

How the Woodbooger Saved a City

For natives of Wise County, Virginia in the Appalachian Mountains, folk legends were a big part of growing up. Storytelling was not just a common form of entertainment for families throughout the region in the days before television, the internet, and smart phones. Storytelling was a part of daily life. Stories of murder and mayhem, ghosts or “haints”, and scary creatures that roamed the steep mountains and deep hollers were common.

These stories were passed from generation to generation and often told after dark with the lights turned down low. Some of these stories were used to frighten children into behaving by threatening them with what would happen if they were snatched from their beds during the middle of a dark night. The creatures that were featured in these stories were often called “boogers”. These boogers came in a variety of forms.

Having been born and raised in Wise County, Daniel Collins was familiar with many of these stories. He was born in the Park Avenue Hospital in Norton that is now the site of a parking lot. He got his name from his great-grandfather, Ephraim Daniel, who lived and died in these mountains. Daniel’s ancestors settled on the Buck Knob in an area that later became known as Collins Mountain.

Daniel had left Norton to attend college and rarely returned to his hometown. He earned a bachelor’s degree in journalism from Virginia Tech in the early 1990’s and became a feature writer during the boom days before the internet and digital media. As a feature writer for the *Appalachian Highlands Gazette* in Roanoke, Virginia, the majority of his articles dealt with art exhibits, new books published by local authors, and interviews with area personalities he met along the way. However, an in depth feature about Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) had led him to the pinnacle of his journalism career. He won a Pulitzer Prize for Journalism for his series about the tragic beginnings of babies born to drug addicted mothers.

One afternoon in late summer, the editor of his paper called him into her office to discuss an opportunity for a feature article.

“Daniel, I have an idea on a feature article for the paper that would be interesting to our readers and give you a chance to visit your hometown,” the editor, Ms. Ellen Miles, stated as she opened the conversation.

Daniel couldn’t imagine a story from his hometown of Norton that would justify the two-hundred mile trek down the interstate to cover it. “Now, Ms. Miles, what in the world could that be? There isn’t much news coming out of that part of Virginia these days,” Daniel replied with a quizzical look on his face.

“There is a lot of fascination with the legend of Bigfoot. In fact, one of those TV cable shows on Bigfoot visited the Norton area just a few years ago,” Ms. Miles replied.

“So, exactly what does that have to do with me?” Daniel asked with a growing sense of confusion.

“The City of Norton has made quite a bit of news in the world of Bigfoot believers with their own local version of the creature. They call it the Woodbooger. They have become an official Woodbooger Sanctuary,” Ms. Miles continued.

“That all sounds very quaint, but I still don’t get what that has to do with me.” Daniel persisted.

“Well, they have an annual celebration called the Woodbooger Festival, and it is coming up in October. I would like you to visit the Norton area and write a detailed article on the Woodbooger legend. I would particularly like to know what the local residents think. Is the Woodbooger real or just a legend?”

“Are you serious?” Daniel responded, still wondering if he as being “pranked.”

“I’m totally serious. To make it a little more fun, why don’t you take your family with you and turn it into a mini-vacation? Since they enjoy camping, I’m sure that your son and grandson would enjoy a trip to that part of Virginia.”

“Probably. They have a long weekend coming up in October, so I can certainly discuss it with them.” Daniel offered as he warmed to the idea.

“You might even see a Bigfoot while you’re there!” Ms. Miles declared as Daniel got up to leave the office to return to his cubicle.

“Yeah, right. I have Bigfoot in the same category as ghosts and aliens – I’ll believe it when I see it,” Daniel replied on his way out the door.

When Daniel got home from work later that day, he phoned his son, Matt, to discuss the opportunity for a camping trip to Norton. “Matt, my editor has asked me to go down to Norton to do a special feature article for the paper. The trip will be in October, and she has suggested that I turn it into a mini-vacation by asking you and Noah to join me for a little camping while I’m down there.”

“Sounds interesting. Noah loves camping. What’s the subject of the article?” Matt replied.

“It’s about the Woodbooger,” Daniel continued.

“What’s a Woodbooger?” Matt asked.

