



18 June 1881

Mr. Abernathy,

As requested, in this package please find our report compiling Prof. Connolly's correspondence and photographs from his springtime travels. You will no doubt note several missing reports, which we attribute to the difficulties of cross-continental mail transport and the unreliability of the telegraph system.

We have no experience in dealing with private investigation firms, but yours comes highly recommended to us through the Denver lodge of our society, so we hold forth great hope for your success in locating Connolly. Should you have further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us. We are pledged to help in any way possible.

The dispatch from Tucson marked Prof. Connolly's last contact with us. Although we are not schooled in the art of investigation, our board believes this may be a likely area in which to begin your search for him. You are the detective, however, so we bow to your experience and expertise in this endeavor.

As stated in our initial discussion, we must request a full accounting and receipts for all expenses incurred above and beyond your agreed-upon fee.

Sincerely,

Stephen Hutchens

Stephen Hutchens

Chairman

Explorer's Society, Charleston S.C. Lodge

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Field Report #1

New Varney Flats, Kansas

21 March 1881

Let me begin by once again thanking the members of our lodge for sponsoring my expedition through the western regions of the continent. It is with a heavy heart that I make this journey alone, but I understand that finance is as active a stressor in our lives as any force of nature. I hope that my endeavors will reflect well upon not only the Charleston lodge, but the Explorer's Society as a whole!

I am currently two days behind the travel schedule I presented to the Society. While I find the delay in New Varney Flats frustrating, I know all too well from experience that an alteration in itinerary of a mere few days while traversing the continent is hardly cause for outrage. Only a year or two ago, I'd have counted myself lucky to have completed the journey without at least sighting an armed gang in the employ of another railroad, if not an outright assault on the train!

Asking around, I determined the problem arose not from a skirmish in the so-called "Great Rail Wars," which the papers in Charleston would have us believe are concluded. I can safely say—if the presence of well-armed guards onboard my train is any indication—the owner of the Black River Railroad Co. considers the matter far from settled. No, instead it seems there was a brief flare-up of partisan violence between supporters of the Union and those of the Confederacy

somewhere westward along the track. For the passengers' safety, the railroad decided to halt its trains temporarily.

At first, I supposed I could be in worse surroundings. After all, the original Varney Flats is the source of a well-known legend back in the tearoom of the Society's Charleston lodge. The tale claims the settlement all but vanished in a single, blood-soaked night.

I hoped to follow up on the tale's origins, but found none of the current residents actually were present. No one could point me to an eyewitness to the supposed event, leaving me to wonder if the outlandish claims of blood-sucking revenants weren't simply exaggerations to hide the depredations of border raiders, or possibly even a bloody-minded war party sallying forth from the nearby Coyote Confederation.

I did happen across several posters advertising a passing carnival by the name of "Nightlinger's Traveling Exhibition of the Extraordinary," which claimed to have on display—among other things—the mummified cadaver of an Aztec king. Sadly, the flyers were left over from the previous week, leaving me unable to verify the accuracy of said claims with any immediacy.

On a side note, one of the residents told me that the owner of the carnival, Jebediah Nightlinger, had expressed an undue amount of interest in the stories revolving around the original Varney Flats. Nightlinger even closed the carnival for a day to visit the ghost

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town. No doubt the huckster was collecting further outlandish tales for future performances!

Hopefully, my next update will find me in the western metropolis of Dodge City.

Professor Kevin Connolly

Field Report #2

Dodge City, Kansas

26 March 1881

I lost patience with the delay in New Varney Flats after the second day and purchased passage aboard a stagecoach, hoping to leapfrog the delay and catch another westbound train in Dodge City. It seems ill-luck is fated to plague me on this journey, as less than three hours after departing the town, I saw the train pass us from the window of the bouncing and dusty coach. If there is a more uncomfortable manner to travel the rutted trails of the West, I've yet to experience it, and would add I hope I never do in the future!

