

# Pedal, Paddle and Hike

By Trent Carbaugh

*Not all who wander are lost – J.R.R. Tolkien*

## Things That Go Bump in the Lock House

### *A Look At Creatures of Folklore in the Potomac River Valley*

Human beings to some extent or another believe in some irrational, bizarre, or otherwise just plain odd stuff. We, as a species, often choose the irrational over the rational explanation simply because we prefer it. Folks in the past did the same. They lived in a world where the wildness and uncertainty of nature was much closer; they saw things they could not easily explain from the back of a horse, walking on a dark road, or on the wood line at the edge of the isolated farm. Without the modern conveniences of electricity or instant communications, shadowy things sometimes became dire threats or portents of unpleasant events to come. Unusual occurrences, for lack of a better explanation, often became supernatural events and the things that went bump in the night were one of the creatures described below, not just the cat knocking something over.

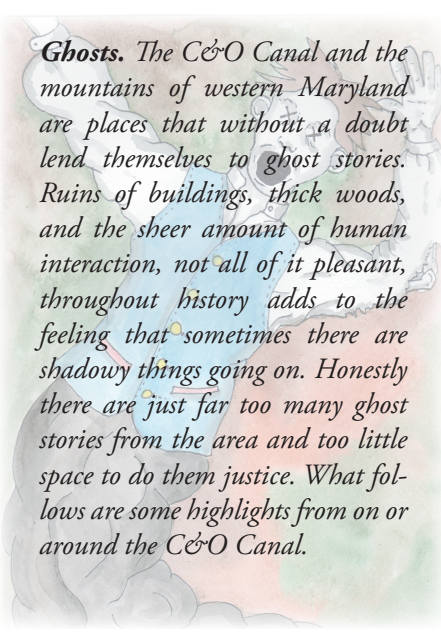
The early immigrants to Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania were a diverse lot. Scots, Germans, English, and a smattering of other Europeans all came to the American Colonies with their own tales from folklore. When you figure

in Native American stories, these beliefs adapted and changed and a New World mythology evolved.

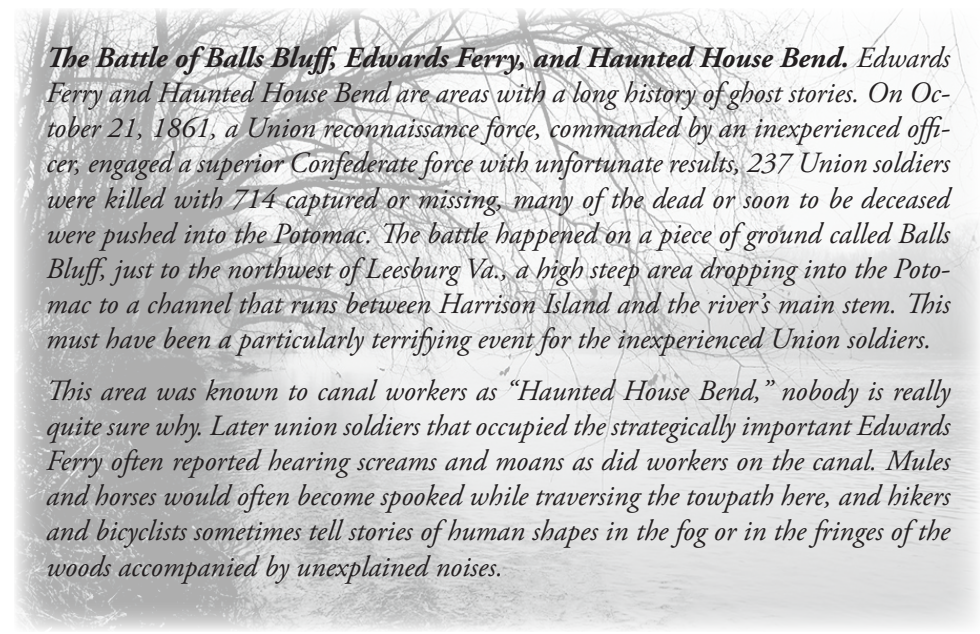
The New World *was* a scary place for the newly arrived folks from other countries. Most of these people came from places that were very old. Cultures in Europe and Africa were built on the bones of previous civilizations that often stretched back into prehistory. America was, without a doubt, a very frightening place for Europeans. The mid-Atlantic colonies were covered in old growth forests all of the way to the west as far as anyone had gone. Of course the Native Americans had a playfully sarcastic sense of humor that often elaborated on these tales and added their own take on them just for the joy of storytelling and to keep the newcomers on their toes.

