

Beware the beast!

Michael Futch | Posted: Sunday, July 23, 2000 12:00 am

They said a goat lay dead, its nose chomped off. The carcass of a hog was found, the whole front end eaten and most of its bones broken. Six or seven or maybe even eight dogs were killed, their heads badly mangled and their bodies supposedly sucked dry of their blood with the zest of a fiendish vampire.

The year was 1954. January of 54.

Come October of that year, Hurricane Hazel would whip up this quiet farming and textile town during its furious three-day sweep through the Carolinas and up the Atlantic Coast. But nine months before that hell on earth, some of the townspeople in this Bladen County town believed that a creature went on a rampage, leaving destruction and fear all its own. The town, population 786 in those days, was up in arms over something dark and evil thought to be lurking in the swamps near town.

The woods were full of hunters. Big catlike tracks had been found, and the wood of one doghouse door had been shredded to ribbons by what appeared to be talons. The late Roy Fores, who was the towns chief of police at the time, warned parents to keep a close eye on their children.

As the story goes, a large black catlike animal with a round face was sighted near the town as it dragged a dog into the underbrush. A mill worker named Lloyd Clemmons claimed to have seen the animal, telling The Associated Press news service that it was about three feet long, 20 inches high and had a tail about 14 inches long. It was dark in color, he said.

One night a mob of more than 500 men, most of them armed, gathered near the towns Cotton Mill Hill section after a woman reported that she had almost been attacked in her front yard by the thing.

The Beast of Bladenboro, it came to be known.

Years before televisions Dark Shadows and The X-Files, this bit of small-town doings evolved into a big story and an episode that lasted through six cold January days and nights.

Some say it was all a hoax, one that blighted the reputation of this town. But whether fact or fable, the beast put the town of Bladenboro on the map.

Its a big tale, said George Edwards, the owner of Edwards Pharmacy which stands downtown facing the railroad tracks. I havent heard anybody talk about it in 20 years. Its something of the past, and I guess people try to shun it.

Forty-six years ago, Jabe Frank was helping to run an Esso service station on Seaboard Street when the vampire beast was thought to be roaming the countryside.

Frank is 76 now, having lived all his life in Bladenboro. You couldnt walk the streets, he recalled last week. There was nobody walking the streets at night.

He was sitting at a booth with a group of older men who regularly gather together early mornings at Edwards Pharmacy. Outside, it was overcast, the rain clouds pitched over the town like circus tents.

Edwards Pharmacy was built in 1925, about the time most of these men were born. This red brick corner drugstore still has a working soda fountain, which is mostly a thing of the past in the big city. Edwards Pharmacy is known for its orangeades, lemonades, and chocolate milkshakes made with real Hersheys chocolate. Behind the counter, theres a stack of the Andy Griffith gospel CD I Love to Tell the Story on sale at \$9.59 a pop.

This isnt Mayberry, but it may be close.

On this day, Frank was celebrating his birthday. The drugstore employees had pitched in to buy birthday cakes for Jabe Frank and Robert Packer, who had turned 75 on this Thursday.

These men are among a senior bunch known affectionately as the Bladenboro Intellectual Club. Theres a sign posted on the wall just inside the front door of the store that says just that.

Most of these men remember when the tale got started.

They remember the madness in the eye of the vampire beast storm.

What started the thing, an old goat died at the cotton mill, Frank said. Some kind of varmint bit his nose off. They said the beast had struck.

The Bladenboro Cotton Mills are now known as Mayo Yarns.

The Bladen Journal newspaper, in its special edition recap of the 20th century for its coverage area, wrote that dogs being killed in the western section of the county led to the Beast of Bladenboro scare. Eight dogs were killed over a five-day span as the stories began. According to reports in some cases the dogs were carried off and their carcasses never recovered, and others had been found badly chewed and mangled around the head.

Police chief Fores examined one dog that had no blood left in the body, the newspaper continued, causing speculation that the mysterious animal was a vampire, or an animal that killed for blood, not meat.

