

# The ghostly heritage of Brattleboro

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Special to the Reformer

To millions of readers throughout the world, Brattleboro, Vt., is a dark and sinister place of intergalactic evil doings, witchcraft and worse. In the literature of the strange and supernatural, our town is a main stop on any tour through the ghostly landscape of American weird fiction.

The acknowledged master of supernatural stories since Poe is Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937). A reclusive, impoverished Rhode Islander, Lovecraft died a virtual unknown only to be discovered by millions of readers the world over. Translated into a dozen languages, adapted into computer games and revamped into over a dozen feature films, Lovecraft's best tales may be found today in any bookstore or library. And it was Lovecraft who gave Brattleboro its honorable mention in the honor roll of the macabre.

In the year 1927, Lovecraft arrived in Brattleboro to visit friends and see the local sights. Soon after, between February and September of 1930, Lovecraft wrote one of his best known novels, "The Whisperer in Darkness," which appeared in the national magazine *Weird Tales*. Brattleboro's image in literary circles would never be the same.

Lovecraft's tale of terror opens with the Vermont floods of November 1927 as the narrator describes "odd stories of things found floating in some of the swol-

len rivers; ... They were pinkish things about five feet long; with crustaceous bodies bearing vast pairs of dorsal fins or membranous wings and several sets of articulated limbs, and with a sort of convoluted ellipsoid, covered with multitudes of very short antennae, where a head would ordinarily be..." It turns out that Brattleboro was a jumping off point for ...

a hidden race of monstrous beings which lurked somewhere among the remoter hills - in the deep woods of the highest peaks,

and the dark valleys where streams trickle from unknown sources. These beings were seldom glimpsed, but evidences of their presence were reported by those who had ventured farther than usual up the slopes of certain mountains or into certain deep, steep-sided gorges that even the wolves shunned.

As the gruesome tale unfolds, a debate ensues in the letters column of the *Brattleboro Reformer* where subscribers debate the existence of crab monsters, all of which results in the narrator being invited to Brattleboro by a native to see for himself proof of extra-terrestrial horrors lurking just outside of town. Accepting the invitation, the hero ponders just where he is going:

I knew I was entering an altogether older-fashioned and more primitive New England than the mechanised, urbanised coastal and southern areas where all my life had been spent; an unspoiled, ancestral New England without the foreigners and factory-smoke, bill-boards and concrete roads, of the sections which modernity has touched. There would be odd survivals of that continuous native life whose deep roots make it the one authentic outgrowth of the landscape - the continuous native life which keeps alive strange ancient memories, and fertilises the soil for shadowy, marvellous, and seldom-mentioned beliefs.

Now and then I saw the blue Connecticut River gleaming in the sun, and after leaving Northfield we crossed it. Ahead loomed green and cryptical hills, and when the conductor came around I learned that I was at last in Vermont. He told me to set my watch back an hour, since the northern hill country will have no dealings with new-fangled daylight time schemes. As I did so it seemed to me that I was likewise turning the calendar back a century.

The train kept close to the river, and across in New Hampshire I could see the approaching slope of steep Wantastquet, about which



Howard Phillips Lovecraft

singular old legends cluster. Then streets appeared on my left, and a green island showed into the stream on my right. People rose and filed to the door, and I followed them. The car stopped, and I alighted beneath the long trainshed of the Brattleboro station.

Arriving by train from Greenfield, Lovecraft's narrator launches into a lyric yet spooky description of Brattleboro's main street. Seven decades since Lovecraft's writing notwithstanding, this short profile of Brattleboro could have been written yesterday:

The town seemed very attractive in the afternoon sunlight as we swept up an incline and turned to the right into the main street. It drossed like the older New England cities which one remembers from boyhood, and something in the collocation of roofs and steeples and chimneys and brick walls

formed contours touching deep viol-strings of ancestral emotion. I could tell that I was at the gateway of a region half-bewitched through the piling-up of unbroken time-accumulations; a region where old, strange things have had a chance to grow and linger because they have never been stirred up.

Leaving the relative safety of Main Street for more rural destinations proves a big mistake for Lovecraft's hero as all hell will soon break loose. With a growing sense of impending doom, the narrator continues his travelog:

As we passed out of Brattleboro my sense of constraint and foreboding increased, for a vague quality in the hill-crowded countryside with its towering, threatening, close-pressing green and granite slopes hinted at obscure secrets and immemorial survivals which might or might not be hostile to mankind. For a time our course followed a broad, shallow river which flowed down from unknown hills in the north, and I shivered when my companion told me it was the West River. It was in this stream, I recalled from newspaper items, that one of the morbid crablike beings had been seen floating after the floods.

Gradually the country around us grew wilder and more deserted. Archaic covered bridges lingered fearfully out of the past in pockets of the hills, and the half-abandoned railway track paralleling the river seemed to exhale a nebulously visible air of desolation. There were awesome sweeps of vivid valley where great cliffs rose, New England's virgin gran-



ite showing grey and austere through the verdure that scaled the crests. There were gorges where untamed streams leaped, bearing down toward the river the unimagined secrets of a thousand pathless peaks. Branching away now and then were narrow, half-concealed roads that bored their way through solid, luxuriant masses of forest among whose primal trees whole armies of elemental spirits might well lurk.

"The Whisperer in Darkness" has nothing remotely resembling a happy ending. In fact, by the time the tale ends, the reader has the distinct feeling that the last place on earth anyone in their right mind would want to be is hiking the woods around Brattleboro. One must suppose that if there are any crab monsters from Yuggoth still lurking around Dark Mountain or Round Hill today, they are most likely covered by the Endangered Species Act and should be left alone. As Lovecraft concluded at the end of his tale:

When I left Brattleboro I resolved never to go back to Vermont, and I feel quite certain I shall keep my resolution. Those wild hills are surely the outpost of a frightful cosmic race -

## Author's weird stories gaining in popularity

The 19th century school of literature called "Realism" has one of its most accomplished authors in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930) whose tales of frustrated life in small town New England are enjoying a revival in popularity.

Born in Randolph, Mass., the author's family moved to Brattleboro in 1867 where she would graduate from Brattleboro High School. In 1903, Freeman authored what many consider the best collection of ghost stories ever penned by an American woman, "The Wind in the Rose Bushes and Other Ghostly Tales." The title story along with "The Shadows on the Wall" are often anthologized in collections of creepy tales.

Of her years in Brattleboro and their influence on her weird fiction, Ms. Freeman once said she had learned of "that black atmosphere of suspicion and hatred which gathers nowhere more easily than in a New England town" from her girlhood experiences in Vermont.