Some cultures brought their folkloric creatures with them, such as the hexenwolf, black dogs, and witches. Other critters were unique to North America, such as snallygasters and hoop snakes. Wild men/women and little people appear in Native American, European, African, and Asian contexts. Ghost stories are from everywhere people have ever lived.

So turn down the electric lamps and light a candle for ambiance and follow along here for an introduction to one of the weirder byways of history, this is certainly the time of year for it. Most of these creatures were/are believed to inhabit the area between the Susquehanna River and the Potomac River watersheds, though many of them show up with different names in other places. Oh, and keep an eye on the window, you never know what might be looking in.



**Ghosts.** *The C&O Canal and the mountains of western Maryland are places that without a doubt lend themselves to ghost stories. Ruins of buildings, thick woods, and the sheer amount of human interaction, not all of it pleasant, throughout history adds to the feeling that sometimes there are shadowy things going on. Honestly there are just far too many ghost stories from the area and too little space to do them justice. What follows are some highlights from on or around the C&O Canal.*



**The Battle of Balls Bluff, Edwards Ferry, and Haunted House Bend.** *Edwards Ferry and Haunted House Bend are areas with a long history of ghost stories. On October 21, 1861, a Union reconnaissance force, commanded by an inexperienced officer, engaged a superior Confederate force with unfortunate results, 237 Union soldiers were killed with 714 captured or missing, many of the dead or soon to be deceased were pushed into the Potomac. The battle happened on a piece of ground called Balls Bluff, just to the northwest of Leesburg Va., a high steep area dropping into the Potomac to a channel that runs between Harrison Island and the river's main stem. This must have been a particularly terrifying event for the inexperienced Union soldiers.*

*This area was known to canal workers as "Haunted House Bend," nobody is really quite sure why. Later union soldiers that occupied the strategically important Edwards Ferry often reported hearing screams and moans as did workers on the canal. Mules and horses would often become spooked while traversing the towpath here, and hikers and bicyclists sometimes tell stories of human shapes in the fog or in the fringes of the woods accompanied by unexplained noises.*



**Paw Paw Tunnel.** Given the amount of workers killed during the building of the 3,118 foot long tunnel, in accidents or by sickness along with violence associated with labor disputes, there should be plenty of ghosts lurking in the area.

In 1837, disagreements about pay and rivalries between workers turned violent. English miners, employed for their technical expertise, "Dutch" workers (local German immigrants), and Irish laborers ended up in conflict. The Irish, who did seem to be getting the short end of the stick, terrorized the work camps and managed to briefly drive off English workers. In 1838 more riots occurred resulting in the destruction of the tavern at Oldtown, Md. and the workmen's shanty town was burned. Eventually the problems were worked out, mostly, and the tunnel was completed and open for operation in 1850.

Visitors to the tunnel have described seeing moving shadows, hearing disembodied voices, and a few instances of being grabbed by hands that are not there. Modern paranormal researchers claim to have experienced the same things as well having their instrumentation register the presence of something happening in the non-visible electromagnetic spectrum.

**Hoop Snakes.** One of the more absurd creatures here listed, hoop snakes would be quite the dangerous critter to run into. Of various lengths, the hoop snake had the unique ability to grasp the end of its tail in its mouth and form a hoop like shape. This allowed the hoop snake to roll at high speed to escape or to attack (usually) its foes. Though armed with considerable fangs its most dangerous weapon was a poison filled spike on the end of its tail. This poison was so virulent that it could kill a mature tree with one stab, turning it black and rotten almost instantly. Fortunately, a rolling hoop snake is said to be quite clumsy when moving and are easy to escape. When walking on the towpath you should ask yourself though, are those bicycle tire tracks or hoop snake tracks...


