

Tracking Bigfoot Through 1970s North American Children's Culture

*How Mass Media, Consumerism, and the
Culture of Preadolescence Shaped Wildman Lore*

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ABSTRACT

Juvenile Bigfoot stories of the 1970s filtered generic themes inherent in wildman tales through culturally specific concerns about children's desires, the ubiquity of consumerism, and the power of mass media. The stories were meant to help children navigate the complexities of American culture. Children found something else: a way to break from their parents and claim a place in the social world as adults. They did not fret over consumerism but adapted to it. KEYWORDS: Bigfoot, children's culture, mass media, lore cycle, consumerism

In the mid 1970s, Thomas Steenburg's high school social studies class was assigned to write and present a paper on any Canadian topic. Steenburg lived in the small town of Bancroft, Ontario. He had been interested in the legendary Sasquatch since he was five or six years old and was determined that his essay would be on the creature. His social studies teacher was unimpressed with the choice. Steenburg, however, was determined and eventually won his way. He could regale the class with monster stories if he wanted, but, his teacher warned, he would be graded the same way that all the other students were. Steenburg poured over books about the monster (Steenburg 2000:6). While statistics are difficult to come by, anecdotal evidence

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suggests that Steenburg's case was not unique. The 1970s witnessed a noteworthy number of children—boys, mostly—who, like Steenburg, battled with adults over the meaning of the monster Sasquatch.

Sasquatch is, of course, a well-known figure to folklorists, a modern update of the traditional wildman (Kirtley 1964:77-90). Along with Bigfoot, the Yeti, and the Abominable Snowman, Sasquatch penetrated the culture of North American children during the 1970s. The main path—or, at least an important one—for the transmission of stories about Bigfoot and other wildmen was the mass media.

Tracking Bigfoot through children's culture, then, offers a chance to observe the adaptation of folklore to the mass media and contemporary concerns. "Popular art," such as the juvenile Sasquatchiana produced during the 1970s, is "a kind of mass produced folklore," wrote Harold Schechter, "the form of storytelling that has taken the place of traditional folk narrative in the technological world" (1988:11). As this case shows, the adaptation was not straightforward. In moving from (presumably, although not always) oral transmission to mass media transmission, Bigfoot passed through different folkloric genres, from legend to *märchen* and back. Bigfoot stories were also put to different uses by different groups—there may have been a mass audience for the mass media, but that audience was not homogenous. Many adults used Bigfoot stories—if they acknowledged them at all—to educate their children in the proper ways to live in a consumer society. Much of this moral instruction was underwritten by Freudian theories of childhood development. Children, it seems, approached Bigfoot differently. The creature was a way for them to finesse a different dilemma: how to create a social identity while still maintaining connections with their parents. Like so many other wildmen, Sasquatch was a guide to the uncharted.

Not too long ago, folklorists looked at mass media as anathematic to their discipline—folklore focused on the variable oral culture of small groups, not the supposed immutability of culture created for the mob. Baldly put—perhaps too pointedly—mass media was fakelore (Dorson 1950:335-343; Dégh 1994:1-12; Bendix 1997:188-212). Over the last twenty years or so, however, folklorists have found that the tools of their trade can be used to make sense of mass culture—just as anthropologists have also found that the methods of their discipline, once confined to interpreting "primitive" societies, can shed light on the modern world, even the production of scientific knowledge (Latour 1987:13-17). "It is not enough to recognize that mass media play a role

in folklore transmission," noted Linda Dégh. "It is closer to the truth to admit that the media have become a part of folklore." Theoretically, she suggests, it is not necessary to separate them: they function in the same way (Dégh 1994:25-26). Scholars such as Gary Alan Fine and Bill Ellis have tracked the ways that legends move through society, how they reflect contemporary concerns, and how they influence actions. To paraphrase Bill Ellis, we—modern, supposedly secular and rational people—live by legends (2001).

This essay also uses W.T. Lhamon's concept of a "lore cycle." Lore cycles, according to Lhamon, are gestures, performances, and stories that compress a group's (often contradictory) beliefs on some subject (1990:98-101;1998:69-70). He points to American blackface minstrelsy as an exemplar of the lore cycle: minstrel acts combined interracial fascination and desire with fear and denigration. As minstrel shows evolved—first among the proletariat, then in theaters, and finally in elements scattered among other cultural forms, such as the sitcom and hip hop video—performers played out various ideas about race, sometimes emphasizing disdain, sometimes love, but always featuring at least a little of both, altering their acts to address the concerns of the moment. "Lore cycles," Lhamon said, expose "the mediational process of culture that allows people to fit themselves to the stimuli and interruptions of their eras" (Lhamon 1998:78). "They keep culture traveling and mutating," while also carrying traces of older beliefs (Lhamon 1998:79). Lore cycles operate both in small groups and mass ones, as part of oral culture and other forms of media.

An American wildman lore cycle took shape in the late nineteenth century. Of course, wildmen have been known across space and time, sometimes accepted as real, sometimes as fantasy, and usually troubling the line between humanity and animality. But throughout North America and Europe, the image of the wildman underwent significant change during the 1800s (Forth 2007:269-273). Elites no longer believed that wildmen existed, at least not anymore. Theories about organic evolution—including, but not limited to, Darwin's—placed wildmen in the past, as apemen, cavemen, and Neanderthals, while the discovery of the unconscious refigured wildmen as a psychological construct, the libidinal id, the uncivilized monster lurking inside everyone's mind (Moser 1998:107-109; White 1972:34). Stories about wildmen after the middle of the nineteenth century not only troubled the line between humanity and animality, but between authenticity and fakery, as well as that between liberty and danger. Over the course of more than a century,

as this cycle turned, these conflicting—and confounding—ideas compressed into stories about a succession of wildmen, eventually reaching children’s culture in the 1970s, where they were put to different uses by children and their parents.

