"The Darkness is the Whole Thing": Environment, Belief, and Community in the Wampus Legend of the Retsof Salt Mine

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“THE DARKNESS IS THE WHOLE THING”: ENVIRONMENT, BELIEF, AND COMMUNITY IN THE WAMPUS LEGEND OF THE RETSOF SALT MINE

by

Ashley Gorrell Purser

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF SCIENCE in American Studies (Folklore)

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2005
ABSTRACT

"The Darkness is the Whole Thing": Environment, Belief, and Community in the Wampus Legend of the Retsof Salt Mine

by

Ashley Gorrell Purser, Master of Science
Utah State University, 2005

Major Professor: Dr. Jeannie B. Thomas
Department: English

"The Darkness is the Whole Thing" is an examination of a legendary animal known as the wampus that makes its home in the Retsof salt mine. Various forms of wampus creatures found in other settings are introduced, followed by discussion of the ways in which environment influences the adaptation of occupational legend. The article considers how belief in the wampus facilitates the expression of fear, an increased sense of awareness, and the development of community in a unique and dangerous work environment. The telling of the wampus legend is considered a narrative tool for solidifying and preserving occupational identity.

(43 pages)
To all those who have ever heard the sound of a wampus in the darkness of the Retsof salt mine
I would like to thank Dr. Jeannie Thomas for her invaluable mentoring throughout both my undergraduate and graduate course work and my committee members, Dr. Jan Roush and Dr. Lisa Gabbert, for their support and assistance.

I give special thanks to Karen Canning with whom I worked to collect mining folklore in Livingston County and to the many miners and community members who were so willing to share their memories with me. I would especially like to thank Joe Vogel whose narratives have been the focus of this study.

I would not have been able to complete this project without the unfailing support of my husband and family. They have been my major motivators and I thank them for their enthusiastic contributions.

Ashley Gorrell Purser
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The Retsof Salt Mine and Occupational Legend

They talk about the lure of the mine. Oh yeah, that’s real, believe me. You’ve got a guy that’s worked in the mine for very long and he’s never going to work anywhere else if he can possibly work in the mine. It’s a very real thing. And I can understand it.

-Joe Vogel, retired salt miner

The lure of the mine is something that men who have worked in the Retsof salt mine understand well. More then a thousand feet below the bustle of the villages which make up Livingston County in western New York lies a virtual city, a labyrinth of rooms sculpted out of the earth that stretches for miles. The dark, expansive environment below the surface has forever affected every man who has ever had to courage and strength to work the mine. Except for the pile of salt that grows each summer and then disappears once snow begins to fall, the work that goes on in the mine is unseen. Yet its influence on the local community is significant. As every resident will tell you, Retsof was named after the mining company’s first president, William Foster, Jr. (Retsof is Foster spelled backwards). When Caroll Coker, a local resident with a knowledge of geology, first imagined that there might be a vein of salt below the surface the area now known as Retsof was only occupied by a few farming families who keep the land for apples and wool. With the completion of the first shaft in September of 1885, the lure of the new mine drew men to the area from all over Europe, a great proportion of them coming from Italy. As workers brought their families to the
area the Retsof Mining Company set up a small town, fondly referred to as Little Italy.

As continued growth strained the accommodations of the small company town, families spread to other small hamlets in the York Township, but the mining community continued to be tightly knit. Community members were proud of their mine, which was said to be the largest of its kind in the world.¹ As a retired miner explained, “That’s pretty heavy stuff there. Just over in little old Retsof. There was a lot of pride, a lot of pride in that place” (Vogel 2004: 28).

Despite incoming businesses, the diversification of work opportunities, and the construction of a university nearby, pride in the local salt mining tradition continues to be important. In the preface to History of Retsof, New York Marilyn Yasso, a long time resident and wife of a retired salt miner writes, “the little community of Retsof, tucked away in the rolling hills of the Genesee Valley region of New York State, represents the realization of the American Promise. Anyone reading the history of Retsof, its founding, its people, catches a glimpse of the fabric of America’s past” (Yasso 1987: 1). This history is something that miners, their families, and community members who have felt the influence of the mine do not want to lose.

When I arrived in the area in the summer of 2004 to assist the local folklorist in gathering local salt mine lore, residents were very willing to share their memories with me. Recent developments within the local historical society

¹The miners told me that they could never say their mine was the largest for certain because salt mines in Russia would not disclose their figures, but that it was unlikely that these mines could have produced more salt than the mine in Retsof.
had kindled an interest in documenting local history throughout the community. As a result, I was able to gather a variety of occupational narratives about the dangers, the darkness, and strong relationships found in the mine. Robert McCarl, one of the great contributors to the growing field of occupational folklore, has repeatedly addressed the use of folk narrative in the occupational setting (McCarl 1976, 1985, and 2000). In studying the occupational lore of salt miners in Livingston County, New York, I found many of the forms of folk communication that McCarl outlines in his case study of firefighters in the Washington, D.C. area: nicknaming, joking, collective and personal narrative, and critique (1985: 183-207). While gathering these forms of communication in the Genesee Valley, I came across a unique occupational legend that is significant to group communication. Legendary folk heroes such as John Henry and Casey Jones have often been used as symbols in labor discourse (Smithsonian Institution 1976: 34-60). In the Retsof salt mine a legend circulates, not about a folk hero, but about small animals known as wampuses.

