

FROM OUT OF THE BLUE

The Early Memoir of a Sea Monster

One measures a circle beginning anywhere.

—CHARLES FORT¹

Mention the subject of lake monsters at any dinner party and invariably the first creature that springs to mind is the legendary Loch Ness Monster. Yet Nessie's spiritual cousin who is said to reside in Lake Champlain has been startling goggle-eyed witnesses ever since pioneer days, and has a history that is every bit as rich and storied as his Scottish counterpart, with hundreds of sightings spanning at least three centuries. In fact, there is only one difference separating the two creatures: a good publicist. Between 1870 and the early 1930s, the Loch Ness Monster was virtually unknown, wallowing in obscurity, and would have given her left dorsal fin to have received the notoriety of her North American counterpart during this period, as the Champlain Sea Serpent had the spotlight all to himself. Today, buoyed by a lucrative European tourism market that drives advertising campaigns aimed at luring tourists to the Highlands, Nessie has surpassed Champ as the world's most famous lake monster. In recent decades, amid a flurry of sightings and renewed journalistic fervor, Champ's star has risen once again until he now ranks a close second to his media-savvy relative from across the Atlantic and is occasionally referred to as "America's Loch Ness Monster."

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Throughout much of its written history the Champlain Monster has been referred to as a "sea serpent," although it is said to inhabit a

lake. The nineteenth century was characterized by a widespread belief that sea serpents roamed the oceans, and it was thought that some had been trapped in local lakes during the previous Ice Age. Whether or not it is technically or even politically incorrect, the sightings in this book are described using the terminology of the times. The creature is almost always described in male terms and in the singular as if there were only one. Yet if it exists, there must be a breeding population, as it would be absurd to think that there is a single creature thousands of years old cavorting around the lake. Therefore, whenever it is referred to in the singular or as “he,” it is done for reasons of literary ease and color; it should be taken as a reference to the entire population, *if* they exist. The same is true of the common use of the word “monster,” which is highly derogatory. “Monster” comes from the Latin *monstrum*; an aberrant occurrence within the natural order and often has sinister connotations. It also derives from *monstrare* (to display or show) such as the “monsters” seen in circus sideshows. To most of his neighbors, Champ is a shy, serene figure who simply wants to be left alone. Many local children affectionately cuddle stuffed Champs as they drift off to sleep. If he were to read the papers, he would be aghast to learn that some people refer to him as a monster. The price of fame demands it as the media has been sensationalizing his exploits for more than two centuries.

Since its emergence from the Champlain Sea roughly 10,000 years ago, the natives living on the shores of what is now Lake Champlain have swapped tales of a mysterious serpentine creature that is said to reside in its depths. This denizen of the deep has since been given many names. During the nineteenth century, it was commonly known as the Champlain Sea Serpent and The Great Snake, while skeptics were fond of calling it His Majesty and His Snakeship. Since the mid-twentieth century, it is most commonly referred to as Champ, although other names are occasionally used: Champy, Sammy, and the Champlain Monster. Skeptics often describe it with the words “sturgeon” and “log,” whereas believers frequently use the words “prehistoric” and “monster.” Whatever *it* is has been evoking wonder and curiosity soon after humans first laid eyes on the lake more than ten millennia ago.²

Is it possible that a small breeding population of prehistoric creatures became land-locked at this time, making the lake their home

and adapting to the fresh water as rain and inland floods gradually flushed away the salinity? Fossil records reveal that the Champlain Sea was once home to an array of exotic creatures including whales and walruses. Is it too far-fetched to think that a species, still unknown to science or thought to have been long ago extinct, could survive into the twenty-first century? If so, how could it elude detection for so long? Proponents argue that the creature *has* been detected—based on hundreds of eyewitness accounts. Yet it is a conundrum that in more than 10,000 years of human habitation on the lake, no one has recovered a body or fossils of a plausible candidate. There are, however, precedents in nature. In 1938, fishermen off South Africa stunned the scientific world by catching a strange-looking fish in their nets. Dubbed “the living fossil” and considered to have been the zoological find of the twentieth century, the coelacanth (seel-uh-kanth) was thought by scientists to have been extinct for 60 million years. Will Champ become the zoological find of the twenty-first century?

INDIAN LORE

Native Americans living along Lake Champlain told stories of a mysterious “horned serpent” that was said to reside in the lake. In the early seventeenth century, Abenaki guides told French captains to be careful not to disturb the monsters that live in the waters of Lake Champlain. “While in the canoes, the men should not make loud noises or fire their muskets without good reason. Neither should they throw anything into the water.”³ Along the shoreline at the place the Abenaki called *Tobapsqua* (“the pass through the rock”), at Rock Regio or Split Rock south of Essex village, New York,⁴ there appear to be pictographs of snakelike creatures resembling modern-day descriptions of Champ.⁵ The “drawings” on Split Rock are natural formations of “contorted segregations of silicates that only resemble snakes.”⁶ The rock and surrounding waters were sacred and believed by the natives to be home to a spirit called *Tatoskok*, which took the form of a giant serpent or lizard.⁷ At least one historian thinks that the spirit in this legend refers to a giant fish or serpent.⁸ The Split Rock spirit was feared by the natives and while passing nearby in their canoes they would place food, tobacco, or pipes into the water in hopes the offering would

afford them safe passage.⁹ This tiny, heavily wooded landmark is situated near the deepest part of the lake—some four-hundred feet—and is the site of several significant sightings. For this reason, many locals consider the waters off Split Rock to be the monster’s home. Could the aquatic spirit that was thought by the Indians to dwell near Split Rock, be more than folklore, in fact an early reference to Champ?¹⁰

