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AMERICAN FOLK LORE
PAUL BUNYAN TALES

Prepared for the Use of Students of the

University of Wisconsin
Summer Session



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PAUL BUNYAN TALES

The mythical hero of the lumberjacks is Paul Bunyan and tales of his great strength and wonderful exploits are, or formerly were, told by the fires of the bunkhouses in the logging camps from Maine to Oregon, Washington and California.

"All lumberjacks believe, or pretend to believe that he really lived and was the pioneer in the lumber country, some of the older men even claim to have known him or members of his crew." In Wisconsin the location of one of his camps is stated to have "been 45 miles west of Rhinelander."

PAUL BUNYAN

"Bunyan was a powerful giant, seven feet tall and with a stride of seven feet. He was famous throughout the lumbering districts for his great physical strength. So great was his lung capacity that he called his men to dinner by blowing through a hollow tree. When he spoke limbs sometimes fell from trees. To keep his pipe filled required the entire time of a swamper with a scoop shovel." He could not write and ordered the supplies for his camp by drawing pictures of what he wanted. Once he ordered grindstones and got cheeses. He forgot to draw the holes. He kept the time of his men by cutting notches in a piece of wood.

No undertaking was too great for Paul. Lumberjacks say that he is the man who logged the timber off North Dakota.

He also scooped out the hole for Lake Superior. This he used for a reservoir as he was needing water to ice his logging roads. The Mississippi river was caused by the overturning of a water tank when his ox slipped.

HIS LOGGING CREW

His logging crew on the Big Onion river, "the winter of the blue snow", in about 1862 or 1865, was so large that the men were divided into three gangs. One of these was always going to work, a second was at work and a third was always returning to camp from work. This kept the cooks busy, for when they had finished preparing breakfast for one crew they had to prepare dinner for another and supper for a third.

To sharpen their axes the men sometimes rolled boulders down steep hillsides and running after them ground the blades against the revolving stones.

Jim Liverpool was a great jumper. Planting his feet on the bank of a river he could jump across it in three jumps.

Black Dan McDonald, Tom McCann, Dutch Jake, Red Murphy, Curley Charley, Yellow-head and Patsy Ward were other well-known members of his daredevil crew. One of the men had two sets of teeth which could saw through anything. One night, while walking in his sleep, he encountered a grindstone and before he awoke chewed it up.

THE CAMP

The cook shanty was so large that it took half a day to walk around its outside. Three forties had to be cleared each week to keep up a fire in the big cook-stove. An entire cord of wood was needed to start a blaze. The loaves of bread were gigantic. When the men had eaten the insides the crusts were used for bunks (some say bunk-houses).

One day, Joe Mufferon, the cook, put a loaf in the oven and started around to the other side to remove it, but before he got there it had burned to a crisp. Before he began to make pancakes he strapped hams on the feet of his two colored assistants and had them skate over the top of the stove to grease it.

His eyesight being poor, one day he mixed some blasting powder with the batter. It blew up and the colored assistants went through the roof and never did come back. That was "the winter of the black snow."

Seven men were kept busy with wheelbarrows hauling prune stones away from the camp. The chipmunks ate these and grew as big as tigers.

Paul had much trouble with his cooks. He was always having to hire new ones. One got lost between the potato bin and the flour bin and nearly starved to death before he was found. The horn which Paul or the cook used to call the men to dinner was so big that it once blew down ten acres of pine. Next time the cook blew it straight up and that caused a cyclone.

The dining room was so large that when a man told a yarn at one end it grew so big by the time it reached the other that it had to be shoveled out.

Doughnuts (sinkers) were carried from the kitchen by two men on poles which they carried on their shoulders. Sometimes they were rolled down the length of the tables, the men catching them as they went by. Big Ole, the blacksmith, cut the holes in them with a punch and sledge.

THE BLUE OX

Bunyan was assisted in his lumbering by a huge blue ox, Babe, of whom he was very fond. This ox had the strength of nine horses and it weighed ten thousand pounds. It measured seven axe handles between the eyes. Its horns were of immense size. The men tied a line to their tips and hung clothing on it to dry. The original color of the animal was pure white. One winter it snowed blue snow for seven days and the ox lying down in it all winter was dyed blue.

