

Seriously Seeking Sasquatch . . .

Commentary by George W. Earley

Private eye John Denson doesn't believe in Bigfoot. Willie Prettybird, his partner, who may or may not be a Shaman, does. But when a wealthy wheeler-dealer puts up a \$100,000 reward for the proof the creatures exist, and when a beautiful blonde Russian primatologist comes to the Northwest to join the hunt, Denson puts skepticism aside and joins the fun.

But the fun doesn't last long. Two murders swiftly reduce the ranks of the hunters, a RV packed with 'priceless' Sasquatchiana [including pint jars of alleged sasquatch shit] is stolen, a tracker's dog is shot and someone seems to have ordered large quantities of spendy rum long before it was needed.

If you don't recall reading about all this in the local papers -- and even *The Oregonian* could be expected to take note of murdered sasquatch seekers -- it's because it all happens in **Bigfoot**, a John Denson mystery by Richard Hoyt [Tor Books, 1993; \$17.95].

In writing **Bigfoot** [which is a fun read, heartily recommended to Upper Left Edge readers], Hoyt clearly did his homework in researching the real world of sasquatch seekers. He's captured the petty jealousies, rivalries, name-calls, and the jockeying-for-media-attention that permeates the lives of many involved in the hunt these days. The scenes he paints of the people are as familiar as his descriptions of the terrain around Mount St. Helens where his oddly assorted groups do their searching.

To tell you how it all comes out would deprive you of some fun reading . . . suffice it to say that Hoyt, reflecting the real world, does leave open the question of the actual existence of Bigfoot.

But in the real world, the search does go on. As does the acrimonious rivalry between the various searchers.

To date, as far as I know, there have been no murders in the ranks of the Bigfoot believers, though there have been lawsuits, threats of lawsuits, plenty of verbal trashing of competitors and, just a few years ago, the jailing of one Bigfoot buff on charges [later proven false] that he had threatened the life of a competing sasquatch seeker.

That last incident happened in Pullman, Washington, on the eve of a major Bigfoot conference the summer of 1989. And Pullman, as some may know, is the home of both Washington State University [where the conference was held] and of Dr. Grover Krantz, associate professor of anthropology at WSU.

Krantz, one of a mere handful of scientists who believe the sasquatch exist, has paid dearly for his 'heretical' views. Tenure was longer in coming to him than for professors who hew closer to the path of establishment science, and he is resigned to never being promoted to full professor.

Still, he plugs ahead, gathering evidence and hoping to actually acquire a sasquatch body in his lifetime. He's fully prepared to shoot one but has yet to have the opportunity to do so. What he's collected the most of so far are castings of purported sasquatch tracks. In **Big Footprints** [Johnson Books, 1992; \$14.95] Krantz describes not only the many footprint castings in his collection, but the information about the track maker that he believes can be derived from the prints it leaves.

In his collection are a number of castings that show not only the wrinkles and folds of skin on the sole of feet, but dermal ridges, tiny whorls not unlike those you see on your own feet.

Krantz has shown these to police fingerprint experts who agree with him that these dermal ridges are, absent an actual body, the strongest possible evidence for the tracks being authentic prints left by an unknown living two-legged animal.

But why no bodies, no bones? ask the skeptics. Injured or sick animals, says Krantz, carefully conceal themselves. Dead bodies are quickly found and consumed by scavengers -- Krantz knows of no instances where the bodies of bears or cougars, which exist in far larger quantities than do sasquatch, have been found after having died a natural death. Bones are quickly scattered and "deteriorate, with most of them being completely reincorporated into the soil in several years . . ."

As for your chances of seeing one, they're slim says Krantz, who characterizes sasquatch as "shy, solitary and nocturnal . . . most evidence of their passage and feeding can easily be mistaken for bears . . . their usual forested habitat provides maximum concealment . . . and includes relatively few places that record footprints."

A slim chance of seeing sasquatch? Vance Orchard wouldn't agree with that. In **Bigfoot of the Blues** [Earthlight Books, 321 East Main St., Walla Walla WA 99362; 1993; \$14.95], Orchard, a newsman for many decades, has set down his memories of years of recounting the sasquatch tales told by others.

Prominent among those tale tellers is one Paul Freeman, who while riding patrol for the Forest Service in 1982, found sasquatch tracks in "the Mill Creek Watershed, source of water for Walla Walla." Freeman's report, says Orchard, brought him and his family so much grief from foul-tongued skeptics that he quit his job and moved out of the area, not to return for several years.

Apparently more thick-skinned after his sojourn away, Freeman, says Orchard, has now become an almost full-time sasquatch seeker and has had the skill [or luck?] to find far more tracks than any other creature chaser. And video tape. Don't forget the videotape, says Orchard, describing how Freeman and son Duane succeeded some years ago in getting some [regrettably poor] tape of a sasquatch prowling the woods.

Bigfoot of the Blues is packed with that sort of anecdotal reporting . . . fascinating accounts of close encounters of the Bigfoot kind.

Unfortunately for skeptical/curious readers, what Orchard's book is *not* packed with are pictures. He continually mentions photos of many tracks he says various sasquatch seekers have seen, photographed and/or cast,



but his book is peculiarly unillustrated. This is all the more puzzling as the referenced photos were reportedly published in his paper. If their lack is due to cost, it's a bad choice -- better to have cut the text a bit.

