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BRINGING THE WORLD TO WEST VIRGINIA, AND WEST VIRGINIA TO THE WORLD

# THE BROAD SIDE

FROM THE WEST VIRGINIA HUMANITIES COUNCIL  
STATE AFFILIATE OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

## WEST VIRGINIA'S ALIEN INVADER FAMILY LORE AND A FIRE IN THE SKY

by Eric Waggoner,  
Executive Director

There's no way for me to know whether my grandfather Kenneth Lyons really saw the fireball streak across the sky. He said he saw it. Then someone else said it, and then we all started repeating the story, just as I'm doing here.

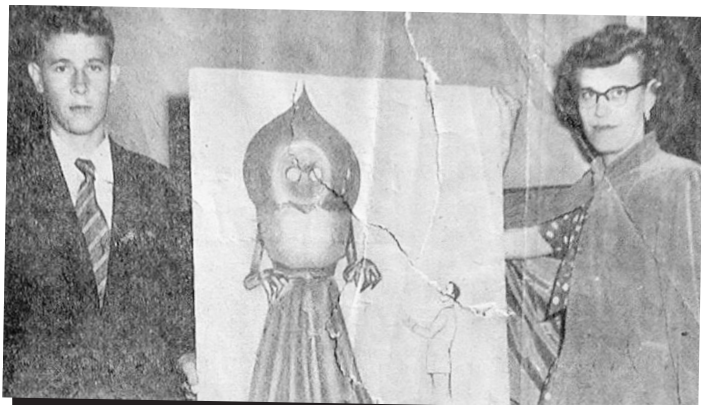
My mom's dad, the story goes, was driving through Braxton County one evening in 1952. As he passed Flatwoods, a bright red flash appeared suddenly overhead, shooting across his field of vision and behind a mountain, where it passed from sight. He didn't stop, but kept right on driving. And that's my family's modest connection to the tale of the Flatwoods Monster, or, if you're pulling 50 like I am, the Braxton County Monster. Or "Braxxie," though that last one sounds a little chummy to me. Just because we never learned his real name is no reason to get overfriendly.

I suppose this sort of story is what folklorists refer to as "family lore," or, to use the academic phrasing, "Pawpaw's blowing smoke." Still, it fits a pattern. Back in the days before wobbly cell phone footage, declassified U.S. Navy video, and 18 seasons of "Ancient Aliens" cluttering up the History Channel, visitors from the far reaches of space tended to show up in your more remote areas of the nation—annoying Illinois farmers by trampling complicated designs into the cornfields, say, or doing a fly-by on Jimmy Carter prior to his speech to the Lions Club in Leary, Georgia (pop. 505, as of the 2020 census). A lot of this sort of thing seemed to happen out of town, in other words.

And so, on the evening of September 12, 1952 in Flatwoods, West Virginia (pop. 160, as of the 1950 census), a fireball fell from the sky and crashed into a hillside farming property owned by local resident G. Bailey Fisher.

Four boys playing on the lawn of Flatwoods Elementary School in the dusk light—Edward and Freddie May, Neil Nunley, and Tommy Hyer—saw the whole thing, and did exactly what young boys in stories like these always must: They ran immediately towards the danger, in the direction of Fisher's farm, stopping at the May home along the way to tell Edward and Freddie's mother what they'd seen. Mrs. Kathleen May called upon neighbor Eugene Lemon, a member of the National Guard, to come along with them. Four boys, two adults, and Richie, the May family dog, set out for the impact site.

I quote now from the Braxton County Convention and Visitor Bureau's web site, because writer Marilyn Hosey's telling of the story is so sharp and evocative: "Upon reaching the site of the crash, the group saw a pulsing red light. Lemon shined his flashlight up the hill, and the group witnessed a terrifying sight—a ten-foot-tall creature, with a head shaped like a spade and what appeared to be a dark, metal 'dress'. The creature's hands were twisted and clawed, and what seemed to be its eyes glowed an eerie orange color. It appeared to levitate off the ground. A strange, sickening mist hung in the air. The creature hissed and glided quickly toward the witnesses, [and] the group then turned and fled in terror."



Kathleen May and Gene Lemon pose with an unknown artist's sketch of the creature they saw on September 12, 1952.

Well, now. To my mind, that's as good as anything in The War of the Worlds, I don't care if you're watching Gene Barry or Tom Cruise go head-to-head with the Martians.

