

# P R O L O G U E



“Civilization is like a thin layer of ice upon a deep ocean of chaos and darkness.” ~Werner Herzog

**Thursday, 17 November 2016, 9:55 PM CST, Hwy 71 South of Gillham, AR**

The small town of Gillham, Arkansas, lies in the Southwest part of the state. The area, originally known as the Silver Hill community, prospered during the first of the county’s mining booms, around 1874. There was never any silver found in the area. However, antimony was found. This metal is useful in alloys with lead or tin, so some mining carried on until World War I, which caused the town to continue growing. In 1897, a new town on the Kansas City, Pittsburg, and Gulf Railroad was developed immediately to the Southeast of Silver Hill; They named it for Robert Gillham, chief engineer of the railroad. The town was incorporated in 1902 with an estimated population of four hundred. The timber mill at Silver Hill and the proximity of the Bellah and Antimony Mines provided prosperity for the area until the Great Depression, which devastated the town’s economy.

World War II finished off what little remained of the community’s economy, which had faltered when the Great Depression had begun. The war took almost all of Gillham’s young men off too far-flung parts of the globe, with some never to return. Most of those who did return were in no mood to settle back into the homes and lives they had lived during the depression. Most scooped up their sweethearts, hurriedly planned and executed weddings, and headed off to build new lives in the excitement and endless possibilities of postwar America. A few stayed and continued working the family ranch or found work in the timber industry. Others found work in the larger towns of Mena, to the north, or De Queen, to the south. By 2016, Gillham, Arkansas, was simply another small town nestled alongside

Hwy. 71 as it snakes from The Missouri border near Bella Vista to Texarkana, Texas.

Two seventeen-year-old boys, Curtis Downs and his best friend Paul Archer, were living it up. Curtis was feeling on top of the world as he gunned the engine of his 2005 Dodge Ram pickup, climbing the rolling hills and maneuvering around the sharp turns of Hwy. 71 as they raced away from their hometown of De Queen. Both young men wore their black and gold De Queen Leopards letter jackets. Their season had been a disappointment, as they had only won two of their ten-game season. The successful teams were presently winding their way through the second round of the state playoffs. Curtis and Paul were trying to forget their miserable season and the reality that neither of them would ever play organized football again. Even though both were gifted athletes, neither young man had the size or speed to advance to the college level. Boyhood dreams of running out onto the field at Razorback Stadium in Fayetteville or War Memorial Stadium in Little Rock, wearing the cardinal and white jerseys of the Razorbacks, were fading fast.

It looked as if their future Razorback gear would be nothing more than tee-shirts purchased at the local Walmart in De Queen. Their future playing field would be the Weyerhaeuser timberlands in the local Kiamichi or Ouachita Mountains or, even worse, a Tyson Chicken plant. Both boys tried to push these thoughts to the back of their minds and concentrate on their newly found freedom. No more football meant no more football coaches, no more football practice, and best of all, no more football curfews. As they sped through the chilled November night, they had a couple of things on their minds: girls and guns. A week ago, Curtis had hit it off with a young lady from Gillham, located a few miles north of De Queen. Janis Burke was eighteen, and everything young Curtis thought a woman should be. More importantly, Janis lived in a trailer with her single mother, who worked nights at the Tyson Chicken plant in Grannis, Arkansas, about 10 miles north of Gillham. Normally the plant closed at 11:00 PM; however, with the holiday season fast approaching, the plant was running twenty-four hours a day. The mother of young Janis had volunteered to work overtime through the night because she needed the extra money to get herself and her daughter through the winter.

Janis promised her mother she would do her homework and go to bed early. Well, Janis got her homework done. However, knowing her mother would not return from work until after 8:00 the next morning, she invited her new boyfriend Curtis to come for a visit. She knew Curtis had a cute friend, Paul, who would be perfect for her best friend, Lisa. Janis had the evening perfectly planned, or so she thought, as she and Lisa waited for the two boys. Curtis was doing his best to live in the moment as he and Paul rocketed north along Hwy 71.

