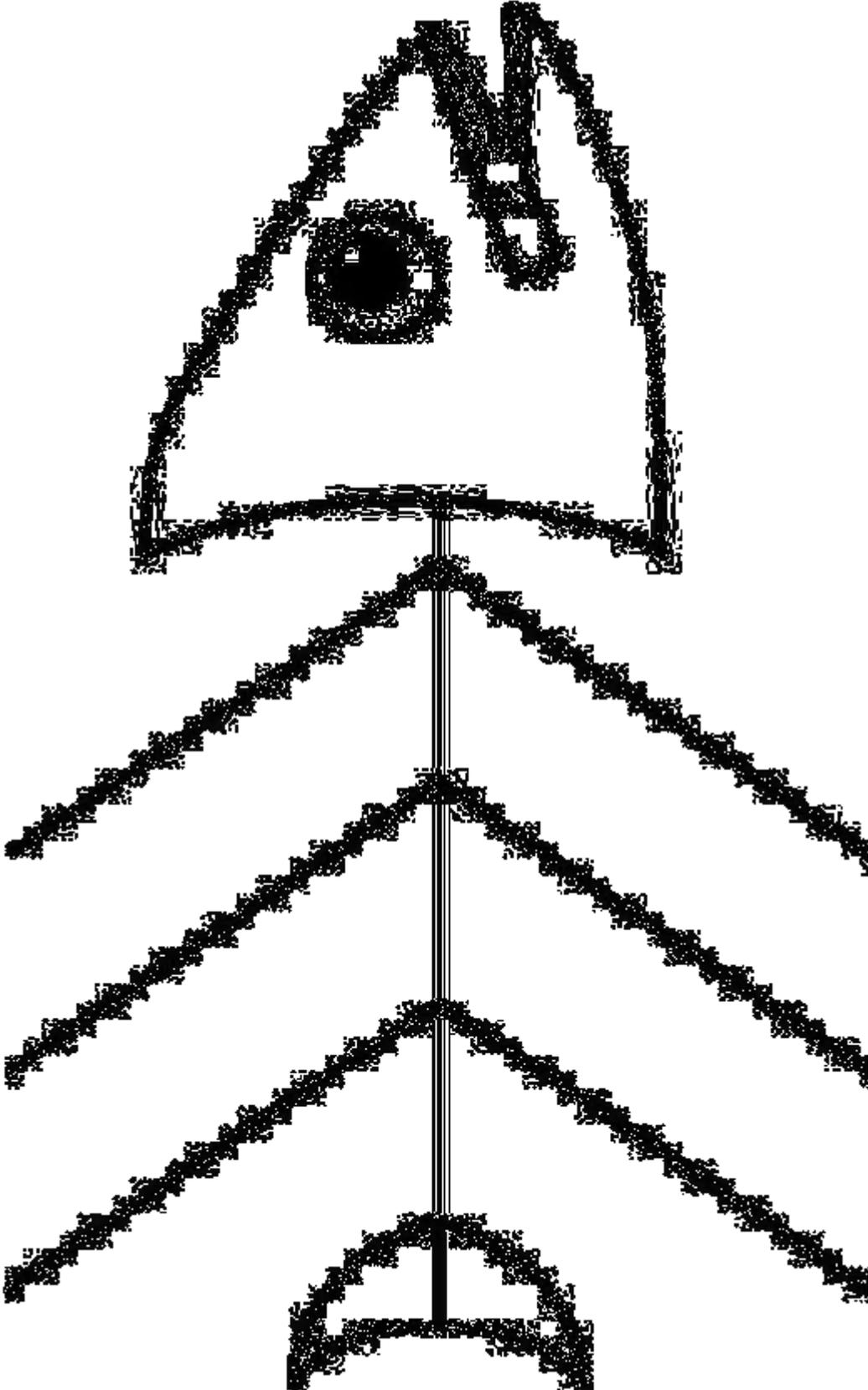


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Utah Lake Monster



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Fishermen Find Utah Lake Monster

Daily Herald

Saturday, May 13, 2006

D. Robert Carter

Not long after the Mormon pioneers settled in Utah, Ute Indians informed the new colonists that Pawapicts or Water Babies inhabited the waters of the Great Basin. The new residents were slow to acknowledge the presence of these supernatural beings until 1868 when Joseph C. Rich, a correspondent contributing to the Deseret News, told of a type of serpent that settlers had spotted in Bear Lake.

