Charlie Leek, of Lower Bank, said that the Leeks, in spite of their name, had to build boats or become ministers. He preferred boats, and his plant, now managed by his grandsons, has become a multi-million-dollar center on the Mullica River.

Jersey Genesis

THE STORY OF THE MULLICA RIVER

By Henry Charlton Beck

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THE JERSEY DEVIL

"I played a soft and doleful air,
I sang an old and moving story—
An old rude song that suited well
That ruin wild and hoary."
SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

BY NOW IT MAY BE that New Jersey's most celebrated of all unwanted children has come back as he or she or it was supposed to long ago. Perhaps there have been unexplained flutterings of ghostly wings at Leeds Point, unearthy cries at midnight down a Pleasantville chimney, or even a clumsy clutter of cloven footprints, neither human nor animal, in the snow of an Estellville dooryard. For in his old haunts further afield The Jersey Devil has been long overdue.

Since first they were aware, Jersey ears have heard grim whisperings about The Jersey Devil. Newspapers used to carry little stories and sometimes long feature articles concerned with certain inexplicable happenings in queer places, odd noises strangely linked with swamps and salt marshes and Mullica fastnesses, with reputable folk telling and repeating shuddersome anecdotes lacking what old-fashioned mortals call common sense. If a man's hen house happened to be invaded with nothing in the way of a clue left behind except a misshapen hoofprint in the mud, if a group of friends boisterous in some moonlit country house became suddenly transfixed by uncanny howls that descended from the roof peak, if some romantic pair driving along an equally romantic lane was tossed unwarned into a ditch because a horse reared and dashed away—"it must have been The Jersey Devil!"

I had been reading Mr. Fithian again, one day, awaiting Mrs. Bowen's return home at Leeds Point. I had remarked the contrasts made by the preacher between the people of the upper side of the Mullica and those further down the coast. At Great Egg Harbor, he wrote, were "straggling, impertinent, and vociferous swamp men"

while closer by the river were "people in this wild and thinly settled country" who, nevertheless, were "extremely nice and difficult to be suited in preaching." The good folk of Port Republic, Clark's Landing, and Leeds Point, he said further, "must have, before they can be entertained, good speaking, good sense, sound divinity, and neatness and cleanliness in the person and dress of the preacher." That wandering parsons were not always as washed as they urged their congregations to be, spiritually as well as physically, was indicated, Mr. Fithian said, "from remarks freely made upon gentlemen who formerly preached here."

Such particular people, so full of common sense, would own no belief in a ghost, be he ever so celebrated, I thought. And yet, when Mrs. Bowen in Leeds Point had all but concluded that highly informative scolding, her attitude was something of a contradiction. So many stories, she said, simply could not be credited by sensible people. Then, at the end, she said casually: "Of course you knew that The Jersey Devil was born here!" Stammering somehow that yes, I knew, I confessed afterwards, when I had recovered from the surprise of it, too far away to make amends, that I didn't know at all.

Once when I was talking to Mrs. Sam Layer in Haddonfield about vanished amusement parks and suspended county fairs, the venerable old lady, then very ill, spoke of a gibbering ghost likely to reappear anywhere in New Jersey when days began again to bring their procession of ordinary events. I said that perhaps the phantom had given up in the face of competition. But then, as I picked up the dead words and the sound of a voice long stilled, I heard Mrs. Layer correct me, saying: "Not The Jersey Devil! Leeds's Devil!"

There it began to fit together, and I launched a quest for all the facts, a quest undertaken at intervals throughout the years by better stalkers than I. Leeds Point, I said at the start, must have had some traffic with Leeds's Devil, and at once I scented danger from dozens of Mrs. Bowens who might be expected to object to whatever an honest ghost hunter might find out. That was why I went back to make sure of what Mrs. Bowen had said. And that, really, was how she came to lead us on—you see, I took a witness with me—to what remained of the house in which, Mrs. Bowen said, "they always say The Jersey Devil was born."

