

Attack of the Roogaroos!

Stories by Gilbert Pelletier, Norman Fleury, Joe and Norma Welsh and interview by Sherry Farrell Racette

Gilbert Pelletier (GP): Well, first of all you gotta understand what the *Roogaroo* is. A *Roogaroo* can be anything, you know. It could turn into a wolf. Mostly it's a wolf. But it could turn into any kind of animal.

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Norman Fleury (NW): We went from the *Roogaroo*, which is the werewolf, and why it happened to people. Why those people had the presence of those bad spirits is because they weren't following a good way of life. They weren't following their religion. They were being bad people. And they're the ones that were victims. They were victimized by the *Roogaroo*. The *Roogaroo* came to get them...To save the soul, you had to draw blood from these animals, hit them on the nose, and when you drew blood, you saved a soul and the animal disappeared.

Sherry Farrel Racette (SFR): Of the soul of the *Roogaroo*?

NF: The *Roogaroo* just disappeared.

GP: But they only had forty days.

NF: They owned so many souls eh? Like you say, they owned so many souls. The people that died and went on after life, if they were bad, the people said well "the Devil came and got that person. He wasn't a good person." So you saved the souls of the departed, the people that went beyond in what do you call it, the "mystery world" or the "spirit world?"

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GP: They had forty days to save that soul, and that's only during Lent, which is forty days...That's the only time you'll see them actually. But we were always afraid of him year-round, but it was only at that time that they went out.

SFR: So the *Roogaroos* were out at Lent?

GP: At Lent and only after midnight. You wouldn't see them before midnight.

NF: See it was associated with religion, and that's why they got priests. They got the priests to come to the homes, and bless the homes and pray, and get rid of those bad spirits that were in those homes.

SFR: So they would come as a wolf, as a dog, usually a black dog?

NF: Or horse or a pig.

SFR: A horse sometimes?

GP: Yeah.

And it could



be part pig. No, it's not necessarily a whole horse or a whole person or whole dog, it could part of an animal. Maybe just a head would be the wolf...But in order to save it you had to draw that blood eh?

SFR: Did they tell *Roogaroo* stories all the time or just during Lent?

GP: Well at certain times, if they start on *Roogaroo* stories that would probably go for the night. You know, it would be straight *Roogaroo* stories for the night eh? Then maybe the next night they'll move on to something else. It could be something else. You know, it could be the Devil that they'll talk about. You know, but this is part of the Devil, because that's (the *Roogaroo*) the Devil's hired help. Yeah, these people work for the Devil. They didn't have much choice actually, I guess...They were hired by the Devil.

NF: Because see they lived a bad life. Automatically they became easy targets.

GP: If you did something really bad, you know. If you'd done something bad all the time, they will become the target for the...

NF: They were more vulnerable. And that's how the people said that they're working for the Devil. And how they got paid is, they got a soul. A soul was given of the departed, you see, because the Devil had them, and so many of them in numbers. So he says, "You work for me and I'll give you a soul." And see that's, that's the way it happened. That was their pay.

Norma Welsh (NW): My Grandma Welsh, she used to tell us stories, and she couldn't speak English. She always told them to us in French. We would all sit around the big potbellied stove in wintertime,

of course, and she would tell us these stories, and not one of us knew

what she was talking about. But we were right into it: we were so

intense. You could more or less tell by her actions that it was scary. She did that for years. Other people told stories

basically the same way in the wintertime, sitting by

the potbelly stove, they would be telling stories about *Roogaroos*, and scaring the heck out

of you. There were lot of good storytellers in those days...

I remember one story about a *Roogaroo*. These people, I knew them at that time. They're dead now, but anyway

this one lady suspected that her husband was a *Roogaroo*. One night she had to go to the neighbours

to borrow some coal oil because that's what we used for lights. Anyway, on the way she met a dog, and the dog

grabbed her by the apron and ripped it. She picked up a stick and hit it, and chased the dog away. It took a

little part of her apron with it. That was fine. She went and borrowed the coal oil and when she got home her husband was lying on the bed and looked like he was sleeping. She went over to look at him.

He was lying there and he had a bump, and he had a piece of the apron in his mouth. And this went on I don't know how long.

