

LEGENDS OF PAUL BUNYAN, LUMBERJACK

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The following study of lumberjack legends has grown out of a little collection of these tales made in the lumber-camps by Miss Stewart, who for years has heard the stories told by the lumberjacks of Wisconsin and Michigan. Recently by corresponding with and interviewing lumbermen and others who are or who have been intimately connected with the lumber-camps we have added to the original collection a considerable number of new legends, besides many different versions of stories already in our collection, and a great deal of miscellaneous information about the hero, Paul Bunyan, and his blue ox. Some of these stories, as must be expected of any such series, are too coarse for publication. It has seemed to us, however, that for the most part the tales are quite wholesome; perhaps the circumstances under which they were collected have automatically excluded those of the rougher type. We realize, moreover, that our present collection represents only a comparatively small number of these stories; versions which have come to us from Oregon and Washington indicate that the tales are widely spread. We expect to continue our search for Paul Bunyan material, and shall be very glad to receive any information which will assist us. Communications should be addressed to Mr. H. A. Watt, Department of English, New York University, New York.

We wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to Mr. B. R. Taylor, Mr. M. W. Sergeant, and Mr. Harold Stark, students in the University who have recently lived in the lumber districts of northern Wisconsin, and who have heard Paul Bunyan tales from boyhood, to Mr. Douglas Malloch of Chicago for a copy of his poem, *The Round River Drive*, a metrical version of some of the tales which was published

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The most significant of recent developments in the study of folk-lore and the popular ballad began with the discovery that the making of folk-tales and communal poetry did not cease entirely with the coming of the printing-press, but that in certain isolated communities unreached by the paralyzing contact of the printed sheet the process of communal composition has gone on, roughly, fragmentarily, perhaps, but none the less genuinely. Here in America there is a complete cycle of ballads celebrating the exploits of the outlaw Jesse James; Professor John Lomax has made an extensive collection of cow-boy songs; and the isolated mountaineers of Kentucky and Tennessee have many songs and tales, some curiously distorted fragments of old-world ballads, others quite local in subject-matter and tone. The student of folk-lore has come, in fact, to expect that wherever there is more or less permanent isolation from the outside world of large groups of people engaged in the same occupation or at least having a community of interests, there is almost certain to spring up in time tales peculiar to that community. It is not, accordingly, surprising that such legends exist among the lumbermen of the Great North, among a community shut off from the world for months at a time and bound together by peculiar bonds. It is among these toilers of the forests that the legends of Paul Bunyan have originated, Paul Bunyan, the greatest lumberjack who ever skidded a log, who with the aid of his wonderful blue ox and his crew of hardy lumbermen cleared one hundred million feet of pine from a single forty and performed other feats related about the roaring fires of the lumber shanties.

The legends of Paul Bunyan are widely distributed throughout the lumber districts of the North. The tales in our little collection have come from lumber-camps in the Northern Peninsula of Michigan and from the Saginaw Valley in the Southern Peninsula, from Langlade County and from camps along the Flambeau and Wisconsin rivers in Wisconsin, from northern Minnesota and from camps as far west as Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia.

It is quite apparent that the lumberjacks in their slow migration westward have carried the tales freely from camp to camp into all of the lumbering states of the North and into the forests of Canada.

The antiquity of the tales is more difficult to determine than the extent of their distribution. It seems certain, however, from the circumstances that they have been passed down from one generation of lumbermen to another for a long period of time, that these stories of Paul Bunyan date well back into the early days of lumbering in Michigan and were carried from Michigan to Wisconsin about the middle of the last century. It seems certain, too, that many of the tales now included in the Bunyan cycle were narrated long before Bunyan became the lumberman hero. Similar tales, lacking, of course, the local color of the Bunyan yarns, are to be found in the extravagant stories of Baron Munchausen and of Rabelais as well as in folk-tales from more settled parts of the United States of America. An extremely interesting study, so complex, however, that we have not yet completed it, is the tracing of the old world originals of the Bunyan stories to determine just to what extent the American tales are new and to what extent they were brought from France and England by early pioneers.