Stories on the creature appeared on the front page of the Fayetteville Observer from Jan. 5 through Jan. 9, 1954. No one knows exactly what the strange animal is that has mangled six dogs and sucked their bodies dry of blood, read an Associated Press report that appeared in the Jan. 7 edition of the newspaper. A seventh was dragged screaming into a swamp Tuesday night by the marauder.

Only one human, a pretty 21-year-old mother, Mrs. Charles Kinlaw, has been attacked. She escaped unharmed.

Things got crazy fast.

Some think it was an escaped panther. Others think it was an overgrown cat, said Sam Pait, curator of the Bladenboro Historical Society Museum in the former Bladenboro Elementary School on the south side of town. But it supposedly killed cows and larger beasts. I think when it started out, I think they found a smaller beast or animal that was killed. That got the story going. We had national big game hunters down here looking for that animal. They saw it over at Pine Ridge, which is a section of town.

Frank said, A man drove up with about 10 dogs in his truck. He was from Tennessee. Bear dogs, he called them. You could hear the dogs barking that night in the swamp.

Fellow town intellectual Packer was a truck driver along then. Between bites of his birthday cake and sips from a small Styrofoam cup of coffee, he talked about the notorious beast at length. In fact, Packer said again and again that he was embarrassed to be talking about it so much.

Beat anything I ever seen, he said. I was in Indianapolis, Indiana, and they were asking me all about it. Hey, you guys got that old vampire down there eating everything?

Thats because the story went nationwide.

At the time, Bladenboro Mayor W.G. Fussell considered the occurrences unusual and telephoned the information to the Wilmington Morning Star. Next morning, wrote John Corey in a magazine article titled Is the Beast Dead? the newspaper carried a two-column front-page story proclaiming a mystery killer-beast with vampire lust at large!

Like the newspaperman that actor Kirk Douglas played in the 1951 movie The Big Carnival, the wire services smelled a good sensational story and went with it. Soon the entire nation was cringing while reading about the Bladenboro beast. The press accounts immediately brought in well-meaning hunters and trained dogs for tracking big cats from Wilmington, Wadesboro, Tabor City, Fayetteville and a number of out-of-state places.

Tourists made detours off U.S. 301 to come to Bladenboro. And like the setting of The Big Carnival, the town of Bladenboro turned into a three-ring circus.

It got out of hand bad, Packer said, shaking his head. It got to where I wouldnt tell anybody where I was from.

I never knew anything like it in all my life, Frank said.

It was dangerous.

Everybody had a pistol or shotgun.

A dispatch from the scene appeared in the Charlotte Observer beginning with this lead: Hunting parties with a total of 500 men and around 50 dogs surrounded this terrorized mill village tonight as a maddened, blood-sucking beast continued to roam at large.

Fussell thought there was something to it, Frank said of the late mayor.

Never heard tell of anything like it was, Packer said. Everybody thought there was something to it. I got right ashamed of it about the time they started having the bear dogs come down from Tennessee.

Newspaper, TV and radio men followed closely, filing juicy and vivid accounts of the hunt. Didnt seem to matter that much of it appeared more imaginative than objective. As the news hit the streets, more and more thrill seekers converged on the place. A quartet of fraternity boys from the University of North Carolina drove down from Chapel Hill to help.

Armed with rifles, the college students went without dogs into swamplands, hoping for a shot at the beast.

Willis Nance, who is now the 68-year-old public works director for the Town of Bladenboro, ran a restaurant in town back in those days, Nances Pitt-Cooked Bar-B-Que. Hundreds came in here with dogs and things, he said. Some came in to just look and see. It was good for business back them. We fed people from Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina. They came actually to see the beast.

Sue Browning, a Bladenboro native, is now a clerk for the town. She was in her middle teens when the dogs were running through the swamps. You could not have paid me to go outside at night, she said. It was frightening. I lived out in the country. We were just hearing about the beast around town. You were afraid to go out at night.

