

APPALACHIAN FOLKLORE

What is Appalachia?

Appalachia as a region has always been a little hard to define. The Appalachian Mountains run the GAME (Georgia to Maine), but no one considers Vermont as a part of the Appalachian region. Officially, the region includes parts of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. However, as a part of a 1981 study, participants only perceived the region to include all these states 10% of the time. While perceptions change over time, Pittsburgh remains Appalachia's largest city.

How do I even say "Appalachia?"

There is a huge debate among the region on the proper pronunciation of Appalachia. The leading three pronunciations are "appa-latch-uh," "appa-lay-shuh," and "appa-lash-uh". The Apalachee were an indigenous people who lived in the Florida Panhandle until the early 18th century. It is generally agreed upon that "Appalachia" is derived from the Apalachee, and therefore the "latch" pronunciation is the origin story. According to a survey by Appalachian podcast "Appodlachia", the general geographic consensus is "latch," but interestingly Pittsburgh is divided on "latch" and "lay"!

Where does Appalachian Folklore come from?

For generations, myths and superstitions have been passed down through the oral traditions of native tribes and early settlers, gaining a foothold in our Appalachian culture. Some of the many native tribes in the region include Cherokee, Seneca, Choctaw, Shawnee, Osage, and Iroquois.



APPALACHIAN FOLKLORE *continued*

Where does Appalachian Folklore come from? *(continued)*

Some scholars believe that the danger and isolation of early mountain life gave birth to many of the legends that still exist today, banging around in our brains and compelling us to take an extra look over our shoulder should we find ourselves out alone at night. Legends have built the region into an area rich in the magical, the spooky, and the strange – which is perfect for the Halloween season.

Our Stories

Below we have a few stories from Appalachian Folklore: The Flatwoods Monster, The Brown Mountain Lights, Mothman, and The Bell Witch with a special appearance from the Hellhounds!

Before sharing our spooky stories below, we would like to recognize the wonderful small publications and blogs we pulled this information from, which also include additional stories, information, and fun things if you'd like to explore their sites:

[Blue Ridge Outdoors](#)

[The Wandering Appalachian](#)

[The Kaysean](#)

[The Collector](#)

[Spooky Appalachia](#)

Rather Listen? Check out Morbid, a Wondery podcast. I will link the episodes connected to Appalachian Folklore below on Wondery, but you can listen wherever you get your podcasts. Each episode is roughly 1hr. 😊

[Episode 219 – The Bell Witch](#)

[Episode 332 – Cryptids: The Flatwoods Monster & The Melonheads](#)

[Episode 337 – The Greenbriar Ghost](#)



APPALACHIAN FOLKLORE *continued*

The Flatwoods Monster

On the evening of September 12, 1952, in Flatwoods, West Virginia, brothers Edward and Fred May rushed home to tell their mother, Kathleen May, that they'd seen something unexplainable. While playing football with their friends, Neil Nunley and Tommy Hyer, at the playground of the Flatwoods Elementary School, they witnessed a bright, strange flying object streak across the sky and crash into the hillside of a local farm.

Intrigued, Kathleen and the four boys recruited 17-year-old National Guardsman Eugene Lemon and headed out to the farm. As dusk settled in, they reached the crash site and saw an eerie, pulsing red glow coming from an oddly shaped form with smoke and steam coming off it. As Lemon shined his flashlight toward it, there appeared a 10-foot-tall creature with a spade-shaped blood-red face, a pair of bright orange eyes, and green glowing body. The creature's hands were gnarled and taloned, and it was wearing what appeared to be a dark metallic dress. A strange and sickening mist hung in the air around the creature as it levitated amongst the trees. The monster then hissed and floated towards the group, causing Lemon to scream and drop his flashlight.

The group frantically fled straight to the local Sheriff's office, where several fainted and all suffered from throat irritation, nausea, and several hours of vomiting. An hour later, several police armed with shotguns returned to the scene with Lemon. They were met with a horrible smell and saw slight heat waves in the air, but no sign of the monster. Authorities didn't find much, but what was found was gathered and sent to Washington D.C., never to be seen again.