"Tonight's the night!" he said, smiling at Paul, who was busy examining Curtis' new Judge Pistol, a recent gift from his father.

Looking up from the pistol, Paul asked, "The night for what?"

"I'm going to get busy, my man."

"You'll be busy getting slapped and told, no," Paul said, laughing.

"No way, man, tonight is the night! There won't be any saying, 'No' tonight," Curtis exclaimed, producing a bottle of Jack Daniels.

"It could work," Paul said, momentarily losing interest in the pistol.

"So, what's her friend look like? Have you seen her?" He inquired.

"No, but Janis says she's a hottie."

"They all say that when they want to hook up their ugly friends with one of their boyfriend's buddies," Paul said with sarcasm.

"I wouldn't worry about how she looks if I were you, Paul. You have bigger worries than that."

"Yeah, what would that be?" Paul asked, walking right into the trap Curtis had laid. "You better hope she's blind and doesn't have a sense of smell or you'll be sitting on the porch all night."

Holding the pistol out of the passenger window, Paul said, "How about I just toss this in the weeds, smart guy?"

"Don't even joke like that, man," Curtis said, seriously.

"Don't worry; I wouldn't do you that way. Besides, I'll be loving up both women tonight while you sit around and rub your pistol," Paul said confidently as he rolled up the window. Both young men burst into laughter. They knew the best they could hope for was some topless fondling if they got that lucky. "You got ammo for this?" Paul asked.

"In the glove box," Curtis answered. Digging in the glove box, Paul produced a box of four-ten shells. "Just four-ten shells, no forty fives?" He asked with mild disappointment.

They didn't have any at Walmart. Dad's going to take me to the Academy in Texarkana Saturday, and I'll get some then. Those four-ten shells are slugs, though; they will do some serious damage to whatever we shoot at."

"Cool," Paul said, eyeing the box of shells with newly found respect. As the boys neared Gillham, Curtis slowed the truck as he came upon a sharp curve just before going under a railroad bridge. The bridge had been upgraded several times over the years. The last upgrade left sizeable walkways between the concrete bridge pylon and the natural rock structure, which were as much a part of the bridge's foundation as the concrete pylons themselves. When the headlights of the Dodge truck filled the bridge area with light, both boys saw an enormous figure with glowing, orange eyes blinking against the glare of the headlights. The figure was wedged in between the bridge pylon and the natural rock. It was holding something to its chest and appeared to be covered in blood.

"What the hell?" Paul exclaimed.

"Was that what I thought it was?" Curtis asked, nervously looking back at his friend.

"It was eating a sheep!" Paul screamed. "It was a Sasquatch, and it was eating a damn sheep!"

"Load the gun!" Curtis said, slamming on the brakes.

"I don't know man, maybe we should just keep going," Paul said, nervously, even as he loaded the gun; his hands were shaking violently.

"Don't be a wimp, man. You know what that is?" Curtis asked his friend.

"That thing is a monster and will probably do to us what it did to that poor sheep," Paul answered.

"Wrong! That's our ticket out of here, man! No lumber mill, no chicken plant, no job at the Walmart changing tires. Man, that's money and freedom. All you have to do is shoot it in the face with those slugs," Curtis said as he turned the truck around to head back toward the bridge.

"Why do I have to shoot it?" Paul asked.

"Because I have to drive. Don't worry; if the thing looks like it's going to attack us, I'll just speed away. Come on man, this is the chance of a lifetime. We have to take it."

"I guess so," Paul said, nervously.

"Roll your window down and get ready. I hope it didn't run off," Curtis said as they approached the bridge. As the lights of the truck illuminated the area of the bridge, Curtis was elated, and Paul was deflated. A tall reddish-brown figure stood in the middle of the highway directly on the center line, fifteen feet in front of the railroad overpass. Blood covered the area around its mouth, as was its chest. It clutched a dead sheep in its hand as it stared unblinking at the truck. It didn't move a muscle. Its expression was vacant as if it didn't care that the two young men in the truck were approaching it. It continued to gaze passively in their direction, almost as if curious.

"Damn, he's huge," Curtis said with a nervous laugh.

