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Local leviathan

Was Petoskey's sea serpent a hoax?

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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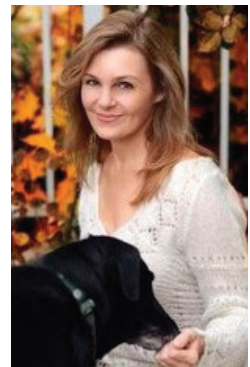
Was Petoskey's sea serpent nothing but a hoax?



By Richard A. Wiles

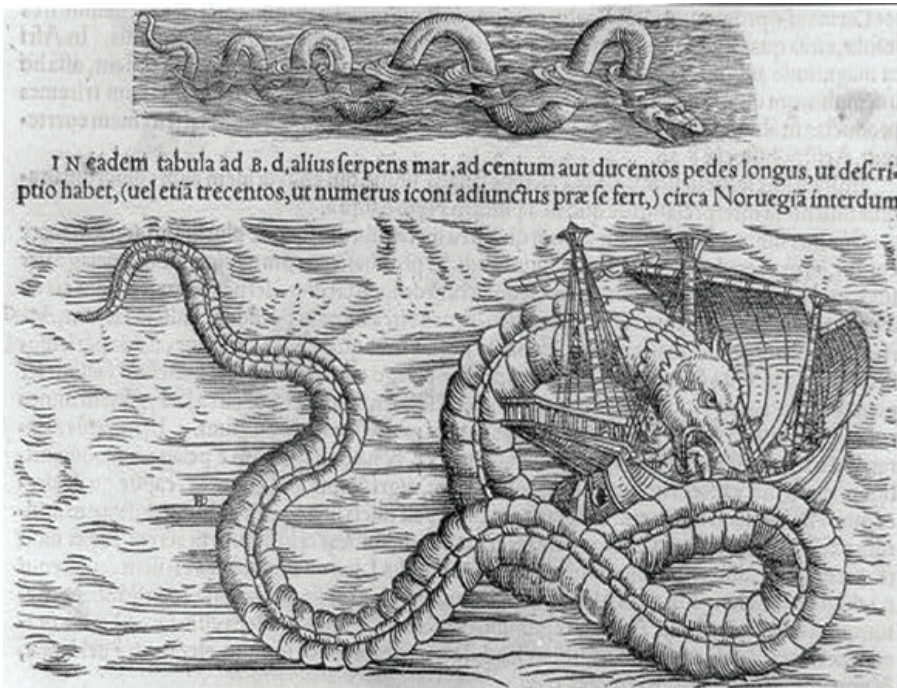
In the summer of 2017, Harbor Springs native Kristie Dickinson authored and published a book titled “Leviathan.” Her plot was based on the late 19th century sightings of sea serpents in Little Traverse Bay, off the shorelines of Harbor Springs and Petoskey, Michigan. According to renowned Petoskey historian Harriet Kilborn, in her November 1956 Michigan History Magazine article, “Historical Hysterics,” the “Petoskey sea-serpent, or at least something weird was first seen in Little Traverse Bay in the late 1870s ... Horace Wilcox, and some other men saw it, or at least reported it as a large something out in the bay ... local people said there must be something to it because Horace does not drink.”

The Anishinaabe (or First People) of the Little Traverse Bay region had long talked about the existence of a creature in the deep waters of the bay. They called it “Motchi Manitou” and according to local author John Wright in his 1917 book “The Crooked Tree,” “Often when great storms raged ... and the waves were high ... a small voice could be heard whispering ... It’s Motchi Manitou (the sea tiger) trying to get out of the water.”



