modes of manliness.

The Scout troop I was part of included fifteen to twenty boys, ages twelve to seventeen, all Latter-day Saints, all members of the same ward, and all from an upper middle-class neighborhood of Provo, Utah, a college town of about 100,000

people. Our troop was fairly informal. While we did have different patrols, they were rarely, if ever, recognized or used in camp activities; we rarely brought our uniforms on campouts and were organized loosely in terms of camp duties. We hiked and associated with our usual friends rather than having to confine our activities to those in our patrols. The older boys sometimes gave orders to the younger boys that were usually followed. We shared tents, scattered around our site in the National Park's campground, with our friends and siblings. We were boys camping with three to four adult supervisors who also came from our LDS ward.

Scouts at camp are betwixt and between in many ways. As adolescents, they are between childhood and adulthood, the worlds of sheltered life and direct confrontation with the world. With limited oversight at camp, they are between the stricter parental oversight they know at home and the freedom of being with their peers. They are also between the city and the wilderness, where they imaginatively play out various possible consequences and dangers of life in their wilderness setting.

Bill Ellis notes that camping, in the United States, "involves playacting, by its very nature. Adults and adolescents, mainly from the city and the suburbs, voluntarily give up modern comfort to live for a while in an imaginative recreation of the 'frontier' world" (1981, 486). The world they are going out to experience is fueled by nostalgia and full of the drama, heroes, and excitement of the Old West. And just as the homesteaders and pioneers encountered a land that did not conform to their myths and ideals, modern campers do not find a land that conforms to the dreams of nostalgia that often propel them there. More than a place to experience nature and prove one's manhood, the Scout camp can be a place of tedium and struggling to participate in domestic chores that are more tedious and difficult than they were at home. Rather than trading the comforts of home for the excitement of the wilderness, they find they have traded the comforts of home for greater difficulty in accomplishing similar menial tasks. Cooking is more time consuming; cleaning requires multiple trips down to the river; only making your bed is easier, and the absence of expectations to wash mitigates the increased difficulty of many necessary tasks. The role of these disaster narratives, the poison lurking in branches, or the death that can descend without notice on a clear day are ways of infusing the quotidian experience of camp life with the intensity of the frontier drama. These stories bridge the gap between lived experience and the world of the legend by transforming the natural surroundings of the Scout camp into the world of the legend.

How is this done? Victor Turner speaks of liminal monsters that are not intended to terrorize initiates but to startle them "into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted" (1967, 105). Often the legends told between Scouts at a camp involve fearful figures who inhabit the geographical area like Bigfoot, the Wendigo, or more local figures like Jack Haggerty of Northern California (see Gyemant 1965). The Zion Narrows legend does not involve a fearful figure so much as the fearful presence of nature. Hiking up the Narrows, river debris and drying tree stumps seen high up the canyon walls act as reminders that a flash flood would rise far above the Scout's ability to escape and come with such power that we would be overwhelmed.

Seen in this way, stories of death and injury in the outdoors can foster a ritualistic experience with nature that prompts a reevaluation of the teller's relationship with the land. In this case, the legends and stories transform the land into the setting of the legend, which the scouts are then able to inhabit with its attendant masculinity and independence. It not only allows adolescents to change their relationship with the land, but also their relationship with reality.

Are these stories legends, though? There are documented accounts of people experiencing some versions of the story that was told in my Scout troop in the summer of 1994. While the story we heard and shared involved the deaths of an entire Scout troop in the Zion Narrows, where we were hiking, there is an account of a group of three leaders and five explorer Scouts descending nearby Kolob Canyon when, due to high water levels, the canyon became dangerous and two of the leaders died. The remaining leader and all five boys were rescued after four days in the canyon (see Burrows 2002, Canyoneering 2005, and Hanscom 1996). This was certainly a real event that was well documented and debated. The debates surrounding the tragedy center on the dangers: who was responsible for those dangers, the leaders or the park rangers, and how to avoid them for one's own group. But those sorts of debates do not make a legend according to Linda Dégh who, in *Legend and Belief*, writes that a legend "entertains debate about belief ... informs, explains, instructs, warns, or exemplifies through the telling of an extraordinary, unexplainable experience that a known person has encountered" (2001, 97-98).

