

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE PAUL BUNYAN TALES

THE QUESTION raised by Mr. Carleton C. Ames in his article on "Paul Bunyan—Myth or Hoax?," published in the March issue of this magazine, has been the subject of extensive comment in Minnesota newspapers. Among those publishing editorials on the theme are the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of April 10, the *Minneapolis Star-Journal* of April 11, the *Bemidji Daily Pioneer* of April 13, the *Duluth Herald* of April 17, the *Lake Wilson Pilot* of April 18, and the *Minneapolis Times-Tribune* of April 19. The writers of most of these comments take the attitude that Mr. Ames is attempting to "debunk" the mythical hero of the lumberjacks; others, however, make it clear that his criticism "is not an attack on Paul but a doubt as to the age of the stories themselves." Mr. Ames restates his case in the *Bemidji Pioneer* of April 19, asserting that his purpose "was simply to raise the question as to whether the Paul Bunyan legend has come up out of the woods and the logging camps, or whether it has been superimposed upon them."

The *Pioneer Press* of April 10 appeals for "evidence that stories about Bunyan were told in the period from 1860 to 1890." Something approaching such evidence is offered by Mr. Raymond Jackson of Minneapolis in a recent letter to the editor of this magazine. He reports an interview with Mr. Fred Staples of Lakeland, the "only real lumberjack left of my acquaintance, now eighty-seven years of age." He is a son of Winslow Staples and a nephew of Isaac Staples, "two brothers who came to Minnesota from Maine to cut trees . . . and sawed them into lumber at Stillwater through the logging days in Minnesota history." "I was fifty years in the woods and can't remember when I didn't know about

Paul Bunyan," asserts Mr. Staples. "I started driving a team for Uncle Isaac when I was sixteen years old," he continues, "and I heard about Paul Bunyan the very first winter I was in the woods." Mr. Jackson believes that Mr. Staples' evidence "would seem to authenticate the existence of Paul Bunyan in the lumber camps of Minnesota and Wisconsin as far back as the seventies."

One of the most interesting comments inspired by Mr. Ames's article comes from Mr. W. B. Laughead of Westwood, California, the author of a booklet on *The Marvelous Exploits of Paul Bunyan* published by the Red River Lumber Company in 1922. Part of his letter, which appears in full in the *Bemidji Pioneer* for May 1, follows:

When The Red River Lumber Company started using Paul Bunyan stories in their advertising in 1914 it was soon learned that Paul was unknown to the general public and to the distributors and sawmill people of the lumber industry. The stories were known only to loggers and many loggers had not heard of them. My own experience in the camps around Bemidji and on the upper Mississippi dated from 1900 and that is where I first heard of Paul Bunyan. In 1901 I heard the tales again from Michigan loggers in California. These men had gone to California from Michigan some 15 years before that time.

In 1920 Mr. Henry L. Neall, then well along in years, wrote to The Red River Lumber Company that he had heard Paul Bunyan stories when a boy in his grandfather's camps in Pennsylvania and that his grandfather referred to them as old traditions.

Paul's exploits are seldom told in narrative form. Some one in a group refers to something Paul did in a casual, offhand way as if to some well known event like Washington crossing the Delaware or Columbus discovering the New World. Another takes it up, perhaps arguing about some detail. Extemporaneous embellishments come into the conversation which becomes a lying contest. In this way local color and modernization creep in.

There is an extensive version in the oil fields full of the trade slang of the drillers, "The Buttermilk Gusher," "The 48-inch Casing From India," etc. Some of the old pine loggers ranged wide as itinerant laborers, sticking to frontiers, and evidently some strays reached the oil fields. It is said that there are locally colored stories of Paul Bunyan in the West Indies.

Research by individuals and institutions have failed to reveal the origin of the Paul Bunyan stories. They appear in the Eastern States prior to the Lake States era of the pine industry. Mention of Paul

Bunyan occurs in letters to newspapers and lumber trade journals but so far as shown by investigation up to this time the publications of The Red River Lumber Company, dating from 1914 were the first compilations. . . .

I regret that I can add no conclusive evidence but none has come my way in 25 years of contact and correspondence with students of the Paul Bunyan myth.

Dr. M. M. Quaife, secretary and editor of the Burton Historical Collection in the Detroit Public Library and professor of history in Wayne University, found Mr. Ames's article of special interest because, he writes, "somewhat over a year ago I tackled this same subject with conclusions substantially identical with those reached by Mr. Ames." With his letter Dr. Quaife enclosed a copy of his article, which appeared in the *Detroit Saturday Night* of February 11, 1939. It will be reprinted in a future issue of *Minnesota History*. "I recommended Mr. Ames's article to my history class in Wayne University," Dr. Quaife remarks, "as illustrative both of historical method and of the necessity of employing it in our everyday literary and personal contacts with life. This is another way of saying that I appreciate the article very highly."



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