The Abenaki of what is now southern Quebec and northern Vermont had a name for an aquatic beast they called *Gitaskogak*, *Gitaskog*, or *Peetaskog*, the “great snake” that was believed to reside in *Bitawbagok*—the Abenaki name for Lake Champlain.¹¹ Not being a single uniform culture and language, there were different traditions and dialects depending on where one lived. The Abenaki (People of the Dawn Land) were an eastern branch of the Algonquin nation. Joseph Bruchac identifies another term for this creature: *Padoskoks* meaning “bigger-than-big snake.”¹² Could these Indians have created myths based on their observation of Champ-like fossils? Fossils of beluga whales have been found in the Champlain basin and these massive creatures frolicked in the Champlain Sea a mere 10,000 years ago, yet none of their descriptions match modern-day Champ accounts or the tales told by the Indians. Beluga whales resemble oversized dolphins, are snow white, grow to an average of fifteen feet and can weigh more than 3,300 pounds. While they swim freely in the northern oceans and the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, a beluga whale in Lake Champlain would stand out like Barack Obama at a Klu Klux Klan convention. It would not stay undetected for long. There is not a single description of Champ that even remotely resembles a beluga.

So how do we explain the legends of a “giant snake” in the lake—descriptions that closely resemble modern-day Champ reports? Perhaps it is because there *is* an enormous snakelike creature in the lake. Yet there are other equally plausible explanations. The natives may have misidentified large fish such as sturgeon and gar, and their stories were exaggerated over time. There are several smaller lakes in New York, Vermont, and neighboring Quebec province where people occasionally spot aquatic monsters.^{13,14} These sightings are most likely misidentifications, for it is highly improbable that a breeding community of such creatures could survive in such tiny bodies of water or go undiscovered. Indeed, a major objection by many scientists to

the existence of UFOs as alien visitors is that there are too many sightings and no concrete proof. Without a carcass, and with sightings from numerous lakes around the world, a similar case can be made against the reality of lake monsters. Furthermore, although many Native American tribes had extensive precontact myths about giant snakes (“the horned serpent”),¹⁵ several areas along Lake Champlain are notorious for rattlesnakes that den and thrive there and could account for these beliefs. Split Rock was known by the Abenaki as *sizikuwáimenhán* or “rattlesnake island.”¹⁶ It is easy to make erroneous assumptions without a full knowledge of local history. During the French and Indian War (1754–1763), a British soldier named Abel Horsmer was stationed along the lake at Crown Point, New York, when in 1860 he made a powder horn carving which included a dragon-like creature. In 1984, Joe Zarzynski suggested that the carving *may* have been prompted by a Champ sighting.¹⁷ By 2009, this vague suggestion had morphed into something entirely different, with mystery writer Michael Newton proclaiming that in 1860 Horsmer “saw a dragon swimming near Crown Point.” Even worse, Newton implies that this is why locals named the nearby harbor at Westport, Big Snake Bay.¹⁸ There is no mystery here. Also called Snake Den Harbor, the area also was known for rattlesnakes.¹⁹ Newton’s account is reminiscent of Peter Beagle’s dedication of *The Last Unicorn* to Dr. Olfert Dapper, who he believed had written an eyewitness account of a unicorn in the forests of Maine. Actually, Dapper never left his native Netherlands—he just collected and published travelers’ tales.²⁰

Myths are easily spawned and perpetuated. For instance, many people are unaware that the Iroquois or “snake people” never referred to themselves as such until recent times. The word appears to be a French variant of a Huron word that was used to describe their Iroquois neighbors and archenemies in derogatory terms: snake-eaters or snake people. Even the word Huron appears to be of French origin and was used to describe either the tribe’s hair style or unkempt appearance. As for the Iroquois, they referred to themselves as *Haudenosaunee* or “People of the Longhouse.”²¹