Dickinson

The first Europeans in the Little Traverse Bay area were the Catholic Jesuit Priests. Father Claude Jean Allouez wrote in his



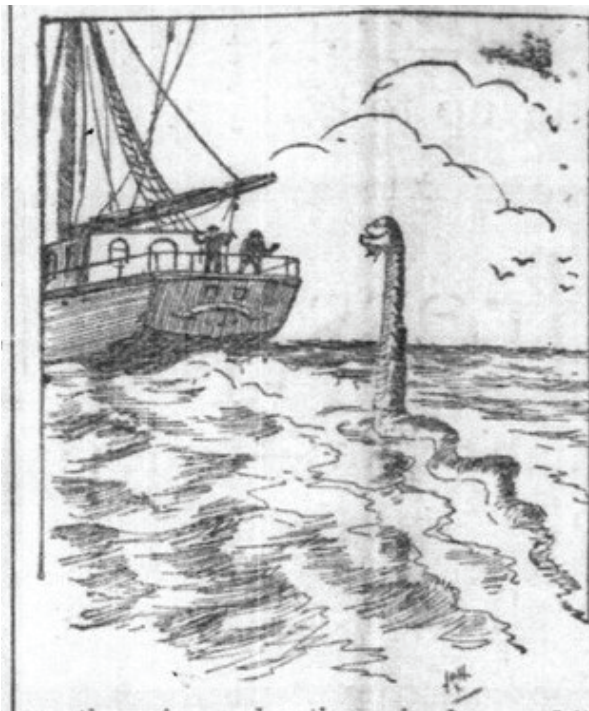
the first Lake Michigan sighting by a crew on board a sailing vessel was in 1867 near Chicago. The "... creature was 40-to-50 feet long with a neck as thick as a person and a body as big around as a barrel."

On July 31, 1890, the *Detroit Journal* contained a short report stating, "The seacoast summer resorts must take a back seat on the old sea serpent fairy tale. People in the vicinity of Traverse Bay have seen the serpent that has been haunting the seacoast so long and describe him as varying all the way from 40 to 700 feet long."

1667 journal (documenting his travels in the Upper Great Lakes region), "... they (the Anishinaabe) believe there are many spirits, some of whom are beneficent ... others malevolent, such as the adder, the dragon, and the storms ..." Allouez further stated "... it was the Manitou "Missibize," or Great Panther, who created the winds and the storms when it waved its enormous tail."

French fur trader Nicholas Perrot's *Memoirs* (1701) refer to the creature as "Michipissy," stating "... this Michipissy always dwells in a very deep cave."

Sea serpents have existed throughout written history beginning with the Jewish legend of Leviathan, a creature created by God which was so large that only the ocean could contain him. The monster could be either male or female and always dwelled in a watery abyss. Author Philip Rife's book, "America's Loch



Chicago Sunday Tribune illustration, 1892

Ness Monsters," (2000) suggests sightings of sea monsters in the Great Lakes in the early 1800s with one report given in 1817 of a Lake Erie creature "30-40 foot long with a serpentine body." Rife also reported

The most described characteristics of all these inland sea monsters was that they were a long, snake-like animal that could move itself through the water "... with an up and down undulating motion that produced "humps" behind an uplifted neck and head."

The most reported dimensions given to these monsters was "... a length of about 30 to 40 feet with a diameter of 2 feet. The head appears like the head of a horse or camel with

mouth whiskers, two small hornlike projections on top, and a 'mane' that might be like a horse. The skin is dark and either has small scales or a smooth skin. The tail is usually said to end in a forked fin. Based on how much time it spends

4 - Petoskey's sea serpent?

underwater or hibernating under ice, it most likely breathes via just gills, or gills combined with lungs.”

After the 1879 Little Traverse Bay serpent sighting (by an assumed sober Wilcox), the next reported sighting in Petoskey of the leviathan was in the summer of 1892.

The July 24, 1892, *Chicago Tribune* contained an article concerning a Petoskey water monster.

The Tribune's illustrator captured what the Little Traverse

Bay summer resorters said they had seen, claiming the serpent was of a dark brown color and 60-to-75 feet long. Its body was round with a girth of about 4 feet. The monster's head "... contained ugly, sharp teeth ... with vicious looking eyes the size of dinner

plates ... a tail that could lash the water into foam ..." The serpent was not seen again until the year 1895.