At one point she went to the priest and asked him what she should do. He said, "You better bring him to church. Maybe we can get rid of whatever's possessing him." Anyway, she took him to church, and when he saw the host, the Eucharist, he went crazy, went screaming out of the church. I don't know if anybody has heard from him since. She told that story for many years about her husband being



a *Roogaroo*. You hear all kinds of stories like that. This man was very violent and drank a lot. A lot of them did at that time. They beat up their wives, but this man I knew personally. I don't know whatever happened to him after that or her for that matter. I guess they moved away from the area.

Sherry Farrell Racette (SFR): What shape would a *Roogaroo* take?

NW: The *Roogaroo* was a dog as far as I know...Like a wolf-like dog, maybe a coyote or something like that. I've heard a lot of stories about husbands being *Roogaroos*.

SFR: What about you Joe, you heard any *Roogaroo* stories?

Joe Welsh (JW): "*Loup garou*" is French for werewolf and "*Roogaroo*" is a bastardization of the French word "*loup*" which means "wolf." I don't know what "*garou*" means. Like I said, it was the French version of a werewolf. I looked it up in a couple of dictionaries. They were so old that they didn't have the same definition. The *Roogaroo* story that I became familiar with is the same as Norma's story.

You know, we talk about differences in communities. There's a family difference here, of course... There were different versions. These people, guys from my generation, would sit around and would add to that a little bit. In all the *Roogaroo* stories that I've heard, they were supposed to be able to be here one instant and over there the next instant, and they would bring news from one community to the other.

And then this particular guy that Norma's talking about, he was supposed to be able to be in Fort Qu'Appelle one minute and in Lebret the next. Two guys from Lebret told me the story about Lebret and Fort Qu'Appelle being four miles apart. And when they wanted to go to Fort Qu'Appelle they usually walked. They were walking along the railroad tracks one day, and they heard this running sound and panting behind them. They looked around and then this Bill said, "Hi guys, how you doing there?" They talked to him. He said, "Well, I gotta go." So he went down to the bush along the lake, and so they continued on their way to town. And when they got back here, this guy was in town already and they said, "How long have been there?" "Oh, about fifteen minutes," he said. Then these guys said "We saw him fifteen minutes ago. We were talking to him." So then the mystique spread.

Then I was living at Gabriel's Crossing, and I met an old guy in Duck Lake. Well, we got to talking about where I'm from and where he's from. He told me his version of *Roogaroo*. It was pretty well the same, and I was telling him about my *Roogaroo*. And he said, "Was this guy named Bill?" He said, "Did he have a little scar on his eye?" I said, "I don't know, I don't think so." And he said, "Did he have a bad shoulder?" And I said, "Well, I don't know." And he said, "'Cause there was a guy named Bill. He was from Lebret. They say he was a *Roogaroo*. He used to come up here, tell his news and then he'd go back to Lebret, Fort Qu'Appelle, tell them news."

He heard that this Bill was a *Roogaroo*. They were drinking one night. The way to stop a guy from being a *Roogaroo* is to cure the curse. You have to draw blood from him, and the only way to draw blood is to cut him on the left ear. So I guess these guys are playing cards, and they got drunk. This guy felt so sorry for old Bill that he was going to cure him of being a *Roogaroo*. So he went outside and got a little stick and he sharpened it. He was gonna stab him on the ear with this stick. So I guess Bill saw him, and he moved away. He nicked his ear, but he felt it. "Uh oh, I missed his ears," so he took another shot at him. He stabbed him in the shoulder, and I guess Bill got the hell out of there. So he checked with a few guys there, "Yup, he had a scar on his face and he had a scar on his shoulder."

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Some guy tried to help him out. They didn't know who it was. It was just a coincidence of learning from my community and from the people that I had spoken with, and then moving two hundred miles away, talking to a guy from Bill's generation and hearing the story like that. It's a beautiful thing to

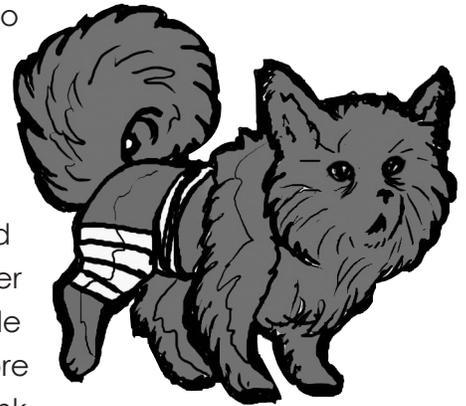
happen, a beautiful coincidence. It adds to the legend. And it always grows, I guess.

