



Watercolor by Linda Reddington

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# The DEVIL, YOU SAY!

By LINDA REDDINGTON

**F**or centuries, hunters who have stalked the sandy Pine Barrens in search of deer and other game have at times felt they themselves were being stalked.

Since America was in its infancy, tales of The Jersey Devil, the Garden State's version of Bigfoot or the Sasquatch of the West, have abounded.

Over the years tales of the devil have come in and out of vogue. At one point it was named the "official state demon," and even a professional hockey team has assumed the name "New Jersey Devils."

Here in Ocean County, the County Parks Department on occasion takes visitors on nocturnal "Jersey Devil hunts" through the barrens, equipped only with flashlights. Many have seen him lurking around Wells Mills County Park, (usually disguised as Cliff Oakley in an elaborate costume.)

There are currently at least two novels concerning the Jersey Devil, and a nonfiction work by James McCloy and Ray Miller Jr., published in 1976 by Middle Atlantic Press of Wallingford, PA.

According to the jacket blurb of McCloy and Miller's book: "In parts of New Jersey today, there are those who still insist that the Jersey Devil is a living, thoroughly

real monster, and not a creature of folklore at all.

"In the course of its extraordinary history, the Jersey Devil has been, exorcised, shot, electrocuted, incinerated, declared officially dead, and scoffed at as sheer foolishness, none of which has had any apparent effect on it, or on the people who persist in seeing it.

"This mysterious creature is said to prowl the lonely sand trails and mist-shrouded marshes of the New Jersey Pine Barrens, and emerge periodically to rampage through the towns and cities of central and southern New Jersey, and eastern Pennsylvania. In its wake it has left many communities in near-hysteria. Schools, factories, and theaters have closed, armed men have ridden "shotgun"

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# Devil

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on public transportation, and innumerable posses have been formed to track the monster.

"But the posses have had their problems. For one thing, no two descriptions of the Jersey Devil are alike. Then, too, trained hunting dogs refuse to follow the creature's trail and occasional bizarre hoaxes have helped to confuse matters even further."

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The authors point out, however, that while a few of the Jersey Devil's supposed appearances have been outright fraud, and other sightings have likely been the result of mass hysteria, this creature has been seen by enough sober, sane, and responsible citizens to keep the possibility of its existence alive and tantalizing.

In 1859, Atlantic Monthly published an article by a "Mr. Smith." It was an interview with a gentleman from Hanover Furnace, N.J., which the author had conducted during a trip in 1858.

"Mr. Smith" is most likely W.F. Mayer of New York, who is listed in Jim McCloy's book as having made such a trip in the fall of 1958.

The conversation went like this:

Mr. Smith — "And now something about the Leeds Devil. What fiend may he be if you please?"

"I will answer, — I will tell you." replied Mr. B. "There lived in the year 1735, in the township of Burlington, a woman. Her name was Leeds, and she was shrewdly suspected of a little amateur witchcraft. Be that as it may, it is well established, that one stormy, gusty night,

when the wind was howling in turret and tree, Mother Leeds gave birth to a son, whose father could have been no other than the Prince of Darkness.

"No sooner did he see the light than he assumed the form of a fiend, with a horse's head, wings of a bat, and a serpent's tail.

"The first thought of the newborn Caliban was to fall afoul of his mother, whom he scratched and bupummelled soundly, and then flew to the window, out into the village, where he played the mischief generally. Little children he devoured, maidens he abused, young men he mauled and battered; and it was many days before a holy man succeeded in repeating the enchantment of Prospero.

"At length, however, Leeds Devil was laid — but only for 100 years.

"During an entire century, the memory of that awful monster was preserved. And, as 1835 drew nigh, the denizens of Burlington and the pines looked tremblingly for his rising.

"Strange to say, however, no one but Hannah Butler has had a personal interview with the fiend since 1835, although he has frequently been heard howling and screaming in the forests at night.

"Hannah Butler (a toothless old woman who lived near the cranberry bogs south of Hanover Furnace) claimed she saw the devil one stormy night long ago, though some skeptical individuals affirm that very possibly she may have been led under the influence of liquid Jersey Lightning to invest a pine stump or possibly a belated bear with diabolical attributes and a satanic voice."

According to the McCloy-Miller text, in

*The biggest sighting of the Jersey Devil was in 1909. During the week of January 16 through 23, thousands of people claimed to have either seen the Jersey Devil or his footprints.*

1894, the Jersey Devil was seen lurking about Smithville, Long Beach Island, Brigantine Beach, Leeds Point, and Haddonfield.

The biggest sighting of the Jersey Devil was in 1909. During the week of January 16 through 23, thousands of people claimed to have either seen the Jersey Devil or his footprints. During that week he showed up in Woodbury, N.J., Bristol, Pa., Burlington, N.J., Gloucester City,

Camden, Pemberton, Collingswood, Moorestown, Ewing, Trenton, Bridgeton, Millville, Roebling, Mount Holly, and Clayton, to name just a few.

Descriptions vary. The late Belva Brown of Barnegat, who said she saw the Jersey Devil as a young woman, described it as goatlike as it climbed up a ladder in her back yard to help itself to some fruit from a tree.

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Nelson Evans, a paperhanger from Gloucester City, said it was less than four feet tall, with a head like a collie dog, face like a horse, a long neck, two-foot long wings, hind legs like those of a crane, but with horse's hooves. It walked upright and its short front legs ended in paws.

Two men from Collingswood, who experienced one of the 1909 sightings, agreed that the creature was three feet high, covered with long black hair, had arms and hands like a monkey, a face like a dog, split hooves, and a tail a foot long.

A trolley car operator just south of Burlington City, said it looked like a "winged kangaroo with a long neck."

Those who aren't believers have come up with theories about the origins of the legend. Some say the "devil" was probably a deformed child, hidden from a small, superstitious population by its parents, and when glimpsed at night, mistaken for something supernatural. Others say the sightings may have been caused by a hallucinogenic fungus, called an ergot that appears in wheat or rye from time to time. McCloy and Miller cite other examples of mass hysteria to suggest an explanation for group sightings such as the ones that occurred in 1909.

Whether the Jersey Devil is real or not, the legend is an important part of South Jersey folklore, and various areas lay claim to it.

Of course, here in Ocean County, we're positive that the source of the Jersey Devil was in nearby Leeds Point, and even though residents of that area claim to be annoyed by curious visitors asking questions about the creature, we suspect there's also a secret pride at being considered the spawning ground of the official State Demon.