

The Brown Lake Mermaid



Here's a strange story that our marketing team recently dug up while doing historical research on the geographic area surrounding Cypress Cove. If you're prone to believe in weird local legends, this one's for you. If you're a skeptic, read on anyway; we're betting you'll keep a closer watch on Brown Lake and any other body of water at Cypress Cove for the next four weeks.

According to a newspaper article from St. Augustine's *Florida Gazette* dated October 1, 1822, Col Joseph Russ and friend George Jackson were on an exploratory excursion through the central parts of the new US territory of Florida when they happened upon a small Seminole Indian village next to what we know of today as Brown Lake in Osceola County. In the village, they found only two children alive. The rest of the inhabitants had been killed weeks earlier by what the children called an *Iha:Ihi Ittabbi*, which in their native Mikasuki language meant "fish legs." Evidently, it was a man-sized creature that lived in the water but could also walk on land.

The children, a boy and a girl, both told the same story: soon after their families set up the village along the shore, people began mysteriously drowning in the lake. Usually, it happened while they were bathing. Something beneath the surface attached itself to their ankles and pulled them into the deeper waters. The young boy actually survived an attack. Though it was difficult for Russ and Jackson to translate his words, the youth managed to tell them that he believed it was a woman swimming under the water and playing a trick on him. She dragged him out to the center of the lake, yanking and then letting him go in a playful manner. When he resisted, she tried to drown him, so he allowed her to take him further out. When she realized he was just a boy, she pushed him back toward the shore and disappeared.

Russ and Jackson spent seven days searching the lake for the mysterious creature, but found nothing. They then took the children to a fishing town near the coast where they left them in the care of a frontier family.

Eleven years later, Colonel Russ wrote a memoir that detailed more of the story. In *Travels Through the Florida Territory*, published in 1833, Russ said this:

My accounting of the empty village at Grave Lake [Brown Lake] is by now well-known, but I shall tell briefly of a second expedition to the same spot, wherein George [Jackson] and I had the occasion to speak with other natives, knowledgeable of the mass deaths. Those natives hunted the fish-legged mermaid for naught less than five years after George and I departed the region. From lake to stream they followed the creature across God-forsaken wilderness to the edge of the sea. Then, back through rough country only to find themselves once more at the shore of Grave.

They finally destroyed the monster there, driving cypress spears into its scaled hide until dead. The leader of the group said the thing wailed like a woman bearing child before its ghost left it. Today, explorers more intrepid than we, upon traveling near to Grave Lake, say one can hear the beastly cries upon the waters during certain moons. Though George and I trust the sound comes from winds slipping through the cypress boughs. Even still, we shall not visit there again.

Some historians believe Russ and Jackson saw more than what Russ admitted in his memoir. Other writings from those times claim the men were both shown the preserved carcass of "Fish Legs." Jackson, in his own recounting of the tale, hinted as much. It is also through Jackson that the legend of Grave Lake has been preserved. In a letter to his wife dated October 1, 1842—20 years after discovering the massacred village—Jackson said this:

...and you know how I feel about these stories from your Aunt Lottie, my dear. Save for one, which you have heard me recount more than needed, such fantasies are for dreamers and gossips. In that matter of Grave Lake, however, there can be no doubt, and even the legend bears closer consideration. For in years to come, when those unwitting souls who no doubt will visit or, Providence forbid, reside near that cursed pool, if the ghastly thing Old Joe and I saw indeed shows itself, as the lore portends, then the legend will have shown its value.

Later research proved that Jackson was referring to a real legend, handed down from explorers and Seminoles familiar with the Grave Lake massacre, which claims that every 100 years the mutilated corpse of Fish Legs shows up in local bodies of water for a period of 31 days. The appearances begin on October 1, which coincides with the date when the final Seminole was killed in the lake in 1822, and they stop after October 31, which marks the date in 1827 when the beast was finally destroyed.

In October of 1922, when Kissimmee's population was only around 3,000 people, no one paid much attention to the few newspaper stories of a decomposing corpse mysteriously appearing and disappearing in local waterways. Back then, there were cattle to raise, homes to build, and towns to grow. Rumors came and went until the end of the month. Then, nothing. As time passed, the legend of Grave Lake has been forgotten. Only a dedicated researcher will find mention of it after 1922. The information is out there, but in an age of science and technology, legends of mermaids and the supernatural are quickly disregarded as foolishness or hoaxes.

As we approach October 1, 2022, will anyone be paying attention to the legend of Grave Lake and the story of the murderous "Fish Legs?" If you live in or around the Cypress Cove community, did you even know that the very lake mentioned in the story is your very own Brown Lake? Keep watch, friends, the mermaid of Brown Lake only appears every 100 years. Maybe this will be the year you'll see a living(?) legend.

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