

UNNATURAL HISTORY

# You Don't Have to Believe It

## Hunger, Thirst, Sun, Fatigue, Strange Food and Drink And Just the Love of a Tall Tale Produce Wierd Beasts

By RONALD L. IVES

See Front Cover

*"—and you know, that cave actually blows smoke rings, once every thirty-four minutes—"*

ANOTHER traveler is recounting the wonders of his latest expedition into the hypothetical wilds, equipped with a good imagination and plenty of snakebite medicine. Today, we smile indulgently at these traveler's tales, but not so long ago, each and every yarn was carefully remembered, and passed on (sometimes "improved" a little) to the next avidly listening ear.

Perhaps the "tall story" is a racial heritage of the days when there was no writing, and wandering minstrels were our newspapers and sources of information. Primitive tribes still retain their histories as legends, passed on by word of mouth from father to son.

### Theses on Paul Bunyan

Today, however, the "tall story" is a part of our literature. Newspapers run "whopper" columns, paying a rather good price for each new tall tale. Several hunting and fishing magazines publish the wildest possible stories sent in by their readers, and the doings of such legendary characters as Paul Bunyan and Juan Catorce are the subject of Ph.D. theses and massive tomes.

Guides in the wilder parts of the country still collect and tell wild tales of wilderness and mountain country to the "dudes," "palefaces," and "flatlanders" who each year leave their inhibitions and intellects in the city and spend two glorious vacation weeks collecting sunburn, poison ivy and mountain sickness.

Old books tell us of the wonders of the ancient world, of the dragons, the sea monsters, and the centaurs. We do not believe these tales today, but many a "paleface" has slept timidly in a screened tent from fear of the dreaded "hydrophobia skunk" of the southwestern deserts.

Wide-eyed tourists listen around the desert campfires to the sad tale of Rot-Gut Pete, who vanished between Salome, Arizona, and his cabin one gloomy

night. It seems that Pete had been celebrating something or other at the Last Chance Saloon, and left shortly after midnight with three sheets in the wind and no pilot. A few days later, when Pete showed up missing in his regular haunts, a search party tracked him out into the desert.

Finally, at the base of a very large flycatcher plant, the searchers found a watch, forty-two boot nails, eleven buttons, a six-gun, a belt buckle, and two silver dollars. They identified the gun as Pete's by counting the notches. Pete, it seems, had leaned against one of the giant flycatcher plants, and the thing had closed on him. Later, when the plant was gorged, it had opened again, dropping the metallic debris on the ground. You have to be very careful out in the desert!

The Northland, too, has its tales, and some of them were never immortalized by Robert W. Service. Strangest among the pseudoscientific discoveries are the furred salmon, reported from the Coppermine River. It seems that the waters of this Arctic river are cold, and the fish there, after generations of freezing, finally evolved a furry coat to protect them. Now, snug in their fur coats, the salmon gaily plunge in the ice-rimmed pools of the river, and their fur is much prized by the Eskimos, who use it for money. Not so many years ago, a questionably famous Arctic explorer is reported to have spent a summer hunting these strange fish in the high-altitude lakes of Glacier National Park.

### Tripodero, Texas Terror

The Texas plains, it seems, are cursed with the presence of a perambulating putty-blower, locally called the tripodero. It seems that the tripodero is ideally adapted for life in the chapparal country. Its legs, like those of a photographer's tripod, are extensible, so that it may rise above the chapparal and look for food. With the legs shortened, it can run under the brush without trouble. By generations of evolution, the tripodero has developed a special hunting method. Living by sucking the juices out of its prey, its jaws have grown together, re-

sembling a funnel. When it feels hunger coming on, the tripodero sucks up a mouthful of clay, which it rolls into pellets with its tongue. Later, when the next meal is found, the tripodero blows a pellet at its prey with terrific force and marvelous exactness. Soon it sucks the juices from the animal and goes out in search of more.

"But Mr. Guide, is that true?"

"Sure, madam, didn't you see that dead cow today beside the trail?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was plumb sucked dry, wasn't it?"