But while Orchard is almost uncritically accepting of the tales told by Freeman and others, including the Summerlin brothers who have "spent many years trapping and tracking wildlife and mankind in the Blues", others are not so impressed.

Rene Dahinden, for example.

Dahinden, a native of Switzerland who came to Canada several decades ago and got so hooked on sasquatch stories that, in time, his obsession cost him his marriage, has little patience with, and less belief in, Freeman and his tales.

In **Sasquatch/Bigfoot: The Search for North America's Incredible Creature** [Firefly Books; 1993; \$14.95], author Don Hunter quotes Dahinden on Freeman: "It's awfully suspicious. The first tracks ever discovered in the watershed are discovered by a man who gets the job a month before. Then more tracks are found -- not once, but three times -- several miles apart. And never unless Paul Freeman is around."

We could, I suppose, be charitable and believe that Paul Freeman somehow emits sasquatch-attractive pheromones but then we are left with the question as to why Freeman's photographs/video tapes are of such poor quality. As Freeman admitted of one of his tapes, "You have to look at it two or three times until you see it." [the alleged sasquatch] "At least" wryly responds Dahinden.

Hunter's book, on which Dahinden collaborated, traces Rene's career -- for it has become a career if not an obsession -- as a sasquatch seeker. Originally published in 1973 and long out of print, this updated version will dis-appoint long-timers in field as the update consists of a tenth chapter, a shortish Epilogue and some changes in the photo section. Not much, long-timers will mutter, to cover two decades and in that they are right. But even with the sketchy update, Firefly has done all Bigfoot buffs a service by bringing back into print a fascinating book that provides both an overview of the sasquatch scene as well as a unique perspective on one man's lifelong search for the truth behind the reports. And at a price that doesn't strain one's wallet.

While backpacking in western Canada some years ago, I often queried forest service personnel about sasquatch. For the most part the responses were non-committal although in Alberta, a senior official huffily responded "There are no sasquatch here. That's a B.C. problem!"

I didn't believe him and neither did Albertan Thomas Steenburg who, some years ago, placed ads in local papers seeking reports. From those responses, plus his own local investigations, came a privately-published book now expanded and commercially published as **Sasquatch: Bigfoot -- The Continuing Mystery** [Hancock House; 1993; \$11.95].

Steenburg, who has spent a large part of his free time over the past 15 years either in the field or interviewing witnesses, provides a number of admittedly anecdotal, yet consistent, reports from the northern half of Alberta.

Included, along with witness accounts, are sasquatch sketches by eyewitness, photos of track casts and of foot prints found in the snow. Having personally spent many hours hiking in the snow, I agree with Steenburg's assessment that his track photos are highly unlikely to be the result of conventional animal tracks distorted by melting.

There are hoaxers and jokesters -- Steenburg recounts one phone call from a man who claimed a sasquatch was his drinking buddy -- but, as evident in reports received by other investigators, the vast majority of folks Steenburg has talked with are sane, sober and sincerely puzzled by what they have seen.

So the hunt goes on . . . right here in Oregon. Yes, dear readers, if you are now interested in being part of the sasquatch scene and care to drive to Portland, the Western Bigfoot Society is always open to new members. A for-profit organization [\$20/year] sponsored by, and meeting in the basement of, *Ray's Used Books & Curios*, 8622 N. Lombard [Portland 97203], the WBS publishes a regular newsletter [**The Track Record**], meets monthly [7 pm, the last Thursday] and often makes weekend field trips to such places as the wilds of Estacada where there have been recent sasquatch sightings. [The WBS also sponsors "Bigfoot Daze" in Carson WA each summer: Aug 26 - 27 this year. Send the WBS a SASE for detailed information.]

For those who may wish to go further afield, the recently formed United Bigfoot Expeditions [P.O. Box 12644, Salem 97309-05644], a "non-profit organization whose primary objectives are to prove the existence of Bigfoot, study them in their natural habitat, and preserve

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that habitat," is actively recruiting like-minded members. UBE's director, Scott White, says their "projects will be discussed periodically" at WBS meetings.

Also occasionally attending WBS meetings is Peter Byrne, director of The Bigfoot Research Project [P.O. Box 126, Mount Hood, 97041. Write, or call 1-800-BIGFOOT, to report sasquatch sightings or for a free brochure]. TBRP is a full-time research effort, funded by the Boston-based Academy of Applied Science.

Byrne, who searched for Yeti in the Himalayas before coming to Oregon, characterizes the project as "a benign, scientific investigation designed to prove the existence of" the Bigfoot creatures. TRBP believes "the creatures are more man-like than ape-like . . . [possessing] . . . unusual intelligence, on a level possibly close to our own."

Could be . . . could be too that TBRP will succeed where other groups have failed. Until then, for most of us, the search for sasquatch will consist of avidly following the published accounts of the stubborn few who stalk field and forest, cameras at hand, hoping for the photo-op proving that Sasquatch Lives! •••

George W. Earley, a freelance writer living in Mount Hood has long sought the elusive sasquatch.

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