Whether Paul Bunyan ever lived or is as mythical as Sairey Gamp's Mrs. Harris we have not yet succeeded in definitely finding out. All lumberjacks, of course, believe, or pretend to believe, that he really lived and was the great pioneer in the lumber country; some of the older men even claim to have known him or members of his crew, and in northern Minnesota the supposed location of his grave is actually pointed out. A half-breed lumberman whom Miss Stewart interviewed asserted positively that there *was* a Paul Bunyan and that the place where he cut his hundred million feet from a single forty is actually on the map. We have found in several localities characters still living about whose prowess as lumbermen exaggerated stories are already being told; it is probable that the tales will continue to be told, with additions, after these local heroes have died. In a similar manner, we believe, did Paul Bunyan come into existence. He was probably some swamper or shacker or lumberjack more skilful and more clever than average,

about whose exploits grew a series of stories; after his death his fame probably spread from camp to camp, more tales were added to those told about him, and thus, gradually, he became in time an exaggerated type of the lumberjack, and the hero of more exploits than he could possibly have carried out in his life-time.

The Bunyan stories are usually told in the evening around the fires in the bunk-houses. The older narrators speak in the French-Canadian dialect, and the stories are often full of the technical jargon of the woods. Usually the stories are told to arouse the wonder of the tenderfoot or simply as contributions in a contest in yarning. They are always of a grotesque and fabulous type, and they are all more or less closely related to the exploits of Bunyan and his lumbering crew. "That happened," says the narrator, "the year I went up for Paul Bunyan. Of course you have all heard of Paul." And so the tale begins. It is matched by a bigger yarn, and the series grows. Often the scene of the exploits narrated is quite fictitious, like the Round River, which is in section thirty-seven, or the Big Onion River, three weeks this side of Quebec. Often, too, the lumberjacks will tell of events that they say occurred on another lumbering stream than the one they are working on; thus the men of the Flambeau camps will tell of the deeds of Paul Bunyan on the Wisconsin River or on the Chippewa River. Sometimes the story-tellers will take Bunyan abroad and will tell of his doings, for example, among the big trees of Oregon, or they will tell of what happened when Paul was a boy on his father's farm. Usually, however, the tales are supposed to have occurred in the "good" days of lumbering, some forty or fifty years back when the country was new, and in localities not far from the camps in which the yarns are told.

But to our tales. Bunyan was a powerful giant, seven feet tall and with a stride of seven feet. He was famous throughout the lumbering districts for his physical strength and for the ingenuity with which he met difficult situations. He was so powerful that no man could successfully oppose him, and his ability to get drunk was proverbial. So great was his lung capacity that he called his men to dinner by blowing through a hollow tree a blast so strong that it blew

down the timber on a tract of sixty acres, and when he spoke, the limbs sometimes fell from the trees. To keep his pipe filled required the entire time of a swamper with a scoop-shovel. In the gentle art of writing Bunyan had, however, no skill. He kept his men's time by cutting notches in a stick of wood, and he ordered supplies for camp by drawing pictures of what he wanted. On one occasion only did his ingenuity fail; he ordered grindstones and got cheeses. "Oh," says Paul, "I forgot to put the holes in my grindstones."

Bunyan was assisted in his lumbering exploits by a wonderful blue ox, a creature that had the strength of nine horses and that weighed, according to some accounts, five thousand pounds, and according to others, twice that. The ox measured from tip to tip of his horns just seven feet, exactly his master's height. Other accounts declare that the ox was seven feet—or seven ax-handles—between his eyes, and *fourteen* feet between his horns. Originally he was pure white, but one winter in the woods it snowed blue snow for seven days (that was the winter of the snow-snakes) and Bunyan's ox from lying out in the snow all winter became and remained a brilliant blue. Many of the Bunyan legends are connected with the feats performed by the ox. Bunyan's method of peeling a log was as follows: He would hitch the ox to one end of the log, grasp the bark at the other end with his powerful arms, give a sharp command to the animal, and, *presto*, out would come the log as clean as a whistle. On one occasion Paul dragged a whole house up a hill with the help of his ox, and then, returning, he dragged the cellar up after the house. Occasionally, as might have been expected from so huge a creature, the ox got into mischief about camp. One night, for example, he broke loose and ate up two hundred feet of tow-line.

One favorite tale connected with the blue ox is that of the buckskin harness. One day old Forty Jones of Bunyan's crew killed two hundred deer by the simple process of tripping a key-log which supported a pile of logs on a hillside above the place where the animals came to drink. The skins were made into a harness for the blue ox. Some days later while the cook was hauling a log in for fire-wood, it

began to rain, the buckskin began to stretch, and by the time the ox reached camp the log was out of sight around a bend in the road with the tugs stretching back endlessly after it. The cook tied the ox and went to dinner. While he was eating, the sun came out boiling hot, dried the buckskin harness, and hauled the log into camp. Another version of this tale is reported to us by Professor Beatty of the University of Wisconsin, who heard the story when he was a boy in Canada. Whether Professor Beatty's version is simply a detached member of the Bunyan story-cycle or whether, conversely, it existed originally as an independent tale and was later connected with the blue ox, we do not know. The latter explanation seems the probable one.