"Yes—it was!!!!" It may be years before the paleface learns that this is just another guide's tale.

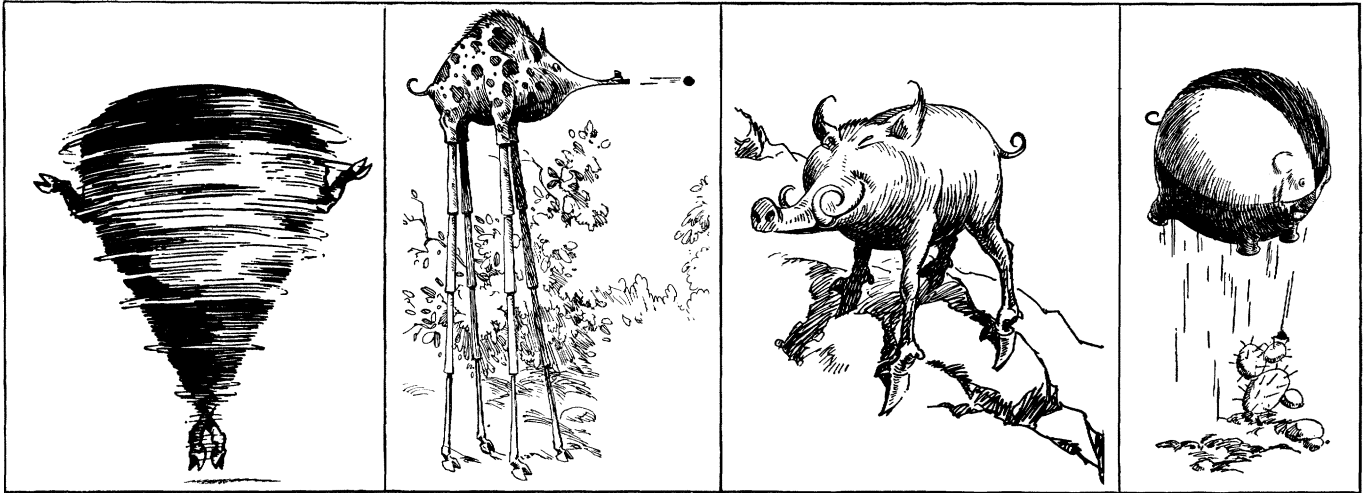
### Jersey Devil Repealed

Northern New Jersey was cursed for years by the appearance of a very terrible monster which defied description. It was reported as the "Jersey Devil" and was a source of considerable worry until someone discovered that the "Jersey Devil" always appeared just after the annual supply of illicit applejack was distributed. Recently, the Jersey Devil has been conspicuous by its absence.

Hunters in the wilds of Bear Mountain, New York State, only a few hours drive from the big city, have suffered the loss of many valuable hunting dogs from the evil machinations of the hodag, a fearsome beast, never seen by man, who lives on a diet of young dogs, each carefully dunked in liquid mud. Attempts to catch this fiendish creature usually end up with a terrible hangover.

Mountaineers have their own special menagerie of weird creatures, and tales of these strange animals are usually told while the guide warms up for an account of how his partner fell off a mountain two miles high last year, and splashed all over the landscape when he hit the rocks. The accident stories may be true, but a standing offer of \$100 for a good picture of the rackabore, one of the most commonly reported mountain animals, has been withdrawn after five years because nobody claimed it.

The rackabore, according to guides who claim to know, evolved many generations ago from the javelina, a piglike animal that lives on the plains. It seems that the javelina population of the plains became too great for the food supply



### IMPROBABLE QUADRUPEDS

Noah never saw anything like these on the Ark—though he may have glimpsed them later, after his famous misadventure with home-made wine. Left to right: the Whirling Whimpus, which nobody ever sees because it spins too fast; the Trip-odero, extended, in firing position; the Rackabore (left-footed model); the Rubberado, which bounces when shot, and makes an incurable boulder out of anyone who eats it. Drawings by courtesy of Outdoor Life.

during one of the early ice ages, and some of the javelinas were forced to move into the hill country. There they developed special legs for hillside travel, short on one side and long on the other. Guides report both "right-handed," and "left-handed" rackabores, which sometimes mate to produce other wonders, most of which go unseen by credible witnesses.

