

## A Traditional Place-Name and its Legends

RONALD L. BAKER

**F**REQUENTLY LEGENDS ARISE to explain the origins of place-names. These etiological legends, however, are of far greater interest to the folklorist than they are to the linguist, historian, and cartographer who deal with the factual rather than the fanciful aspects of place-naming. Still, collecting and studying place-name legends can be rewarding, and legendary etymologies have received the attention of some students of place-names. However, there is another relationship between legends and place-names that generally has been neglected. That is, sometimes place-names are derived from local legends. Such is the case with *Monsterville*, a traditional place-name applied to two different locales in southern Vermillion County, Indiana. Like much local geographical nomenclature, *Monsterville* is strictly an unofficial name: it does not appear on maps or in written sources. Moreover, its usage is restricted largely to teenagers and young adults who need names for their isolated, rural parking spots. Although older people in southern Vermillion County often know the monster stories, they generally do not use the name *Monsterville*, for they rarely have occasion to visit the settings of the legends.

Since December 1967, 17 legends about Monsterville have been submitted to the Indiana State University Folklore Archives. A typical story of Monsterville runs:<sup>1</sup>

Informant: It must have been about five years ago when it happened. I think I was a senior then. It all happened at the Ayrshire Collier[ies] strip-mine pits near Centenary. Sometimes they call that the Sunspot Coal Mine area. Two reputable citizens of Clinton were out fishing. They came running into town and reported to the city police station. The next thing we knew the Clinton paper picked up the story. The men, whose names never were disclosed, said that while they were fishing, near dark, they saw something move on the other side of the pond. It was much taller than a man, they said, and white and shaggy. They also reported firing at near point-blank range with a 12-gauge shotgun, to no avail. They ran away and drove into town to the police station.

The *Daily Clintonian* coined the name "The Sheik." People in the area, especially teenagers, began to flock out there with anything and everything they could get their hands on — guns, bows, slingshots, pistols. It got to be pretty dangerous.

---

<sup>1</sup> This text is no. 13 in the appended list, which gives informant data on all texts discussed. Numbers given in parentheses throughout this article refer to items in this list.

Then reports started coming in from people, many of them reputable in Clinton, saying they had spotted "The Sheik." One of them was a schoolteacher at VanDuyn Elementary School, just east of Centenary. He said he saw it near a fence line at a distance during recess. That would have been on your dad's land. Backyard reports from Centenary residents claimed that the monster was seen behind their houses. Some footprints were found and tracked, but nothing was found. The area became known as "Monsterville" and still is. Part of that land belongs to your dad, so you ought to know more about this than I do.

Anyway, no proof was ever found. But a large white goat, a wild one, was found dead near the area. No monsters were sighted after that.

Collector: How long did the search go on ?

Informant: Oh, I suppose about four or five months.

Collector: How could the goat be taller than [a] man ?

Informant: It was probably standing on its hind legs. . .

Collector: Why couldn't the men kill it with their shotguns ?

Informant: Pellets spread out, and at that range, with the goat's tough hide, it could have made it.

Most of the Monsterville legends have the same pattern as a typical modern horror movie: a monster is discovered; it is reported to the police; the monster causes some destruction or creates panic among the townsmen; the townsmen quickly organize a party to search for it; the monster is not destroyed, though it disappears for a time, and the townsmen live in fear of its return.

Most texts say the monster was first seen by two or more men fishing in the Ayrshire strip pits near Centenary. Naturally, if only a single fisherman had seen the monster, his mentality or sobriety would have been questioned. But when two or more people in a legend share the same experience, some degree of credibility is established. In some of the texts it is reinforced, for informants maintain that not ordinary fishermen saw the monster, but "two reputable businessmen [who] were fishing" (4) first saw the monster. Another informant emphasizes the monster was seen on more than one occasion by respectable people: "two reputable citizens of Clinton" saw the monster while they were fishing, and later other reputable people, including a schoolteacher, also saw it (12). Often informants say that after the monster was discovered by fishermen, other people saw it, too: "many other people said they saw it" (4); "one woman in Centenary saw it in her backyard" (3). One text, especially, adds details suggesting a horror movie: ". . . about three or four years ago two men went fishing in a pond there. They disappeared and were never found. All that was found was their equipment and the boat. Another time some boys went to the same place for a party," and they saw the monster there (10).