The point is: Europeans perceived and understood the actions and beliefs of these New World natives from their own Eurocentric frames of reference. Even the name Iroquois was used to refer to a

confederation of different tribes, each of which had different tribal names and distinct customs. Were stories of a giant horned serpent in the lake a reference to Champ or simply part of the wider North American myth about giant snakes that were once believed to have inhabited the land and lakes? Stories of giant serpents stretched across much of the continent and varied from place to place. No one knows the true meaning behind these accounts, as we are left with oral traditions, stories from early explorers and settlers, and rock drawings from which to piece together a complex system of beliefs—much of which has been lost forever. Abenaki religion is a good example of this. The Abenaki had many gods and spirits and made it clear to the early missionaries that they would not “be so foolish as to give up their thirty-seven gods for the white man’s one god.”²² This has implications for the legends surrounding Split Rock as a closer examination reveals that some natives would place food or tobacco overboard to appease *Sen-al Wissa-Mando* (“The Rock’s Wind Spirit”) and not a giant serpent.²³ It appears that different groups were appeasing different spirits depending on their beliefs at any given time. The modern-day equivalent would be the many people in the region identifying as “Christians,” of which there are dozens of denominations, some of which can be at extreme variance in their teachings. By some accounts, there were even two different wind spirits at Split Rock, male and female.²⁴ Yes, history is complicated and easy to oversimplify.

The Abenaki also told stories of a giant snake (*makwaaskadamôd*) that inhabited ponds, lakes and bogs, and would carry off young maidens. These accounts may have nothing to do with a literal water serpent, but instead may serve as cautionary tales aimed at warning the young and vulnerable of the perils of straying off alone.²⁵ They may be the Abenaki equivalent of the Boogey Man. A kindred creature was the *Meskag-kwedemos* or “swamp monster.”²⁶ It is curious that some of the early French explorers in the northeast reported that when the Indians “discovered massive mastodon bones and tusks in swamps and streambeds, they also identified them as underwater horned monsters.”²⁷ Surely, dinosaur fossils would have fueled some Indian myths. The Abenaki believed in the existence of enormous rabbits,²⁸ giant lizards, and diminutive water fairies who were referred to as the “Little People” or *Manôgemassak*. These latter creatures were believed

to have lived in rivers and in Lake Champlain and “had faces like axe blades.”²⁹ Although most people today—the Abenaki included—no longer believe in giant amphibians and water fairies, it may be that as these mythical creatures were to the Indians, Champ is to us. In this sense, the widespread belief in creatures like Bigfoot and Champ may reflect the same human desire to believe in an alluring world filled with monsters, only the form has changed to reflect the social and cultural context. It could be said that whereas fairies are no longer believable, they have been replaced by more scientifically plausible creatures. In this regard, Champ could be viewed as a sort of overgrown modern-day fairy.

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN'S ENCOUNTER OF 1609

The first recorded sighting of Champ has been attributed to the lake's namesake, French explorer and cartographer Samuel de Champlain (circa 1567–1635).³⁰ This is pure myth that was perpetrated in a 1970 *Vermont Life* magazine article by Keeseville, New York historian Marjorie Lansing Porter (1891–1973). Porter wrote that in 1609 Champlain was exploring the lake when he saw “a serpent-like creature about twenty-feet long, as thick through as a barrel and with a head shaped like a horse.”³¹ Her description is mystifying as Champlain never wrote this. We know that Porter had read many early newspaper reports of sightings, and may have come across the claim and used it, without checking the original source. Many early papers reported that the first European to have seen the Champlain Sea Serpent was none other than the great man himself. For instance, on July 18, 1929, the *Ticonderoga Sentinel* asserted that Champlain saw a creature that was twelve feet long “with a hide so tough that a poniard (dagger) was broken in an attempt to spear him.” Champlain's log states nothing of the sort. The explorer wrote that he had observed creatures five feet long (not twelve!) and he said nothing about scales so hard that they broke a poniard. As for Porter's claim that the creature was as thick “as a barrel,” in Champlain's own words, the creatures “were as large as my thigh,” whereas the head was “as big as my two fists.”³² These descriptions are hardly monster-like. Porter also made a second mistake; claiming the encounter took place on Lake Champlain. In July

1609, Champlain reported seeing a mysterious creature in the nearby St. Lawrence estuary that feeds north into the St. Lawrence River. Shortly after Porter's article appeared, historians began to observe that they had been unable to verify her claim after checking Champlain's writings, and it soon became apparent that it was not true.³³

As to what Champlain saw, we must consult his log. The "Father of New France" and founder of Quebec did describe a fierce-looking creature that the natives called *chaousarou* (chow-sa-roo) which they said grew up to ten feet long.³⁴ Based on his own observations, Champlain said the creature possessed "jaws two feet and a half long, and a double set of very sharp and dangerous teeth. The form of the body resembles that of the pike, and it is armed with scales that a thrust of a poniard [dagger] cannot pierce; and is of a silver grey colour. The point of the snout is like that of a hog. This fish makes war on all others in the lakes and rivers."³⁵ A monster it was not.

