WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Hodag

At the Oneida County Fair, you pay your nickel and enter the large stall to see a beast called the hodag. It is so dark inside you can barely see the ticket in your hand!

Slowly, your eyes begin to adjust. In the back of the stall, a dim light shines down on a large, horned creature. Frightening noises seem to come from it. It lifts its head and roars at you! You run out of the tent, scared but satisfied. **The hodag is real!** ***Or is it?***

The hodag legend comes to us from tall tales told by lumberjacks. It was likely inspired by Wisconsin's Native American stories of water panthers and other spirit beings. The earliest known print reference to the hodag comes from an 1870 history of Kent County, Michigan. But it would be the small town of Rhinelander, Wisconsin, that would make the hodag world-famous.

What was the hodag? According to folklorist Charles E. Brown, "The ferocious beast had horns on its head, large bulging eyes, terrible horns, and claws. A line of large sharp spikes ran down the ridge of its back and long tail. The Hodag never laid down. It slept leaning against the trunks of trees. It could only be captured by cutting deeply into the trunks of its favorite trees." It was said to eat "mud turtles, water snakes, and muskrats," and "it did not disdain human flesh."

In 1893, timber cruiser and land surveyor E. S. "Gene" Shepard claimed to have captured a live hodag. Beginning in 1895, illustrations from this "capture" were used in advertisements for the Centralia Lumber Company. However, it would take more than drawings for people to accept the hodag as real, and Shepard had a plan.

To draw attention to the small but growing town of Rhinelander, Shepard decided to show a captive hodag at the 1896 Oneida County Fair. With the help of a woodcarver named Luke Kearney, he created his own hodag. They carved the body from wood and covered it with ox hide. They gave it bulging eyes and added twelve cattle horns along its spine. Finally, they added wires so they could move its head. Visitors to the exhibit were told that the hodag ate only white bulldogs, and then only on Sundays. The creature was so successful that stories of Rhinelander's famous monster traveled nationwide. They even appeared in science journals!

Eventually, Shepard admitted that the hodag was a hoax, but that didn't stop people from wanting to see it. The town of Rhinelander adopted the hodag as its mascot, and now hodag statues, paintings, and toys can be found all over the city.

Shepard's hodag may not have been real, but who knows? Perhaps the hodag is still hiding somewhere in the woods, waiting for the right person to come walking by on a Sunday with a white bulldog . . .

Learn more about the Hodag in *Odd Wisconsin* from the Wisconsin Historical Society Press.

https://shop.wisconsinhistory.org/odd-wisconsin-amusing-perplexing-and-unlikely-stories-from-wisconsins-past