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Amateur versus professional: the search for Bigfoot

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Those who would seek monsters not as metaphors, but as flesh and blood organisms have gone largely overlooked by the history of science. Starting in the 1950s and 1960s a group of amateur monster hunters and physical anthropologists began to pursue such creatures as Sasquatch, Bigfoot and the Yeti as living species. Whether or not such creatures exist, the monster hunters themselves are fascinating subjects for study, illustrating the tensions that are all too common between amateur naturalists and professional scientists.

The Bossburg incident

On a cold morning just before Thanksgiving of 1969, a small group of residents from Colville in Washington, USA headed to the community garbage dump at nearby Bossburg, a site close to the Canadian border. Ivan Marx, a local wilderness guide, had seen strange tracks at the site not long before and the previous spring a woman had seen a strange creature lurking about the area. Once at the dump, the group was astonished to find several shoe-less footprints in the icy snow. Who would be walking barefoot through the snow around the town dump on Thanksgiving? What's more, the tracks were enormous, almost 17 in. long. Word spread quickly and within a few days people were flocking in from around the region to see the curious prints. Bigfoot, or Sasquatch as it is also commonly called, already had a long running reputation in the forest cathedrals of the Pacific Northwest.

Along with the gawkers at Bossburg, there was also a group of men who were more than just curious. John Green, René Dahinden and others formed the core of a loosely affiliated gathering of amateur naturalists dedicated to the search for the legendary and elusive creature. These serious-minded men fanned out over the area around Bossburg and Colville and found a further 1000 tracks. Besides their size, what set these tracks apart from other Sasquatch tracks was the left foot, which had a pair of unusual protrusions on the outside edge and the toes of which seemed oddly misshapen. With these distinguishing features, the creature that made these prints became known as Cripplefoot [1].

A few weeks later a professor of anthropology from Washington State University joined the fray. For years, Grover Krantz had been researching the Sasquatch in particular and anomalous primates in general. He had never actually seen Bigfoot tracks in the wild and with this sighting practically in his backyard he headed out to take a look. This was a watershed moment in the study of anomalous primates. The common narrative for discoveries of Sasquatch evidence was that amateurs claimed support for the beast's existence only to be dismissed by scientists interpreting the same evidence as a hoax or a misidentification. But not on this occasion. At Bossburg, the exact opposite occurred.

Although a true believer in the existence of Bigfoot, René Dahinden soon came to believe the Cripplefoot tracks had been faked [2]. Krantz, however, saw in the tracks anatomical details he felt could not be faked and his skepticism began to turn to belief (Figure 1). Later, Smithsonian Institution scientist John Napier agreed it unlikely the tracks a hoax because of their morphological details arguing they were an example of the condition known as clubfoot. More than any other scientist, Grover Krantz would argue for the reality of Bigfoot to the point of his career becoming inextricably linked to it.

As they stood in the freezing snow and ice of the Washington woods, arguing over the Cripplefoot, John Green, René Dahinden and Grover Krantz were engaging in one of the longest running discussions in the history of science in America and indeed the West: not over the existence of monsters, but over the relationship between amateur and professional scientists. They had tapped into tropes and traditions about scientific authority. Who had the right to claim it? The experts or the people?

The reign of the amateurs

In the early part of North American history there were no professional scientists. There was a cadre of men of means, landed gentlemen, clergy, doctors and lawyers who roamed about the countryside collecting and classifying the virtually endless array of new species that frolicked about the landscape of the New World. This was a tradition that began in England in the late 1400s and eventually crossed to the Americas. Because of their efforts these amateur naturalists were the prime source of scientific knowledge about the North American continent. Men like Cadwallader Colden, John and William Bartram, Constantine Samuel Rafinesque (who in 1819 was the first to assign a scientific name to a North American monster, the Massachusetts sea serpent *Megophias monstrosus*), Ephraim G. Squier, even Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin became models of the best aspects of the young Republic applied to science: serious, self-made amateurs thinking their own thoughts, unfettered from establishment or hierarchy. Not a secret priesthood, but open to all. It was democratic science [3].

After the revolution, the US government entered the science business by making funds available for exploration and publication. Government officials saw a need to use and support the latest scientific undertakings, not only to

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Figure 1. Grover Krantz inspects his first Sasquatch print, the infamous Cripplefoot in December 1969. Photo by permission of Christopher Murphy and Hancock House Press.

explore the new territories that were rapidly coming under their control but also to keep up with rival powers abroad. How could America be a leader in the world if it was not a leader in science? By the end of the nineteenth century, government-sponsored organizations like the Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, US Geological Survey as well as a burgeoning museum and university system were creating a new role: the professional scientist.

