



# The Mystery of the Texas Chupacabra

**Q** I found this old picture of a hairless animal from the 1950s. . . . It's being called a chupacabra. I think it's an opossum, but others think a fox. What are your thoughts on this weird mystery?

—Andrew D. Gable

**A:** “What is it?” indeed! What is that strange creature, and what if anything does it have to do with the chupacabra, one of my favorite monsters and the subject of my book

*Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact, Fiction, and Folklore?* In order to answer this question, I located and bought the original photograph on eBay (Figure 1). Once I had it in hand, new questions were raised and I soon launched an investigation into this curiosity.

Several aspects of this mystery soon surfaced. The first question that arose was if the animal in the photograph was actually referred to as a “chupacabra.” This is important because in my research I concluded that the chupacabra, as a mysterious vampiric creature, only came into existence in 1995. After my book came out I was contacted by over a dozen people who insisted that they had heard about the chupacabra long before 1995, in some cases dating back to the 1970s and 1950s (Radford 2011a). A reference from the 1950s to a strange creature would be documentary proof that some of my conclusions about the creature’s origins were wrong. I was eager to put my detective work to the test. The second question was the origin of the photograph, including where it had come from and where it had orig-



Figure 1. A “Dog-like Creature Called the Chupacabra” press photo from 1950.



Figure 2. Detail image of the “chupacabra” photo reveals trace evidence of photographic manipulation.

inally been published, because no one seemed to know. Third, of course, was identifying that strange animal if possible.

I began by taking a much closer look at the photograph itself; whether the subject is a famous lake monster photo or a ghostly image, an examination of the original photograph (or as close as you can come to it) is always best. Information vital to solving a mystery can easily be lost when an image is cropped, copied and reproduced, and so on. My best chance for solving this mystery lay in clues embedded in the photograph itself. Upon close inspection with a high-powered magnifying glass, I soon came to the shocking discovery that the

photo had almost certainly been altered (see Figure 2).

*A fake! A hoax! A ringer! A photographic snowjob arranged by some cryptozoological mystery-mongering yellow journalist!*

Well, not necessarily. Though not obvious at first glance, the photo had been retouched—not necessarily for deception but for publication. This was common practice for photographs in the 1950s and later. As Mia Fineman, author of *Faking It: Manipulated Pho-*

the outline of his thumb just under the animal’s left ear has been drawn in; the creature’s eyes have been enhanced; and most obviously, the teeth in the lower jaw of the creature have been made much more prominent. The altering consists mostly of filling in some details, making edges sharper, and adding contrast. There’s no reason to think that the image itself is faked, or that the retouching was done to obscure the animal’s true nature.

In fact from an investigation stand-

“What Is It? If you know, you might tell Charles Hudson of Dallas, Tex. His coon dogs ran the strange creature down and killed it before he could stop them. It has the head of a fox, tail of a possum, feet like a raccoon and is completely hairless.”

It’s not clear where this description came from—whether Hudson himself told the photographer that his creature had fox, possum, and raccoon features, or whether an unnamed zoologist or veterinarian had weighed in on the

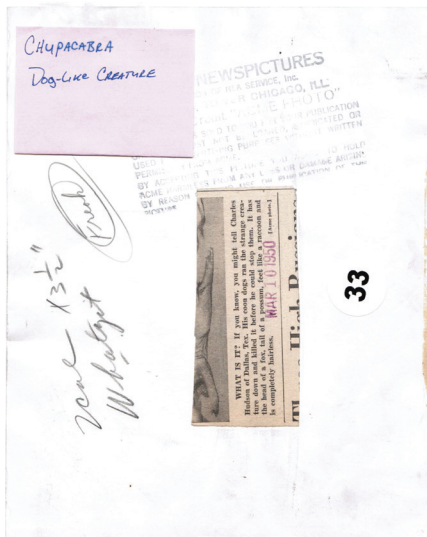


Figure 3. The back of the “chupacabra” photograph is rich with editorial information about the image’s history.