Between that time and my previous call, the afternoon on which I was roundly chastised, I had concluded that I knew the house she meant, a perfect ruin of a place, literally rotting apart, a hollow shell probably full of rats and wood ticks, with weeds grown as tall about it as the lilacs in the front yard. Surely, I said, this place must be haunted. Certainly this must be The Devil's birthplace. But it wasn't at all.

Mrs. Bowen came home at length and graciously consented to accompany us down the gravel road, leading off the roadway to Oyster Creek, where I shall always remember my first and last steamed clams, put away to the "bzzzt!" of flies being fried on an electrified screen door. We passed the old house that would have been so appropriate—no, that was merely another of the old Leeds houses, said Mrs. Bowen. The house she wanted to show us, she said, was farther on. The Shourds house, she called it. When we came to a bend, Mrs. Bowen slowed us up with a show of bewilderment. I began to wonder if the shuddersome goblin had taken his hideout away, too, now that we had come to see it.

"That's strange," said Mrs. Bowen. "It used to be somewhere here. I could have sworn that over there, beside those cedars . . ."

"How long has it been," I inquired quietly, "since you were down this far?"

No sarcasm was meant. Just the same, it seemed a little incredible that the Bowen house was scarcely more than five hundred yards away across the fields and that Mrs. Bowen had not come down this road at least once in a while. Something like an economy of motion was involved, I think.

"Guess it's all of fifteen years," Mrs. Bowen confessed, as if there was nothing at all unusual in that. There was nothing of any special interest that the Bowens wanted or wanted to see again. There was nothing of any special interest to Mrs. Bowen, that was evident. Even so, at the moment and now, too, it was and is a little difficult to believe that a house as famous as the birthplace of The Jersey Devil had vanished without the knowledge of neighbors who lived, all the while, just the other side of the screen of trees. But that was exactly what had happened.

From the car we could see nothing that looked remotely like a

house, even though we were within a few feet of where it had stood. At last, when Mrs. Bowen had gained her bearings, we plunged into the thickets and there, in the midst of a tangle of weeds and honeysuckle and brambles which had grown up through the years, we came upon fallen timbers and the old bricks of a chimney, tumbling in the rubble of a filling cellar hole.

Mrs. Bowen told the story quite simply as we stood there. There had been a Mrs. Shourds, she said, the mother of a family presumably large. One day she was heard to make a wish, as dreadful a wish as ever was made: She hoped that if she was to be burdened by any more children the next would be a devil. And a devil the next offspring, poor dwarfed misshapen being, proved to be! The creature, Mrs. Bowen said, grew painfully in size until the time came when it could move clumsily about in the house in which it was born and where, from most accounts, it was sheltered mercifully from the curious who came to peep in at the windows.

Just think how you would have acted if the story had come to you that Mrs. Shourds had wished for a devil and had begotten it. Wouldn't you have sidled by of an evening, on one imaginary errand or another, to see what you could see? Well, you probably would not have seen very much, even so. Few saw anything at all, according to all the variations of the story. Presumably those who heard a snatch or two filled in the details of the most incredible part of the tale, as it was told again by Mrs. Bowen there in the ruin of plaster and cedar siding which by now must be dust again.

One evening when the wind was howling outside and when a shivery fog came creeping in from the sea, the twisted being cried out wildly and with a flapping of its long arms, turned suddenly to wings, swooped up the Shourds' chimney and disappeared forever as far as the family was concerned. As far as the rest of New Jersey is concerned, this was and is The Jersey Devil, Leeds's Devil, or the Devil of Leeds Point which in cycles of years that vary in the manifold accounts has continued to haunt the countryside with one technique or another. This, at least, was Mrs. Bowen's sketchy recollection of it.