The following discussion is an examination of the way in which environment affects the adaptation of and the belief in these legendary creatures. I will argue that in the occupational setting of the salt mine, belief in this legend is important for the safety of the miners and their ability to perform acceptably in the mining occupation. The sharing of the wampus legend simultaneously allows for the expression of fear and the building of community through play. I will also

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2 This work is a collection of folklore found in the labor press and provides examples of legendary heroes as they are portrayed in company newsletters.
discuss how the continued sharing of lore such as the legend of the wampus has become important to the preservation of the mining tradition valued by members of this community.
The Tradition of the Wampus Cat

In gaining an understanding of the salt mine wampus it is valuable to examine other oral traditions in which there are legendary creatures identified as wampuses. The following is not intended to be a comprehensive history of all wampus legends, since there is very little I know about these other traditions beyond the scope of this discussion. But from what I have been able to uncover, it is safe to say that the wampus is a fairly widespread tradition. There is an assortment of wampus creatures with different forms and functions that arise in cultures all over the United States.

The most common variety seems to be the wampus cat. There are several legends which claim its origin. Jinx Johnston, described as a large and robust Virginian country man who "was not the type of man that could scare very easily," claimed to have had an encounter with the wampus cat and often told his tale around the campfire (Pagewise). He tells the story of a hermit woman who once lived in the hills of West Virginia. People believed that she was a witch and that she would hex their cattle and other farm animals. One night the townsfolk set a trap for her. She came to the house of a farmer in the form of a cat, cast a spell of deep sleep on the family, and jumped out the window to steal a farm animal. When she went to the barn and began to transform herself back into her human form, a group of people jumped out of the shadows and scared her. She was never able to complete her transformation and has remained half-woman, half-cat, the wampus cat, ever since.
Johnston encountered this creature one night as he was raccoon hunting in the moonlight. He heard the wild cries of the wampus cat and then smelled a terrible smell, the smell of “skunk and wet dog.” When he turned around he saw a hideous creature, with “saliva dripping from its fangs, yellow eyes that glowed in the dark, and a howl that nearly brought him out of his skin” (Pagewise). He turned and ran as fast as he could with the monster close at his heels. When he made it home he slammed the door, grabbed his Bible and began to read from it. The words caused the Wampus to howl and finally return to the hills. Her cry is often heard, even today, when the moon is shining brightly.

A similar legend is attributed to Native Americans of the same area (Pagewise). According to this legend a young woman did not trust her husband and wanted to know what he did on his hunting trips. One day she placed the skin of a mountain cat over her body and followed the men into the woods to spy on her husband. She saw the men gathered around the campfire and was captivated by the stories that were told and the magic that was given to them. Later the woman was caught by the men and for her crime she was transformed into a wampus cat, half woman and half mountain cat. She is said to still haunt the woods of Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

A different type of wampus cat is said to roam not only the woods of the Northeast, but the mountain trails of the West as well. In 1939 Henry H. Tryon, a collector of lore born in the Black Rock Forest of New York, put together a compilation of tales that he believes to have originated chiefly from western
logging camps (1939: vii). After inquiring after unusual woodland creatures, Tryon received many letters containing tales of creatures of all kinds, including the wampus cat. He included those that seemed to be most widespread in his book *Fearsome Critters*. In this context the wampus moves into the realm of the tall tale. The wampus is listed alongside such “fearsome critters” as Snipes, the Axe-Handle Hound, and the Whiffenpoof (an incredibly large lake fish that can only be captured by spitting tobacco juice in his eye).

The tales Tryon received of the wampus cat were shared by members of logging communities. This creature does not have the humanistic features or aggressive behavior of the previously mentioned wampus cats, but it does create a lot of mischief:

The Wampus Cat has been blamed for a variety of forest tribulations. If a Wampus wades a stream, the fish won’t bite for seven days. When the Wampus is on the prowl the only game abroad is the fool hen. The howl of the Wampus on a lonely night will curdle a crock of sourdough. Females of the species may be killed only with a crosscut saw. The males, practically indestructible, carry in their fur the germ of blister rust. Under the influence of a full moon, the glare from their eyes starts forest fires. Their footprints are visible only in solid rock. They steal prospectors’ picks to brush their teeth. (Tryon 1939: 59)

Despite the problems this wampus causes for the logging community, they can also be useful. According to the tales, when trappers of the Salmon River in Idaho were having problems with eagles killing deer, the Wampus Society—“consisting of every man who has seen a rampant Wampus Cat at dusk menacing a mountain lion with a jackhammer”—suggested that they bring in the wampus.
The wampus is born with an extendable right forearm that "works like a folding pruning hook on the pantographic principle" (Tryon 1939: 59) and is particularly fond of capturing eagles. This is surely where the creature's scientific name, *Aquilamapprehendens forcipes*, comes from (59).

There are many other references and brief descriptions of the wampus in different contexts. Robert Pyle mentions that the wampus, "a legendary monster of the forests in the Oregon Cascades," may be similar to the Sasquatch (1995: 133). An online listing of creatures related to the Yeti says that wampus cats are "usually described as 'bipedal black panthers,' looking like a cross between a human and a panther" (Angelfire nd). According to the article, some researchers believe that wampus cats are really primates, possibly even devil monkeys, as they behave in similar ways. In Stith Thompson's motif index, under Spirits and Demons, the creature is listed as Waumpaus, "a monster with large dog tracks" (F401.3.3.1).