Champlain's account is a textbook description of an adult garfish or gar pike (*Lepisosteus osseus*) that still flourish in the lake today—accurate right down to its grey color, razor sharp teeth, and piglike snout. The natives told Champlain that to cure a headache they took the teeth of a *chaousarou* and would "bleed themselves with the teeth of this fish on the spot where they suffer pain."³⁶ Similar remedies using gar teeth are mentioned by other Native American tribes such as the Huron.³⁷ In the 1612 edition of Champlain's map, *Carte Géographique de la Nouvelle France*, he even drew a picture of a *chaousarou*; it looks identical to a longnose gar.³⁸

In 1664, Louis Nicolas, a Jesuit missionary, arrived in New France and compiled a book of drawings and customs of the native inhabitants and the local flora and fauna.³⁹ Among the sketches is one that closely resembles a gar pike identified as *chaousarou*. This is almost certainly Champlain's *chaousarou*.⁴⁰ But how could the creature recorded by Samuel de Champlain be described as growing to ten feet long when a longnose gar only reaches six feet? Fishermen are notorious for exaggerating the size of fish. There is even a name for it: "fish stories" about "the one that got away." Historian John Ross writes: "It would seem that the natives . . . were, themselves, not above telling tall tales to the newcomers with the white skin and the strange beliefs."⁴¹ It is noteworthy that Champlain never claimed to have seen

a ten-foot long *chaousarou*; the creature he saw was only five feet long. He said that the natives had *told him* that it could grow to ten feet. The natives also told him other tall tales, such as the existence of a bigfoot-like creature called the *Gougou* that was taller than his ship's mast and lived on an island in the lake.⁴²

Ross thinks that many seventeenth-century explorers commonly exaggerated their New World discoveries in hopes of making a bigger impression back home. He contends that Champlain was able to protect his reputation by attributing certain exorbitant claims to the Indians. He writes: "Champlain protected his integrity by saying that eating habits of this fish were described to him by the Indians who said that 'When it wants to capture birds, it swims in among the rushes or reeds, which are found on the banks of the lake in several places, where it puts its [open] snout out of water and keeps perfectly still; so that, when the birds come and light on its snout, supposing it to be only the stump of a tree, it adroitly closes it, which it had kept ajar, and pulls the birds by the feet under water.'"⁴³ Surprisingly, this part of the story as told by the natives is true. Gar eat birds—not exactly common food for other fish in the lake, and an almost certain indicator that the fish the natives were referring to was a garpike.

Nicolas not only sketched a *chaousarou*, he made a drawing of a "sea monster which was killed by the French in the Richelieu River."⁴⁴ As the river is connected to Lake Champlain, could this be an early reference to Champ? His sketch resembles the mythical merman (the male counterpart of a mermaid), and is half human, half fish.⁴⁵ Most likely what Nicolas saw was from the pinniped family and could have been a seal, sea lion, or walrus seen at a distance.⁴⁶ He also drew a creature that was supposedly seen not far from Lake Champlain in "the River of Chidesak which empties into the St. Lawrence." Identified as a giant seahorse, it has the head of a horse, two front paws, and the body of a fish.⁴⁷ Was Nicolas the first European to have sketched Champ—right down to his distinctive horse-shaped head? Hardly. In 1535, French explorer Jacques Cartier sailed up the same waterway, which he dubbed the "River of Horses." These creatures were undoubtedly walruses that were known to inhabit the same river at the time.⁴⁸ His drawings bear little resemblance to modern-day images of the Champlain Monster, which are distinctly snakelike.⁴⁹

The association between famous people and aquatic monsters is not uncommon. In the year 565, the Irish monk St. Columba is often credited with having the first recorded encounter with Nessie. But like Champlain's sighting of Champ, this also is mythical. The saint was supposedly watching a man swimming in the loch when a monster allegedly appeared and headed directly for him, its mouth agape. According to the legend, St. Columba is said to have commanded the monster: "You will go no further. Do not touch the man; turn back speedily," at which point the creature immediately stopped, then swam off.⁵⁰ The account of St. Columba's feat was written about one-hundred years later and likely never occurred, as the lives of medieval saints are filled with colorful claims of fantastic encounters with aquatic monsters. More to the point: St. Columba's "encounter," if it happened, never took place on Loch Ness, but on the banks of the River Ness.⁵¹ Few people are aware that the first widely publicized sighting of a large, aquatic creature in the Loch was not until 1933!⁵² Numerous reports of the Champlain Sea Serpent were documented well over a century before this date. Between the 1870s and early 1930s, the most famous lake serpent in the world was the Champlain Monster, and accounts of his antics were reprinted in hundreds of newspapers across the country and around the world.

A MYSTERY SURFACES ON LAKE CHAMPLAIN

The first-known sighting of the Champlain Sea Serpent was published on May 18, 1808, when the New York-based *Public Advertiser* reported: "Lake Champlain—A monster has lately made its appearance on the waters of the lake."⁵³ It is evident that sea serpent sightings were known to the early settlers in the area, yet with newspapers in their infancy, and the early pioneers having more practical matters on their minds such as staying alive, most sightings would have gone unreported. Even if someone saw a serpent in the lake and wanted to report it, there were no telecommunications in 1808. Assuming they were literate and had the time and inclination to write, a settler would have to deliver their letter to the nearest newspaper in hopes that they would publish it—which was far from certain. Given the fear of ridicule by skeptical neighbors, many settlers may have been content to say nothing.