The story and mention of it in a letter or two began the turning of many invisible wheels. Our friend, Mr. Gaskill, in Washington, replied that it was an old associate, Frank Lee, who had made a life's

business of uncovering information on the Leeds Point phantom. "He kept his notes on scraps of paper, however," warned our correspondent, "and they may have disappeared long ago. But if you will look up Mrs. Lee, who I believe lives in Vincentown, you may get something that ought to be preserved."

I wrote a letter to Mrs. Lee. For a long time there was no answer. When a reply came, finally, it was from Mrs. Rhoda Lee Compton, Mrs. Lee's daughter. Mrs. Lee had died, too, and while there were many old books about, Mrs. Compton was certain there had been no notes about the ghost. Not until some time after that did I realize that Frank Lee, to whom Mr. Gaskill had referred me, was Francis Baizley Lee whose books on New Jersey are well known.

I began to think my luck was out, especially when an obituary appeared telling of the death of Fire Warden Bozarth, at Batsto near The Forks, in which it was declared that he "was the last man known to have seen The Jersey Devil." I had met and talked with Mr. Bozarth, but never in any of our conversations did he reveal knowledge of such a distinguished visitor. It was while I had reverted to looking up the family history of the Shourds, descended surely from one Cornelius Shourds, a stockbroker who came all the way from Holland, back in 1684, on the urgent invitation of that pioneer of Pennsylvania, William Penn, that a second letter came from Mrs. Compton saying that her cousin, J. Elfreth Watkins of Philadelphia, had come to visit her. "Oddly enough," she wrote, "he was with my father years ago when they were tracking down those Jersey Devil stories. He says he may be able to find some trace of them in his files."

After some friendly correspondence in which Mr. Watkins said that much of the material in his files had been stolen, he came upon a yellowing clipping of an article he syndicated in 1905, headed boldly "On The Trail Of Leeds' Devil" and subtitled "The Dread Monster of Jersey's Big Forest." "Just back of the white and velvety coastline of New Jersey," Mr. Watkins began, with the full glory of early newspaper writing, "there tapers up from its deep base along Delaware Bay to its apex at Long Branch a green triangle known as 'The Pines.' Its black, innermost heart has suffered a hiatus, a quick transition from twentieth to eighteenth century, plunged into a dark,

sylvan mediaeval realm of witches, wizards, conjurers and monsters. . . ."

His scene established, Mr. Watkins proceeded, saying that he did not believe that "anywhere in your mythologies you will find any reference to 'Leeds' Devil' but it was a pilgrimage in search of the lair of this monster (which has kept the 'pine hawkers' in the State in terror since Colonial days) that made me turn my back upon the sea and sent me trudging across the white floor of 'The Pines' and wading through its dismal cedar swamps." I had joined that quest, you see. Now, so must you.

"I was set upon the monster's trail by Mr. Francis B. Lee, of Trenton," wrote Mr. Watkins, then the head of a news and feature syndicate, "an astute historian who has made a careful study of the folklore and dialect of the 'pine hawker.' The story goes that back in mid-Colonial days there lived in Burlington, on the Delaware, a city far beyond the frontier of The Pines, a woman known as 'Mother Leeds.' Witchcraft was then at its height in the Colonies and she was accused as an adept in its black arts. In 1735, according to the tale, Mother Leeds gave birth to a male child whose father, at first unidentified, was later said to have been none other than the foul fiend and prince of darkness, otherwise known as Old Horny and Beelzebub.

"The child was normal at birth but before the termination of the tempestuous night of its arrival it horrified several old crones gathered about the bedside of Mother Leeds by assuming a serpent-like body, cloven hoofs, the head of a horse, the wings of a bat and the forked tail of a dragon. The coloring of the terrible monster turned to a dusky brown and after bepummeling its mother and her chapfallen companions it uttered a series of loud, raucous cries and flew up the chimney. Circling about from village to village, while the tempest still screamed through the trees, the monster stopped on its way to devour several sleeping babes and then made for The Pines."