The original story does not entertain debate about belief, although it is often used to explain, instruct and warn. One informant, inspired by some beautiful pictures, planned a hike in the Zion Narrows in the summer of 2003 with a roommate. Another roommate's girlfriend, hearing their plans, told him to be careful because "my cousin went to hike the narrows with his Boy Scout troop and got caught in a flash flood. A wall of water came and he died" (Ellsworth 2009). Similar to the stories we shared on our Scout trip, my informant was told that "A storm up in the nether regions caused a flash flood that came down and killed him." Certainly the message of the story was one of warning. Another informant heard about a Scout troop camping in a dry creek bed "somewhere in Southern Utah" when a flash flood during the night — "which often happens in those areas" — wiped most if not the entire troop away (Rife 2011). This version lacks many of the specifics of the other accounts but maintains some of the story's most basic elements: the desert of Southern Utah, Boy Scouts, death, water, and unseen danger.

While news accounts of disasters in Zion are not numerous, an article in the *Salt Lake Tribune* sought to identify the major disasters that have occurred there since 1927. The two leaders dying in Kolob Canyon is mentioned as well as two hikers dying in the Narrows in 1998 in a flash flood (Havnes 2009). The article adds that most people die falling from cliffs rather than drowning. However, in the world of our Scout camp, it was not the precipitous cliffs our stories led us to fear, but the canyon and the unpredictable water. It seems it is the unlikely fear that is most compelling. Looking over the side of a cliff, the outcome of inching towards it is obviously death. But in our Scout disaster narratives, it is the unlikely danger

of being drowned in a desert, the rare surge of massive amounts of water where there is so little, that inspires fear and the excitement of danger.

Zion National Park's website contains a page outlining safety information. Steep cliffs come in at the top of the list, followed by water (as in drinking and staying hydrated), driving, heat exhaustion, heat stroke, hypothermia, and firearms (Your Safety). The main warnings that have anything to do with the Narrows come from hypothermia or the temperature of the water, rather than the amount encountered. On hot days walking up the knee-deep waters, the temperature doesn't seem to be a major concern, nor does the amount of water, so why do these fearsome tales center on them? Why these many discrepancies in the accounts versus the stories we told ourselves?

There were many differences between the stories we told and the event we were supposedly recounting. We told stories of an entire Boy Scout troop from Salt Lake City being wiped out by a flash flood in the Narrows, the canyon we were then hiking. The facts of the story had been altered in transmission. The original troop was not Boy Scouts but Explorer Scouts, older and more experienced. We imagined the disaster hitting the Scouts when it was the leaders who died in the real event. And while the two troops did indeed come from the same area, Northern Utah, the Explorer Scouts were hiking in nearby Kolob Canyon, not the Narrows. While geographically near each other, they are vastly different canyons. Kolob Canyon, the site of the disaster, is a narrow slot canyon requiring a wet or dry suit, rock climbing gear for one hundred fifty-foot rappels, and a permit that indicates the water flow expected based on the release of a dam above the canyon. The Narrows, on the other hand, while sounding like a narrow canyon, is wide enough for two to six lanes of car traffic through most of its length and requires very little equipment beyond what any hiker might need. The Narrows do not require a permit, though they do post general conditions for the causal hikers who come to hike part or all of the canyon.

Looking closely at what changed, we can piece together how this local story went from a news story to a local legend told and modified to apply to those telling the story. Returning to Dégh's definition of a legend, we see that some of the changes involved making the story come more from a "known person." What we lacked in actual knowledge of these people was made up for by making the characters as similar to ourselves as we could. Thus the Explorer Scouts were made into younger Boy Scouts, the tragedy fell on those we identified more closely with, the Scouts, rather than the leaders, and, what needed no modification, they were a troop coming from Northern Utah to Southern Utah, and the differences of the specific canyons were erased by trading the one we were hiking for the one where the tragedy actually occurred. Were the events extraordinary? Extraordinarily regrettable, certainly. The increased drama involved in the eradication of an entire troop was certainly an extraordinary aspect of the event as we knew it. The story did entertain debate about belief, in that the apparent veracity of the tale was part of what gave the tale so much force in our young minds. As Robert Gyemant writes, "As it is with most legends, there is historical detail enough to imply historical truth" (1965, 106). The accuracies and

inaccuracies indicate that folkloric processes were at work in digesting the facts of the event into the details of the legend.

On the same trip to Zion's, as with many Scout troops, we hiked not only the Narrows, but Angel's Landing, where more people die and where the danger is more apparent. So why hadn't we heard or why didn't we share any stories about that hike? We certainly enjoyed it through the heat and the arduous hike and the amazing panorama of the three canyons meeting in the valley around us. At times on the trail, cliffs drop away on either side. It is a site of actual excitement and danger that does not inspire stories like the seemingly placid and safer Narrows. Why that discrepancy? Part of it may be in the combination of thrill and safety in the Narrows. With less immanent danger, we are left to enjoy the thrill of danger at a safe remove through story and imagination rather than through bodily risk. The thought of danger is, in this case, far more enjoyable than actual danger.

