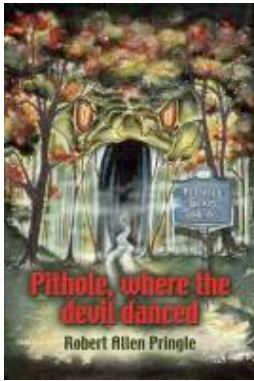


PITHOLE  
DEAD  
AHEAD

# Pithole, where the devil danced

Robert Allen Pringle



**Pithole: Where the Devil Danced** A tale of the legends of Pithole, Pennsylvania. An oil boom ghost town. A diabolical man appears at will and haunts the surrounding area. From the misty past to modern times and the new rush to frack for natural gas. One local family faces more than a struggle against greed and corruption..

# **Pithole**

## **Where the Devil Danced**

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PITHOLE

WHERE THE DEVIL DANCED

Robert Allen Pringle

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This novel is a work of fiction. All characters, companies, and creatures are fictional, any resemblance to real people are simply coincidental.

Pithole, Pa is a real historic site located in northwestern Venango County with a visitor's center and tours by accident.

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## Chapter One

Once, in the past, so far back as to be almost unimaginable, a tropical ocean covered the land I now sit upon, pecking away at my keyboard. In those vast primordial oceans life began, first with microscopic single cell creatures that absorbed their food directly from the molecules of the water. As millions of years passed they became more complex and after an epoch or two, (the amount of time ancient Earth biologists surmise that these changes occurred is staggering) they developed bodies and digestive systems, reproduction, sensory and mobility organs and limbs. They moved. They hunted.

What these biologists know is based on fossil records. They have studied only a tiny portion of solidified sea floor. They have only a rudimentary grasp of the evolution of life in the ocean. In reality, no one knows what creatures appeared, evolved, thrived and then went extinct in the billions of years of Earth's history.

Countless millions of species have called the oceans of this planet home only to vanish like a ripple in a wave on the surface, leaving no trace of ever having existed. What abilities, functions and intelligence levels these creatures or plants, for that matter had are unknown. We humans of the here and now consider ourselves the cutting edge of evolution yet we look at ancient anomalies and scratch our heads. Every day some new discovery is made by anthropologists of our past. Many are kept secret because they simply can't be explained by the accepted scientific view.

The geology of Earth is constantly changing. The estimated age of modern man's 100,000 years or so is merely the flick of a finger in the eons of time since the miracle of life occurred. Truly, we know next to nothing. The geological upheavals that occurred to form the sandstone and limestone caps that trapped the organic waste that became the coal and oil were spread out over eons of time.

When man arrived in western Pennsylvania, only the worn stumps of mountains that were greater than the Alps remained, with a scattering of glacial rocks lying silent in the vast hardwood forests. South of the great lake

known as Erie, whose bottom was gouged out by two mile thick ice that moved undaunted in the great ice age, is the area known as the cradle of the oil industry.

Hundreds of years before Columbus, long before the fearless Norsemen plied the Atlantic Ocean braving the unknown. A group of people were building a mound in the shape of a serpent, in what is now Ohio. It was a rendition of their god. They called themselves the Children of the Snake. They would journey to the area later known as Penn's Woods, believing their great serpent lived beneath the soil there and its blood would collect on the surface in shining black pools.

They used the crude oil for medicine, paint and flaming sacrifice. Soaking the doomed animals and captives with it and then igniting it. They dug many pits to allow the oil to seep up and collect in a triangular area with the corners located at Franklin, Titusville and Tionesta. You can still find these pits today, if you wander deep into the woods.

When the Seneca Indians finally settled in the area, they found the same uses for the crude, except for the burning sacrifices. There was one area they avoided, where a gaping hole in the rocks gave off the odor of sulfur and seemed to have no bottom. No animals, birds or insects lived within a hundred feet of it, and mournful groans could be heard emanating from it on occasion.

