

Published in the New York Times

THE LEGEND OF THE JACKALOPE

While thousands of hunters roam the West this year in search of big game, few, if any, are lucky enough to catch the legendary jackalope, an animal with a jackrabbit's body and the antlers of a deer. Although Big Foot, the Loch Ness Monster, and other creatures of disputed existence have gained more scientific attention, residents of this small eastern Wyoming community thought enough of the jackalope to erect an eight-foot statue of it in the middle of town.

There are some persons in Douglas who will insist that the jackalope does, indeed, exist. But Ralph Herrick, a taxidermist here, admits, somewhat reluctantly, that his brother, Doug, and he created the jackalope in 1934.

One evening when they were late for dinner, they placed a recently killed rabbit beside a pair of antlers on the floor of the taxidermy shop. "When we came back, Doug said 'Let's mount it the way it is', ", Herrick said.

Since that time, Herrick's jackalope trophy business has continued to grow. "Lately, I can't make 'em fast enough," he said.

The Douglas Chamber of Commerce issues thousands of jackalope hunting licenses every year to tourists, and signs on the highway near here tell motorists to "watch out for the jackalope".

Although the creature's fame has spread throughout the West, Herrick and a South Dakota company are the only two concerns now producing eucalypts. Herrick's brother stopped making them more than 25 years ago. Gift shops in town do a brisk business selling jackalope postcards and other novelty items.

The jackalope was the main attraction here until discoveries of vast deposits of uranium, coal, oil and natural gas more than doubled the town's population to 7500 in the last three years. Herrick said his business has grown independently of the town's new-found prosperity, as persons from around the county began to hear about the jackalope.

some parts of this tourist industry have never been very popular, like canned jackalope mild, but Herrick sold more than 165 trophies at up to \$35 each last year, and he has already sold more than that this year.

Tourists who purchase jackalope permits are surprised to learn they may only hunt the creatures "on the 31st day of June, between the hours of midnight and 2 a.m."

Herrick said he does not know how many of the legends surrounding the jackalope began, such as the one about the creature's extraordinary ability to imitate the human voice, or the story that

said the first man to see the jackalope "was a trapper named Roy Ball in 1829".

Actually, the original jackalope was sold 43 years ago to the late Ball, who put it on display in his LaBonte Hotel here. This jackalope was stolen from the hotel in September and the culprit remains at large.

Still, the jackalope is not the only unusual creature indigenous to this part of the world. On display in Herrick's taxidermy shop was an animal he called the "Wyoming catfish", made from the tail of a catfish and the front of a cat. "I could sell more of these if I could get more cats," he said.

Two of the favorite sports of Douglas residents are convincing gullible tourists that the jackalope does exist and reinforcing the beliefs of those who already think the horned rabbit is real.

A California man - "he was wearing a Hell's Angels jacket" - told Herrick he wanted to catch some jackalopes and start a breeding farm. Herrick recalled, "I told him that they shed their antlers that time of the year, and you can only hunt them during the winter. Luckily, he hasn't been back."

Herrick said, "People get real mad if you tell them there's no such thing as a jackalope. They take it very seriously. And why make people mad?"