“It’s their resident Bigfoot. In fact, they have a weekend festival called the Woodbooger Festival. We would attend the festival as part of the trip.”

“Well, I don’t know. It has been several years since we visited your hometown, and you know that Noah is very interested in Bigfoot. Count us in, just as long as you can guarantee us that we won’t run into one during the camping trip,” Matt replied with a chuckle in his voice.

“You have my word on it,” Daniel promised as they ended their call. “I’ll get back to you with more details as the date gets closer.”

As the last days of summer began to wind down, and Labor Day came and went, Daniel asked Matt and Noah to stop by the house on Sunday afternoon to discuss plans for the trip. “We can leave on Thursday morning, get down to the area by Thursday evening and set up camp. We always camped in the High Knob when I was growing up in the area. That gives us Friday for you to tour the county and for me to conduct my interviews. We can then go to the Woodbooger Festival on Saturday and camp one more night before returning to Roanoke on Sunday” Daniel said as he ran through the proposed plan.

“Sounds good to me,” Matt responded.

“Grandpa, are there any Bigfoots in those mountains?” Noah asked with a little fear in his voice.

“No, son, the whole Woodbooger thing is a local legend. My job is to interview people from Norton while I am there to get their opinions on whether they actually think it’s real. Trust me, we won’t run into a Bigfoot on our camping trip,” Daniel assured him.

Departure day came, and Daniel, Matt, and Noah headed off south on I81 deeper into Southwest Virginia. After a brief stop at the Food City grocery store to pick up supplies, they headed up the steep two-lane road from Norton to the High Knob recreation area in the Jefferson National Forest. High Knob is the highest peak in the Cumberland Mountains. They started to feel a little chill in the air as they ascended the road from the US 23 bypass up to the campground.

They set up camp, started a camp fire, and prepared a dinner of fried pork chops and baked beans. Everything seemed to taste better out in the woods. After dinner, they sat around the camp fire until the embers started to die down and pitch dark descended on their campsite. Daniel told a few stories from his childhood, being careful to steer clear of the ones about monsters in the forest. They settled into their sleeping bags for a good night’s sleep before the busy day ahead on Friday.

Daniel awoke early around 6 AM before the sun rose above the ridges to the east. He busied himself with gathering more dead wood for the campfire. The deep snoring from inside the tent signaled to Daniel that it could be a while before Matt and Noah began to stir. After they finally awoke, they prepared a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs, cleaned up the camp, and headed down to Norton to start their day.

Matt and Noah asked to be dropped off at the local shopping center. There was a gaming store there, and they wanted to see the latest releases. "I'll pick you up at noon in front of the Walmart" Daniel promised as they departed the truck.

Daniel's first stop was at Mayor Ron Ramsey's office at the City of Norton Building just a block off Park Avenue. The secretary waved him in, and the mayor met him at his office door. He greeted Daniel with a warm handshake now that the threat of the virus had passed. "Welcome to Norton," the mayor offered as he pointed to a seat at the table in the corner of his office. "What brings you to our city on such a beautiful fall day?"

"Mr. Mayor, I was actually born in Norton. I now work for the *Appalachian Highlands Gazette* in Roanoke, so I don't get back to the area very often. I'm here to do research on a feature article on the Woodbooger. My son and grandson came with me. We're camping on High Knob and plan to stay around for the Woodbooger Festival on Saturday."

"So, how did this Woodbooger story get its start?" Daniel asked as he tried not to sound too much like a newspaper reporter.

"The whole thing started about ten years ago when the folks from one of those TV cable channel programs on Bigfoot came to the High Knob in search of Bigfoot evidence. They didn't actually encounter a Bigfoot, but it did put Norton on the map. The story kind of snowballed from there," the mayor replied.

"How so?" Daniel asked as he made a few notes on a legal pad.

"By a vote of the City Council, we designated Norton as a Woodbooger Sanctuary. We started the Woodbooger Festival. We even trademarked the name Woodbooger. Anything to help the economy recover."

"Recover from what?" Daniel asked.

"This area had kind of a double punch in the gut over the last few years. First, the coal industry collapsed from the effects of cheap natural gas, more stringent environmental regulations, and reduced world demand because of the recession. The virus came along after that and dramatically reduced our tax revenues," the mayor stated.