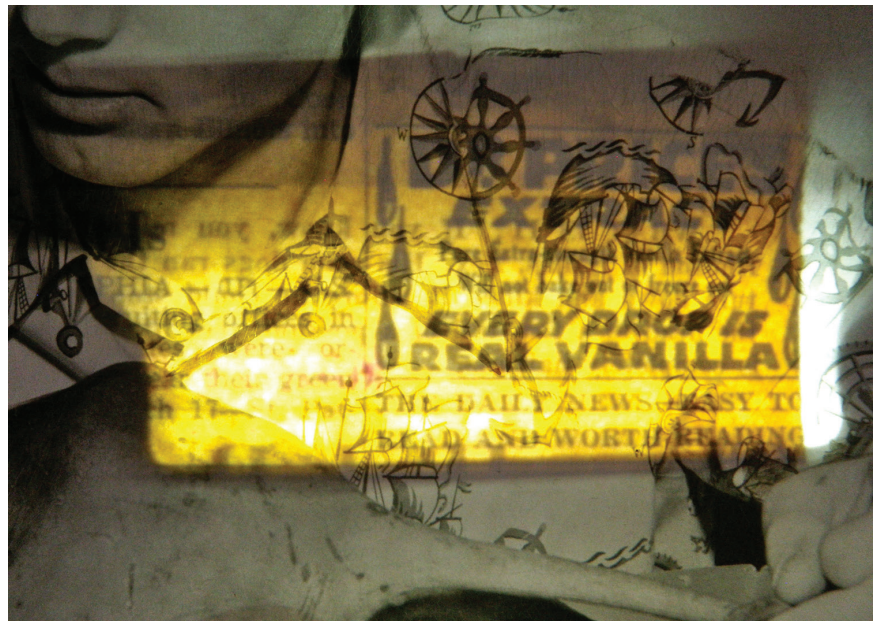


Figure 4. Through restricted backlighting the identity of the newspaper that published the mysterious “chupacabra” photo in 1950 is revealed: *The Chicago Daily News*. According to the advertising slug, not only is the *Daily News* easy to read, but it is also worth reading.

*tography Before Photoshop* notes, “Many of the earliest instances of photographic manipulation were, in fact, efforts to compensate for the new medium’s technical limitations—specifically, its inability to depict the world the way it looks to the naked eye” (Fineman 2012, 9). Thus, for example, photographers would sometimes manually compensate for an underexposed image by adding some strategically placed lines or shading. The intent was not deception but instead its opposite, accuracy; the retouching would help to clarify what the different elements of the photograph were.

In this case there are several examples of retouching: the man’s shirt collar has been outlined to make it stand out;

point the photograph itself is far less interesting and important than what is on the back (see Figure 3). The various editorial notes written and taped to the back of the photograph offer a revealing glimpse into the evolving folklore of the chupacabra. With a little detective work informed by a journalism background, we can decipher the trail and piece together a history of this photograph and discover how a 1950s “What is it?” became a 2012 “chupacabra.”<sup>1</sup>

The first mark on the back of the photo was a standard journalism permissions stamp from Acme Newspictures, now owned by Corbis. Later on, a news clipping was taped on top of that stamp showing that the photo was published March 10, 1950, with the caption

strange find. In any event it was a weird news story likely to generate interest and move papers, and that was the only issue that mattered to the editors.

But which editors, where? According to the seller’s eBay listing, the photo came from the archives of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Daily News*, *Detroit News*, and *Sport* magazine. I had no way of knowing which of those papers it appeared in, and because the newspaper clipping was pasted to the back of the photograph, removing it would have damaged one or both documents. However, using a specialized high-powered forensic light I examined the newsprint on the other side of the pasted clipping and discovered that the photograph had in fact appeared in the

*Chicago Daily News* (see Figure 4).

Thus with some degree of accuracy we can trace the evolution of what this strange creature was thought or assumed to be over time: a “What is it” and a fox/possum/raccoon chimera in 1950; later on (likely in the 1960s or 1970s) a freak or “Whatzit”; and finally in the 1990s or 2000s a “chupacabra” or “dog-like creature.”