In the 1990s the wampus found a new habitat in outer-space through a video game entitled "Hunt the Wumpus." This intergalactic creature is said to have been inspired by the Auger-Tail Wampus, a mythical creature of the American West that had "longer legs on one side of the body so it could walk up hill sides standing level, and had an auger type tail so it could drill holes with its tail" (Darel nd). According to one history of the game, this wampus may have made appearances in several Gene Autry novels (Darel nd). But Autry has not been the only author to write about the wampus. Recently Don G. Brasher of
Crittenden County, Kentucky published his book *The Wampus Cat* (Patten 2005). In this case the wampus is simply a mysterious panther his grandfather called a wampus cat.

Despite their uncertain origins and paths of transmission, these varying legends of the wampus demonstrate that this creature is alive and well in many cultural contexts. While I have only been able to collect bits of some of these tales, the legends that I have been able to locate express the social and environmental concerns of the groups that tell them (see Thomas 1991). In the legends mentioned above the details vary according to the regions and environments in which they are found.

In the legend told by Jinx Johnson a woman separates herself from the patriarchal, Christian society by which she is surrounded and is therefore accused of being a witch. Her inhumanity is revealed when she is caught in her half-human, half-animal form. Her wickedness is further illustrated by the fact that she cannot tolerate hearing the words of the Bible. In the second legend a woman’s inappropriate curiosity and disrespect for her husband is condemned. Both of these legends narrate the consequences when women in these cultures step beyond their social spheres and dabble in the world of magic.

The concerns expressed in the tales of the logger’s wampus cat are very different. Here, the wampus helps explain environmental inconveniences like a shortage of fish or game or poor conditions for making bread. It comments on the
balancing of ecosystems and the responsibility the local community might feel in causing the same environmental disturbances that the wampus cat is accused of.

Wampus legends range from the frightening to the playful. The Retsof wampus legends contain both elements. Indeed, the salt wampus seems to mediate between a frightening environment and a playful work community. Whether the men who first told the tales of the salt wampus were familiar with other wampus legends I cannot say. Nor is it certain what form these creatures took when they first made it down into the mine but we can look at how the wampus is being described today and in the recent past. Compared to other wampus legends, the salt mine legend seems simple in form. There may be more detailed stories of interaction between miners and wampuses, but the stories I heard simply say that the animals are there. But examination of the environmental and social contexts in which the legend is told sheds more light on the significance of the simple creature in this mining culture.
The Retsof Salt Mine Wampus

Even before I arrived in New York, I had heard that there was some sort of creature called the wampus that supposedly lived in the salt mine from Karen Canning, the local folklorist with whom I worked throughout the summer. A long-time resident of the area, Karen had heard of the wampus but had never heard any details. When we began collecting local salt mining lore, we hoped that we would run into the creature.

Many of the community members we spoke with recognized the name but, like Karen, they could not give any specifics. I ran into my first real description of the salt mine wampus without asking for it. When we began our fieldwork, Karen and I placed an ad in the local newspaper asking for anyone with memories of the mine to contact us. One of the first calls we received was from a man named Joe Vogel, a retired miner who at the time was president of the annual Salt Miners' Picnic. Vogel began working at the mine in 1953 after he came home from fighting in the war. Forty-four years later, after a lifetime of service, he retired at age sixty-seven.

Vogel invited me to meet him and his 9-year-old granddaughter on a late Monday morning at Denny's for lunch. He brought with him a five-page letter he had addressed to me entitled, “Fading Memories of Life at Retsof Mine.” Many of the stories he shared with me that day were written in his letter, and while the letter was fairly comprehensive, I really enjoyed having him share his stories with me verbally. Because of Vogel’s wonderful descriptions and the thorough
analysis he provides with his narratives, I have quoted him at length throughout the remainder of this article.

The first thing that Vogel spoke about was the unique environment in the mine, how dark and ominous it seemed when he first began working there. I asked him if he had ever heard any ghost stories told in this spooky environment. He responded by telling me and his granddaughter about the wampuses. He said that there were other ghost stories about the mine but that the wampus was the most "universal." His description of the creatures is as follows:

The wampus was supposed to have been a, oh, like a woodchuck sized animal, groundhog size animal. Of course, it won't have any hair because in the mine it's damp and it's cold and it couldn't grow hair and it had a tail similar to a beaver. It had a flat tail. It could slap the tail, you know, later, after you hear this story, you'd go down into the mine and you'd hear a piece [of salt] fall, whack! (Joe hits the table with his hand) ‘God! There's a Wampus!’ (2004: 5)

According to Vogel, these small creatures live in the corners of the mine, usually near the lunch room and live off of the miners' lunch scraps. He relates that although the wampus is a very benign creature, one would never want to come in contact with one. There have been no incidents of harm caused by a wampus, although a hungry miner might be upset to find a portion of his lunch missing.

It would seem a stretch to connect the small, hairless creature of the salt mine with the wampus cat except for its striking similarity to the description of the discovery of the wampus cat related in Tryon's collection. He states that the "origin of the Wampus, on the authority of Stanley Basin mountain men, dates

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3The men I toured the mine with gave very similar descriptions of the creature, only they added that the Retsof wampus lived off of salt snakes. When I asked what the salt snakes ate I was told they eat the salt.
back to the old-fashioned beaver. It seems that a trapper’s dog surprised a beaver far from water. There was nothing for the animal to do but climb a tree. But beavers don’t climb trees. So it became a Wampus Cat” (Tryon 1939: 60). If the first wampus cat truly did have roots in the “old-fashioned beaver,” the loggers’ wampus cat and the salt miners’ wampus could possibly be cousins.

