

The Legend of the Jersey Devil **(A brief history in four parts, by Josh Sanofsky)**

Part 1 - Origins

Almost everyone who lives in the northeastern United States has heard of the Jersey Devil. It's one of the most famous early American legends, and one of the most often investigated and sought-after cryptids; the earliest reported encounters with it date back as far as the late 1700s or early 1800s. And as with many legends, there are almost as many different versions of the creature's origins as there have been sightings of it.

The most common version of the legend goes something like this: In the 1700s, a woman named Deborah Smith emigrated from England to marry a Mr. Leeds, and went to live in the area of New Jersey now known as the Pine Barrens. When the story of the Jersey Devil truly begins, Mrs. Leeds had given birth to twelve children, and had discovered that she was about to give birth to her thirteenth.

Some versions of the story say that when she learned that she was pregnant with her thirteenth child, she reacted with fury and disgust, crying out "I hope it's a devil!" or "May it be a devil!" Other versions say that she invoked the devil during the particularly difficult and painful labor that followed. Be that as it may, when the child was born it was either immediately known to be unnatural by its appearance - being born with horns on a horse-like head, wings and a tail - or shortly after its birth changed into a devil-like creature (depending on the version).

There are even versions of the versions. One says that rather than cursing the child herself or calling on the devil during the birth, the child's devilish nature was the result of a family curse. It doesn't say which side of the family, though. Another version says that the creature visited Mrs. Leeds every day; she would stand at her door and tell it to leave, until finally it left and never returned.

Some versions say it was the sixth child, or the eight, tenth, twelfth or thirteenth. Some say it was born normal, others deformed. Some say the mother immediately drove it out of the house, while others say she confined it to the cellar or attic.

Another popular version of the legend says that a Mrs. Shrouds of Leeds Point, New Jersey, made a wish that if she ever had another child, she wanted it to be a devil. Her next child was born misshapen and deformed (though not necessarily unnatural). She kept it hidden in the

house so curious neighbors wouldn't be able to see him. Finally, one stormy night the child flapped its arms - which turned into wings - and escaped up the chimney, never to be seen by the family again.

Burlington, New Jersey claims (as do a few other locations) to be the birthplace of the Jersey Devil. They say that in 1735, Mother Leeds was in labor on a stormy night with her friends and family gathered around her. Rumors said that she was a witch, and that the child's father might be the devil himself. When it was born, it appeared to be perfectly normal, then changed from a normal baby into a creature with hooves, a horse's head, bat wings and a forked tail. It proceeded to beat everyone present, then flew up the chimney. It circled the village before heading toward the pines, and commenced to harry the town until a clergyman banished the creature for 100 years in 1740.

In every version of the story, there are some consistent details. The name "Leeds" enters into many of them, either as a location or the name of the cursed family. Most agree on the final appearance of the creature as it left its birthplace, as described in the previous article.

There is also potentially some historical precedent for the story. One historian discovered that a Daniel Leeds owned land in Great Egg Harbor, New Jersey, in 1699, and that his family lived in Leeds Point. He also discovered that a Samuel Shrouds came to Little Egg Harbor in 1735, and lived across the river from the house of Mother Leeds. The Leeds and Shrouds names appear in many versions of the legend.

Another professor found that a "devil" was mentioned in historical and religious writings from the Burlington area as early as 1735. He noted that the name "Burlington" was used to refer to an area of New Jersey from the city of Burlington to the Atlantic Ocean, which encompasses Leeds Point and several other locations associated with the legend.

It's worth noting that the Pine Barrens itself is a fascinating region of heavily forested land. The area's soil is sandy, acidic and nutrient poor, which led to sparse settlement as it was poor farming land. In spite of this, the uncommon conditions there enable the Pine Barrens to support a diverse spectrum of unusual plant life, including orchids, carnivorous plants (such as the Venus Flytrap), and a rare pygmy variant of the Pitch Pine, amongst others. Even before the birth of the Jersey Devil, the Lenni Lenape Native American tribes of the region referred to the area as "Popuessing," meaning "place of the dragon."