These individuals were not upper-class dilettantes or dreamy explorers, but academically trained, full time workers and they were taking charge. They did not just collect and tag specimens; they followed established rules of procedure in laboratories and employed theoretical models and techniques to work out answers about the workings of the natural world. The amateurs were still of use in collecting and surveying life forms, but scientific leadership was now firmly in the hands of the professionals [4]. The Victorian naturalist tradition was giving way to the theoretician and laboratory experimentalist.

The monster hunters

By the turn of the century, the reign of the amateur naturalist was over in America. Where they had once been at the center of scientific discourse, the amateurs now found themselves on the margins. By the second half of the twentieth century, however, a new character in the pantheon of amateur naturalists had begun to emerge. Out of a number of guises, including birdwatchers, rock hounds, and outdoor recreation enthusiasts, the monster hunter was born. That is when the relationship really went sour.

The modern interest in anomalous primates began in the 1920s, when reports of such creatures began to come out of the region of the Himalayan Mountains. Some British anthropologists commented on the possibility of the Yeti, but with little more than reports there was not much to discuss. Then in 1951 mountaineer Eric Shipton took a photo of a 'snowman' footprint that caused great excitement with the public and interest in the scientific community. In an article for *Nature*, Wladimir Tschernezky, a professor of zoology at Queen Mary College in London, published a short article on Yeti tracks. His conclusion was that the snowman walked like a human and was similar to the fossil primate *Gigantopithecus* [5]. Journals like *Nature* and *Science* soon had a steady flow of Yeti-associated articles and letters in their pages as scientists discussed the phenomena. Monsters had briefly acquired an air of scientific respectability.

With all the interest in the Yeti, attention soon shifted across the ocean. While reports and legends about hairy humanoids in North America preceded the arrival of Europeans, it was in the 1950s that a rash of sightings occurred in the US Pacific Northwest and Western Canada. This, along with the excitement being created by the Yeti helped inspire a group of amateur naturalists to begin a new field to search for the Abominable Snowman's American cousin. The members craved scientific respectability and recognition for their work, despite being wary of academics that employed the theoretical techniques of modern laboratory biology.

Monster hunting appealed to rugged individualists comfortable with a free and unencumbered life tramping through the vast expanse of the wilderness. With few exceptions, they had little formal higher education in the sciences, but were passionate about wildlife (eventually, the amateurs were joined by a small coterie of forest rangers and government wildlife agents). Some saw the

pursuit of the Sasquatch as a road to riches, some as a road to intellectual attainment formerly closed to them, and some were in it just for the adventure. They tried to apply high-tech devices to the search, but had no uniform organizing research principles. They did, however, have one shared ideal.

Men like Roger Patterson (1933–1972) and Robert Gimlin (whose infamous film bears their names), John Green, Peter Byrne, René Dahinden (1930–2001) and others did not hesitate to go look for creatures the professionals told them did not exist. They reveled in their amateur status, wearing it as a badge of honor. Patterson and Gimlin were struggling Washington ranch hands, John Green was a journalist and newspaper editor from British Columbia, Peter Byrne was a British big game hunter who came to America at the behest of Texas millionaire and Yeti enthusiast Tom Slick. René Dahinden, a Swiss-Canadian immigrant, was the model of the amateur naturalist Bigfoot hunter. An orphan with no formal education, he threw himself into anomalous primate studies with an intensity that would have given Captain Ahab pause. Far from being intimidated by the academics, these men argued that the lab-bound eggheads were woefully ignorant of what was going on out in the woods. They tried hard to interest mainstream science, but mostly to no avail. They were routinely told Bigfoot *couldn't* exist, no matter what their evidence was.

These characters were, however, inspired in part by a two academically trained men who straddled the line between the amateur and professional. Scottish naturalist Ivan Sanderson (1911–1973) and Belgian zoologist Bernard Heuvelmans (1916–2001) had higher degrees but no institutional affiliations. They also believed the animals did exist. Heuvelmans wrote the first influential book on the subject of anomalous wildlife *On the Track of Unknown Animals* (1958) and Sanderson wrote the central work devoted completely to what he called ABSMs, *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life* (1961) [6]. Both the amateurs and semi-amateurs like Sanderson and Heuvelmans sniffed contemptuously at the professionals, countering their skepticism with thousands of eyewitness reports, hundreds of plaster casts of footprints and even a photograph or film or two, daring them to explain these away.

