

Evidence for Bigfoot? An Investigation of the Mill Creek 'Sasquatch Prints'

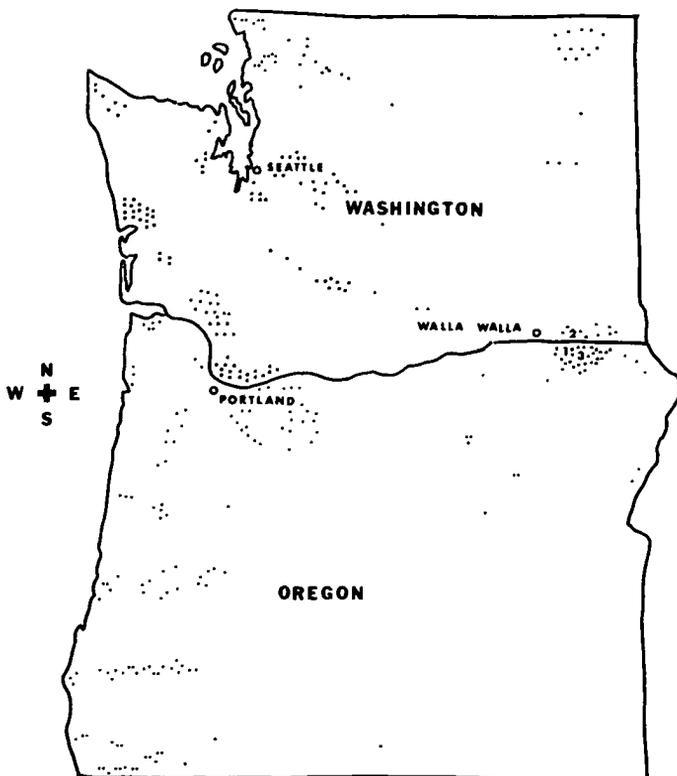
Some have called these footprints with dermal ridges authentic, but evidence to the contrary is abundant and mounting.

Michael R. Dennett

THE LEGEND of Sasquatch, the giant humanoid monster alleged to inhabit the Pacific Northwest, has taken an important new turn. A seemingly growing number of scientists and, for the first time, a respected magazine are accepting as valid evidence that indicates the creature exists. *Newsweek* (September 21, 1987) ran a dramatic article in its "Science" section about startling new proof of Bigfoot. The evidence, reported *Newsweek*, consisted of four sets of footprints that showed dermal ridges, the foot's equivalent of fingerprints. Forty fingerprint experts agreed they were authentic, the article said. The magazine quoted a skeptical anthropologist from the University of California, Berkeley, as conceding that "it would be impossible to fake prints with dermal ridges."

Plaster casts of the giant footprints, some 15 inches in length, have been collected by Grover Krantz, an anthropologist at Washington State University (WSU). Krantz, a longtime advocate of the existence of Bigfoot, claims that the casts show "detailed microscopic anatomy absolutely perfectly." The casts, first reported by Krantz in 1982, are indeed impressive. Anthropologist Robert Meier, of Indiana University, who had originally declined even to look at the impressions, revised his opinion after viewing them at a dermatoglyphics convention. In a recent paper Professor Meier wrote: "I think [Krantz] should be commended for his thorough and dedicated investigation into the Sasquatch matter, and generally he has offered cautious interpretations of the

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Map of Bigfoot Sightings

Dots represent individual Bigfoot sightings, tracks, or hair samples. Note that many sightings are in areas of high population, particularly near Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington.

Just to the east of Walla Walla is the Mill Creek area (1 shows the location of the first tracks found with dermal ridges; 2 and 3 are the sites of subsequent findings of the footprints with dermal ridges).

Data for map based on information collected by Kevin Lindley and Vito Quaranta.

evidence.” Benny Kling, a dermatology specialist, confirms Krantz’s interpretation of the casts. After examining two sets of casts, Kling concluded: “Parts of the foot which should be worn smooth of dermal ridges are so worn on both individuals, indicating that both individuals have walked barefoot for a long time; such highly specialized knowledge of primate dermal wear patterns would probably not be known to a potential hoaxer.” Kling also noted a pattern of dermal-ridge failure, a not uncommon human/primate feature, stating that they “occur in the correct places, an almost impossible fact for even a sophisticated hoaxer to predict.”