All of these details have to have come from somewhere, and that somewhere would be the

huge body of encounters people have had with the creature over the past 275-odd years. We'll look at some of those encounters in the next part.

Part 2 - Encounters

The Jersey Devil has built up a vast collection of encounter reports since its first appearance in the 1700s. All of them come from the area in and around the Pine Barrens, and the majority of them are by reliable witnesses. Here are some of the most notable ones:

In 1819, at the behest of President James Monroe, Commodore Stephen Decatur was visiting the Hannover Mill works to inspect the quality of his cannonballs as they were being forged. While there, he reported that he sighted a flying creature matching the Jersey Devil's description, and that he fired at and hit it with a cannonball...to no effect. Work that was done on Decatur's house in Washington, D.C. in 2007-2008 turned up papers suggesting that this encounter might have been something more than chance - he was definitely in New Jersey at the time testing the quality of the cannonballs produced by Batsto and Hannover, but was evidently accompanied by Dr. James Killian, a famous paranormalist and cryptid hunter of the time. Stories collected from throughout New Jersey and southeastern Pennsylvania have the two men in pursuit of the creature for some months.

The writings of Joseph Bonaparte, the eldest brother of Emperor Napoleon, indicate that he saw and fired upon a creature matching the Jersey Devil's description while hunting on his Bordentown estate in 1820. Like Decatur's encounter, shooting at the creature had no effect.

In 1840, the Jersey Devil was blamed for several livestock killings; similar attacks were reported again in 1841, accompanied by strange tracks and "unearthly" screams. There were similar reports again in 1859 and a flurry of sightings in 1873, followed by a report of it terrifying children in 1887. Again, as in Decatur's encounter, there are reports of people shooting at it to no effect.

On July 27th, 1937, a creature matching the description of the Jersey Devil was seen by many of the residents of Downingtown, Pennsylvania.

In 1960, unusual tracks were found and accompanied by loud shrieking heard near Mays Landing. That same year, merchants around Camden offered a \$10,000 reward for the capture

of the Jersey Devil, saying that they would even build a private zoo to house it if it could be brought in alive.

In 1990, several soldiers from Fort Dix reported witnessing a strange creature matching the Jersey Devil's description while on maneuvers.

In 2007, a creature with a horse's head and bat like wings was reported to walk in front of a couple of hikers in Wharton State Forest. The following January 21st (2008), a man in Eldora heard a strange screech and saw a creature matching the Jersey Devil's description perched on top of his chicken coop. He said that the large winged creature flew off after being startled by his cell phone ringing.

In 2008, the *New York Times* was given no less than ten reports of encounters with the Jersey Devil by a group local to the Pine Barrens that collected them.

The list of sightings is seemingly endless, and continues to this day. But by far the most spectacular event associated with the Jersey Devil is the so-called "Phenomenal Week" of January 16th - 23rd, 1909. During those days, sightings of the Jersey Devil were reported by thousands of people in the area surrounding the Pine Barrens, including:

Dozens of people sighted the creature flying over Woodbury on the 16th. On the 17th and 18th, strange and seemingly impossible tracks were found in Burlington, NJ; Bristol, PA; and several other towns. The tracks were said to appear and disappear at random, sometimes even appearing in the snow on top of houses or passing beneath and through impossibly low or small spaces.

On the 19th, Nelson Evans and his wife, of Gloucester, reportedly saw the creature outside their windows at 2:30 AM and provided a detailed description of it: "It was about three feet and a half high, with a head like a collie dog and a face like a horse. It had a long neck, wings about two feet long, and its back legs were like those of a crane, and it had horse's hooves. It walked on its back legs and held up two short front legs with paws on them. It didn't use the front legs at all while we were watching."

The same day, two Gloucester hunters tracked the creature's trail for twenty miles. It appeared to "jump" fences and squeeze under eight-inch gaps. Similar trails were reported in several other towns the same day.

On the 20th, Haddonfield and Collingswood formed posses to find the devil. Both groups reportedly watch the creature fly towards Moorestown, where it was reported being seen by at least two more people.