With the ox Paul dragged a whole house up a hill, then he dragged the cellar up after it. When he wanted to peel a log he hitched the ox to one end and himself took hold of the bark at the other.

The ox pulled and out came the log "as clean as a whistle." Babe sometimes got into mischief. Once he broke loose at night and ate up two hundred feet of tow line. Sometimes he slipped in behind the crew, drank the water in the river and left the drive high and dry. Some of the lakes in Wisconsin and Minnesota are in holes made by his feet.

Bunyan had many other oxen besides Babe. When strung out in a line if each took the tail of the other in his mouth they would stretch halfway across the state. Their yokes piled up made one hundred cords of wood. One day he drove his oxen through a hollow log which had fallen across a great ravine. When they came through he counted them and saw that several were missing. These, he found, had strayed into a hollow limb.

BIG OLE

Big Ole was Paul's blacksmith at the Big Onion camp. He was a very powerful man and when he struck his anvil the ring of the metal could be heard in the next county. He alone could shoe Babe, the ox, single handed. Once he carried two of his shoes for a mile and sunk knee deep in the solid rock at every step. Every time the ox was shod a new iron mine had to be opened up.

THE PYRAMID FORTY

At Round River, in section 37, there was a forty shaped like a pyramid, with a heavy growth of timber on all of its sides. To see to the top "took a week." It was "as far as twenty men could see." Bunyan and his crew labored all one winter, "the winter of the blue snow," to clear it. From it they cut one hundred million feet of timber. Some of the men got one short leg from working all winter on one side of the slope.

THE ROUND RIVER DRIVE

The crew rolled the logs cut on the pyramid forty down to the bank and in the spring started them down the river. They drove for "two weeks or more" hoping to reach a mill town where they could dispose of them. It was not until they had passed their camp several times that they realized that the river was round and had no outlet. Someone recognized the pyramid.

FORTY JONES EXPLOIT

One day Forty Jones, the straw boss, saw some deer tracks near the river. He watched for them and at night when they came to drink removed the key-log from a pile of logs forty feet high, which rolled down hill and killed two hundred of the herd.

The camp then had enough venison to last all winter.

THE BUCKSKIN HARNESS

The barn boss made a harness of the hides for the blue ox. Lafer Pink-eye Martin was hauling in logs for firewood. When he started with his load it began to rain and the buckskin to stretch and when he reached camp Babe was beside him but the load was still down in the woods. He tied the ox and went in to dinner.

While he was eating the sun came out very hot, dried the harness and hauled the logs to camp.

BEAN SOUP LAKE

Near the Round River there was a hot spring. One day the tote team bringing up a mammoth load of beans overturned near the spring and the beans fell into it. The teamster expected to be discharged for losing the beans. Joe, the cook, took some salt, pepper and pork and threw them in among the beans. So the camp had good soup all winter. The cook's assistants, however, were angry because each day they had to tramp three miles to bring soup to the camp.

Another version of this tale says that the tote teamster was driving across a frozen lake with a load of peas when the ice suddenly thawed and the ox was drowned. Bunyan dammed the lake, fired the slashings on shore, and then, opening the dam, sluiced down the river to his men pea soup with an ox-tail flavor.

When the men were working at a distance from the camp the cook got the soup to them by freezing it onto sticks and pieces of rope.

WILD ANIMALS

Haunting the woods about the logging camps were numerous fabulous animals. Some were very wild and fierce and others harmless. There was a bird which laid square eggs so that they would not roll down hill. The upland trout built its nest in tall trees and was very difficult to catch. The side-hill dodger had two short legs on the up-hill side. The pinnacle grouse had only one wing. This enabled it to fly only in one direction about the top of a conical hill. Snow snakes were most active in the winter time. They made victims of men who wandered in the woods after dark. The rumptifusel and the hodag were beasts of great ferocity.

LITERATURE

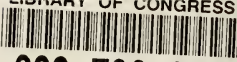
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