Author regales library audience with accounts of the odd and bizarre

Some people collect stamps, coins or even recipes, and then there's Chad Lewis.

An author and researcher, Lewis is a collector of stories about the odd, macabre and just plain strange.

Lewis was the guest speaker last week at Saukville's Oscar Grady Library, drawing an audience of several dozen listeners. They ranged in age from impressionable children to adults whom some would say should know better.

During the talk and slide show titled "Wisconsin's Strange Past," Lewis unearthed more than a century of collected stories to illustrate just how quirky the Badger State can be.

Lewis has a master's degree in psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Stout, but his real strength is knowing what kinds of stories make people squeal and squirm.

He is the coauthor of a series of road guides to haunted locations and appeared previously at the library to share some of his collected ghost stories.

Last week's talk was culled from his book "Hidden Headlines of Wisconsin: Strange, Unusual and Bizarre Newspaper Stories 1860-1910."

As he showed slides of long-forgotten news clippings from around the state, Lewis presented the hard-to-believe tales in a matter-of-fact voice, letting listeners decide whether the yarns are true.

"I enjoy talking about the bizarre history of Wisconsin in the safety of a public library like this," Lewis said.

To collect his stories, he said, he has traveled the world.

"For 18 years, I've trekked across the world in search of the paranormal. If it is strange and unusual, I have probably searched for it, from the Chupacabaras in Puerto Rico to the elusive sea monster in Loch Ness," Lewis told the crowd.

"But many times the strangest things happen in your own back yard."

Lewis then turned to a collection of newspaper stories, most from the early 1900s, giving ghoulish accounts of people being buried alive, unknown beasts terrorizing the countryside and the downright odd — like the man who refused to take a bath for more than 60 years.

“You’ll notice a trend in a lot of these stories. They are usually reported in newspapers a good distance away from where they are purported to have occurred,” Lewis said.

“We don’t know if they are actually true or if it was just a case of a slow news day. Remember this was before the days of Google, and the people reading the stories wouldn’t know the people the stories were about, so they couldn’t ask them if it was true. In the early 1900s, publishers would often try to sell papers by using sensational headlines.”

To illustrate his point, Lewis showed a slide of a Milwaukee Journal story dating to 1901 about a peculiar fish caught by a commercial fisherman working for Smith Bros. in Port Washington.

“It looked like a swordfish without the sword, about 20 inches long and had many colors,” Lewis said. “It was so unusual they charged people 10 cents a piece to see it, which tells you how hard up for entertainment people were. Alas, we have no photographs of the fish.”

That lack of photographic evidence is a common thread with many of the quirky tales he collected.

Lewis said stories of panther-like creatures roaming the state have long been discredited by authorities until recent reports have verified that cougars are in our midst.

He said reports of ghosts and UFO sightings are often greeted with the same level of skepticism, but noted that such tales keep surfacing.

Lewis then mentioned a story he heard about a woman who haunts a nearby country road late at night, often startling passing motorists.

“I am not going to tell you where the road is, but you might be passing it on your way home,” he said.

Someone in the audience suggested, “You’re talking about Jay Road near Boltonville, right?”

Lewis didn’t confirm or deny the comment, but made a mental note as if it was a tip he planned to follow up on.

“That’s J-A-Y Road, correct?” he asked.

After hundreds of speaking appearances, Lewis said, he is always looking for the next story to investigate.

“I was in Mukwonago the other night, talking to 150 people. From that, I probably came away with 30 stories. That’s what I love,” he said.

Image Information: AUTHOR AND PARANORMAL researcher Chad Lewis autographed a book for a flustered Jenifer Bublitz of the Town of Saukville. Below, Lewis used slides to illustrate how the public has had a longstanding fascination with tales of the odd and unexplained. Photos by Sam Arendt