While I cannot pinpoint specific dates, it seems that stories of the salt Wampus have been around as long as the mine itself. It appears to be essential and inevitable that the any Livingston County salt mine must have wampuses. Three different mines shafts have been built during the mine’s operation. As each shaft became exhausted, the miner’s dug new shafts and mining continued in different areas of the Livingston County. Vogel mentions that, when the second mine shaft had been dug around 1921, the wampuses came over to the new shaft along with the miners. This implies that they must have been present in the original shaft. The wampuses were alive and well when I toured the mine in the summer of 2004.

Just as the creatures mentioned earlier adapted to reflect the environments in which they were told, in the salt mine the wampuses have physically adapted to their surroundings. Joe’s explanation of the creatures’ inability to grow hair because of the mine’s cold, damp air suggests that they would have had hair had they lived elsewhere. The unique environment of the mine has affected the Wampuses’ physicality, but they are not the only creatures to undergo physical changes in response to living in the salt mine.
Before the introduction of rail lines around 1920, mules were used to transport mined salt. Stables and a large barnyard were built in a cleared area of the mine to house the animals. When miners had completed their work for the day, the mules were let out into the barnyard for the night. Some mules were born in the mine and most spent the greater part of their lives there. Once a mule was taken into the mine, it did not leave again until it could no longer perform the hard labor. I was told by several of the people I spoke with that if the mules had come back out of the mine, they would have been blind. The mules’ eyes had adjusted to the darkness of the mine and so they usually lived in the mine until they died. With the miner’s awareness of this proven phenomena, it is only logical that the legendary mine creatures they speak of would have also undergone physical changes in this environment.

The wampus’ beaver-like tail makes the creature a well-suited resident of the mine. With it, the Wampus mimics the natural sounds of the mine environment. Although the ceiling of the mine is fairly stable, often big slabs of salt will break free and fall to the floor. These slabs, weighing hundreds or even thousands of pounds, make loud slapping noises when they hit the floor. This sound, as Vogel mentions, is the same sound Wampuses make when they slap the floor with their tails.

In order to fully understand the significance of the adapted or emphasized characteristics of the salt wampuses, it is important to understand the unique environment of the mine itself. As the resemblance of the noise made by the
slapping of the creatures’ tail and the falling of slabs of salt suggests, the
wampuses may actually be a physical manifestation of the mine itself.
Environment and Fear

The environment down in the salt mine is one that is very different from any other place on earth. Indeed, more than one-thousand feet below the surface, the honeycomb expanse of the mine is a world of its own. In 1892, *The New York Times* reprinted an article from the *Geneseo Democrat* that recounted the experience of two friends of the editor who had the opportunity to take an afternoon trip down in the mine. In describing their descent into the mine the men said:

You may imagine that you would like to go down that shaft, but let me tell you that when you once stood on the verge of that yawning hole waiting for the car to let you down, it is two to one that your courage would fail you, and you would inform the guide that you would postpone the trip until some other day.

The men talked of meeting Superintendent Chapin and waiting for the signal to lower the car, then continued the recounting of their descent:

From that time until we reached the bottom no man will ever be fully able to describe the experience. When the signal sounds, the first thing you do is to hug your hat down on your head for keeps, and by the time you have got that act accomplished it seems as though you were going down at about a rate of a thousand miles a minute. You have seen one streak of greased lightening chase another—well, it's no comparison. (*Geneseo Democrat* 1892)

The trip down into the mine was only the beginning of the guests' extraordinary experience. Once the men made it through the description of their descent into the mine, they related being handed tallow candles, the only source of light used by the workers, even though kerosene, gas, and electricity were available at the time, to light their way. Looking down a long, dark tunnel about a mile in length they could see the lights of the men working in the distance. Their guide gave
them a tour of the mine, passing about sixty rooms that they guessed were about twenty to thirty feet wide and seven to eight feet high. This was only a small section of the mine. Had the men toured the whole mine they figured it would have taken them about a week on foot.

One-hundred-thirteen years and a myriad of technological advances later the journey down into the mine is not much different. The mules have been replaced first by locomotives, then by specialized machinery and conveyor systems, but the environment is very much the same. I had the opportunity to go down into the mine myself in July of 2004. While I trusted the men who took me down into the mine completely, I could not help but feel uneasy as the walls of the shaft flashed by during what seemed like a ten-minute plunge to the mine floor. When we reached the bottom, armed with hardhats and flashlights, we boarded a Jeep that took us through the mine to where the men were working. Once we moved away from the shaft, our only light came from the headlights of the Jeep. Its light illuminated the walls of the tunnel and gave us a mysterious glimpse into the rooms that had already been mined. Turning around, I could watch as the blackness enveloped everything we passed. In this environment it was very easy to believe that small creatures might be peering at us from the dark corners of the mine.

In speaking about the wampuses, Vogel makes it clear that this “darkness is the whole thing.” He was not the only person I talked to who emphasized the darkness of the mine. Most of the people I spoke with, whether they were miners
or community members who had had the opportunity to go down into the mine, told me about the experience of driving to some deserted part of the mine and having everyone turn off their flashlights. When the driver turned the lights off on the Jeep, they weren’t able to see their hands in front of their faces. More than one visitor has been frightened by this experience. As Vogel said of this event, “It is horribly dark! And you get into that kind of dark, the dark scares a lot of people just being dark” (2004: 22). I experienced this same thing on my tour of the mine, and, while I have had similar adventures while touring a cave near my home in Utah, being aware of the vast expanse of empty space that surrounded me in the mine made this experience particularly unsettling.