Pause should be made here, interrupting Mr. Watkins's fascinating narrative to point out, for the benefit of Mrs. Bowen and others, that here is direct quotation from the Sunday supplements of over

thirty-five years ago. "Mother Leeds" is no more the creature of my imagination than she was of the man who wrote the article after working with Mr. Lee, the "astute historian." Mrs. Bowen's version, it becomes evident at once, lost much more than names in years of retelling the story.

"During the hundred and forty years that have since elapsed belated travelers crossing that dark sylvan tract have seen and heard the monster. Joseph Bonaparte, ex-King of Spain, who loved to hunt deer in this forest, is said to have encountered it once, while Commodore Decatur, who came to The Pines to test cannon balls made from the native bog ore at the since crumbled foundry at Hanover, is said to have fired one of these projectiles—designed for the Algerian pirates—directly through the monster 'without halting its mad pace.' The pine hawkers, who tell experiences even more terrible, attribute to it such supernatural powers as were assigned to the black witches of English folklore. It turns the milk sour in the pails, lames horses in their stalls, dries up the cows in the clearing pastures, seres the corn in the fields.

"Accompanied, as it usually is, by the howling of dogs and the hooting of owls, there can be no surer forerunner of disaster. Where the barrens line the shore it flits from one desolate grass-grown dune to another and is especially watchful upon those wild heights when coasting schooners, driving their prows into the sand, pound to splinters upon the bars and distribute upon the waves their freight of goods and human lives.

"Upon such occasions Leeds' Devil is seen in the companionship of a beautiful golden-haired woman in white, or yet of some fierce-eyed, cutlass-bearing disembodied spirit of a buccaneer whose galleon, centuries ago, was wrecked upon the shore of Cape May County. Again this monster is said to share its haunts with a headless seaman who, the Barnegat people say, was decapitated by none other than Captain Kidd himself and whose stiffened trunk that pirate king left sentinel over buried, ill-gotten gold.

"At other times Leeds' Devil is seen to hover, like a giant bird of prey, above some silent, star-bespangled pond within the umbrous recess of a cedar swamp. On such occasions its foul breath blasts the lives of hundreds of fishes, found floating next day upon the surface,

A typical scene at the edge of one of the cedar swamps in the Mullica country.

One of the most memorable characters of the Mullica was William Fretz Kemble, who ran a nursery, planted exotic flowers in odd places in the woods to bewilder naturalists, and became known as the Santa Claus of Lower Bank.

Across from the old paper plant at Sweetwater, turned into a charming private home, is the Elijah Clark house, setting for the romantic novel, *Kate Aylesford.* An old boat, beached long ago at Clark's Landing, recalls the Landing, and early Clark patriots, privateers, millers, and church-builders.

tainted and unfit for food. Half cantering, half flying through the shadowy vistas of the forest, it drives before it to their coverts deer, rabbits and squirrels. Such," Mr. Watkins at last concluded his colorful story, "is the black record of Leeds' Devil, transposed from the nasal dialect of the Pine Hawkers—and these human denizens of the forest we must not pass by unnoticed. . . ."

Clearly the original legend, pieced together by Mr. Watkins and the late Mr. Lee, has everything: A monster that combines the worst of the animal, bird, and reptile kingdoms, notable witnesses of its frightfulness, the original touch of trying to shoot down a ghost with a cannon—and even a blonde. Beside the narrative in which Mother Leeds, and not Mrs. Shourds, became the mother of the horrific villain of the piece, the more modern derivation is feeble and forlorn. Even so, I had not heard the whole of it.

From Mrs. Blake in Pleasantville came response to a further inquiry. Mrs. Blake wrote me that The Jersey Devil was "positively born" in three places and that Burlington was *not* one of these. In Leeds Point, she said, he was born in a house on the site of the old Shourds house. In Pleasantville, she disclosed further, he was born in a house that stood on the site of a dwelling occupied then by Dr. Rieck at 507 South Main Street. "I presume," she wrote, "that in Estellville the site of his birthplace can be as positively identified."

