

Mississippi Myth

By Arlene Eisenbise

The New Madrid earthquakes of December 1811 and January 1812 caused the Mississippi River to reverse its course. Is it possible a “merbaby” was washed upriver? Was one tossed ashore near LaCrosse, Wisconsin, where in time the mummified creature was discovered?

I have waited long, since a time beyond counting. Whenever you passed en route to the city, I called out. At first my voice was too faint. I willed it to strengthen. One day I sensed you heard me as a whisper in your busy mind. When next you passed I was aware of your glance in the direction of this decaying building where I dwell. My voice drew only brief attention until today—this miraculous day—when you no longer dismissed the calling. I listen.

The rusted bell clatters against the worn door. The aging antique dealer rises with effort from a stool behind the scarred counter. He nods. “Afternoon, Miss. Looking for anything in particular?”

“I’ve been drawn to your store for some time. Don’t know why. Not yet.”

For the first time I hear your human voice.

She lifts something from a shelf, turns the metal key at the back of a red-jacketed bartender. As he downs his pretend-drink, pretend-smoke puffs from both ears. She giggles.

Your laughter is music. You are a happy being. I hear your heels against the floor planking.

The tapping stops and then begins again.

Your steps move closer.

“Did you know this butter churn is chipped?” she asks.

The butter churn did not draw you in. I did. Move past the frayed books with their crumbling glue. They are not nearly old enough. You are responding to an ancient cry, a sorrow so deep you cannot pull it to the surface. I know of it, for the sorrow is also mine.

“The stand holding this old fish tank is ornate,” she comments.

Yes, you like fish. You were part fish. Like me, you were of the water. Remember the night when it boiled and churned, pulling me from your arms. We screamed then, in unison. I still scream but in silence now. I hear your sigh. I beg of you, do not abandon your search. You and I have waited all this time. You are so close to discovery. Wipe the dust and smoke from the gilt-edged mirror. It hangs crooked on the wall before you. Witness the seeking in your mystical eyes.

“Give a holler, Miss, if I can be of assistance. Take a look at that Amish quilt, a collectible of rare design. Hand dyed. Old as the hills. It hangs next to the display case.”

Yes, come. Then you will be nearby. Behind the streaked glass you may notice my still form, dried and shrunken. But I am not beyond recognition, not to you.

“A quilt doesn’t interest me. Something . . . something more unusual.”

I hear the shopkeeper’s tottering steps.

“If it’s the unusual you have an eye for, look there in the case on the middle shelf. You won’t find a more unusual creature anywhere.”

The shopkeeper sniffs the air.

“Speaking of the unusual, what’s that fragrance?”

“It’s an essential oil—bergamot.”

Of course, in your human lifetime you would no longer smell of seaweed. Your eyes follow in the direction the shopkeeper points. I both await and fear your reaction. I hear your gasp.

She presses her face to the glass. “Oh . . . oh. Wherever did you find it?”

“Came with the shop. We advertise the creature.” The shopkeeper waved his tri-colored brochure. “It’s a come-on.”

“Then it’s not for sale?”

“Not unless they demolish the building. There’s some talk of widening the highway.”

“And when might that happen?”

“When the State gets around to it.”

Your eyes caress my form. You do not laugh or wince as others have.

“Its tiny face holds such anguish,” she says.

“Gives my wife the willies, I tell you. It’s not fish, not human either. Wouldn’t want those needle-thin teeth sunk into one of my fingers.”

“Poor tortured being. It has ribs. See, there beneath the taut leathery skin?”

Her fingers massage the glass. “There must be a story. Were you told about its discovery?”

“Yes, the story goes that . . .”

I know the story. I was there. One day you, too, may remember when the floor of the ocean quaked and split. When the waves rose, sending the water of the great river backwards. Terrified, I tumbled and tossed in the dizzying waves until thrown high onto a bank. Mud covered my bruises, my physical wounds. Other wounds have yet to heal. As the mud baked dry, so did I. In time I arrived here to await this day.

She raised a hand to stop his words. “No need to tell me. I will come to know the story. May I leave my card? Notify me when the State decides.”

With a knuckle you tap the glass mere inches from my body. You are remembering. I hear your thought: I will come for you, merbaby.

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