Furthermore, the unnecessary detour took me directly through the town of Afton Valley, the very site of the conflict that stalled my journey. We stopped only briefly, just long enough to trade the coach's team of horses

for fresh beasts, and, after glimpsing a few of the residents, I remained inside the passenger compartment. Certainly, the local citizens were a rough-looking lot. This is to be expected in the so-called "Disputed Territories." But mere surliness would have been unlikely to dissuade me from stretching my legs after the thrashing the past few hours in the stage had inflicted upon me.



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Rather, nearly everyone I observed in Afton Valley appeared to be suffering from some infectious malady, exhibiting hacking coughs, red, swollen eyes, or both. Fearing an outbreak of typhus, yellow fever, or possibly malaria, I opted to remain within the coach and kept my kerchief close to my face at all times.

A shame really, given that on the outskirts of the hamlet I witnessed a striking spread of whitish flowers with red-tipped petals. I've heard tell of these flowers, often found near battlefields Back East, but know them only by their vulgar name, "blood roses." I would have liked to have obtained a specimen or two for comparison purposes to see if the species is indeed the same as those east of the Mississippi, but discretion advised against any further exposure than necessary to the apparent epidemic.

After avoiding contact with the potentially infectious disease in Afton Valley, the rest of the journey to Dodge City was uneventful, if bumpy and hot. In Dodge, all I have to worry

about are cowboys fresh off the trail with pockets full of cash and bellies overfull with liquor. Thankfully, the latter is not contagious, and sadly, neither is the former!

I have purchased a ticket on a Union Blue train departing tomorrow. If all goes well, I will send the scheduled update from Denver, prior to boarding the Denver-Pacific for the final leg to California.

Professor Connolly

Field Report #4

Salt Lake City, Deseret

31 March 1881

The ride over the Rockies passed without incident, and I had the pleasure of spending it in the company of one Elmer Vawter, formerly of the Union state of New Jersey. Mr. Vawter proved an endless repository of tall tales from the Northeast. I was taken, in particular, by the legend of the so-called "Jersey Devil."

If Mr. Vawter's stories are to be believed, the devil is a singular creature of chimeric nature, combining aspects of stag, bird, and possibly a wolf or

Field Report #3
29 March 1881

ARRIVED DENVER SAFELY STOP NEXT REPORT FROM SALT LAKE
STOP SCHEDULE TIGHT STOP DID NOT VISIT DENVER LODGE STOP

PROF. CONNOLLY

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other predator. Further stretching credulity, he claims sightings of the animal date to the first half of the last century! According to the popular myth, the creature has made its home in a rather desolate area of the state known as the Pine Barrens, and was either born to or summoned from the depths of Hell itself by a woman known as "Mother Leeds."

I find most of the tale highly dubious, beginning with the supposed demonic origin and ending with the assertion that the beast has survived nearly 150 years. However, as we have found, most outlandish myths have some basis in fact. Witness the discovery of the *Troglodytus* gorilla by Dr. Savage only three decades ago. Until that time, most Western explorers laughed at the indigenous peoples' tales of brutish bush men. An expedition to the Pine Barrens might be warranted, if not by our own lodge, then perhaps by one native to the Union.

Salt Lake City, or the "City of Gloom" as it's often called by visitors, has proven an education in itself. Never have I seen so many examples of the New Science on ready display. In the farmlands of Dixie, it's certainly not uncommon to encounter a tinkerer selling his own version of clockwork demoler, but here complex mechanisms

and devices are almost the norm! I should have liked to have more time to wander the streets cataloguing unique contraptions, but alas, my train was scheduled for only a brief layover in the city.

C.

Field Report #6

Shan Fan, California

3 April 1881

After a brief sojourn in Virginia City, I have reached the Denver-Pacific line's terminus at Shan Fan. I hope our esteemed members have had time to discuss what I discovered while in



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Nevada. I remain at a loss to explain via current scientific principles the existence of that phenomenon. Personally, I must confess I'd had my own doubts of the authenticity of "ghost rock fever," but now I can find no other likely explanation. Furthermore, having witnessed the anomaly the miners referred to as a "fever phantom" firsthand, I find logic fails me.