Understanding the differing perspectives of boys and the adults who tried to instruct them requires using several types of evidence, some with more limits than others. It is possible to get at the adults’ views by closely reading their texts against the cultural conditions of the time, adding to that comments which some of the authors have left about the motivations for their work. On the contrary, it is difficult, almost impossible, to fully assess what boys who read about Bigfoot thought about their experiences, since the vast majority left no record of their responses. Some Sasquatch enthusiasts have told of how they became interested in the mysterious beast, often as a child. These accounts are not representative, however, since, unlike most children, enthusiasts went on to spend a lot of time, energy, and money on Bigfoot. Besides, they are remembrances, childhood emotions translated into adult understandings, inevitably with some (unacknowledged) changes. Still, such recollections do offer insights. When buttressed with other analyses of childhood, a picture of what children saw in Bigfoot, how they responded to it, and what they learned does emerge.

The main body of this essay is divided into three sections. The first traces how the Bigfoot legend was translated into the mass media and incorporated into the wildman lore cycle. The second shows how adult producers of children’s culture transformed the legend into a fairy tale—*märchen*—meant to civilize children. Finally, the essay turns to the boys who were the audience for these tales and how they translated the stories back into legends and used those “to fit themselves to the stimuli and irruptions of their era” (Lhamon 1998:78).

BIGFOOT AND THE WILDMAN LORE CYCLE

Establishing the start of something is always contentious, and that is certainly the case with Bigfoot. Enthusiasts have argued that the beast’s beginnings date back millions of years and can be traced through the tales of Native Americans and early newspaper reports. Even some skeptics admit that Bigfoot’s start came long ago, in wildman tales that gradually took on new forms over the years. More prosaically—but also possibly more accurately—Bigfoot’s birth date can be narrowed down—though not definitively—to some time in the late summer and early fall of 1958. It was then that a group of loggers in Northern California

began to gossip about a strange creature that seemed to haunt their camp, tossing equipment, stealing food, and leaving huge tracks in the soil (Place 1978:68). The workers and their families called the track-maker Big Foot, and speculated about the nature of the creature: Was it a giant ape? A wildman? A huge bear? A hoax?

At this point, the stories of Big Foot were legends, what Gary Alan Fine calls “a proposition for belief” (Fine 1992:2). Even tellers of Big Foot tales did not always believe what they were saying—although Big Foot’s existence was always deemed possible (Genzoli 1958:14). Big Foot allowed the people living in the relatively isolated northwest corner of California to make sense of their lives, their place in the world. The legend, Dégh notes, is the genre that “allows, indeed coerces people to think, to philosophize, to contemplate, to argue, and to debate” (Dégh 2001:313). The main and probably only means of communicating about Big Foot in these first days was orally, with men and women swapping various stories about the creature’s doings. However, Big Foot did not remain the exclusive property of the loggers and their families for long. In time, word of the monster tracks and their mysterious maker spread to the *Eureka Times*—where the creature’s name was simplified to Bigfoot—and, from there, to the wide world, via newswires, radio reports, even TV game shows (Genzoli 1977:33). As Bigfoot spread through the mass media at the end of the 1950s, it became incorporated into the American wildman lore cycle.

Wildmen performances, stories, poems, and legends had circulated through American society at least since the middle of the nineteenth century. In those days, wildmen had raised difficult questions about evolutionary theory, about the humanity of blacks, and, particularly, about the status of the new middle class (Cook 2001:119-162). Nineteenth century America valorized self-made men; the problem with self-made men, though, was that they lacked the traditional measures of refinement—learned manners, old money, a family name—and so the line between a respectable man and a conman was difficult to distinguish. Confronting wildmen exhibits at the circus forced middle-class Americans to confront their own status—the legend raising metaphysical questions, just as Dégh suggests. Was the wildman in the cage real or an actor in a costume? What did it even mean to say that something was real in an age when technologies could reproduce colonial furniture and photographs could recreate moments lost to time?

American interest in wildmen slowly dwindled during the early part of the twentieth century but returned forcefully after World War II, first

with the news that British mountaineers were hunting the Abominable Snowman in the Himalayas, then with reports that Americans were hunting that beast, and finally with reports of wildmen living in North America (Buhs 2009). A year before newswires carried stories of Bigfoot around the world, they brought news that a small town in British Columbia planned to hunt its own wildman, the so-called Sasquatch. Eventually, the stories about the various wildmen became entwined. Asian and North American species were considered relatives. Bigfoot and Sasquatch were often used as synonyms for each other, sometimes even for the Abominable Snowman. Interest in the wildman again declined, this time during the middle of the 1960s, only to return when small-time conman Roger Patterson and his friend Bob Gimlin filmed what they claimed was a female Bigfoot lumbering across a northern California forest. Bigfoot and Sasquatch became stars for the next decade.

