

Matt Chelf

The Legend of Boggy Creek Monster

I doubt if you could find a lonelier, spookier place in this country than down around Boggy Creek.

Nostalgia was just part of the countryside, or at least my father's vision of the countryside. I'd be riding around with him in Old Blue and he'd point to an abandoned building or an empty field and he'd tell me what it used to be when he was growing up. Who lived where and who grew how much tobacco in what year. Friends from high school, old farmers who taught him something in life. When my father was still a young man, he was given to storytelling, and he was a natural, made anything and everything hilarious. When he pointed in this way and spoke, I saw the world as he saw it but backed by the emptiness I saw and felt. To him there lived a life that was invisible to me, and that made me feel sorry for him. For myself I just felt loss, an aching, unnamable loss that stemmed from nowhere because I had never known the world he described, just the wreckage of its aftermath, and I mourned it without object. I didn't want what he had. In fact, I wanted to be away from it.

We drove through downtown Magnolia, every bit of it boarded up and forgotten with the exception of the post office, so the people who still lived here could remember they lived in a great nation, the United States, and could access splendors like a zip code. I gazed at the row of dust-smearing, vacant glass storefronts, a modern-day ghost town, gone before it even started across my vision. My father, sensing my wonderment, said, "When I was your age every one of these was something, and there were people everywhere." He pointed to a brick building with a playground. "That's where I went to elementary school." Now it was a storage unit.

"What happened?" I said.

He shrugged. "People moved on."

The way he said it, he sounded hurt, himself confused. In his mind, something had gone terribly wrong. He went on about business shipping to China and other coded accusations of liberals that he at least still tried to hide.

"Young people don't want to live around here no more," he said, emphasizing *no more*. He looked at me, and I could feel the pointedness of the comment. I'd known for a long time I didn't want to live in LaRue County, or anywhere near it. I dreamed of escape. To me, this was all gravity, the dead sucking you down.

One day I would run off to live in a city. My father probably knew it was going to happen in the future. More than I did. The death of the small town was every bit as familial and personal as it was social and economic to him. No wonder he believed in Monsters. How else could he explain to himself the horror?

I was seven years old when I first heard him scream. It scared me then, and it scares me now.

One night when I was twelve my father came home excited from Walmart. “You’re never going to believe what I found on DVD.” He laughed and whinnied as he does when he’s landed upon something good, stretching out and suspending the moment. My brother and I, who were sitting on the floor in front of the television, paused the video game we were playing and looked up, quickened. The night had been boring and dull, but my father’s appearance breathed a bolt of tension into it. “I couldn’t believe it,” he proclaimed. “I didn’t even know they had this on DVD.”

My mother, carrying plastic bags full of groceries, made her way to the kitchen, making a *yeah right* face, her usual skepticism when my father got worked up. But rather than dispelling my curiosity, it perked me up even further.

“Quite possibly the scariest movie ever made,” my father went on. “They played it at the drive-in when I was a kid. It had everyone so scared they was huddled together in their cars. People crying, they were so scared. People had to leave they was so freaked out.”

And then he taunted us, mostly me and my brother, but my mother too.

“I bet there ain’t none of you chicken shits can sit through this movie.”

“Oh, God,” my mother said. I could tell by the tone in her voice Dad had been carrying on like this ever since Walmart—plus the forty-five-minute drive to our home deep in the Kentucky countryside. Her tone wasn’t just annoyed he’d left her to carry up the groceries. It was bruised. Mom wore her nice jeans and a sweater. That means they’d been out to dinner together and stopped at Walmart to grab a few things. Perhaps she was imagining a romantic evening with her husband while he perused the movie aisle, sent there, perhaps, to find a “chick flick” as my father called them. Instead, he found something more to his flavor. Something to share with the whole family.