While I felt uneasy being surrounded by such complete darkness I at least had the comfort of knowing that there were seven other people right beside me at all times. For the men working the mine this is not the case. Often there is only one person working in a room of the mine. Vogel tells an interesting story about the fright of working in that darkness alone:

I’d be there all day [laughs] yeah, and working in the mine all alone is not, [laughs] good. There’s noises, you know, a little piece will drop and you hear this. “Oh, who’s there?” you know. You’re looking around. And of course it’s black dark. Total, total darkness unless you’ve got your headlamp. I guarantee you, I was scared—well, I was scared. [laughs] And I didn’t know until later, the guy that was working another machine, running another machine in the closest area to me, he says, “You never knew,” he says, “but I would shut that machine off two or three times a day and walk over to make sure you were still there. ‘Cause,” he says, “If you weren’t, I wouldn’t have been either.” [laughter] I says well, “Who’s going to get ‘ya?” He says, “I don’t know.” . . . [laughing] ‘cause the size of this place, it’s black dark, it’s damp, you know. All you can think of [is] tombs and all that. But, it was the most fascinating place to work. (2004: 3)
Vogel’s reference to tombs articulates well what is truly unsettling about being alone in the dark more than one-thousand feet underground. It is a horrifying thought to think that the mine might collapse above you or that alone in the dark your light might burn out and you could be lost forever or buried alive.

Miners cannot forget the story of Benny Seduskie, a 21 year-old miner who, in the summer of 1916, spent 12 days and 12 nights lost in the labyrinth of the mine (Yasso 1987:45). On the way to the shaft after work one night the carbide lamp on Benny’s hat went out. He had been trailing behind the other miners and the power was switched off before Benny could make it to the shaft. Trying to find his way to the shaft, Benny made a wrong turn and was lost in a deserted area of the mine. Benny had recently come from Russia, had no relatives in America, and had not yet made any friends in the town of Retsof. He was not missed until several days later when he was needed at work. Eventually Benny was found, after losing 90 of 180 pounds, and was returned to health. His story, however, stands as tragic reminder of the dangers present in the mine and the importance of developing strong relationships with fellow miners.

Despite the dark environment and the dangers of working in the mine, the men love their work. In speaking with retired miners, there was not one who did not stress how wonderful they thought it was to work in the mine. They seemed very proud to point out that the salt mine was a safe place to work, especially compared with other types of mining. Salt mines are cleaner and more stable then other mines. While loose chunks of salt often fall from the ceiling, there are rarely
devastating collapses and there have been very few fatal accidents. While other mines can be wet and cold, the salt mine is fairly dry and maintains a temperature of 60 degrees Fahrenheit year-round. The miners do not have to search for rich veins of salt because it is all around them in one solid mass. Because the salt is solid, the thick pillars of salt left behind after a room has been dug provide a very stable support for the ground above.

Even in this relatively secure environment great precautions are taken to maintain the workers’ safety while in the mine. The miners take great pride in their award-winning rescue team, which has taken many honors over the years. In 1929 the mine was awarded the Sentinels of Safety Trophy from the United States of America Department of Commerce Bureau of Mines for no days lost from all accidents for each thousand man-hours of work performed. Based on the assumption that men working in the mine would inhale a great amount of salt dust and might have difficulty adjusting to the darkness, I suspected that salt mining might cause health problems such as high blood pressure and insomnia. The miners, however, insisted that there really were no health risks working in the mine.\(^4\)

Despite the mine’s extraordinary track record and relatively healthy work environment, miners cannot forget that the mine can be deadly. Knowing that they

\(^4\) One man I spoke with guessed that the miners must suffer from Emphysema or other problems with their lungs similar the black lung common in coal mining. This man had never worked in the mine and came to this conclusion because of his observation that when the men came into his father’s store after a day of mining they were covered in white salt from head to toe. It seemed natural that some of this salt dust would have been inhaled into their lungs. Whether or not this salt was inhaled into the lungs or not the men must have been affected by the salt in some way. From my own experience down in the mine I can say that you can taste the salt when you breath and it remains on your lips when you leave.
faced dangers and risked their lives everyday in the mine, it seems odd at first that a small, hairless creature could create any feelings of fear in these men. I asked Vogel if a wampus had ever harmed anybody or if miners were afraid they would do anything to them, and he responded:

V: No, you didn’t want to leave your lunch pail out because a Wampus might come and get stuff out of it or, um, you know you, it was just that they were always there. Because you didn’t see [them] didn’t mean they weren’t there.

P: And you heard these noises that you said sounded like they could be them?

V: Right. This was probably, for being all alone in a huge area, this was the noisiest place in the world. Um, any, course there again, sound didn’t travel far. Um, because the air is pretty much dead and, it’s like taking a flash picture, the walls just absorb the flash. Um, and sound doesn’t, hollering doesn’t go far. So you knew if you heard something it wasn’t too far away. You, you wouldn’t have heard a chunk drop two rooms away (2004:23).

In this dark environment the sense of sound becomes particularly keen and is vital for safety. Because of the possible dangers that surround workers in the mine they must constantly be aware of what is going on around them. With reduced vision caused by the darkness, the best way to be attentive is by listening. It is by listening that you know when a slab of salt might fall. Because of this emphasis on sound, I find that there may be a connection between these mine-dwelling creatures and a more widely spread mine tradition of knockers.