**Big Pool.** Some people have claimed to see a Native American ghost walking around the area of Big Pool. This fellow is said to be well dressed in traditional clothing. Like most ghost stories he is seen late in the evening or in very foggy conditions. As a historical note, the area on the Potomac River side of Big Pool had a very large Native American presence in pre-contact times.

**Fort Frederick.** Fort Frederick, built in 1756/57 during the French and Indian War, just off of the C&O at Big Pool has lots (and I mean lots) of ghost stories associated with it. I must also admit that I have experienced many strange occurrences there when I was on staff. The Fort was initially used as a garrison and supply depot to protect Western Maryland and the route to Fort Cumberland. During the Revolutionary War, it was used as a prison for British and German prisoners of war and was briefly occupied by Union troops during the Civil War. Fort Frederick also has the distinction of being the first place that Confederates crossed the Potomac and invaded the north on Christmas Day 1861. It was a very short invasion, just a few hours.

Some of the common stories are classic ghost tales like the Scottish soldier late at night who can be heard crying for home in the northeast bastion or transparent soldiers marching in ranks on the parade ground in the fort. Other tales are not so common such as howls and screams coming from the surrounding woods or the infamous "fog" that blankets the fort gates on some nights causing folks to lose their way, sometimes for hours.

The strangest to me has always been what I called the 3:30 ghosts. At about 3:30 in the afternoon, especially on hot August days when visitor traffic was non-existent, you could see and hear things that weren't really there. A person in colonial clothing passing across one of the barracks doors, footsteps on the upper floor above where you would be, coming from a locked room, or voices you could just barely hear. This was so commonplace that I would use these occurrences as practical jokes on the high school kids that we hired as interpreters for the summer. This probably tells you too much about my sense of humor and just how un-seriously I take ghost stories.






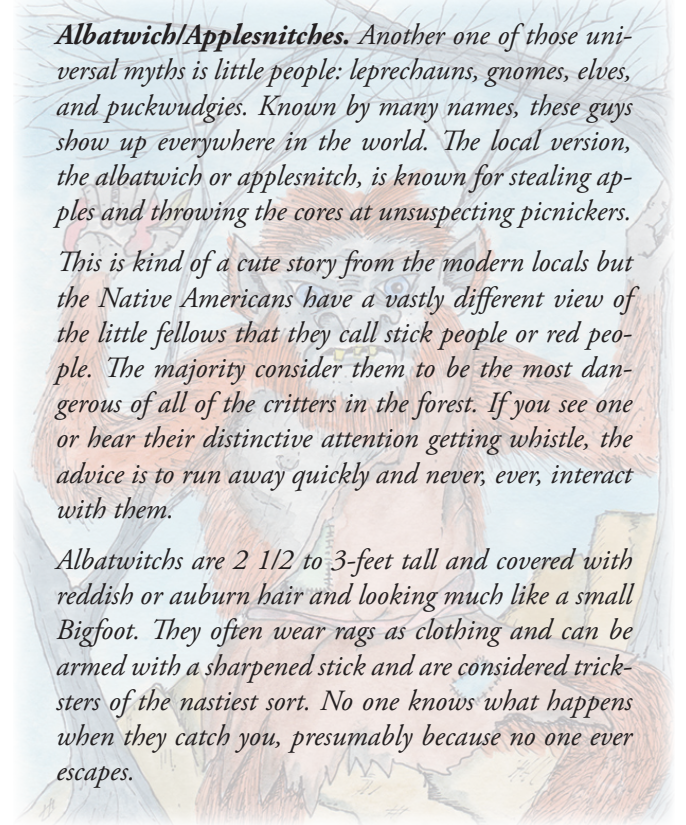
**The Snallygaster or Schneller Geischt.** Often described as half horse and half alligator, the snallygaster was a large critter that preyed on livestock and possibly the occasional human. Some colonial witnesses described it being with or without wings, sometimes flying, some said it had a metallic beak (with metal teeth), and in one or two cases tentacles like an octopus (I suspect that most of these witnesses were on their way home from a tavern). The origins of the snallygaster are obscure; they do not appear to be a crossover from European folklore except in the broad sense of dragons but unfortunately many of the Native American tales from the area did not survive European contact so we may never know the snallygaster's true origin.

