



# The Silver Lake Serpent

## *Inflated Monster or Inflated Tale?*

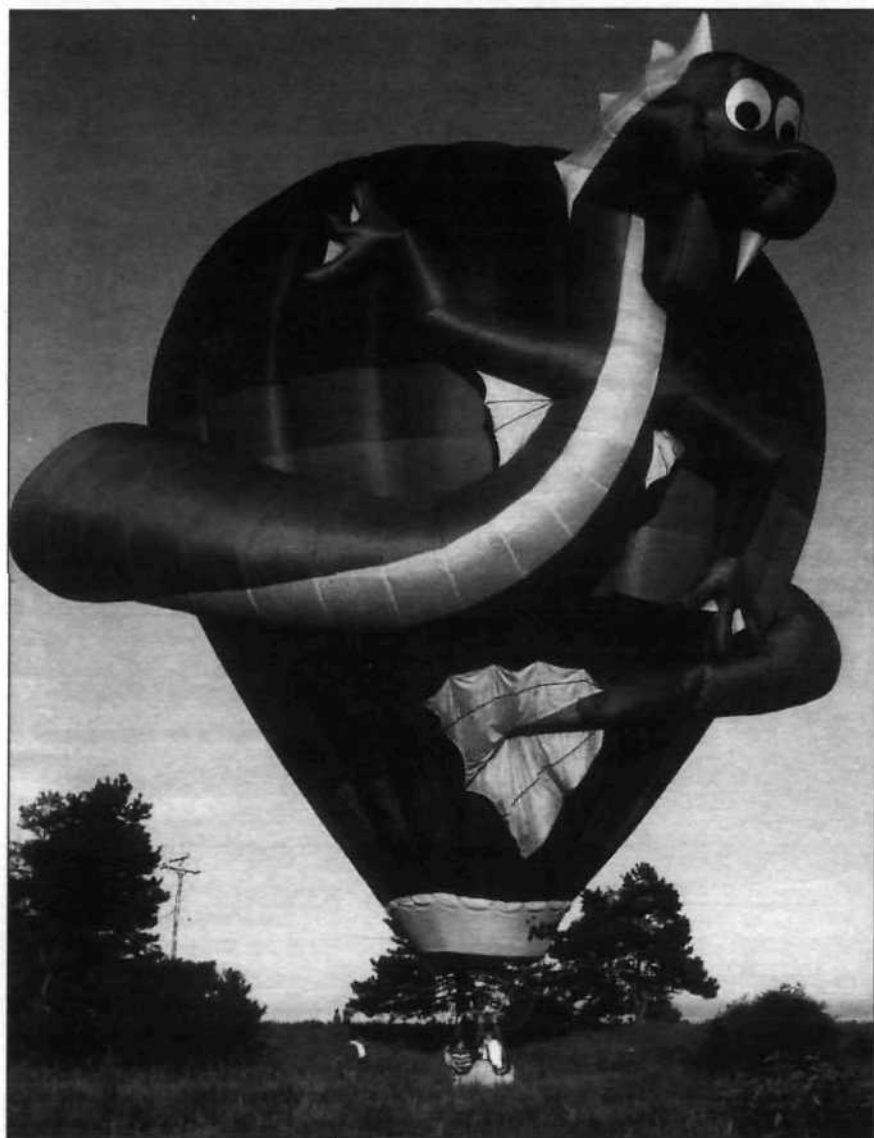


Figure 1. Hot-air balloon at the 1998 Silver Lake Serpent Festival, Perry, New York. (Author shown in white shirt)

On the night of July 13, 1855, in Wyoming County, New York, two boys and five men were fishing from a boat on Silver Lake near the village of Perry. After several minutes of watching a floating log, one man exclaimed, "Boys, that thing is moving!" Indeed, according to the *Wyoming Times*, after bobbing in and out of sight, suddenly, "the SERPENT, for now there was no mistaking its character, darted from the water about four feet from the stern of the boat, close by the rudder-paddle, the head and forward part of the monster rising above the surface of the water. . . . All in the boat had a fair view of the creature, and concur in representing it as a most horrid and repulsive looking monster" (Silver Lake serpent 1855).

Soon, others were reporting sightings, and excitement spread far and wide. As reported in an 1880 pamphlet, *The Silver Lake Serpent*, "People came on foot, by carriage, on horseback, and in fact, by any means of locomotion in their power, to see if even a glimpse of the monster could be obtained, and the hotels found they had 'struck a bonanza'" (p. 3). Several expeditions were launched—ranging from a whaleman with a harpoon to a vigilance society of men armed with guns to a company having a capital stock of one thousand dollars and bent on cap-

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turing the creature (*Silver Lake Serpent* 1880, 3–21).