Afraid it would get us.

A long-distance phone call came from a man who said he would arrive soon with his elephant gun, Corey wrote in the magazine article. Marines joined the search. In an interview, Fussell said he considered calling the governor and asking for the National Guard.

The late Bill Shaw, in a staff-written story for the Jan. 8, 1954, edition of the Fayetteville Observer, wrote:

All Bladenboro is up in arms about this mysterious thing called by some Vampire. Should the varmint show itself in the day time, its carcass wouldnt be worth the proverbial plugged nickle. For all over Bladenboro the blue steel of rifles and pistols is gleaming in the warm January sun. A farmer chopping wood for supper has his trusty rifle leaning carefully against the woodshed, and if he absolutely has to leave the protection of his home after dark you will more than likely see a bulge under his coat that wasnt there before.

When the sun goes down in Bladenboro so do the shades and night latches. Dogs are locked securely in woodsheds, abandoned hen houses, and on the back porches of their masters house.

... Children are not allowed to stay outside after dark, for fear of being seized by the blood-sucking vampire, Shaw wrote. For surely a beast that can carry the carcass of a howling dog off into the deep woods would have no trouble with a small youngster.

That Friday, the mayor called off the hunt. The search was off, he said, unless the beast struck again or was actually sighted, according to The Associated Press.

Some believed that the beast was a descendant of an escaped wild animal from a circus once playing in town. Police chief Fores ventured that it was a mad wolf lurking in the wild reaches of the swamps.

They think it was some big wharf rat, Packer surmised.

S.W. Garrett of Wilmington, who furnished a pack of five Plott hounds, estimated that his dogs came within 20 yards of an animal, and that the animal in pursuit sounded to him like a panther wailing. He told that to The Associated Press.

Truth be told, the hunters turned up no trace of the creature, and it got to the point where authorities were more concerned about the trigger-happy hunters than the beast.

Frank recalled something that local farmer Blake Monroe told the eager hunter from Tennessee with the bear dogs. Old man Blake said, Your dog wont run a damn lie.

The pole, now rusted, stands today next to what is L&J Car Wash.

He was trying to get it hushed up, Packer said. It had got to where it got out of hand. Its sort of funny now, but it wasnt funny to me then. I didnt like it. But now as Ive gotten older, its come more of a joke. It was a joke all the time.

But, as these two members of the Bladenboro Intellectual Club said, plenty of people believed it.

A number of locals said Julian Tater Shaw, formerly the towns water and streets superintendent, was right in the thick of it all. Some even hinted that it was all Shaws invention. But Shaw said his health has declined over the years, and he said he doesnt remember much about the beast.

Remember Mrs. Charles Kinlaw, the one person in town who supposedly had been attacked by the beast but escaped unharmed? A woman who answered the telephone at the residence of C.E. Kinlaw disconnected the phone, but not before saying, That was a bunch of bull.

I dont know, said 72-year-old Floyd Pait, a Bladenboro man who was in the service at the time. I heard some older people than I am talk about it, but I reckon theyve been known to lie. They said that some of their livestock got killed. Hogs and something like that. I dont know.

Ten years ago, Bladenboro Town Manager Tom Barnes suggested that the town take advantage of its link to the fabled Beast of Bladenboro. The Town Board appointed an eight-member committee that would decide whether to recommend that the town would hold an annual festival with the beast as a possible theme.

Like the mysterious beast, nothing ever materialized.

There was something to start the story, said Pait, the curator of the Bladenboro Historical Society Museum. But in its passing around, I personally believe that it got blown out of proportion. But it was good for the town. It was the only time that Bladenboro got national publicity.

Pait, for one, is sort of proud of the story. Packer, on the other hand, took a lot of flak for it during his truck driving days. Now retired, Packer still has his reservations about what happened around town 46 years ago.

Here we were fighting Germans at the Battle of the Bulge, he said, and next thing, we are worried about a beast in Bladenboro.

