



The small town of Barrow, Alaska lies 300 miles North of the Arctic Circle.

Monster Solutions

The True Story of Monsters in Barrow Alaska

There are some strange things going on in the city of Barrow, Alaska, 320 miles north of the Arctic Circle and inspiration for the horror movie *30 Days of Night*. Are there vampires? Maybe—a local resident explains those a little later in this article. Are there monsters? It turns out there are.

The monsters aren't vampires, they're Muffin Monsters® – sewage grinders made by JWC Environmental in Costa Mesa, California and used to shred, grind and crush trash which finds its way into Barrow's underground sewage system.

In the movie an oversize Muffin Monster – six times its normal size and with twice as many razor sharp steel cutter teeth – plays a pivotal role in a fight between a vampire and the town's Sheriff, played by Josh Hartnett. The movie opened in October 2007.

Currently there are six Muffin Monsters protecting Barrow's pump stations. They grind trash and keep wastewater flowing smoothly in this arctic city where the ground is frozen into rock hard permafrost, according to Tim Russell the Utilidor System Superintendent for Barrow Utilities and Electric Co-op Inc

(BUECI). He has overseen the grinders since they were installed in the mid-90s and he manages water distribution, wastewater collection and treatment.

"We used to have drum type comminutors to shred trash, but they got clogged-up pretty easily, particularly out by the correctional facility – whatever inmates could get down the toilet they would flush – shoes, blue jeans and the like," said Russell. "Since installing the Muffin Monsters we haven't had troubles with the pump stations clogging."

Are there really 30 days of night?

"More than that," said Russell. "We get almost 90 days of night during the winter. It's cold and dark, but it's not too bad around here. The city has lots of street lights so everything is lit up. I've been here 23 years – it's not a big deal."



Columbia Pictures

Vampire and Barrow's Sheriff fight next to a Muffin Monster grinder.

From mid-November to mid-January the sun never rises, leaving the city in total darkness. During the summer the opposite occurs – the sun never sets. From May to August the sun "just spins above us" according to Russell. Residents line their windows with aluminum foil to try and block out the light and get some sleep. Barrow is the farthest northern town in North America and hundreds

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of workers pass through on their way to or from construction and oil drilling projects in Northern Alaska.

The working conditions are harsh, but the mission of BUECI is a critical one – the 4,700 year-round residents need water, power and sanitation services no matter what the weather is like.

“We’ll go out and work when it is -40°F (-40°C) below,” said Russell. “We’ve been out when it is -100°F (-73°C) below zero with the wind chill – that’s when we really go to work. It’s a challenge to keep the water flowing in those conditions.”

It’s not a job or a place everyone can handle. Clayton Labrecht, Maintenance Manager for BUECI, said he’s seen lots of people come and go.

“Some people get off the plane and get right back on,” said Labrecht, a former resident of Minnesota who has now spent the last 30 years in Barrow. “I think it’s warmer here than Minnesota – it’s very dry up here.”

Scenic Beauty

One thing that draws people to Barrow and keeps them here is the scenic beauty – the rolling ocean and tundra. There are roaming polar bears, caribou and walrus to observe. The native people – the Inupiat Eskimos – have a long tradition of whaling and still send boats out to bring in whales for harvesting. The original name for Barrow is Ukpeagvik and archeological research has found evidence of settlements dating back to the year 500 A.D. Many residents depend on subsistence hunting, including seals, whales, caribou, duck and whitefish.

“The culture here is very interesting,” said Russell. “Seeing whaling is quite an experience and then to see how they harvest everything.”

What’s Surprising About Barrow?

Working in the cold weather takes a toll on people and machinery. Keeping things operating in the bone chilling cold isn’t easy.

“I think people would be surprised by the way things are constructed for the Arctic,”

said Russell. “Everything is boxed in. Even our vactor truck tank is inside an insulated box.”

The city uses a series of underground crawl spaces called the Utilidor to house piping for water and wastewater, as well as TV and electrical cables. These tunnels are 6’ (2m) in height and trapezoidal in shape – 5’ (1.5m) across at the top and 6’ (2m) across at the bottom. The Utilidor is made with wooden walls and heated in order to prevent the utility pipes from freezing. Further away from the city where pipes are buried directly in the ground, water is constantly circulated in order to keep it from freezing.

So what about those vampires?

Russell hasn’t seen any, but “I sure scared the hell out of myself a couple times” he says with a hearty laugh.

“Let’s see – I suppose we’ll see a few at Halloween time,” said Russell. “You gotta watch out for little tykes carrying their trick or treat bags.”

Russell said some folks in town are superstitious and on one assignment workers didn’t want to go into the underground utilidor because there were rumors the street was haunted.

For BUECI the focus isn’t fighting back a plague of vampires – it’s developing new and innovative ways to serve the citizens of this small town.

This year the town is constructing a brand new wastewater treatment plant which uses the high-tech membrane bioreactor process. The new facility will produce extremely clean water which helps protect human health as well as the precious landscape and animal life.

Muffin Monsters protect sewer systems day-in and day-out in cities around the world. There’s even a pair at the McMurdo Research Station on Antarctica, so JWC has grinders at both the top and bottom of the world.

For Barrow, darkness may come every winter, but the town can rest assured it’s protected by some strange yet powerful Monsters.

Russell hasn’t seen any vampires yet, but “I sure scared the hell out of myself a couple times” he says with a hearty laugh.



There are 6 Muffin Monsters installed in Barrow’s wastewater collection system.



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