Time passed, and white men appeared, stepping cautiously around the ancient trees, avoiding the natives while exploring the land. The French descended from Canada, plying the rivers, meeting the Indians, trading with them and befriending them. Wars were fought, but the westward push of the relentless white man could not be stemmed. The innocuous valley waited in silence for the sound of the axe.

In the east the inhabitants rebelled against their king, but only faint echoes of their battles ever reached the verdant hills. Against all odds, the rebels persevered and in gratitude to the troops all were granted land of their choice west of the Appalachian Mountains.

In 1787 a group of three men entered the valley, following the small creek that flowed into the Allegheny River. One of them caught a whiff of the

sulfur fumes, and they went to investigate. Sulfur was necessary in the making of gun powder, which was always in short supply in the wilderness.

They passed by a pit with a stinking pool of black liquid gathered in it, with nothing growing where it touched the ground. They topped a small rise, and saw what they thought was a cave in a group of rocks. They also noticed the absolute quiet of the immediate area. In the forest there is a constant sound of life, insects buzzing, birds chirping and small game moving about. Here, silence, like the grave.

The smell seemed to be coming from the dark opening, and the youngest of them gave his musket to his friend and went to investigate. A slight breeze blew at his back as he got on his knees to peer into the hole. He inadvertently knocked a few stones in, and they made slight noises as they bounced and fell. Deep in the abysmal cavern a pair of eyes, black as obsidian, opened and gleamed.

The wind abated for a few seconds, and the fumes from inside overcame the curious teenager, and he was rendered unconscious. When he didn't respond to the others calls they rushed down to help him. They dragged him away from the opening, and in a few minutes he came to. He was shouldering his pack when he saw the man standing on the rise above them.

At first they thought he was a preacher. Dressed all in black, an ankle length duster, and a flat brimmed round hat, but his ear to ear grin was unsettling. Long jet black hair down to his shoulders, and shining black eyes, he stood with his hands held out to his sides. The three woodsmen stared and felt uneasy. The man raised his hands, leaves and twigs began to swirl in the air on both sides of him. The eldest of them shouted "Devil", raised his musket and fired. The man simply laughed in a voice that was too loud, and leapt at them. Their screams echoed unheard through the forest for hours.



Time passed, and more people came to the area. The towns of Franklin, Titusville and Tionesta prospered. Many more took to farming, claiming the uninhabited land. On a homestead lot beside an unnamed creek, a Mr. Holmren cleared some forest and built a home. He continued to clear the



trees away, but the soil was poor with many rocks. His wife and three children toiled beside him in his endeavor to eke out a very modest living.

The forest was rich in game however, and they ate reasonably well with deer and turkey as their staples. There was an occasional bear as well. To the east near Titusville, a determined man named Drake worked hard to find a salt deposit he was sure lay under the ground. He fashioned a drilling device using a steam engine, which hammered a steel rod down into the ground. He never found the salt he sought. He discovered oil instead.

A new industry arose, with wild eyed speculators, cash in hand, competing for oil rich sites. Derricks rose, displacing the aged trees, and money was made. The seekers of fortune began to range out in all directions, and new towns sprang to life, Oil City, Oileopolis, Rouseville to name a few. All prospered as the oil boom took hold.

In the summer of 1864, a year after the carnage of Gettysburg, with the civil war still going strong, laborers were scarce. Speculators were still abundant however, and one morning two men appeared at the Holmren farm. After a brief discussion, they were permitted to look over the property for possible drilling sites. One of the men had a forked witch hazel stick he called a divining rod. He held it out in front of himself, grasping the two forks loosely in his fingers and began to wander around.

The branch pulled him in a certain direction, until he came to a round depression in the ground. The stick dipped so hard and quick it stuck in the ground right in the middle of the pithole. The other man remarked how lucky they were, as they wouldn't have to dig a pit to begin with. Terms were discussed with Mr. Holmren, and he agreed to lease the land for five years, for fifty thousand dollars. All buildings on the site at that time reverted to him, and he received twenty five percent of all oil discovered. The speculator walked away happy, with a lease for two hundred acres in his vest pocket.

