

June 2023



"It's your New York!"

The Rondout Reader



The RED GLOW

A CHOATE LEGEND

By Kevin Ahearn



CHOATE ROSEMARY HALL

Choate cultivates a school environment in which all members of the community feel valued, safe, and part of something greater than themselves.



When I was very young, one of my first teachers was a 17-inch black and white television.

On Saturday morning came *Howdy Doody*, the kiddie show starring a freckled-faced marionette. Buffalo Bob, the MC clad in buckskin, offered an amazing challenge to the 'Peanut Gallery,' two dozen kids my age in the 'live' audience.

"Boys and girls," said Buffalo Bob. "I have a riddle, and if you can solve it, you'll get a special prize from Howdy himself.

All the 'Peanut Gallery' leaned forward in anticipation.

"What kind of *new coat* is always...wet?"

Hands shot up, voices rang out. "A raincoat, a raincoat, **A RAINCOAT!**"

One little girl on the left side in the back raised her hand meekly, but didn't say a word.

"What do you think?" asked Buffalo Bob.

"A coat of paint," she said.

*Aha, a life-shaping moment! No matter how many people believe otherwise and however loud they yell, what's right is right. Not because you are pretty or polite or privileged, but that you are *right*.*

Being right wins, Howdy Doody taught me.

Little did I know that I had another lesson coming; I was about to be enrolled in the finest, fanciest 'prep school' in the whole country!

Well, sort of...

Located in the lush woodlands outside Wallingford, Connecticut, *Choate* was founded in 1896 by Judge William G. Choate. By 1904, enrollment had grown from 4 to 40 boys. But except for an athletic field in front, wooden houses separated by private homes, there was little that 'bespoke a school.'

After WW II, *Choate* grew to 550 male students. More houses were purchased along with hundreds of acres of land. Then came the Andrew Mellon Library, the Chapel, and the construction of seven new dormitories. Growth also focused on broadening and deepening the curriculum, and solidifying *Choate*'s national reputation. By the early 1950's the prep school was recognized as the finest in the nation, its graduates heading for Harvard, Yale, Princeton and other high-class Ivy League universities.

A center for progressive thinking, through the St. Andrew's Society, *Choate* initiated a special summer program in 1925. Two dozen 'underprivileged' New York City boys, ages 11-13, would be brought to the campus for a two-week 'learning experience.' The campers were chosen specifically for their differences-- athletes and scrubs, big and small, extroverts and wallflowers and two Negroes:

How would these diverse intelligent children react in the *Choate* environment? Would they play well together? Would they feel the *Choate spirit*? And if faced with adversity, would they team up and face it head on or run away in fear?

Staffed by eight of the school's finest scholars, plus a headmaster and a kitchen staff, *Choate* was going to find out.

With help from the **Red Glow**.

My mother was a hustler, god bless her. With five kids to feed, she was teaching and looking to go to summer school for her Masters. Seems she knew someone who knew someone involved in the *Choate* program and got her oldest and 'very smart' son enrolled.

I had gone to CYO Day Camp some summers before, but this would be the first time I'd be away from my mother overnight. Two weeks at a place I'd never heard of? Mom reassured me that all would work out. Besides, except for the train ticket, it was free!

Joe and Jack Kennedy had gone to Choate. Edward Albee, the playwright, too. If James Bond had gone to Eton, then Bruce Wayne would have graduated from *Choate*. Maybe I would get something out of this.

(Mom said later I'd gained ten pounds.)

Four tents had been set up on one of the athletic fields. Six boys and two staff per tent. The counselors were *Choate*'s finest--young, fit and dedicated. Twenty-three other boys, and I couldn't find one friend because I was a smart-ass city punk who couldn't play softball or basketball worth a damn.

But I had learned how to swim. Taking a wooded path to the swimming hole on the Quinnipiac River, a snake popped out of the water with a fish in its mouth.

I liked nights the best when we'd be in our tent and the counselor would read a story by flashlight. Ray Bradbury's 'Usher Two' was cool, but my favorite was 'Voice in the Night' which may have been the inspiration for the later Japanese film, *Attack of the Mushroom People*.

Midway into our second week, someone uttered those fateful words: "The **Red Glow** is out there. **The Red Glow** will come for us."