One tale of the blue ox had best be told in the words of the lumberjack who sent it to a friend of Miss Stewart's, in a letter written with very evident care and with every other word capitalized.

"Paul B Driving a large Bunch of logs Down the Wisconsin River When the logs Suddenly Jamed. in the Dells. The logs were piled Two Hundred feet high at the head, And were backed up for One mile up river. Paul was at the rear of the Jam with the Blue Oxen And while he was coming to the front the Crew was trying to break the Jam but they couldnt Budge it. When Paul Arrived at the Head with the ox he told them to Stand Back. He put the Ox in the old Wisc. in front of the Jam. And then Standing on the Bank Shot the Ox with a 303 Savage Rifle. The Ox thought it was flies And began to Switch his Tail. The tail commenced to go around in a circle And up Stream And do you know That Ox Switching his tail forced that Stream to flow Backwards And Eventually the Jam floated back Also. He took the ox out of the Stream. And let the Stream And logs go on their way."

Most of the exploits of Paul Bunyan center at Round River. Here Bunyan and his crew labored all one winter to clear the pine from a single forty. This was a most peculiar forty in that it was shaped like a pyramid with a heavy timber growth on all sides. The attention of skeptics who refuse to believe in the existence of the pyramid forty is certain to be called by the story-teller to a lumberman with a short leg, a member, the listener is solemnly assured, of Bunyan's

crew, who got his short leg from working all winter on one side of the pyramid, and who thus earned the nickname of "Rockin' Horse." From this single forty Bunyan's crew cleared one hundred million feet of pine, and in the spring they started it down the river. Then began the difficulty, for it was not until they had passed their old camp several times that they realized that the river was *round* and had no outlet whatever. According to another version this logging occurred on a lake with no outlet.

Bunyan's crew was so large that he was obliged to divide the men into three gangs; of these one was always going to work, one was always at work, and the third was always coming home from work. The cooking arrangements for so many men were naturally on an immense scale. Seven men with seven wheel-barrows were kept busy wheeling the prune-stones away from camp. The cook-stove was so extensive that three forties had to be cleared bare each week to keep up a fire, and an entire cord of wood was needed to start a blaze. One day as soon as the cook had put a loaf of bread into the oven he started to walk around the stove in order to remove the loaf from the other side, but long before he reached his destination the bread had burned to a crisp. Such loaves were, of course, gigantic,—so big, in fact, that after the crew had eaten the insides out of them, the hollow crusts were used for bunk-houses, or, according to a less imaginative account, for bunks. One legend reports that the loaves were not baked in a stove at all but in a ravine or dried river-bed with heat provided by blazing slashings along the sides.

Such a stove as Bunyan's demanded, of course, a pancake griddle of monstrous size. As a matter of fact, Bunyan's cook, Joe Mufferon, used the entire top of the stove for a griddle and greased it every morning by strapping hams to the feet of his assistant cooks and obliging them to skate about on it for an hour or so. Of this famous tale there are several versions. According to one the cook mixed his batter in a sort of concrete-mixer on the roof of the cook-shanty and spread it upon the stove by means of a connecting hose. A version from Oregon shows the influence of local conditions upon the Bunyan tales; from this version we learn that two hundred *Japanese* cooks with bacon-rinds or bear-steak strapped to their feet skated upon the stove before the cook

spread his batter. In a Minnesota version Bunyan employs his twenty-four daughters for the same menial task. By mistake one day the nearsighted cook put into the batter several fingers of blasting-powder instead of baking-powder, and when the mixture was spread upon the griddle, the cookees made a very rapid ascent through the cook-shanty roof and never returned to camp.