Obstinacy, according to the guides, is a very strong trait among the rackabores. Once, many years ago, two rackabores, one right-handed, and one left-handed, met on a narrow trail overlooking Grand Lake, Colorado. Neither could turn, and neither would retreat, so that both starved to death on the trail. The two skeletons are now hung in a tree in a college surveying camp, where all may come and see. The bones have a strangely equine appearance.

During the early days, when the Spanish were pushing their New-World empire north from Mexico, strange and wonderful things were encountered. It was then that Pedro Martyr wrote his justly famous *De Orbe Novo*, in which he collected all the tales available to him. In it we find accounts of the famous Island of the Amazons, visited only once a year by men, and of the giant

king Datha, who, in his youth had been oiled and stretched daily. Details of the wonderful land of pearls were recounted, and the gold mines of Chicora were first described. Strangely, much stock has been sold in these gold mines, and the area seems to have been the Carolina region, which today produces gold in commercial quantities.

### Lost Lake of Mercury

Fray Pedro de Escobar, a member of the Onate expedition of 1604, collected many accounts of strange and wonderful beings who lived on the shores of the Gulf of California, then generally believed to be the strait which separated the mythical kingdom of Anian from the mainland of America. Escobar tells of the tribe of unipeds who lived to the northward. It seems that these strange creatures were built on the same general blueprint as men, except that they only had one leg and hopped about in search of food. Somewhere in the still not-too-well-known desert country of the Southwest there was reputed to be a lake of mercury, which shimmered in the desert sun. Apparently this lake has dried up, for no trace has been found of it in recent years.

Strange and wonderful creatures lived in the wilds of Lower California, according to the old chroniclers. One group had ears so large that they used them for umbrellas, while other tribes, called the Patagones, used their feet for the same purpose. One very scholarly reporter tells of a race of tailed men. These tails were so stiff that when the tribesmen wanted to sit down they had to use chairs with open seats. Several tailed men have been reported during the history of the earth, but a whole tribe of them has never been encountered.

Food was very distasteful to some of the mythical tribes of the new world, and they gained their nutriment by inhaling odors of various kinds. Other savages lived wholly under water, even sleeping there—possibly to avoid the bad night air that was reported from the early 1500's.

Even the ancient Indians had their imaginary creatures, some of which were probably the prototypes of a few reported today. The sandhill perch, recently reported from the dust-bowl area, is not a new invention. A few years ago, a prominent archaeologist, digging in the Mimbres valley of New Mexico, unearthed a grave more than 1,000 years old. Carefully placed over the skull was a beautiful pottery bowl, and on it, painted skilfully and in much detail, was a fish, easily recognized as a catfish, which two men were dragging along the ground. The fish, as suits an animal that lives on land, had four perfect legs. It was about as big, as judged from the sizes of the captors, as the modern fish that get away.

### Mimbres Valley Surrealism

Surrealism seems to be related psychologically to the "tall tale." Mimbres Valley people of 1,000 years ago suffered from that, too. On one of their bowls is painted a perfect "rattlerabbit," whose body to the waist is that of a rabbit, but whose tail belongs to a rattlesnake.

Every old map is shown complete with a galleon sailing on the ocean, and a sea monster lying in wait for luckless seamen. We laugh at this naive belief, but not long ago a group of scientists spent considerable money investigating the Loch Ness monster reported from Scotland. Even today, a request for funds to be used (*Turn to Page 222*)



SYNTHETIC SHELLBIRD

Concocted out of fossil shells as a caricature of a well known geologist, this fantastic fowl was named in honor of its victim, *Heterogenus lawsoni*, anon.

## From Page 215

in a hunt for dinosaurs in South America, or ice worms in Alaska, will bring a response, sometimes sufficient to enable a doughty warrior to drink himself into a happy stupor, in which he can dream about the strange animals without leaving the safety of his favorite bar.

