

Taurus crockettensis: A Tennessee Relic

More than 5,000 years ago, curious mammals with the body of a raccoon and a broad head and horns resembling those of a bull traveled in packs as they roamed the woodlands and fields of Tennessee. Today, we recognize these creatures as the bull-raccoon or what zoologists refer to as *Taurus crockettensis*. The Latin name for the species recognizes the celebrated folk hero, frontiersman, soldier, and Tennessee native, David Stern Crockett (August 17, 1786 – March 6, 1836) known for his “coon-skin” hat. As early as the 1870s, *Taurus crockettensis* fossils have been found at locations along the Cumberland Plateau and in Middle Tennessee.

The most intact and best-known fossil evidence of the bull-raccoon is commonly referred to as the Boxley Springs Relic, discovered when utility lines were being installed near Old Hillsboro Road (TN46) in the Boxley Springs Estates neighborhood of Franklin, Tennessee in the late 1990s. Many in Williamson County believe

that this particular bull-raccoon died in the Great Global Flood described in the Bible (Genesis: 18-24), offering evidence for Creationism; the Tennessee State Paleontologist refutes this theory. The Boxley Springs Relic is now part of the Hokes Archives at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

Evidence in support of animal hybridity is common in the ancient world. Homer and Hesiod report the existence of chimeras, and the archaeological and fossil record is replete with numerous examples including the centaur of ancient Greece, a specimen of which is on view at the Hodges Library on the University of Tennessee campus in Knoxville. We may also look to the winged bull of Assyria, the dragon of Persia and China, and Yali from India. From ancient Greece there is the story of the Phoenician woman Europa. Taking the form of a white bull, the god Zeus, who was infatuated with Europa, abducted her, swimming to the island of Crete where he made her the queen. With Zeus,

Europa gave birth to three minotaur sons. In Europa’s offspring, we see an example of animal hybridity that may explain a creature such as the bull-raccoon.

Sean B. Carroll, a molecular biologist and geneticist from the University of Wisconsin, provides a contemporary basis for understanding the viability of animal hybridity. Says Carroll, “On May 15, 1985, trainers at Hawaii Sea Life Park were stunned when a 400-pound gray female bottlenose dolphin named Punahele gave birth to a dark-skinned calf that partly resembled the 2,000-pound male false killer whale with whom she shared a pool. The calf was a wholphin, a hybrid that was intermediate to its parents in some characteristics, like having 66 teeth compared with the bottlenose’s 88 and the 44 of the false killer whale, a much larger member of the dolphin family.” Carroll claims that “the discovery of hybrid species and the detection of past hybridizations are forcing biologists to reshape their picture of species as independent units.

The barriers between species are not necessarily vast, unbridgeable chasms; sometimes they get crossed with marvelous results.” [1]

Like the residents of Boxley Springs Estates, many people in Tennessee are familiar with animal hybridity through their study of the Bible that references both unicorns and dragons. Less familiar is a passage from the Book of Ezekiel that describes a man-like creature with four faces and four wings:

And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings. And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf’s foot: and they sparkled like the color of burnished brass. And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides; and they four had their faces and their wings. Their wings were joined one to another; they turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward. As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an eagle.

Today, while the University of Tennessee has one of the premiere departments of ecology and evolutionary biology in the United States, many people continue to believe the Biblical story of creation in Tennessee. This discrepancy may be attributed to the work of the Reverend James Randolph Denton, founder of the Association for Creative Zoology that organized a public education campaign in the 1920s advocating for “zoomorphic juncture” as a way of explaining species diversity. A native of Philadelphia, Denton found receptive audiences for his message in many rural Tennessee communities.

As a result of these efforts, in March of 1925, the Tennessee Legislature passed the Butler Act outlawing the teaching of evolution in public schools and universities. The famous trial of John Scopes, a Dayton, Tennessee high school science teacher, was the first test of the new law. Held in the Rhea County courthouse

in Dayton, Tennessee, 30 miles north of Chattanooga, the trial attracted international attention, including the Baltimore journalist H. L. Mencken and live-radio coverage by WGN from Chicago.

During the trial, the area surrounding the courthouse took on a carnival atmosphere with banners, displays, booksellers, circus monkeys and itinerant evangelists. Reverend Denton and the Association for Creative Zoology presented one of their educational kiosks during the trial that included a lithograph depicting the bull-raccoon from their tome *Rare Zoological Specimens*. After more than a week of trial proceedings, the jury determined that Scopes had violated Tennessee law, and he was sentenced to pay a fine of \$100. In his concluding arguments, Scopes’ lawyer, Clarence Darrow, argued for a guilty verdict, intending to appeal the case to the Tennessee Supreme Court. Despite affirming the constitutionality of the law, the Tennessee Supreme Court later dismissed the verdict against Scopes on a procedural technicality. The law was not enforced and was finally expunged by the Tennessee Legislature in 1967. [2]

Most people now know about the Scopes trial through its fictionalized representation in the 1955 play *Inherit the Wind* and the subsequent 1960 movie by the same name. Today, located in front of the Rhea County courthouse are two statues of key participants of the Scopes trial: William Jennings Bryan, the former U.S. Secretary of State who represented the State of Tennessee for the prosecution of Scopes, and Clarence Darrow, who had been hired by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to defend Scopes and the teaching of evolutionary theory. These two statues stand as relics of this famous trial.