“I’m not watching it tonight,” Mom said flat out, trying to stamp down the fire. A lot of the time, Dad was taciturn, but he’d occasionally get on these kicks where he’d explode with energy and enthusiasm, and he’d expect everyone to get behind him. It must’ve

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felt one-sided and unfair to my mom, whose love of soap operas, rom-coms, and dramas he'd mock, especially when they were fighting. He'd say to me, "Women want one thing," and he'd thrust his index finger forward like a gun. "They want that boo-hoo-hoo," and he'd pantomime crying, rubbing his eyes, whining. Then he'd say, "But life ain't like that."

But seeing my father all worked up presented a rare opportunity for me. Normally I was afraid of him. His withdrawn energy made it so I didn't know how to be around him. But I could join him in his excitement. I could understand and connect with his childish exuberance.

I stood up.

"What is it?" I said. "Show me."

"*The Legend of Boggy Creek Monster*," my father said. He included the word "monster" even though it wasn't in the actual title.

My mother groaned.

Plastic already ripped off, he held the movie case in his hand. I took it from him.

The Monster lurched across a swamp bottom. His long arms ended in a shadowy form between fingers and claws. Matted shag hung from the lumpen shape of his body. A wan orange sun settled behind an ashen tree line. The image was so recognizable to a country boy like me. Swamp bottoms were everywhere. I'd stared at many a brackish wall of oak and pine and listened to the secret footsteps that rustled in the dark and witnessed the eyes of the unknown peering back at me from the other side of barbed wire.

I absorbed the back copy. Here was the true story of the Fouke Monster as told by the residents of Fouke, the small-town Arkansas people who witnessed and lived alongside the foul, mad-shrieking, swamp-haunting, ten-foot-tall biped who carried away pigs in the night. It even attacked a family.

Then I flipped back to the front cover and stared with new horror.

I had noticed the resemblance to Bigfoot immediately. My father loved anything monster, but he was especially passionate about Bigfoot. A big part of my childhood was him sitting me down on the couch to watch Bigfoot documentaries with him on daytime TV. We used to talk theory, and he'd answer all my questions thoughtfully. And when I'd get skeptical, he'd say: "Son, Man thinks he's so smart. Man thinks he knows everything. But that ain't so. Man don't know everything. Can't know, neither."

I'd been raised to believe in Bigfoot the same as I was raised to believe in God. Both were fact, yet beyond reason. Both were fear and hope.

It twists and winds its way across the Fouke countryside, widening and narrowing, sheltering within its thickly wooded banks a multitude of creatures that run, fly, swim, creep and crawl. So densely thicketed that only a few hunters and trappers have the skill to make their way deep into this wild, swampy country.

I was from a place a lot like Fouke. Mt. Sherman. Small, rural, middle of nowhere, a road runs through it. Agricultural base. Mostly White. This Fouke resembled the Mt. Sherman of my father's childhood more than it resembled the Mt. Sherman of my childhood. My father grew up in a time when Mt. Sherman and all the surrounding small towns had life to them. He liked to wax about Clyde's Levi—a small department store in Mt. Sherman that just sold Levi's jeans. It blows my mind to think a department store could exist in Mt. Sherman, but according to my father Clyde's Levi was Kentucky famous. People came from all over the region, so busy you couldn't get in on the weekend.

But in the Mt. Sherman of my childhood, not even the gas station could stay in business. I was old enough to remember both the feed and farm supply stores and Pete's Grocery, a one-room shack where local farmers liked to sit around a table, smoke cigarettes, and talk. By the time I was twelve those institutions were boarded up, casualties of death and generational turn over. The farmer base dwindled. To me, Mt. Sherman was just a green sign off the side of the road, no substance to it because there was no identity, no core, no one thing I could point to to define this so-called community.

Mt. Sherman was not a place I wanted to be.

My narratives—and so my dreams—came from cable TV, PlayStation, Nintendo, and dial-up internet. DVD's replacing VHS, I grew up with change and speed as the norm, not stillness. If Fouke had once represented a dream, and places like Mt. Sherman were potential simulacrum, then that dream had died by time I was born.

Fouke is way down in the southwest corner, where Arkansas joins Texas and Louisiana. If you've ever driven from Shreveport to Texarkana, you've passed right through Fouke, even if you don't remember seeing it.

