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FEATURED

Laurel Highlands Haunts | Are Lost Children still haunting mountain?

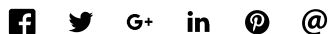
By Randy Griffith

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Dunlo native Walter Hutsky Jr. recalls legends at the Lost Children of the Alleghenies Monument, also known as the Cox Monument, near Pavia in Blue Knob State Park on Oct. 26, 2017. Randy Griffith/The Tribune-Democrat

Randy Griffith/The Tribune-Democrat



IMLER – Katie Eckenrode and her friends knew the story of the Lost Children of the Alleghenies when they decided to do a little amateur ghost hunting as teenagers.

More than a decade later, the Altoona woman remains convinced there are spirits in the Blue Knob State Park forests.

"It kind of freaked me out," Eckenrode said in a telephone interview. "It's like a haunted location."

Alone in the pitch-black woods, the teens encountered unexplained footsteps, children's voices and falling rocks.

Former ghost hunter Walter Hutsky, of Monroeville, investigated the location a few years ago with the now-defunct Southwestern League of Apparition Technologists.

While the SPLAT investigation found nothing unusual in the secluded memorial site, historic accounts of the Lost Children are mystical, Hutsky notes.

The story centers on George and Jacob Cox, children of Samuel and Susannah Cox, who lived on a farm west of Claysburg.

The boys, ages 7 and 5, apparently became lost when they tried to follow their father into the woods on April 24, 1856. For days, up to 4,000 people combed the forest in vain, calling for the boys, Charles R. McCarthy wrote in his 1914 book, "Lost Children of the Alleghenies and How They Were Found Through a Dream."

"Ten long days and sleepless nights had passed away with the disconsolate parents of the lost children, and with less hope of finding them now than ever before," McCarthy wrote.

On the 10th night, the story goes, Jacob Dibert dreamed he was looking for the boys in a vision with specific details: A dead deer, a shoe, a large stream with a beech log across it, a ravine and, finally, a birch tree. Dibert lived about 10 miles away and was not familiar with the area being searched.

He told his wife about the dream, but didn't share it with neighbors because they would think he was crazy, McCarthy wrote.

"Mr. Dibert was an intelligent man and was in no way superstitious," McCarthy wrote. "He had no faith in omens (sic) or dreams, and really he had no reason to believe in them, as none of his dreams up to this time had ever come true."

But after Dibert had the same dream, with the same details, the following two nights, he went to his wife's brother's house near the Cox farm. His brother-in-law Harrison Wysong recognized the location Dibert described, but said he did not believe the kids could have made it that far. In addition, they would have had to cross Bob's Creek, which was quite deep that spring, McCarthy wrote.

"None of the searchers had looked for the children on the east side of the stream," the book says. "None supposed for an instant that they could have crossed it without being drowned."

Undissuaded, the story continues, Dibert convinced Wysong to help him search the area. Everything was as he dreamed. When he saw a broken tree, he knew the worst was coming.

"If my dream is true that is a birch-tree and the boys are lying at the root of it," McCarthy wrote, quoting Dibert.

"And sure enough the tree was a birch and there lying cold in death were the worn emaciated bodies of the poor, lost children, just as he had seen them in his dream."

The children were found huddled together. They probably died of exposure, or hypothermia.

A monument honoring the Cox boys was erected in 1910 after residents of Pavia collected donations for the 50th anniversary of their deaths. The monument remains, but is now protected from vandals by a chain-link enclosure. It can be reached from Route 869 by driving more than two miles along Monument Road, a narrow gravel lane through the state park forest.

Another unusual event in the same area adds to the mystery of the Lost Children, McCarthy wrote.

This story claims that in 1887 Pavia resident Cidney Griffith left Portage, walking toward home and expecting to meet her a buggy driven by her brother. She became lost in an area known as Cedar Swamps.

On the second night after her disappearance, Jacob Dibert's son Isaac Dibert dreamed about her location. He led a successful rescue the next day. McCarthy said he interviewed Griffith for the book.

Eckenrode wrote about her experience for Pennsylvania Mountains of Attractions, a travel website with a number of haunted or mysterious suggestions. Two readers responded to her posting with stories of their own Lost Children encounters.

Although Eckenrode said in a telephone interview she saw children's footprints in fresh snow on a subsequent daylight trip to the monument, she isn't sure it is the Cox boys' ghosts in the woods. She points to McCarthy's account of searchers enlisting a Somerset County "witch" to help in the search.

"I think the witch woman was tied to the events," Eckenrode said. "I felt a darker force. It may have been some force pretending to be these children."

Hutsky is not convinced. His experience with SPLAT's ghost hunts reinforced his belief that there are reasonable explanations for seemingly paranormal events.

Hearing children's voices in the woods may be the mind attaching meaning to sounds in nature, he says, using the psychology term "pareidolia."

It's the same phenomenon that causes some to hear music in an electric motor hum or swear they heard the phone ring in the shower's rippling.

"I like dealing with science and history," Hutsky said. "I don't believe in almost anything paranormal or spiritual. This made me believe even less."

Randy Griffith is a multimedia reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. He can be reached at 532-5057. Follow him on Twitter [@PhotoGriffer57](#).



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Oct 31, 2017

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+2

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