

**HARRISON**

Every man, wherever he goes, is encompassed by a cloud of comforting convictions, which move with him like flies on a summer day.

—Bertrand Russell, *Skeptical Essays*

Old Jim and I stood on the shore of Harrison Lake drinking in the sunshine, gazing out on thirty-five miles of frigid Canadian water, two tiny specks on the edge of a wilderness larger than any in the continental United States. The sound of bagpipes cut the morning air, and we turned to see a parade of bagpipers trailed by a small figure dressed in an ape costume, wearing a banner that said “Ms. Sasquatch.” We returned her perky wave, and I skimmed a schedule of the day’s events: a round of Sasquatch Golf, a Sasquatch Raffle, the Spring Box Party, and on the main program, the Sasquatch Forum, parts 1 and 2.

Just across the street stood the Harrison Hot Springs Hotel, a dowdy, British-looking structure with a picture of the queen behind the reception desk and tables in the lobby permanently set for afternoon tea. It seemed an absurdly formal venue for a Bigfoot meeting—but then again, why not?

The audience headed for the Coronet Room was predominantly male. Many wore shirts with nature themes: pictures of wolves and grizzly bears, and eagles attacking with outstretched claws. The attendees appeared earnest and eager for information. Vendors in the corridor offered books about Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster as well as more obscure creatures like the Orang Pendek and the Ogopogo. There were T-shirts bearing ape-man likenesses and audiotapes with titles like *Bigfoot: The*

*Ultimate Adventure.* One bookseller was offering memberships in the Cryptozoology Society, an international organization devoted to the investigation of undiscovered animals. Tables near the door were covered with pamphlets and business cards offering “Sasquatch Research” and “Big Foot Investigations.”

Somewhere in the crowd was John Green, the man who had lured me to the conference. After reading his book *On the Track of the Sasquatch*, I had phoned him at his home in Harrison and introduced myself as a journalist interested in learning more about Bigfoot, hoping he could answer some questions. In particular, I wanted to know about Roger Patterson and Bob Gimlin, the men who shot the film of the beast in the late 1960s. Were they alive? And had the film ever been disproved?

Green told me on the phone that Patterson had died a few years after the filming. Gimlin lived in Yakima but generally refused interviews. As for the film, my timing was remarkable. In a few weeks an event called the Sasquatch Forum was convening in Harrison Hot Springs, and he suggested that I might want to attend one of the sessions, titled “The Patterson Film on Trial.” When I expressed surprise that there were enough enthusiasts to warrant a conference, he noted this was the third annual event, “and interest is growing.”<sup>1</sup>

My home base in Portland being a hotspot for Bigfooters, Green put me in contact with a longtime local devotee named Jim Hewkin, who was also attending, and I hitched a ride with him to British Columbia. Old Jim was a wealth of Bigfoot arcana. A field biologist for forty years, he had no doubt the beast was out there. It didn’t bother him that he’d never seen one. Quite the contrary. “That’s the reason it’s got half a chance,” he said. “The thing about wild animals—they’re solitary. And Bigfoot is *the* most solitary of all.” He attributed its elusiveness to an ability to hide out in vast stretches of wilderness. “There’s a lot of country up and down the coast here no one ever visits,” he said. “Sixty-some planes have gone down in this area since the war that have never been found.”

He believed Bigfoot ate carrion, which would explain its widely reported odor. He had studied several cases in which dead farm animals had

been moved by a very powerful creature and eaten over a period of time. Only a Bigfoot could do that, he said. His favorite story involved a logger who had watched a Bigfoot family dig a pit in a rocky hillside to reach a nest of hibernating ground squirrels, which they snatched up and ate like bananas. I quizzed him about the Patterson film and got the impression it was the single reason many of the Bigfoot community believed in the creature—though most, he said, would deny that reasoning.

The forum's lead-off session featured Henner Fahrenbach, a short, trim man with a cordial demeanor and a soft German accent. Fahrenbach was a microbiologist at a primate research center who exuded competence from every pore. He had analyzed the beast's physical characteristics and knit them into a slide show. "Forget all this chit-chat about missing-links," he began. "That word should be purged. By whatever name you choose to call this creature, it's at the top of the food chain. You have a very small population with a low reproductive rate but a very high probability of survival."<sup>2</sup>

The lights dimmed, and a fuzzy photograph of Bigfoot appeared on the screen beside him. "Height," he intoned, tapping the image with a pointer. "Right below eleven feet seems to be the tallest reliable report. The shortest we have seen documented in the literature is . . . four foot seven." Weight: he couldn't talk about weight, as no reliable means had been developed to gauge it. Smell: like "they roll in carrion or something of this nature." Hair color: "People have reported everything from black, brown, cinnamon, grayish white to a near white." He remarked that people mail him bits from time to time, and he launched into a description of hair follicles accompanied by photographs taken with an electron microscope, which rendered them on the screen like giant fir trees.