On the 21st, the creature attacked a trolley car in Haddon Heights, but was chased off, resulting in trolley cars in several nearby towns beginning to maintain armed guards. Several poultry farmers found their chickens dead that day, and the devil was reported to collide with an electric rail in Clayton without being affected. A telegraph worker near Atlantic City claimed to have shot the devil, only to watch it limp off into the woods - it was apparently unfazed, as it continued rampaging through Philadelphia, PA and West Collingswood, NJ. In West Collingswood, the devil seemed poised to attack nearby people and was supposedly hosed by the local fire department to chase it off. It reemerged in Camden to injure a dog; the first reported attack on a living creature.

There were a few more sightings on the 22nd, but the damage had been done - widespread newspaper coverage had led to a panic throughout the Delaware Valley, resulting in a number of school and business closings.

It can't be denied that people have been seeing something in and around the Pine Barrens over the past 275 years or so. But what? In the next part, we'll explore some of the theories people have put forth to explain what the Jersey Devil might be.

Part 3 - What is it?

We've looked at the origin of the Jersey Devil legend, and explored some of the vast number of experiences people have reported over the years. With such a huge number of reported encounters, often by large groups of people rather than individuals, surely there must be something behind it. But what?

The most mundane explanations go back to the original legend and tie into it. We know, for example, that in 1735 a woman by the name of Leeds did live in the region in question. She is known to have had a large number of children, perhaps as many as twelve or thirteen - it wasn't that uncommon at the time. Given her likely age after bearing so many children, it's possible that she had reached a point close to menopause, where birth defects occur at a greater rate

and pregnancies are higher risk.

It's not unreasonable to hypothesize that last child could have been born deformed - and at the time, deformed children were thought to be the spawn of the devil. It wasn't uncommon for one to be locked away or hidden in a small room to avoid public scorn or - even worse - the mother being accused of witchcraft. Such a child could have been exposed to the public at some point, and the legend is born.

But as reasonable and likely as that sounds, it can't explain the years of encounters and sightings that have continued right up to modern day. Needless to say, there have been as many explanations suggested as there have been encounters with the creature.

Biologists and Zoologists have suggested that people might have been seeing a species of bird that was once indigenous to the New Jersey area - the Sandhill Crane. It regularly stands 40 – 48 inches tall, has a wingspan of up to seven feet, and its call is a loud (and some say unnatural-sounding) screech. But land development has driven the Sandhill Crane south and out of the region, and the crane is an herbivore where the Jersey Devil has been known to attack animals and steal livestock. Not to mention the fact that the rest of the Devil's description really doesn't fit...

Others have suggested that the Jersey Devil might be (or be related to) the Hammer Headed Fruit Bat (*Hypsignathus Monstrosus*). While there is a striking resemblance to the description of the Jersey Devil, none are known to exist in the wild in America (they're native to Africa), and the bat in question rarely grows more than eleven inches tall - which is large for a bat, but not near the reported size of the Jersey Devil.

One particularly wild theory suggests that the Jersey Devil is actually a 'survival' - that is, an animal which has survived past the commonly accepted point of extinction, like the Celocanth. In this case, people have suggested that the Jersey Devil might be a group of pterodactyls that have survived throughout the years. Needless to say the physical details are only a rough fit at best, and it seems extremely unlikely that such a survival could have occurred.

But there are even wilder theories. It has been suggested that the Jersey Devil could be the descendant of another creature of legend - the dragon. Both creatures are said to have long necks, wings, and the ability to fly; and in some encounters with the Jersey Devil, it has been said to breathe fire like a dragon. But dragons are, of course, purely mythical. Aren't they? The Native American tribes of the region did call the area "Popuessing," which means "place of the

dragon."

There are, of course, a large number of supernatural theories about the Jersey Devil. Some people have asked why the Jersey Devil has to be a creature that can be explained by scientific means. Couldn't it truly be a supernatural entity? After all, it has survived for so long; been shot without taking harm; its tracks have been followed to and through places that no natural creature of its size could have passed through; its tracks have been reported to change size mid-stride, and even to change shape; and it has eluded every attempt at capture.

Needless to say, that's going to be a hard theory to prove or disprove.

Coming back around from the supernatural, cryptozoologists have put forth two 'real world' explanations that many Jersey Devil researchers support.