One place they found a home was in working-class entertainments—tabloids, men’s adventure magazines, cheap paperback novels, and independently produced films that toured America’s hinterlands. These tales raised questions and played on anxieties similar to the ones provoked by nineteenth century wildmen. Was Bigfoot real? What would it mean if it were? What, after all, was reality? The identity of working-class men was wrapped around the notions of skill and competence, character and morality—these qualities made them better than the middle class, they thought, even if society chose to pay the middle class more, to literally value them more (Lamont 2000:105). But in the years after World War II, these characteristics were increasingly degraded as America shifted from an industrial economy to a consumer-based one (Cushman 1995:210-278; Pendergast 2000:8-13).

Bigfoot became a vehicle for grappling with this new world, of resisting the cultural arrangement, and of accommodating one’s self to it (Buhs 2009). The magazines, books, and movies in which the wildman appeared flattered the mostly male, mostly working-class audience’s sense of self worth, denigrating the womanly art of shopping and championing traditional notions of character. Harp Ryder, for example, the hero in Edgar Pangborn’s short story “Longtooth” was a man out of the 19th century, a “dinosaur” who scraped out an existence on a farm in rural Maine. Ryder owned a hunting knife, “his own long tooth,” like the one in the mouth of the Yeti that he met (Pangborn 1970:7, 14, 34). At the same time, Bigfoot helped to ease the working-class men into the world of consumerism and mass culture. The makers of independent Bigfoot films in the 1970s pioneered audience research and targeted

marketing (Wasser 1995:51-65). The books and magazines that made the creature into a celebrity were also consumer products, using the language of resistance—to sell, to turn the audience into the consumers (Parfrey 2003:5-10). An at-times symbol of authenticity and freedom, Bigfoot led its working class enthusiasts into a world they considered fake and dangerous.

BIGFOOT AS MODERN FAIRY TALE

Another place where Bigfoot found a home in the years after Patterson and Gimlin's film went public was children's culture. The children's author Marian Place wrote four books on Sasquatch during the 1970s. At least a dozen more juvenile Bigfoot books were published by 1983. Libraries in Oregon and Ohio, and perhaps elsewhere, organized summer reading programs around the study of the beast, encouraging children to check out the explosion of literature. Throughout the decade, the monster appeared in cartoons such as *Scooby Doo*. A number of movies and TV specials also featured the creature. In 1977, Bigfoot starred in his own television show, *Bigfoot and Wildboy*. There were Bigfoot lunch boxes, Bigfoot board games, and Bigfoot action figures (Hartlaub 2000:A1).

The adults and children who created and inhabited this cultural niche reworked the ideas compressed into the image of the wildman, continuing to spin the lore cycle. Adult producers of children's culture transformed Bigfoot from an object of legends into the subject of morality tales and *märchen* (Dégh 2001:6). On a certain level, then, Bigfoot tales, conveyed via the media rather than orally, were just another iteration of classic fairy tales, with Bigfoot playing the role of the ogre, the giant. Such stories seem endemic to childhood (Fiedler 1993:28); they provoke, and sometimes help to resolve, existential dilemmas about "authority, procreation, and intergenerational conflict," in Marina Warner's phrase (1998:10). Certainly, the debate between Steenburg and his Social Studies teacher, while nominally about the educational value of Sasquatch, was also about who had power in the classroom and who could influence the direction of Steenburg's thinking. This explanation, though, is too generic. It fails to capture the specific generational issues at play in 1970s North America, the changing image of the wildman, and the associated alterations in the ways that stories about such creatures were told.

Two vocabularies, distinct yet intermingling, have dominated literature for boys (and, to a lesser extent, children more generally) since the middle of the nineteenth century (Kidd 2004:1-12). The first is the

language of character building. Boys are made into men by developing all those traits associated with a culture of character: working hard, fulfilling responsibility, repressing emotions, saving money, applying ingenuity to make labor more efficient. This is the language of advice literature, of the YMCA, of the Boy Scouts. The second vocabulary derives from what Kenneth Kidd called—in a pun on *fairy tale*—the feral tale (2004). Boys in these stories are wild—they are Kipling’s Mowgli or Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan. In its classic form, the feral tale is about the besting of savagery by civilization: strong character traits are used to control wild nature. Such stories play up the conflict between liberty and danger (at the expense of humanity versus animality and authenticity versus fakery), showing how the dangerous liberty enjoyed by nature needs to be subdued to make possible the political liberty of white men.

Some of the children’s Bigfoot literature followed these traditional templates. Sheila Rolfe’s 1974 book, *Sasquatch Adventure*, pitted Boy Scouts of good character against a tribe of savage Sasquatches that—although they had existed for eons—were too stupid to hunt or farm and so were reduced to stealing from humans, eventually kidnapping a boy and girl. The Sasquatches planned to eat the children but decided against it when the kids taught them how to fish and hunt and make fires and cook, mastering nature with scouting knowledge. Dingo Reed, the school age hero of Hal Evarts’s *Bigfoot* (1981), never saw a Sasquatch—and certainly was never held hostage by a family of them—but by becoming involved with a search for the creature, by applying his woodcraft and knowledge, revived his family’s dude ranch (crumbling since his father’s death), and cured his grandfather’s alcoholism. Good character again provided the path to conquering wild nature—in this case by turning the wilderness into a place suitable for tourists.