Some Utah residents expressed belief in these unusual monsters, while others pronounced them a scam. New accounts of monster sightings surfaced from Bear Lake, the Great Salt Lake, Sevier Lake, Fish Lake, and Utah Lake. Some of these stories were blatantly false, while others appear to have been told by people who actually believed they had seen strange aquatic animals in Utah's waters.

After the first wave of stories flooded Utah's press, interest in the creatures briefly waned. Then in September 1870, commercial fishermen from Springville brought the monsters back into everyday conversation. While plying their trade on the shores of Utah Lake, the Dallin family found the upper left portion of the skull of some large animal. The teeth were missing, but the empty sockets showed they had been as large as those of an ox had. The skull's most remarkable feature was the five-inch-long tusk that projected from the rear section of the jaw.

This strange find was judged by some of those who had examined it to be a remnant of the Utah Lake Monster. Springville correspondent for the News, Charles D. Evans, had the skull in his possession and invited the newspaper's readers to view it at any time.

That next spring another man who was likely to be taken seriously spotted the monster. On a clear, calm day, Goshen Bishop William Price was traveling south on the road west of Utah Lake when he, C.G. Webb, and another man glimpsed the Utah Lake Monster. The creature was about one mile from shore and traveling in the same direction as the men.

The Deseret News quoted Price's brief description of the creature: "It had a snakish appearance and stood several feet out of the water like a section of a large stove pipe." The bishop concluded the serpent was about 60 feet long.

The News gave Bishop Price's claim lukewarm support. The paper printed the following comment: "Men, whom we would readily believe upon any other subject, have stated that they saw a monster, and have described it with a minuteness that has left their hearers but little foundation to dispute them."

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The Daily Corinne Reporter took a much lighter-hearted approach. Referring to Price's story and relating it to a reputed monster in the Great Salt Lake, the Reporter's editor wrote, "The story invented by Bishop Price, that our monster has changed his abode to Utah Lake, is a sheer fabrication. The big fish was at Monument Point last Monday."

Monster stories dropped from the newspapers for a number of years before being briefly resuscitated again in 1877. The Deseret News finally adopted a lighter tone toward the strange creatures. Under the heading "Monstrous," the newspaper printed: "Report has it that Monsters are becoming fashionable. It was stated in Lehi recently that a huge creature of the reptilian order had been seen in Utah Lake."

By 1880, the Utah public had generally lost faith in the existence of the Lake monsters. The News reported that many people were convinced the monsters were a "large species of bug, commonly known as humbug." The Utah County Enquirer mentioned that people in Utah Valley had become "apt to discredit and laugh at the stories concerning the monster that is said to inhabit the waters of Utah Lake."

But the sun had not quite set on the Utah Lake Monster's heyday. The most detailed report of its sighting in Utah Lake was soon to be made. In June of 1880, both the News and the Enquirer reported another monstrous experience.

Two truthful and intelligent young boys, Willie Roberts and George Scott, were taking a spring bath in Utah Lake near Provo. The boys had swum out a fair distance when they noticed something that looked like a dog or a beaver swimming toward them. They did not pay much attention to the animal until they heard a lion-like roar.

Looking up, they saw a strange animal approaching them "occasionally raising itself out of the water and showing its four legs which were as long as a man's arm." The animal's head appeared to be two or three feet long, and its mouth, which looked like that of an alligator, appeared to be 18 inches wide.

The frightened boys swam toward shore as quickly as they could, and the strange animal followed, making "savage gestures." When the boys finally reached land, they turned and saw that the animal was only a few yards from shore.

Not waiting to see if the creature could travel on land as well as it did in the water, the two friends hurried home to tell their parents of their experience. The terror-stricken manner in which the boys told their story convinced their parents and neighbors that the animal the boys had seen was a monster or something equally frightful.

Neither the Salt Lake Daily Herald nor the Daily Tribune carried stories describing the sighting, but both papers later offered comments on the occurrence. The Herald's response was waggish: "Another Lake monster is reported; this time from Utah Lake. Bear Lake must hurry."

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The Tribune saw a chance to poo-poo the monster, take a jab at the LDS Church, and criticize the Provo paper all in one short paragraph. The opportunity was too great a one to pass up. The Tribune printed:

"Two boys of Provo, who have partaken of the spirit of Latter day, spin a yarn to the effect that one day recently while bathing in Utah Lake, a water monster with mouth wide open, made for them, chasing them out of the Lake and scaring them nearly out of their wits. The Provo Enquirer gives currency to the story, and the whiskey down there is just as villainous as ever."