First, the Jersey Devil could be a hybrid animal of some sort (like a mule, for example). There are two problems with this theory: hybrids tend to be sterile, so reproduction (and thus an ongoing population) is unlikely without intervention; and what creatures could be mated that would produce that unlikely combination of features?

Second, cryptozoologists have suggested - as they have for many unexplained creatures - that it might simply be a previously undiscovered and unidentified form of animal life. New animals are discovered daily somewhere in the world - it's small-minded to believe that we know every type of creature that inhabits the Earth. Perhaps there is a creature native to the Pine Barrens that lives nowhere else on the planet and has never been captured or killed by humans. Still, with more than seven million people living in the state of New Jersey, it seems unlikely that such a creature could have gone unseen (and uncaptured and unkilld) for this long. Unlikely, but not impossible.

Maybe it's one or more (or all) of the above. To date, we just don't know. But obviously, some explanations are more likely than others. Whatever the Jersey Devil is, one thing about it is undeniable: it has made an indelible impact on popular American culture. We'll look at that in the next part.

Part 4 - The Jersey Devil in Popular Culture

Whether you're prepared to believe in the Jersey Devil or not; whether you find any of the stories about encounters with it or explanations of its origin and nature believable, one thing about it cannot be denied: It has had an impact on popular American culture. Like many cryptids (especially Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster), the Jersey Devil has slowly insinuated itself into television, film, music, literature, and even sports, amongst other things.

For example, in what may be a rare honor for a creature of legend, the Jersey Devil has had not one but two professional hockey teams named after it; the Eastern Hockey League Jersey Devils (1964 – 1973), and the National Hockey League New Jersey Devils (renamed from the Colorado Rockies when the team relocated to New Jersey in 1982).

The Jersey Devil has a United States Air National Guard fighter unit named after it; the USAF 177th Fighter Wing, nicknamed "Jersey Devils," operate within the borders of the Pine Barrens region.

On television, the Jersey Devil has made appearances in or been used as the basis for other creatures in a wide variety of shows, ranging from an episode of the X-Files to a recent episode of Supernatural. It made appearances in a few cartoons, including the Extreme Ghostbusters episode "The Jersey Devil" (naturally) in 1997, and an episode of The Real Adventures of Jonny Quest called "The Spectre of the Pine Barrens" (I'm sensing a pattern here).

There have been several reality programs dedicated to it, including an episode of Animal Planet's series Lost Tapes and an episode of Paranormal State. In 2002 an episode of the Travel Channel's Scariest Places on Earth featured it, and in 2009 the History Channel aired an episode of their program MonsterQuest entitled "Devils in New Jersey," which looked at the legend and possible explanations for it, including putting together a computer rendering of what they thought the creature might look like.

It has had an impact on literature as well. H.P. Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* introduces us to the "Shantak-bird," described as having the head of a horse and scales instead of feathers. Being a New England native, it's not hard to suppose that Lovecraft might have been inspired by stories of the Jersey Devil. There have, needless to say, been more than a few books about cryptozoology that have featured it in various forms and with a wide variety of possible explanations as to its existence, and it has been the subject of several works of fiction as well.

The Jersey Devil has made its way into the music industry: On October 31st, 2008, as a

Halloween treat, Bruce Springsteen - a proud son of New Jersey - released a video and downloadable audio single entitled "A Night with the Jersey Devil" on his website.

And recently it has even worked its way into video games, appearing in Sony's Playstation game "Jersey Devil" and one of the Castlevania games, amongst others.

Whether you believe in the Jersey Devil or not, and no matter what you do or don't believe it might be, its power to grasp and linger in the imagination is undeniable. Its legend - however it started - has endured for nearly 300 years, and its story will likely continue being told for a long time to come. It has been researched extensively by historians, scientists and amateurs alike since before the early 1800s, and continues to be today.

Perhaps someday someone will find the creature itself, or trace the legend's roots back to their actual beginning and provide an explanation for all of the sightings and encounters over the years. Or maybe it will remain a mystery forever - perhaps that would even be for the best. We need mysteries in the world to entice fresh minds in every generation, and no mystery is more fascinating than an old and unsolved one.