On Saturday July 24, 1819, there was a spectacular report of the monster on the New York side of the lake. In a letter to the *Plattsburgh Republican*, it was reported that a Captain Crum had been navigating a small scow off Port Henry two days earlier.⁵⁴ “On Thursday last, the inhabitants on the shore of Bullwaggy Bay, were alarmed by the appearance of a monster, which from the description must be a relation of the Great Sea Serpent.” The letter continued:

Captain Crum, who witnessed the sight, relates that about eight o'clock in the morning when putting out from shore . . . he discovered at a distance of not more than two hundred yards, an unusual undulation of the surface of the water, which was followed by the appearance of a monster rearing its head more than fifteen feet, and moving with the utmost velocity to the south—at the same time lashing with its tail two large sturgeons and a Bill-fish which appeared to be engaged in pursuit. After the consternation occasioned by such a terrific spectacle had subsided, Capt. Crum took a particular survey of this singular animal, which he described to be 187 feet long, its head flat with three teeth, two in the center and one in the upper jaw, in shape similar to the sea-horse—color black with a star in the forehead and a belt of red around the neck—its body about the size of a hoghead with hunches on the back as large as a common potash barrel—the eyes large and the color of a peeled [*sic*] onion—he continued to move with astonishing rapidity towards the shore for about a minute, when suddenly he darted under water and had not since been seen, altho' many fishing boats have been on the look out. . . .⁵⁵

Bulwaggy Bay (now spelled Bulwagga) is a well-known Champ hotspot and has been the scene of numerous sightings since. What are we to make of this extraordinary tale? Given the extreme detail for an object so far away, including a description of its eyes and exact length, the account must be taken with a grain of salt. How could anyone estimate the length of an object so precisely? Perhaps Captain Crum was comparing the length to that of a vessel which he knew was 187 feet long, but you would expect him to have said so, otherwise it undermines any semblance of credibility. Then there is the problem of

too little detail, as we are not told Captain Crum's full name or that of the person who supposedly interviewed him. Suspiciously, the story appeared on page two! Imagine, a humungous sea serpent is spotted by a local captain in a major port community, residents are said to be excited and scouring the bay for the creature, and it does not even make page one! Many books cite this case as the first documented account of the Champlain Monster after Samuel de Champlain, yet fail to mention how the anonymous author of the article ends the letter.⁵⁶ It is signed "Horse Mackerel." What are we to make of this cryptic name?

In assessing the reliability of this case, a short history lesson is in order. The subject of real sea serpents was well known throughout the world at this time and was long accepted as an established fact. For centuries, encounters of ocean-going ships with large unknown sea creatures were dutifully recorded in their logbooks. Nautical historian Phil Reines observes that during the nineteenth century, many ship captains and naval officers attested to seeing sea serpents. "Too many reports from too many ships and certainly, a plethora of responsible eyewitness accounts over many years presented an impressive body of well-documented incidents that were accepted as fact. By the middle of the 19th century, no responsible seagoing nation doubted the existence of . . . the Sea Serpent."⁵⁷ The belief in sea serpents also was common throughout the ancient world and is even referred to in the Bible.⁵⁸ Two years before the Port Henry incident, newspapers throughout New York and New England were abuzz with reports of a sea serpent off the coast of Gloucester, Massachusetts. Although scientists have attributed sightings of the famous Gloucester Sea Serpent to everything from a ribbon of seaweed floating on the surface to a whale shark or a sea elephant, spectacular accounts from the New England seaboard would fill papers around Lake Champlain for the next several years.⁵⁹ In 1818, there were many publicized rewards offered to whalers along the New England coast for a specimen, dead or alive, and many attempts were made to obtain one; residents around Lake Champlain would have been well aware of it.⁶⁰ Amid the numerous reports of a sea serpent frolicking off Gloucester and nearby Cape Ann in spring 1817, a panel of scholars was appointed to examine the sightings and to interview witnesses in hopes of determining the

creature's reality.⁶¹ Later that year, the scientists issued a report concluding that the Gloucester Serpent was real.⁶² This was big news at the time. Their findings inspired Captain Richard Rich, a legendary local whaler, to mount a famous search for the monster, which he claimed to have harpooned. His sea serpent turned out to have been a Bluefin tuna, commonly known as a horse mackerel.⁶³ The writer of the 1819 *Plattsburgh Republican* article was almost certainly doing so in jest and making reference to this affair. The article is even entitled: "Cape Ann Serpent on Lake Champlain," and the writer (Horse Mackerel) said that Captain Crum "had sent an express to Capt. Rich, of Boston, communicating this intelligence . . ."