In late January of that year, the *Petoskey Record* reported that workmen building the Petoskey breakwater, just down from Ingalls Street, spotted something in the water of the bay. One week later, on Feb. 6, the *Petoskey Record* reported a committee of residents had been formed to help ensure that the Little Traverse Bay's serpent would be caught as soon as the ice went out in the late spring. The Jan. 30, 1895, *Petoskey Record* even contained sketches of what had been seen out in the waters of Little Traverse Bay.



January 30, 1895 *The Petoskey Record* illustrations



Once again, it was Wilcox who was one of the observers of the Petoskey "sea serpent," just as he had been back in 1879. By now

he had turned his Petoskey crockery and glass store into a photography shop, one that would continue to operate until 1911 (when he retired at the age of 65). Though Wilcox was not able to photograph the serpent, he did describe it in such detail that a newspaper sketch was made. That sketch depicted what he and the others thought they had seen. Sightings of the Little Traverse Bay sea monster tapered off for the rest of the decade, only to resurface in the summer of 1901 when a critter was seen between Petoskey and Charlevoix.

According to a 1904 Washington Times article, "The end of the 19th

century saw an explosion of interest in sea serpents as well as other mysteries of nature in the United States and Europe. This was the dawn of an age when legend met science with the idea that science could solve ancient mysteries. One could say that we are still in that age, although the technology we have to tackle the problem now far outstrips what was available then. In the Atlantic, there arose the idea of a single beast, "the great American sea serpent."

The Petoskey "sea serpent" reappeared as an allegorical float in the Sept. 8, 1905, Petoskey parade honoring the gathering of the Northern Michigan Maccabee Association, a fraternal order similar to the Odd Fellows or Masons. It would be almost 10 years before the serpent would come out of hibernation to appear once again in a gala parade. This time, it was in the Petoskey Elk's Parade of June 25, 1914. The July 1914 issue of *Popular*

Mechanics ran a short feature article concerning that sea serpent float.

However, the national fame for Petoskey's leviathan was short-lived. One year later, in June, following the float's display in the Grand Rapids Elks Parade, the fire-breathing dragon-like creature set itself on fire and was totally destroyed. No mention of a sighting of the Petoskey sea serpent took place in any publication for almost 20 years. Finally, in May of 1934, the *Detroit Free Press* mentioned the possibility of a sighting (in either Traverse City, or Petoskey) for the upcoming summer's resort season.

The Petoskey sea monster was outed as a fake in 1938 in the same week Orson Welles scared the nation with his radio drama "War of the Worlds." Harbor Springs author John C. Wright, in a visit to his old hometown, revealed in late October of