Simply put, what I saw appears to fly in the face of the very foundations of science as I understand them! However, I trust my previous—and far more detailed—missive contained more than enough data to formulate your own theories. I did succeed in obtaining the remains of a victim of the fever: a small lump of ghost rock. What implication this carries, I can only hypothesize. Due to the uncertainties of mail transport, I will keep the mineral in my possession for the remainder of this journey.

I did have opportunity to visit briefly with our sister lodge here. I must say, I was quite impressed by their facilities and their hospitality. After dispensing with the usual membership verification, Captain Pennington-Smythe allowed me unfettered access. I daresay the lodge rivals our own for comfort and appointment! I encourage any members who follow my explorations in this area to pay the Shan Fan lodge a visit.

C.

Field Report #7

Shannonsburg, California

5 April 1881

I intend to hire a boat to take me to a few of the Great Maze's mining camps. The Iron Dragon train on which I traveled from Shan Fan had decidedly fewer creature comforts than the Denver-Pacific. I should have expected such given that, by and large, the other passengers on the line are miners, boat crew, and other laboring types who likely have no desire to waste their salaries on a finer bench or dining car.

The more earthy accommodations have allowed me freer access to several immigrant workers recently arrived from the Orient. Mastery of the Mandarin tongue is not my foremost linguistic accomplishment, but I can, nonetheless, manage enough of basic dialogue to carry on simple conversation. I learned that most of these people arrived under contracts of indentured servitude, although I suspect many of us would consider them little more than voluntary slaves.

I was able to gather a few of their culture's myths through our discourse, but I fear the details may have surpassed my own skill with their native tongue. Giant humanoids—or ogres, if you will—seem to make up a large portion of their crytozoological tales. These beasts seem to share characteristics of biological and spiritual entities, and to my own coarse ear, their origin might better be classified as demonic rather than terrestrial.



After my experiences in Nevada, I'm less inclined to dismiss these claims outright, but note that some seem less credible than others. I can accept the possibility of massive hominids, but I find others less likely founded in reality. In particular, the *t'ao t'ieh* (which I roughly translate as "gluttonous ogre") would appear to be an exaggeration at best. According to travelers with whom I spoke, the creature is possessed by a hunger so extreme it will consume itself if denied another source of nourishment!

Such behavior in an individual might be explained as a manifestation of lunacy, but to accept that an entire species is capable of self-cannibalization seems to fly in the face of Professor Darwin's accepted theory of natural selection. Furthermore, the damage such consumption would cause far outweighs any minor nutritional gains.

Logic aside, many of the Orientals with whom I spoke maintained not only that such creatures existed, but that certain of their countrymen were capable of controlling these oddities through arcane rituals, using them as particularly horrific henchmen. In fact, one insisted that the individual holding his contract of indenture employed exactly such a beast to compel obedience among his workers. Any worker who displeased the man was fed to the creature!

These encounters have renewed my enthusiasm for my journey. It is against exactly this sort of dangerous ignorance that we in the Society must forever toil. Only through scientific understanding of our world may we free our fellow man from the bonds of unenlightenment—and other men.

C.

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Field Report #9

Lynchburg, California

14 April 1881

I strongly suspect my last report did not reach you, as I learned the Maze runner carrying the mail was sunk by one of the large water serpents known hereabouts as Maze dragons. Ironical, considering the report largely dealt with my observations of just such an animal while traveling outbound from Shannonsburg! The sights of the Great Maze continue to astound me, and utterly defeat any attempts at capturing them within the confines of the written word.

Never fear—I promise to provide a full verbal report of the experience upon my arrival back home.

I spent the past week in and around a rather wild mining town called Lynchburg. Were it not for the titanic mesa upon which it sits, surrounded by the crashing waves of the Pacific, one might be hard-pressed to differentiate it from boomtowns in the Rocky Mountains or Black Hills—excepting the decidedly Oriental influence, of course. Saloons and bawdy houses abound, packed with miners looking to purchase a moment's respite with hard-earned scrip.