Tall stories, perhaps, serve a definite need in our present life. Man has always wanted something to wonder at, or to laugh at, and the tall tale satisfies both needs. While most tall tales are told with tongue in cheek, and accepted with a grain or two of salt (taken atop a teaspoonful of the same), there is another group of stories, just as untrue, but sincerely believed by the teller. Under certain conditions, human brains get a trifle out of order. Insanity is not included in this—it is a semi-permanent disorder. When a man is extremely hungry, thirsty, tired, cold, or drunk, his perceptions get a trifle out of order, and he is given to "seeing things" that are not there, in exactly the same manner as a fever patient has hallucinations. Many of these dreams brought on by abnormal hardship seem very real, and are often believed by the recounter, even if by nobody else. When a man collects too many of these unforgettable dreams of things that never happened outside of his own mind, he is locally reputed to be "bushed." Perhaps Jim Bridger's

famous tale of the petrified forest in Yellowstone Park, inhabited by petrified birds, who sang petrified songs, had its origin in too much solitude and hardship. Many famous stories have undoubtedly been inspired by the effects of fever or solitude, or hunger.

Some of the wild tales told by travelers are based on some mistaken observation of an actual thing. For example, the legendary mermaid of the South Seas may well have had its origin in a poor observation of a dugong, or sea-cow. To a poor observer a sea-cow might look like a mermaid, particularly if the observer wanted to believe that it was a mermaid.

Somehow, the stories told by the best masters of fiction cannot compare with those found in isolated mining camps and heard from half-crazy miners or prospectors, whose brains have been a trifle addled by long years of hardship and solitude, and then stimulated by liquor. Usually, however, the "bushed" miner has only one story, which he tells over and over, while the composer of fiction has to think up a new one each week.

When the stories of Atlantis cease to attract, someone invents a continent of Mu. And when Mu is thoroughly discredited, another mythical land, inhabited by nonexistent beings, is conjured up by the imaginative, the misinformed, and the mentally-out-of-order, for the

edification of the credulous. Somehow, an apocryphal tale is more attractive than the truth and hunting for buried treasure is more attractive than digging in a mine, even though the mine may pay \$3 a day regularly, and the buried treasure does not exist.

Guides keep a repertory of tales to tell the annual crop of palefaces. Despite our high degree of general education, some "flatland" woman can always be persuaded to carry her camera open and ready all day, so that she can get a picture of the rackabore to send back home, and each year another tourist is persuaded to sleep in the hotel in a high-country town because of the very dangerous effects of mountain dew.

This article was edited from manuscript prepared by Science Service for use in illustrated newspaper magazines. Copyright, 1938, by Every Week Magazine and Science Service.

Science News Letter, April 2, 1938

### PLANT PHYSIOLOGY

## Neutron Bombardment Produces Abnormal Growths

**B**OMBARDMENT of seeds with fast neutrons from a cyclotron produces abnormalities in the leaves and other parts after they sprout, reports Roy Milton Chatters of the University of Michigan. (*Science*, Mar. 18) In some of the leaves one whole side would be missing, in others, normally entire leaves would be deeply lobed, each lobe with a distinct midvein. The cotyledons or seed-leaves were sometimes cleft, and they were usually sprinkled with minute white dots.

The seeds, which included those of evening primrose, cactus, snapdragon and one or two other genera, were exposed alongside the "tank" of the cyclotron, suitably shielded, for periods of from one to nine weeks. Some of them had their germinating capacity considerably reduced, but others showed as high germinating powers after prolonged exposure as they did before.

Science News Letter, April 2, 1938

## Books

SCIENCE NEWS LETTER will obtain for you any American book or magazine in print. Send check or money order to cover regular retail price (\$5 if price is unknown, change to be remitted) and we will pay postage in the United States. When publications are free, send 10c for handling.

Address Book Department

SCIENCE NEWS LETTER  
2101 Constitution Ave. Washington, D. C.