Fahrenbach's expertise seemed infinite. He had even deduced the beast's average brain size: 800 cubic centimeters, much larger than that of the gorilla, whose average brain size is a mere 550 cc. "The eyes generally seem to have an animal look about them," he said. "Contrary to many reports, [the arms] probably do not hang way down. The Sasquatch walks with bent knees and has reasonably long arms, and walks stooped

over so that brings the arms somewhat lower. . . . They don't shuffle, they stride. . . . Concerning the hands: the thumb is short and stubby . . . the fingers are surprisingly pointed. . . . [They have] an opposable thumb, there's no question about it . . . it's the hallmark of primates. . . . The chest . . . has a circumference of something like sixty-five to seventy inches, which probably accounts for the aerobic reserves they have." The teeth are described as similar to ours. There's "not too much in the way of fang reports other than sensationalists who want to impress you how brave they were chasing a monster that had fangs."

Fahrenbach's presentation was so precise that I had a hard time believing zoos didn't have these things behind bars. After my lifetime of assuming Bigfoot didn't exist, here, apparently, was evidence not only that it was real but that its body parts had been thoroughly studied and analyzed. "On the subject of breasts," he deadpanned. "One report I have, the observer described a young female . . . as having pert breasts. Presumably, he was a connoisseur."

At the break, Jim introduced me to John Green, a tall, slender man who looked to be in his seventies, with a shock of white hair. He invited Jim, Fahrenbach, and me to join him for lunch. A short walk through the village brought us to Green's home, where he laid out half a dozen plaster footprints for our inspection. They differed widely in size and shape and showed varying degrees of detail, but they were all much larger than the average human foot. To me they looked like clown feet squared off at the toes, with no arch. A few had vegetation stuck in the plaster.

Green's intelligence and collegial manner lent a powerful air of authenticity to the casts lying before us. I asked him what one would find in a primer about Bigfoot. "Lobbing rocks is a purposeful activity the apes have been known to do," he said patiently. "And they have a real connection to water." Fahrenbach quizzed Green about the history of the casts, and I took photographs. Green had me take a shot of him holding the largest specimen against Fahrenbach's forearm—elbow to end of hand—to illustrate its size.

Over lunch Green recounted how the Sasquatch business began: In

1956, René Dahinden, a recent immigrant to Canada from Switzerland, appeared at Green's newspaper office in Agassiz, not far from Harrison, with the idea that he was going to hunt for Sasquatch. Green told him it was just a tall story, but Dahinden couldn't be dissuaded. After a few days Dahinden went home. Green wrote a story about him for the paper and thought no more of the matter. The next year, the Agassiz village council asked for a grant from the British Columbia Centennial Committee to finance a Sasquatch hunt to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the province, and Dahinden returned to lead it. This unabashed publicity stunt was picked up and reported by news outlets worldwide. Soon thereafter, several seemingly credible reports surfaced of Sasquatch sightings in the province.

Dahinden and Green teamed up to investigate. A hiker told them he'd observed a six-foot-tall female Sasquatch, weighing in the neighborhood of three hundred pounds, nibbling leaves from a bush in a mountain clearing. A logger claimed that while on holiday exploring for gold, he was kidnapped and held for several days by a Sasquatch family before escaping. Green had several interviewees swear to the truth of their accounts before a magistrate. He researched government archives and found reports of ape-man-type creatures in British Columbia going back to the 1880s. After these Sasquatch reports came the reports of ape-man activities in California: footprints that appeared at Bluff Creek in Northern California in 1958, and Patterson's film in the same area nine years later, all of which Green wrote about in *On the Track of the Sasquatch*. Since then, he has spent innumerable hours compiling reports.

After lunch Green booted up a computer in his office and showed us reports he'd entered into a database. There were 1,331 incidents (tracks and sightings) that met his standards for plausibility, rated on a ten-point scale. The walls were covered with huge maps that showed every water course and elevation in Canada and the western United States; they were plastered with stickers, each representing a report.

I asked him what he thought of the fact that some people think you must be a nut to believe in Sasquatch, and he answered me calmly, as a

benevolent professor might recite ground rules to a freshman. Early on, he said, when he was young and new in this area, he hadn't given the idea much credence. But when he got to talking to people, he kept hearing things that couldn't be neatly explained away. He was now absolutely certain such an animal existed, although, contrary to what some people think, he believed "it is not near-human but [lives] a life similar to that of a bear." Also contrary to popular belief, it was in no danger of extinction, being one of the most widespread species on Earth. On the Northwest coast alone, he said, the creatures had 90 percent of the area to themselves.