But you'll notice no one in this welcome party, including Richie the family dog, chose to square up against this glowing-eyed, metal-skirted, levitating apparition with the foul stench and the gnarled claws. Instead they "turned and fled." A sensible people, we West Virginians. Also bull-headed: About an hour later A. Lee Stewart, co-publisher of the Braxton County Democrat, displaying a bravery once customary among small-town newshounds, returned to the site, accompanied by Lemon and several other men armed with shotguns. But all they found was a rank odor, and a lingering heat where the thing had stood. Braxxie, who or whatever he was, had vanished.

When I was a kid the best-known image of the Flatwoods Monster was the one often reprinted alongside an article in the September 14, 1952 edition of the Charleston Daily Mail, under the headline "Braxton Co. Residents Faint, Become Ill After Run-In With Weird 10-Foot Monster." In the photo, taken at the Charleston Greyhound bus station, Kathleen May holds up an artist's sketch of the Flatwoods Monster, the first image of it ever shared, its eyes hooded and its claws extended. Given what she'd been through very recently, Mrs. May looks rather

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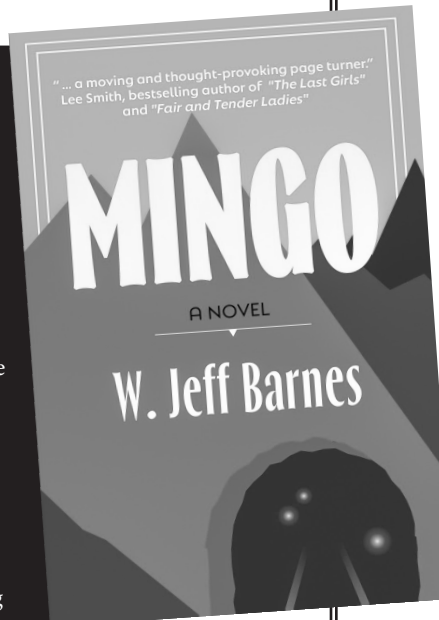
## A HOUSE DIVIDED

### THE POWERFUL HISTORICAL FICTION OF *MINGO*

by Sudhakar Jamkhandi,  
Program Committee Member

Author W. Jeff Barnes will visit Charleston on July 31 for the final installment of the Council's 2022 Little Lectures series. Little Lectures are held every third or fourth Sunday at 2:00 PM in the historic MacFarland-Hubbard House. For more details, visit the Little Lectures page at [wvhumanities.org](http://wvhumanities.org).

This year's Little Lectures series is made possible through the NEH's A More Perfect Union funding initiative. Special thanks to Mr. Jamkhandi for bringing the novel to our attention.



W. Jeff Barnes' debut novel, *Mingo*, is a heart-rending story about southern West Virginia's undeclared "war" between coal miners and absentee coal company barons in the early 1900s, culminating in the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain. It is an impressive first effort from Barnes, a lawyer from Tazewell, Virginia who now practices in Richmond.

Barnes begins *Mingo* in the small town of Matewan, made famous by the shootout and John Sayles film of the same name, but the time is 1908 and Sid Hatfield's gunplay is yet twelve years in the future. The novel opens mid-funeral for the matriarch of the Matney family, and among her mourning family we find our two protagonists: young brothers Bascom and Durwood Matney. The lonely existence that looms ahead of the two boys and their Pa, an alcoholic coal miner beginning to feel the effects of black lung, might seem melodramatic in less skilled hands, but Barnes employs a swift, sparse prose that commands sympathy and pulls the reader in.

The teenaged Bascom has little choice but to follow his father into the mines. But Durwood is too young to work and is whisked away to Richmond, Virginia to live with his mother's cousin Grace. Grace and her railroad lawyer husband Walker's lifestyle on posh Monument Avenue is a far cry from the hardscrabble life Durwood has always known: the house seems too big, the clothes too fancy, and finding friends among the children of Richmond's elite is easier said than done.

The novel excels at bringing to life the stark differences between Richmond and Matewan. The two cities feel like separate Americas—a feeling that no doubt animated the miners in their struggle for better pay and safer working conditions for two decades in the notoriously hard conditions of the southwestern coalfields. Barnes lets these conditions speak for themselves, allowing time and circumstance to gradually force Durwood and Bascom apart despite how deeply they care for each other. Will their diverging beliefs place them on opposite sides of a shooting war?

Few novels are perfect, and *Mingo* occasionally bites off a bit more than it can chew. Arguably, the appearance of Durwood and Bascom at certain events serves to downplay the importance of the real figures—Frank Keeney, Fred Mooney, and Bill Blizzard, for example—who were crucial historical actors at Paint Creek, Blair Mountain, and the Charles Town Treason Trials. But I suspect Barnes chose to use his characters as stand-ins for larger groups to streamline the narrative.

