

Hain't Neither: Tales For Campfires And Halloween

By Todd Wilkinson and Champ Herren

Spooky Ozarks Tales That Never Happened And Some That Just Might Have

Every town and county in America has its collection of local legends, the majority which have very little basis in fact. Most of these legends have been embellished over the years, as one generation passes them along to the next, adding their own variations to the oft-told story. The Ozarks are no exception in regards to local legends of “horribles and haints.” Following are backgrounds of several well-known stories that continue to terrify those who hear them, even if they “hain’t true.”

Winoka Lodge

One of the most famous examples is the oft-repeated story of Winoka Lodge in south Springfield, Mo. Countless Springfieldians over the years have heard the tale of “The Camp Where The Girl Scouts Were Murdered” on the banks of Lake Springfield. It’s one of those places that every kid in Springfield believes to be haunted, or used by a Satanic cult for secret rituals—there are many different versions of this legend—and yet there is no evidence of any murder or any other reason for Winoka to be “haunted.” Most likely the legends began because of its remote location and the many abandoned buildings on the property. Yet, as with many urban legends, there is a grain of truth. Local librarians are very familiar with Winoka and answer questions about the story on a regular basis, especially around Halloween.

Several years ago the Local History librarians discovered a newspaper article from the 1970s that discussed a murder



(Photo: undergroundozarks.com)

Winoka burned in 1977. All that remains are crumbling foundations and vine-covered chimneys.

at a Girl Scout camp in Locust Grove, Oklahoma. According to the article in *The Daily Admorite*, three girl scouts were murdered in June, 1977, and the camp, which had been operating since the late 1920s, was permanently closed the day after the murders. Since Winoka has never been associated with the Girl Scouts of America, and was in fact private property used as a hunting and fish-

ing lodge, it would appear that the story of the Locust Grove murders have somehow been transferred over to Winoka Lodge in the years since.

The “Albino Farm” and the “Haunted Bridge”

Another story that has fascinated Springfield teenagers since the 1930s (at

least) is the Albino Farm and the Haunted or Hatchet-man's Bridge in north Springfield. The stories are related, and yet so many versions of the story exist today that the truth behind them may never totally be found. We do know some of the story, though.

The "Albino Farm," actually "Springlawn Farm," was owned by a family named Sheedy. Over the years, the farm, located north of Greenlawn Cemetery, has been associated with several legends that tell of a "colony" of albinos who were held captive on the farm, or a mean albino caretaker who used to scare trespassers away from the farm by carrying a huge ax. Another legend told of "hatchet-man's bridge," just to the north of the farm.

In one version of the legend, a guy and his girl happened to be driving across the bridge at midnight, and their car unexpectedly stopped. The boy got out to go for help and told the girl to stay inside the car with the doors locked. The boy did not return after about an hour, and the girl soon fell asleep, only to be awakened by a series of loud "thumps" on the roof of the car. The girl, now afraid for her life, waited until morning before getting out of the car, only to discover the mutilated body of her boyfriend hanging upside down from a tree above the car, his head hitting the car roof!

Another version of the legend surfaced in 2002 in a column by Springfield columnist Sarah Overstreet, which told of an "insane physician" and his "experiments" on albinos being held captive at the farm. Another legend tells of an "Albino Cemetery" on the property, yet no evidence can be found in local Springfield cemetery records that such a cemetery exists.

So, what is the truth behind the Albino Farm? Springlawn Farm was actually owned by a prosperous Irish immigrant named Mike Sheedy, who bought the land in North Campbell Township in 1873. By all accounts, Springlawn was a prosperous and well-kept farm, and Sheedy was an active member of the community and the Democratic Party in particular.

Sheedy had a number of children, and local legend says that some of the daughters never married. These sisters attempted to keep the place up, but by the 1970s, all three had passed away, and the farmhouse burned down in 1980. The farm had a two-story, 12-room frame house and a large barn. Only the



(Photo: undergroundozarks.com)

What could be better as a source for spooky tales as the old outbuildings and overgrown silo at the "Albino Farm?"

foundations of these buildings remain today, along with a well house, a smaller barn and a round building, and these are now threatened by development.

Now, how did this prosperous farm of a prominent Springfieldian get transformed into a "house of horror?" Like Winoka Lodge, we will probably never now for certain. Most likely it was due to the fact that over time, the farm fell to ruin. Throw in a couple of spinster sisters with a run-down farm, add a gruff caretaker, and you have the recipe for instant urban legend. The late John Hulston, a prominent local historian, interviewed a Sheedy descendant who believed that the family "may" have had an albino hand working at one time. Others believe the legend began with Hillcrest High School students in the 1960s.

In the 1940s, local historian and folklorist May Kennedy McCord believed that many of the local ghost stories and legends of the Ozarks were disappearing. The reason for this was due to the fact that "there are so few really lonesome places nowadays," as Vance Randolph quoted her in *Ozark Magic and Folklore*. In order to raise "a good crop of ghosts," you must have a lot of old mills, deserted houses and covered bridges—and these romantic spots are not as common as they used to be. Sadly, this statement is still correct: The old "Haunted/Hatchet-man's Bridge," the rickety one-lane iron structure which haunted the

nightmares of many a Springfield kid, has been torn down and replaced with a simple concrete slab—not designed to produce a good scare. And rumors are now circulating the "Albino Farm" is to be razed to make way for a subdivision. It seems that our modern world has no need for ghosts.