Asked about recent sightings, he pointed to a small red triangle on the map, on the coast of northern California south of Eureka, where tracks had been reported just a few months before by the local newspaper, the *Southern Humboldt Life and Times*. I asked if he always believed news reports.

"There are certain things to look for in reports," he replied. "That the primates don't have claws. That the stories aren't too remarkable. Or a person who sees too much. There's a lot of that." He swept his hand across the maps. "You plot sightings on a map and you'll find where people are searching the most. The more people look, the more reports that turn up. It's always been that way."

After lunch, the forum resumed with presentations by two investigators from northern Canada, who played videotape interviews with people who said they'd observed the creature. A woman described seeing the animal two hundred yards away, striding rapidly past a herd of horses. The next presenter—a weightlifter, judging by the size of his biceps—offered a biomechanical analysis of the animal's stride, using the Patterson film as an illustration. Seeing the clip on a large screen, I was reminded how convincing it is if one is not predisposed to reject Bigfoot out of hand.

The existence of the animal can't be disproved just by studying the celluloid image. The figure looks small and very dark in the frame, and it is constantly moving. The clip is roughly a minute long. The most arresting moment of the sequence occurs about midway, when—without

breaking stride—the figure (a female, judging by its sizeable breasts) turns its upper body and looks at the camera. It is a powerful, almost chilling moment that lasts only for a beat. Then, as if simply deciding in that fraction of a second that the cameraman was not a danger, it turns away and continues its methodical retreat.

An overflow crowd pushed into the Coronet Room for the keynote presentation, “The Patterson Film on Trial,” presented by Danny Perez, listed in the program as the Center for Bigfoot Studies. Hollywood couldn’t have created a stranger character to address a crowd of mountain men than Perez, a short, slender man in his mid-thirties, with a deep coppery complexion, coal black eyes, pomaded, wavy black hair, and an ultrathin mustache.

Standing onstage in a loud checked sport coat over a black shirt, accented by a red tie inflamed with white polka dots, Perez scanned the crowd intensely, then thrust his arms in the air and shouted: “The Patterson film on trial! Is this famous film the best tangible evidence we have to prove the existence of Sasquatch? Or is it . . . a *fraud*?”<sup>3</sup>

He paused a moment for dramatic effect. “We’re trying to believe Roger Patterson,” he said. “We want to believe him—but!” He turned to an easel and wrote: “I. NO CAMERA EVER RETRIEVED.” “No camera was ever retrieved. They never found OJ’s knife, and they never found Roger Patterson’s camera.”

From the back of the room came a strained voice: “Oh, shit, come on, Danny!” Perez ignored the comment. “Another important piece of information about the film,” he proclaimed: “Roger Patterson filmed his partner walking along the Bigfoot tracks . . . and the film *disappeared!*”

“Hold it a second!” came the voice from the back again. I turned to see a short, angry, elderly man with close-cropped gray hair, on his feet, shouting with an accent that sounded vaguely Germanic: “You’re giving a speech on one side, I want to be on the other.” Perez began to protest, but the man shouted him down: “Why don’t we do it right now! You make a statement, and I rebut. We can cut the bullshit and stop wasting time.”

Jim leaned over to me with a grin and said “That’s René.”

A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd. Perez replied with an emphatic “No,” and René Dahinden angrily snatched up a video camera on a tripod. “End of discussion. I’m not going to put up with this crap!” he muttered and stomped from the room.

Perez continued as if nothing had happened. Using slides and an easel to illustrate his points, his list of problems with the Patterson film grew. Finally he came to a picture of an old man sitting with his feet stuck out toward the camera, wearing two huge ducklike feet that loomed large in the frame. “This picture,” intoned Perez, “is from Louisiana. This man, Tony Signorini, fooled a whole goddamn town for thirty years. A world-famous zoologist wrote a very long, extensive paper on these tracks, saying it was apparently a large, unclassified penguin. He went out to look at the tracks and he said, ‘Wow, I see toe movement, I see this, I see that.’ But he was wrong. And that guy was—? Ivan T. Sanderson—the late Ivan T. Sanderson—the very distinguished Ivan T. Sanderson. A TV personality. Ivan saw these tracks and bought everything—hook, line and sinker. And fell right on his ass!”

That evening the audience filed once again into the Coronet Room. René Dahinden sat by himself behind a table on the stage, a small figure wearing a plaid flannel shirt. In a rambling speech—part plea, part proclamation—delivered in a mesmerizing sing-song accent, cursing freely, he described how, not long after Patterson brought his film out of the woods, he took it upon himself to personally investigate the circumstances behind it.