Though the Maze itself is worthy of a lifetime's study, my sojourn here is limited to little more than a week. I have been fortunate enough to observe numerous oddities firsthand, not the least of which I found within the confines of Lynchburg itself.

One of my dinner companions, a somewhat boisterous boat captain, invited me to join him for an evening at the "fights." I found out upon my arrival that said bouts are not held according to the Marquess of Queensbury rule. Instead, combatants descend into a steep-sided pit in one of the local saloons where they bare-knuckle brawl until one is rendered unconscious. As I'm sure you've guessed,



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wagering provides a large part of the entertainment.

The evening's final match involved a pair of vicious mongrel dogs versus what I thought was a grossly obese man. Further observation revealed it was, in fact, a revenant of the sort discussed in Dr. Frederick Sutherland's 1877 treatise. However, this specimen appeared to have spent some time submerged in water after its initial demise, and the exposure had drastically affected its biology.

The creature's flesh had taken on a soggy, soap-like consistency and it emitted a foul odor reminiscent of rotted cheese. Its waterlogged nature no doubt contributed to its swollen appearance.

The abomination made rather quick work of the dogs, using only its hands and teeth. It seemed impervious to physical pain, and my companion informed me that such creatures, known among the miners as "bloats" for somewhat obvious reasons, are virtually immune to firearms and pikes. Apparently the piercing nature of the weapons is wholly ineffective, passing harmlessly through the paste-like flesh. (Based on the biology of the undead, I would imagine, though, that alcohol might react negatively with its altered state.)

As a side note, I seem to have crossed paths with Mr. Nightlinger once again. My companion made certain to highlight that human participants were no longer allowed to face a bloat in the pit, as that would be "uncivilized." Taken aback and fearing

a horrific tale, I inquired whether anyone ever requested such a match, to which he responded, "Only once." Nightlinger himself had proposed a bout between his strongman and one of the creatures when his show passed through here about a year ago.

On that occasion, the proprietor agreed and all watched as Nightlinger's muscled man dispatched the monstrosity with alacrity. It took another four months before the fight promoters were able to secure a replacement bloat...

C.

Field Report #10

Perdition, California

25 April 1881

I have decided to remain here for a few days to survey local mesa towns, before continuing overland via the colorfully named "Ghost Trail." With the Wasatch rail line's terminus nearby, I believe this is an excellent location from which to mail my next bundle of correspondence. (I opted against visiting Lost Angels, as I have come to understand the good Reverend Grimme's faithful tend toward mercurial behavior.)

Rather than traversing the Maze overland, I booked passage on a small freighter. I'd heard numerous tales over the past days of the dangers posed by southern California's factions, from the self-styled "Emperor" Norton to the Rattlesnake Clan, and decided to take my chances with whirlpools and sea serpents instead. Besides, waterborne travel would allow me to

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visit more of the unique mesa towns, as well as a chance to document more of the Maze's indigenous marine life.

Most towns in the Maze proper are located atop towering pillars of rock and reachable only via the large elevators that soar from ramshackle, sea-level piers to the summits above. Maintenance on said contraptions is disturbingly intermittent, making an already disconcerting trip a gamble with one's life! As a result, I won't deny feeling a modicum of relief when, at our second port of call, we found the elevator apparently out of service.

Further investigation—primarily conducted by crewmen yelling to the top of the cliff face—determined that the town, or at least the operator's station, was abandoned. The captain of our vessel, a man of an ethical fiber seldom encountered among Maze traders, expressed his concern at this development. He told me he had visited the settlement only a week ago and noted at that time the residents seemed to be acting "queerly."

The captain sent a crewman to scale the cliff wall and lower the elevator. Interested to see what had evoked the otherwise stalwart man's unease, I chose to brave the device with the landing party. On reaching the settlement—which appeared to have been home to several dozen permanent residents—we found it completely deserted and devoid of any life: human, dog, cattle, or otherwise.