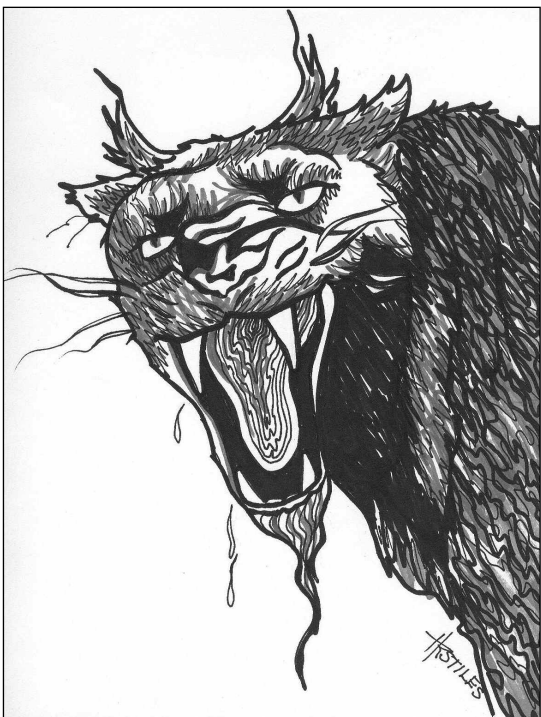
While albinos and murdered teenagers make good story fare over burnt hotdogs and marshmallows, equally good yarns can be spun from legends concerning our local flora and fauna. These tales are comprised of great felines the size of calves and creeping stinking hominids that wander about the lonely places where native hillfolk seldom venture. These tales told a century ago in rough hewn cabins to the flicker of firelight still delight audiences today. One only has to imagine the granny woman leaning forward in her chair, a gnarled hand resting upon a cane, surrounded by a wide-eyed group in gingham and denim—mouths agape and spellbound by her mastery of terror.

The Ozark Howler

In the hills the legend of large black varmints skulking about are as old as time. The Scots who settled here had tales of the cu' sith; a large vicious black dog that roamed remote sections of the British Isles. Rather than scientific fact, this legend finds its origins in the desire of weary parents to curb bad behavior of their children. As this ancient race immigrated to the New World the cu' sith morphed into "booger dogs" and "black dogs of death" which were ill-fated omens for anyone unlucky enough to see one.

If you were to ask any group of natives whether or not they have seen a black panther, many would respond with tales of ancestors who were chased home one night or fell to one of the great beasts while hunting. Nearly every county has a Panther Creek or Hollow or some such place name attributed to one of these great windies. The scientific community maintains that there are no large black cats in the continental United States. However the legends persist—told and retold at night by hunters and farmers who knew the land intimately, tales that were set amongst the heavy timber and craggy knolls of the Ozarks. This is where lithe shapes appear in the moonlight and every rustle of leaves fills a body with dread. Here is where the Ozark Howler prowls.

The Ozark Howler is a large black cat



(Drawing: Helen Rogers Stiles)

There's little to go by for a likeness of an Ozark Howler except imagination.

(or dog by older accounts) with glowing eyes and tufts of hair that resemble horns and a beard. Their name comes from the terrifying howl emitted in the depths of night that, when heard, leaves brave men shaking. Sightings of the big critter continue to occur, although cryptozoologists can't agree on what it is. One plausible theory is that the old time black panthers, along with the howler, are jaguars who have roamed far north from Mexico and Central America. Others maintain that it is more likely that the phenomenon is caused by cougars exhibiting traits of melanism, (dark coloring). Most agree this is not a yet undiscovered species. Google "Ozark Howler" and decide for yourself.

Hillbilly Bigfoot

The Bigfoot phenomenon is not reserved for those in the Pacific Northwest. Native American and contemporary reports alike, place North America's favorite cryptid right here in the hills. In the last few years the hairy hominid has been sighted in both Christian and Greene counties by witnesses who appear credible, (i.e., not intoxicated and no desire for gain by telling). One only has to look at the website of the Bigfoot Research Organization to see the reports of Bigfoot activity in southwest Missouri and northern Arkansas. In the 1970s the

area around Louisiana, Missouri, was inundated with Bigfoot sightings. Volumes of reports describe a great stinking beast seen walking about in ape-like fashion with arms swinging, emitting vocalizations that ran the gamut from howls to growls. In a short time the national press caught on and dubbed it: "MOMO" (Missouri Monster). Many credible eye witnesses were interviewed and plaster casts were made of large tracks. MOMO, however, remained uncooperative for the plethora of would-be photographers roaming the North Missouri farms and woodlands. Before very long it became apparent that MOMO had vanished. Did it grow tired of the new celebrity status and move on? Or did it never exist? It is hard to say. However with many folks, *seeing is believing*, and reports on a computer screen or in a newspaper are not enough to sway opinions. They want hard evidence, like a carcass. So unless you heed some less than credible sources, there are no captured bigfoots, nor has an autopsy been performed. Like many a tale it is what the teller makes it. Bigfoot remains for some a mystery and for others simply firelight fodder.

Our Ozark heritage refines storytelling to a fine art. So take the next opportunity given to you by a power outage or when the street lamp eerie light on the sidewalk to tell your companions

of the howler and MOMO as well as of the Hatchetman of the Haunted Bridge. Start out something like this;

"...as the wind chills and the trees divest themselves of their leaves in a custom old as time, it becomes the season to take extra care. As daylight grows dim on that meandering path through the hills...take heed and quicken your step! The cedars loom large and the contorted black jack becomes every fearful shape to the mortal mind. Around the next bend or shadowy place lies the unknown...Take heed...quicken your step and beware!"

—Todd Wilkinson and Champ Herren are Ozark storytellers. Todd is a librarian at Ozarks Technical Community College and Champ is an insurance agent in Marshfield.

Like Spooky Tales?

Storytelling is one particular look at an event or legend and this is merely our version. Use it around the fire and enjoy. If you have another take on these or any supernatural tales, or you would like to book the authors to spin lies for your event, contact them at wilkinst@otc.edu or champherren@yahoo.com.

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