According to the legend, Jedediah Choate, 'long of beard and short of fuse', the 'bad seed' of the founder's family, was a trapper in these woods long before Connecticut became a state and America became a country. A giant of a man, he strapped a

trademark lantern to his belt, claiming the crimson glass gave off a blood red light that scared away 'Injuns and bars.'

One night, alone in the forest he'd staked out as his own, Jedediah was awakened by an ominous rustling. Ready for trouble, the trapper lit his lantern and the darkness glowed red.

Whether it was Mahican Indians or a bear, Jedediah's body was never found and it's said, even by 'Choate scholars', that the **Red Glow** still roams the woods, his lantern bright, hell bent for trespassers.

Yeah, I thought. And the 'Mushroom People,' too!

I'd switch tents to be with the counselor who'd be reading William Hope Hodgson's 'Voice in the Night.' Two audio versions so far. Halfway into the third, a cry rang out.

"It's the **Red Glow**! The **Red Glow**'s come for us!"

We charged out of the tents like soldiers going to war.

In a cloudless, new moon sky, a billion stars lit the heavens. Deep in the forest, the **Red Glow** shone like a distant traffic signal, but *moving*, as if the light had come to life.

A dozen flashlights burning, the counselors assembled the boys.

"Follow the **Red Glow**. Chase the **Red Glow**. Get the **Red Glow**!" echoed through the camp.

Off we went not unlike the torch-bearing mob pursuing Frankenstein's 'monster.'

Then came that 'Howdy Doody' moment...

We'd be running *after* the **Red Glow**, but the service road beyond the tree line...if we took a shortcut across the athletic field, we could cut off the **Red Glow**...Together we could face...we could stand up to the **Red Glow**!

"This way!" I shouted and broke from the pack.

My first experience as a leader, or so I believed. On the other side of the tree line, we'd come out in front of the **Red Glow**.

I looked back. I was alone. The beaming flashlights shone farther and farther away. And the **Red Glow** kept coming...

If I had stopped in my tracks and thought about what I was doing...The first son of a disabled WW II flyer, did I long to be the hero my father once was? Mom would be so proud. Or had I been brainwashed by TV and comic books?

But I didn't think. Didn't have to; I was *right*. I kept going.

Years later, after waiting nearly a decade, I finally got my Peace Corps appointment: Costa Rica - to teach softball. Two groups of five volunteers would coach swimming, volleyball, basketball, track and field, and softball in ten different villages, revolving every four months.

The swimming guy quit halfway through training. I volunteered to take his slots. Dozens of Costa Rican children drowned every year. If I could save just one life...

At my first town, my classes were an immediate success complete with a waiting list. But as I could only stay for four months, I took a hard look at the program. Of the six villages I'd be teaching in, only three of them had any water while other towns with swimming pools would get no teacher. Three of the Costa Rican politicos sponsoring the program came from the towns without a swimming area.

The program was a scam! I voiced my concerns to my fellow volunteers. None stood by me. When I was called to meet with the country director, I went in alone.

Peace Corps threw me out of Costa Rica. Returning to headquarters in Washington DC, I had to meet with a government psychiatrist.

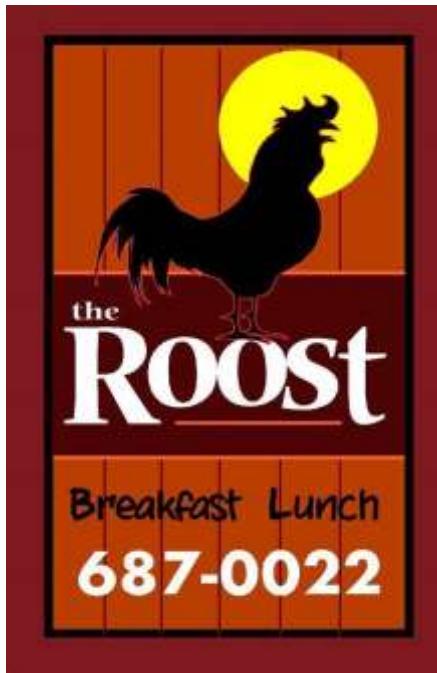
After telling him about my father and my life so far...