We set about exploring the buildings and made a worrisome discovery. Several of the buildings were filled

with silken fibers, similar in some respects to a spider's webbing, but considerably thicker. Were I to hazard a guess based on the webs, I would estimate that any spider creating them would have to be at least the size of a large man.

Our disquiet grew as we began to find desiccated corpses secreted in the deepest corners of many of said structures, further fueling speculation that some enormous arachnid was loose in the area. Needless to say, the crew desired as quick a departure from the mesa as possible, lest we encounter the creature that spun the webs. Our captain insisted his men set fire to the ill-fated town before we returned to the boat.

During this interlude, I was able to pace the perimeter of the mesa quickly, it being only about a quarter-mile across. At the edge of the mesa farthest from the abandoned town, I discovered a long strand of the same webbing stretching to a nearby plateau. Whether this marked a route of ingress or egress I was unable to determine, as the captain recalled us to the boat shortly thereafter.

I have heard stories of unusually large tarantulas along the border with Mexico, but in my experience that species does not create webs, and certainly not to the extent I witnessed. I believe this may be the first evidence of a new species of arachnid. Although I was understandably uncomfortable at the time, in retrospect I am disappointed I was unable to make a visual study of the animal. Imagine the

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accolades our lodge would enjoy if we were able to produce incontrovertible evidence of a heretofore unknown species!

C.

Field Report #12

Yuma, Arizona

6 May 1881

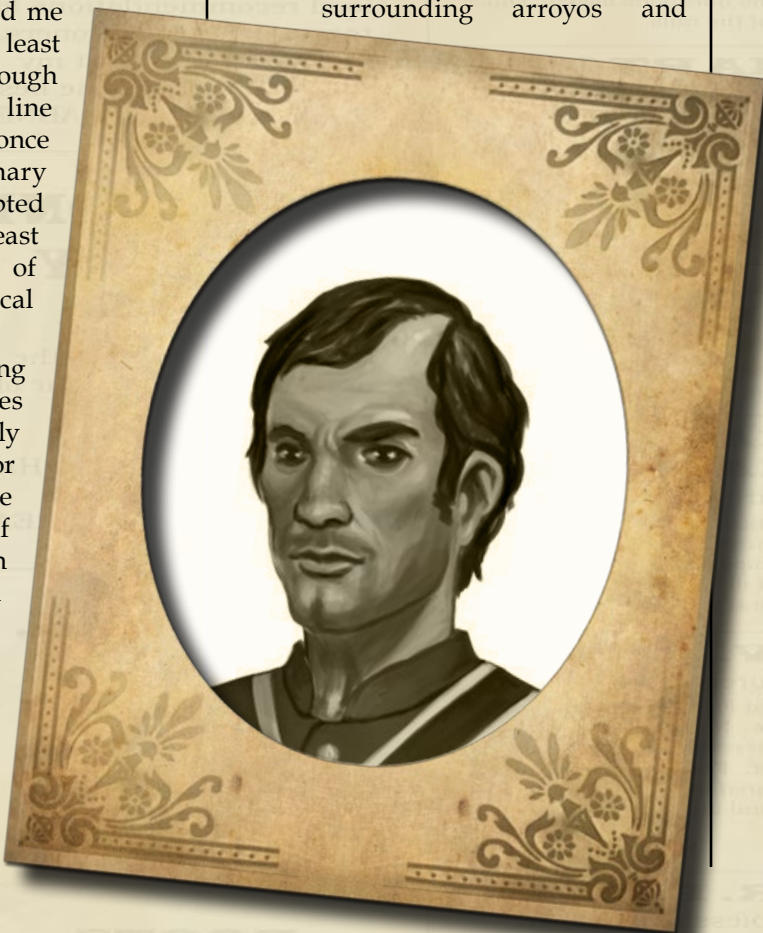
I ended my stay in Perdicion after only a few days. The town proved a bit raucous for my Southern sensibilities. I was able to find departing for Arizona a trader by the name of Clevinger, who graciously allowed me to travel with him at least as far as Yuma. Although Bayou Vermilion's line ends far closer at the once mobile but now stationary town of Railhead, I opted to avoid rail travel, at least for a while, in hopes of better sampling the local flora and fauna.