The Bigfoot stories that followed the classic structure of character building and the feral tale, though, were vestiges of an earlier time. Demographic and economic changes worked together in the years after World War II to make children’s desires more problematic. Fathers were often absent, working or commuting; suburban living isolated mothers and their children (Demos 1997:63-83). Americans fretted about the bond between mother and son. Mothers could teach a daughter to be a woman, but could they teach a boy to be a man? Would boys’ desires be managed correctly? Would they be ruthlessly repressed, creating shells of men? Would they be overindulged? These concerns were amplified in the late 1960s and early 1970s, just as Bigfoot entered boys’ culture, by the feminist and gay rights movements. “Americans’ most basic notions

of manhood needed to be worked out," wrote Bruce Schulman in his history of the 1970s. "They could no longer be assumed" (2001:177).

America's transformation into what Lizabeth Cohen calls "A Consumer's Republic" (2003) deepened these worries. Consumerism and the mass media changed what it meant to be a person, what it meant to grow up (Cushman 1995:214-20). Especially in the years after World War II, focus shifted away from character and toward personality. Personality was not something that one possessed, as character was, but something that one created, notably through consuming. What historian Warren Susman called "the culture of personality" unfettered desires, allowed them to be sated and, through them, a unique individual created (1984:271-286). The good person was not the one who saved money and repressed cravings, but the one who bought things so that he or she could express his or her true self (Jacobson 2004:14). These new ideas—which so bothered working-class men and helped to structure the Bigfoot stories that they read and watched—also made children's desires problematic, and so influenced the morality tales that they were told (Seiter 1993:7-50). In a culture of character, children were taught to restrain their desires—that was the point of tales such as Rolfe's and Evert's: that children should not be like those around them, the monsters, the alcoholics, who could not control themselves. In a culture of personality, children were exhorted to follow their desires—but given that children were immature, such admonitions could easily lead to ill. Who wants a child to follow his or her every impulse? Children had to learn the right desires, be inculcated with good values, learn to manage their emotions, not deny them (Jacobson 2004:56-92). Boys became men not by controlling their animalistic urges, but by acknowledging and taming them. Feral tales and character building remained the vocabulary of choice in boys' literature, but the process by which the animal became a man changed, as did the man who emerged.

Central to the reconfiguration of the feral tale were American conceptions of Freudian psychology. Freud is no longer in favor, and many of his ideas have since been shown to be wrong, but that hardly invalidates their importance at the time (Zornado 2001:33-41). Freudian ideas were ubiquitous in American society after World War II, becoming—and in some ways remaining—part of American conventional wisdom (Edmundson 1997:35-36). The main conduit for the spread of psychoanalysis among the public was Dr. Benjamin Spock (Sulman 1973:258-265; Maier 1998:134-137, 204-209). A pediatrician trained in psychoanalysis, Spock published "The Pocket Book of Baby Care" in 1946,

rendering Freudian ideas into everyday language. “Dr. Spock’s greatest talent,” wrote historian Steven Mintz, “was to make Freudian concepts—such as the latency period, Oedipal conflict, castration anxiety, and penis envy—seem like common sense” (Mintz 2004:279-280). Spock’s manual became the second best-selling book in American history, behind only the Bible, moving 30 million copies by the mid-1980s (Davis 1984:3-11). He also wrote a monthly column for a succession of women’s magazines, further disseminating Freudian ideas. The theories were welcomed because they seemed to offer a solution to the problem of children’s—especially boys’—desires, presenting a specific method by which parents could recognize and nurture their offspring’s desires to produce “not simply a healthy, happy child, but also psychologically well-adjusted adults and a harmonious democratic society” (Mintz 2004:280). Historian Nathan Hale noted, “Freud had supplied a new language, a new way of ‘thinking about ourselves’” (Hale 1995:285).

This psychoanalytical vocabulary was deeply entangled with the feral tale. As Kenneth Kidd noted, many of Freud’s case studies can be read as feral tales—stories of Wolf Men and Rat Boys who had not properly managed their desires (2004:5, 8-9). Even Oedipus, with his dangerous carnal desires, was, in Freud’s hands, something of a wild boy. The linkage between the feral tale and psychoanalysis, Kidd suggested, encouraged later scholars such as Erich Fromm and Bruno Bettelheim to find Freudian themes in classic *märchen* (Kidd 2004:147). Their works, in turn, may have encouraged authors of children’s literature to use Freudian imagery in hopes of helping young readers address their developmental anxieties. But Freud’s feral tales and those tales that followed his reshuffled the elements of the American wildman lore cycle. Childhood desires were certainly dangerous, but liberty—personal and political—was achieved not by repressing them, but by acknowledging them, learning to manage them, and cultivating them so that a mature personality could be created. Almost every American children’s book Sasquatch story ended with the wish that Bigfoot always remain free. An easily dismissed tic of the genre—a simple way to finish a story—the repetition pointed to something else: that the impulses represented by Bigfoot were not to be controlled. Desires were to flourish: they led to new “growth experiences,” as the saying went (Ehrenreich 1990:89). They allowed children to develop into adults by defining themselves according to their hobbies and those things that they could buy. Desires were supposed to be confronted, managed, and directed.

Originally published in 1963, Maurice Sendak’s picture book, *Where*

the Wild Things Are, epitomized the way that the culture of character and Freudian thought worked together to alter the feral tale. In the story, the young protagonist Max dressed as a wolf and became increasingly wild, until his mother finally sent him to his room. There, Max imagined himself voyaging to a far-off land populated by wild things. He tamed the beasts, was elected their king, and led the tribe in a wild rumpus, a Dionysian dance under a full moon. When the celebration was over, he sent the wild things to bed without dinner, just as he had been punished, and then, lonely, set off for home again, where he found his dinner warm and ready to be eaten.

