

Daily Herald

Fishermen find Utah Lake Monster

Daily Herald | Posted: Saturday, May 13, 2006 11:00 pm

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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 to be 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. 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."

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 didn't 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."

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

Other Water Baby tales are more closely related to Utah Lake. Some early settlers of Utah Valley even changed Utah Water Indian tales so they substantiated stories found in the Bible. This was the case with William S. Robinson, who was a boy when his family settled in American Fork during pioneer times.

Robinson wrote: "When we came here, we heard that a great monster was in the lake. We asked an Indian about this big reptile and he said it was a fish, and told how four of the Indians were in swimming and heard a noise and saw this big fish following. It swallowed them and they had a knife and cut themselves out of the fish. You can connect that story with the story of Jonah, (from) which I think it is handed down."

Many of the Great Basin's new settlers came to Utah Valley from England and Denmark and were familiar with stories of dragons and kraken, or as we call them, sea monsters. Utah pioneers may not have been able to believe in little people who lived in the lake, swallowed humans and carried them into the water, but it was apparently less difficult for some of them to believe in something just as chilling and dramatic. Indian tales sown on the fertile field of pioneer imagination resulted in a bounteous harvest of monster lore.

There was, however, little public comment dealing with the presence of water monsters in Utah until August 3, 1868. On that date, a letter in the correspondence column of the Deseret News sported an eye-catching headline consisting of the following four words printed in bold capital letters: "MONSTERS IN BEAR LAKE" The letter read in part:

"All lakes, caves and dens have their legendary histories. Tradition loves to throw her magic wand over beautiful dells and lakes and people them with fairies, giants and monsters of various kinds. Bear Lake has also its monster tale to tell, and when I have told it, I will leave you to judge whether or not its merits are merely traditionary."

The correspondent, Joseph Rich, son of Charles C. Rich, went on to say the local Indians believed Bear Lake contained a monster. They claimed that many years earlier the animal carried off Indians who were swimming in the lake. Although the monster had not been seen for many years, the Indians faintly remembered what it looked like. They said the monster had legs 18 inches long and spouted water upwards from its mouth.

On a summer Sunday in 1868, three men and six women spotted a huge brownish animal between 40 and 90 feet long swimming in Bear Lake. It swam faster than a speeding locomotive, and ten others of various sizes swam in its wake.

Rich finished his imaginative article by teasing his audience with these words: "Is it fish, flesh or serpent, amphibious or amfabulous or a great big fib, or what is itfi ... Here is an excellent opportunity for some company to bust Barnum on a dicker for the monster, if they can only catch one."

Did the clever, articulate correspondent from Rich County believe what he wrotefi The answer lies in the following statement Rich jotted down about twenty years later when summarizing the many things he had accomplished at that point in his life. He wrote, "I discovered and made famous by publication in the Deseret News that wonderful first class lie -- The Bear Lake Monster."

What motivated Rich to write his now famous letterfi To many people in Utah's capital city, life on the northern fringe of the territory near Bear Lake seemed provincial and boring, and the area received few visitors during the first years of its settlement.

Rich apparently contrived to convince the people of Salt Lake City, including the woman he hoped to

marry, that life in Rich County was not as drab and humdrum as they thought it was. Rich intended to attract more visitors to the area by making the Bear Lake Country the most talked about and widely known section of Utah Territory. Could his fanciful scheme succeedfi

To be continued...

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This story appeared in The Daily Herald on page B2.