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From Wild Man to Monster:

The Historical Evolution of Bigfoot in New York State

BY ROBERT E. BARTHOLOMEW AND BRIAN REGAL

When the first European settlers entered what is now New York State and its environs, they brought with them not only their material culture, but also an array of beliefs in mythical beings. Such creatures had been part of the European psyche for centuries. A central character in this pantheon was the “wild man” thought to inhabit the darker parts of the European countryside. Also known as the *woodwose*, *wooser*, or “wild man of the woods,” it was conspicuous in folklore between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries and holds a prominent place in later medieval European artwork and literature. A wild man’s image even appears in many coats-of-arms and as a herald figure in book illustrations. During the later Middle Ages, “wild people” were thought to be ordinary humans, such as hermits and eccentrics: the socially marginal and mentally deranged, who had turned to life in the wilderness and began to regress, growing a thick coat of hair and foraging for food like a wild animal. The character of the wild man did not remain a feral human. The image evolved slowly over time into a more malevolent and less human form. By reviewing sightings of man-like monsters in nineteenth-century and contemporary New York, this transformation can be traced.

Not surprisingly, the early pioneers of what is now New York State reported their own wild men. Some of these accounts undoubtedly depict hermits or deranged individuals whose dishevelled and unkempt appearance led to the conclusion that they were degenerates regressed to a feral state after living in the wild. The first New World account of a wild man in the region occurred in 1818 near Ellisburg, close to

the Canadian border, when a “gentleman of unquestionable veracity” reported seeing a man dashing through the woods. It was covered in hair and bent forward as it moved. A massive search ensued, involving hundreds of residents, but to no avail (*Exeter Watchman* 1818). Two decades later, in August 1838, a boy told his father of encountering a hairy boy in the town of Silver Lake, Pennsylvania, on the New York border:

The boy was sent to work in the backwoods near the New York State line. He took with him a gun, and was told by his father to shoot anything he might see, except persons or cattle. After working for a while, he heard some person, a little brother he supposed, coming toward him whistling quite merrily. It came within a few rods of him and stopped. He said it looked like a human being, covered with black hair, about the size of his brother, who was six or seven years old. His gun was some little distance off, and he was very much frightened. He, however, got his gun and shot at the animal, but trembled so that he could not hold it still. (*Dorchester Aurora* 1838)

During the summer of 1869, a wild man was spotted by at least one hundred residents in the vicinity of Woodhill and Troups ville in Steuben County. It made shrieking sounds as it raced through the countryside. An eyewitness said it moved “with a springing, jerking hitch in his gait [that] gave him more the appearance of a wild animal than a human being.” One man got a close-up view: “The long, matted hair; the thick, black, uncombed beard; the wild, glaring, bloodshot eyeballs, which seemed

bursting from their sockets; the swage, haggard, unearthly countenance; the wild, beastly appearance of this thing, whether man or animal, has haunted me” (*Evening Gazette* 1869). Later that year, a wild man was observed eating minnows near Sucker Brook, one mile south of Ogdensburg along the Canadian border. While human in appearance, its observers said its “arms and legs were covered in long hair” (*Plattsburgh Sentinel* 1869).

In March 1883, a wild man was spotted in the northeastern portion of New York at Port Henry on Lake Champlain. Witnesses said the hair on the creature was so thick that it resembled an overcoat (*Plattsburgh Sentinel* 1883). Between August and November 1883, the tiny community of Maine in western Broome County, was the site of a spate of wild man sightings. The creature was described as “low in stature, covered with hair, and running while bent close to the ground.” It was reported to have made frightening shrieks and piercing cries (*Free Press* 1883).

These nineteenth-century accounts depict a remarkably similar form: human in appearance, with animal behaviour and physical characteristics. Typically hunched over as it ran through the wilderness uttering shrieks, cries, and whistles, it was covered with an extraordinary amount of hair and occasionally possessed a beard. Near the turn of the twentieth century, sightings of wild men began to dramatically shift to descriptions of ape- or monkey-like creatures that often possessed superhuman strength. On the night of July 26, 1895, in the Delaware County resort town of Margaretville, Peter Thomas was driving

a team of horses on a lone road when a “wild-eyed man or ape” stood in the road ahead. Thomas said the creature had “long and hairy arms” and was “uttering a raucous, inarticulate cry.” He said the creature twisted the neck of one of his horses before dragging it into the darkness. The creature was “seven feet high, of human shape, covered with hair.” The next day, local farmer John Cook said he shot “a ferocious ape-like being,” before it grabbed him and threw him to the ground. The wild man stood “about seven feet tall, entirely nude, covered with black hair, with a long beard and with teeth which project from its mouth like fangs” (*Newburg Daily Express* 1895; *New York Daily Herald* 1895).

A wild man resembling a gorilla was spotted several times in April and May 1899 in the small village of Johnsonburg in Wyoming County in western New York. Missing chickens and sheep were linked to the creature’s appearance. When some women strolling through the woods saw the creature, they said it “ran swiftly up a huge tree and was lost sight of” (*Oswego Daily Times* 1899). At about the same time, hunters were scouring the woods for a wild man in the town of Dresden, in the Finger Lakes region of central New York. One witness who reportedly bumped into it in the bushes said it resembled a “gorilla, being covered with a dark sort of hair or skin,” yet he also said it was wearing a red shirt (*Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* 1899).