Sendak started the sketches that developed into *Where the Wild Things Are* while undergoing psychoanalysis, and by the time that he was working on the book had committed himself to making works of art that announced their "Freudian allegiance" (Cech 1995:123-125). *Where the Wild Things Are's* Freudian allegiances are easy to see: Max's voyage took him to his id. It was a kind of therapy. The answer to the book title's implied question—where are the wild things?—is: inside the boy. Max's encounter with the libidinal forces that roiled inside him was gentle by Freudian standards and far different than the encounter with feral wildmen in Rolfe's book or Ewart's *Bigfoot* (Kidd 2004:156). Max did not try to civilize the wild things or deny that they existed, but indulged them for a time. He learned to manage his desires—to experience them without being controlled by them—and to consume the right things (including that hot dinner at the end of the book).

Most children's stories about Bigfoot followed the same script as Sendak's book; these were the mass culture equivalents of oral variants, altering some of the elements with lesser or greater artistry. Perhaps the most direct translation of Oedipal drama into Bigfoot fiction was Mary Calhoun's *The Night the Monster Came* (1982). The story concerned a crisis faced by nine-year-old Andy. Andy's father worked at night, meaning he was rarely around; meanwhile, his mother was taking real estate classes, leaving Andy alone for three nights—nights when a monster began to visit. Andy imagined that it was Bigfoot, but the monster was also the incarnation of his own Oedipal conflict. Andy wanted to please his father. He "loved the way his dad's whole face curled up when he smiled [when he said] 'Son, you're all right'" (Calhoun 1982:41-43). But he also wanted to replace him. He sat in his father's chair when he did his homework and inappropriately touched his mother, punching her affectionately in the arm. The conflict burdened him: he imagined what the world would be like if snow were

black—winter days would be as dark as winter nights; there would be no relief.

Finally, on the third night—the night before his mother finished her class and he would be alone in the house with her and his monstrous desires—he mastered the beast. The monster turned out not to be a Sasquatch at all, but an injured bear that had taken refuge on the family’s porch. Andy lured the beast into the garage and locked it up. He then called his father home. Andy’s dad was angry that his son had dealt with the bear by himself until Andy “explained how the bear would have charged” his father and killed him if Andy had not trapped it. “All Dad could do was shake his head and exclaim, ‘Andy, you are—I don’t know whether to spank you or thank you’” (Calhoun 1982:58). The Oedipal crisis was averted: the beast did not kill the father. The boy and the dad bonded.

Elements of the story suggest the earlier style of feral tales. Andy was a Cub Scout—a feral image, but one that was under the firm guidance of adults. He applied reason and mastered nature. However, in doing so, Andy was becoming the kind of man fit for consumer society. He locked up the manifestation of his desire, but he was not afraid of wildness, nor afraid of his impulses. “I was thinking too fast to have time to be scared,” he said of his encounter with the bear (Calhoun 1982:61). And he knew that his desires still needed to be free, to be allowed to roam, not conquered, but directed. In the last scene of the book, his “knees felt watery with relief as he realized something. He would have been ashamed to have caught Bigfoot, that wild free mystery monster” (Calhoun 1982:62). The comma-less pileup of adjectives at the end is telling: it was free association, almost as though it was the voice of the subconscious, a cherishing of the wildness within, the desires that were necessary in a consumer society.

Marian Place’s award-winning *The Boy Who Saw Bigfoot* (1979) made similar points, though with more aesthetic success. The boy in question was Joey Wilson, who had been through a series of foster homes before moving in with Mike and Sara Brown. Sara was an outdoorsy type who loved fishing, but her children had grown up and moved out; her husband was a truck driver and gone for long stretches of time. Sara became Joey’s foster parent in large part to have a companion on her outdoor trips—which locked Joey into an Oedipal crisis. He was alone with Sara most of the day, and although he wanted to be her son, he was also encouraged to act as her husband. Before leaving for work each morning, while Sara was still asleep, Mike Brown told Joey to take care of Sara,

to keep her from getting hurt. He taught Joey how to make breakfast for Sara, how to gas up the jeep, check the oil, and refill the water jugs before trips into the forest. He also told Joey his "secret": "Even though Sara was a big woman, she needed a man to look after her. When [Mike] was gone to work," Joey came to understand, "[he] was that man" (Place 1979:26).

Sara claimed to have seen Bigfoot, which made her a figure of ridicule: her other children used to get in fights defending her honor, and Joey soon found himself doing the same. The fisticuffs were just one example of his inability to get along. He ran away from most of his other foster homes, battled the compulsion to run away from the Browns, and had few friends. When he saw a family of Sasquatches and his story made the local news, his classmates dubbed him "Bigfoot Wilson," which was meant as an insult, equivalent to "fatso, pegleg, dirty face, dumbo, slant-eyes" (Place 1979:71). The insults bothered Joey, but the beast fascinated him, especially the young one, which he called Junior. The beast was a reflection of him: he constantly compared himself to it, measuring how much he ate against how much he thought that it ate, how much he stank against how much it stunk, how big a footprint he left against the beast's footprint. The young Bigfoot had a place, a family, which is what Joey wanted but also what scared him—because joining a family meant acknowledging his heart's true desire while also forcing him into an Oedipal crisis.