Water holds a mystery of danger that heights and heat, which kill more people in the park yearly than does excess of water, do not. Part of the reason is found in the material conditions of the West. Scouts growing up in or familiar with the West know the importance of water and their reliance on it. Droughts, water rationing, and children's folklore in the West emphasize the importance of water. "One two, three, water hog!" and "Save some for the whales!" are good examples of children's folklore emphasizing the importance of water.

As LDS youths, the Scouts were familiar with scenes of water-based destruction. Biblical stories including the flood, the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, Jonah and the fish, and even Christ calming the Sea of Galilee as he walked on the water show that water can be a source of punishment and an unruly element. Although water is used in one of the holiest ordinances in Mormonism, baptism, and symbolizes a new birth, it also symbolizes death and is a frequent scene of hardships. The *Book of Mormon* tells of the dangers for Lehi and his family as they crossed the ocean to the Promised Land. Later the Jaredites also experience difficulty as they cross the ocean. Further, when Christ visits the Americas, he punishes the wickedness by sinking many cities in the ocean (see 3 Nephi 8 and 9). In the Doctrine and Covenants, a more modern book of scripture, there are many pronouncements about the dangers of water. In a revelation given after some dangers experienced by early church elders as they canoed down the Missouri and after one saw "in a daylight vision ... the destroyer riding in power upon the face of the waters," warning about the dangers of water abound: "behold, there are many dangers upon the waters, and more especially hereafter" (D&C 61:4), "For I, the Lord, have decreed in mine anger many destructions upon the waters; yea, and especially upon these waters" (meaning the Missouri) (D&C 61:5), "Behold, I, the Lord, in the beginning blessed the waters; but in the last days ... I cursed the waters" (D&C 61:14), "Wherefore, the days will come that no flesh shall be safe upon the waters" (D&C 61:15), and others. While water as an evil force is certainly not a pervasive doctrine and receives such specific focus in only one chapter of scripture, combined with the stories, they may account for a tendency to vilify water. Combine that with the West's reliance on the peskily absent element, and water becomes a dangerous element in need of such legends to explain, warn, and instruct us to be wary.

Legends of disasters in the wilderness often act as explanation, instruction, or warning. When Brant Ellsworth heard from his roommate's girlfriend about her cousin who had died in the Narrows in a flash flood, she told it, and he heard it, as a cautionary tale. The warning included the knowledge that the danger might be unseen, "You won't see it overhead. But ten miles upstream there could be a massive downpour which will cause the flash flood," and summarized by his roommate's words "yeah, people die down there" (Ellsworth 2011). Here, Dégh's interpretation of the function of the legend fits perfectly with its function in the urban world, but to read the meaning of the legend as it was told in the setting where it occurred, we look at Elliot Oring's definition of the legend. Oring writes that legends are about "the creation of a story which requires the audience to examine their world view — their sense of the normal, the boundaries of the natural, their conceptions of fate, destiny, and coincidence" (1986, 126). Beyond requiring the audience to examine their worldview, these stories allowed our troop to re-imagine the boundaries of the natural world and place ourselves in the most dangerous, exciting version of that natural as exemplified in the legend. Rather than live in the hot, weary, sometimes menial and tedious world of camping, it allowed us to immerse ourselves in a world of dangerous possibilities where we could play with the possibilities of death and disaster.

Part of what makes that playing possible is the immediacy of the natural details of the legend. While there are many definitions of what makes a legend, the "message" is only part of what makes this legend so persistent and vivid. The immediacy of the physical facts of the legend, and how that immediacy imbues the geographic area with a heightened sense of excitement, is what lends the legend such force and narrative power. While tales of entire Scout troops being washed away in desert floods are amazing enough, walking the very banks of the calm river while noting the stumps and debris of the flood forty feet above you on a cliff wall, a vivid reminder of the tale's reality, emphasizes the potential threat and actual excitement.

In *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* Jan Brunvand discusses the function of legends. They can be entertaining, validate cultural ideals or institutions, explain the unusual or supernatural happenings of the world *or* they can "show that the prosaic contemporary scene is capable of producing shocking or amazing occurrences which may have actually happened to friends or to near-acquaintances but which are nevertheless explainable in some reasonably logical terms" (1981, 12). The legends and legend telling can infuse a boring situation with more excitement because of the possibility that something amazing will happen. In *One Space, Many Places* Mary Hufford makes the observation that "Through stories people deepen their relationship to the places surrounding them" (1986, 8). These particular stories deepen that relationship by infusing it with the drama, excitement, and mythos of the frontier where life was hard, but real men were made.