Few professional scientists were prepared to take the possibility of anomalous primates seriously. But some did, at least for a time. American anthropologist Carleton Coon (1904–1981) and archaeologist George Agogino (1921–2000) were interested in the Sasquatch and Yeti and investigated sightings. William Charles Osman-Hill, a noted British primatologist working in America, was sent artifacts and other materials for comment, while another British-born scientist working in America, John Napier (1917–1987) who had worked on African hominids like *Homo habilis* wrote *Bigfoot: the Yeti and Sasquatch in Myth and Reality* (1973) [7]. Agogino generally kept a low profile; Coon was a Harvard-trained scientist and established senior faculty member who enjoyed being controversial; Osman-Hill was always circumspect in his pronouncements; and while Napier went out on a limb with his book, he waffled so much that it was not clear where he stood on the matter. They all drifted from the search, however, when little more evidence was forthcoming.

The lone professional

The only scientist to go all in on the subject was anthropologist Grover Krantz (1931–2002). Born into a family of Utah Mormons, Krantz abandoned religion for science early on. After serving in the military he went to the University of California at Berkeley to study physical anthropology, eventually being awarded a doctorate with a focus on human evolution. He became interested in anomalous primates when he would read reports of the Yeti at high school. His interest grew as he heard of and collected reports of Yeti-like creatures roaming the North American wilderness. He also read the works of Sanderson and Heuvelmans. In 1964, he traveled to Bluff Creek in California to visit the spot where the famous 'Bigfoot' tracks had been found by a logging crew in 1958 [8]. He did not see the creature – or any tracks – but found himself increasingly intrigued by the idea of Sasquatch, though not much by the available evidence.

The period between 1967 and 1970 was a turning point for Krantz. It was in October of 1967 that Patterson and Gimlin took their film, which hit pop culture the following January when the widely circulated men's magazine *Argosy* ran a cover story on it which included a number of stills from the film [9] (Figure 2). The article was a sensation and helped give a face – albeit a dark, hairy and blurry one – to the Bigfoot legend. When Krantz saw the article he was rather disappointed, saying it "looked to me like someone wearing a gorilla suit" (which was exactly what most scientists said) [10].

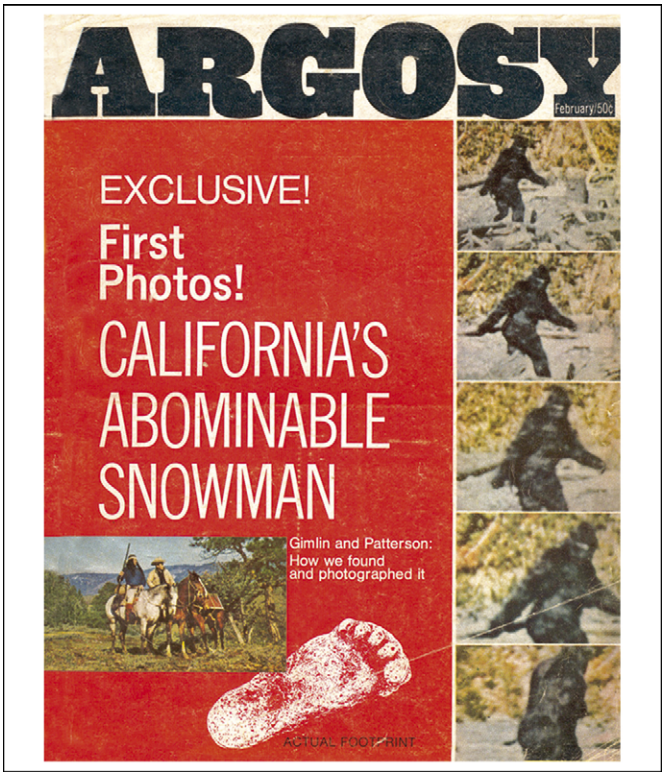

Figure 2. The cover of *Argosy,* the men's magazine that published the first stills from Patterson and Gimlin's 1967 film.

Then, in the summer of 1968, Krantz was offered a position as assistant professor of anthropology at Washington State University in the heart of Sasquatch country. He took advantage of his new location by going to a few places where people had claimed to have seen the creature. He then saw the entire Patterson film at a local theater and had a change of heart. Unlike the grainy stills from *Argosy*, the film revealed anatomical details which captured Krantz's imagination. About the same time, he read Sasquatch researcher John Green's *On the Track of the Sasquatch*, published a year earlier [11]. Green's compendium of eyewitness reports and use of *Gigantopithecus* as a possible source for the creature impressed the anthropologist. Then that Thanksgiving holiday came along.

In December of 1969, Krantz saw the Cripplefoot tracks *in situ*. The morphology of the foot appealed to Krantz's anatomical training. He concluded that no simpleton hoaxer would think to forge such a convincing fake. He also saw Sasquatch hand prints from the same area. These too had details only someone well versed in primate anatomy could have imagined. Krantz was now convinced the creature was real [12].