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The most ubiquitous rendering of the Flatwoods Monster, with its spade-shaped head, glowing orange eyes and metal "dress."

Unfortunately, the developers of *Fallout 76* didn't use this version in the latest iteration of the hit videogame franchise, which is set in West Virginia.



## WEST VIRGINIA'S ALIEN INVADER

(Continued from front)

remarkably unfazed, even gritty: *Isn't this a hell of a thing?* her expression seems to say. A different picture from the same shoot shows Gene Lemon holding up the other end of the sketch. May, Lemon, and A. Lee Stewart were interviewed for the September 19 broadcast of the New York-based television program "We The People," and the nation got its first look at the Flatwoods Monster.

The first look of many, as it turns out. Mothman may be West Virginia's most notorious cryptid, and the weird saga of Bat Boy traveled all the way from the pages of the Weekly World News to London's splashy West End theaters. But the Flatwoods Monster's distinctive silhouette—Ace-of-Spades hood, spindly hands, and pleated metal skirt—pops up around the world, and in the most unlikely places. Even most native mountaineers might be surprised at how internationally famous he's become.

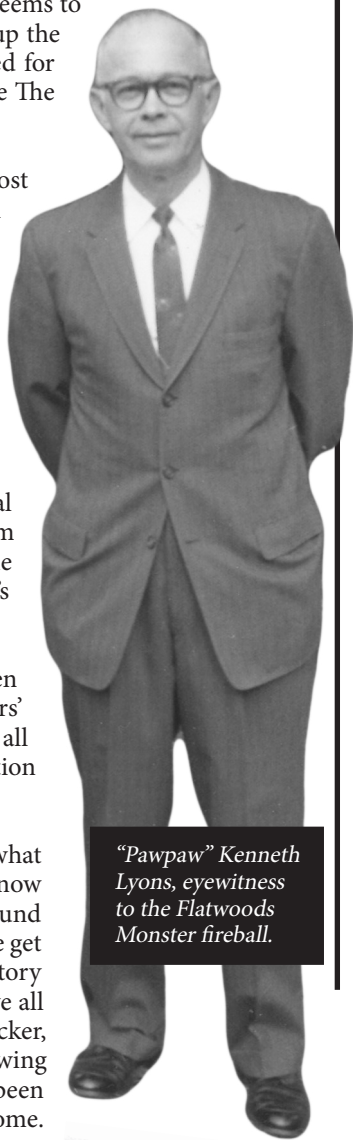
You know who wouldn't be surprised? Andrew Smith, the affable curator of the Flatwoods Monster Museum in Sutton, and should you ever find yourself passing exit 62 on I-79, you really owe it to yourself. The Braxton County CVB maintains an outstanding exhibition space featuring historical artifacts, books and films, representations of Braxxie over the years from all around the world, local ephemera and objects directly connected to the legend, and one-of-a-kind photographs and other items from the May family's personal collection.

The museum has been featured in television shows including "The Unseen World" and "America's Got Monsters," and in Small Town Monsters' documentary film *The Flatwoods Monster: A Legacy of Fear*. Travelers from all around the U.S. and beyond stop in Sutton every year to visit the only destination site on earth dedicated to West Virginia's strangest out-of-towner.

Mothman may get most of the press, but I've always had a special affinity for what I still instinctively call "The Braxton County Monster," even if most people now know him by another name. One autumn evening he showed up, poked around Braxton County's beautiful hill country for a bit, and went on his way. Did he get grumpy and knock down a bridge? No. Did he have a tragic, twisted backstory like poor Bat Boy? No. He was just a traveler in need of a rest stop, as we've all been at one time or another. Now whenever I see his outline on a bumper sticker, or his likeness on a can of Braxxie Blonde Ale (the Greenbrier Valley Brewing Company, and highly recommended), I get a little nostalgic. He may have been here only for one evening, but for my money, he's as West Virginian as they come.

The West Virginia Humanities Council will be unveiling its own little piece of Flatwoods Monster merch soon, exclusive to our members, so stay tuned. Until then, if you're passing through Braxton County, keep an eye on the cloudline. You never know when unexpected company might drop in.

**The Flatwoods Monster Museum is located at 208 Main Street in Sutton. Learn more about the museum, the legend, and Braxton County at [www.braxtonwv.org](http://www.braxtonwv.org).**



"Pawpaw" Kenneth Lyons, eyewitness to the Flatwoods Monster fireball.