The story in each instance was the same, Mrs. Blake pointed out —"the unwanted child, the home already filled with numerous offspring from the poor feeble-minded parents. The mother wishes the child may be a devil when born; the child has a cloven foot and hands like claws. He finally claws his mother's breast and flies up the chimney and away into the night with horrible screeches. The same screeches seem to attend his return-visits," said Mrs. Blake, "which, by the way, come every seven years and always portend disaster."

Expressing an opinion that the germ of the legend was traceable to Old World superstitions "brought with the people from Europe," Mrs. Blake confessed that she never had heard "when the Devil developed the vampire wings he is supposed to have." While the monster may have developed from superstitions, there must have been some foundation to the story of his birth, Mrs. Blake told me later. "Possibly a deformed and degenerate child was born into such a

home in each of the locations along the shore," she suggested. "The child may have run away, either perishing from cold or dying when attacked by wild beasts. Parents and neighbors imagine all sorts of stories," she added, "and it is probable that every tragic event along the shore was placed to the credit of The Jersey Devil."

Alfred M. Heston, the Atlantic County historian, writing as recently as 1928, recounted the legend, favoring Estellville for the opening scene, declaring the mother of the beast to be a Mrs. Leeds who lived there and not in Leeds Point at all. The baby was normal, he said, and it was soon exchanged, in some baffling manner, for the monstrosity that turned up a few days later. Mr. Heston pictures the creature swooping out the window, not up the chimney, and so loses much of the effect. Details for this departure seem to have come from one George Gregory, whom Mr. Heston calls "a matter-of-fact gentleman" whose home was in Philadelphia but whose summers were spent in Cape May County. There it was, in Goshen, that Mr. Gregory obtained the facts from a Mrs. McCormack who, inspired by an "appearance" of the Devil in 1909, spoke at length on the subject with all the authority of her eighty-four years. Mr. Heston said that Mr. Gregory had it from Mrs. McCormack who had it from the nurse, probably midwife, who attended the Mrs. Leeds of Estellville, that "every day, for a time, the child-devil returned to the home of Mrs. Leeds and perched on the fence."

Mr. Heston appends still another and singularly flat claim that the mother of the monster was neither a Shourds nor a Leeds but a woman who, having refused food to a gypsy, was consequently cursed, her first-born subsequently performing most of the tricks ascribed to The Jersey Devil, making its debut, as in other variations, in the house at Leeds Point.

The Devil's name could have been Leeds, and it could have been Shourds, too. Daniel Leeds "located land" in Great Egg Harbor in 1694. Samuel Shourds, Sr., came to Little Egg Harbor in 1735. Daniel and his family lived at Leeds Point. The Shourds, almost legion, were scattered all through the Mullica neighborhood within surprisingly few years. It is impossible, however, to speak with any certainty, to conclude that The Jersey Devil gained its aliases from a person or a place, although there may be something more than coincidence

in the fact that Sam Shourds moved shoreward from Bristol, Pa., directly across the Delaware from Burlington, reputed home of "Mother Leeds" in 1735, the year of the supposed diabolical visitation.

Writing in 1929, the late Squire Hargrove of Pemberton, whose tall stories have thrust me into many a tight corner, managed to revive The Jersey Devil for a time, giving him birth at Leeds Point but not at any dwelling of the Shourdses—the Squire drops him at the old Leeds homestead, then occupied by Jesse Mathis. The Squire quotes Jesse as saying that people along the Mullica Valley and beyond believed that children born half-witted had been "touched" by Leeds's Devil and that this was the origin of a modern derivation. By 1934, however, the monster had lost so many of his trappings that a man whom police named as Willis Borton, wanted in five states on charges ranging from burglary to murder, glibly called himself "The Jersey Devil," and as such made the headlines.