This was all to no avail, and the excitement eventually died down. Then, reports a modern account: "Several years later [1857] a fire broke out in the Walker Hotel. Firemen rushed to the scene to put out the blaze. When they worked their way into the attic they came upon a strange sight. In the midst of the flames they saw a great green serpent made of canvas and coiled wire" (*Legend* 1984, 11). States another source: "The truth was then revealed by Mr. Walker himself" who "built that monster serpent with his friends to pick up the business at the Walker House Hotel" ("True" 1974).

Mr. Walker was Artemus B. Walker (1813–1889), and the scheme attributed to him and "a few of his intimate and trustworthy friends" is described in a local history by Frank D. Roberts in 1915:

The serpent was to be constructed of a body about 60 feet long, covered with a waterproof canvas supported on the inside by coiled wire. A trench was to be dug and gas pipe laid from the basement of a shanty situated on the west side of the lake, to the lake shore. A large pair of bellows such as were used in a blacksmith shop, secreted in the basement of the shanty connected to that end of the pipe, and a small light rubber hose from the lake end to the serpent. The body was to be painted a deep green color, with bright yellow spots added to give it a more hideous appearance. Eyes and mouth were to be colored a bright red. The plan of manipulating the serpent was simple. It was to be taken out and sunk in the lake, and then when everything was ready, the bellows were to be operated and air forced into the serpent, which naturally would cause it to rise to the surface. Weights were to be attached to different portions of the body to insure its sinking as the air was allowed to escape. Three ropes were to be attached to the forward portion of the body, one extending to the shore where the ice house now stands; one across the lake, and the other to the marsh at the north end; the serpent to be propelled in any direction by the aid of these ropes [Roberts 1915, 200–201].

Roberts adds that "Many nights were spent" in the construction of the crea-

ture, after which it was transported to the lake one night and sunk at a depth of some twenty feet. Then came Friday evening, July 13, 1855, and—you know the rest of the tale. Today, Perry's city limits signs sport a sea monster, and the town annually hosts a lighthearted Silver Lake Serpent festival—most recently featuring hot-air balloons. (One of these was an inflated sea serpent in which I flew over the scenic lake and countryside. See Figures 1 and 2.)

The hoax story is a colorful yarn, but is it true? It has certainly been reported as factual even by writers inclined to promote mysterious monsters—providing a touch of skepticism that seemed to enhance those writers' credibility. For example John Keel's *Strange Creatures from Time and Space* (1970, 260–261) claims the case proves "that a sea serpent hoax is possible and was possible even in the year 1855." Keel (260) also claims that "witnesses generally gave a very accurate description of what they had seen." He is echoed by Roy P. Mackal whose *Searching for Hidden Animals* (1980, 209) specifically states that the Silver Lake creature was "described as . . . shiny, dark green with yellow spots, and having flaming red eyes and a mouth and huge fins." Other sources follow suit, including the *History of Northwestern New York*, which states that watchers "beheld a long green body, covered with yellow spots . . . and a large mouth, the interior of which was bright red" (Douglass 1947, 562). Alas, these writers are merely assuming people saw what Roberts's description of the fake serpent indicates they should have seen. In fact, not one of the original eyewitness reports mentions the yellow spots or the red mouth.

Among the problems with the hoax story is that—although wonderfully skeptical—it exists in a suspicious number of often-contradictory variants. For example, whereas Roberts's previously cited account of the hoax's discovery refers to a wire-and-canvas monster being found by firemen in the hotel attic, other sources give a very different explanation, stating that "in the debris left by the fire were found the remains of the Silver Lake Monster" (Mackal 1980,

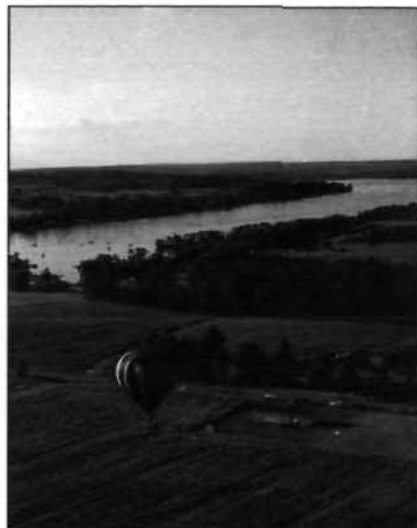


Figure 2. Balloon's-eye view of Silver Lake, Wyoming County, New York, site of 1855 lake monster sightings. (Photo by Joe Nickell)

209), specifically "the frame of the serpent" (*Silver Lake Serpent Revived* n.d.) or maybe just "remnants of wire and green canvas" (Fielding 1998).