“What about you,” my father pointed at Corey.

My older brother's smirk faded. He might've been amused at first, but now he had a choice to make. Play into memories of staying up late with Dad watching *The X-Files* and Pizza Hut, or get angry about Dad basically forcing everyone to watch his movie?

Corey was like my father: when they got worked up about

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something, there was only that one interest. Prior to our father's disruption, he'd been hogging the PlayStation controller, and I was watching him play *Final Fantasy VII*.

Either he could resist and risk another fight, or he could just go along. He stared at the floor and weighed his options.

"Yeah, I guess," he said.

For my little sister, Ryann, the choice was much less complicated. She was eight years old, a little older than what Dad must've been when he first saw the movie at the drive-in in 1972. She'd done a good job of staying out of sight, but now she sidled up to Dad and said, "I want to watch it."

"Should she be watching this?" Mom said, and turned to Ryann, "Go to your room."

Ryann cast a hurt look at Dad, a wounded, banished look that said it wouldn't be fair to cast her alone while we, the family, gathered around the television for this ceremony of bonding through fear.

"Now hold on a second," my father said.

"It's not fair," Ryann said, her cracked voice close to tears.

"Baby girl can sit by me."

"Alright," Mom said. "She's your problem if she gets scared."

"I'll hold the blanket up over her eyes when it gets scary."

But every now and then, drawn to civilization like a moth to a flame, he creeps out about dusk.

Popcorn, blankets, lights off, we gathered in the living room. I was electrified. Never mind Mom's baleful shadow. I wanted to be scared. To be scared was to melt into the couch, become one big family.

At first I was confused by what I was watching. It wasn't like anything I'd seen before. This was 2001, the era of *The Fast and The Furious*, and this movie was so naive in how it harkened back to slower, simpler times. The opening swamp panoramas and ambient soundtrack of frogs croaking, droplets falling, owls hooting set a promising scene, but the first sight of the man in the gorilla suit made it impossible to suspend disbelief beyond the first few minutes of the film. The documentarian element, talking to The Locals, made it clear no one was going to die or get hurt, and that was a tension killer. Everything about the movie lacked risk, that was clear to me almost immediately. From pacing to dull film grain, it felt *old*, like some crappy VHS from elementary school science class or a nature documentary on public access TV. The voice-over narrator didn't help. Neither did the thick Texarkana accents that were hick even to my Kentucky ears. In fact, the movie seemed to reject every invention

from post-war cinema that made movies eye-catching, even cut shots.

The overall effect wasn't horror, it was laughter, and within minutes we were all laughing at my father's movie. My mother grew bold with her heckles, which inspired my brother to crack jokes, which led me to imitate him. Soon you couldn't hear the movie over us.

My father paused the movie. "Really?"

"When's it get good?" I said.

"Does it get good?" said my brother.

Only Ryann remained quiet, though she grinned.

"This is what scared you, Shannon?" said my mother.

"Y'all just laugh," he retorted, "but don't cry to me when it gets scary in this next part."

The terrifying stories of face-to-face encounters with the creature triggered the Fouke community into action. A big hunt was organized with some of the best hunting dogs in Arkansas and Texas involved.

There *was* something undeniably eerie about the movie, but it wasn't the Monster. What was scary was the mass hysteria, the willingness of a lot of people—a lot of White men—to get guns and dogs and flood lights and go chase the Monster through the woods.

To my father, it was an image of freedom, of what country people can do when they feel threatened. It was an image of nostalgia for a time when a community could face its problems together, head-on.

Had this film purported itself as a work of fiction, I might've been inclined to view this hunt in the spirit of Frankenstein, but the movie sells itself as True Life, backed by first-hand accounts and newspaper reportage.

Part of what I mocked—perhaps *because* I feared—was how thoroughly it was set in the backwoods mentality of this community of three hundred and fifty souls that, according to the narrator's description of the town, hasn't changed since he was a kid. It was an image of stasis, of what happens when you're left alone for too long. Your mind starts to warp. You start seeing things.