After the Port Henry affair, the Champlain Sea Serpent was not seen until 1826, when he reportedly startled two young fishermen on the Vermont shore. The shaken pair said a thirty foot-long creature emerged from a cave and slithered toward them. Its body was "as round as a common saw log and covered with red and black spots." The next day they returned to find what appeared to be a trail left by the monster and a musky snakelike smell hung in the air.⁶⁴ The creature was not sighted again for several decades when a flurry of spectacular encounters would elevate Champ to celebrity status.

PRELUDE TO A MONSTER SCARE

With the completion of the Champlain Canal in 1823, and the Erie Canal two years later, the Adirondack region grew and prospered. The lake's economy was further boosted by the opening of the Chambly Canal in 1843, allowing boats to go around the Richelieu River rapids in southern Quebec, linking boat traffic between the St. Lawrence River and the northern end of Lake Champlain. These waterways, together with the building of new roads and expanding rail lines, opened the vast, unspoiled Adirondacks to the outside world as the area quickly became a magnet for tourists. With its quaint villages and pristine wilderness, it was inevitable that both population and commerce would increase. Commenting on this explosive growth in tourism, in 1886 naturalist William "Adirondack" Murray wrote: "Fifteen years ago [1871], the Adirondack region was an almost unknown

wilderness. A few dozen sportsmen visited it each summer. . . . Today, 100,000 people visit the woods each year, and great hotels stand on the shores of the little lakes. . . .”⁶⁵

During the nineteenth century, communities along the lake were experiencing an economic shift that may have contributed to a wave of sea serpent reports in the 1870s and 1880s. Historian Connie Pope writes that the iron and lumber industries were in decline at this time and entire populations were gravitating away from inland villages, dependent on logging and mining, and moving to the new railroad hubs and lake ports.⁶⁶ It may be no coincidence that with more people moving to the lake, there would soon be a dramatic upsurge in sightings. Yet, the most curious aspect of these reports remains unexplained: the serpent’s fickle personality. Often years would pass without a single recorded encounter, while in other years, such as 1873, 1886, and 1887, there were more than a dozen reports each. Newspapers were no doubt a factor in fueling these flaps, either by encouraging other witnesses to come forward, or prompting residents to scour the lake in the expectation of seeing the serpent. A second possibility is that there *were* sightings during this period but they were not recorded, as people were preoccupied with the greatest social and political upheaval in the nation’s history. A sea serpent in Lake Champlain would likely have seemed insignificant in comparison to more serious matters of the day: the War of 1812, the abolition of slavery, events leading up to the Civil War and its aftermath, including the assassination of President Lincoln. But six years after the end of the nation’s ghastly war between north and south, the serpent reappeared in 1870, staging a performance before a steamboat excursion from Essex, New York. Astonished passengers told of seeing its head and neck rise from the water, leaving behind a forty-foot wake.⁶⁷ During the encounter, it was said that a little girl named Alma “held her ticket clinched in her teeth as she ran frightened and excited with her elders to the ship’s rail.”⁶⁸

The next summer, passengers on the eighty foot-long, double-decker steamship *Curlew* excitedly spotted a mysterious creature near Barber’s Point, north of Crown Point, New York. The St. Albans *Temperance Advocate* reported that it was moving “at railroad speed” and the water was “strongly agitated for thirty or forty feet from the erected head of the monster when in motion.” It was too far away

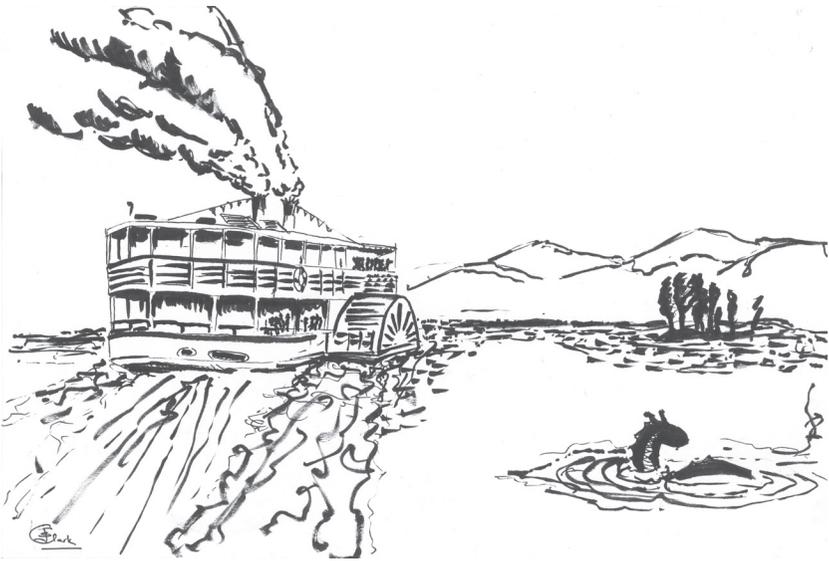


Figure 1.1. During summer 1870, the serpent was spotted by passengers of the steamship Curlew north of Crown Point, New York (Jonathan Clark sketch).

to get a better description and was seen through a field glass.⁶⁹ This incident marked the beginning of a series of close encounters that would gradually escalate into a regional panic. Soon the entire lake was on monster alert. In 1873, it came, in spectacular fashion, to the settlements on the New York side of the lake.