"Curtis, throw this rig in reverse and let's get the hell out of here," Paul pleaded.

"No way, Paul. This thing is dumber than a box of hammers. It's going to let us roll right up on it and shoot it. Roll your window down Paul and get ready."

"No way man, I'm not rolling down my window."

"Paul, if it wanted to get us, the window wouldn't keep us safe. It would go right through it; the damn thing must be ten feet tall."

"Yeah, and bullet proof too," Paul snarled, upset by his friend's lack of concern with the threat right in front of them.

"Paul, we're seconds away from being rich men. Do you want to be known as the guy who killed Bigfoot, or do you want to pluck chickens for the rest of your life? This time tomorrow you'll be shopping for a new truck." Paul was warming to the idea of being rich, plus the creature wasn't exhibiting any threatening behavior. He decided he was stuck here anyway, so he might as well play his hand.

"Okay man," he said, rolling down the window and nervously extending his arm forward with the pistol pointed in the general direction of the creature.

"Let me ease up a little closer," Curtis said as he took his foot off the brake, allowing the truck to inch forward slowly. The creature

remained motionless, illuminated by the headlights, continuing to look passively at the vehicle and its occupants. Paul again saw the orange glow of the eyes, which caused him to shiver. The truck was ten feet from the creature, and Paul had to hold the gun upwards at a forty-five-degree angle in order to point it toward the face of his intended victim. Both boys had to lean forward and look up through the windshield in order to see its face. There was the slightest of changes in the creature's facial expression.

For a moment, Curtis and Paul both thought they saw a slight smile on the creature's face and saw it nod its head, almost imperceptibly. A moment was all they had to register that thought. Suddenly, a blinding white light illuminated the vehicle from above. Both teenagers squinted their eyes to see through the immense glare. At the same moment, they heard very heavy and fast running feet approaching from their right. Then there was a furious explosion of glass and metal as the truck was turned on its side. Paul's world went black; he never knew what hit him. Curtis could only register surprise at the attack from their flank as he lay on his side against the driver's window. The last thing he saw was the truck's windshield as it smashed, spraying him with shards of glass. Then sweet darkness took away his fear. Janis and Lisa spent the rest of the evening confused and wondering why Curtis and Paul never showed. It never occurred to them that the distant sound of emergency vehicle sirens had anything at all to do with their missing guests.

### **Thursday, 17 November 2016, 10:25 PM CST, Hwy. 71 South of Gillham, AR**

The accident site surrounding the area of the Dodge pickup was a mystery to the First Responders. There was a dead sheep in the road, a bashed-in windshield, and evidence that at least two occupants had been in the truck. They questioned the original motorist who came upon the scene. He said he never saw a driver, only the overturned truck. Sevier County Sheriff's Deputies and Arkansas State Troopers discussed several plausible scenarios. Did the truck strike the sheep? Did somebody throw the sheep from the railroad bridge onto the

truck's windshield? None of it made sense. There were no skid marks indicating a high-speed rollover. It was as if the truck had simply been turned on its side. There was no blood or evidence of the truck's occupant or occupants other than an unopened bottle of whiskey. There were, however, two sets of tennis shoes neatly lined up next to the road, as if the owners of the shoes had removed them and placed them neatly beside the road. A Taurus Judge pistol was rested in one shoe.

Arkansas State Trooper, Jennings, had been the first to notice the shoes. A Sevier County Sheriff's Deputy said to him, "That's weird, have you ever seen anything like it before?"

"Yeah, once," Jennings replied.

"What do you make of it, then?"

Jennings moved away silently. I don't even want to think about it, he thought, putting distance between himself and the shoes. The truck was registered to a man in De Queen, and a unit was sent to that address. Following questioning the owner, they discovered the truck was being driven by his teenage son, Curtis, and there was a good chance his best friend, Paul, was with him. Now, the parents of both boys were at the accident scene, and the wailing of two worried mothers was more than Jennings could take. Determined to find answers and put distance between himself and the grieving mothers, Trooper Jennings kept moving and searching. A couple of other law enforcement officers had moved further away into the darkness as well. They, too, were affected by the sorrowful sounds of the mothers as they reacted to the accident scene, which held no sign of their children.

