

“Charles Manson’s 63-Year Old Boys Town Mystery”

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“In 1949, when 14 year old Charles Manson arrived at Father Flanagan’s legendary Boys Town, he was brimming with hope. He saw a promising future. Then something happened that crushed hope and sent history in a darker direction.”

One doesn’t have to look very far to find evidence of childhoods gone bad: Robert Hawkins of the Omaha Westroads shootings and, more recently, Adam Lanza of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings. While watching stories like that unfold can be incredibly difficult, we are drawn to them wondering ‘how in the world could this have happened?’

Lawson McDowell understands. In fact, the Omaha author has spent the past few years investigating a man named Charles Manson. Based on his findings, he’s written a book about one of America’s most feared criminals.

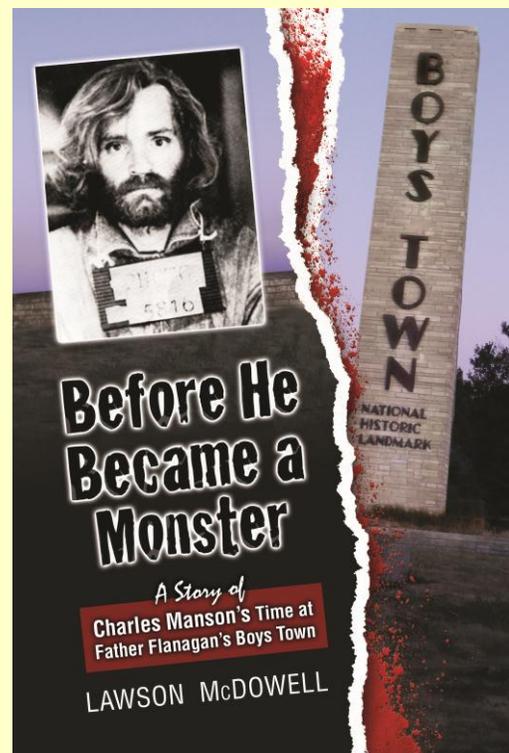
“Before He Became a Monster” is an historical fiction work about Manson’s time at Boys Town, 20 years before the Tate-LaBianca murders.

“Manson arrived at Boys Town in 1949 after begging Indianapolis priests and authorities for a chance to succeed in life,” said McDowell. “He had just turned 14 years old and was a kid who experienced a childhood no one should endure.”

So, what went wrong at Boys Town? McDowell wouldn’t say. In fact, his response was, “No spoilers today.”

He did, however, open up about other things; starting with his introduction to Manson.

“Several years ago, one of my friends worked at Boys Town. Over dinner one night, he mentioned Charles Manson was a student. I was surprised, so I decided to investigate... My initial research only deepened the mystery. After three months, my intuition told me there was probably a good story in Manson’s hasty flight from Boys Town. I dug deeper, eventually talking directly to Manson about it.”



If you’re wondering where Manson is now, according to McDowell, he is locked away in Corcoran State Prison. That’s about 50 miles from Fresno. And, he’s not alone.

“Manson is confined with several well-known criminals,” he said. “Juan Corona, who murdered 25 migrant workers, is there. The parent killing Menendez twins are there. Even Sirhan B. Sirhan, who assassinated Robert Kennedy, was in Manson’s cell block for a time. There are also assorted drug lords and white collar felons who need protection. I’ll bet they must have very interesting Monopoly games.”

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Lawson McDowell

As for why we should care that Manson was at Boys Town, McDowell said that Manson is a figure who made a profound impact on American culture, that he is still relevant in our society because his ideas still attract today’s youth. And, that he receives more mail than any prisoner in American history.

“Beyond that,” said McDowell, “Manson’s time in Boys Town is a good story.”

But it wasn’t much time. According to sources, Manson was there three, maybe five days. What we do know is that it wasn’t long. McDowell said that it was a mystery that intrigued him... that the things that happened at Boys Town changed the course of history in a darker direction for Manson.

So, how did the folks at Boys Town respond to McDowell’s questions?

“...When they saw I was not out to harm them or their great institution, most were very cooperative,” he said. “On balance, I was very impressed with Boys Town.”

Not able to see Manson’s files, McDowell admits that he went to Boys Town to get a feel for the culture during the great construction period. Remember, we’re talking about 1949.

“The campus was transitioning from dormitories to home-like environments,” he said. “At the same time, they were erecting huge buildings that in some cases outsized major public works.”

As for the communication with Manson, McDowell said that he started writing him in 2009; however they didn’t talk until 2010.

“He saw I am a railroad man,” said McDowell. “His relatives in Kentucky were railroad people on the C&O. Manson reminisced about walking to the

railroad yards as a child to see the trains and watch his uncles switch coal cars. He was surprisingly knowledgeable about railroad operations.”

And, he’s apparently not, according to McDowell, as many would think, the ‘crazy man’ he projects for main stream media.

“I believe his antics for the media are a control tactic,” said McDowell. “They stem from a desire to mislead reporters who try to incite him on camera. Manson believes his real trial was in the media, not the courthouse. He is still bitter that President Nixon declared him guilty while the trial was still underway.”

So, does McDowell believe there is a question about Manson’s guilt?

“Perhaps, but to me, a bigger question is the fairness of the trial. We live in a nation where the rule of law is so important that we set people free if there is any reasonable doubt of guilt. Yet, in Manson’s case, we had a suspect who was denied his own witnesses, denied the right to cross-examine, and faced a single eyewitness against him, a girl who had been part of the actual murder party... America needed a demon to explain these unthinkable murders. Manson was the answer.”

As for the conversations themselves, McDowell said that the two had to work at being congenial. McDowell had to suppress his own biases against Manson, while Manson had to overcome his distrust for outsiders and the fear of people trying to hurt him.

“There are plenty of killers in prison who would bask in the notoriety of killing a celebrity like Manson,” he said.

As for Manson, he still maintains his innocence; has since the start according to McDowell.

“Most people think he was convicted of murder, but that’s not correct,” he said. “Committing murder was never the question. He was convicted of *conspiracy* to commit murder.”

“Before He Became a Monster” was released earlier this month. McDowell said that readers will find it entertaining and upbeat with little gore while suggesting what might have gone terribly wrong at Boys Town.

“For me,” said McDowell, “the book was a mind-opening project that left me wondering: Has America’s demon been telling the truth all along?”