Today, there is still no answer to what in Flatwoods that night. At that time, there weren't many UFO sightings, making the Flatwoods incident only the second or third of its kind, and likely the first with so many witnesses. Many chalked up the witnesses' reactions to hysteria, but some have noted a startling similarity to the effects of mustard gas. Some believe the group mistook the creature for a large barn owl, but some are true believers that it was an alien encounter.

At the time, the Flatwoods incident made national headlines. Today, on the main road into town, a sign reads "Welcome to Flatwoods: Home of the Green Monster." You can even visit the Flatwoods Monster Museum for free in nearby Sutton, WV, and participate in activities that celebrate the monster, now fondly referred to as "Braxxie."



APPALACHIAN FOLKLORE *continued*

The Brown Mountain Lights

In the dark skies above Brown Mountain, North Carolina, eerie ghost lights have been spotted in the night sky for over a century. The glowing star-like orbs are typically said to be blue, red, orange, or white. Some say they slowly hover or dance over the mountain before suddenly disappearing, while others have reported that they make quick, firework-like motions before silently exploding. As recent as 2016, Forest Service officers had reported close-up encounters on the mountain with beach ball sized orbs that floated by and then vanished, and scientists from Appalachian State University believed to have captured images of the lights on digital video cameras.

The first sighting of the Brown Mountain Lights is, interestingly, up for debate. Some date the first recorded sighting back to 1771, when German engineer John William Gerard de Brahm wrote about lights over the North Carolina hills in his journal. However, skeptics argue that de Brahm might have never even visited North Carolina, so there's no way he could have seen the lights, and that the story was spun so that sightings pre-date electricity in the area, discrediting later theories.

Another option for the first recorded sighting was in 1913 by a fisherman who claimed to see odd red lights dancing above the horizon. Sightings continued, and word got around to the federal government. Following the U.S. Geological Survey investigation later that year, they concluded that the Brown Mountain lights were nothing more than the distant lights passing trains. However, a major flood in 1916 changed that theory. The raging waters washed out roads and bridges and took out power for several weeks—but the Brown Mountain Lights were still spotted in the night sky. Upon reinvestigation in 1922, the USGS adapted their theory and concluded that the lights were either headlights of cars or trains, or bushfires.

The local Cherokee legend claims that there was a bloody battle between Catawba and Cherokee warriors on Brown Mountain. Mothers, widows, and sisters set out into the mountains after the battle was over, carrying torches to search for their loved ones. The glowing lights are the spirits of the Cherokee women who are still searching.

Current scientific theories about the lights speculate that they could be caused by natural gases on the mountain or ball lightning. If you want to find out for yourself, the best time to see the Brown Mountain Lights is September through early November. The lights can be observed on the Blue Ridge Parkway at the Brown Mountain Light Overlook located at milepost 310 or the Green Mountain Overlook at milepost 301.



APPALACHIAN FOLKLORE *continued*

Mothman

On November 12, 1966, gravediggers at a cemetery in Clendenin, West Virginia, claimed to see a man with wings lift off from a tree and fly over their heads. About 80 miles away at the confluence of the Ohio and Kanawha Rivers stood Point Pleasant, West Virginia, a sleepy town until it was forever changed just three days later.

Two young couples were driving together near an abandoned World War II TNT plant just north of Point Pleasant when they saw a slender, 7-foot tall man-like creature with red glowing eyes and massive 10-foot white wings. They fled as fast as they could, speeding down the road at over 100 miles per hour, but the creature kept up, flying alongside the car while making terrifying screeching sounds all the way back to the city limits.

They were so spooked by their experience that they went directly to the police. Newspapers dubbed the creature “the Mothman,” and the story took off. The national press picked up the story, and Mothman became a sensation. Soon after, at least 8 more sightings in and around Point Pleasant were reported, all describing a large man-like bird with large red eyes. As Mothman sightings continued, local reports of UFOs and suspicious men in black began streaming in.

However, not everyone was convinced that such a cryptid existed. Many claim that the sightings fit the description of a sandhill crane – a large, American crane that can be as tall as a human man, with red coloring around its eyes. He hypothesized that one of these birds might have wandered outside of its typical migration route, as it's not native to that part of West Virginia.

