

My Harrowing Introduction to Horror Movies

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Being the baby of the family I was usually excluded from situations that were too 'adult' for me. These included movies. In 1954 when I was 10, the movie 'Them' came to the Abby Theater. My brother Don was visiting for the weekend from Milwaukee, and my sister Lila was about a junior in high school and of course old enough for these mature experiences, so unannounced to me they left to see it.

When I found out I was furious. Why couldn't I have gone? Hey, I'm 10 years old now and all grown up. Plus I had been exposed to a lot of frightening scenes by that age. Sarge was constantly beating up Beetle Baily, and Popeye was clobbering the bad guys in the comics. When watching TV at Choener's, as we didn't get one until 1955, heroes like Tom Mix and Hopalong Cassidy were shooting the bad guys dead. And living on a farm, over the years I had seen my share of dead cats, roosters getting 'the ax', and thousands of flies stuck to fly paper that hung in the house and all over the barn, in perpetual end of life death throes.

When Don and Lila got home they began telling how exciting the movie was. It started with a series of mysterious deaths in the New Mexico desert. Sergeant Ben Peterson finds a young girl who is so traumatized she is unable to speak. Along with FBI agent Robert Graham and scientists Dr. Harold Medford and his daughter Pat, they discover that all the incidents are due to giant ants mutated by atomic radiation from the nuclear bomb testing in the late 1940s. With the aid of the military, they attempt to find the queens and destroy any nests before the eggs hatch. But the two queens are missing! They are thought to have flown to Los Angeles and may already be starting a huge colony deep in its maze of sewer tunnels. To add to the danger, a young boy and girl playing near the entrance are missing and probable lost within the maze. Will the military arrive in time to save them and destroy the colony?

After this I was even more furious. Big ants – how scary could they be. I'd seen thousands of ants in my life. Put them under a magnifying glass and they look big. Big deal! Now I really wanted to see 'Them'. This was the first realistically filmed horror film with high tech animation and I wasn't allowed to go along. For days I continued to gripe about it to pa and ma. Finally pa said out of desperation, "Ok, tonight I'll take you to see 'Them'. I doubt if he had any interest for himself, as his and ma's genre was Ma and Pa Kettle, Abbot and Costello, and maybe mild cowboy movies like Roy Rogers and Dale Evans.

Finally I was being treated like the 10-year-old adult that I was. My excitement built throughout the day as afternoon turned into evening, then to dinner, and then to milking the cows - the last daily

task for a dairy farmer. There was just enough time to wash up and head to the Abby Theater – about a 10-minute drive.

As we walked in and took our seats about half way down the aisle, my anticipation peaked. The curtain rose and the theater dimmed to darkness. The scene was a desolate desert – nothing but sand and cacti, a young girl wandering aimlessly in a daze, a camping trailer – its back-side ripped open, then some bloodied clothing, a pistol emptied into something horrific – apparently to no effect. Later as the police and scientists investigate the scene, blowing sand obscures everything beyond a dozen yards, and then a faint eerie sound in the unseen distance, ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee, then louder, ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee, then louder still, ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee.

I hadn't yet seen one ant, but already I was frozen with fear. I was instantly shocked into realizing what a mistake I'd made. Panic was escalating inside me beyond what I'd ever experienced. Then a hideous head appears above a sand dune - its bulging eyes, crushing mandibles, and fence post sized feelers sensing its next victim. These aren't ants, they're death machines!



“Pa, I’m really scared. I want to go home”.

“You pestered me all week about Don and Lila leaving you behind when they went to see it without you. You’re going to sit there and watch”.

And watch I did, except it was with fear above the ‘do not exceed the red line’ level throughout the entire movie. With the continual, ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee, and having seen what these hideous beasts looked like and what they can do it didn't even do any good to close my eyes.

Somehow I survived, or did I, as that night was the worst of my childhood. Throughout the night I had nightmares of giant ants lurking just across the road in Herman Baumer's cornfield. I was still traumatized the next morning. For many years after that I've been fearful of horror films that are somewhat true to life. It wasn't until much later that I finally became astute enough to see the unscientific flaws of science fiction movies, and the unrealistic likelihood of other storylines. But even now, after having learned of the gruesome war crimes of the last century, the horrific murders shown in the news on a much too often basis, and knowing the unlimited evil that can reside in man, I'll pass on any horror movie that is overly realistic.

If only I could have seen back then the YouTube website that labeled 'Them' as: "An Endless Terror! A Nameless Horror!" It's comforting knowing that in the movie the ants lost, but in my life they won by stirring up a fear in me that shattered my 10-year-old adult innocence.