THE GREAT SERPENT SCARE

In 1873, the Champlain Sea Serpent came of age, appearing at the southern end of the lake in a series of extraordinary sightings the likes of which have never been seen since. Whitehall, New York was then a busy commercial hub nestled at the base of Lake Champlain. It was a major regional thoroughfare for vessels delivering goods to the many village ports dotting the lake. Founded in 1759 as Skenesborough, it was the first European settlement on the lake.⁷⁰ This alone may help to explain the paucity of sightings until this time. There had been few Europeans living on or near the lake, and the early pioneers

who were there were in survival mode, dodging Indian raiding parties, living through smallpox epidemics, and eking out a living in the unforgiving wilderness. In the spring of that year, work crews were “beavering away” on the few remaining shoreline sections of the New York and Canadian Railroad line that would soon link New York City with Montreal and result in a dramatic decline in the use of boats to transport goods on the lake. The episode began in the rural, sparsely populated town of Dresden, a rugged region north of Whitehall where heavily forested mountains and jagged ravines meet the lake. Deceptively beautiful yet treacherous, the area was infested with rattlesnake dens and much of the terrain was physically inaccessible. It was within this primal setting during July 1873 that a work gang, laying track, spotted a strange large serpentine creature in the water. The *Whitehall Times* of July 9 reported the incident:

As he rapidly swam away, portions of his body, which seemed to be covered with bright silver-like scales, glistened in the sun like burnished metal. From his nostrils he would occasionally spurt streams of water above his head to an altitude of about 20 feet. The appearance of his head was round and flat, with a hood spreading out from the lower part of it like a rubber cap often worn by mariners with a cape to keep the rain from running down the neck. His eyes were small and piercing, his mouth broad and provided with two rows of teeth, which he displayed to his beholders. As he moved off at a rate of 10 miles an hour, portions of his body appeared above the surface of the water, while his tail, which resembled that of a fish, was thrown out of the water quite often.⁷¹

Witnesses said the creature was “twenty or more feet long, and at least twenty inches in diameter” as it skimmed along the surface for a quarter mile before dropping from sight.⁷²

A contractor for the New York and Canadian Railroad, C. S. Leonard, quickly came forward with a strange tale of an encounter weeks earlier. Leonard said he had been the head of a work crew filling in a ravine on General David Barrett’s property in Dresden when

his workers told him of an incident involving “a big snake.” Thinking little of it at the time, Mr. Leonard said that his suspicion was aroused a few days later when he found “bones, feathers and remains of a fish, which had probably been left by the monster.” He thought that the creature had been trapped, or lived in the deep ravine.⁷³

By mid-July, General Barrett himself told of seeing a “sea serpent” poking its head out of the water near the deck of his home. He said he ran to fetch a gun but the creature was gone by the time he returned. His son, David Barrett Jr., and neighbor, Leverett Wilson reportedly gave chase and soon spotted it “dragging its immense length across the tall grass of the marsh. It had something in its mouth which resembled a large turtle.” Barrett said he took aim and fired, but the creature instantly slithered into the water and vanished. The two men described it as between thirty and forty feet long with silvery scales glistening in the sun.⁷⁴

As news of the latest incident spread, other residents came forth with their own encounters. Two weeks before the railroad crew sighting, a fishing party from Whitehall said they were at Linley Marsh in Dresden, when there was a commotion on the lake. The startled men said a creature “arose about four feet from the water’s surface” which they initially thought to have been “an enormous turtle.” Meanwhile “fish were observed to spring from the water in the neighborhood, while a great wave rippled the water’s surface of the marsh.”⁷⁵

Adding to the alarm was J. A. Parker of Whitehall, who related a close encounter eight years earlier. Parker said he was traveling on the highway two miles east of the village when he spotted “a large snake 18 to 20 feet-long, and as large as a man’s thigh emerge from the mountain recesses and move swiftly across the fields at the rate of ten miles an hour toward Jerry Collins’ marsh, and take to the water.” He said the scales were also “glistening brightly in the sun.”⁷⁶ The *Whitehall Times* supported his account, asserting: “Any of our citizens who know Mr. Parker know him to be a man who would make no such statement unless he had seen the snake.”⁷⁷ During this time, one’s reputation and social standing influenced public opinion. If the “right” persons claimed they saw something outlandish, it was often accepted as truth. After all, “a man’s word was his bond” and seeing was believing.

ESCALATING FEARS

What happened next would thrust the Lake Champlain region into the national media spotlight, and locals into a tizzy. Animals began disappearing, prompting alarm that the sea serpent was snatching them. General Barrett noticed that two calves were missing from his pasture. Inspecting the field, he found what he took to be the serpent's calling card: a trail of matted grass leading to the shore. Neighboring farmers reported missing sheep and fowl, and observed that their cattle appeared nervous and restless at night, bellowing and making a ruckus. The general was so concerned that a watch was organized to keep an eye on the animals throughout the night to ensure they did not become a midnight snack for the serpent. At this point, many were in a state of near panic, surmising that the missing animals had been prey for the monster in their midst.