I think it was Mrs. Blake who told me that people along the shore fully expected the Devil to make a spirited comeback in 1940. If he appeared, the billing must have been on a small rural circuit and none too sensational at that, for I heard nothing of it. What I did hear, only the other day, is that Mrs. Bowen, disowning the family connections and adhering to the name of Shourds instead of Leeds, could have gone all the way and discounted Leeds Point as the Devil's birthplace. Mrs. Underhill, down in Lower Bank, told me he belongs to the Mullica after all.

"Up Cale Cavileer's Lane," she said, "there is an old house. It was formerly owned by Moses Leeds, whose daughter, Jane, married Uncle Jake Johnson. She had so many children that she finally decided not to have any more, but if she did, she said, she hoped he would be a devil. Later a boy was born, and stories are told that after he was born he flew out the window. That is the beginning of the many different stories about Leeds's Devil. All kinds of descriptions were given of him, none as a natural human being. People down here say they have often seen him running along the rail fence between our house and the fields toward Leeds's Lane and the old Leeds house."

As I have said, whether the name be Leeds or Shourds or something else, and whether the cloven hoof or horse's head or writhing

serpent's body will again lend chills to the manifestations, the lurking prodigy is long overdue. It may be that as a harbinger of disaster he has perished, long since, from overexertion.

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SANTA CLAUS OF LOWER BANK

"Donne, I suppose, was such another
Who found no substitute for sense;
To seize and clutch and penetrate,
Expert beyond experience."
T. S. Eliot

Ordinarily I do not willingly address the luncheon clubs. Usually there is some legitimate excuse to save me from an ordeal in which I find myself wondering if the food is contrived to make the members overlook the speaker or whether, by some chance, the opposite is true. Once I escaped by inches when, fifteen minutes before I was scheduled to appear, Alden Cottrell, a State forester, came to see me and somehow I persuaded him to be my substitute. Next time I was not as lucky.

Somehow I drifted into my usual enthusiasm for Mullicana. I spoke of people for whom ancestral acres by the river was Beulah Land, people who shun the world outside or despair of it, people who get along with just enough, who make what they need and who have achieved a kind of economic order worth investigating. The interest seemed general, the comment kind. Then, afterward, there appeared in the club's little newspaper something so patronizing that before I had considered the wisdom of retort, I had answered the challenge. Conditions I had described, it was said, could not produce greatness nor could these people make lasting contribution to civilization. That was enough to set me going. I responded:

"I am considerably in your debt for your commentary on my address before the club. However, your conclusion that these Down Jersey people of mine have made little in the way of new contributions to civilization is hardly based on fact. Through several generations these people, possessing some of the best blood in New Jersey, have made tremendous contributions, chiefly by minding their own business and preserving something we lack, a true community kind of living and a talent for making an economic order work. Their ingenuity is undoubted: When they need balers and rakes for sphagnum moss gathering, they make them; when boats are wanted, they make them—most boat-builders are either working for the Navy in their own yards along the little rivers or they have been brought to Camden shipyards in the emergency; when there is any great need for anything, their own talents fashion it, from a house to a coffin. I don't think you meant to reflect on these people. Actually, one must define civilization. Probably what you meant by civilization to me is decadence. Civilization does not consist of large spoonfuls of profit motive, great demands for legal twists and turns, great thirsts for things we have to immolate ourselves to get. There are almost as many people down country who have left off what I think you mean by civilization to live in a civilization they believe superior as there are natives happily unaware of being super-civilized—at least two are in Who's Who and one has proved, at least to his own satisfaction, that collectivism works and is only beaten by systems that have titles like WPA. Honesty, integrity, making what you have do, lack of suspicion—all these, I believe, are nearer to civilization than the spirit which grips a group of men and makes it sing something about coughing up a dime."

I ought not to have made any reference to the singing. As I was quickly informed, I had missed the real purpose of it. I had missed, as well, the true meaning of civilization and, in addition, I was sadly lacking in any concept of the club's service. I still maintain, however, apart from everything else, that it is something of a spectacle of foolishness when grown men, suddenly spying a late-comer, as suddenly lend their voices to words set to the tune, "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain when She Comes"—