Joey's interest in Bigfoot was strong enough that he convinced his teacher to lead the class on a nature hike to look for Bigfoot. This was Joey's trip into his subconscious, his voyage to the land of wild things. While the other kids looked around, he ducked into the bushes and donned a Bigfoot mask: "the ugliest thing I ever saw," he said, "It made me shiver" (Place 1979:86). For the moment, Joey became those things he had repressed, those desires to be liked, to be loved, and to be accepted. They were ugly, but compelling. It was a moment of enormous magnitude, which is why he shivered. He then jumped out of the bushes and scared the other children. They quickly realized that there was no beast and the class bully called him "Bigfoot Wilson" again. The voyage to his inner wilderness, however, had changed Joey. He no longer bristled at the insult. He welcomed it. Joey knew who he was and where he belonged; he no longer desired to run away. The joke also relaxed the community and Sara was no longer an object of ridicule, which relieved Joey of the responsibility to protect her—resolving his Oedipal anxieties. At dinner that night, he called Sara and Mike a "super mom and dad" (Place 1979:92). And for mastering his desire, Joey became a

celebrity, with his story in newspapers and on television. The confrontation with his own wilderness did not build his character but heightened his personality and made him attractive, the kind of man fit for a consumer culture.

Variants of Bigfoot stories also appeared on television and at the movies. Often, these fairy tales used Bigfoot as nothing more than a conventional bogey. Many of these televisual stories, though, relied on the same vocabularies, indeed, on somewhat dated versions, such as those employed by Rolfe and Evarts. The titular characters in the Saturday morning kids' show *Bigfoot and Wildboy*, for instance, spent their time protecting the forest from polluters and the world from mad scientists, but their heroism went unsung. These variants, too, were accomplished with different degrees of artistic success. Even those involved with the creation of *Bigfoot and Wildboy* thought it poorly made. A nameless script reviewer (or reviewers) was given to sardonic comments: "Sure!" after an implausible bit of action (Boyle 1978), or "Please tell me this is a joke" (Boyle 1977b). In later versions, the show was divided into sections during moments of tension. At the break in one episode, the narrator asked, "Can this be the end of Bigfoot?" The unknown commenter wrote, "We can only hope" (Boyle 1977a). By comparison, *Land of the Lost*, another Saturday morning live-action show featuring Bigfoot-like creatures put out by the same production company, was more carefully constructed. Many of the scripts were written by science fiction authors who took time to develop characters and give them relatively complex motivations. The language of the Sasquatch-like Pakuni, unlike Bigfoot's grunts, was carefully thought out and created by a linguist (Erickson 1998:112-115).

Television (and big screen) variants, though, provoked negative responses from many adults. The problem was the medium: it was presumed to work against the civilizing message of the *märchen*. Television inserted itself between the parent's guiding hands and the child's developing mind, making the cultivation of children's desires difficult (Seiter 1993:37, 118). One anonymous writer on an internet site remembered starting to watch *Bigfoot and Wildboy* with his father: "My Dad took one look at the opening credits one day and said, NO WAY, YOU ARE NOT WATCHING THIS. . . This show was more homoerotic than Batman and Robin, for goodness sake!" (*Bigfoot and Wildboy* 2007, emphasis in original). Censors forced *Land of the Lost* producers to translate all of the Pakuni lines to make certain that no bad language was slipped in—although no one would be able to understand the swearing anyway

(Burke and Burke 1999:125). Even variants crafted to address critiques of television were sometimes viewed with skepticism. The public television program *Sesame Street* featured young, impulsive monsters—Bigfoot-like, then, if not exactly Bigfoot—but they were watched over by a multi-racial cast of adults. Their spats rarely devolved into violence. Their imagination was cultivated—they never watched TV, choosing instead to play and to read. They respected adult values and never tried to subvert them. Nonetheless, in 1980, a panel of child development experts deemed the show “too fast, too frenetic, too arousing”—the last a phrase that compressed a panoply of worries about uncontrolled desires (Burke and Burke 1999:180). The mass media now serve as the main disseminators of folklore—theoretically indistinguishable from oral transmission in many ways—but those involved with the creation and consumption *do* pay attention to modes of transmission and treat differently even the same message depending upon the medium that carries it.

PRETEENS AND THE LEGEND OF BIGFOOT

That last claim needs a caveat: those involved in the dissemination of lore *sometimes* differentiate among the modes of transmission, and so the scholar needs to be aware of the possibility. Qualification is necessary because some of the kids who became interested in Bigfoot did not make the same distinction that adults did between reading about the monster and watching it on the screen. Judging by testimonials, the most influential piece of Sasquatchiana was *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, a low-budget film from 1972 about a small Arkansas town haunted by a shaggy, Bigfoot-like giant (Coleman, L. 2003:206-211). It was this movie that first drew Thomas Steenburg to the subject (Steenburg 2000:6). Inspired, kids then turned to books. “I was about ten years old when I saw [*The Legend of Boggy Creek*]. I went immediately to the library the next day and checked out all the books I could find on Bigfoot,” said Bill Rebsamen, a fan of mysterious creatures (Coleman, L. 2003:208). Loren Coleman followed a similar trajectory, although a bit earlier, his inspiration the 1957 Yeti movie *Half-Human*, which he watched on a Friday night when he was twelve years old. “I went into school the next Monday and asked, ‘What is this about the Abominable Snowman?’” Brushed off by his teachers, Coleman “went to the library and went through the reader’s guide and got every old magazine article, every book [he] could find about the Abominable Snowman” (Miller 2005).