Local legend further fueled the atmosphere of escalating fear. General Barrett said that there had been stories of a giant serpent near his farm for at least a decade. According to one story, a cave on the nearby Chapman farm was home to a monster reptile. Residents reported seeing "bright and hideous looking eyes" staring back at them from



Figure 1.2. Artist depiction of the Champlain Monster snatching a calf from the Dresden shoreline during the Great Serpent Scare of 1873 (Jonathan Clark sketch).

the darkness of the cave, while another local, Harvey Buel said he had spotted a massive serpent in the area on several occasions over the years.⁷⁸ Above Dresden in the tiny hamlet of Putnam, where Lake Champlain and Lake George are just miles apart, the serpent was said to frequent the many dens and caves south of Gull Island on the eastern shore of Lake George.⁷⁹ A newspaper correspondent wrote that a man acting on behalf of the great showman P. T. Barnum had once entered one of these caves in hopes of capturing the creature and putting it on display at his museum. As the story goes, screams were heard from inside the cave and the man and his guide were seen rowing vigorously to the western shore, never to return. The same correspondent told of an earlier sighting by six witnesses in which the serpent was said to have been seen slithering toward Lake Champlain in the midst of an advancing forest fire.⁸⁰

On Friday, July 25, there was a spectacular encounter by occupants of the little steamboat *W. B. Eddy*, which was reportedly struck by the great serpent and nearly overturned while en route from Ticonderoga to Whitehall. Startled passengers and First Mate Kin Holcomb said that they could see the creature's head and neck thirty yards away before swimming off at the speed of "a fast sailing steamboat. . . ." The incident occurred as they were passing the Barrett farm at Dresden. At first, it was thought the vessel had struck a log, the craft shifting violently to one side: "The passengers all made a rush to the opposite side of the boat when the vessel suddenly righted and the spectators were horrified at observing the head of a great snake rise from the water about 100 feet to their stern and spirt two jets of water high into the air." Mr. Holcomb said that as the serpent swam away, it "appeared above the surface like great waves resembling mammoth ridges of silver, as its bright scales sparkled in the sun."⁸¹

The incident with the *Eddy* caused a sensation as residents at the southern end of the lake near Dresden and Whitehall were on high alert. The Whitehall Harbor Inspector recalled an incident several years earlier while fishing at nearby South Bay below Dresden. Mark Doherty said that he hooked a catfish and had reeled it to within fifty feet of his boat when "the head of an immense snake . . . appeared near the catfish. As it disappeared, his line was snapped quickly" and a ripple in the water moved away.⁸² He was convinced it was the serpent.

Meanwhile, sightings continued to pour in at the southern end of Lake Champlain. A railroad foreman named James McGue said he watched in disbelief as the serpent entered Blind Bay in Dresden, which extends half a mile into the mountains. Too frightened to follow after it as it disappeared into the thick brush and tall grass, McGue claimed that the creature was more than thirty feet long “and spirted two jets of water from its nostrils, and that its tail looked like the tail of a fish.” He said the creature “threw it [the tail] out of the water every few seconds.”⁸³ His description was similar to that reported by passengers on the *Curlew*.

In late July, the serpent swam to the Vermont side in Shelburn Bay (now spelled Shelburne), south of Burlington. J. P. Farmer, the engineer at the Burlington marble mill, was so moved by his encounter that he contacted the offices of the *Burlington Free Press* to recount his ordeal. He said the incident occurred on Monday morning at 10:30 while fishing near the top of the bay, not far from the George Munroe Farm nestled on the eastern shore. According to an account of the ordeal: “The water was very still and was suddenly disturbed by an unusual splashing, when he [Farmer] looked up and saw, not over thirty feet from him, an animal with a brownish body, seemingly from twelve to fifteen feet in length, and having a large head in shape like a bullpout’s (a freshwater catfish). The serpent . . . disappeared under the water but came up shortly afterwards and made for the boat. Farmer then pulled away from it, and it again sank, but soon reappeared about twenty feet ahead of him, swimming towards the mouth of the bay.” Mr. Farmer rowed to the shore and summoned Mr. Munroe and Amos Page. The three men stood watch for the next two and a half hours in hopes of seeing the creature, but to no avail.⁸⁴ Munroe claimed to have seen a similar creature on his farm in about February 1872, in one of his cow pastures where it was thought to have been lying in wait to snatch a fresh meal of veal courtesy of one of his calves. Munroe is said to have courageously driven the creature off his farm—no doubt to the cheers of the populace and relieved moo’s of the rescued calves.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, Patrick Childs of West Haven, Vermont, which borders Dresden, was exhibiting symptoms of “monsteritis.” Childs said that he