Four other informants also identify the locale as a party spot for adolescents. In these texts the monster was first seen by teenagers who were parking in the old mining area south of Centenary. One informant, for

example, said the monster was seen by “mostly kids who went out there to park.” She reveals, further, that teenagers no longer park in the area: “. . . the kids used to go back in there to park, but they don’t anymore. They’re scared to. There’s something back in there that doesn’t want them there. . . . Some of the kids I graduated with saw him [the monster]” (1). Another informant briefly describes the eerie parking spot: “About four years ago some kids were parked out there, which was stupid anyway. The overgrowth is horrible, and it is scary at night. All of a sudden they heard this horrible noise. Coming down the hill was a charging animal [the monster]” (17).

In a single text, the mine setting of the legends is significant, for a nightwatchman at the Ayrshire mines saw the monster “fooling around some of the machinery” (6). Other texts very generally say simply that “people” saw the monster or very specifically say “Joe Birch supposedly saw it. He was the only one” (16).

Several informants suggest the monster is a giant with shaggy hair (Motif F 531.1.1.6.3, “Giants with shaggy hair on their bodies”).<sup>2</sup> Typical descriptions of the monster are: a “big, white, furry monster” (1); a “big, white, hairy thing” (1); a “seven to ten foot tall, white and shaggy-like creature” (3); a “gigantic white monster” (5); “at least ten feet tall, sort of white in color, and ugly” (6); a “huge creature of some kind” (7); a “monster, covered with white hair and seven feet tall” (10); a “big, white, furry thing . . . a monster” (12); “It was much taller than a man . . . and white and shaggy” (13).

Other informants generally agree that the monster is white and hairy, but they add that it has features of a goat: “a big, white thing, a big monster. It had the head of a goat and a body of a bigger animal” (12); “a big, white furry animal with the head of a goat” (14); “I forgot what . . . it looked like. I know that it looked like a goat in some way, and I think a cow, too. No, maybe it was a bull” (16); “It had the head of a goat and the body of . . . a bear” (17). One informant agrees that the monster is furry with horns but says it is “little” (15). In these descriptions of a monster with goat-like qualities, ancient folklore motifs enter. In Greek mythology goats combine freely with other forms (*cf.* Motifs B 24, “Satyr”; F 442, “Pan”). Perhaps more relevant here, however, are the goat-like demons of Christian Europe. Not only does the devil have goat feet (Motif G 303.4.5.4) and goat-like horns (Motif G 303.4.1.6.1), but fairies, witches, ghosts, and ogres frequently assume the form of a goat (*cf.* Motifs F 234.1.2, G 211.1.5, E 423.1.9, and G 351.4). Accordingly, supernatural beings in goat form are very familiar in international folklore.

<sup>2</sup> All references to motifs are to Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols. (Bloomington, Ind., 1966).

Motifs of ghostly lights, popular in folk legends in Indiana as well as throughout the world, combine with some of the stories of Monsterville. One informant says the monster "was holding a light" (cf. Motif E599.7, "Ghost carries lantern") and was "making some kind of weird noise; . . . it was very large and hairy and had some kind of weird odor to it" (2). Another informant (9) says the monster was a "huge, bright creature. . . . Most people said it was big and looked like a large, glowing light from the distance" (cf. Motif E421.3, "Luminous ghost"). Other folklore motifs of spectral ghosts (Motif E421), ghosts in white (Motif E422.4.3), and magic invulnerability (Motif D1840) are also suggested in the Monsterville legends. For instance, one informant says the monster is ". . . large, white and sort of transparent" (8), while another informant maintains the monster is "a mysterious white creature that ran fast and couldn't be hurt when it was shot" (4).