At least one source asserts that "The creators of this stupendous hoax soon afterward confessed" (Peace 1976), and monster hunter Mackal (1980, 209) names the "confessed" perpetrators as Walker and *Wyoming Times* editor Truman S. Gillett. However, one writer attributes the newspaper's alleged involvement to "rumor" (Kimiecik 1988, 10), and a long-time local researcher, Clark Rice, insists that Walker was only *suspected* and that "No one ever admitted to helping him" (Fielding 1998).

Due to the many variations the story is appropriately described as a "legend," "tale," or even "the leading bit of folklore of Perry and Silver Lake" (Perry 1976, 145). States Rice: "It was a subject that was bantered around when you were growing up, and everyone had a different version" (Vogel 1995).

## A Hoax?

Invariably the books and articles that give a source for the tale cite Frank D. Roberts's previously quoted account. Writing in 1915, sixty years after the alleged hoax, Roberts gives no specific source or documentation, instead relying on a fuzzy, passive-voice grammatical construction to say, ". . . to the late



Figure 3. Author with bellows (probably a blacksmith's) allegedly used to inflate a fake rubber serpent as part of an elaborate hoax.

A. B. Walker is credited the plan of creating the Silver Lake sea serpent" (emphasis added) having supposedly been assisted by "a few of his intimate and trustworthy friends"—who, alas, remain unnamed. He adds, "It is said that the serpent was made in the old Chapin tannery" (emphasis added), further indication that Roberts is reporting rumor (Roberts 1915; 200, 202).

The elaborateness of the literally monstrous 1855 mechanism raises further suspicion about the tale. Never mind the alleged laying of the "gas pipe," when gas lines did not come to Perry until 1909 nor piped water until 1896 (Perry 1976, 119, 124), raising questions about the availability of the pipe. And never mind the "small light rubber hose" that reportedly extended from shore to serpent, when the availability of that seems equally doubtful in a mid-nineteenth-century village. There is a large old bellows, attributed to the hoax, that is displayed in the Pioneer Museum at Perry (see Figure 3), but its display card states only that it is "believed to have been used to inflate the Silver Lake sea serpent" (emphasis added).

Materials aside, the complexity of the alleged contraption as described by Roberts provokes skepticism. Although such a monster would not seem to preclude the laws of physics (Pickett 1998), the propulsion method Roberts describes raises serious questions. The three ropes that were reportedly attached to the serpent and extended to three lakeside sites would have greatly complicated the

operation, not to mention multiplying the danger of detection.

Indeed, the Silver Lake contrivance would seem to have been a rather remarkable engineering feat—especially for a hotelier and some village friends. One suspects they would have sewed a lot of canvas and made many experiments before achieving a workable monster, yet Roberts (1915, 202) claims theirs worked on the first attempt. In fact, over the years attempts to replicate the elaborate monster have failed (Fielding 1998; Peace 1976).

Despite the claim that Walker created the serpent, 1855 newspaper accounts make clear that there was an earlier Indian tradition about a Silver Lake serpent and that, furthermore, such a monster had been "repeatedly seen during the past thirty years" (Silver Lake Serpent 1855). Certainly, not all of the 1855 sightings can be explained by the monster contraption Roberts described. According to his account it was installed near the northern end of the lake, where both the inlet and outlet are located. Yet on Thursday, August 16, farmer John Worden and others who were "on the west shore of the lake between two and three miles above the outlet" (emphasis added) reportedly sighted "the monster" about a quarter mile distant (Silver Lake serpent 1855). Surely no one imagines the fake monster being controlled from more than two miles away! Neither can the monster apparatus explain sightings of a distinct pair of creatures at the same time (Silver Lake Serpent 1880, 19–20).

In fact, the earliest version of the hoax tale appeared in the December 12, 1860, *Wyoming County Mirror*. "Everyone remembers," stated the brief article, "that during the Silver Lake snake excitement, at Perry, the hotel there reaped a rich harvest of visitors. A correspondent of the Buffalo Commercial says that when about two years and a half ago, the hotel was partially burned, a certain man discovered the serpent in the hotel." This "was made of India rubber," and supposedly "corresponded minutely" with a *Buffalo Republic* description of the serpent. The man who discovered the rubber fake "has just got mad at the landlord and divulged the secret." The newspaper story ended on a skeptical note: "We suppose this last game is just about as much of a 'sell' as the original snake."

In sum, the historical evidence diminishes as we work backward to the alleged hoax, whereas, conversely, details of the story increase the further they are from the supposed event. Therefore it appears it was the story—rather than the serpent—that became inflated. If Walker and/or others did perpetrate a hoax, it is unlikely to have involved an elaborate contraption such as Roberts described.

