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### The History of Chautauqua County, Kansas

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## The Caney River Monster

In the summer of 1883 after many months of travel a family from New York set up camp in the Little Caney River bottoms in Southeastern Chautauqua County. The Fentwek's found the place pleasant and a good place to rest up as they hunted for land to call home. Katie, the youngest of the several children was to celebrate her birthday a few days later. After a happy birthday celebration and a gift of a small crafted golden locket and chain the family began to prepare for night as the evening approached. Katie had wandered off a short distance into the woods, which bordered the campsite, never to be seen again. The father made a frantic search as a thunderstorm quickly approached. Torrents of rain fell that night and by the next morning the river was flooding over its banks. Searchers including Indian trackers spread over the area. They found nothing, with heavy hearts the family moved on, away from this now miserable place.

In December, the mail carrier between Sedan and Peru did not complete his tri-weekly trip between the two towns. A search found his horse grazing in a meadow without saddle or bridle. George Bitters had disappeared.

The next spring young Elmer Johnson had gone out squirrel hunting. His broken gun and hat were found covered with blood. Some thought he had been a victim of a bear or panther, others were not so sure.

In September of 1885 a group of young men, upon returning from camping out in the hills in Osage Indian Territory, reported finding two horse skeletons still in harness hitched to a dilapidated wagon. Local marshals investigated the site and reported that the remains were at least a year old.

In February 1886, Oscar Beach and a friend were out hunting in the northern part of the Osage Reservation. They became separated in the rough heavily treed and brush covered country. Beach never returned to their camp. The friend was a half breed Creek Indian who was suspected to have killed Beach but no evidence to the fact was ever found.

Ranching in the Osage Reservation was producing large herds of cattle. Elgin was an ideal central shipping point. The Atchinson Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad proposed to build a new railroad from Caney to Niotaze then southwest through the Cascade Hills to the town of Chautauqua and on to Elgin. As construction proceeded west, a construction camp moved along to support the Italian construction crew. Pat Durfee an Irish man was the construction foreman. He was a huge man and wore a large heavy gold chain around his neck. On several nights the crewmembers reported strange noises at night as if someone was prowling around. One night Durfee was startled awake



by someone tugging at the gold chain. Pulling out his gun Durfee fired at a running figure as it passed into the shadows. There was a cry like that of a wounded animal. As Durfee approached the prone figure, a huge man thing dressed in skins, leapt to its feet and hit Durfee senseless with a club.

With daylight the construction crew led by two Cherokee Indian trackers took off on the trail of the monster or whatever it was. They followed the trail for most of the day when they were stopped as large stones came flying at them from behind a large boulder. The monster crashed through the surrounding brush and disappeared into a hidden cave. The men attacked the cave but unerring missiles of rocks held them back. Durfee rushed the cave only to be bodily hurled back down the ravine. The monster then charged the startled men knocking them right and left with his club. A group of Italians with long knives drawn circled him stabbing and thrusting until he collapsed. Upon inspection a horribly scarred and mutilated face was found under a covering of matted dirty hair. Steel shackles and short pieces of chains were found on his wrists. Durfee's gold chain was retrieved from the lifeless body before it was thrown to the bottom of a ravine and covered with rocks and dirt.

Upon inspection of the cave a row of 16 grinning skulls met the viewers eyes. Human bones lay around in disarray. There was a crude fireplace and a bed of dry grass. Hanging from pegs driven into cracks in the rock wall hung a saddle and mail pouch, Elmer Johnson's clothes and Oscar Beach's gun. In a pocket in the wall was found a small gold locket and chain.

Upon report of the monsters demise and description authorities recalled that some years earlier a chain shackled crazed half-breed Delaware had broken out of his bondage and escaped into the Osage Hills and was never found.

So ended the story of the Phantom Half-Breed of the Cascade Hills, but what about the "Caney River Monster"?

The author must admit that he is the responsible person along with some mischievous Sand Hills high school age pranksters. In the early 1960's I had stumbled on to the story of the Cascade Hills Phantom. I wrote it up and H. K. George, the editor of the Caney Chronicle, couldn't pass up such an intriguing historical story. The boys quickly picked up the story and applying a little creative ingenuity by having some of their friends to take their dates out and park at a prearranged location on a lonely road. The boys would then come crashing out of the roadside brush jumping up on the car and beating its sides with weeds. The girl friend was naturally terrified. Rumors of the Caney River Monster quickly spread to teenagers living in area communities such as Bartlesville, Coffeyville and Independence. This caused Deputy Sheriff, Howard Coltharp to make



many a late night trip to the west of Caney to brake up group's teenagers out looking for the monster.

Forty years later the mention of the Caney River Monster brings smiles and memories to many local middle aged residents and sparks new stories in the halls of Caney Valley High School.

Caney Valley Historical Society