Many skeptical individuals, including ABC “Good Morning America” reporter Steve Fox and the Los Angeles KABC-TV researcher David Frank, were impressed by the apparent authenticity of the casts. Even this writer was surprised at the detail shown in the plaster reproductions of the impressions.

It is clear that support is mounting for Krantz and his interpretation of the footprints. Geoffrey Gamble, chairman of the Anthropology Department at WSU, and Krantz's boss, says he tends "to believe in Bigfoot's existence" but is "not convinced." Anthropologist Roderick Sprague, of the University of Idaho, has been even more outspoken in his support of Krantz, saying critics are "as anti-intellectual as the Spanish Inquisition." And according to Krantz, surveys have shown that as many as 15 percent of his peers "believe the animal is likely to exist."

Central to the story are the first two sets of Sasquatch tracks found to show dermal ridges and valleys.¹ The tracks were discovered in June 1982 in an area known as Mill Creek Watershed, in Oregon's Blue Mountains. These tracks, claims Krantz, are proof positive that the creature of legend is an animal in fact. While the WSU professor is gaining support among fellow scientists and a few journalists, many others remain unimpressed.

When I talked with veteran Sasquatch researcher René Dahinden, he told me, "The [Mill Creek] tracks are 100 percent fakes, absolutely fakes!" Dahinden, who has spent 30 years searching for Bigfoot, said he had questioned many experienced hunters in the area where the tracks were found and none of these hunters had ever seen anything to suggest that a group of giant primates lives there.

"Look," Dahinden explained, "remember the Hitler diaries of a few years ago? Several experts said that the handwriting was just right, that all the dates and events were historically correct, and therefore they had to be authentic. But it turns out that the ink used was not invented until 1954, so the diaries are a fake. So who cares about the handwriting or the dates. The same thing applies to the Freeman [Mill Creek] tracks. They are fakes, so who gives a damn about Krantz and his dermal ridges!"

Nor is Dahinden alone among Sasquatch enthusiasts in looking skeptically at the tracks. It was clear from the beginning of my research on the case that Krantz and *Newsweek* magazine gave only part of the story.

Doubt about the authenticity of the tracks is based, in part, on an investigation conducted by the U.S. Forest Service.² Surprised by the discovery of alleged Sasquatch tracks in land administered by the Forest Service, Roger E. Baker, regional administrator, sent wildlife biologist Rodney L. Johnson to investigate. Johnson visited the Mill Creek site the day following the discovery of the tracks. Johnson's report and conclusions indicate that the tracks were hoaxed. In one area, according to Johnson, "it appeared that the fine forest litter (needles, etc.) had been brushed aside prior to making the track. It was obvious that the litter had been displaced sideways from the track area in an unnatural manner."³ In addition, Johnson reported, "In several cases, it appeared that the foot may have been rocked from side to side to make the track." More damaging were Johnson's technical observations. He found that the stride of the tracks "did not change with slope," that there "was no sign of heel or toe *slippage* on the steep gradient," and that the "toes on some tracks appeared wider" from print to print.



FIGURE 1. Dermal ridges and valleys from a cast of Mill Creek tracks, 1982.

The Forest Service biologist is also at odds with the assessment of Kling, the dermatological specialist Krantz favors. Johnson found that the "small toes lacked a definite pad at the tips as would be expected." In direct contradiction to Kling, Johnson reported that "markings were very clear on the portions of the foot that should be worn smooth and calloused." And Johnson was able to view the actual tracks in the field, not just plaster casts.

One other significant item was mentioned in Johnson's report: "The tracks at both sites were not to the bottom of the mud. In fact, we were sinking in deeper with boots on at the same locations."