Paul Bunyan's ingenuity in keeping his men supplied with food and drink appears best in the pea-soup lake story, of which there are several versions, and in the wondrous tale of the camp distillery. Near the Round River camp was a hot spring, into which the tote-teamster, returning one day from town with a load of peas, dumped the whole load by accident. Most men would have regarded the peas as a dead loss, but not so Paul. He promptly added the proper amount of pepper and salt to the mixture and had enough hot pea-soup to last the crew all winter. When his men were working too far away from camp to return to dinner, he got the soup to them by freezing it upon the ends of sticks and sending it in that shape. According to another version of the pea-soup lake story Paul deliberately made the pea-soup; he dumped the peas into a small lake and heated the mess by firing the slashings around the shore. In a Wisconsinized version of the Michigan tale the peas have become, for some reason, beans. A much exaggerated version of this story comes from northern Wisconsin. According to this account the tote-teamster was driving across a frozen lake when a sudden thaw overtook him. The teamster saved himself, but the ox was drowned. Bunyan dammed up the lake, fired the slashings around the shore, and then, opening the dam, sluiced down the river to his laboring crew an abundance of excellent hot pea-soup with ox-tail flavor.

The legend of the establishment of the camp distillery is one of the most entertaining of the Bunyan tales. Paul had trouble in keeping any liquor in camp because the men sent to town for it drank it all up on the way back. The following is Mr. Douglas Malloch's versified account of how he solved the difficulty:

"One day the bull-cook parin' spuds
He hears a sizzlin' in the suds
And finds the peelin's, strange to say,
Are all fermentin' where they lay.

Now Sour-face Murphy in the door
Was standin'. And the face he wore
Convinced the first assistant cook
That Murphy soured 'em with his look.
And when he had the peelin's drained
A quart of Irish booze remained.
The bull-cook tells the tale to Paul
And Paul takes Murphy off the haul
And gives him, very willingly,
A job as camp distillery."

Some of the tales of the camp exploits concern members of Paul Bunyan's crew rather than the hero himself. One of the men, for example, had two sets of teeth, and, walking in his sleep one night, he encountered the grind-stone and chewed it to bits before he was fully aroused to what he was doing. In the adventure of another member of the crew we have the familiar tale of the man who jumped across the river in three jumps. The crew sometimes showed ingenuity on their own account as when they rolled boulders down the steep sides of the pyramid forty, and running after them ground their axes to a razor edge against the revolving stones.

Connected very frequently with the Bunyan tales are accounts of fabulous animals that haunted the camp. There is the bird who lays square eggs so that they will not roll down hill, and hatches them in the snow. Then there is the side-hill dodger, a curious animal naturally adapted to life on a hill by virtue of the circumstance that it has two short legs on the up-hill side. Of this creature it is said that by mistake the female dodger once laid her eggs (for the species seems to resemble somewhat the Australian duck-bill) wrong end around, with the terrible result that the little dodgers, hatching out with their short legs *down* hill, rolled into the river and drowned. The pinnacle grouse are birds with only one wing, adapted by this defect for flight in one direction about the top of a conical hill. There is little doubt that these animal stories existed outside the Bunyan cycle, and are simply appended to the central group of tales.

The story of Bunyan's method of paying off his crew at the end of the season shows the hero's craftiness. Discovering in the spring that he had no money on hand, Bunyan

suddenly rushed into camp shouting that they had been cutting government pine and were all to be arrested. Each man thereupon seized what camp property lay nearest his hand and made off, no two men taking the same direction. Thus Bunyan cleared his camp without paying his men a cent for their labor.

Not all of the Bunyan stories are concerned with Bunyan's life in the Round River or the Big Onion camps. There are several accounts of his exploits far from the forests of the north-central states. It is said that when he was once dredging out the Columbia River, he broke the dredge, and, sticking it into his pocket, walked to the nearest blacksmith shop in South Dakota, had it repaired, and returned to the Oregon camp before dark. Besides his blue ox Bunyan had, according to some versions, so many oxen that their yokes, piled up, made twenty cords of wood. One day he drove all of these animals through a hollow tree which had fallen across a great ravine. When he reached the other side, he found that several of the oxen had disappeared, and, returning, he discovered that they had strayed into a hollow limb. Occasionally one hears some account of Paul Bunyan's boyhood exploits on his father's farm. It is said that on one occasion he and his father went out to gather a huge water-melon which was growing on a side-hill above a railroad track. They carelessly forgot to prop the melon up before they severed the stem with a cross-cut saw, and as a result it broke loose, rolled down hill, burst open on striking the rails, and washed out two hundred feet of track. This tale and similar ones do not seem to belong strictly to the Bunyan cycle, but to be, rather, like the animal fables, mere appendages.