Within a week a derrick was set up, and a spudder drill operating. Two hundred feet and some traces of oil were found in the first sand layer. Punching through rock at four hundred feet they found more traces in the second sand, after five hundred feet, nothing, six hundred feet, nothing. At seven hundred, an especially hard layer of rock was encountered. Progress

was slow, and prospects looked weak. The decision was made to keep pounding down for fifty more feet.

The next day they broke through the bedrock, and oil began to flow. The immense underground pressure forced the oil up the shaft at an astounding rate of a hundred barrels a day, with the hole still plugged with the drilling tools. Every able bodied man dug a holding pit, but the oil increased its flow. They filled barrels as fast as they could get them.

News of the strike went out, and within a week over a thousand men were there, leasing plots and drilling more wells. A town was staked out, and lots sold, with the understanding that in five years all land and buildings would become the property of farmer Holmren. The boom was on.

The original well, now named the United States well, was unplugged and the oil flowed at the rate of twelve hundred barrels a day, a new record. Leases sold for up to a hundred thousand dollars cash. Five thousand men now swarmed on the property, with more arriving daily. Rough roads were cut, and soon became muddy morasses. An unbroken line of teamsters, hauling five barrels each, stretched from the new town of Pithole to Titusville, a distance of fifteen miles. They had to cut down an untold number of young trees to build a corduroy road, it was like a rough washboard most of the way. Horses and mules were worked to death, and their rotting carcasses lined the ungodly road.

Buildings sprang up seemingly overnight. One hotel, accommodating a hundred and twenty guests was built in one day! Taverns and brothels were slapped together, and immediately opened for business. In the midst of the noisy hubbub, few people noticed a man dressed all in black, who walked up and down, with a wide grin fixed on his swarthy face. He would enter the drinking establishments and stand to one end of the bar, observing the riotous men and the dancing girls. He took an interest in one young man, a handsome actor trying his hand on speculation by the name of John Wilkes Booth, and was seen in deep conversation with him.

The gamblers came, the confidence men, the thieves, crooks and bullies. Among them a bare knuckled brawler named Ben Hogan, who called himself the wickedest man on earth. He held up ten thousand dollars in cash, and said

he'd fight any man if he could put up the money. The crew at the Deep Molly well put up the cash, and the fighter, Big Dick McGuire. Dick weighed three hundred pounds, a solid mass of tough Irish muscle, and a popular fellow in the town. Hogan, at six foot even, and one hundred eighty pounds, had his work cut out.

That evening, the other men put up a makeshift ring right on Holmren Street, and the fight was on. Bare knuckles and no rules, the two men went at it. Hogan's attack was so fast and vicious that big Dick only hit him once. Within two minutes, McGuire was on his back in the filthy dirt, his face battered and bleeding. The onlookers stood mute, stunned.

Hogan took his winnings and opened a bar beside French Kate's Gentlemen's Sporting House, and the two got along well. Hogan proved to be a braggart, bully, and just plain disagreeable. Then one night it was raining like hell out, and Ben was alone in his bar, where he served warm beer and moldy cheese. The door opened, and the man in black entered. Rain blew in on the hemlock floor, but the grinning man was bone dry.

"Evening", he said with his customary wide grin, "not busy I see."

"You want something or what?" Hogan said belligerently.

"Oh I just wanted you to know that you are not the wickedest man on earth." His black eyes sparkled in the oil lamp light as he spoke. Hogan watched amazed as the man's head changed shape to that of a snake, the grin widening with a row of razor sharp teeth. A forked tongue flicked out and he hissed, "I am."

