

Introduction

Which Came First, the Legend or the Beast?

“In cryptozoology we are studying legends. Legends are the smoke above the fire.”

—Loren Coleman, *Cryptozoologist*, 2018

IN DECEMBER 1991, I trudged for days around a frosty corner of southeast Wisconsin to interview people who claimed to have seen what they said looked like a fur-covered werewolf on a rural byway known as Bray Road, just outside of the small city of Elkhorn. And yes, they did say “werewolf,” and no, that did not send me running for silver bullets. Looking into topics of local interest was my job as a reporter for the county’s weekly newspaper, *The Week*, based in Delavan, Wisconsin, so I was trying to keep an open mind. It wasn’t easy. Area residents were saying they had seen what looked like a large wolf walking or running on its hind legs, eating chunks of road-killed animals held in its upturned paws, and generally acting in ways that normal eastern gray wolves were not known to act. Moreover, there hadn’t been a known population of wolves breeding in and inhabiting southeastern Wisconsin for many decades. None of it seemed likely.

As I listened to stories of encounter after encounter, however,

told by what seemed to be sincere and sober citizens, my mind reached for possible explanations of impossible claims. Were eyewitnesses seeing an actual wolf gone bipedal for some odd reason?



*The author's rendition
of a goat man*

Most of the alternatives I could conjure up also seemed unlikely. I had heard folktales of other manimals, such as Maryland's Goat Man, that had supposedly become mutant monsters due to genetic experiments. Folktales and legends are generally not considered proof of anything, however.

There was also speculation that the creature could be something ghostly, more akin to the spectral black hounds of the British Isles than to a Hollywood-style human with fangs and fur. I even had to consider the chance that there was no real creature, no true sightings, just a hoax perpetrated by unknown jokers, perhaps.

After all, the long, cold winters of the Dairy State have been blamed for all sorts of odd behavior among its residents. Certain Wisconsinites have gained notoriety for activities ranging from the sublime to

the shocking: from late-blooming, self-taught artists who spend long evenings by the fire creating visionary sculpture from rusty metal and concrete, to cannibalistic serial killers Ed Gein of Plainfield and Milwaukee's Jeffrey Dahmer. Admittedly, Gein and Dahmer were motivated by much more than ice and scant daylight, since psychological derangement figured prominently in each case. But the peculiar nature of their crimes was seriously

weird—what I call bad weird, as opposed to good weird—in the extreme.

After listening to the Bray Road witnesses in person, however, I finally decided that no matter what the origin of the mystery creature sightings, the stories had already spread far enough locally to have reached campfire-tale status. That meant the phenomenon I'd dubbed "The Beast of Bray Road" could be considered folklore in the making. I realized I'd been given a rare opportunity to observe and document the birth of a new legend, and I felt obliged to record whatever I found for future reference.

Back in 1992, the likeliest scenario to my mind was that the upright creatures were just what they looked like: flesh-and-blood wolves or wolf-dog hybrids that were able to walk upright and often did. The ability to walk on hind legs, or bipedalism, is not a supernatural act for animals, but it is unusual. When seen in the wild, bipedal locomotion usually indicates an injured forelimb. Given healthy limbs, and YouTube videos of dancing dogs aside, quadrupeds rarely live their lives in a vertical posture, since their skeletal frames are not designed to support their whole weight on their hind legs.

And yet, many who witnessed the upright canine creatures thought there was also something otherworldly about them . . . some kind of knowing, uncanny intelligence in their glowing, yellow eyes. As famed Bigfoot researcher and author Ivan Sanderson said in his book *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life*, "A lot of myths are straight history; a lot of history is pure myth."¹

It seemed obvious to me in those early days that I'd have to look at many more reports to have any hope of understanding anything at all about the creatures and why they were being sighted. Luckily, the reports continued to roll in from all over the

United States, Canada, and other places, even though I hadn't been actively soliciting them, and after ten years or so I began to publish them online and in my books.

