

The Sea Serpent of Seneca Lake

Written by

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For centuries there have been stories about a mysterious monster that occasionally makes its presence known at Seneca Lake, the longest of the Finger Lakes. Native American Indians found Seneca Lake to be a mysterious place on many levels. They told of rumors that it was a bottomless lake. They also believed that the monster that lived in its depths was a force not to be trifled with. The first European

Americans who encountered this area brushed off these stories as merely being the superstitions of a primitive people.¹

An incident on July 14, 1899, received wide attention in local newspapers as well as in the *New York Sun*. The *Otetiani*, a side-wheel steamboat with Captain Carleton C. Herendeen and Pilot Frederick Rose, was traveling on Seneca Lake with a few passengers on board. Somewhere between Dresden and Willard at about 7 p.m., Pilot Rose reported that about 400 yards ahead he saw something that appeared to him to be an overturned boat. Captain Herendeen then examined the object with his telescope and described it as being about 25 feet long with a very sharp bow and long-narrow stern.²



A number of passengers gathered around the pilot house and discussed what was being reported as an overturned boat. These passengers included Albert L. Fowle and D.W. Hallenbeck, two Commissioners of Public Works; George C. Schell, the Police Commissioner; Fred S. Bronson, the manager of the Geneva Telephone company; Charles E. Coon, a commercial traveler for a Philadelphia business; and Professor George R. Elwood of Guelph, Ontario, a geologist who has studying the country around the lake.

When Captain Herendeen completed his viewing of the object, the pilot signaled the engineer to slow the boat down. The steamboat approached to within 100 yards and lowered a boat to make a close inspection of the object. In the process of lowering this small boat, the “object” (the supposed upturned boat) turned and began to move away. The captain ordered “full speed ahead.” As the object was moving slowly, the steamboat was gaining on it rapidly. The object turned again, but this time turned toward the boat, “raising its head, looked in the direction of the boat and opened its mouth, displaying two rows of sharp, white teeth.” Captain Herendeen said that he would ram the “creature” (as he now came to refer to this “object”) and take it alive, if possible. Otherwise he would kill it, and either take it aboard or tow it to Geneva.

The boat was turned so that the boat would approach the creature from the side. The deck of the steamboat was crowded with passengers who were ordered by the captain to put on life preservers “and keep cool” because he did not know what would happen when the boat actually struck the monster. “Every eye on deck was fixed on the monster and hardly a person was

breathing normally. While the boat was yet some distance from it, the monster again looked at the boat, sank out of sight and the boat passed over the spot where it had been.”

The steamer continued her course to Geneva when suddenly one of the female passengers exclaimed, “There it is.” The “thing” had come up and the passengers and captain ran to the rear of the ship to take a closer look. About 50 yards from the ship they saw the long, lithe body of the monster lying on the surface. The captain gave the order to try to turn the boat so that the boat’s starboard paddlewheel would strike the creature midway between its head and tail. The boat went ahead full steam and struck the monster with enough of an impact that every passenger was thrown off his/her feet. Lying close beside the ship was the monster with a gaping wound in its side. “It raised its head, gave what sounded like a gasp, and lay quiet. Its spinal column had been broken and it was dead.”

Lifeboats were quickly lowered and rowed to the side of the monster. Boat hook ropes were placed around the carcass, and other ropes were fastened on board the ship and then attached to the improvised swings. All helped to haul in the monster. The carcass was clear of the water when the rope near the tail slipped off and the tail dropped into the water. The weight on the other rope became so great that it began to slip through the hands of those holding it. They were compelled to let go or they would be pulled overboard. As soon as some of the body of the monster struck the water, it began to sink and disappeared. The depth of the lake at that point is over six hundred feet, so everyone realized that the monster was lost.

The ship reached Geneva shortly before midnight and passengers began to tell their stories of the incident. It is easy to understand that differing versions of the length of the monster—from 25 to as much as 90 feet—would be told.

It is significant to comment on what local newspapers had to say about this incident. The Geneva *Gazette* reported that “The lake serpent should not have had such an ignominious end. It should have been captured alive and squirming, brought to Geneva and exhibited...” The Rochester *Herald* said that Professor George R. Elwood, the geologist on board, and who had been in one of the lifeboats that made a rope fast around the carcass, gave what was considered the “most careful and perhaps most trustworthy account.” He said the following:

...that [a Clidiastes] is exactly what the creature we saw last night seemed to be. It was about twenty-five feet long, with a tail which tapered until within about five feet of the end, when it broadened out and looked much like a whale. The creature weighed about one thousand pounds. Its head was perhaps four feet long and triangular in shape. Its mouth was very long and was armed with two rows of triangular white teeth as sharp as those of a shark, but in shape more like those of a sperm whale. Its body was covered with a horny substance which was as much like the carapace of a terrapin as anything else of which I know. This horny substance was brown in color and of a greenish tinge. The belly of the creature, which I saw after the rope slipped and the carcass was going down, was cream white. Its eyes were round like those of a fish, and it did not wink.³

Geneva’s other newspaper, the Geneva *Daily*, did not immediately report on the incident. On Monday, July 16th, however, the Geneva *Daily* reported that the heat wave the previous weekend “drove a good many Genevans to many things, including drink.” A week later, the Geneva *Gazette* suggested that the story of the serpent had not been followed up. The *Gazette* reporter speculated that the passengers on the Otetiani must have stopped at one or more of the wine cellars along Seneca Lake and were prepared to see “creatures and monsters of all shapes and sizes.”⁴

There have been several instances in which residents along Seneca Lake have claimed to have seen fish as big as people in the lake, some of these resembling large carp and other that look like porpoises. Don Woodrow, a professor of geoscience at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, attributes these reports to “oversized carp which, when turned over to sun themselves, ‘look bizarre.’”⁵ Perhaps some facts and assumptions have contributed to these stories. One geologic fact is that Seneca Lake and Cayuga Lake are the only two Finger Lakes whose lake bottoms are below sea level. The Iroquois speculated that the two lakes were joined together by some underground stream or channel hundreds of feet below their lake surfaces. For years there has reports of the sounds of “drums” or “guns” on Seneca Lake mainly but also on Cayuga Lake. “It is left for us to decide whether there are unidentified creatures in Seneca Lake or whether the sighting in 1899 was a practical joke of the perception of some over-refreshed passengers.”⁶

¹ Chris Gethard, Mark Moran and Mark Scurman, “Capture of the Seneca Lake Monster,” *Weird New York: Your Travel Guide to New York’s Local Legends and Best Kept Secrets*, New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc. 2005, p 74.

² <http://ontario.nygenweb.net/lakecanadesaga.htm>

³ <http://ontario.nygenweb.net/lakecanadesaga.htm>

⁴ Emerson Klees, *Legends and Stories of the Finger Lakes Region*, Rochester, NY: Friends of the Finger Lakes Publishing, 1995, p 37.

⁵ <http://campus.hws.edu/NEW/pss/lake/lake-cs2.html>

⁶ Klees.