The next day the bar was deserted. There were so many transients, that no one noticed when someone wasn't there the next day. People would just shrug, and go back to making and spending money. French Kate immediately took it over and expanded her enterprise. Hogan was forgotten.

One month later he was seen speaking at a temperance meeting in Cleveland. He carried a Bible with him everywhere, and had sworn off drink forever. His hands trembled as he spoke in halting terms.

“Drink brought me face to face with Satan himself, the evil serpent. Why I still live I’ll never know, but I will never touch another drop again.” Sometimes breaking a man’s pride is worse than killing him.

In the boomtown there was no law to speak of, except public opinion, and that was pretty low. Pithole was red hot, open for business twenty four hours a day, every day. Only the grocery stores were closed on Sundays. A store on Holmren Street went up for sale one morning for two thousand dollars. By five o’clock, it sold for the fifth time for sixty thousand. The brothels all had one special room where two exhausted girls could sleep for four hours at a turn.

In a shack behind French Kate’s’ Sporting House, a young woman was found dead, with most of her lower stomach missing, outside in the mud, the headless body of a new born lay. Two feet of the umbilical cord, still attached and bitten off.

The teamsters kept raising their rates until there were only pennies to be made on a barrel, but the oil kept flowing. The barrel coopers had to transport wood from farther and farther away. Firewood used to heat the water for the steam engines became scarce and the price for it rose. The local game was gone and the expense of eating every day increased. The teamsters grew more aggressive and demanding. Then a feller got an idea and built a pipeline, the first of its kind. They ran the pipe down Pithole Creek to the Allegheny where barges lined up and filled 1000 gallon tanks to be floated on down river to Reno to be refined. They only wanted the kerosene and heavier lubricants. They dumped the waste right into the Allegheny, what would later be known as gasoline and diesel fuel. On the pipeline, they had to post armed guards every fifty feet to keep the teamsters from disrupting the flow. The threat of fire was great, the very ground was saturated with crude oil and chunks of paraffin wax lay scattered about.

Many large signs were erected saying, “NO SMOKING”, “NO OPEN FIRES”. With all the disruption to the subsurface, the water wells would sometimes turn to crude. So much was spilt by accident or just poor control of the volume, the creek was lined with people skimming oil off the surface with buckets and filling their own barrels.

*Pithole: Where the Devil Danced*

Then fire broke out at what was known as the twin wells. Men manned the pumps until the water turned to oil and added to the conflagration. Great wooden holding tanks, containing up to twenty thousand gallons, burst into flames and collapsed, the burning liquid flooding the streets, engulfing man and horse alike. In the middle of all this raging hell, the man dressed in black was seen howling out laughter as he danced along the way, the flames not touching him. In the morning Pithole was a smoking ruin.

The hotel survived as well as a few other structures, but the building was torn down and the salvaged boards were used to build a house in Titusville, now the historical home of Ida Tarbell.

Most of the survivors left, but a few stalwart souls tried to rebuild the burnt derricks and shacks. The oil petered out in a couple years and soon the last wagon left searching for new prosperity. The area was an ecological disaster. It would be many years before Mother Nature began to heal the scars. Farmer Holmren loaded his belongings and abandoned his farm, whistling as he went.

## Chapter Two

In 1972, Venango County which had acquired Pithole for the total sum of four dollars and thirty seven cents back in 1867 was informed by the state that they were going to build a memorial museum close to the site. It was July and hot. Construction was well underway, and by two in the afternoon, most of the workers were shirtless and sweating as they lay the cement blocks erecting the walls. The building was situated on a rise just off the gravel road that gave access to the farms nearby. The valley where the streets were still discernable in the overgrown fields lay below the future tourist destination.

One of the young men stood up and wiped his forearm across his sweaty brow and noticed a figure approaching from the former Holmren farmstead. It was a man dressed all in black, wearing a full length coat, a wide brimmed preacher's hat and heavy boots.

"Howdy boys," he greeted them with a wide grin, "what in the world are you doing?"