In Fouke, the general perception of reality had become that everyone not only believed there's a Monster in the woods, they saw it, and they hunted it.

It reminded me too much of my own life, of little LaRue County, of Mt. Sherman, far, far smaller than even Fouke.

I could see why my father loved the movie: here were his people—farmers, hillbillies, ranchers, rednecks, hunters, trappers—a village of rugged individualists, swamp folk, country folk, small-town rural America coming together to make sense of a common foe,

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the Monster, this thing in the woods who comes round your house at night. It played into this country's idea that permeated the culture of my upbringing that we're being attacked—by the Government, by the Devil, by Society—at the same time it yearned for mystery beyond the pale of reason. If there was going to be a major cryptozoological discovery, here were the pioneers who'd make it.

There's a White man with a gun in just about every scene.

My father was one of them. Or, he wanted to be. And he could have been, imaginatively, if we had let him. If Mom hadn't pierced the aura with comments like, "Oh my God, it's a man in a gorilla suit," as Fred Crabtree changed the bird shot to buck shot in his double barrel. My father needed his kids' enraptured attention so he could be seven years old again—but then Corey, his oldest son, joined Mom in making fun of the movie. It was too cheesy, lacked technical expertise, and we were modern even if, like them, we lived in the sticks and talked with accents. We survived Y2K, bought a DVD player, and connected to dial-up internet—we earned our irony, and Mom wouldn't let us return to the insular realm.

"I bet there ain't a full set of teeth between them," Mom said.

Finally, my father took the remote and said, "Alright, I had enough of y'all's bullshit," and pressed stop.

"What, Shannon," my mother said defensively. "We're just joking."

My father said nothing.

My brother stared into his lap.

"I'm sorry," I said, half-laughing to disguise the fact I really was sorry. "I'm sorry," I said again, this time more serious.

The beauty of the Bottoms under soft moonlight is transformed into dark and menacing danger. And the shadows of the night trigger your imagination into being places, where possibly, the creature is lurking.

Living in Portland, Oregon, at the age of thirty-four years old, about the same age as my father when this story takes place, I sometimes find myself nostalgic for LaRue County, the home of my childhood. For my father's exuberance and my mother's irony. For the whole family, huddled together on the couch watching something ridiculous on D-V-D, as my father would say, emphasizing each syllable. So, I went back recently and re-watched *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, which you can now stream on Amazon, where the description reads: "This remarkable True Story is the first, full-length feature on the subject of 'BIGFOOT', and sparked an entire genre of film, as well as the burgeoning scientific field of 'cryptozoology'!"

I watched the film alone at my kitchen table in the middle of

the afternoon while my wife was at work, wanting to see if it was as bad as I remembered.

In a way, it was a charming portrait of the virtues of small-town life.

But the racial undertones of a group of White men with guns and dogs chasing a dark-skinned creature through the woods were clearer to me than ever. I couldn't watch the movie naively, even though I wanted to, even though I found aspects of the movie enjoyable, even relatable.

The folk of Fouke County are something of my ancestors. My father wanted me to know that. And I do.

~

We did finish the movie that night, all those years ago.

In the last scene of the movie, I understood my father most clearly. The narrator visits his old house near the tree line where the Monster used to linger and shriek. The man looks to the woods, and in looking to the woods, he sees himself as a six-year-old running barefoot through the shoulder-high golden grass bottom. Chased, as it were, by the Monster. His old house, a shack to begin with, is wooden ruins. He wears a nice suit. He left home and made something of himself. He looks successful, but something bothers him, something agitates his soul. He isn't that overalls kid anymore. Life moved on. He got older.

His last words might've sprung from my father's mouth as he sat on the couch, chewing his fingernail as he basked in his pain: "I'd almost like to hear that terrible cry again, just to be reminded that there is still a bit of wilderness left, and there are still mysteries that remain unsolved, and strange, unexplained noises in the night."

