

JERSEY ROOTS

105 years ago, something terrorized South Jersey

By Erik Larsen

@Erik_Larsen

Every child who grows up in or near the Pine Barrens knows the tale of the Jersey Devil.

As authors James F. McCloy and Ray Miller describe in their 1976 book, "The Jersey Devil," the most widely-known version of the legend (as told for generations around summer campfires) is that the creature was spawned by witchcraft in the early 18th century near what is now Historic Smithville.

Depicted as a kind of anthropomorphic dragon in modern illustrations, the Jersey Devil for the most part is not like Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster. In the cases made for those other legends, their believers argue such creatures are simply the direct descendants of ancient cryptids that have managed to survive hidden into modern times and continue to reproduce.

Contrarily, to believe in the Jersey Devil is to believe in the supernatural or the occult — that there is a literal demon-monster haunting the Pine Barrens of South Jersey.

In 1909, mass public panic is recorded to have swept across South Jersey, and border towns in Pennsylvania and Delaware, as thousands of ordinary people became convinced the bogeyman in the woods was real and coming to get them.

The fear was instigated by a rash of sightings and claims of evidence



An artist's rendering of the legendary Jersey Devil, depicted as a demonic creature that has haunted the Pine Barrens since at least colonial times, first published in the Asbury Park Press in November 1978. ASBURY PARK PRESS FILE ART

left behind between Jan. 16 and Jan. 23, during what McCloy and Miller call "Phenomenal Week."

In their book, they report these were not simply eyewitness accounts from isolated pineys, but from reputable officials such as a police officer in Bristol, Pa., who claimed to have shot at the creature in the early morning hours of Jan. 17, before it flew off into the darkness.

According to the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark, Trenton Councilman E.P. Weeden told reporters he was stirred from his sleep in the middle of the night by the sound of flapping wings outside his bedroom window.

Weeden claimed he even found pairs of cloven footprints in the snow outside his home, which coin-

cided with reports of similar footprint-sightings made by other residents across the wintery white landscape of the state capital that morning.

Farmers and townsfolk all over the region repeated similar stories; nocturnal shrieks and hisses, bumps in the night, a strange figure on rooftops, odd markings, the aforementioned footprints and mutilated animals; basically all the foreshadowing of imminent doom consistent with an M. Night Shyamalan film.

"This city has joined in the 'What is it?' stir," reads a Jan. 21, 1909 dispatch from a correspondent with The Trenton Times, who was reporting from Riverside in Burlington County. "The un-

known animal, believed by local residents to be a one-legged, one-footed bird, has been lurking about this city the past thirty-six hours. Though never seen, its tracks are found mainly about small buildings and chicken coops.

"It visited the out-houses of Joseph Manz and next morning he found his pup dog dead. ... Manz declared that the culprit wore small horse shoes on his shoes, the tracks of which he found all about his place, even on the top of the building," the dispatch read.

To this day, what really happened this week in 1909 remains a mystery.

Erik Larsen:
elarsen@app.com