Wampuses are not the only legendary creatures that have taken to the darkness beneath the earth’s surface. Legends of underworld dwellers go as far back as Hades and Pluto. The cavernous expanses of mines have been a prime
place for legends to thrive. One such legend is that of "knockers." Knockers are often attributed to Cornish tin mines, but they are a widespread mining tradition.⁵ They are said to be small, humanlike dwarfs, approximately 18 inches tall and imitate miners in dress and appearance. In general the knockers are known to be good-natured. They often lead miners to the richest veins of ore or warn them of impeding disaster by making tapping noises with their small hammers and picks. Knockers can also be mischievous by making mysterious noises and stealing or hiding miners' possessions. The playful behavior of the knockers is comparable to the wampuses' tendency to steal miner's lunches and the like.

I do not know to what extent immigrant workers might have been aware of the knocker tradition, but as the tradition seems fairly pervasive it does not seem unlikely that some may have been familiar with it. If miners had been aware of both the stories of knockers in other mines and tales of the wampus cat, one might come to the conclusion that the salt mine wampus is a merging of these two legendary characters. Having the physicality of the beaver-like wampus cat, the Retsof wampus reminds miners of impending danger through the auditory tapping of its tail in the same way knockers' tapping assists and protects miners digging for ore. Even if stories of the miner's wampus developed independently of these traditions, it seems that they function, at least in this way, similarly to the knockers. But just as the environment inside the salt mine is unique, so are the miner's ghostly helpers.

⁵ (Beaman 1993, Leach and Fried 1950: 585-586), Rose 1996:182)
The wampuses are certainly not the only reminders of danger that salt miners encounter. More formal reminders are presented in company newsletters in the form of letters from management, cartoons created by the Safety Commission, and jokes or stories submitted by the miners themselves. Standing at the entrance to the mine is a statue of a woman holding a baby, a reminder that the miners have a wife and family waiting for them to come home each night. The plaque next to her bears the miner’s creed: “I am only one interested in safety but I am one, I cannot do everything but I can do something to prevent an accident and I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do!” The articles in the company newsletters, the statue, and the miner’s creed are all calls for safety. But, like the knockers traditionally found in mines around the world, the wampus serves as a companion in the mine that is constantly reminding the workers to be aware of their surroundings, in a form as unique as the salt mine itself.
Play, Initiation, and Belief

While the wampus legend is a continual reminder of danger, the miners' are able to play with their fears through the telling of the legend. These stories are usually told as a form of initiation. The legend is artfully incorporated into routine conversation, allowing the men to draw the “greenies” in without alerting them to the fact. Vogel gives a brief description of how this is accomplished:

We had young guys hired. That was who you wanted to get to. The guys at the top of the shaft were waiting, loading the guys on the cart. They would start, “Have you seen—,” well, a foreman would come in for a second shift and all the guys at the hoist would have to say is, “Have you seen anything of the Wampus lately?” Well of course these new, [laughs] these young guys, their ears popped out and the foreman picked up, “Well, there was a couple reported but we’re really not sure if it was a Wampus.” [laughs] And they’re going on with the description. This one kid says, “I’m not taking any shovel down, I’m taking a shotgun” (2004: 5).

In the introduction to his collection of “Fearsome Critters,” Henry Tryon gives an excellent explanation of this type of play. He recalls the first time he was introduced to one of the critters, which he later included in his published collection of tales, while he was working a summer job in a logging community. On the trail back from work one day a fellow greenie mentioned to the group that he had heard a strange, screech-like cry that he could not place. Seeing this opportunity, two of the older men, who Tryon terms the principal introducers, carry on a skillful “team-play.” After nonchalantly mentioning at “the precise psychological moment” that it must be have been “one o’ them tree-squeaks” the
two men go into an artful telling of this initiatory legend. Tryon articulates his fascination with the men’s team-telling of it:

It was like watching two highly skilled bridge players. Sam would lead with a colorful bit of description, and Walter would follow suit with an arresting spot of personal experience, every detail being set forth with the utmost solemnity, and with exactly the correct degree of emphasis. At the end, so deftly had the cards been played that the listener was completely convinced of the animal’s existence. This method of presentation is widely used. For the best results, two narrators who can “keep the ball in the air” are necessary, and perhaps an occasional general question is tossed to someone in the audience, such inquiries being invariably accorded a grave, corroborative nod. (Tryon 1939: viii)

I witnessed this same method of presentation of the wampus legend during my tour of the mine. About half an hour into our tour, as we were driving to a secluded area of the mine to turn off the headlights of the Jeep and experience complete darkness for ourselves, I asked the two men who were guiding us if they had ever heard of the wampuses. Taking on the role of principle introducers, they jumped at the opportunity and commenced to give me a description very similar to Vogel’s and structured much like the example recounted by Tryon. With complete sincerity (and a twinkle in their eyes) they explained that the salt snakes the Wampuses sometimes liked to eat lived in the holes drilled by the powdermen⁶ and then shone their flashlights in the corners of the mine where the Wampuses might be hiding. When I began to chuckle they only became more animated. While it was my question that prompted this telling of the legend, it

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⁶ The powdermen are some of the most trusted men in the salt mine. They are responsible for drilling holes into the face of the mine and then filling them with explosives. Once everyone has gone home for the night they blast the face of a room and the salt is ready to be removed the next day.
was told in much the same way as Vogel said it is told to new workers. Under normal circumstance, as Vogel alludes to above, the legend is usually told while the men are on the cage.