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That was the interesting part of what I had to find out. There are three versions, and one has to do with Catholicism. In the old days with all the rules that the Catholics had, there was a period of time between the beginning of Lent and what's called Ascension Thursday. Anyway, this is forty days ahead of Easter and one is forty days after Easter. During that time you have to—it's a rule of the Church, or it was a rule of the Church—go to confession and receive Holy Communion. And if you didn't, that was a worst kind of mortal sin you could commit, and no matter what you did for the rest of your life, you were condemned to hell.

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It was tough, tough road. But that was one of the versions, and it was the same cure. Well, in stories that I've heard anyway. This other guy, this one that we've been talking about, there was another rule that he was neglectful about. He was supposed to have had more ability than the average person, but he wasted it. Like being drunk, missing church, beating his wife, neglecting his responsibilities as a man. That was another way you could become a *Roogaroo*.



And again, in the Métis and Half-breed stories, the cure was the same. And around Fort Qu'Appelle there was another guy who was the Indian version of the *Roogaroo*, and they called him the same thing—“*Roogaroo*.” And there was another guy, he wasn't bad. He was a decent man, but he put himself above everybody. He was proud and cheeky, and he wasn't kind to people who were less fortunate than he was, and that's how he became a *Roogaroo*.

To lift this curse was a little bit different, but it ended up the same. You had to draw blood from him, but in this particular story that I learned, it didn't have to be from the left ear.

You could, if you were kind to him, have good luck in hunting or fishing. So the Old People who told me this story about this particular guy said that if you leave to go hunting in the fall, and if maybe you only get one duck, you should leave it in the wood pile as if you went fishing in the wintertime. You pulled your nets, and you didn't get very many fish, you would leave the fish in with wild game, or candies or things like that. Sweet stuff—they're supposed to like sweet stuff. So, if you left them in your wood pile or along the trail where you knew that he (the *Roogaroo*) frequented, and he'd find them, you would get better luck in your hunting or fishing. This old guy, he said he used to do that all the time. And if he left a duck or a goose or something in the fall, he'd have particularly good hunting, and then in the winter he left a couple of fish in his wood pile this guy (the *Roogaroo*) would come get them, and for the next couple weeks or so his nets would be full. And that extra effort would make sure you have extra luck.

So just out of that one community there were three different versions of a legend, and they all have to do with, with morality and being decent...The Catholic Church's version naturally was the meanest. You didn't have a hope in hell, but the other two you had a way of redemption.

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There was an old Indian guy from, from Standing Buffalo. He told me that he had relatives from all over North America, from Louisiana, the Bayou and Cajuns. He said there's different *Roogaroos* there, and he said there's an island in one of them oceans down south of the States. I finally figured out he meant the Caribbean. And then in Haiti, they have a different version. This guy knew a lot of stuff. And so I went to

libraries and looked it up, and sure enough, wherever there are Catholics and French and Indians, there comes those kinds of stories. They have the same root, and the same moral lessons and more or less the same kind of story. The redemption factor is usually the same and that's all over the place.

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The other part of the thing was that when evil or the force, whatever it was, cursed you, the curse would last seven years, and during those seven years someone had to redeem you from the burden. If, after seven years you weren't saved by someone, then they needed the Catholic Church. You had no hope of redemption after those seven years. The guy gave you certain time to be redeemed. And the form of the *Roogaroo* in the stories that I've heard, you were a big ugly black dog who everybody was afraid of. To show kindness to something that you are afraid of took take a lot of courage for one thing, and, and I guess the idea was to face a fear and to confront it. And something worthy would happen to you at the hand of somebody else. So there was another moral lesson or moral obligation for fellow human beings. I found that to be in direct contrast to the Catholic one, where you had no hope. Whereas in the Métis one, and in the Indian one, you had to depend on another human being to save and redeem you.

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SFR: Did people just ever use *Roogaroos* to frighten you?

NW: Oh, all the time...Oh, for sure. The Catholic Church scared the heck out of us with all this gloom and doom, and we're going to hell forever. It didn't matter what we did, we had to go invent sins to go to confession...During Lent there was more talk about stuff like that (*Roogaroos*) because if you danced or ate meat, you were going to hell for sure.