Alas, interesting as these reports were, I have found it is much easier to record encounters than to understand them. Twenty-six years of "chasing" monsters later, it still comes down to this: Are these sightings simply a combination of mistaken species of known animals, truly undiscovered animals,¹ hoaxes, and coincidence, or are they somehow—perhaps through the power of myth and legends—intertwined with the human mind? Some researchers suspect these creatures spring from another reality, and that they use the human mind or spirit to project themselves into our world as perceivable beings. Many Native American beliefs hold the more specific view that Sasquatch, dogmen, and other such creatures use freshwater springs as portals between the spirit world and our own. According to the online Hočąk Encyclopedia, the lakes surrounding Wisconsin's state capital, Madison, all serve the spirit world as trans-realm conduits. It states, to cite just one example, "The old Winnebago Indian name for Lake Wingra was *Ki-Chunk-och-hep-er-rab*, meaning the 'place where the turtle comes up.'² And also presumably goes back down.

When all speculation is said and done, however, there is still that question that fans, enthusiasts, and researchers of every stripe want answered: Are the creatures something we would consider "real," or are they entirely "other world"? My suspicion these days is that they may be both, and that our reality operates on a scale from dense matter to realms the human eye cannot see.

I'll do my best to keep seeking answers here, although nothing absolute is promised. There were and are countless other investigators and researchers diligently seeking the same truths about

other cryptids (hidden or unknown animals) like Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster. Again, thanks largely to the Internet and TV shows about mystery beasts, more and more creature hunters continually join the ranks. There is now a small army of cryptid enthusiasts combing the far corners of the globe for unknown beasts and searching for the truth in legend and lore.

So why hasn't this small army yet proven these creatures exist? I don't believe it's entirely the fault of the investigators. Keep in mind that certain mysterious entities such as, say, werewolves, refuse to be limited to any one definition, and the stories told about them morph more swiftly than can the most talented human shapeshifter. And just when it seems we have one old legend pinned down to help prove an origin, another version or a bothersome contradiction will pop up and we have to start over or look elsewhere.

As the editors of the very helpful book *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* put it, "In the nineteenth century, when the term *folklore* was coined, many people assumed that folklore, like a fossil, preserves a frozen image of the ancient past . . . To the contrary, through close observation, folklorists have noticed that folklore tends to be extraordinarily dynamic, extremely prone to change with changing times and environments."³ That means we are shooting almost blindly at *two* moving targets—the legends and the present creatures they describe.

Knowing that these myths and legends change throughout time and location presents an extra, but not insurmountable, challenge. Despite adaptations, the creatures remain largely recognizable through the centuries, probably because their stories are so often repeated. We hear tales of Centaur sightings in

twentieth-century Illinois, right across the river from St. Louis, and our imaginations conjure that same image so vivid in Greek mythology of a four-legged, equine body fronted with the torso, head, and arms of a man.

Still, thanks to the wide dissemination of today's many styles of art and illustration, the "Centaur" sighted today may not look *exactly* like the man-horse described in days of old. It may display a beefier torso and sport a contemporary hairstyle. It may also have forsaken its forest home to lurk—as reported in one sighting we will discuss later—near the St. Louis arch. Or it may choose to play hide-and-seek with Bigfoot rather than battle the Lapiths at Hippodamia's wedding. Either way, a Centaur is still thought of as half horse, half man. And if his majestic appearance ever begins to fade in our minds, we need only consult a book on Greek mythology or watch one of the films in the *Harry Potter* series to remind us of what a Centaur should look like.

Summing it up, the Centaur, the dog woman, the Bigfoot, the giant Man Bats, even the werewolfish Beast of Bray Road . . . all still pretty much resemble their immortal story selves in today's representations. That is how eyewitnesses know them when they see them, even as the legends grow ever darker as spooky things like killer clowns jostle their way into the spotlight. Perhaps something beyond mere literature of the distant past or Internet-fueled legends of today really does help preserve these basic forms and manifest the scream-your-face-off monsters we're all so anxious to see.

CHAPTER 1

Lake Snakes to Slenderman: Modern Legends

THE STUDY OF FOLKLORE is a scholarly discipline equal to any other and commands its own field of inquiry. The good news is there will be no pop quiz here. I'm strictly an amateur folklorist myself. But like any subject pinned down and formalized by academia, folklore has its own accepted lingo. Luckily, the short list will do for our purposes. But the terms—*folklore*, *legend*, and *myth*—are not as interchangeable as casual users might think. And merely pasting the correct label on the story type of a creature encounter won't prove the true nature of that cryptid. The folklore/legend labels are simply tools to help us categorize things that lounge beyond our comprehension—things such as, perhaps, legends of meat hooks guarded by dog women, to be examined in our next chapter. But before we run off with a pack of hounds to bay at Pennsylvania's October moon, let's go over the basic categories.