In addition to Johnson's expertise as a wildlife biologist, the Forest Service requested, and received, the assistance of Joel Hardin, a U.S. Border Patrol officer, to help investigate the footprints. Hardin is reputed to be one of the best trackers in the Border Patrol. He has often been called on to find fugitives or lost hikers. By following "human sign" as slight as rolled rocks, bent grass, and scrape and scuff marks, Hardin has often succeeded when searchers with tracking dogs have failed. In fact, Hardin has never lost a trail when following an escaped prisoner or fugitive. He was flown to the Mill Creek Watershed to accompany Johnson.

The area around Mill Creek is closed to the general public because it is the source of drinking water for several area towns. As a result of the lack of human traffic, Hardin said he found conditions for the "observation and readability of human sign [to be] excellent." After a complete search of the area, Hardin could not find *any* continuity to the tracks beyond the range



FIGURE 2. Plaster cast of Mill Creek track, foreground. No. 2 pencil shows size of track. Duplicate of Mill Creek type in background. The difference in color is due to duplicate being cast from ground, thus picking up dirt. Allegedly authentic track was made from duplicate mold and thus did not pick up any dirt to discolor cast.

of the distinct impressions. He states that “the tracks appeared and disappeared on the trail with no sign leading to or away from the area.”⁴ That a giant creature could suddenly stop leaving a trail, after making huge dents in the earth, seemed impossible to the border patrolman. Hardin’s conclusion: hoax.

An important part of the evidence for the authenticity of the footprints is an alleged eyewitness account of Sasquatch activity just before the discovery of the tracks. Paul Freeman, at that time a new Forest Service patrolman, claims he observed a creature in the watershed that could only be the legendary Sasquatch. The next week Freeman discovered the now-famous tracks with the dermal ridges.

Freeman claims to have encountered other evidence of the creature since then. He says he has found Sasquatch handprints, Sasquatch dung, at least two samples of Sasquatch hair, and several additional sets of footprints, also with dermal ridges. In 1986, after Freeman learned that it was believed that Sasquatches break and twist the tops of small fir trees, he began finding evidence of this too. He has tape-recorded the screech of a Bigfoot, photographed the creature, and encountered it face to face a second time, in October 1988.⁵ During this second sighting he unsuccessfully tried to film Bigfoot.

Bob Titmus, who has recently been made an honorary member of the International Society of Cryptozoology for his nearly half a century of field research on Bigfoot, told me he did not find Freeman to be a credible

witness. Titmus explained that on one occasion, while in the field, he told Freeman he thought there might be a Sasquatch in the area. Freeman hopped into his truck and within 20 minutes returned to say he had located some Sasquatch prints. The tracks showed dermal ridges, Titmus told me; but when he looked for signs beyond the few prints Freeman had located, he found no evidence of activity even though the terrain favored tracking. Titmus concluded that the tracks were probably a hoax.

Other Bigfoot enthusiasts are also skeptical of Freeman's testimony. They cite Freeman's "exceptional success at finding Sasquatch footprints" as unlikely. In addition, some are uncomfortable with the fact that Freeman has a history of attempting to fake Bigfoot tracks. *Incredible as it may seem, the key witness for the Mill Creek tracks has admitted to faking footprints of Sasquatch.*⁶ When I talked with Freeman in the fall of 1987, he also told me that he intended to open, and operate, a Bigfoot museum. At that time he had various Sasquatch memorabilia for sale, including small busts of the creature.

When I asked Krantz about Freeman's faking prints, he told me that he had no indication that Freeman was involved in any new attempts to hoax Bigfoot. Yet I believe that Krantz has substantial evidence of exactly that. Freeman has found at least two sets of Sasquatch "hair."⁷ A longtime Sasquatch journalist and supporter of Krantz admitted to me that a thorough



FIGURE 3. Bust of Bigfoot made by Paul Freeman. (Craftmanship and detail show Freeman to be a talented individual. He also paints with oils, and several people have said his paintings are quite good.)