The cage, or the lift that lowers men and materials down into the mine and brings them back up again, is one of the few places where a large group of miners gather during the workday. This was not only a place where the initiatory legend of the wampuses was commonly told, it was a place where most verbal banter took place. Vogel explains that because of the dangerous nature of their work most joking or pranking between miners was verbal:

There were very few pranks because in that kind of setup uh, you’re on a cage, I think they would take thirty, twenty-five to thirty, on a cage at a time. Well, you don’t want to start horsing around on a cage because that was very dangerous. Didn’t stop some guys from doin’ it but, and if you wanted, to tease somebody verbally, it was always on the cage were everybody could hear it. You know, “What were you up to last night? Saw your car last night where it shouldn’t have been,” all that kind of stuff. Which is pretty universal in any kind of plant you work in but, that was one thing that I remember. (2004: 20)

This playful, social interaction is an important part of most working relationships. By being told the legend of the ampus in this setting, new men are introduced and incorporated into this social network.

Like other initiation rituals, the telling of the wampus legend serves a critical purpose. In his article “Characteristics of Occupational Narratives,” Jack Santino outlines two ways that narratives can provide insight into specific problems that may arise on the job. The first types of problems he mentions are the physical challenges presented in an occupation. The unique environment of
the mine and the special challenges it presents have been discussed above. The second types of concerns that narratives deal with are the various sociological problems faced on the job (1978: 70). Santino describes the way narrative can aid the negotiation of occupational relationships:

The network of relationships a worker has is complex: he must relate to and work with subordinates, peers, bosses, management, outside agencies, and the general public. Narratives arise along each of these relationships, and allow aggressive feelings fictive release. People working with each other will conflict. Nevertheless, in order for an overall operation to be productive, the individual workers must function well together. They are each moving parts of a larger machine, and they must avoid friction with each other or the machine will break down. Occupational narrative, by allowing the fictive expression of negative emotions, is a kind of lubricant that reduces the friction between the parts and allows the operation to function more smoothly (1978: 70).

Like the narratives Santino discusses, the sharing of the Wampus legend helps to quickly distinguish relationships and social order and to define each worker’s responsibilities toward their companions.

Vogel makes it clear that the most important relationships in the mining company were between the men who go down the shaft everyday, not between the miners and those who managed the company. You didn’t work hard to earn the respect of the foreman, you fought to win the respect of the men you worked next to. “It was tougher satisfying the guy you were working with than it was working to satisfy the foreman ‘cause you could con him a little bit. But the guy working next to you, he knew” (2004: 8).

The relationships between men in the mine were complicated by the fact that often the men they worked with were not just fellow workers. In Livingston
County, mining has always been a family occupation. Vogel mentioned in our interview that he was very lucky to gotten the job at the mine because he did not have any relatives that worked there. The only reason he believes he was hired on was that his supervisor recognized his last name on his application. He had grown up with Vogel’s father and so Vogel was hired on. Joe explains that this family structure was important in mining because “not only was your father watching what you did, but your grandfather and your uncles and you know, you didn’t dare goof up because you’d be out of the family as well as out of job” (2004: 2). Although current labor laws have had a significant impact on the mine company’s hiring policies, even today many of the miners are fourth and fifth generation salt miners.

Even if the man you worked next to was not a blood relative, kinship in the mine was crucial. Joe reiterated several times that “the guy that’s working beside you literally, literally has your life in his hands... anybody that took any kind of a chance, you didn’t want him anywhere near you” (2004: 3). This is perhaps why verbal initiation through legend was so important. Vogel mentions:

I can’t think of any other place to go in and work where you had the possibilities of telling this stuff to new people. Because new people in a factory setup know, they could figure out very quickly, “Oh, I don’t think so.” But in this, you were so dependent, and they made it very evident that you were dependent on the guy next to you. (2004: 25)

Through the telling of the legend of the wampus, miners are able to demonstrate to new workers their complete dependence without physical initiations that might put them in serious danger.
In addition to creating a sense of order and building community, through this initiation, fear is again played out in the form of the Wampus. One exchange between Vogel and his granddaughter is particularly fascinating because of the direct way in which she questions her grandfather about these tough men being affected by this legend, and so I have included it at length here:

V: You know, usually within a couple of days when the guy started he heard about the Wampuses. Uh, and it was one of those things that, you just couldn’t say that they didn’t exist. You were saying, you know, “You’ve heard of the duckbilled platypus. Well, it looks a lot like that.” These guys would have this picture in their mind. That was the way it was described to me first, it looked like one of them. I’m thinking, “Oh, my Lord! That’s a poor mixed up animal!” If you know anything about the platypus. I think God was having a bad day when he made the platypus. That is one goofed up animal!

S: Weird creatures.

V: That’s strange. But that’s what they compared it to and--

S: Then why were you scared of it?

V: You’re scared of something you can’t see, it’s--Sam, you’ve got to realize, you’re in the dark. You know, when you get off the train back in the old days, or off the Jeep today, you walk ten feet from the Jeep and you go like this [holds his hand in front of his face] without your lamp on and you cannot see a thing, you cannot see anything! It’s the darkest dark I have ever seen in my life. (2004: 21-22)

Again the darkness is the key. On the first day of the job a new employee would already be apprehensive about working down in the mine. Of course the older miners, who would have felt such anxiety themselves when they first began mining, would take advantage of this opportunity to play with these fears.

Vogel identifies what it is about this legend that makes it such an effective initiatory tool. The darkness, the danger, the uncertainty that are all a part of work
in the salt mine make dependability and reliability on each member of the mining team crucial. It is not just fun to tell these stories to new comers, it is crucial that they believe them to the extent that their behavior will reflect a sense of awareness and reliability that every man’s life in the mine depends on.