The snallygaster, or critters described with the same appearance and characteristics, are a fairly common folkloric beast in the mid-Atlantic region. It was a particularly common belief in areas of German settlement in southern Pennsylvania and central Maryland although historically there have been reports of sightings from far western Maryland, West Virginia and into the Ohio country.

The snallygaster stories are in general very similar in description and behavior to its more famous cousin the Jersey Devil. Living in the wilderness of the Pine Barrens in southern New Jersey sightings of the "Devil" are still reported to this day.



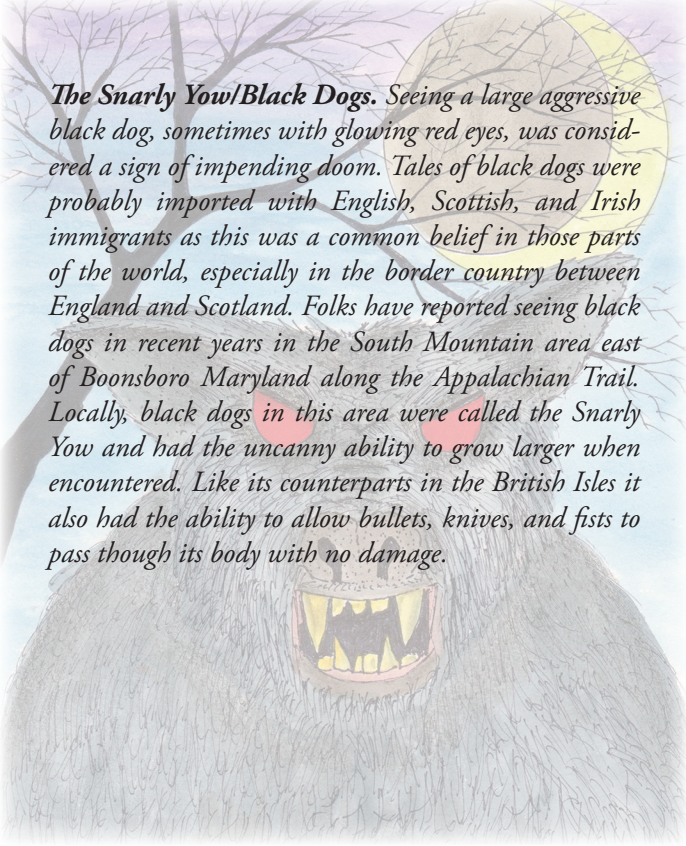
**Forest People.** Wildmen/women, Sasquatch, Bigfoot, Yeti, known by many names are a universal bogeyman; some type of creature of a similar description is a common belief held all over the world. Most people of western origins think of Bigfoot as modern tall tale. Native Americans on the other hand just see them as part of nature to be respected and left alone. Forest people have been with us since prehistoric times as ancient cave art shows us. Standing 8 to 9-feet tall and sporting a hairy hide in a variety of colors, with long arms, eyes glowing red in the dark, and, of course leaving their signature large footprints, a forest person would be quite startling to run into. Modern reports of encounters with large hairy beings along the Potomac start west of Cumberland, Md. and as far east as Potomac, Md. and everywhere in between. So keep an eye open for glowing red eyes watching you from the berm side of the canal as you settle in for the night at that remote hiker/biker.



**Albatwiche/Applesnitches.** Another one of those universal myths is little people: leprechauns, gnomes, elves, and puckwudgies. Known by many names, these guys show up everywhere in the world. The local version, the albatwiche or applesnitch, is known for stealing apples and throwing the cores at unsuspecting picnickers.

This is kind of a cute story from the modern locals but the Native Americans have a vastly different view of the little fellows that they call stick people or red people. The majority consider them to be the most dangerous of all of the critters in the forest. If you see one or hear their distinctive attention getting whistle, the advice is to run away quickly and never, ever, interact with them.