The foreman replied as the men took a quick water break. He told the man about the state and the museum. They noticed that even with the heavy clothes the man was not perspiring or even seemed uncomfortable in the ninety degree heat and smothering humidity. He even had on black leather gloves.

"Oh good," he exclaimed, "then people will come back around. I can't wait." He then tilted his head back and began to laugh out loud. He turned and walked back towards the empty fields away from the astonished workers.

"I'll be damned," said the foreman.

The man, who was now a couple hundred feet away stopped and looked back, still with that incredible grin on his face, he laughed once more and all the men plainly heard him say, "You probably are." Then he vanished in thin air.

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*Pithole: Where the Devil Danced*

June ninth, 1974. Bill Lyons was washing his '71 Roadrunner in his driveway. He had a date later on that evening with pretty Patty Tatem. The music coming from the eight track tape player was a new Led Zeppelin album, and it was hot!

Things were going good for young Bill. He had a job pumping gas, the car ran great and he was probably going to get laid tonight. He had a case of Pabst on ice in the trunk just to make things easier. Jerry, the mechanic at the station had gotten it for him. He was just hosing it off, when his mom came out on the porch and called him to dinner.

Patty was trying to decide between shorts or the mini skirt. There was a new song on the radio by a band called Foghat, and ohhh did it make her want to dance. Billy might get laid tonight, she thought, but first we're gonna talk about getting married. She put on the mini.

Her dad was giving her a ration of shit about the way she was dressed, just when Bill pulled in the drive. She told her dad she was eighteen now and would dress as she damned well pleased. The screen door slammed shut as she headed for the car. They took off and headed for Titusville and the main street drag where everybody with a hot car would cruise up and down waving at friends and goosing their engines.

Bill didn't want to be doing this long as gas had just gone up to the unbelievable price of 49.9, damn Arabs. Patty was pouting as he turned east on 36 and opened up the four barrel on his 440. She had to admit to herself she loved it when the power surge pushed her back in the bucket seat. He cranked the tunes, J Giles with Magic Dick on the licking stick.

They turned off on Pithole road and he stopped and got a couple cans of beer out of the trunk, pulled the rings and peeled back the little tear shaped tabs. "About time," said Patty, taking a long sip. They drove out past the museum to a lane leading into the woods. He drove back in and parked. It was growing dark, and Bill got a blanket out of the backseat, handed it to Patty and went and gathered some firewood. He opened the trunk and got a couple more brews. Patty was busy rolling a joint, careful not to spill any. Pot was expensive now, \$25.00 an ounce.

Bill had the Stone's Sticky Fingers tape in and they joked and partied for a little while then Patty got down to business. She took his hand, leaned in and kissed him, "Bill, what do you think about marriage?"

He looked at her like she was joking but then realized she was serious. "Uh, marriage, yes, well, it uh, seems to work for some folks."

"Yes, yes it does," gushed Patty, "I could get a job somewhere and we could buy a house and..."

"Whoa, slow down a little here. I pump gas for two bucks an hour. Just maybe enough to rent a place if we find a cheap one."

"Oh you'll find a better job and aren't you learning how to work on cars now? It would be nice, and then we can do this whenever we want." She reached to kiss him and they laid back. The mini came in handy after all.

In the shadows beyond the campfire light the man in black was almost invisible. His eyes gleamed as he watched the busy couple, his wide grin a testament to his enjoyment. He raised his hands as the couple reached their climax and a gust of misty wind blew over them.

Nine months later Patty presented her husband with a beautiful, delicate baby girl they named Jessie Jayne. Bill had remembered the pot and the beer, but forgot about condoms. He had gotten a better job at Square Deal Tire and Lube, (square deals on round tires was their motto). Patty volunteered to help at the courthouse with elections and got a job helping Joe Whitlock in his bid for congress.