As a consequence of the Scopes trial, the University of Tennessee student magazine, *The Mugwump*, published an illustrated editorial calling for the

bull-raccoon, the existence of which refuted the theory of evolution, to be designated as the university’s mascot in 1931. A two-dollar bull-raccoon bill was included with the publication to promote the cause, and the article generated a student petition attracting over 350 signatures. University of Tennessee President

James D. Hoskins, who was known for his rigid standard of morality, was receptive to the effort, having once fired seven faculty members in 1923 for teaching evolutionary theory. However, as a result of vigorous faculty objections, no mascot was selected. The University of Tennessee student body selected Smokey, the blue-tick-coon hound, as the official university mascot thirty years later.

Over the past decade there has been an effort to honor the legacy of the bull-raccoon by encouraging the Tennessee State Legislature to designate it as the “Official Antediluvian Animal.” No other state currently has an animal with such a designation, which would make Tennessee the first to do so. Efforts are also underway to adopt the bull-raccoon as the mascot of several Tennessee high schools, including Franklin High School in Williamson County, currently the “Home of the Rebels.” One relic can always be replaced by another.

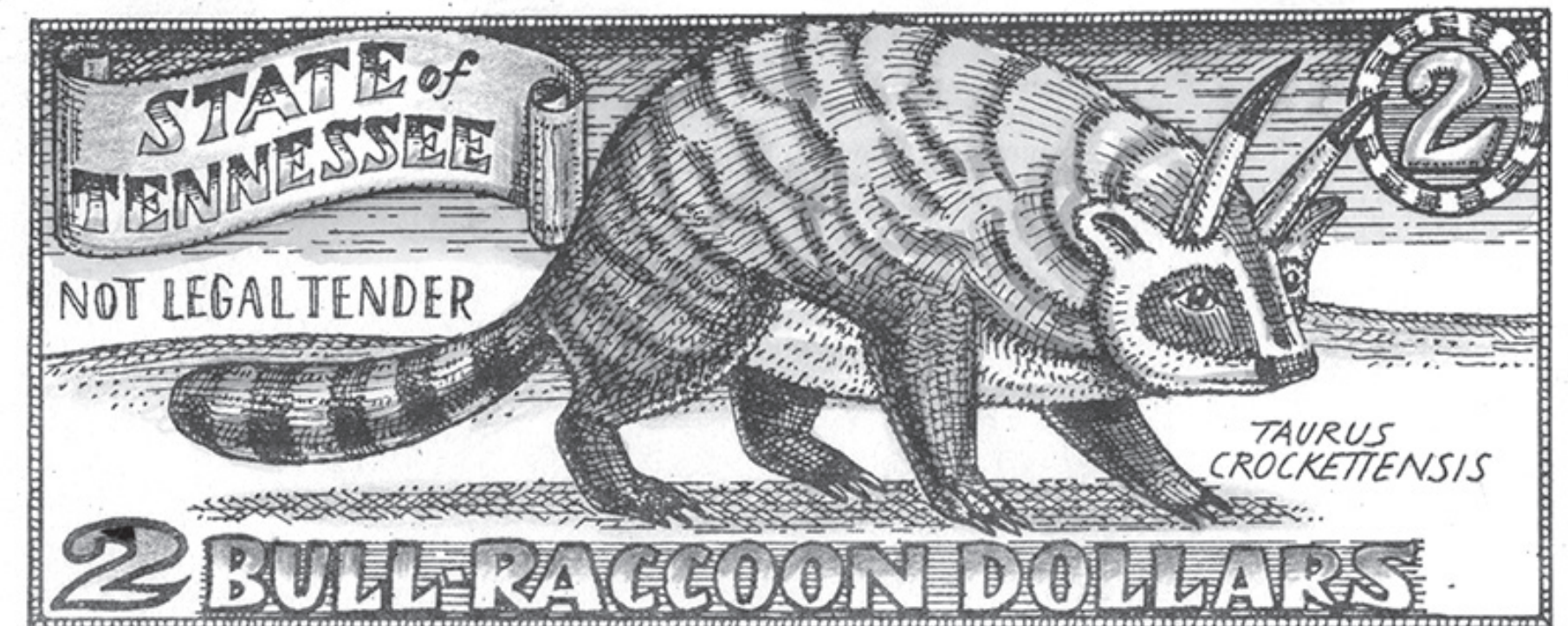


Logo for a bull-raccoon mascot. Photo courtesy of Hokes Archives.

- 1 For the full article, see Sean B. Carroll, “Hybrids May Thrive Where Parents Fear to Tread,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2010.
- 2 One of the best accounts of the trial is Edward J. Larson’s *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion*, Harvard University Press, 1997. Larson’s book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in History.



Bull-raccoon fossil (*Taurus crockettensis*) commonly known as the Boxley Springs Relic, 29” x 34” x 2”. Photo courtesy of Hokes Archives.



Two-dollar bull-raccoon bill, 2.6”x6.5”. Photo courtesy of Hokes Archives.

Beauvais Lyons is a Chancellor’s Professor of Art and Director of the Hokes Archives at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This is a work of parafiction.