During the early twentieth century, sightings of ape-like creatures in the Long Island countryside and the suburbs of New York City became more common. While the escaped zoo animal or pet hypothesis was invoked, no escapes were ever confirmed, and no creature was ever captured or shot (*New York Herald* 1909; *New York Herald Tribune* 1934). Since the middle of the twentieth century, reports of large, hairy monsters have dominated the Bigfoot landscape. Under a full moon, around 11:00 p.m. on September 24, 1980, seventy-year-old Kinderhook grandmother Martha Hallenbeck and several relatives reported encountering a large hulking creature

outside Martha’s rural home. Capital District film critic and radio personality Bruce Hallenbeck later wrote a letter detailing this incident involving his grandmother to *Albany Times-Union* newspaper columnist Barney Fowler. The letter stated in part: “She was terrified; it screamed, moaned, made guttural noises, and finally my nephew got his shotgun and fired into the air. It moved away, walking on TWO legs, such as a human would do.” When Fowler published the letter, it triggered a deluge of encounters among area residents.

There have been so many sightings in the Kinderhook area since the late 1970s that locals have dubbed it the “Kinderhook Creature.” One incident reportedly took place on a night in November 1980, when Barry Knights and Russell Zbierski were walking on a desolate road near Cushing’s Hill when they noticed noises coming from both sides of the road. In a 1980 interview with Bruce Hallenbeck, the pair said that five huge, hairy creatures with cone-shaped heads and no necks suddenly converged on the road ahead. The men ran in the opposite direction. At about the same time, a woman just down the road said she saw a huge hairy creature that walked on two legs remove food from trash cans by her garage. She told Knights and Zbierski that her dog was so frightened that it began to spin in circles and wet itself.

During February 1982, two Whitehall police officers were on routine patrol, driving along a remote stretch of Route 22 near East Bay at 4:30 a.m., when they were startled by a huge hairy humanoid standing seven-and-a-half to eight feet tall. In a 1982 interview with Paul Bartholomew, officer Dan Gordon said he looked on in disbelief as the creature crossed the road in a flash. It then climbed up a steep embankment and out of sight. Shaken, Gordon pulled out his service revolver and walked around, but it had disappeared into the night. Gordon said it was covered in mangy, dirty, dark brown fur and resembled an ape with poor posture, as its shoulders slumped. It had long arms that swung back and forth as it took massive strides. He said its speed was remarkable,

noting that a “relay runner would have trouble keeping up with [it].”

On a chilly, moonlit morning in August 1998, two men were driving on North Bush Road near Caroga Lake in Fulton County at about 2:00 a.m., when they pulled their truck to the roadside to urinate. “Chris” returned to the vehicle before his companion, and when he flicked on the high beams, he saw a huge figure standing only 20 feet away. It was seven to eight feet tall—part human, part animal—and had a flat face and arms that swung in an exaggerated motion. Covered in long, brown hair, Chris said, “It stood perfectly still for a minute and then grunted at us. Then it turned and walked away. It didn’t move like a man. It kind of swaggered back and forth, like it lunged each leg forward when it walked” (Bigfoot Research Organization 2002).

Since the 1950s we are confronted almost exclusively with reports of a hulking, hair-covered creature, typically standing about seven feet tall. Even though it is occasionally described as ape-like, absent is the beard, occasional aggression, and chasing after humans. It is less human and more beast. While a few modern-day witnesses have reacted fearfully, most view the “monster” as peaceful, even harmless. Since the 1970s, there have been several extremely strange reports. Bigfoot has been seen near UFOs and gliding across roads or rough fields in a quasi-supernatural fashion, while in other parts of the country, Bigfoot has been described as transparent or disappearing in a flash of light. This increase in Bigfoot’s powers coincided with a spate of books and TV documentaries on the topic beginning in the early 1970s, which also appear to have contributed to a more uniform image of the monster. This version of Bigfoot as a possibly paranormal or extraterrestrial creature, however, elevates it to supernatural status. Modern-day Bigfoot, in fact, is essentially an overgrown fairy in a more acceptable guise.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the stubborn persistence of Bigfoot sightings and beliefs are anti-scientific symbols in an increasingly secular age.

According to Ernestine McHugh, a cultural anthropologist from Rochester: “A lot of people are disenchanted with everyday life, and they long for something that seems magical. We’ve even domesticated Halloween as a day for children. So for many people, Bigfoot is one of the few avenues left to the uncanny” (Pitcher 2001). Peter Dendle concurs: “To be on to something that even the professors of Harvard do not know about . . . can be very empowering in an age of routine deference to higher bodies of institutional knowledge.” He postulates that the contemporary search for Bigfoot may represent a “quest for magic and wonder in a world many perceive as having lost its mystique” (Dendle 2006, 200). It is clear from the web sites of the dozens of Bigfoot groups that are now mushrooming across the United States that many Sasquatch hunters view this rare creature as a poster child for the dangers of scientific “progress,” which is widely viewed as threatening the planet with the consequences of the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, a real estate dealer in Florida recently claimed to channel the telepathic thoughts of a Bigfoot. Its message: concern over global warming and unhappiness with the Iraq war.

Whether real or imaginary, the study of wild men and big hairy monsters is a legitimate and fascinating part of our social and cultural history. Reports of such creatures behave as if they are themselves flesh-and-blood

organisms: the legends grow and evolve over time, producing an ever-changing species. North American reports of man-like monsters, Sasquatch, and Bigfoot are a form of living folklore stoked by the mass media, misperceptions, hoaxes, and tall tales. Their study can shed light on the changing conditions of life in New York State. ▼

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