Two weeks later, the Deseret News printed the letter of another skeptic. David T. LeBaron, a Mormon and a veteran Utah Lake fisherman who lived in Spring Lake in Utah County, stated that he had been on the Lake hundreds of times in 25 years, and he had never seen a monster. He commented:

"I have seen . . . animals of almost every imaginable size and shape, also large vessels, floating logs, etc., but they always turned out to be rushes, bunches of moss, pelicans, else some kind of ordinary animal or fowl, which being magnified upon the water, multiply their proportions to a great degree. At times a rush not larger than a man's finger drifting at a distance looks like a mammoth saw log, and any one at first seeing it would declare it to be such."

LeBaron's argument must have been convincing, for no articles attempting to debunk his statement reached the papers. The people of Utah County were privately debating the pros and cons of monster life in Utah Lake for many years more, however.

Not quite satisfied with their initial attack on the monster story, the Tribune struck again the day after LeBaron's article appeared in the Deseret News. The voice of Utah's gentiles printed the following vitriolic remarks:

"And now the brethren discredit the big whale story. They say no such fish was ever seen in Utah Lake. By and bye the brethren will disbelieve the Book of Mormon, will swear Joe Smith was a lying prophet and Brig was his successor."

Such nasty remarks were commonplace in the Tribune of that day and age.

Three years later in 1883, the boys and their monster received a lighthearted curtain call from the pen of British traveler, Phil Robinson, who spent three months touring hither and yon through Utah Territory. Robinson's Mormon informants told him of the frightful specter that had appeared in the Lake, and he gave it a cameo role in his book, Sinners and Saints. Robinson provided the monster with a swan song when he wrote:

"The Utah Lake has borne an uncomfortable reputation as the domain of strange water-apparitions. . . . I would commend to notice the great snake of the Utah Lake. It has frightened men -- and, far better evidence than that, it has been seen by children when playing on the shore. I say "better," because children are not likely to invent a plausible horror in order to explain their sudden rushing away from a given spot with terrified countenances and a

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consistent narrative. . . . Have wise men from the East ever heard of this fabled thing? Does the Smithsonian know of this terror of the Lake -- this freshwater kraken -- this new Mormon iniquity?"

David LeBaron's argument and the Tribune's scathing treatment of the monster stories had the desired effect. Articles relating to the Utah Lake Monster received no press coverage for the next four decades. Then in 1921, the monster tales were briefly revived, only to sink ingloriously again into the depths of the Lake.

The American Fork Citizen reported that Frank Grasteit, a commercial fisherman on Utah Lake, and others were looking for "a strange sea animal of some sort" that had been seen by various people during the last several months near Goshen and Mosida. The creature was reported to be a fast-moving animal that held its head above water while swimming. It was about four feet long, black in color, and shaped like a seal. The fishermen were attempting to net the strange beast and bring it to American Fork for a special exhibition on July 4.

After reading this news, W.W. Robinson, one of American Fork's oldest residents, reminisced in the local paper how an animal answering that description had been seen by many people about 40 years earlier. It had never been caught. He thought the strange beast must live "partly in the nearby mountains and partly in the Lake."

The animal was not caught, but a letter written by Robert Walker and sent to the American Fork newspaper seemed successfully to debunk the fears of any alarmed citizens of the valley. He wrote that the animal in the Lake was nothing more than a black otter about the size of a dog.

Fortunately, the animal lived on fish and was not harmful to humans.

According to Walker, otters "lived around sloughs and some have been seen near the sugar factory pond." It had been years since an animal of that kind had been spotted in the valley.

Walker reached a conclusion relating to the Utah Lake Monster that was similar to the conclusion George A. Smith reached concerning the Bear Lake Monster 50 years earlier. Smith wrote to Robert Beauchamp August 24, 1870, "Probably investigation will show that they are seals that excite our Bear Lake neighbors."

Unlike the Bear Lake Monster, the Utah Lake Monster does not appear to have been created by the publication of an intentional lie. Utah Lake's monster likely surfaced as the result of the vivid imaginations of Utah County residents being stimulated by strange Ute Water Baby tales, Joseph C. Rich's Bear Lake Monster articles in the Deseret News, illusions caused by the reflecting waters of the Lake and a dearth of good optometrists.

For more than 80 years now, nothing further has been reported on the status of the Utah Lake Monster. However, if you are fishing, boating, or water skiing on Utah Lake, and you spy something out of the corner of your eye that is large and yellow with black spots and has a

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ferocious looking head, you may have located the missing kraken -- or maybe you just need to reduce your consumption of psychedelic mushrooms.

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This story appeared in The Daily Herald on page B2.