

Big Bertha May 2000

American folklore has many tales of legend and intrigue. Some are just fables, and some are legends and who knows, some may even be based on fact. In the Pacific Northwest there is Sesquatch, the East Coast has its witches and the Jersey Devil. From the Chippewa Indians to the present, the northwoods also has its share of stories. Some are legends such as Paul Bunyan, others make a man's blood run cold. In the latter category lies the northwoods legend of Big Bertha. Few have admitted seeing her, but all have heard of her legendary victory over Big Val in the toughest woman contest which, to hear it told, was much akin to the battle between John Henry and the Steam Hammer. The stories are fictitious of course, or are they.....

It started out as an ordinary northern Michigan spring day. Warm, sunny and the air was crisp. The perfect day to do what northern men do in the spring besides rabbit hunting, that is, tap maple trees for maple syrup. Syrup season in Michigan is really an "in between season", in between ice fishing season and summer trout and walleye fishing season. (Note: Michigan is a true 4 season state: small game hunting season, deer season, ice fishing season, summer fishing season.) Not all-northern men participate in syrup season, but a few of us hearty souls do. Most men during this time are preparing for the spring trout season, but I am one of the few who still marches into the woods carrying buckets, taps, and hoses in search of the liquid gold of Michigan, maple syrup. But, I digress.

As I mentioned, this day was perfect for the task at hand. Maybe the day was too perfect; perhaps that should have been a warning. Sitting under my favorite maple tree arranging taps and hoses, it happened. While cutting hose to drain syrup into a bucket, I managed to cut my finger. Now this was not an ordinary cut; this was a cut worthy of a north woodsman, no matter what the season. You don't really need to know the details of how I cut my finger. Nor do you need to know about my magnificent struggle for survival against all odds on how I got out of the woods to seek medical attention. What is important is what happened after I found medical attention.

Taking one look at what I had done to my finger and trying desperately and unsuccessfully to stop the bleeding, Babe decided that I needed more medical attention than her north woods woman first aide knowledge. So we drove the 30 miles to the Cheboygan hospital while I tried in vain to stem the flow of blood from my slashed finger. As luck would have it, the emergency room was full with your usual assortment of **non-emergency** patients, a **supposed** heart attack victim, a child who **may** have eaten rat poison, and some old person who had **supposedly** passed out after taking his medication. Meanwhile I sat there growing weaker by the minute, as a crimson tide flowed from my slashed finger onto the emergency room carpet. Only half awake, somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness, it happened. A loud voice said, "I need help." The #@#% cops just beat the @##@\$% out of me; I need help" Then even louder, "Hey you, what the hell is the matter with you?" Startled into what I thought was consciousness I looked up to see not an angel of mercy staring down at me, but something I will never forget. It was about 5 feet two inches tall and about 300 lbs, with short fur or hair. At first I thought it was the Tasmanian Devil from the Looney Toons. But then I thought "what the heck would taz be doing in the Cheboygan Hospital emergency room?" Again the voice asked "What the hell is the matter with you. I need help. Are you ahead of me?" Not knowing whom or what I was dealing with, I meekly nodded my head in assent and lifted my now throbbing finger. The voice came closer "Let me look at

that @#% finger, I used to be a nurse; I can tell you if you should be here.” My worst fears were that I was dealing with a monster from hell disguised as a nurse. As I later found out I was wrong; I was dealing with something much worse. As the voice examined my finger it said “Holy @\$%, this is the worst #\$\$#@#% cut I have ever seen. This man really needs help. What the @#\$\$@ is wrong with you people. Oh \$#@, I’m getting sick. I’m going outside to puke.” Thank God, the voice wasn’t a nurse, but who, or more importantly, what was it? She returned. “Yep, I just got out of jail today and was sitting in Hammerin Hanks havin a 7-up, when in bursts two cops. They pulled me off that bar stool and proceeded to beat the @#%\$ out of me. If I hadn’t lost that 100 lbs and had been up to my fightin weight, I could have taken the two of them easily.” I had no doubt that she could still take them. I expected to see the officers wheeled into the emergency room anytime. Now somewhat more awake I observed this northwoods phenomenon more closely. Could this be a close encounter with..... No, no she was just a legend.

Drip, drip, drip went the crimson river from my finger to the floor. But my wound became secondary as my scientific mind took over. What is this? Who is this? Where did it come from? Next an asthmatic was wheeled in. The “Thing” went over and examined this patient. Then she (I was guessing the “thing” was of the female gender) spoke again “I’ve got asthma too; you don’t look so bad. #@\$% I’m going outside and have a smoke.” She returned shortly. In the meantime a diabetic had come in with a sugar problem. This did not sit well with the she-devil, who had become sort of my guardian she-devil. The she-devil spoke “Oh @#%\$, not another one. What the hell is **your** problem?” The new patient answered. The she devil shouted “A diabetic! Hell, I’m a diabetic too. You don’t need no \$#@% medical attention! When are you guys going to sew this guy’s finger up. He’s bleeding to death. When you take care of him, I better be next or there will be trouble. Those @#%\$ cops are going to pay for these bruises!” After making this statement the she-devil proceeded to go around and show her bruises to those unfortunate souls that she hadn’t already frightened from the room. No one dared not to look; fear was everywhere. Next a possible stroke victim was wheeled in from a nursing home. The Thing spoke, “I worked in a nursing home. I know a stroke when I see one. This guy is ok. Take care of the guy with the finger”, she shouted. As the blood dripped slowly from my finger, I admit, I had to agree with her. After all, she used to be a nurse.

The real nurse motioned me over and said that it was my turn. A trail of blood marked my route to the sitting room. Another real nurse entered; I could still hear the she-devil howling in the waiting room “I was defenseless when those #\$\$%# cops.....” The nurse apologized for what was going on out in the waiting room. Then said, “She’s real trouble. She’s here twice a week when not in jail.” I asked, “Who is she?”. The nurse responded in a voice almost afraid to speak the words, “That sir, is Bertha” I said, “You don’t mean....?” “Yep, also known as Big Bertha” Great Ceasar! The legend was true! Now I wish I had run into the Tasmanian Devil instead.

The doctor came in and proceeded to put stitches in my finger. However, he didn’t finish. He was interrupted by a commotion in the hall. They were wheeling Bertha into a room down the hall as she was screaming “Those #@\$%\$ cops are going to pay now. Get me a doctor so I can show him before these #\$\$%@ bruises heal. Get me a @#%\$ doctor I said!” The doctor left, stating that he would soon return and finish stitching. As I sat there, I contemplated what I had just seen. I didn’t contemplate long. From down the hall I heard the doctor shout “Call the police. She’s loose!” I looked down on my unfinished surgery and decided that perhaps the wound wasn’t so bad after all; it would probably heal on its own in good time. I left and went looking for Babe. You see, in all

the legends of the northwoods from the Chippewa to now, there are none that tell you what to do if you should encounter Big Bertha.