The negotiation of this belief is something that Vogel comes back to over and over again. At one point during his narration Vogel states that he doesn’t know if anyone ever saw a wampus and his granddaughter breaks in saying, “Or even if it exists.” Vogel responds, laughing but with a sincere look in his eyes:

Well, you know, you hear stories enough Sam, how do you know they don’t exist? This is what they tell’ya... It, you know, it’s one of those that you think, well it’s possible. Just because you’ve never, there’s lots of things I’ve never seen that I know exist. (2004: 5)

The burden of proof here clearly lies with the doubter, not with those who have spent time in the mine and have had the experience of being told this legend in the proper environment.

Belief in the wampuses is not a matter of lack of logic. As Vogel makes clear, the sounds the wampuses make can be explained away as the sound of the slabs of salt falling from the ceiling. A wampus is a very convenient explanation for lunches or other personal items that go missing. But even with an awareness of these logical explanations, until it can be proven that the wampus could not possibly exist, unless a light is shone into every dark corner, the wampuses will continue to thrive. As Linda Dégh has pointed out, a big mistake legend scholars often make is overemphasizing the role of belief in legends (1971: 66-67). But in this case the issue of belief is not something I brought up as the interviewer, it is
something that Vogel’s granddaughter questioned him about and that he discussed repeatedly: “You just couldn’t say they didn’t exist...how do you know they don’t exist...there’s lots of things I’ve never seen that I know exist” (2004). Miners do not have to know that wampuses exist, but they do have to believe enough in the possibility of their existence that they are prompted to act appropriately in their workspace.

Belief in this legend is belief in something more than just the wampus. When Vogel was explaining to me where the wampuses came from, he told me that “these Wampuses were supposed to have immigrated from the old mine. Now there was no, no justification for anyone taking one down” (2004: 4). This statement is telling in many ways. Again, logic is used in explaining the wampuses’ presence in the mine. The fact that he says no one had justification to take a wampus down indicates a level of belief in the creature that is sufficient enough for Vogel to imply that it would have been entirely possible for a human to have taken one down.

Another significant aspect of this comment is Vogel’s reference to the wampuses’ relocation as immigration, a word he used more than once to describe their movement. These wampuses relocated more than once. Since the wampuses are present in the third shaft, the shaft I had the opportunity to explore last summer, it can be concluded that the wampuses immigrated there as well. The wampuses follow the miners on their own accord but it seems that however they make it down, it is essential that the salt mine has them. Since the miners are
telling this legend, perhaps they need the Wampuses as well. Descending from immigrant workers themselves, miners might easily relate to these fellow immigrants who have also made their homes in the mine. It may be possible that the Wampuses are a personification of the miners themselves.
Fading Memories

The Livingston County mining community has faced many challenges in the 120 years of its existence. There have been strikes that have halted production, changes in labor laws that have redefined working relationships, and accidents that have caused great pain. Through each of these challenges the community’s determination, pride, and resilience has allowed the mining tradition to continue to thrive. But in 1994 something happened that no one thought would ever have been possible—the mine collapsed.

According to reports I have heard, the mine collapse should never have happened. Livelihoods were damaged because of this tragedy, but so was the sense that the mining would continue forever. Ever resilient, local miners have established a new mining company and are mining a new shaft. Mining may continue for decades to come in the Genesee Valley. But the destruction caused by the mine collapse will not soon be forgotten. Having felt helpless to prevent the changes that caused the collapse, retired miners are now anxious to preserve everything they can.

Toward the end of our interview, Vogel explained to me why it was so important to him that memories of the mine, which included the legend of the wampus, be remembered:

The whole thing is, you hate to have it disappear, because it was, well, the way I look at it, the mine was too important to the whole area to just let it, that’s why I’m so glad they’re working with the Masons to get that room\textsuperscript{7}... To them [the miners] being miners, well, I won’t say sacred but

\textsuperscript{7}The York Historical Society was working to get a room in the local Masonic Lodge, which will hold a permanent collection of salt mining history, at the time of this interview.
it’s a special thing. Uh, it’s like farmers. [laughing and hitting his fist on the table] They’re miners! (2004:26).

The lure of the mine is something these men cannot and do not want to escape. Vogel mentions that if it hadn’t been for the mine collapse he would still be working at the mine today, as would many other “old timers.”

It is significant that the title Vogel gave to his letter to me was “Fading Memories of the Retsof Mine.” Since he no longer has the opportunity to work at the mine each day, he can solidify his identity as a continuing member of this community by sharing his narratives and by having them recorded. Roger D. Abrahams speaks of the relationship between storytelling and identity:

[O]ne’s identity emerges from the stories one tells on oneself or one’s community. The sum of these stories constitutes the life-history of the individual or the group. Each incident, each report of past experience, is transformed as an emblem of both the uniqueness of the individual—insofar as they replay an experience unique in its time and place of occurrence—and a badge of group membership. (Abrahams 2003: 201)

Like Joe Vogel, each worker can likely remember the first time they heard about the wampuses. In this way the legend is as personal as it is universal. Each individual becomes an integral part of the larger mining community. By retelling this legend and sharing other occupational narratives, community members like Vogel are able to reinforce their identity as members of this unique group. By sharing his memories in the presence of his granddaughter, Vogel ensures that this important aspect of his identity does not fade away but will be remembered as an important aspect of family identity as well.
As Vogel illustrated throughout our interview, you simply cannot say that
the wampuses do not exist. The environment and manner in which the legend is
told is too convincing. “That’s what kept the Wampus living. It, you know, it’s
one of those that you think, well it’s possible” (2004: 5). If the wampus is the
personification of the mine and the men who worked it, it may be possible that the
continued telling of and belief in the legend helps to keep the mine and the strong
community that is an integral part of it living.