This relative lack of regard for the means of transmission was only one of many ways that children approached Bigfoot differently than

adults. To be sure, children, no more than adults, can be treated as a homogenous group, and some kids may have read Bigfoot stories as nothing more than fairy tales, some may have taken to the Oedipal themes, and some may have found messages in the story that are hard to imagine and have not been recorded. The bulk of the evidence, however, indicates that children who became infatuated with Bigfoot during the 1970s did so in a manner that was consistent, and consistently treated the beast differently than adults. They transformed Bigfoot back into a legendary character—the stories about it were propositions for belief—and collected facts to determine if the monster did indeed exist. The facts, in turn, helped them deal not with the Oedipal anxieties that adults worried beset their children but another developmental concern: how to escape from parental control. In the children's version of the wildman lore cycle, it was the authenticity of the monster itself—not desires that it was supposed to represent—that was coupled with the possibility of liberty.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that children of the 1970s became interested in Sasquatch during their preteen years. Kids in this age group, like younger ones, orient themselves around their parents, seek their advice and approbation. At the same time, they have the freedom to extend their world beyond the family. They find friends. "Perhaps the most distinctive feature of male preadolescence as a developmental period," noted Gary Fine, "is its emphasis on the peer group" (Fine 1987:79). Running with a gang of friends allows preteens the opportunity to practice and refine social skills as well as demonstrate competence in some endeavor away from parents. The gang is the crucible in which the social self is forged (Erikson 1963:259-261). Preadolescents have to learn to negotiate these dual alliances, to prove themselves to their friends as well as to their parents. One reason that Bigfoot may have been of interest to preteens is that it allowed kids to finesse this potential conflict.

On the one hand, a few renegade scientists and the *New York Times* had invested Bigfoot with some small amount of credibility, and parents probably would have been happy that their children were going to the library, losing themselves in books. Reading was an adult-approved activity. On the other hand, Bigfoot was also associated with working-class magazines, tabloids, and cheap books, and this association was especially strong in the life stories of kids who investigated the likelihood of Bigfoot's existence, since it was in these working-class publications that such a possibility was entertained most seriously. Many Bigfooters

remember their parents hoping that they would someday outgrow their infatuation with the beast (Steenburg 2000:6; Ridenour 2000). Thus, cultivating an interest in Bigfoot allowed children to both appease their parents, separate from them, and, often, join a clique of others also captivated by the monster, where they could develop their social selves away from parents' prying.

Sometimes, these cliques were small. Jerry Coleman, Loren's brother, remembered, "During the sixties not many youth organized activities existed so my summers became expedition excursion [*sic*] with the neighborhood kids. We started clubs like 'The Rogues of Night' and the 'Abominable Snowman Club.'" (Coleman, J. 2004). The anthropologist and Bigfoot investigator Vladimir Markotic kept in contact with a gang of Calgary boys who spent time in the woods looking for Sasquatch, finding footprints, rock piles, and "crudely drawn man-like figures on rocks" (Leman and Leman 1972). Sometimes, the community that Bigfoot fans entered was large. By the time he was fourteen, Loren Coleman, accumulated (according to his own count) 400 correspondents, the letters about wildmen and related mysterious creatures (Miller 2005). A decade later, Danny Perez, another Bigfooter, also developed a large contingent of correspondents (Ridenour 2000).

In these groups, young Bigfoot fans mastered a body of arcane knowledge, one that parents thought was meaningless—even silly—and one that mainstream culture often ridiculed as well, allowing them to develop in their own space, guided only by their curiosity and a few distant adults (Mitchell 1998:230-263). The clubs that Jerry Coleman joined "investigate[d] the woods, fields, and streams that were found not far from our homes. We would capture animals, identify tracks and dig for fossils" (Coleman, J. 2004). A woman told Bigfoot hunter Peter Byrne that when she was ten or eleven years old, she saw Bigfoot prints at camp and immediately emulated her fictional hero Nancy Drew, following the tracks, sketching them, and, later, comparing them to published examples of animal tracks (Crowe 1996:49-50). In Shelburne, Vermont, a group of girls banded together to study the monster. They wrote, "We are doing some reserch [*sic*] about Bigfoot. We have a laboratory down in our basement. We meet every day. I have been touched by Bigfoot once. Our laboratory is not very much of one but it is enough. Our theory is that Bigfoot is a mixure [*sic*] or *Arubustus* [*sic*] and Early [*sic*] homo-sapiens" (Frances et. al. n. d.). Even in the more dispersed community of Bigfoot fans that kept in contact through correspondence there were ways of proving expertise: letter writers swapped ideas, shared articles, and debated

contemporary controversies. They clipped magazine articles, filed and indexed them, certain that what they were doing was valuable.

Mastering the lore of Bigfoot did not just prove a preteen's competence, but also showed him or her worthy of entrance into the adult world. Loren Coleman found in Bigfoot (and other mysterious creatures) a way to overcome his father's surreptitious betrayal and prove his intelligence. His dad had kept secret that his school had classified him as a genius, but Coleman still "knew I was different, I knew I could—in 1965, an English teacher once asked for a three-page report on any subject that interested me, and I turned in a 70 page hand-typed report on Sea Serpents" (Miller 2005). That he knew about these things everyone else dismissed was proof of his intellectual powers. Thomas Steenburg also found command of Sasquatchiana a way to demonstrate his readiness for the adult world. He completed his Social Studies report and presented it to the class. "My fellow students were transfixed. When I had finished my classmates applauded and my teacher sat there making notes. The next day the teacher called me to her desk and gave me my marks—110 out of 100! She then asked if I would give my presentation to her other classes" (Steenburg 2000:6). Like Coleman, Steenburg went on to write several books about Bigfoot, cementing his reputation as an expert.