This mirrors the process I uncovered in researching my chupacabra book; as I and others have noted, understanding a monster’s cultural history is crucial to understanding its nature. Daniel Loxton and Donald Prothero state in their acclaimed recent book *Abominable Science!* about Bigfoot, “What we want to discover is: Where the heck did the Bigfoot idea come from in the first place? Has the legend changed over time? Does the story feel compelling only because we are steeped in decades of ... folklore and popular culture?” (Loxton and Prothero 2013, 31).

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I discussed this folkloric and lexical history in a recent *Discovery News* article:

How can badgers, coyotes, foxes, raccoons, dogs, and other animals all be (at least temporarily) called the chupacabra? How is it that chupacabras can be everywhere and yet their existence remains unproven? The answer lies in the lexical evolution of both the word “chupacabra” and the public’s understanding of what it means. In the mid-to-late 1990s, chupacabra referred to a very specific, unique creature: a bipedal animal that stood about 3 to 5 feet tall; had long arms and legs; a large oval-shaped head; alien, wraparound eyes; and a distinctive row of spikes down the spine. This was the original description given by the world’s

first chupacabra eyewitness in August 1995 in Puerto Rico. The creature was said to suck the blood out of livestock and small animals. Later research, published in my book *Tracking the Chupacabra* revealed that this original chupacabra report described a monster in a science fiction film, not anything in real life. Thus the whole origin of the monster is based on an eyewitness’s mistake.

That original version and definition of the chupacabra largely faded away by about 2000, and a completely new and different version of the chupacabra emerged in the mid-2000s. The two-legged, spiky-backed, blood-sucking alien-type chupacabra all but ceased to exist, replaced by the hairless doglike animals we see today. A string of dead animals were found, most of them in rural Texas. The finders, not knowing what else to call them, used the name chupacabra though the animals had no connection to the Puerto Rican monster at all. This new chupacabra even lost its famous appetite for blood: None of the chupacabras found have any proven connection to blood-drained animals. (Radford 2011b)

Thus by the late 1990s the word *chupacabra* evolved into a catchall name for any weird animal. So what was the unfortunate animal that Mr. Hudson’s coon dogs ran down and killed in Dallas, Texas, in early 1950? Unless the carcass was saved and is rediscovered floating in a specimen jar nearly sixty years later, a definitive answer provided by DNA analysis is unlikely to be forthcoming. However, there are more than enough clues about the creature’s identity in the photograph to make a pretty solid guess.

Darren Naish, a science writer and paleozoologist based at the University of Southampton, examined the photograph and has concluded that the “What is it?” is probably a raccoon af-

flicted with mange, a skin disease that causes the hair to fall out. He explained,

several features of this animal (including the forward-facing eyes, large lower canine teeth, naked rhinarium, obvious claws, and so on) show that it’s a carnivore (and obviously an unfortunate freak individual suffering from hair loss). The dark mask around the eyes immediately indicates raccoon, an identification also consistent with the “mid-length” snout, ear shape, limb proportions, tail that’s neither short nor all that long, and general shape and size. So, my working hypothesis is that it’s a raccoon, and a juvenile one since it doesn’t look that big compared to the human in the shot. Note also that its forelimbs are mostly dark, another raccoon feature. By looking at pictures of juvenile raccoons online, I’m happy enough to think that this is the correct identification. (Naish 2013)

So the Texas Chupacabra Whatzit is probably an ordinary raccoon. But an examination of its various incarnations through time reveals much about chupacabra folklore. ■

#### Note

1. The “What is it?” label was a common sideshow/freak show label or term for some mysterious (often bipedal, manlike) creatures over the decades. The designation “Whatzit,” written in pencil on the left-hand side of the photo, is also a newsroom designation for a “sexy” story about something weird or unknown. Note also that the broader news keyword “freak” is written and circled just to the right of the “Whatzit” memo. For more on a “What is it?” in a sideshow context, see Nickell 2005, p. 158.

#### References

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