Twelve of the Monsterville tales do not indicate that the monster is malevolent. In fact, one informant emphasizes that "it has never caused any harm" (4). One version, however, suggests that the monster killed two fishermen (10), and two versions assert that the monster killed some farm animals (3, 5). Still, although most texts do not give any evidence of destruction or murder by the monster, the monster is feared apparently because of its great size, its invulnerability, and its other supernatural qualities. According to one text, for example, one of the fishermen who saw the monster "said he saw the monster cross an outlet from the lake, and it ran on top of the water" (8). The magic power to walk on water is familiar to readers of the Bible; however, many Christians probably are not aware that walking on water is a widespread motif found in, among others, Eskimo, Asian, Icelandic, and Irish folklore (Motif D2125.1, "Magic power to walk on water"). One boy found the monster so frightening that his hair turned white, a common motif in horror legends (Motif F1041.7, "Hair turns gray from terror"). Teenagers who park in the area find the monster terrifying because it "rocks the car warning them to leave because he has found a new home and doesn't want to move" (11). Other modern legends set in deserted lovers' lanes are suggested here. In fact, some variants of one very popular parking story, "The Boyfriend's Death," even tell of the boyfriend's murderers rocking a car in which the frightened girlfriend is hiding.<sup>3</sup>

As in the 1931 classic horror movie *Frankenstein* in which rancorous Central European peasants mob with torches and clubs and pursue Dr. Frankenstein's hapless monster, the townsfolk in the legends of Monsterville also gather their weapons and search for a monster. In one tale, the Clinton police look for the monster, "but they couldn't find any foot-

<sup>3</sup> Linda Dégh, "The Boyfriend's Death," *Indiana Folklore*, I (Fall 1968), 106.

prints" (6). In some versions, fishermen, who first saw the monster, chase it, although they do not catch it either (2, 3, 5, 8). Most often, however, a gang of townspeople, especially "high school kids and the men around town" get together with "bows and guns and slingshots and anything that they could get their hands on" (10) to pursue the monster. One informant explains, "The people were afraid of it [the monster], so they decided to get together with chains and go kill it. They never found it, and it was never seen in the town again after that" (14). Another informant says the monster was not found by the townsfolk because "they made too much racket. It ran off and was never seen again there" (12). Although "idiot boys kept looking for that monster for days" (15), the monster was never found or destroyed. The monster has not been seen recently, but one informant suggests it will return: "... that monster returns every so many years, and it is just about due" (17).

A few informants indicate that they believe the Monsterville stories. One informant says, "I think it was [a monster], and I think it's still alive, too" (1). Other texts also include comments suggesting that the story is believed: "... this story had Clinton in an uproar for some time. I believed that they saw something out there" (12); "... this story was and is believed by many people. I know people saw something that made them think it was a monster" (12). Another informant does not believe the story, although the collector notes that "several people in Clinton still believe there is a monster" (11). As one informant suggests, however, the stories of Monsterville are more often rumors than belief tales, or legends: "When the monster was seen, we were on vacation, and we didn't hear anything about it until we got back. Our next door neighbor told us about it. . . . I don't think anyone has seen it for at least a year, and I don't really believe it happened anyway" (9).

There are attempts to rationalize the Monsterville tales, too. One informant says people thought the monster was "only a runaway goat or a sheep or a white bear or something. Most of them say it was a white bear because it was easier to think that than that it was really a monster" (1). Another informant explains that "a large white goat, a wild one, was found dead near the area" (13).

Most informants locate Monsterville at the old Ayrshire strip pits just south of Centenary. Some are often vague about the location, however, replying typically that Monsterville is located "by one of the strip pits around Centenary" (1); however, other informants are more specific, locating Monsterville "at the south end of the pits" (7) and at "the Ayrshire Collier[ies] strip-mine pits near Centenary . . . the Sunspot Coal Mine area" (13).

Four texts (12, 14, 15, 17), collected more recently than most of the others, locate Monsterville in Universal rather than in Centenary. In

recent years, a street of abandoned houses in Universal – “Company Row” of the old Bunsen Coal Company (1911–1925)<sup>4</sup> – was a big attraction, drawing especially high school and college students to the area. Until about two years ago when “Company Row” was torn down by the Peabody Coal Company to make room for a new strip mining operation, students went there at night to make love, drink beer, or have a scary experience. They visited the abandoned coal town during the day to ride their motorcycles through the empty street or just to see a real ghost town. One informant expresses the appeal of “Company Row” to students: “. . . there is this old mining town out by Universal. It has been abandoned for years. It’s really neat and scary at night. The town consists of one long street with little houses close together on each side” (12).

