

BIG IN OHIO

Bigfoot, aka Sasquatch, will draw hundreds to a conference next weekend

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, May 11, 2008

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Ohio has a proud history: Mother of presidents. Birthplace of aviation. And don't forget, bastion of Bigfoot.

It seems the Buckeye State is a haven for stories of the legendary ape-like creature and those who pursue it.

"Ohio is one of the hottest places in the nation for this sort of thing," said Matthew Moneymaker, director of the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization, or BFRO, based in southern California.

The state ranks fourth in the country when it comes to reported Sasquatch sightings, with 191, according to the group's Web site. None of those have come in Lucas County, but a handful were in northwest Ohio, including Hancock and Erie counties.

Now is a great time to be a Sasquatch seeker in the state. A documentary about two southern Ohio Bigfoot hunters, *Not Your Typical Bigfoot Movie*, is making the rounds at film festivals, and on Saturday aficionados will gather at Salt Fork State Park near Cambridge, Ohio, for the 20th annual Bigfoot Conference/EXPO sponsored by the Eastern Ohio Bigfoot Investigation Center.

Among them will be Kerry R. Roode, a former police chief from St. Marys, Ohio, about 20 miles southwest of Lima. The 50-year-old remembers being intrigued with the creature first as a teen when he saw the *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, a low-budget movie about a Bigfoot-like monster, then later during his law enforcement career when he received word that some locals were going Sasquatch hunting and officers were asked to help monitor them.

"They were going to try to shoot one," he said.

Pursuing evidence of Bigfoot became a hobby for Mr. Roode in retirement. He goes out once a month to a meeting with the Ohio Bigfoot Organization or field activity, and he's done several major camp-outs lasting more than four days.

"We've gone out in the field to look in promising areas, where reports are," he said. "It's something for me to do. I don't call myself a believer necessarily."

But Mr. Roode sees a mystery — all the sightings, the footprints, the photos — and wants to get to the bottom of it.

"I look at everything and I go: There's evidence that there's something out there," he said. "Most people just don't ... make stuff up, especially something that's going to cause them to be ridiculed."

The story of Sasquatch (derived from a Native American word for "wild men") is an old and colorful one that is not limited to this continent. Folklore from around the world is sprinkled with tales of giant, hairy, often foul-smelling man-creatures skulking around the wilderness.

Bigfoot captured the American imagination in 1958 when giant footprints were reported in northern California and



Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization director Matthew Moneymaker and sponsor Wally Hersom are framed by photos they believe capture a Bigfoot. (ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/CINDY YAMANAKA)

photos of plaster casts were circulated in the media. About a decade later, Roger Patterson claimed to have caught one of the creatures on film. Hundreds of reported sightings followed in the United States and Canada, most in the Pacific Northwest.

For believers, these were stunning reports of an undiscovered species. For skeptics, they were stories to file right next to the ones about UFOs and the Loch Ness Monster, either outright hoaxes — people walking around in monkey suits or making fake footprints — or cases of people misidentifying something as normal as a mangy bear.

Joe Nickell, senior research fellow for the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry in Amherst, N.Y., whose work includes the study of unknown animals, said it's understandable that stories of Sasquatch would arise.

"I think that because our planet is shrinking we're looking for new frontiers, and one new frontier is to find these remote areas, these last surviving creatures from earlier epochs," he said.

However, that doesn't make them real, just as he's concluded with other man beast legends he's investigated, including werewolves.

"It boggles the mind that [Bigfoot] would be so populous that it would be in ... every state of the union as well as Canada. ... There's almost too many reports to be credible, given that we haven't yet found a single carcass," Mr. Nickell said. "All of the evidence so far is just the kind of evidence — just exactly the kind of evidence — that you could get if the creatures were mythical only."

No such arguments can deter true believers, though.

"These things have been part of Ohio history and culture for many years," said Mr. Moneymaker, the director of the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization who went to law school at the University of Akron. "I have seen one myself."

That encounter, he said, happened in 1994 in eastern Ohio. He went looking for the creature at the edge of a wildlife preserve after locals had reported hearing them, and one growling Bigfoot came within 15 feet of him, he said.

That's proof enough for him. Just because science hasn't found a body yet isn't a reason to doubt, he said.

"You can walk around the woods in Ohio and not come across the bones of anything," Mr. Moneymaker said. "Nature kind of reabsorbs all that in various ways."

No matter what you make of the evidence, one thing is clear to Don Keating, founder of the Eastern Ohio Bigfoot Investigation Center: Interest is up. More than 350 people attended last year's conference and he's hoping for 400 this weekend.

Among this year's speakers will be Jeffrey Meldrum, an associate professor of anatomy and anthropology at Idaho State University and author of the book *Sasquatch: Legend Meets Science*.

Mr. Keating said the conference is a chance for regional investigators to come together, compare notes, and enjoy the great outdoors. If they find Bigfoot while they're out there, so much the better.

"I take the mind frame that I'm out there to take pictures," he said. "If we happen to cross anything that may be Bigfoot-related, great."

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