

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

PAUL BUNYAN — MYTH OR HOAX?

THAT LEGENDARY LOGGER, Paul Bunyan, has in recent years become rather a popular figure. Books of Paul Bunyan stories are published for both juvenile and adult readers; communities celebrate Paul Bunyan festivals; it remains only for Walt Disney to make the great lumberjack the subject of a Technicolor feature to ensure his place among the immortals.

It would seem that the saga of Paul and his big blue ox has been accepted almost at face value as a bit of the indigenous folklore of the pineries. No question appears to have been raised as to whether these yarns were ever actually spun by the shanty boys on the deacon seats of the logging camps. And yet, to those who are interested in the story of the loggers of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan, such a question will indeed seem legitimate. To raise it is the purpose of this article.

When Paul Bunyan first became a popular figure some years ago, it occurred to my father as singular that he, as one who was raised in the atmosphere of the logging camps and whose father spent most of his active life in the logging industry, had never heard of such a fascinating figure. This seed of incredulity has since germinated into a more active curiosity and has been passed on to me. Some informal researches have been carried on in the form of conversations with many old-timers of the camps. Their number has included representatives of all the great divisions of Wisconsin's pineries, the drainage basins of the Marinette, the Wolf, the Wisconsin, the Chippewa, and the St. Croix. Minnesota's loggers also were represented. These inquiries have also covered both the early period of logging, when the camps were dominated by "State-of-

Mainers," New Brunswick men, and Canucks, and the later period, when the Scandinavian influx had filled the woods with Swedes and Norwegians. Some inquiries were also made of individuals of a later generation whose contacts with the woods were at second hand.

The results of these inquiries point toward certain tentative conclusions. Not one of the old-timers consulted recalled ever having heard of Paul Bunyan in the logging camps. In one or two instances, persons of the later generation referred to above professed to have heard Paul Bunyan stories related by old-timers before the modern versions were in circulation, but of all the old loggers contacted by ourselves and others interested not one would testify to having heard a story of Paul Bunyan in the camps. This evidence is, of course, of a negative character. It seems incredible, however, that if the Paul Bunyan yarns had any kind of circulation during the heyday of the loggers, they should not have come to the attention of at least some of these individuals.

Further evidence is available. Mr. Stewart H. Holbrook has published a history of the logging industry under the title *Holy Old Mackinaw*. His sole reference to Paul Bunyan is in a chapter headed "Around the Barrel Stoves" as follows: "Legends grew out of these bunkhouse discourses—not the made-up tales of Paul Bunyan, but tales of actual men."¹ Another important work in connection with any study of the lumberjack is the late Franz Rickaby's collection of songs entitled *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty Boy* (Cambridge, 1926). Nowhere in this book do we find the name of Paul Bunyan. It seems hardly credible if the Paul Bunyan legend was current among the shanty boys who put everything else into their songs, that some of these rude minstrels should not have set it to music.

A good case for the contention that Paul Bunyan is a fake of comparatively recent origin may be made out on the

¹ Stewart H. Holbrook, *Holy Old Mackinaw*, 232 (New York, 1938).

basis of the stories themselves. Using Mrs. Shephard's version of the legends, let me point out a few incongruities.² In her foreword, Mrs. Shephard tells us that these stories may have originated even earlier than the 1860's and that they were at their height during the 1880's and 1890's.

Paul Bunyan having lost his pipe on one occasion, one of the bull cooks made him a cigar out of patent tar roofing. It seems pertinent to ask when patent tar roofing was invented. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* tells us that roofing of cardboard or paper impregnated with asphalt is of comparatively recent origin. The story would seem much more typical of lumberjack humor if the cigar had been made out of a pair of shoepacks.

In a description of one of Paul's bunkhouses, we are told that the upper bunks were so high that the men came down from them in parachutes. It seems to me that about the last thing likely to occur to the imagination of a lumberjack in the 1880's would be a parachute.

The steam-driven concrete mixers for making hot cake batter seem somewhat out of place in the woods of 1860-90, and when we are told that the Standard Oil Company now has some of the pipes that Paul used to convey pea soup through the woods, we can only believe that the lumberjack author of that particular yarn must have been gifted with second sight to predict the coming of pipe lines to the Middle West.

It is perhaps significant that the authors of various collections of "Bunyania" have not bothered to do much in the way of authenticating or documenting their stories. Mrs. Shephard seems to take their authenticity for granted and in listing her sources confines herself to contributors of material for the compilation. She lists numerous names of greater or less eminence, but in no case explicitly quotes them as vouching for these stories as the actual product of the logging camps.

² Esther Shephard, *Paul Bunyan* (New York, 1924).

The verdict at this stage of the investigation must go against Paul Bunyan. A tentative conclusion is inescapable that Paul Bunyan as the legendary hero of the shanty boy, as true folklore, is spurious. He may have appeared in the camps of a later day, possibly about the turn of the century, when the true shanty boy had all but vanished. He may exist among the lumberjacks of the Pacific coast, where logging is a far different operation than the Minnesota and Wisconsin jack ever knew, but he was a stranger to the loggers of the Middle West when logging was at its height.

The burden of proof may fairly be placed on those who are presenting Paul Bunyan to us as a native product of the imagination of the shanty boy, and who are making him, in a sense, the patron saint of the old-time logger. Before Paul and Babe are any more firmly ingrained in our minds as, to quote Mrs. Shephard, "the unique contribution of the American frontier to the world's folklore" the proponents of this view should be called upon to present the evidence which authenticates their hero as an indigenous product of the pineries. I, for one, will await such evidence with an open mind and a lively curiosity.

CARLETON C. AMES

RIVER FALLS STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE
RIVER FALLS, WISCONSIN

A MINNESOTA SAGA

THE DANCE in all its various forms has long been used as a medium for the presentation of historical subjects. Greek myths and legends formed an important part of the dance choreographer's material when ballet became a theatrical form in the seventeenth century; the Diaghileff Russian ballet in Paris achieved exciting effects through the use of Russian historic tales; and, in the field of the social dance, many folk dances are movement enactments of old stories.

But only recently, within the last ten years, has the American scene been used to any great extent by American dancers



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