“Our future will depend on the tourism industry. We are developing many ATV trails, hiking and biking trails, and other recreational facilities in Norton and Wise County. We hope to make the area a destination location to allow visitors to experience the natural beauty of Southwest Virginia that may be our biggest asset for the future,” the mayor continued.

“So where does the Woodbooger fit into the plan?” Daniel asked.

“The Woodbooger has given us a symbol to rally around as we work through these difficult times and seek to diversify the economy into more tourism.”

“Mayor, I know you have a busy day, but I have one final question for you. Do *you* believe the Woodbooger is real?” Daniel asked as he packed up to leave the mayor’s office.

“I’ll let you decide”, the mayor grinned.

“Spoken like a true politician,” Daniel responded as he departed the mayor’s office for his next interview with the editor of the local newspaper just a few blocks up the street on Park Avenue.

Robert Bolling, the Editor of the *Wise County Times*, invited him into his office. Daniel noticed that the office was filled with files piled high on the bookcase, loose papers that topped the desk, and a “morgue” of past newspapers stacked in the corner.

“I understand that you’re in Norton to write an article on our local Bigfoot – the Woodbooger,” Mr. Bolling said.

“That’s right. My editor thought that this could be an interesting story for our readers. I also brought my son and grandson with me for a couple of days of camping up on High Knob,” Daniel replied.

“The Woodbooger phenomenon has become a big deal in Norton over the last decade. As the mayor may have told you, it has provided a desperately needed boost to tourism for our area,” Mr. Bolling stated.

“Has your paper actually included any reports of Bigfoot encounters?” Daniel asked.

“Well, we have had a few reports from deer hunters up on the High Knob and a few folks who swear they have seen large footprints. Nothing we could actually prove through any evidence. You’re welcome to go through our archives for any articles from the past.”

“I have a few minutes, so I think I will. Thanks for the time today. Maybe we’ll see you at the Festival on Saturday.” Daniel replied.

“I have one final question for you before I leave. Do *you* believe that the Woodbooger is real?” Daniel asked.

“I’ll leave it to our reporters to investigate, and our readers to decide,” Mr. Bolling responded.

“I understand,” Daniel commented as he departed Mr. Bolling’s office for the microfilm room.

Daniel’s last stop for the morning was at the office of Chief Ed Mullins, Chief of the Norton Police Department, back over at the City of Norton Building. Chief Mullins greeted him in his full police uniform at the front door.

“Mr. Collins, the Mayor told me to expect you to come by this morning. I understand that you are here to do a little research on our Woodbooger,” Chief Mullins commented.

“Yes, I was born in Norton, but I hadn’t been back in several years. This Woodbooger phenomenon seems to have become big part of the city,” Daniel replied.

“Since it started about ten years ago, it seems to get bigger every year. We are even having the annual Woodbooger Festival this weekend in celebration.”

“Yes, I’ll be attending the Festival along with my son and grandson. We are camping up on the High Knob,” Daniel stated. “Have you had any actual Woodbooger encounters reported to your officers?”

“We’ve had a couple from people who live across the other side of the US 23 Bypass up toward Flag Rock and the road up to the High Knob who have made reports. Most of them seem to be on Saturday nights after a little partying. We thought it might be more as a result of the moonshine than an actual encounter,” stated the Chief.

“Chief, I have one final question for you. Do *you* believe the Woodbooger is real?” Daniel asked.

“I can tell you that I’ll go strictly by the evidence, but we will take the Woodbooger into custody if we corner him,” the Chief replied with a smile.

“When you do capture one, will you promise to give me to scoop on the story for my newspaper?” Daniel asked.

“Absolutely, you’ll be the first to know.”

Daniel left the Chief’s office to meet Matt and Noah at the mall. After a successful morning of shopping, they had worked up an appetite. “Where are we going to lunch?” Noah asked.

“Well, the Woodbooger Grill, of course,” Daniel responded as they headed from the mall back down into town. The restaurant was packed as they entered. They spotted an empty table in the corner and seated themselves.