This kind of play with danger is distinct from legend trips and what Bill Ellis terms "mock ordeals," in that the legends and stories are evoked by the place rather than the other way around, as in legend trips. Further, the ordeal is real only in that there is a heightened sense of *potential* danger while experiencing

the more mundane discomforts of camping life. And here is where playing with masculinities and adulthood enters into the stories and their appeal. The adult world, as well as the natural world, is largely unknown and as such can be a source of anxiety and fear for adolescents. Imagining the dramatic danger transforms the discomforts of camping life into more exciting, manly adventures; gives them a handle on perceived, real, but unrealized fears; and serves as an outlet for the fears and anxieties of wilderness, manhood, and adulthood.

Conclusion

Legends lie on a spectrum between the real and the imaginary. These Scouting stories and legends, like many others, are drawn from real stories and become legends only in their telling and retelling as fact surrenders to a good, gripping story. In moving each way, towards the more imaginative and towards the more real, an interesting picture of why we create, share, and perpetuate stories of disaster emerges.

If we move first towards the more fictive side, Susan Sontag, in *The Imagination of Disaster*, contends that the strength of science fiction films is “their immediate representation of the extraordinary” (1976, 119). In what she calls “sensuous elaboration,” these films allow viewers to participate in the fantasy of their own death, or the destruction of the world itself. Sontag privileges the spectacle over the words or story, but in the case of disaster narratives in and of the wilderness, they combine to create a vivid, participatory narrative the boys can enter and come to the edge of death and destruction, take a look around, and return unharmed and victorious. Similar to the monsters in science fiction, nature as liminal monster seeks not only to kill them, but to obliterate them, just as it has the other Scout groups in the stories (127). Sontag concludes that the imagery of disaster in science fiction is above all the emblem of an *inadequate response* ... which shows “the inadequacy of most people’s response to the unassimilable terrors that infect their consciousness” (130). Sontag’s hyperbole aside, the terrors being dealt with in science fiction are the same ones being escaped in the wilderness: an urban world dictated by forces more powerful than the boys such as parents, mothers, or school or work schedules.

Moving towards the more factive, we might look at the anticipatory response to Hurricane Irene this summer. The wind of Irene held many comparisons with Hurricane Katrina, which was similar in size and force to Irene. CBS news warned that “Irene could bring Katrina-style flooding to coast” (Condon 2011). While other predictions were more accurate, like the loss of power to much of the affected areas, the comparison of Katrina to Irene seemed to ignore some vital facts — such as the levees in New Orleans which caused most of the deaths and damage and their absence anywhere in Irene’s path — and focus on mother nature as monster and force of immanent destruction. She “slammed” into the coast, “marched” up the coast. Similar to how Scout legends can imbue an area with potential danger, many news accounts wrote of the potential dangers of the real storm, the “potentially affected population” and “potential damage” (Ranii 2011). Anticipation of the actual event, while very different from the imaginary

anticipation experienced by Scouts hiking in the Zion Narrows, shared with the Scout's anticipation an entrance into the realm of fantasy. Just as legends combine truth and fiction, so too do our views of the future, even the immediate future, partake of imagination. While the Scouts were able to use this imagination to imbue the present with greater excitement, intensifying that potential danger even a bit can turn it into the great fear and panic in anticipation of Irene.

Sacvan Bercovitch, in *The American Jeremiad*, explains how this might happen. The particularly American form of the jeremiad, he explains, rhetorically fused the sacred, supernatural world of God's will with the secular, natural world of man's actions (1978, 9). The legend, for many and these disaster legends in particular, seems to elevate the commonplace and everyday into a world of the supernatural. There is something proleptic in this exercise when we compare the legends with its cousins on the extremes of the fictive/factive spectrum. In all of them, science fiction, fact-based Scouting legends, and anticipation of natural disasters, we are again fusing those supernatural and everyday worlds in mixtures to excite, appall, or amaze ourselves or others. As such, legends, like news and science fiction, are a way we invent and interpret the world. As invention and interpretation they can be productive or destructive: ways to increase excitement, ways for urbanites to respond to the crushing demands of modernity, and added fuel for widespread panics. Seen this way, the legend is not merely a way to negotiate the possible and the actual, but is a persistent and pervasive human negotiation between our imagined world and our lived experience.

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