The reason there are two Monstervilles in Vermillion County is easily explained. As students of American place-names know, new places are often named for old, familiar ones. Old world names were given to towns in the United States, and names of eastern towns were given to western towns. Accordingly, the naming of the second Monsterville near Universal follows a familiar pattern in place-naming. Students living in southern Vermillion County who parked at the old Sunspot Coal Mine in Centenary were forced to find another parking spot when the old strip pits there became a county dump; consequently, they moved about two miles south to “Company Row” in Universal to park. When they moved, they took the place-name *Monsterville* and its legends with them. In fact, it was much more logical to think of a *ghost town* as a *monster ville* than it was to apply the *Grundwort* “ville” to an old strip mine. Thus, “Company Row” offered the place-name and its legends a congenial setting.

Ironically, the second *Monsterville* is now a strip mine, too, and no longer functions as a teenage hangout; therefore, unless the name moves again, Indiana will have lost a colorful place-name derived from intriguing legends. At any rate, an examination of the name *Monsterville* and its accompanying legends suggests that the researcher interested in only the factual aspects of place-naming must collect and study legends, too; for sometimes place-names are derived from fanciful stories.

---

<sup>4</sup> For the early history of “Company Row,” see *History of Parke and Vermillion Counties, Indiana* (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen and Co., 1913), pp. 353–354. A photograph of the deserted homes along “Company Row” appears in Robert C. Kingsbury, *An Atlas of Southern Indiana*. Occasional Publication no. 3, Department of Geography, Indiana University (Bloomington, Ind., 1966), p. 14.

## INFORMANTS

(in chronological order)

1. Told by Sheri Huxford, 18, student from Rosedale, to Chadwanna Jukes, December 10, 1967.
2. Told by John Urin, 22, construction worker from Centenary, to Bob Milliron, April 20, 1968. "He heard this legend from his mother when he returned from military service."
3. Told by Jerry Zanandrea, 22, college student from Blanford, to Bob Milliron, April 20, 1968. "He heard the legend of Monsterville at the Blanford Sportsman's Club shortly after it occurred."
4. Told by Marco Zanandrea, 63, self-employed from Blanford, to Bob Milliron, April 20, 1968. "He heard the Monsterville legend through business associates."
5. Told by Frank Gambiani, 58, self-employed from Blanford, to Bob Milliron, April 20, 1968. "He obtained his information on Monsterville from one of his customers."
6. Told by Don Binole, 22, schoolteacher from Blanford, to Bob Milliron, April 20, 1968. He heard the Monsterville story from "a friend and a radio newscast."
7. Told by Larry Colombo, 28, accountant from Clinton, to Bob Milliron, April 22, 1968. "His legend about Monsterville came from his wife."
8. Told by Mac Costello, 27, schoolteacher from Clinton, to Bob Milliron, April 22, 1968. "Mr. Costello obtained his legend on Monsterville through several of his students."
9. Told by Cindy Householder, 20, college student from Clinton, to Bob Milliron, April 22, 1968.
10. Told by Janet Hamm, 19, college student from Indianapolis, to Michael Ahlbrand, April 28, 1968.
11. Told by Tom Chiado, 20, college student from Blanford, to Madeline Bonucchi, July 29, 1969.
12. Collected by Madeline Bonucchi, 21, college student from Clinton, August 1969.
13. Told by Jerry Zanandrea, 23, schoolteacher from Clinton, to Susan VanDuyn, August 6, 1969 (*cf.* No. 4). "As part of the pool room gang in high school, Jerry's informants for the "Sheik" story were some of the Centenary boys who claimed they had seen the white monster."
14. Told by Cindy Donham, 22, college student from Clinton, to Susie Cooper, August 14, 1969. "She didn't believe Monsterville."
15. Told by Vicky Allen, 23, employee of Reuben H. Donnelley, Terre Haute, from Clinton, to Donald Wilson, December 2, 1970. She had known the legend for at least three years.
16. Told by Thomas Chiado, 22, schoolteacher from Blanford, to Donald Wilson, December 18, 1970 (*cf.* No. 11).
17. Told by Madeline Bonucchi Wilson, 22, graduate student from Clinton, to Donald Wilson, December 30, 1970 (*cf.* Nos. 12, 13).

Indiana State University