

The Winsted Wildman

Of all the far-fetched stories that have come from this region, usually by way of *The Winsted Evening Citizen*, none can top the story of the Winsted Wildman; it even became the title of a book by Frank Wentworth, published in 1929.

The story begins in 1895, August 1895 to be exact, and no doubt on what is known in the newspaper trade as “a slow news day”. The *Winsted Herald*, a weekly paper reported the following breaking news:

“The Wildman – He Appears to Selectman Riley Smith and Scares Riley’s Bulldog Out of a Year’s Growth”.

“Last Saturday Selectman Riley Smith went up to Colebrook on business. Mr. Smith, while there, went over into the fields and began picking and eating berries from the low bushes in the field. While he was stooping over picking berries, his bulldog, which is noted for its pluck, ran with a whine to him and stationed itself between his legs. A second afterward a large man, stark naked, and covered with hair all over his body, ran out of a clump of bushes at lightning speed, where he soon disappeared. Selectman Smith is a powerful, wiry man and has a reputation for having lots of sand, and his bulldog is also noted for his pluck, but Riley admits that he was badly scared and his dog was fairly paralyzed with fear. If any of the readers of the *Herald* have lost a wild, hairy man of the woods, six feet in height, and want to find him, they can go up to Colebrook, and when near the “Lewis Place” wander around in the woods and fields and perhaps recover their lost property”.

Winsted Herald, August 21, 1895

The following week’s edition, under the headline “Selectman Smith Stands by His Story”, went on to say: “The story of the Wildman caused quite a little excitement about town. There is little to add to the story, except to say that Mr. Smith states that the man was within a small cleared space, which was surrounded by bushes. Mr. Smith did not see him until the dog whined and ran between his legs. Mr. Smith says the man’s hair was black and hung down long on his shoulders, and that his body was thickly covered with black hair. The man was remarkably agile, and to all appearance was a muscular, brawny man, a man against whom any ordinary man would stand little chance

Mr. Smith is a man who talks but little, he is a man of undoubted pluck and nerve, and his word is first class. When Mr. Smith says he saw the man *he did see him*, and there can be no question about it.

Quite a number of men in Winsted today stated to us that they were ready to go and hunt for the man.

Well gentlemen, the way is open. If he is still there, he ought, for the sake of the isolated farmers there and the women folks, to be captured”.

Winsted Herald, August 28 1895

Another week passes, and the headline now reads: “Jim Maddrah Says He Was Chased by the Terror”. “Jim says it is a fact, that while berrying in Riley Smith’s berry patch recently, he saw the Wildman. Jim shot the Wildman with a Kodak and got the following picture. Jim says the Kodak got frightened and put all the hair on the man’s head. (Note: Mr. Maddrah’s picture of the Wildman adorns the cover.)”

Winsted Herald, September 4, 1895

Also in the same paper appears the following: "Mrs. Pulver, of Colebrook, mother of Bert Culver, [the Pulvers lived on the farm at the intersection of Conn. Routes 183 and 182], Postmaster of Colebrook, hailed Hall's Stage this morning and in great distress and excitement informed the driver and occupants of the stage that she had seen the Wildman a short distance from the house this morning and requested the driver to ask the people of Winsted to send a party to catch the Wildman at once."

And yet another article in the Sept. 4 edition: "Possibility that the Wildman is Arthur Beckwith, the insane artist, escaped from a madhouse. Beckwith's romantic history is that he was once a wealthy, talented artist, but an accident made him insane. The out-of-town papers are still writing up the Wildman by the yard, without much regard for facts, and for that matter without much regard to fiction. The *Hartford Sunday Globe* contained the following in its latest issue":

("It is worthy to reproduce because of its premises as to the identity of the wandering vagabond who was encountered in the woods by Selectman Smith): The theory that he may be Arthur Beckwith, the escaped insane artist, lends an additional interest to the affair. Beckwith was the son of Nelson Beckwith, a former minister to France, and though a wealthy man, was brought up to earn his own living. He opened a studio in New York and began to accumulate a fortune. At his father's death he received \$500,000, as his share of the estate, and at that time possessed \$140,000 of his own. While driving a pair of fast horses on 7th Avenue he met with an accident, which placed him in a maniac's cell. He was inclined toward suicide and was closely guarded in his home for many years.

In 1890 he was sent to the Litchfield Asylum. Under treatment he became milder and was regarded as harmless. On Sept. 10 1892, while playing pool, he was left in a room for a moment and when his keepers returned he was missing.

Six months later he was found in Cuba, living in a cave and acting like a Wildman. He wandered about the country nude, living on uncooked food, vegetables and fruit. He never molested anybody, but caused a reign of terror. He was finally captured and taken to the coast of Florida, where he again escaped. Later he was retaken, brought to Connecticut and again placed in the Litchfield Sanitarium. Later he was removed to the Sanford Hall Insane Asylum, at Flushing, N.Y., but in the spring of 1894 he again escaped".

Throughout September additional news items about the Wildman appeared, some purporting to come from Civil War military enactment corps, others about the various reporters from newspapers all over the northeast. The military units failed to appear and the reporters all went home empty handed, except for the fingernail biting accounts they conjured up with their fertile minds.

The Winsted (shouldn't it have been called the Colebrook?) Wildman began as a mystery and ended as a mystery. Perhaps someday a local explorer will rediscover the Colebrook Cave and find an over size skeleton and a pile of long black hair; then we can put the whole story to rest.

Historic Bytes
Bob Grigg