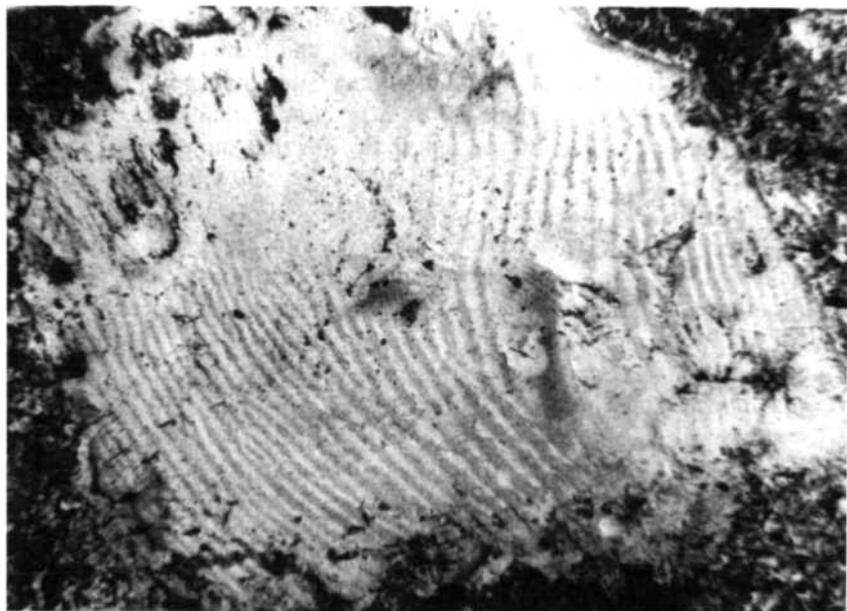


FIGURE 4. Close-up of dermal-ridge pattern in recreated version of Mill Creek track. The apparent larger size of the recreated version may be due to the fact that the print was made from a size-16 foot while the original Mill Creek tracks may have been made by a smaller set of feet. Alternatively, the giant Sasquatch monster may have tiny ridge patterns compared with those of a man with large feet.

laboratory analysis of a set of hair samples (that I believe Krantz obtained from Freeman) proved conclusively that the “hair” was in fact a manmade substance. When I pressed Krantz about this, he dismissed the issue because “other experts” had identified the “hair” as very strange, or from an unknown animal. Another Bigfoot advocate explained to me that Krantz “will peddle hair samples until someone tells him what he wants to hear.”

Crucial to Krantz’s case is the apparent commitment of “40 fingerprint experts” to the authenticity of the footprints.⁸ Yet, when I asked him for the names of “several of the best fingerprint experts in the country and some from abroad,” he declined to provide *any* information. Instead, he *insisted* that there was nothing I could do to shed additional light on his already thorough study of the tracks and vigorously tried to get me to drop that line of investigation.⁹

With difficulty I have tracked down some of the fingerprint specialists who have examined the Mill Creek tracks. George Bonebrake, a former supervisor of the FBI’s latent-fingerprint section, said: “There appeared to be dermal ridges at various places on the cast of the footprint, but not enough to give an overall appearance or to base an opinion.”¹⁰ Robert Olsen, a latent-print examiner, said he “could not detect whether they [the Mill Creek tracks] were faked.”¹¹ More important, did Krantz ever ask the correct questions of these fingerprint experts?

I asked Dr. Kazumichi Katayama, of Kyoto University, Japan, and Dr. A. G. de Wilde, of the Laboratory of Anatomy and Embryology, the Netherlands, both experts in dermatoglyphics, if they could distinguish a Sasquatch print from that of a large human.¹² Both responded that it was "most unlikely." When asked, "Do you feel that footprints that show dermal ridges in a few spots on the foot would be very difficult to fake?" they both answered no. To my surprise de Wilde informed me that he had studied the footprints intensively and that his comments were probably the first received by Krantz. Wrote de Wilde, "I do not see any principal difference between these parts of ridge patterns and the complete patterns of men with large feet."¹³ Significantly, de Wilde concluded, "*If circumstantial evidence of the findings is reliable enough* [emphasis added] then dermatoglyphics are not against Krantz's conclusions about the existence of Sasquatch man."