The Woodburger Grill in Norton, VA

The waitress approached the table and took their drink orders. “You must be the guy who has come to investigate our Woodbooger,” she said to Daniel.

“How did you know?” Daniel asked, surprised by his overnight celebrity status.

“News travels fast in a small town,” she observed.

“What are your specials today?” Daniel asked.

“The Super Woodburger is our big seller for this weekend.”

“We’ll have three Super Woodburgers with fries,” Daniel stated.

After lunch, Daniel, Matt, and Noah toured the county including the local university, the historic Inn at Wise, the Powell Valley overlook, and Flag Rock. Noah was startled as they went down the path from the parking area toward the Flag Rock Overlook and encountered the full size Woodbooger statue. “Wow, that thing is scary! I’m glad that it’s not real,” Noah stated as he walked closer to his Dad.



The Flag Rock in Norton, VA

Following an afternoon of touring, they headed back up to their camp site. They prepared a dinner of hot dogs and smores over the camp fire and settled in for the night. They arose early to get ready for the Woodbooger Festival and made their way down the mountain to the center of the City. A good crowd had already arrived. As they toured the exhibits, they asked many of the attendees if they believed the Woodbooger was real. Although no one had actually seen one, they had the feeling that most of them were believers.

At the end of another long day, they made one final trip up the mountain to their camp site. After dinner, Daniel announced that he had a special surprise to end their trip – they were going Bigfoot hunting that night! Matt and Noah seemed to be a little less than thrilled, but they went along with the plan. The leaves with their vivid red, orange, and yellow hues carpeted the floor of the forest as they made their way along the trail in the deep woods. As the sun disappeared below the mountains off to the west toward Cumberland Gap, the shadows slowly started to creep down the deep hollers, overgrown with mountain laurel bushes and spruce saplings so thick that you could hardly see through them.

As night fell, they paused to stifle the crunching sound of leaves beneath their feet and listen to sounds from the Jefferson National Forest that now engulfed them. They heard the distinctive “who, who” sound of a Great Horned Owl roosting on a limb of a tall white oak tree. In the distance, they could hear a plaintive wail of what they took to be a coyote. They could swear that they also heard the faint knocking sound of a tree being struck with another piece of wood, although they agreed it could have been just the wind. After a while, they began to smell a strong odor, kind of like a deer that had become road kill in July after a couple of weeks beside the highway. Daniel turned to Matt to ask “Do you smell that?”

Before Matt could answer, they heard the sound of something moving through the thick brush up on the ridge above them. Fearing for the worst, they shined their LED flashlights in the direction of the sound and silently hoped that it was only a deer. Their eyes strained to peer into the moonless night looking for answers. After a while, they could swear that they could see two large red eyes that were much too high off the ground to be a deer, bear, or even a hunter, staring back at them. Daniel felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck. His forehead became damp with perspiration in spite of the cool mountain air. All three of them were paralyzed with fear. Daniel turned to Matt and Noah and, in as calm a voice as he could muster under the condition, declared “We need to get out of here and back to camp – now!”

A restless but uneventful night followed. They awoke early, and no one spoke of their encounter on the mountain as they packed up their camping gear. Instead of making breakfast, they decided to stop at one of the fast food restaurants in town for a bag of breakfast biscuits before heading home. Just before turning onto the ramp to the US 23 bypass, they paused to look at the new, gleaming Norton Tourism Center with the Woodbooger prominently displayed on the sign above the building.

They had discovered that the folks in the City of Norton see the Woodbooger as more than a legend. The coal industry is never going to return to its prior prominence. The future prosperity of the area depends on the growth of the tourism industry. The residents of the City of Norton are counting on the Woodbooger to be the catalyst for this growth and the transformation of the local economy.

Noah was already looking forward to his next trip to Norton. Suddenly he turned to Daniel and asked “Grandpa, do *you* think the Woodbooger is real?”

“Noah, as a journalist, I can’t be sure. What do you think?”

“Grandpa, I think that the Woodbooger will always be real for adults and children, of all ages, as long as they believe.”

As they headed east on the US 23 bypass, a large, hairy creature, perched high atop Flag Rock, watched them until they disappeared out of sight on their journey home.