

Myths & Tales: Paul Bunyan

Remember Paul Bunyan? He's a giant lumberjack in American folklore. His exploits revolve around the tall tales of his superhuman labors, and he is customarily accompanied by Babe the Blue Ox. The character originated in the oral tradition of North American loggers and was later popularized by freelance writer William B. Laughead (1882–1958) in a 1916 promotional pamphlet for the Red River Lumber Company. He has been the subject of various literary compositions, musical pieces, commercial works, and theatrical productions. His likeness is displayed in several oversized statues across North America.

According to Michael Edmonds in his book, *Out of the Northwoods: The Many Lives of Paul Bunyan*, Paul Bunyan stories circulated for at least thirty years before finding their way into print. In contrast to the lengthy narratives abundant in published material, Paul Bunyan "stories" when told in the lumbercamp bunkhouses, were presented in short fragments. Some of these stories include motifs from older folktales, such as absurdly severe weather and fearsome critters. Parallels in early printings support the view that at least a handful of Bunyan stories hold a common origin in folklore. The earliest recorded reference of Paul Bunyan is an uncredited 1904 editorial in the Duluth News Tribune which recounts:

“His pet joke and the one with which the green horn at the camp is sure to be tried, consists of a series of imaginative tales about the year Paul Bunyan lumbered in North Dakota. The great Paul is represented as getting out countless millions of timber in the year of the "blue snow." The men's shanty in his camp covered a half section, and the mess camp was a stupendous affair. The range on which an army of cookees prepared the beans and "red horse" was so long that when the cook wanted to grease it up for the purpose of baking the wheat cakes in the morning, they strapped two large hams to his feet



and started him running up and down a half mile of black glistening stove top.”

All four anecdotes are mirrored in J.E. Rockwell's "Some Lumberjack Myths" six years later, and James MacGillivray wrote on the subject of stove skating in "Round River" four years before that. MacGillivray's account, somewhat extended, would reappear in *The American Lumberman* in 1910. *The American Lumberman* would follow up with a few, sporadic editorials such as "Paul Bunyan's Oxen," "In Paul Bunyan's Cook Shanty," and "Chronicle of Life and Works of Mr. Paul Bunyan." But it was Rockwell's earlier story that was one of the few to allude to Paul Bunyan's Goliath-like stature and introduce his big, blue ox, prior to Laughead's commercialization of Paul Bunyan, although W.D. Harrigan did refer to a giant, albeit, pink ox in "Paul Bunyan's Oxen," circa 1914. In all the articles Paul Bunyan is praised as a logger of great physical strength and unrivaled skill.

Some commentators scite Paul Bunyan as an example of "fakelore," a literary invention passed off as an older folktale. They point out that the majority of books about Paul Bunyan, especially those targeted to juvenile audiences, are comprised almost entirely of elements with no basis in folklore. However, while modern commercial writers are credited with setting Paul Bunyan on his rise to a nationally recognized figure, this ignores the historical roots of the character in logging camps and forest industries.

At the same time, several authors have come forward to propose alternative origins for Paul Bunyan. D. Laurence Rogers and others have suggested a possible connection between Paul Bunyan tales and the exploits of French-Canadian lumberjack Fabian Fournier (1845–1875). From 1865 to 1875, Fournier worked for the H. M. Loud Company in the Grayling, Michigan area. Another unverified claim, that Paul Bunyan was a soldier in the Papineau Rebellion named Paul Bon Jean. The origin of the legends say that at the mouth of the river in the Two Mountains area near Saint-Eustache, Quebec, loggers stormed into battle against the British, among them a fierce and bearded giant named Paul Bonjean, monikered as "Bonyenne". His name was anglicized and stories were eventually modified and added upon from storyteller to storyteller.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Bunyan]



Babe The Blue Ox at Brainerd, MN



Paul Bunyan statue in Bangor, Maine.