Albatwitches are 2 1/2 to 3-feet tall and covered with reddish or auburn hair and looking much like a small Bigfoot. They often wear rags as clothing and can be armed with a sharpened stick and are considered tricksters of the nastiest sort. No one knows what happens when they catch you, presumably because no one ever escapes.



**The Snarly Yow/Black Dogs.** Seeing a large aggressive black dog, sometimes with glowing red eyes, was considered a sign of impending doom. Tales of black dogs were probably imported with English, Scottish, and Irish immigrants as this was a common belief in those parts of the world, especially in the border country between England and Scotland. Folks have reported seeing black dogs in recent years in the South Mountain area east of Boonsboro Maryland along the Appalachian Trail. Locally, black dogs in this area were called the Snarly Yow and had the uncanny ability to grow larger when encountered. Like its counterparts in the British Isles it also had the ability to allow bullets, knives, and fists to pass through its body with no damage.



**Hexenwelf/Dwyao.** *The mortal enemy of the snallygaster is the hexenwelf. Werewolf creatures were a common belief in Germany and Eastern Europe with regional variations; these beliefs were brought along with the German immigrants. There are hints that these things were part of local Native American legend as well, pre-European contact. The hexenwelf (dwayo or dawayo was the name used in the Catoctin/ South Mountain area of Maryland, possibly of Native American origin) was a classic werewolf. Man sized, with a short tail, capable of running on two legs or four, and dangerous to livestock, farmhands, and milkmaids. In some accounts the hexenwelf (plural) are able to turn invisible or visible at will, other witnesses state, though, that the critter is just extremely good at blending into its environment. Hexenwelf would often hunt in packs and most anything alive and kicking were its preferred meal with the exception of cats and dogs who were often seen running with hexenwelf in a friendly manner. According to folklore packs of hexenwelf, presumably with their cat and dog allies, would chase down snallygasters in the forested mountains and epic battles would ensue with much howling, bellowing, and crashing through the trees. Hexenwelf have been reported as late as the 1960's around Catoctin Mountain National Park, and Cunningham Falls State Park.*

*Modern sightings of "dogmen", as they are called now, are remarkably similar to historic descriptions of hexenwelf with the disturbing ability of the creature to disappear and reappear at will.*

**Witches.** *Witches were kind of a catch all to blame bad things on; your milk cow dries up, a witch did it, chickens stop laying eggs, you must have made the witch mad at you again. Historically though, in the area the only "witches" were wise older women (and a few men) that helped people with folk medicine and served as midwives. Of course, many of these older ladies were looked at askance for not fitting into the perceived norms of their local culture and no doubt some of them were of a contrary nature. If you were beset with problems that you could blame on witches you could bribe the aforesaid older ladies to intervene in your problems in exchange for bundles of old clothing (preferably black) or gifts of food.*

*One unique local defense against witches was the "Witch's Seat" this could manifest itself as a convenient rock on a hilltop or a "seat" built with a comfortable sitting stone extending out from your chimney close to the top. The idea being that when a witch was flying by on her broomstick, she would be pleased that you gave her a nice comfortable place to rest from her nefarious tasks with cows and chickens, this discouraged her from sending harm your way. On holidays you could put out food as well, pleasing her even more.*

*All images by Trent Carbaugh.*

It doesn't really matter if any of these creatures were or are real. What matters is that folks in the past believed in them (and plenty do nowadays as well), or more importantly believed in the *idea* of them. This helped people cope with things that they could not understand. A wasting sickness could be attributed to the depredations of an evil witch, an empty chicken house could be caused by a hexenwelf or a snallygaster. You could feel you were being proactive about those things you couldn't control by leaving food out for the witch or putting up a hex sign or two on your chicken house.

So what do we make of these tales? Are these just figments of our collective imagination? The result of a long evening in the local tavern? Or do some of these things have some basis in reality? I spend quite a bit of time in the mountains and forests along the Potomac River, and I must admit that I have seen and heard some strange things; tracks I cannot explain, a long whistle from the brush, shadows that move when they shouldn't so I keep an open mind. So when you're staying in a lock house or camping along the canal on a dark

and stormy night pay close attention to the darkness around you; who knows what you'll run into. Hopefully it won't be hungry.

#### Select References:

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