Since the arrival of the parents, he and the other officers knew they were looking for two teenage males. Beyond the truck itself and the whiskey, the only other evidence at the scene was the remains of a dead sheep. The sheep didn't appear to have been hit by the truck. It looked as though something had torn it open with brute force. Jennings came upon a low area that was covered in soft, damp soil with no grass. As he looked down, his heart sank. This wasn't what he had expected to find. A huge, bare, humanlike footprint was embedded in the soft soil. The footprint sent chills down the spine of the Trooper. Things were getting a little too creepy now. The footprint

appeared to be at least eighteen inches long and seven to eight inches across. It brought back the memories of an incident he had been trying to forget for over two years now.

In July of 2014, he had responded to a military aircraft crash at Queen Wilhelmina State Park in the Ouachita Mountains near Mena, Arkansas. He and another Trooper, along with a Game Warden, had come upon a group of National Guardsmen who had discovered three charred remains. Remains of what? He had been asking himself for the past couple of years. He knew they weren't people, and he knew they weren't local black bears as the Game Warden had claimed during the discovery. There was a National Guard Sergeant who seemed to suspect they were the corpses of something else which had gotten caught in the fireball of the crash. He remembered the young NCO and his passionate argument with the Game Warden. He also remembered how the Game Warden had taken command of the situation and ordered the Guardsmen out of the area before the NCO had a chance to explain his theory.

Those weren't bears, he reminded himself. Bears would not have been the subject of such a heated debate. Nor would they explain the debrief he and his fellow Troopers were given by the Game Warden and a Special Agent with the National Forest Service, who swore both troopers to secrecy. He had never received any plausible explanation for the scene which he'd witnessed or why it was so important to keep it all quiet. Then again, he didn't need to be told. A Park Ranger had come to the scene to assist the Game Warden in guarding the bodies until they could be removed. On their way out of the area, he and the other State Trooper had come across footprints in a creek bed, which led straight to where the corpses were lying. They were large prints of bare feet, exactly like the one he was staring at now, except this one had six toes. Although he found the number of toes confusing, the growing fear in his stomach soon made it just a confusing detail. His mind was racing; he did not want to encounter whatever left this print, much less on a dark night like this.

He and the other Trooper couldn't wait to get out of the woods and back to their vehicles which were parked at the Lodge. They never spoke about the prints to each other, but they both knew there were things in those woods they didn't want to encounter. It reinforced



their fears after dawn the next morning when they saw the Game Warden and Park Ranger in the medical tent. Both were injured and in shock. They claimed to have been attacked by assailants who threw large logs and rocks with incredible accuracy. When asked why they didn't shoot, they explained the attackers were hidden from view inside the wood line.

Trooper Jennings had some law enforcement friends in Oklahoma whose border was only nine miles away to the West. He'd heard tales from some of his Oklahoma buddies about the troubles in and around Talihina, Oklahoma, which also occurred two years ago. How could you keep something like this quiet? He thought to himself. He didn't want to believe any of this could have happened to those two boys who were missing from the truck, but the evidence was staring him in the face. As much as he didn't want to admit it to himself, he knew what left the print on the ground. He caught himself shivering; it wasn't so much because of the print. It was because of the shoes at the accident scene. All they'd ever found of the F-16 pilot two years ago were his boots. Those boots had also been neatly aligned on the side of the road, exactly like the tennis shoes here. The print pointed west toward Oklahoma, which added to his unease. Wherever these kids are, I'm afraid we're never going to find them, he thought to himself.

Keying the microphone on his lapel, he said into the radio, "Base, this is seven; we're going to need Fish and Game out here. And you'd better wake up the boss; he'll need to see this." The other State Troopers and a couple of County Deputies heard his transmission and made their way over to him. As they walked up to him, he looked at the Deputies and said, "Better get your brass out here. They'll tear you a new one if you don't let them know about this. They'll want to get ahead of it before it hits the media." Then he directed his light on the print.