May the devil take this one!"

That, according to one legend, is what Mrs. Leeds said before she gave birth to her 13th child. The year was 1735. Mrs. Leeds lived in poverty with her 12 starving children in the Pine Barrens region of southeastern New Jersey. Apparently, someone heard her plea. Legend has it that the baby crawled from the womb terribly deformed. It had the head of a collie, the wings of a bat, and cloven feet. Quickly it flew out the window and into the woods. Since then the monster, known as the Jersey Devil, has been haunting the Pine Barrens.

That, however, is just the most popular version of the story. There are many others. According to some accounts, the mother's name was Mrs. Shrouds and she lived in Leeds Point, New Jersey. One tale claims that the child was born deformed, but the mother tried to protect it from public ridicule. Then on a stormy night, the child flapped its arms, turning them

This drawing shows the winged creature with the head of a horse that Mr. and Mrs. Nelson Evans claimed to have seen on a shed roof in Gloucester, New Jersey, in 1909. Had they seen the Jersey Devil?
into bat wings. The child then disappeared up the chimney. Still another story suggests that the child was not born deformed at all and only later turned into a hideous creature. Even the Jersey Devil's year of birth isn't certain. At least five different years have been suggested.

Whatever its true origin, the story of the Jersey Devil seems to be indestructible. And it keeps popping up again and again. In the early 1800s, naval hero Stephen Decatur saw the Jersey Devil flying across the sky. Decatur was testing cannonballs at the time. He fired and hit the creature, but it kept going in spite of the hole in its body. Joseph Bonaparte, the brother of Napoleon, claimed he saw the Jersey Devil while hunting in New Jersey. Others found strange tracks and heard odd screams at night. Fear became so intense in some parts of the Pine Barrens that locals refused to leave their homes after dark.

With the dawn of the 20th century, reports of the Jersey Devil died out for a time. Charles Skinner, an expert on American myths, declared that the days of the Jersey Devil were gone for good. Perhaps the creature was dead. Or perhaps people had just stopped believing in it. Either way, the people in the Pine Barrens could now go about their daily lives without fear.

Then, with no warning, the fear came rushing back. Once more, thousands of people began seeing the Jersey Devil. The creature was observed all over the state. Sightings occurred from the seacoast to Pennsylvania. By January 16, 1909, people had begun to panic. Zack Cozzens from Woodbury, New Jersey, saw a flying creature. "I first heard a hissing sound," he reported. "Then something white flew across the street." The monster had glowing green eyes and flew "as fast as an auto." Another man saw the same monster perched on the edge of a canal. Police officers shot at it but couldn't seem to hit it.

Meanwhile, bizarre footprints were turning up all over the place. That was especially true in Burlington, New Jersey. The prints went from roof to roof. They went down streets and then just disappeared in the middle of the road. Sometimes they stopped in the middle of a field as if made by a bird that had taken flight. No one could identify the prints. Two animal trappers said they had never seen tracks like those. Most people believed that the footprints belonged to the Jersey Devil.

On January 19th, the Jersey Devil paid a call on Mr. and Mrs. Nelson Evans of Gloucester. The monster arrived at 2:30 A.M. and began making weird noises. The couple looked out the window. They spotted the creature dancing on the roof of a woodshed. "It was about three and a half feet high, with a head like a collie dog and a face like a horse," said Mr. Evans.

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The Jersey Devil has become a part of local folklore, even making its way onto souvenir postcards such as this.
The Jersey Devil kept howling and dancing for 10 minutes. "My wife and I were scared, I tell you," said Mr. Evans. "But I managed to open the window and say, 'Shoo,' and it...flew away."

The sightings, which lasted until January 23rd, caused a sensation. They made front page news in Philadelphia. The story was also reported in the papers in other parts of the country. Most dismissed it as a joke. One newspaper editor said that the Jersey Devil was just a product of the imagination of "complete idiots." The Philadelphia Zoo also joined the fun. Zoo officials offered a $10,000 reward for the capture of the Jersey Devil. Norman Jeffries and Jacob F. Hope dressed up a kangaroo in green paint, feathers, and antlers. They put the "creature" on display and charged the public a fee to see it.

Eventually, the Jersey Devil dropped out of sight. The creature wasn't seen again until 1927. Then a taxi driver saw it while changing a flat tire. The Jersey Devil jumped onto the roof of the man's cab and shook the vehicle violently before flying off. In 1951, it was spotted again. A 10-year-old boy claimed seeing a creature "with blood dripping from its face." After that, many other people reported sighting the Jersey Devil. Again strange tracks were found—but this time police determined they had been made by a stuffed bear paw attached to a stick. The police were not amused. They began posting signs along highways that read "The Jersey Devil Is a Hoax." Still, some people didn't believe the police. They organized hunting parties, hoping to kill the Jersey Devil. Of course, the police didn't approve of people running around with guns, endangering their lives and those of others. As a result, the police arrested several "Devil hunters."

Once again the hysteria died down. Since then, the Jersey Devil has spent most of its time in hiding. But every once in a while it pops out again. In 1966, for instance, a farmer claimed that the Jersey Devil had killed all his livestock. Eight years later, an ambulance driver claimed he heard the Jersey Devil screaming in the woods. And so it goes.

Although the creature is quite elusive these days, there is still one certain way to see a Jersey Devil—or several of them for that matter. The National Hockey League team from New Jersey is known as the New Jersey Devils.