They bought an old camp with a 1950's something trailer on it at the tax sale. It was only a couple miles outside Tionesta. Patty's mother had a lot to do with that in more ways than one. She worked at the courthouse and put up half the money. Bill's dad helped him fix it up a bit and with some used furniture donations from family and friends they had a nice little place.

The Roadrunner was gone but they had a good, solid four wheel drive Chevy truck. They needed it as the road they lived on got no winter maintenance from the township. Boondocks, is a word that comes to mind.



The nearest neighbor was a half mile away but they were comfortable with that. The baby was healthy and happy, life wasn't bad.

About two years passed and one afternoon in late spring Patty had Jessie outside playing with a large plastic ball when a man came walking up the road. Patty saw the stranger all dressed in black with a wide brimmed circular hat and a full length coat, stop on the road in front of the house.

"Mighty fine day Ma'am, mighty fine day," he said in greeting, "might I ask for a glass of water?"

She glanced at her daughter and the man said, "I'll keep an eye on her", as a happy grin spread across his face.

"I'll be right back", Patty said with authority and walked briskly into the house. She returned a minute later with a Tweety Bird glass they had got at McDonald's. The man had advanced only a step or two to the edge of the lawn. He nodded his thanks, but his grin made Patty uneasy.

"My husband will be home from work real soon," she stated flatly.

He was gazing at the baby who was pulling bits of grass up and putting them in her mouth. "A beautiful child you have there and so healthy looking also."

"Yes, she is a blessing," Patty replied.

With that the man laughed out loud and handed the glass back. She noticed there were bits of ice in it now. He put his hand to the brim of his odd hat still with that wide grin plastered on his face and turned. "It was a pleasure, such a nice baby." He walked away. She watched him disappear around the bend and noticed he hadn't touched a drop of the water.

Bill listened carefully to her account of the encounter over a dinner of fish sticks and tater tots. He sat there and thought for a little while then sighed. "I've been a fool," he told his wife and went outside to the all purpose shed slash workshop out back. He returned carrying something wrapped in an old towel.

"What's that," she asked?

“Protection, I don’t know why I didn’t do this sooner.” He revealed a chrome plated .38 revolver. “I sorta forgot about it.”

“Forgot about it, how long has it been out there?” she couldn’t believe it, they didn’t have too many secrets between them, none as of yet, anyways.

“You remember back when I found that skull on the game lands this side of Pithole?”

“Yeah, you were what, fourteen, fifteen?” Patty was looking concerned.

“Thirteen, the gun was laying there in the leaves. I wanted it and never told the cops,” Bill said with a shrug.

“Oh my God Bill, that is evidence. They had a murder investigation. That could have solved a crime!”

“Suicide’s more like it, who would have marched some guy a mile and a half into the woods to put a bullet in his brain? Anyway you’re gonna learn how to shoot it.”

Patty looked at him and then looked at the gun, she was intrigued. The only weapon she ever fired before was an old .22 her dad had. She really liked the cop shows on TV, especially Cagney and Lacy, she favored Cagney. The baby was watching them from the highchair, eyes wide and her mouth open in a little “o”.

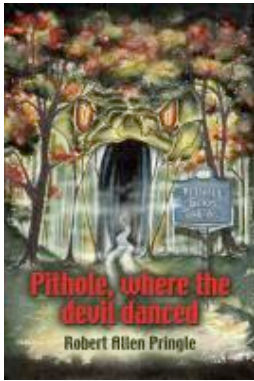
“Okay, when?”

“I’ll pick up a couple boxes of shells on payday, you can set some bottles and cans up on those rocks behind the shed,” Bill said.

Patty looked up at him, “Hey, they ever figure out who that guy was?”

“Nope, they only found a few bones and the guy didn’t have any teeth. No wallet, no shoes, no keys or coins, just that skull with two holes in it. The funny thing I found out was all the shells were fired, he musta saved the last one for himself.”

Patty shrugged and picked up the gun, the baby began to cry.



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