

Jan 1954

# Is the BEAST DEAD?



By JOHN COREY

*With the killing of a bobcat, the terror generated by the Beast of Bladenboro disappeared, but some think the real beast still lives*

Is the "Beast of Bladenboro" still roaming Bladen County's murky swamps?

Four years ago this mysterious animal created national headlines and put the textile town of Bladenboro in a dither when the creature reportedly killed and sucked blood from six dogs and threatened to attack a young woman before being driven off.

Highly-colored press accounts of the alleged incidents stirred the ire and adventure instinct of hundreds of Tar Heels and out-of-state citizens. At least 1,000 hunters with 50 packs of dogs and armed with batteries of small-arm weapons poured into Bladenboro during the episode which lasted through six cold January days of 1954.

They joined local parties tracking the vampire-like marauder.

Bladen residents appreciated the help, but responsible officials like Mayor W. G. Fussell felt most of the volunteers were thrill-seekers who actually posed a danger greater than the animal with so many armed parties nappy searcher could easily cause the death of another hunter rather than the animal with so many armed parties scouring the woods.

When professional hunter and guide Barry Lewis killed a bobcat while

hunting in another section of the county, Fussell saw an opportunity, right or wrong to end the touchy situation.

The mayor snapped a photo of Lewis' wildcat and sent the film to a state newspaper with the caption:

"The Bladenboro Beast Has Been Captured. This is It!"

Whether the cat was the beast or not, Fussell didn't know. But its picture in the newspaper certainly restored calm in Bladenboro. The horde of hunters and thrill-seekers left town and there's been no trouble since.

"We had to do something," Fussell recalls today. The town was armed to the teeth. Even small boys carried guns. Chief of Police Roy Fores and I knew someone would surely be shot accidentally."

And Mayor Fussell considered the whole affair a hoax anyway.

"The animal was about 90 per cent imagination, 10 per cent truth," he contends. "Newspaper reporters labeled it 'The Beast of Bladenboro' and called it a vampire."

Yet, Mayor Fussell, who has since relinquished this post, unknowingly touched off the scare.

For three straight days in January, 1954, Chief Fores received reports that

mangled dogs with blood sucked from their bodies had been found near Big Bay and Red Hill swamps skirting Bladenboro. Mayor Fussell considered the occurrences unusual and telephoned the information to a Wilmington newspaper.

"A little publicity never hurts a town," believes the ex-mayor, who learned its value managing a Bladenboro movie theater. But he didn't anticipate its full import in this case.

Next morning, the newspaper carried a two-columned front-page story proclaiming a "mystery killer-beast with vampire lust at large!"

Wire services quickly picked up the sensational-sounding story. Soon the entire nation cringed reading about the Bladenboro Beast.

The press accounts immediately brought in well-meant hunters with trained dogs for tracking big cats from Wilmington, Wadesboro, Tabor City, Fayetteville and several out-of-state places. Under Chief Fores' direction, they combed the swampy barrens surrounding Bladenboro.

Newspaper, TV and radio men followed closely, daily calling in vivid accounts of the hunt, which was to last for six days and nights. As the news went out, more and more thrill-seekers

converged on the town. Even four fraternity boys from the University of North Carolina drove down to "help." The idea originated in a bull session at Chapel Hill.

The reporters' copy made exciting reading. Much of it appeared more imaginative than objective.

One newspaper printed in bold type that the vampire-like monster dragged a screaming dog into the depths of Bryant Swamp while members of a hunting party were only 100 feet away.

Another publication carried a story that a pet rabbit whose head had been bitten off and warm blood sucked from its insides had been found.

Nerves of the fear-stricken community tightened. They pulled even tighter when the beast reportedly charged a pretty Bladenboro mother, Mrs. C. E. Kinlaw, when she stepped to her porch at night to investigate cries of a small dog. The ghostly marauder fled into a bay near the mill village when the woman screamed and her husband rushed to her side.

Anger flared and offers of assistance poured in from the outside.

A long-distance phone call came from a man advising he'd arrive soon with

his elephant gun. U. S. Marines joined the search. Tourists detoured by Bladenboro to help. Officials considered calling out the National Guard.

Imaginative speculations by scores rose as to the animal's identity.

Some believed it a descendant of an escaped wild animal from a circus once playing in town.

Police Chief Fores ventured it was a mad wolf lurking in the wild reaches of Big Bay and Red Hill swamps.

Wilmington hunter S. W. Garrett, owner of a pack of bear dogs, judged it to be a large cat, weighing about 100 pounds.

Many named it a maddened panther. The curator of the Raleigh State Museum rejected this possibility, however. A panther "never occurs in this country," Curator Harry Davis said. "We've checked on panther stories before. One turned out to be a big house cat."

Davis speculated the dog killer could be a coyote since "they've been traded around quite a bit, brought East as pets and released after owners got tired of them."

At the peak of the hunt Mayor Fussell himself added fuel to the scare

when he exhibited at his theater a fright-provoking movie called "The Big Cat." The film featured a sheep-eating wildcat which turned an English community into hysteria.

The Raleigh News and Observer tempered the whole episode with a humorous feature written by one Dr. Noah Lott, professor of Pantology, Corn Pone College. Laughed Dr. Noah Lott: "Now that Carolina has a panther cat, women will stay put, brats will come home before dark."

Bladenboro's post office swelled with mail.

One letter of indignation came from an Asheville humane society, objecting to risking dogs' lives hunting the beast.

An out-of-state writer wanted to buy the dog killer if caught alive. "There're too many stray dogs around my house, maybe he could rid me of them," explained the correspondent.

A one-arm sign painter capitalized on the town's new prominence. He painted and sold auto bumper plates bearing a picture of a cat-like monster with the inscription, "Home of the Beast of Bladenboro." Sales were good, he reports.

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Air-view of Bladenboro . . . the dog killer with a vampire lust reportedly originated in the woods south of the town (bottom of picture) and moved from east to west. Bladenboro is a farming center and home of a large textile mill.