I anticipated observing such rumored creatures as the inscrutably named "desert thing," or perhaps even a Mojave rattler. After a couple of uneventful days with no sightings, I inquired about such with my traveling companion. Mr. Clevinger informed me that both animals were quite real. However, as both ambushed their prey from

beneath the very ground, he stated we were unlikely to see either—at least until we were about to be consumed by one. With that knowledge, my longing for firsthand encounters was muted.

Even moreso after we encountered the West's version of wild pigs!

Traveling through an area that Mr. Clevinger referred to as the Colorado desert (presumably after the nearby river), the sound of a guttural grunting and squealing reached my ears. My companion grew quite nervous, peering anxiously into the surrounding arroyos and



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draws. I asked him the cause of his alarm, and he responded with a single word, "Javeranhas." I was unfamiliar with the appellation and inquired further.

His explanation was cut short as a horde of nearly 100 bristling peccaries erupted from a nearby culvert, rushing toward us. Clevinger fired off a volley of shots from his carbine and dropped a few of the lead pigs. The other animals fell upon their comrades in a feeding frenzy so fevered that I still shudder at the thought.

The trader made haste in leaving the area, saying that

once the beasts had stripped the flesh from their fallen packmates, they would again be on the hunt. I would have liked an opportunity to perform a closer study on the anatomy of the carnivorous swine. From my limited observation, I believe the "javerahnas" possessed slightly exaggerated tusks, but that could be simply the artifact of my startled response upon my memory.

C.



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Field Report #13

Tucson, Arizona

13 May 1881

I have little of interest in the way of zoological observations to provide in this report. My time in Tucson has been uneventful, with a single notable exception which I feel compelled to share, as it was certainly unsettling for me.

A few days ago, I attended a vaudevillian show at a local theater. I was most taken by a ventriloquist act that served as a lead-in to the main attraction, a somewhat clumsy rendition of Goethe's *Faust*. What struck me as so engrossing about the ventriloquist was the quality and workmanship of his mannequin. Seated near the front row, I could not help but note the degree of detail on the puppet, which appeared fashioned from high-quality porcelain if not actual china.

The young man himself was quite entertaining, being gifted not only with an impeccable sense of timing for his jokes, but also a surprising acting ability. His feigned surprise at his own dummy's actions was quite convincing and even more amusing for its seeming genuineness. Why, had I not known better, I'd have believed the dummy moved of its own volition!

After the show, I went backstage to congratulate the young performer and more closely examine his puppet. I found the door to his room slightly ajar, and upon receiving no response

to my hails, peeked inside. There I found the poor soul murdered before his mirror, with numerous slashes about his neck.

As the closest thing to a witness, I was interviewed by the town marshal. The experience was quite beyond my ken, but it gave me opportunity to gather insight into the investigative procedures of law enforcement. I was able to learn that, although the murder was particularly brutal and seemingly evidence of a personal vendetta, the marshal believed that theft was the primary motivation. After all, the criminal had stolen the man's undoubtedly very valuable puppet.

I also discovered that the young ventriloquist arrived in Tucson in the company of none other than Nightlinger's Traveling Exhibition only a week ago! If you'll excuse my excitement at a mere sideshow's passing, the number of times I've crossed paths with this attraction have left me somewhat fixated on it. Given the opportunity, I would feel reticent in my duties if I failed to examine the proprietor's claims for his show.

Inquiries have led me to believe the carnival may visit nearby Tombstone presently. As soon as I can secure safe passage, or at least a traveling companion, I shall depart. My journeys thus far throughout the "weird" West have taught me the folly of braving this expanse alone.

C.