“I didn’t like Patterson particularly,” he said. “I didn’t dislike him. What I was trying to determine was: was it a man in a fur suit?” He diagramed on an easel the measurements he had made at the site where Patterson shot his movie and sought to explain his deductions. But the lines and figures and trajectories he scribbled were overwhelming; they soon clouded his presentation, and he grew anxious. “I spent since 1968 to today,” he pleaded, looking out at the audience. “Twenty-eight damn years. You name it, I did it. I went to Los Angeles. I went to pawn shops. I went to film labs. Seven trips to the film site. And I measured the crea-

ture's walk. And what I'm saying to you," he declared, jabbing the air for emphasis, "is that a man, even without the fur suit and fake feet, couldn't cover this distance in the same time."

It was an odd scene: Dahinden trying desperately to drive his point home when, judging from the faces in the room, the audience was already on his side. All I could figure was that I was watching years of frustration boiling to the surface. Indeed, he appeared to be addressing an audience far beyond the people gathered around me.

He held out his hands in supplication. "All our doubts. We argue, we doubt and really get blue about it and say, 'Jesus Christ, what the hell are we doing, we're wasting our time.' But we always come back to this damn film and say: 'What about the film?'"

The next morning Jim and I ate breakfast with John Green in a waterfront cafe, at a table crowded with Bigfooters. They passed gossip back and forth over pancakes and eggs like stockbrokers analyzing the markets. Talk turned to a theory that the creatures were spirits from another dimension, which the table did not generally favor, followed by discussion of an underground city of the creatures, which was likewise pooh-poohed. The conversation then shifted to Indians, which elicited some shared frustrations about the tribes being less than helpful. "You can't believe the Indian stories," Green said with an air of exasperation. "They don't separate spirituality from reality."

Mention of the name Peter Byrne produced much shaking of heads and a few expletives. Apparently Byrne had received a grant to hunt Bigfoot (nearly half a million dollars was the rumor) from a shadowy East Coast group called the Academy of Applied Sciences. "More or less a post office box," Green said acidly, a response strangely at odds with his otherwise serene demeanor. The general consensus pegged Byrne as a relentless self-promoter who had pissed off the Bigfoot mainstream by refusing to share information. Worse yet, he'd succeeded in parlaying old-money connections into a handsome living investigating Bigfoot while receiving copious national publicity. And now he had a hotline: 1-800-BIG-FOOT.

The forum didn't make me a believer, but a lot of people apparently were. From what I'd learned, tracks and sightings were not uncommon; there were Bigfoot organizations around the country; and the hunt even had its own pseudoscientific underpinnings.

On the way home I peppered Jim with questions, starting with Dahinden. Over the years, he said, René had developed a reputation as kind of a rabid dog. His estrangement with Green was long-standing and bitter (Jim had no idea what it was about). He sniped (as I'd seen) at anyone who professed to be a Bigfoot expert. He had even sued Patterson's widow for rights to the film clip—and won. As for Gimlin, Patterson's filming partner, Jim said he'd never met him, but people who had said he was a straight shooter who claimed he saw a real animal.

As a filmmaker, I appreciated Patterson's creativity: the semibelievable ape suit, the choice of location, the jiggly camera, the film running out just as the beast disappeared into the shadows. Only a craftsman with a flair for the dramatic, and guts enough to go for it, could have pulled off such a feat. And he capped it, apparently, by sticking to his claim even as he lay dying of cancer. This was the kind of story that could take on a mythological quality of its own. What intrigued me most—baffled me, actually, as I found my mind going in circles trying to reconcile the thought—was that Patterson apparently believed in Bigfoot enough to go to his grave espousing the idea, yet he faked the film. On the one hand, that mental dissonance didn't seem incompatible at all; on the other, it seemed absolutely weird.

. . .

Mythology comes from the Greek word *mythos*, meaning “story” or “word,” which today's dictionaries define as being associated with deities and demigods, invented ideas, unproved beliefs, and imaginary things or people. This definition strikes me as outdated, for I've seen mythologies created instantly from the real world.

Take the plains of central Texas outside Waco, where, only weeks before, my camera crew and I had been shooting a documentary. A hot

wind picked at the photographs of seventy-six people staked beneath seventy-six flowering quince trees in a field where the children of a religious order called the Branch Davidians used to run their go-karts. All that remained of the home they once called Mount Carmel was a crumbled foundation, surrounded by solidified piles of dirt infused with bric-a-brac and household items like barrettes and detergent bottles—just about the only things that hadn't been ripped off by sightseers who showed up at all hours of the day and night to vicariously relive the gunfight and ensuing standoff with the FBI.

My cameraman swung around for a shot as a carload of tourists turned off the road into the site. The occupants spilled out looking puzzled, trying to reconcile the emptiness before them with the scenes they'd witnessed on TV. Any way you cut it, Waco was a tragedy, and the mythologizing of it was well underway. But that myth had its genesis, more or less, in fact. Bigfoot's story is less clear-cut.