The hatchet men

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the tradition of The Hatchet, and, just in time for the centennial, the venerable icon of campus high jinks is back where it belongs. How The Hatchet was last stolen and how it came home again is a twisting tale of intrigue—as usual …

by Ron Thomas
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ear President Thomas: I realize this e-mail will probably get filtered through at least one person, but it’s a risk I have to take. I’d like to discuss the return of an important Puget Sound relic. Please send an e-mail to the address indicated.

That’s the message I received on the morning of Sept. 2, 2008, when I came into the office. The “from” line read: “H. Atchet,” with a dubious return address. I wondered if it was a hoax or the real thing. Not for long. I responded by hitting “return” on my e-mail, expressed my interest in the subject, and shared my personal phone number and an invitation to call me to discuss the relic further. I hit send and didn’t think much more about it.

The next day, sure enough, a call came in on my line. A male voice on the other end of the phone said: “Well, we have it. The Hatchet, I mean, and we want to return it. Are you free sometime tomorrow after 6 p.m.?”

I felt like I was in some John LeCarre spy novel. The voice was so nonchalant. “This must be a hoax,” I thought.

Nevertheless, I responded (just as nonchalantly) that I was available at the time specified, and I invited whoever “we” was to the president’s house for the handoff.

At about 6:05 the next evening the doorbell rang. I actually didn’t think it would. But it did, and our cat, Coco, scurried upstairs as proof that my ears didn’t deceive me. (She does that whenever the bell rings.) I opened the door, and there were two students from the Class of 2006 whom I remembered, now looking a little older, each holding a small package—something resembling microphone cases—each about 15 inches long or so, and maybe eight inches wide.

I invited them in and said, “So is that it?”

They affirmed “it” was, and we retreated to the back of the house, to the Gwen Phibbs sunroom where Mary and I usually have our dinner on the rare occasions that we are not entertaining a group in the formal dining room. We sat down at the table, and they opened up their cases, and there it was—or should I say there they were, because “it” was in two parts: the handle was in one box and the hatchet head in the other.

“It was kind of fragile, so we thought it best to keep it in two pieces,” one of them said. “But it fits right together like this,” and he put the handle into the head, and there was The Hatchet at last, just as it looks in the pictures. It was the first time I’d seen the real thing, and it looked, well, real. And, somehow, important.

No mystic choruses of “All Hail to Alma Mater” came down from the sky or from the president’s woods just outside the windows. But the thing did look pretty cool—a little bigger than the otherwise convincing replica ASUPS had made two years ago and displayed in the case in Wheelock Student Center. And this one was clearly, authentically, old. It had the unmistakable marks of wear, of human use and handling, the jumbled inscriptions from 100 years of high jinks and class years engraved by the many hands of so many Puget Sound students through the decades.

I finally asked the obvious question that was in the air from the moment I got that e-mail. “OK, so I am a little afraid to ask, but how did you get it?”

A story was then told, primarily by one of the two returners, with a few elaborations from the other. One night, as the tale went, the two were on their own unauthorized “nooks and crannies tour” of the campus, and were ascending the inside of the steeple of Kilworth Chapel. As the first of them approached the summit by the internal ladder, he reached up to hoist himself by the floorboard above and felt something under his hand. He grabbed it and brought it to his eyes and shined his flashlight on it. He was holding the sacred object—or half of it, actually—the hatchet half. He reached up and found the handle up there, too. And then he knew. This was it. He shouted to his companion: “I’ve got it. I’ve got The Hatchet.” That was five years ago, he said.

The story gets a little vague from there. They didn’t know what to do with it, so they kept it in two parts, hidden in their residence hall rooms, stuffed in drawers, and in boxes when they moved to off-campus apartments, lost it amongst a lot of storage when they graduated. A former girlfriend was helping unpack after moving to a new apartment. “What’s this thing?” she asked. “Wow, that’s where I left it!” one of them shouted.

The two “Hatchet Men,” as I call them, claimed to harbor some guilt and some pride in possessing the precious object all those years, especially back in 2005, at Homecoming, when ASUPS staged their “We Want It Back” movement, getting the entire crowd at halftime of the football game to chant the phrase in unison. Pangs of guilt once again troubled them in 2006, when the fake one was introduced by another ASUPS administration to flush out the real thing.

But they didn’t take the bait. They decided then that when 2008 came around, the 100th anniversary of the original discovery of The Hatchet, that was the time to return it.

“So, here we are,” the story concluded. “Homecoming is a couple of weeks off, and we thought the campus should have it back. We wanted you to have it, President Thomas, because you were an important part of our last years at Puget Sound, and we wanted it to be taken care of for the university. You’ll see that we had a jeweler put an ’06 on the corner there—it’s real gold and it’s our class.”

I asked if they wanted to be known and celebrated for returning The Hatchet. “No way,” they said. “We have one condition—anonymity. We don’t want anyone to know we had it or who brought it back.”

I agreed to their conditions: I could tell the story but not reveal their identities. We popped a bottle of champagne, and Mary and I toasted the two Hatchet Men, remembered some of the old stories about the adventures of the Logger relic, and I sent them on their way.

Now, do I believe this Logger version of an Indiana Jones story? I don’t know. My story is the truth. But theirs? Who knows? Were these emissaries covering a more sinister tale of theft by themselves or by some other perpetrators? Strong possibility. Am I glad they saw fit to bring it back to campus? You bet.

As I mentioned in my last column in this magazine (which I had written before I got that e-mail), The Hatchet is an eloquent symbol of Puget Sound’s history and values, of our determination and resourcefulness, of our commitment as a community to rebuild, to get better, to be at our best. We are now working with members of the campus and alumni community to develop a way to keep The Hatchet tradition alive and keep it on campus as was always intended, part of the life of the university and a deep part of the consciousness of every Logger. \( \_ \)