

more miserable place could not be imagined than a weed-choked and bramble-covered habitation of dragons where the satyrs cavorted and owls held court.

The ancient Greeks associated owls with Athene, the goddess who sprang full grown from the head of her father Zeus, king of Olympic deities. The owl came to represent Athene, goddess of wisdom and protector of warriors. The battle of Marathon was won because the soldiers believed

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the goddess had flown over them in the form of an owl. Later, generals secretly brought owls to battlefields where they were released to exhort the soldiers.

The Athenian owl lost its positive influence when the Romans conquered Greece. The owl was given the name *Strix*, or witch, and became an object of fear. If an owl wandered into town, elaborate purification ceremonies were performed to remove its influence. A hooting owl foretold the death of Augustus Caesar.

Ancient cultures believed if you want to see well in the

dark, carry the dried eyeball of an owl with you. In England, though, you must eat the eyeball to obtain the desired result.

In Africa, observers recognize that an owl has both a sleepy eye and a wakeful one. Lest you eat the wrong one, place both eyeballs in a bowl of water, noting that one will float - the wakeful eye - and the other will sink. Eat the wakeful eye. Then find a friend who has trouble sleeping and suspend the sleepy eye over his bed; his insomnia will be cured.

To cure the drunkard, stir owl eggs into his wine each day for three days and he'll give up drinking forever. Children who eat owl eggs will never develop a taste for strong drink.

Owls have been nailed to barns in Europe to ward off hailstorms and to prevent lightning strikes. Japanese aborigines carved a wooden model of the Eagle Owl which was displayed in the center of the Ainu village. There it offered protection during times of famine or pestilence.

The Newuk Indians of California believe that a certain bony structure that surrounds the owl's eye is made up of the fingernails of ghosts caught by the bird in its nightly wanderings. In China, it is believed that owls enter homes at night gathering fingernails of the inhabitants they wish to torment on future visits.

Hearing those legends gives me cold shivers, but I try to remember that these stories come from an age of campfires and kerosene lamps. ■



*Immature Ivory Gull at Burnham Harbor, Chicago, 2 January 1992. (Joe B. Milosevich photo)*