Krantz, who has already proposed that Sasquatch be given the scientific name *Gigantopithecus blacki*, insists that no plausible scenario exists for the hoax explanation of the Mill Creek tracks. Yet an economical and reasonable sequence of events can be constructed.¹⁴ In investigating the case, I learned from two separate reliable sources that Freeman had once worked for an orthopedic-shoe company. After learning this I talked with a number of custom- and orthopedic-shoe manufacturers and asked if a cast of a foot could be made to duplicate a foot with dermal ridges. I learned that some manufacturers and even some independent cobblers will make a *mold of the foot* from wax or similar casting material. When I asked how such a mold might be expanded to the dimensions of a Bigfoot, most of the custom-shoe people said they would just use someone with a giant foot. All of them said that size-16 feet (12 $\frac{3}{8}$ "") were fairly common and that size 19 (13 $\frac{5}{8}$ "") were occasionally encountered. Several mentioned feet larger than size 19, and one said he had a customer who had a size 26 (15 $\frac{7}{8}$ "") foot.

Richard Filonczuk, a cobbler in the Portland, Oregon, area, said that a plaster "foot" showing dermal ridges and valleys might be made from a mold of the human foot. I asked him if he would make me a set, and he agreed to do so for \$25. Filonczuk used one of his customers with large feet (12 $\frac{1}{4}$ "") to make me a set of casts that I could use to make Mill Creek-style impressions (see Figure 4).

Without any knowledge of the circumstances of the Mill Creek tracks, de Wilde had guessed at what I think is the most likely explanation for the authenticity of the dermal markings: that they were produced from impressions from a real person's foot. Explained de Wilde: "The patterns of the ridges do not exclude that of a human being with large feet. The size of the feet is [also] not a convincing argument, because several people in Holland . . . have feet nearly of equal length to the [Mill Creek] Sasquatch prints."

In the course of investigating the Mill Creek tracks I have met many Bigfoot enthusiasts. Several have gone out of their way to assist me, and many others have been helpful. Most realized they were providing information that would certainly reduce the value of the Mill Creek tracks. Some also

anticipated the conclusion many would reach: that if the most impressive footprints were a hoax, then other clearly recognizable Sasquatch prints could also have been faked.¹⁵ René Dahinden summed it up best when he lamented to me, “Oh, what Krantz has done to Bigfoot research! He has destroyed the credibility of track prints forever!”

Notes

1. There have been a couple of claims that tracks found before 1982 showed dermal ridges, but no evidence of such casts has been forthcoming.

2. The Forest Service investigation was conducted for Forest Service use only and has not been made available to the press or the public. Even after I obtained a copy of the report, Forest Service people would not comment on its findings. Krantz and other Bigfoot advocates are aware of the details of the Forest Service report.

3. This and other quotes are from Johnson's official report titled: “Documentation of Investigation into Sighting of ‘Bigfoot’ Tracks in the Mill Creek Watershed, June 8, 1982.”

4. Quotations are from an “Official Memorandum” by Joel Hardin dated July 28, 1982. Other details are based on his “Memorandum” and private correspondence.

5. It is not clear how many times Freeman claims to have seen Bigfoot. He took one photo of an alleged Sasquatch sometime between 1982 and 1987 and a second photo, actually snapped by his son, in 1988.

6. On ABC's “Good Morning America” program, October 1987, Freeman admits that in the past (prior to 1982) he had tried to make fake Bigfoot prints. Krantz has characterized Freeman as “one of his best sources of Sasquatch information.”

7. One set of “hair” samples found by Freeman was identified by the New York City Police lab as “being exactly like human hair.” No other Sasquatch hair samples, to my knowledge, have been so identified.

8. I believe the figure of “40 experts” to be an exaggeration but that at least 6 experts have studied the casts.

9. In fairness I should state that I did not press Krantz for the names. In published articles, Krantz identifies three of the fingerprint experts.

10. *Science Digest*, September 1984, page 94.

11. *Ibid.*

12. I queried these fingerprint experts because I believed them to be among the international experts that Krantz claims. De Wilde proved to be one who had examined the casts in detail.

13. Personal correspondence.

14. This is by no means the only possible explanation of how the tracks were hoaxed. It is also possible that the ridges were an unintentional artifact of the hoax and not intended to be discovered.

15. Some Sasquatch footprints, perhaps many, may be nothing more than unusual depressions in the ground magnified into Bigfoot prints by people's imaginations. In such cases the hoaxer may be the human mind with a little help from nature. ●