"When are you going to stop taking these beatings on your head and shoulders?" the doctor asked me.

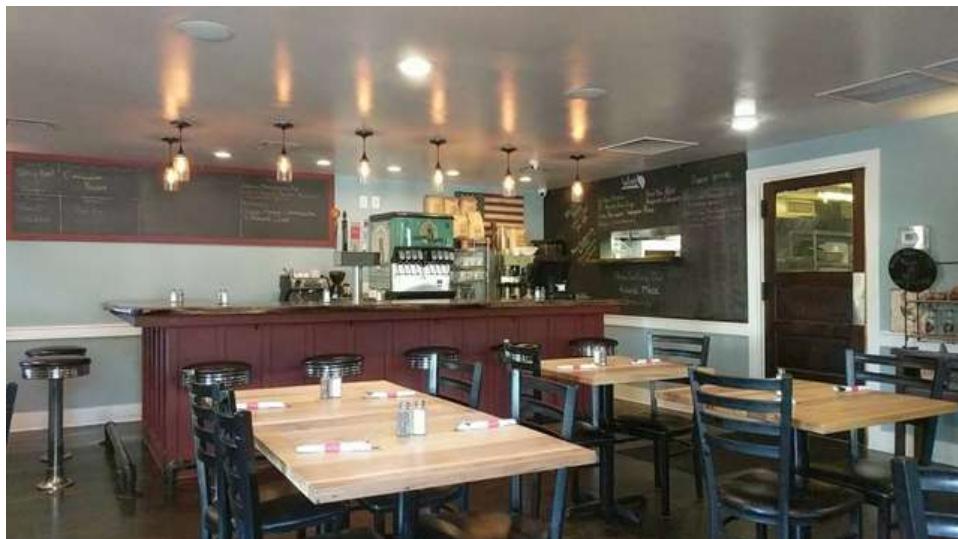
"But I was right!" I insisted.

"The program must be followed." he said, backed up by diplomas on the wall. "You're wrong because you're alone. Who is the lone volunteer to demand change...from the Peace Corps?"

Within a year I'd get another Peace Corps assignment. The Costa Rican 'sports' program would be disbanded.