Then, ten days before Christmas in 1967, tragedy struck. While the Silver Bridge, a suspension bridge over the Ohio River that connected Point Pleasant to Gallipolis, Ohio, was teeming with rush-hour traffic, the bridge collapsed, killing 46 people. Two of the victims were never found. While logic says that the bridge collapse was the deadly result of poor upkeep and excessive strain that compromised the bridge's construction, some claim to have seen Mothman at the bridge shortly before its collapse and believed its presence was a harbinger of doom.

After the 1967 disaster, sightings decreased, but the legend of the Mothman remained. Though it remains unexplained, Mothman has become a kind of mascot for Point Pleasant, where there is a Mothman Museum and an annual Mothman Festival is held on the third weekend in September.



APPALACHIAN FOLKLORE *continued*

The Bell Witch *(with a special appearance by the Hellhounds)

John and Lucy Bell were farmers who settled in Adams, Tennessee around 1803. They lived peacefully on their farm until 1817, when one day, John noticed a strange animal out in his fields. It had the body of a dog and the head of a rabbit. John shot at this strange creature, but it disappeared. Over the coming months, others also began to witness strange apparitions appearing on their property. Drew Bell tried approaching a bird of “extraordinary size” before it flew away, and Betsy Bell saw a girl in a green dress swinging from the branch of an oak tree. Dean, a slave belonging to the Bell family, reported being followed by a large black dog on evenings he visited his wife.

*Unusually large, black dogs are also a common appearance in Appalachian folklore. These dogs are also referred to as Hellhounds, and are sometimes reported to have glowing, red eyes. They are often associated with locations of symbolic power relating to choices, like crossroads, and places of death, like cemeteries or places where executions occurred. While Hellhounds are often considered omens of death, some believe that instead, they offer protection and guidance out of dangerous situations.

Soon, the family began experiencing strange activity in their log home. Knockings, scratchings, gnawings, and dragging of chains across the floor disturbed the Bells at all hours. The activity continued to escalate, and the Bells' daughters began complaining that someone or something was trying to pull at their bedcovers and pinch them while they slept.

For over a year, the Bells were determined to keep the phenomena a secret, afraid of what the family's community at Red Bottom Baptist Church would think. Eventually, though, he told the story to his friend, James Johnston. Johnston was skeptical until he stayed at night at the Bell farm and experienced the same kind of disturbances. Before long, people all over the east and southeast knew about it and wanted to either debunk the Bells' claims or experience the phenomenon for themselves.



APPALACHIAN FOLKLORE *continued*

The Bell Witch continued

Over time it seemed that the entity fed off attention and people's fears - growing stronger. They started to hear a whispering voice, then stronger it spoke. It claimed to be the spirit of a local witch named Kate Batts, which brought about the nickname of the Bell Witch. She constantly argued religion, sang hymns, and even once recited two sermons word for word while they were being told at their respective churches, which were 13 miles apart. The witch seemed to have a particular hatred for John Bell and his daughter Betsy, as Betsy was slapped, pinched, and stuck with pins by the witch. Strangely, The Bell Witch didn't seem to carry the same disdain for John Bell's wife or his sons.

The story of the Bell Witch came to a head when she vowed to kill John Bell three years after beginning her reign of terror on the family. On December 20, 1820, John was found dead with a vial of poison at his side. His death was officially attributed to the Bell Witch, making Tennessee the only state to recognize a person's passing as "supernatural". Kate took credit, insisting she had poisoned him because he was a bad man.

After John Bell's death, things began to return to normal on the Bell farm until Betsy, the Bell's youngest daughter, became engaged to a local man named Joshua Gardner. The witch disapproved of Betsy's upcoming marriage and tormented her until she broke off the engagement. Soon after, the poltergeist said she was going to leave but promised to return in seven years.

Seven years later Kate did return, visiting John Bell Jr. who was not living at the Bell farm at the time. They allegedly talked for three nights about the past, the present, and the future. After that, the Bell Witch bid farewell and promised to return to haunt the Bell descendants in 107 years. Dr. Charles Bailey Bell, a Nashville-based neurologist, was John Bell's closest living relative 107 years later in 1935. It is unknown whether he was haunted by the Bell Witch, but the legend has endured in Appalachia as one of its most famous ghost stories.

