

## 25 From Blawenburg Kid to Movie Star



*Blawenburg child actor, Tom Gaman in 1961*

By most accounts, growing up in Blawenburg in the late 1950s and 60s was pretty quiet and uneventful. You manufactured your own fun and relied on the kids you knew for entertainment. Tom Gaman, who grew up on Mountain View Road on the eastern side of Blawenburg, describes his childhood years in retrospect as “delightful.” But it certainly wasn’t uneventful.

Tom, who now lives in California, recalled his childhood in a recent phone conversation.

Tom’s parents were British, and they came to the Princeton area because it was a reasonable commute to New York City where Tom’s father, John Gaman, worked for New Zealand Insurance Company. They insured cargo on freighters in the days before container ships. John took the train from Belle Mead, when that was an option, and a ferry to the financial district in New York City. Initially, the family lived on Province Line Road, but then John was briefly transferred to San Francisco. In 1957, the family returned to the Princeton area when John was promoted to assistant manager of the insurance company. They bought a house in Blawenburg.

The family loved animals, and the tranquil, rural life on Mountain View Road was perfect for raising many of them. Tom recalls that they built a stable on their property, got a couple of horses, and joined Somerset County 4-H. His horse was a pinto named Jobie, but he called it Fred. They bred rabbits and sheep for food. They had a one-horned goat named Alvin and milked another named Cynthia. They also trained seeing-eye dogs. The Gaman property was a veritable menagerie with plenty of action to keep Tom, his older brother Dudley, and younger sister Jane busy.

Tom’s mother, Elizabeth, worked at NJNPI (New Jersey Neuropsychiatric Institute, now Skillman Park) doing heart research using rabbits. For his weekend job, Tom’s walked to the NJNPI Bureau of Research, as it was called, to feed the hundreds of lab rabbits kept there.

Tom was in the last graduating class at Princeton Country Day School before it merged with Miss Fine's School to become Princeton Day School in 1965. Like most Montgomery Township students at the time, he went on to attend Princeton High School.

### **A New Adventure**

Tom's life became a lot more active in early 1961, when, on a lark, he answered a newspaper ad to try out for a movie. The production company was seeking British boys for a movie that would be made from a book he had never heard of. He had no acting experience, but this opportunity seemed like something worth pursuing. Tom applied. What did he have to lose?

Months went by and Tom heard nothing. Then, Ernest Gordon, a family friend who was the Dean of Princeton University Chapel from 1955 to 1981, was talking with his friend, who happened to be the director casting British boys for a movie. Dean Gordon suggested that one of the Gaman boys might play a part, and before he knew it, Tom was in New York talking with Peter Brook, the director of a movie called *Lord of the Flies*. On a Thursday afternoon in June, the last day of school, Brook asked, "How would you like to be in a movie?" The following Monday, Tom found himself at Idlewild Airport (now JFK) taking off to Puerto Rico with 30 British boys to make a movie he knew nothing about.