Presumably, other kids interested in Bigfoot found the subject empowering as well: mastering a body of knowledge that was dismissed by most adults, inverting the power structure, ensuring that they would become adults. Bigfoot made children into adults, or adolescents, at least. And then most of these kids lost interest in Sasquatch, putting it aside and moving on to other, more appropriate, more adult matters—in retrospect coming to see their earlier interest as a childish passing fad (Mitchell 1998:246, 260-261). Bigfoot enthusiast Jim McClarin dropped out of the community and looked back on his time studying the creature as somewhat unseemly (Coleman, L. 2003:229). So did Kyle Mizokami, who thought that after he left the Bigfoot community he would become—referring to the actor who played James Bond in only one film of the movie series—"the George Lazenby of the Bigfoot field, a vaguely remembered character who made a brief, tiny contribution the nature of which cannot exactly be recalled at the moment" (2001). Anthropologist David Daegling grew up reading magazine articles about Bigfoot and recounting the tales around campfires, even thinking that there might be something to the tales, until he became an adult, when he wrote a book debunking the creature's existence (Daegling 2004:vii,

1-4). Daegling was sympathetic to believers, but also was certain they were, as he had been, wrong. A few preteens, such as Coleman and Steenburg did not move on, and there's a sense in which, then, their development seems arrested, their interest childish, or, put more positively, they retained a sense of wonder about the world and expected, someday, to be surprised.

But while Bigfoot could be used to create a space away from adults, to escape from their attempts to civilize, it is too much to say that preteens used the legend of Bigfoot subversively. Children used the monster differently, but ended up where the adults had wanted—understanding how to live in a consumer society. Children interested in Bigfoot were dedicated consumers—buying the tabloids and magazines that featured stories on the monster, attending the movies, watching the TV shows, buying the lunchboxes, and board games. Jim McClarin had a briefcase containing about 2,500 bibliographical citations on index cards that he valued at \$2,000 (Lawson 1970:8). “These files that I’ve collected, all the work that I’ve done,” Danny Perez said, “all this is going to be important” (Ridenour 2000). Sasquatch was the thing that some boys chose to make the center of their identity, the thing that they used to individuate themselves, to guide their development. The relationship between childhood interest in the monster, becoming a consumer, and creating a personality was perfectly expressed in Loren Coleman’s reaction to the publication of Ivan Sanderson’s compendious *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life*. Coleman bought the book, and then, he remembered later, “I very systematically took my money from having the largest paper route in Decatur, Illinois; yes, every penny I earned to buy books, to buy old magazines that were contained in the bibliography there” (Miller 2005). The lore cycle could be shuffled and shuffled again: authenticity and fakery, liberty and danger, animality and humanity played off each other in numerous ways, but no one, it seems, did so to escape consumer society.

Juvenile Bigfoot stories of the 1970s, in print and on screens, filtered the generic themes inherent in wildman tales through culturally specific concerns about children’s desires, the ubiquity of consumerism, and the increasing power of mass media to influence developing minds. The stories were meant to help children navigate the complexities of American culture and arrive safely at maturity. Children found something else in the stories: a way to break from their parents and claim a place in the social world as adults. They did not fret over consumerism but adapted to it, using Bigfoot to help them fit into the world.

CONCLUSION

The 1970s were the heyday for Bigfoot and for the creature's presence in children's culture. The beast, however, did not disappear when the decade did. It continued in books, television shows, and movies. Indeed, Bigfoot movies became increasingly targeted at children in the 1980s and 1990s. These stories continued to explore some of the same Freudian fears and anxieties about consumerism; the issues remained relevant. Bigfoot also made forays into the developing Christian children's sub-culture, appearing in stories such as *Legend of the Desert Bigfoot* (Thoene and Thoene 1996), *My Life as a Bigfoot Breath-Mint* (Myers 1997), and *Wild Ride on Bigfoot Mountain* (Buchanan 1999). Most notably, this generation of Bigfoot tales for kids reflected worries about the environment and the increasingly violable boundary between humans and animals. These anxieties have roots that run back into the 1970s. The first Earth Day celebration was held in 1970, the same year that President Richard Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency. A few years later, word came from California that a gorilla named Koko had been taught sign language, breaching one of the fundamental barriers between humans and animals. In 1977, there was a more literal mixing of humans and animals when a South African doctor announced he was going to transplant a baboon heart into a human (Heart Transplant Plan 1977:1; Jasper and Nelkin 1991:26-41). Adult literature about Bigfoot in the 1970s took up these themes, casting Bigfoot as an avatar of the environment or mulling over the human-animal boundary—very often in highly racialized terms. The concerns did not make their way into stories for children until the 1980s, however, when movies such as *Harry and the Hendersons*, *Little Bigfoot*, and *Bigfoot: The Ultimate Encounter*, as well as books such as *Bigfoot Cinderrrrrella* (Johnston 1998) and *Sebastian (Super Sleuth) and the Baffling Bigfoot* (Christian 1990) made the wildman into an embodiment and guardian of the natural world.

Bigfoot stories continue to be written and performed. The lore cycle is still spinning. No doubt, they will persist well into the future; the monster has become something of a stock figure in American culture. As these stories continue to be produced, they will reflect other, new anxieties that develop—new theories of childhood, new ways of living in the world, new ways of growing up.

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