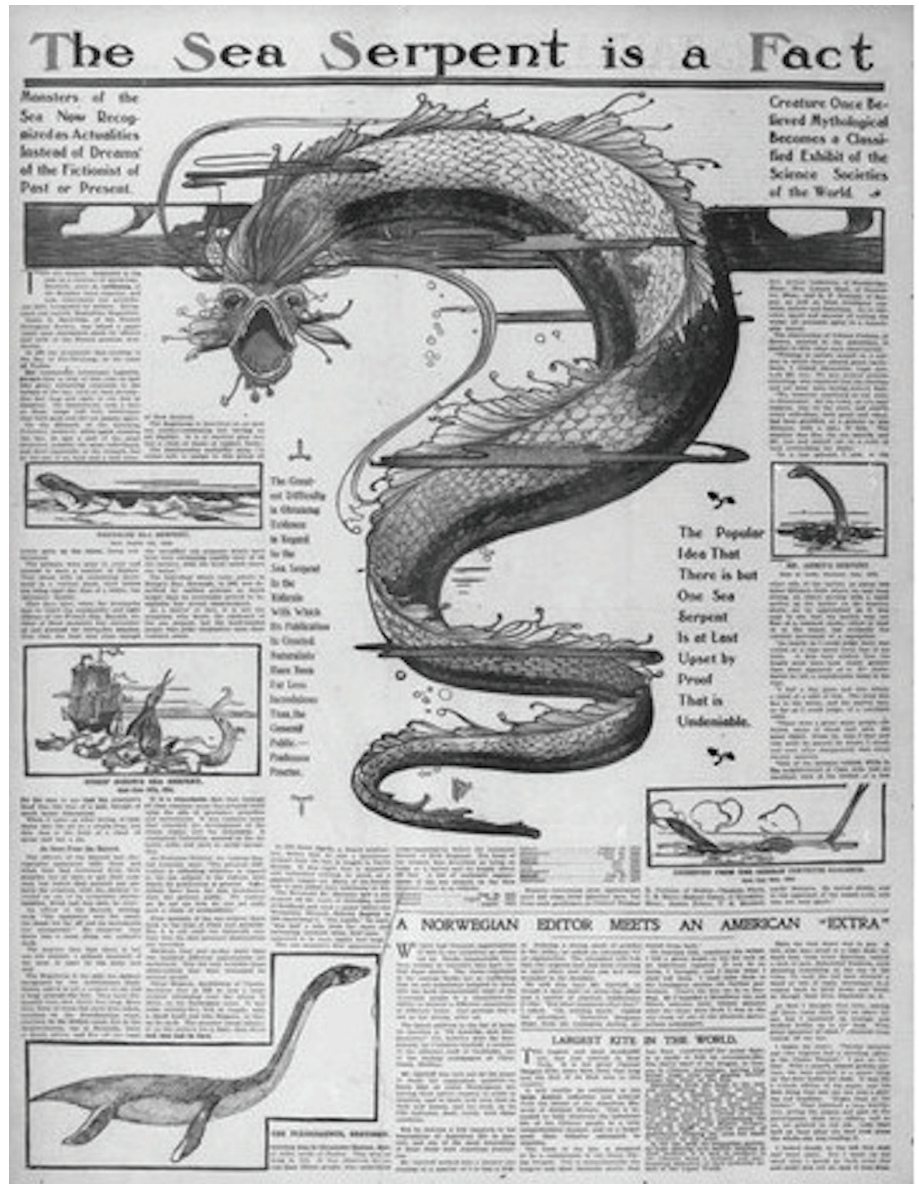
1938, that the "famed monster of the bay was a fake." Wright was 21 years of age when he helped perpetuate the serpent hoax of Little Traverse Bay.



Wright

His accomplice, photographer William Miller, was of the same age. Wright went on to author many books about the Little Traverse Bay region featuring his Native American ancestry. The "father of Petoskey's sea serpent" died at his home in Ithaca, Michigan, in 1939.

Petoskey's "Monster of the Bay" stayed asleep until 1947. A *Detroit Free Press* article in September of that year



revived hopes that the Little Traverse Bay's serpent was real after all. Former Petoskey resident, and one time reporter, and then editor of the *Petoskey Evening News*, R. Ray Baker, wrote that the Petoskey sea serpent could well have been a reptilian hold-over from the Mesozoic Era, some 100 million years previous.

"That was the age of dinosaurs on land, serpents in the sea, and winged dragons in the sky," he wrote. Baker pointed

out that Dr. Russell Hussey, University of Michigan professor of geology, had just written a book titled "Historical Geology." Hussey pointed out that plesiosaurs of the Mesozoic Age "swam like turtles using their powerful limbs which had modified into paddles ... Some forms of this species were 20 to 40 feet in length."