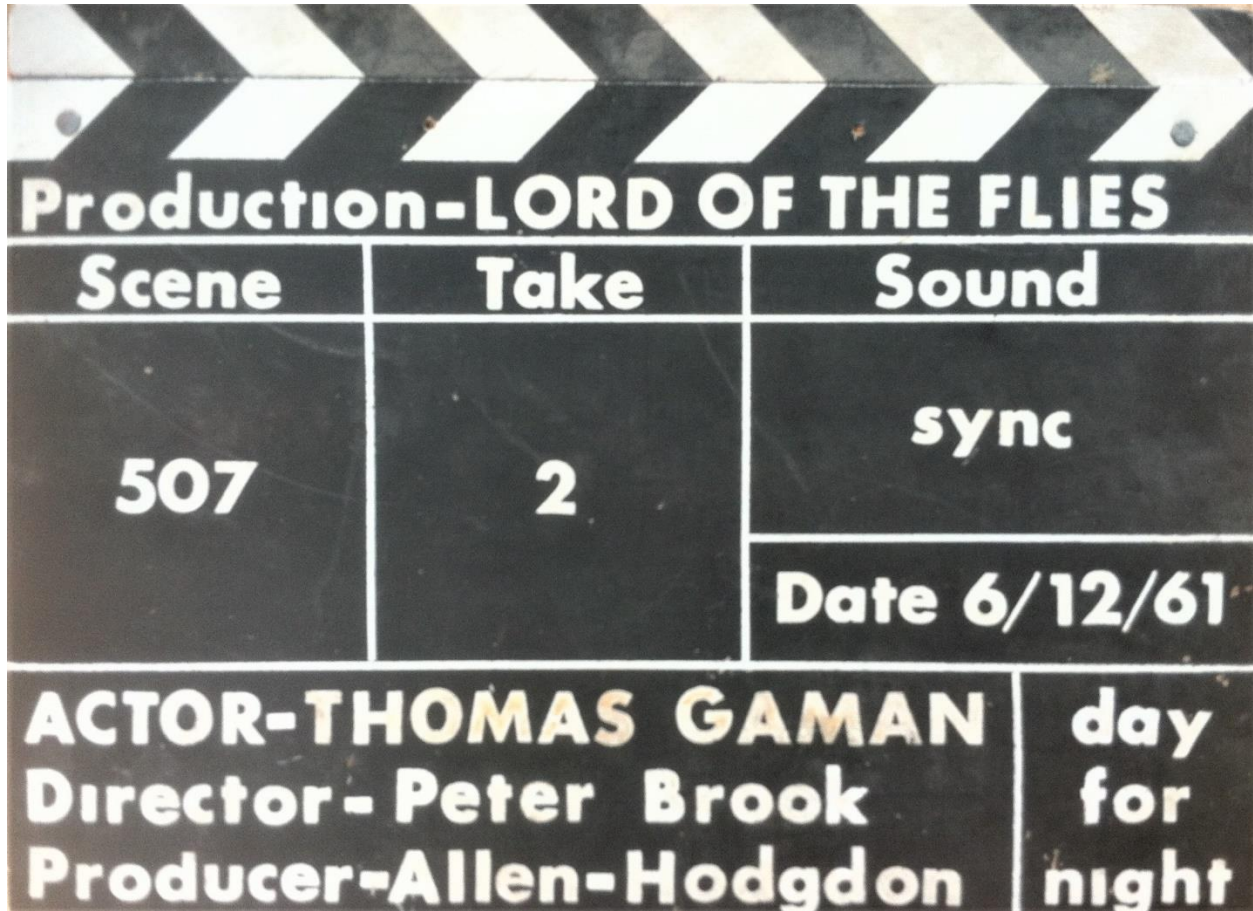


*British boys off to make a movie*

"They told me the movie was about boys on an island. They said it was sort of like Swiss Family Robinson," Tom recalled. This assessment of the movie was a bit of an understatement! Based on William Golding's 1954 book by the same title, the movie was described by the production company this way: "Lost on an island, young survivors of a plane crash eventually

revert to savagery despite the few rational boys' attempts to prevent that.” A movie reviewer described it as boys turning to savages as soon as adults are off the scene.

The movie is filled with symbolism that has been the catalyst for stimulating contemporary discussions. Both the book and the movie are still used in high school literature classes to promote discussion about the themes of fear, hate, and violence, which are so prevalent in human nature.



### **Shooting the Film**

In Puerto Rico, Tom and the 30 other boys were housed in an old pineapple factory. The film was shot on Vieques Island near the village of Esperanza. After some practice takes on local beaches, over 40 hours of filming took place between June and September.

Initially, Tom was going to be a general cast member, one of the nice boys turned savage. But this was a black and white film with scenes shot in the daytime and night. The director felt that the original boy cast in one of the lead parts wouldn't show up well on the film, so blond-haired Tom was given the part of Simon. His character had one of the most poignant lines in the movie.

“Maybe there is a beast... maybe it's only us.”

In the movie, the conch is the symbol of control and power. The boys made sounds using a conch shell to get the other boys' attention, and at group meetings, the person with the conch would be able to speak. At one point, Simon has a realization and expresses one of the main themes of the movie. He says, "Maybe there is a beast. What I mean is, maybe it's only us." Thus, a reference to the inherent evil within us.



*Simon finds the pig head and the dead pilot.*

Later in the movie, Simon climbs the mountain and discovers the dead pilot of their crashed plane suspended from a tree. He thinks that the pilot is the beast, so he rushes back to the group to tell them what he found. Meanwhile, the boys were becoming more out of control as they feared an imagined beast that comes out of the water. They prepare a great fire and sharpen sticks to battle the beast if they are attacked. As Simon, returning from the mountain top, emerges from the jungle in the dark, he is thought to be the beast. He is speared by the panicking boys, staggers to the edge of the waves, and his lifeless body floats out to sea. You wouldn't see this scene in *Swiss Family Robinson*!

After that summer at Vieques, it took two more years and two more versions of the film to get it ready for the release to theaters. Tom remembers how terrific it was when it premiered in New York in August 1963. Later, when the movie was shown in Princeton, the theater allowed Tom to bring all his friends to see it for free. That was special for a 13-year-old.

### **Life after Acting**

In 1969, shortly after Tom graduated from Princeton High School, his father was transferred to San Francisco again to become a manager at the insurance company. Tom, Dudley, and Jane relocated as well. Tom has not returned to Blawenburg since he left, but he said he has many fond memories of his childhood here.

After high school, Tom went to Washington University in Saint Louis for two years, and then transferred to UC Berkeley. He got interested in forestry at Washington University and that interest grew into a BS in Forestry from Berkeley. He went on to earn a Master of Science in Forestry at Yale University, the first university offering a forestry program in the US. This led to a career in various aspects of forestry that has spanned 40 years in many countries. Tom has traveled the world, serving as a naturalist, camp director, forestry consultant, and volunteer. He began his own consulting business in 1978. Tom has lived in Inverness, CA for the past 33 years. Today, he is semi-retired, but often finds himself in the woods he loves so much doing forest inventories, conservation plans, and natural resource mapping.



*Tom and his wife Barbara at the dunes at Cape Reinga, the north cape of New Zealand, in 2019.*

### **Time Flies**

The *Lord of the Flies* is still a part of Tom's life. In the 1990s, the Internet had arrived, and the movie appeared on YouTube. "After 34 years of silence about the film, all of a sudden people wanted to know about it," he recalled. Tom was suddenly being asked to speak in high schools and other places. Indeed, there is a lot of information about the movie and its actors just a click away on your favorite search engine.

In 2013, a Blue-Ray version of the 1963 movie was released. Tom narrated a documentary about the movie that is on DVD, and this has created more interest in Lord of the Flies.

Life's journey has many unexpected twists and turns. For Tom Gaman, an unexpected childhood experience that took place while he lived in Blawenburg led to a lifetime of great experiences and memories.

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### **Blawenburg Fact**

Tom Gaman wasn't the only actor who lived in Blawenburg. Lee Van Cleef (think *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*) also spent time in the village. We'll share his picture and story in a future blog.

### **Looking ahead**

Look for a picture post at the end of October. In November, I will tell the story of Annie's House, the home built by Cyrenius Voorhees, and the house I have lived in for the past 46 years.

### **Sources**

Wikipedia, Lord of the Flies movie

Interview Tom Gaman, September 26, 2019

### **Pictures**

From the files of Tom Gaman

Internet–Lord of the Flies 1963