What is there in these exaggerated tales of interest to the student of literature? We believe, first, that, crude as they are, they reveal unmistakable indications of having grown up under the same principles of literary development which produced by a slow process legend-cycles much more romantic and famous. The tendency to group the tales about one hero is universal in legend, as is illustrated by the Arthurian and Robin Hood cycles, and less completely by the folk tales of Rübzahl, the spirit of the Riesengebirge of Germany, Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, and the strong man,

Tom Hickathrift, of England. Moreover, like other legend groups, the Bunyan stories tend to be concerned with a single locality, Round River or Big Onion River. Finally, many of the legends are more or less closely connected with a single exploit, the clearing of the pyramid forty, in much the same way, to compare the little with the great, that Greek legends center in the Argonautic Expedition and the Trojan War, and Arthurian legends in the search for the Holy Grail.

Of more interest, however, is the remarkable quality of the exaggeration in the Bunyan legends. This quality is worth analysis not only because it shows universal tendencies, but because it is the basis of what has come to be known as typical American humor. The tendency in all legend is to exaggerate, to make the physical strength or craft of the hero much greater than normal, to make an Ajax or an Odysseus of him. But in classical romance and epic this exaggeration is a thing of slow growth. It happens naturally, through a desire to make the deeds of the hero seem more wonderful, and not deliberately, through a desire to arouse amusement by gross exaggeration; it is an apotheosis, not a caricature. The exaggeration in the legends of Paul Bunyan is certainly of a different sort from that in classical legend; it is more Munchausenesque. The teller of the tale of the pea-soup lake, and of the camp-distillery, and of the great Round River drive has two motives: first, he wishes to excite wonder; second, he wishes to amuse. In their wonder-motive the Bunyan legends belong to that numerous class of travelers' tales typified by the fabulous accounts in Mandeville and Hakluyt, and in the books of other collectors. They are stories designed to be swallowed by camp-followers and tenderfeet for the entertainment of hardened dwellers in the woods. In their humor-motive they belong to that large class of stories which depend for their effectiveness not upon true representations of facts but upon gross departures from normal standards. Humor is a difficult thing to define, but one of its important elements is certainly that surprise which comes from the sudden and unanticipated contemplation of an incongruous variation from the normal. Good taste has gradually set limits to what cultivated persons regard as legitimate humor, but the child still

laughs at the drunkard and to some the abnormality of insanity is still amusing. Humor has, accordingly, very often taken the form of gross exaggeration or caricature, especially under the spur of a contest in yarning. This type of humor is typically American. It is really only a natural development of the attempt to "boom" new sections of the country by representing conditions as superior to what they actually are. It is but one aspect of the cheerful, rose-colored, but quite distorted optimism which aroused the disgust of Dickens and other Englishmen (see *Martin Chuzzlewit*) and has earned for Americans among Europeans whose boom days are over the name of braggart.

It is this quality of humorous exaggeration, then, and the idea of a contest in lying, which makes the Bunyan legend cycle typically American, or, it might be better to say, typically pioneer, in spirit. And the reader does not have to look far for American parallels. Mark Twain's books are full of tales of the same stamp; Owen Wister's *Virginian* teems with them; lately in Harry Leon Wilson's *Ruggles of Red Gap* we again meet this characteristically American type of story. The note is the same throughout,—gross caricature in fact and characters to arouse the wonder of the tenderfoot and to amuse the initiated by the mere bigness of the yarn.

The Bunyan cycle of legends certainly contains a great many tales which sound strangely familiar to the person who meets Bunyan for the first time. It is altogether probable, in fact, that a great many of these stories had their origin elsewhere than in the woods and have simply been added to the Bunyan collection. We have been told on good authority that a legendary blue ox exists in a certain mountain district of Tennessee and that in this same district not only the men but even all the animals have short legs to adapt them to hill-climbing. The tale of the man who jumped across the river "in three jumps" is, as has been pointed out, widely distributed. Some of the Bunyan stories, on the other hand, almost certainly originated in the woods. To Professor Cairns of the Department of English at Wisconsin we are indebted for an ingenious explanation of the possible origin of the tale of the pyramid forty and its prodigious supply of timber. In the early

days of lumbering in the North more than one man staked out a claim on a single forty and, ignoring section lines, cut "government pine" for miles around, securing, it was humorously reported by those who knew but winked at the robbery, a great deal of timber from one forty. This cutting of government pine appears definitely in at least one Bunyan story, the tale of the method adopted by Bunyan to pay off his crew. Excepting for stories of this sort, however, which seem distinctly confined to the lumber districts, and which would, indeed, have little reason for existing elsewhere, the majority of the Bunyan legends are very likely adaptations of tales which have elsewhere an existence in some form.