However, Hussey pointed out to Baker in an interview that the Petoskey sea serpent more likely was in the form of

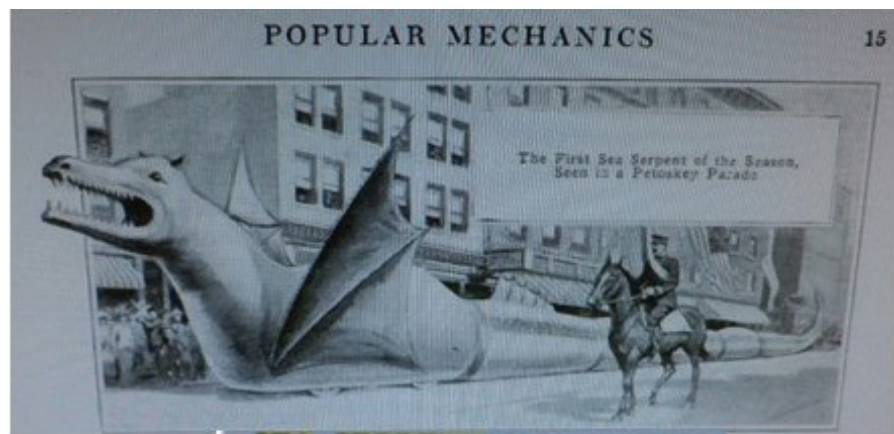
6 - Petoskey's sea serpent?

a mosasaur. That was a Mesozoic-era creature “which was a fast-swimming reptile with a long, slender body with four limbs that had modified into flippers.”

Baker asked the professor if such an ancient creature could still be in existence. Hussey replied that “it was possible, but not likely ... it would have to be a living fossil and, if in existence, most likely in the deepest parts of the world's oceans.”

In June of 1948, *Northern Michigan Review* reported an anonymous man saw the serpent at 9 a.m. off Seven Mile Point. The man said “the sea serpent emerged his horny head from the water, about half a mile out from shore. Lake trout drooled from the ugly creature's mouth. ... he estimated that the sea serpent measured between 60 to 30 feet from the horn on the tip of his nose to the arrow-shaped tip of his tail.”

During the August Petoskey Sportsmen Festival of that year, the Petoskey sea serpent lost a front tooth to a bear trap being used to try and capture the creature. On Tuesday night, August 10, near the Petoskey Portland Cement plant, the serpent sprung the large steel trap, only losing a tooth to the contraption. The trap had been baited and set along the shoreline and in it the next day was a “gigantic straited and gnarled tooth measuring 14 inches long and 3 inches thick.” According to the August 12, 1948, *Northern Michigan Review*, “No one actually witnessed the incident, although a few persons who happened to be on the beach at Menonoqua (across the Little Traverse Bay) reported a tidal wave



SEA SERPENT SIGHTED IN MICHIGAN PORT
A sea serpent, 108 ft. long by actual measurement, formed the principal attraction of a parade in Petoskey, a Michigan lake port. It was life-size, lifelike and lively, but it wasn't alive. It was built of hoops, lumber and wire and its skin was painted canvas, in six sections with hinged joints. Three automobiles carried this monster, and the manner in which they were operated gave a remarkably lifelike wriggling through the streets of the city. The head was a horrid affair, with a tongue, 7 ft. in length, darting in and out of the cavernous mouth, while smoke, steam, fire and water were ejected from

washed far up onto the beach, and some residents near the cement plant area said they were awakened at about 3 a.m. by a tremendous roar.” Once the festival ended, so did the last sighting of the monster. 🌿

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School

and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychol-



“Examining the enormous tooth left apparently by the sea serpent in a bear trap near the cement plant are Fred Tripp, assistant superintendent, and Bill Streeter, plant electrician and president of the cement plant union. The trap was believed sprung by the serpent during the night Tuesday.” -- from the Aug. 12, 1948 *Northern Michigan Review*



Setting a bear trap for the monster in 1948 resulted in just one tooth left behind presumably from the sea serpent. This is the last that has been heard or seen of the local leviathan -- that has been reported at least.



Northern Michigan Review illustration, 1948

ogy from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

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