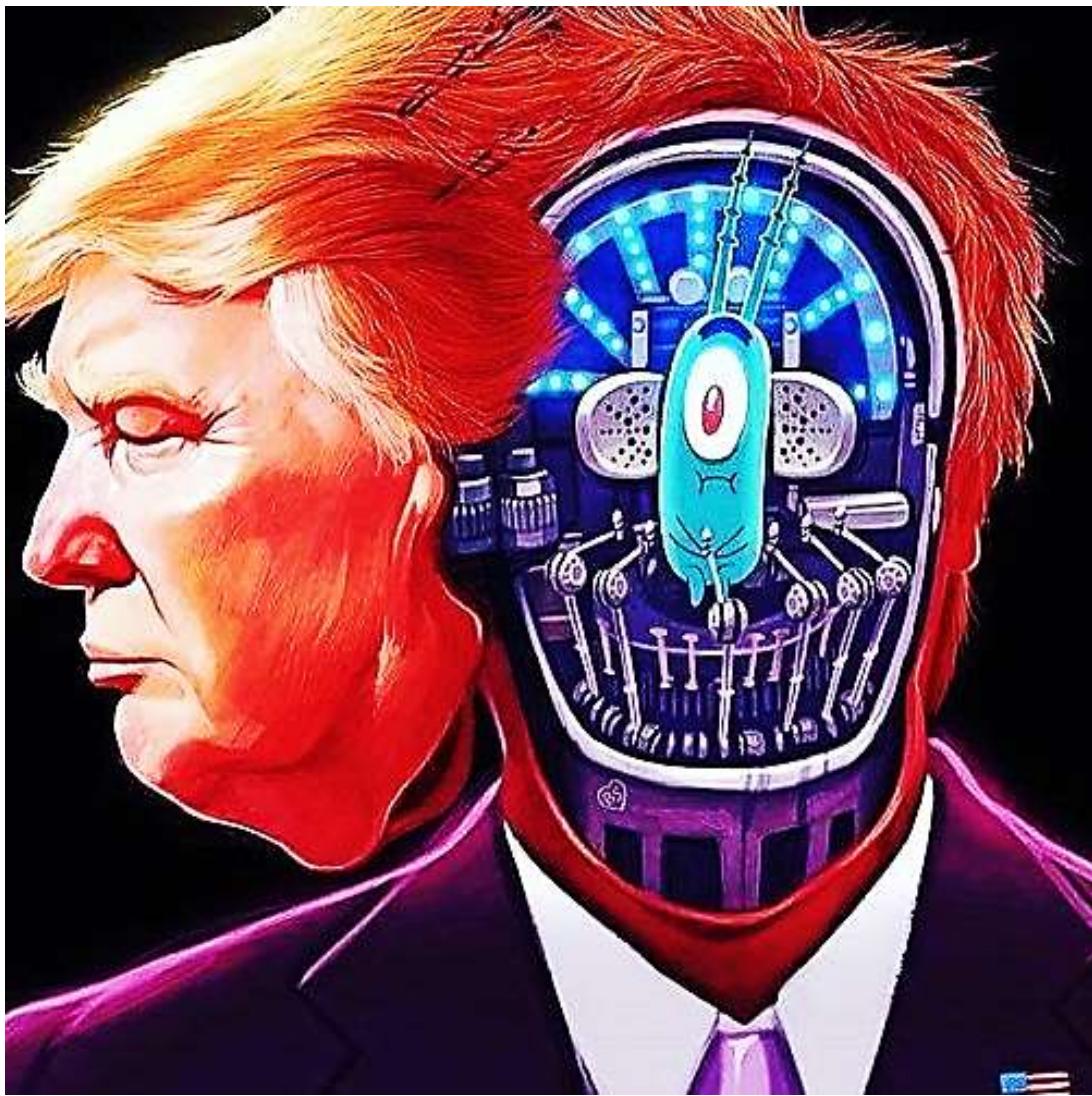


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The **Red Glow** seemed to float in the darkness unlike the jumpy flashlight beams of the counselors and the boys far behind.

I got to the trees lining the service road and stepped onto the gravel. The **Red Glow** was coming and I alone was going to stand up to him.

Wasn't I?

Adding five points for being a veteran, I scored 105 on the State test for 'recreation leader' in the prison system and got a position at a brand new 'maximum security' jail which would soon earn the highest accreditation in Department of Corrections history.

So how come so few of the guards were doing their jobs? On the afternoon/evening shift while I was reffing a basketball game or coaching up softball, the Corrections Officers would gather in my office to wile their shift away.

"That's the way it is," I was briefed. "The way it'll always be."

I took the sergeant for a walk around the gym and told him how I felt.

"I can't control my men," he said.

The gym area now had a security problem: me.

Mounting a combined effort to get me fired, the Corrections Officers wrote me up for every conceivable thing and within a year, an innocent man had been thrown out of jail. Disgraced, I could never work in the system again.

The other civilians, teachers and counselors, knew full well that security was lax, but not one took a stand.

Three days after I had closed on my house, the inmates rioted in the recreation area. The prison handled it poorly and blamed the civilians. All were transferred to other jails and the facility became a 'special housing unit' with the inmates locked in their cells 23 hours a day.

Six months later, the inmates took over part of the prison and held hostages. After the crisis was resolved, an investigation revealed that seven Corrections Officers had left their posts without proper relief. All were transferred and kept their jobs.

That's the way it would always be.

*I saw the **Red Glow** as a subway train coming down a leafy tunnel formed by the trees. And I was in front of him, standing on the tracks.*

For a fleeting moment, I thought of the 'Legend of Sleepy Hollow,' of Ichabod Crane facing the headless horseman.

*...What would *Bruce Wayne* do?*

With classes of adults from around the world, I was the most successful teacher in a New York county English as a Second Language (ESL) program as well as a GED teacher. As most of the students lived on the poverty line or barely above it, the classes were paid for by the State.

The commissioner, the executive director and the program leader had big plans. Taking students' tuition money from other classes, they took expensive field trips to Washington DC and then to Japan. A glossy pamphlet was published. Additional thousands were paid to Japanese agents to recruit students for our 'Intensive Language Institute.'