There were hoaxes associated with the 1855 frenzy but they were largely played out in the newspapers of the day, which treated the whole affair as great sport. For example, in September the *Chicago Times* reported that two visitors had seen the monstrous serpent harpooned and towed to shore. The newspaper jocosely reported that at nightfall the creature uprooted the tree to which it was tethered and returned to the lake. It was recaptured the next day, said the *Times*, whereupon it "awoke, threw its head 60 feet into the air; lurid eyes glared like balls of flame and its tongue, like flashes of forked lightning, 10–12 feet long, vibrated between its open jaws" (Douglass 1955, 119).

Insinuations of hoaxing probably elicited an early statement by *Wyoming Times* editor Gillett. On August 8, 1855, he wrote: "We assert, without fear of contradiction, that there is not a log floating on the water of Silver Lake—that

nothing has been placed there to create the serpent story . . ." and that the paper had published what was related by truthful people (Silver Lake serpent 1855).

## Tracking the Monster

Even if there was a hoax (either a fake serpent or a journalistic scheme), that does nothing to explain the earlier sightings. At this late date we can only round up the usual lake-monster suspects. As the perpetual saga at Scotland's Loch Ness demonstrates, "monsters" may be created by floating trees and driftwood, leaping fish, swimming otters and deer, windslicks, and many other culprits—often seen under such illusion-fostering conditions as mirage effects and diminished visibility (Binns 1984). For example, some of the Silver Lake sightings, including the one that launched the 1855 frenzy, occurred at night when visibility would have been relatively poor and imaginations heightened.

Eyewitnesses typically insisted the object was a living creature, sometimes with its head above the water. A possible candidate is the otter, which "when swimming seems a very large creature" (Scott 1815). While treading water, an otter can raise its head and neck well above the surface and otherwise simulate a monstrous serpent, especially if swimming with one or two others in a line (Binns 1984, 186–91). The large North American otter (*Lutra canadensis*) inhabits "virtually the whole of the New World" (Chamin 1985, 6). On one of my visits to Silver Lake, I was startled while walking along a nature trail to glimpse a creature swimming in a nearby stream; it quickly vanished and I was puzzled as to its identity until I later learned that otters had recently been reintroduced there.

I subsequently talked with New York State wildlife experts about otters possibly being mistaken for mid-nineteenth-century "lake serpents." Bruce Penrod, Senior Wildlife Biologist with the Department of Environmental Conservation, stated it was "very probable" that otters were in the Silver Lake area in 1855. And if the sightings were not hoaxes, he said, he would clearly pre-

fer otters—or even muskrats, beavers, or swimming deer—over sea monsters as plausible explanations for such sightings.

His view was echoed by Jon Kopp, Senior Wildlife Technician with the department. Kopp had an illuminating story to tell. In 1994 he was involved in banding ducks and was sequestered in a blind on Lake Alice in Clinton County. It was dark, when suddenly he saw a huge snakelike creature making a sinuous, undulating movement, heading in his direction! As it came quite close he saw that the "serpent" was actually a group of six or seven otters swimming in single file, diving and resurfacing to create the serpentine effect. "After seeing this," Kopp said, "I can understand how people can see a 'sea serpent'" (Kopp 1998).

I thought of otters especially when I studied two previously mentioned accounts of 1855 that described a *pair* of "serpents" estimated at twenty to forty feet in length. Possibly the witnesses in each case saw two or more otters, which, together with their wakes, gave the appearance of much longer creatures. All of the witnesses were observing from considerable distances—in one case through a spy glass (*Silver Lake Serpent* 1880, 19–20)—distances that could easily be overestimated, thus exaggerating the apparent size of the creature. Because otters are "great travelers," with nomadic tendencies (Kopp 1998), it is possible that a group of them came into Silver Lake in the summer of 1855 and later moved on, thus initiating and then ending that particular rash of sightings.

The least likely explanation for the Silver Lake reports is that some exotic creature inhabited its waters. Whatever people did see, the situation was hyped in turn by the local newspaper and the antics of would-be monster hunters. People's expectations were thus heightened and that led in turn to misperceptions. Even the overly credulous paranormalist Rupert T. Gould admitted that people expecting to see something could be misled by anything having a slight resemblance to it. Gould called this tendency "expectant attention" (Binns 1984, 77–78) and it is the basis of many paranormal claims—apparently including sightings of the Silver Lake

Serpent, a case of the tale wagging the monster.

## Acknowledgments

In addition to those mentioned in the text, I am grateful to Tom Pickett, Department of Physics, University of Southern Indiana; Tammy Miller, Perry Chamber of Commerce; Barbara Henry, Perry Public Library; Tim Binga and Ranjit Sandhu, Center for Inquiry; the staff of the Special Collections Department, Buffalo and Erie County Public Library; and the Inter-Library Loan Department, New York State Library.

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