While at Bossburg, Krantz met John Green and began a long and amiable friendship. He also met René Dahinden, though while their relationship was long it was to be far from amiable. Dahinden was already suspicious of the Cripplefoot prints (Figure 3). This was in part because nobody had actually seen the beast itself, in spite of hundreds of fresh footprints and many people tramping excitedly around in search of the creature that had made them. Dahinden was also suspicious of the man at the heart of the discovery, Ivan Marx. A veteran of an aborted Sasquatch hunt in California a few years earlier, Marx lived in Bossburg [13]. It was Marx who called John Green about the tracks at the dump. Green in turn called René Dahinden and the ball began to roll. A year after the tracks were found Marx earnestly produced a laughably fake film of the creature scampering about the woods.

That Krantz felt the Cripplefoot tracks genuine peeved Dahinden no end, increasing his already finely honed distaste for academics, who he enjoyed calling 'boffins'. Though they would go through brief periods of relative peace, Dahinden would spend the rest of his life hounding Krantz with insults and threats in his broken, often vituperative English speech and prose. "I will pull you down and blackball you in the Sasquatch research," he once sputtered to Krantz in one of their disagreements [14].

Figure 3. The irascible René Dahinden holding the Cripplefoot casts, probably in December 1969. These are the prints that finally pushed Grover Krantz to believe the creature was real. Note the deformed condition of the left foot. Photo by permission of Christopher Murphy and Hancock House Press.

As a scientist, Krantz knew he needed two things: one was a theoretical model to explain how such a creature might come to inhabit the Pacific Northwest and the other was a body. His answer to the first was to follow John Green's lead in choosing the extinct Asian primate *Gigantopithecus* as a likely progenitor. The second was to promote the idea of shooting a Bigfoot and dissecting it (a proposition that appalled most amateurs). Krantz threw all his professional training and knowledge – and the rest of his 30-year career – into proving the connection between Bigfoot and *Gigantopithecus*. He collected footprint casts, arguing for the existence of dermal ridges in their detail, he worked out biomechanical data for the creature and attempted to establish scientific names for it, which included *Gigantopithecus canadensis*. Despite his credentials and effort Krantz met with as much resistance from scientists as the amateurs had.

Conflicting positions

Following the initial attention, mainstream science soon lost interest in anomalous primates. Those professional scientists who sneered at Bigfoot argued that the amateurs had no idea what they were doing. They lacked the requisite methodologies and theoretical models to understand why the creature made no sense from a biological, behavioral and evolutionary standpoint. The amateurs believed the creature real not based on any evidence, but on blind belief and wishful thinking. Some scientists thought it beneath them to consider the ramblings of backwoods crackpots or excited campers misidentifying other creatures for monsters.

Ironically, there was an element of resentment of professionals among amateur ranks for some of the same reasons. The amateurs accused the professionals of being laboratory- and library-bound eggheads with no idea what things were like in the field. Their academic training had blinded them. Their fancy degrees and titles made them too smart for their own good. Their use of theoretical models did not take the reality of the 'evidence' into account, and their reliance on university and museum appointments made them beholden to their masters, ready to toe the corporate line and squelch opposition from the people. Disgruntled amateurs, tired of the treatment they were receiving, used terms like 'so-called scientists' and 'narrow-minded scientists' when referring to their rivals. Their real-world experience showed them, for example, that contrary to professional pronouncements, there was obviously plenty of room and food to support Bigfoot populations in the wild. The amateur's also argued contemptuously that those who called themselves scientists were misusing the word. It was the dedicated amateur naturalists who were more scientific than scientists. It was an old animosity held deep in the American psyche about theoretical science and suspect 'intellectual elites'. It was the dark anti-intellectualism of American populism.

Krantz, in particular, was held in contempt by some of the amateurs because they said he fell too easily for evidence they considered fake. Dahinden, for example, had a high standard for accepting evidence. There was also something else. Far from trying to bring the two worlds of amateur and professional together, Krantz was interested in taking Bigfoot out of the hands of the amateur naturalists and putting it into the hands of professional anthropologists while at the same time leaving amateurs like Dahinden behind. Both men perceptively realized that once Sasquatch was proven to exist it would fall into the realm of anthropology and the amateurs would lose their prize forever.

Not much has changed since those cold months in Northern Washington in 1969 when the Cripplefoot tracks were found. The battle lines are in the same place: enthusiasts still head out into the woods like birdwatchers, now armed with infra-red cameras and lures soaked with primate pheromones. A few scientists take it seriously while most of their colleagues scoff at them [15]. Belief in Bigfoot has become a part of the rejection of knowledge all too many Americans engage in over the pronouncements of 'experts'. While the search for Sasquatch is a relatively benign form, more sinister examples have grown in the creation/evolution debate and arguments over global warming. As historians of science look into the controversy over the footprints and other evidence of Bigfoot it will tell them less about big hairy monsters that lurk in the woods than the big hairy monsters that lurk in us.

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