

Ginger Henry

"It's a monstrous miscarriage of justice."

"I'd say there's something fishy going on here."

"By George! Let's get him back in his home waters."

-- Comments heard on the streets of Hague

It's all the buzz in Hague. The citizens are incensed. Poor George, the Lake George monster who was born and bred in this picturesque little town in the northern basin, is wasting away in the Lake George Historical Association Museum in Lake George Village. The people of Hague want him back where he belongs! But the Lake George Museum says no way, standing firmly on the principle "possession is 90% of the law."

However, George's true owner, Shirley Armstrong, supports Hague fully in its quest. "When I placed George on loan to the Lake George Museum," she said, "I did it with the understanding that he would be properly displayed. But I am completely dissatisfied with the display." In any case, she continued, now that Hague has a museum of its own, "the monster should be in his home haunts, which is Hague."

Hague's Town Supervisor Dan Belden agrees. "He was created here, and his home should be here. I'll do anything in my power to see that he comes back to Hague," he said. The President of the Hague Historical Society, Jerry Crammond, also wants the monster back in Hague. "It would be nice to have the Lake George monster returned to the place of his birth," he said. "It would be great to have him prominently displayed in our community center."

Judy Foster, President of the Hague Chamber of Commerce, is outraged that the monster has not been returned to Hague. "It shouldn't even be a question!" she said. "He was created in Hague, he was put in the water in Hague and all the sitings were in Hague. How could anyone even think that he belongs anywhere but Hague?" Judy and her husband Peter own the stately mansion where Henry Watrous, George's creator, once lived. "Mr. Watrous loved Hague and he would certainly be horrified to learn that Hague is having such difficulty getting what is rightfully theirs."

Who is this monster at the source of the dispute? It all began back in the year 1904, when two Hague summer residents were engaged in a friendly rivalry to prove who was the more creative prankster of the two. Harry Watrous was a renowned artist and president of the National Academy of Design who owned a stately home just north of Hague. Col. William Mann was the publisher of the New York scandal sheet *Town Topics*, precursor to the *New Yorker* magazine, and had a summer residence on nearby Waltonian Island.

Both gentlemen were avid trout fishermen, competing to land the biggest catch. One fine summer day, Watrous spotted Mann hauling in what appeared to be a 30 to 40 pound specimen. But before Watrous could get close enough to get a better look, Mann had sped off.

The next week, Watrous visited Mann's island home, where the gigantic trout was displayed prominently on the wall. Upon closer examination, however, Watrous realized something fishy about the catch. The trout was made of wood. Watrous had fallen for Mann's prank -- hook, line and sinker.

Of course Watrous had far too much pride to let Mann have the last laugh, and immediately set about finding a way to get revenge. Let's listen to Watrous's own words as, years later, he described his plan to a reporter from the *Evening Sun*. "I got a cedar log and fashioned one end of it into my idea of a sea monster," he recounted. "For eyes I inserted in the sockets of the monster two telegraph pole insulators of green glass... I painted the head in yellow and black stripes, painted the inside of the mouth red and the teeth white, painted two red places for nostrils and painted the ears blue."

After rigging up a pulley system whereby he could control the monster from shore, Watrous waited for just the right moment to have him surface. That moment came when Mann, accompanied by guests from New York, boarded his boat at dusk to travel to his island home.

Watrous to the *Evening Star* reporter: "I watched as the launch approached, and just as it was about ten feet away from my trap, I released the monster. It came up nobly, the head shaking as if to rid itself of water, and I will say that ... it was a very menacing spectacle." Sorely frightened, Mann and his passengers made straight for his island dock. A lady passenger beat the water vigorously with her parasol, the gentlemen screamed unrepeatable epithets and Mann reportedly cried repeatedly, "Good God! What is it?"

One of Mann's guests, a New York reporter, immediately filed a report of the monster's existence and soon headlines asking, "Is there a Sea Serpent in Lake George?" were flashing across the city papers. Over the next weeks, reporters flocked to the scene. (Hey! Who wouldn't volunteer for an assignment to simply sit patiently on the shores of Lake George during August?) But, as one can well imagine, the reports on monster sightings did little to help Hague's tourist trade. One local hotelier pleaded with Watrous to stop the pranks -- or at least to spread the word that the monster had moved to the waters of another hotel!

A young couple honeymooning at the Island Harbor House that summer was taken by surprise during a romantic moonlight canoe ride when the monster surfaced, causing the canoe to capsize. The husband thrashed his way to shore, sacrificing his new bride to the monster. Fortunately, the Mrs. made it to shore on her own, where she declared -- as she packed her bags -- that she now knew who the real monster was.

After that, the Lake George monster languished in a shed on the Watrous property, seemingly forgotten until Louis Spelman of Silver Bay discovered him two decades later. He took him to his workshop, where he resided until Walt Grishkot happened upon him in 1961. It didn't take long for the local news media to learn that the monster had resurfaced (could Walt have played a role here?) and begin running stories on it. The reports caught the eye of Kay Bailey, who thought the monster was just the cutest little thing and declared that she simply had to take him home with her to the Virgin Islands. She was in luck. Her cousin, Shirley Armstrong, was covering the story for the *Times Union* and was able to purchase the monster for her from Spelman.

In the Caribbean, George (as Shirley had christened him) achieved instant fame, participating in parades around the island. But it didn't take Kay long to realize that George was just not taking to the waters of the Caribbean and that he really belonged on Lake George. Walt Grishkot and his wife Joan volunteered to fetch him (now there's *another* assignment I wouldn't have minded taking on!) and soon he was back home.

Well, not really *all* the way back home. For it seems he only made it as far as Lake George Village rather than to his real homewaters in Hague. Knowing that Hague didn't have a museum at the time, Shirley decided to place George on loan to the Lake George Museum in order to make him available to the public. However, Shirley said, now that Hague has its own museum, that's where George rightfully belongs.

Hague Chamber of Commerce President Judy Foster said, "Hague has accepted it as a real mission to get the Lake George monster back where he belongs. We'll do everything in our power to accomplish this. After all, Hague takes great pride in its history, and the monster is a part of that history. It's downright embarrassing that we have to preface any story about the monster by saying that he's in a museum down in Lake George Village rather than here in Hague where he belongs."

Use this as an op ed piece perhaps?

I can't think of a single reason for the monster to remain in the museum in Lake George. On the other hand, there are numerous reasons why he should be returned to Hague. First of all, he's part of Hague's history, and has nothing whatsoever to do with Lake George Village. The annual Hague Hoax Fest, centered around the story of the monster, brings the history of Hague to life, teaching residents and visitors about the town's past. It's somewhat ironic that the fest's organizers have had to build a replica of the monster to put on display because they simply cannot get the real thing returned to them from a place 30 miles down the road..

Secondly, Shirley Armstrong owns the monster and her wish is for him to be returned to Hague.

Thirdly, what I find even more disturbing than Shirley's point that the monster is not properly displayed in Lake George is the fact that the individuals at the museum apparently have no background knowledge about the history of the monster. It does little good to put the monster (or any other artifact) on display if the visitor has no idea what he or she is looking at. Case in point: When researching the history of the Lake George monster a number of years ago, I called the museum in Lake George with some questions. I was told that they did not have any information about the monster, only that he was housed there. The Hague Museum, on the other hand, run by Town Historian Clifton West, has extensive documentation on the monster. In addition, Clifton has his own memories of Watrous, whom he knew personally.

It would be interesting to hear whether or not the Lake George Historical Association Museum has any arguments at all as to why the monster should be housed there.