THE MONSTER OF BRAXTON COUNTY  
**Around a Bend  
They Saw a Pair  
of Bulging Eyes**

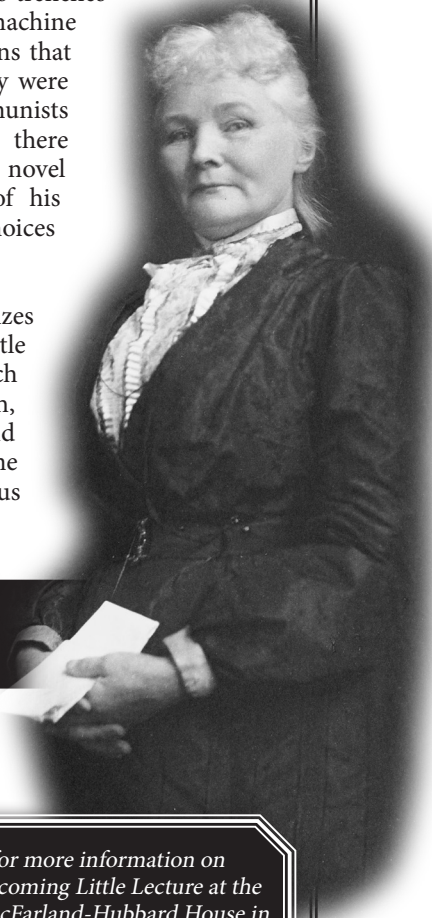
## A HOUSE DIVIDED

(Continued from front)

These quibbles don't detract from the author's achievement. Barnes weaves a credible story and evokes genuine sympathy for his characters—and this latter point is the novel's greatest triumph. It would have been easy to position the reader squarely on the side of the struggling miners, ignoring the social and political complexities that made it so difficult for the United Mine Workers to unionize Logan and Mingo counties. But many of the anti-union men who filled Sheriff Don Chafin's trenches on Spruce Fork Ridge and fired machine guns down at their fellow Americans that fateful September sincerely felt they were defending democracy from communists and socialists. Barnes understands there are "two sides to a pancake," as his novel puts it, and refuses to let any of his protagonists off the hook for the choices they make.

Intentionally or not, *Mingo* emphasizes that we are too quick to draw battle lines, too intent on segregating each other into categories of poor and rich, socialist and capitalist, worker and boss, hillbilly and elite. By the time the bullets have begun to fly, all of us have lost.

Famed activist and union organizer Mother Jones makes an appearance in *Mingo*.



See below for more information on Barnes's upcoming Little Lecture at the historic MacFarland-Hubbard House in Charleston on July 31.

**Mingo** is available from Little Star Press and can be ordered on Amazon or other online retailers. The book can be purchased locally at Taylor Books in Charleston.

Copies of the novel will be available for purchase at the lecture.

## EVENTS JUNE - JULY 2022

### June 4 - All Day - Welch

The *Crossroads* Smithsonian exhibit will open at the Jack Caffrey Center in Welch. This is the **final stop** for the *Crossroads* tour in West Virginia.

The exhibit, accompanied by special programming, will be open to the public until July 7. Contact the City of Welch for details on hours and events.

### June 26 - 2:00 PM - Charleston

Dr. Rachel Donaldson will deliver the Council's June Little Lecture, *A Long Struggle for Justice: The West Virginia Mine Wars and the Legal Aftermath*.

Since 2022 is the centennial of the Charles Town Treason Trials that followed the Battle of Blair Mountain, Dr. Donaldson will discuss the legal and jurisprudential impact of the trials, and how many of these issues remain relevant today.

Admission is \$10/seat. Lecture will be followed by a Q&A and light refreshments. RSVP to the Council at 304.346.8500 or email Program Officer Kyle Warmack at [warmack@wvhumanities.org](mailto:warmack@wvhumanities.org).

### July 31 - 2:00 PM - Charleston

W. Jeff Barnes, author of the historical novel *Mingo*, will deliver the Council's July Little Lecture, *Two Sides To A Pancake: The United States of Mingo*.

Barnes will discuss his boyhood fascination with the Battle of Matewan, the importance of his coal mining family roots, putting himself into hundred-year-old shoes, and using fiction as a tool for exploring ideological conflict.

Admission is \$10/seat. Lecture will be followed by a Q&A and light refreshments. RSVP to the Council at 304.346.8500 or email Program Officer Kyle Warmack at [warmack@wvhumanities.org](mailto:warmack@wvhumanities.org).

The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council is supported by the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector. The purposes of the West Virginia Humanities Council are educational, and its mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia. The Broad Side is ©2021 by the West Virginia Humanities Council. All rights reserved. Copyright of individual articles is retained by their respective authors. Images used with permission. Additional graphics and layout obtained from Veclezy.com.

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