We had no charter, no language lab, nowhere to house the students. No one on the staff spoke Japanese. The 'Institute' was a single aluminum-sided building behind a car wash at the end of a strip mall.

Only I objected and was fired. No student ever came from Japan to attend the 'Institute'. Based on his 'ESL expertise and experience,' the commissioner got a higher-paying position on Long Island. The program leader left for a better job. The executive director ran for the county legislature.

Never again would I be allowed to teach for the State.

As a social worker with a full slate of clients for a Mental Health Day program, my reading and GED classes were always full. For the first time, disabled clients passed the GED test.

But when they got no Christmas gifts from the program I became concerned. The clients ran an in-house canteen, selling sodas and snacks, earning money for their benefit. The secretary in charge was an habitual gambler. The county had been warned not to let her handle cash.

"How much money is in the client canteen fund?" I asked at a staff meeting.

My supervisor went berserk, pounding his fist on the table, shouting at me, threatening.

"You're a brave man," one of the doctors told me.

"So was Custer," I said.

Courage had nothing to do with it; I was right.

But I was alone.

They fired me.

Thousands of dollars unaccounted for, the clients' canteen fund was entrusted to other staff. The secretary was transferred where she continued to promote employee gambling trips to Atlantic City.

The **Red Glow** came closer and closer. I could make out the black bands holding his lantern's crimson glass.

I didn't run. I didn't hide. I stood my ground as if frozen to the spot.

He was a big man, just like the legend said... Closer...

"Oooooow!" He let out a howl as he aimed the lantern at my face.

I could see him beyond the glow. He had no beard. He was the same age and so fit and clean cut...just like counselors.

The **Red Glow** was...The **Red Glow** was...*Choate*!

In an instant he was by me, running like a halfback. Had I hidden behind a tree, sprung out and tried to tackle him, I would have been trampled.

(And my Mom brokenhearted.)

The big man circled around and ran at the flashlight beams. I caught up as the boys jumped him like lion cubs on a cape buffalo. The counselors quickly ended it, introducing the *Choate* alumnus who had volunteered to show us all a good time.

Looking back, I wish one of the boys or one of the counselors or the big man himself had come over and maybe patted me on the head and given me a talking to.

What if I'd been *wrong*? Had I gotten lost in the woods, at least someone would have been relieved when they finally found me

"Good work, boys. Well done!" The chief counselor addressed the group. "You came together, stuck together and triumphed!"

Everybody cheered everybody else.

"Let *Choate*'s infamous legend become a symbol for the challenges of life you cannot face alone," he said. "Trust and work with others--The *group* wins!"

"The **Red Glow** is still out there," he warned us. "And always will be."

The St. Andrew's summer camp program closed down in 1965. The *Choate School and Rosemary Hall* merged in 1974. Women were admitted, including Ivanka Trump and Jamie Lee Curtis.

At this year's Commencement and Baccalaureate Services, the president of the student body addressed more than 500 of his fellow graduates and their families, saying "Choate is a gift. A gift none of us have truly earned or deserved. It is an act of grace that will carry us forward."

I got a job with a small publisher and printing company. Apathy and incompetence had rendered its Books Division a disaster. It took me nearly a year to get it running. An author I brought in and edited sold thousands of copies.

For a marketing campaign, the boss ordered me to steal copyrighted data from a rival publisher. I told him what the consequences could be.

He fired me and scrubbed the plan. I don't think he'll be in business much longer.

My last job had me working online for a writers' literary agency as an evaluator, editor and writing coach. The agency had manuscripts submitted electronically and my mission was to convince the customers to pay for a variety of authors' services provided by the company.

Many thanked me for my honesty and I'm still in contact with a couple. But most wanted only professional confirmation that their novels or autobiographies were worthy of being published at any price.

"You're either determined to be writer or you've already written," I'd imply. "If you've 'already written,' what do you need me for?"

The company fired me. Not long after, the CEO and three of his directors were indicted for fraud. A class-action suit by disillusioned customers is pending.

At the finest prep school in America, the **Red Glow** had taught me to stand fast on my own. But never a hint how much it would cost me.

"Hey kids!" said Buffalo Bob back in the day. "What time is it?"

"It's Howdy Doody Time!" shouted the 'Peanut Gallery'.

And always will be.

