

THE PAUL BUNYAN TALES

Among the letters of comment received by the editor of this magazine after the publication in the March issue of Mr. Carleton C. Ames's "Paul Bunyan — Myth or Hoax?" was one from Dr. M. M. Quaife, secretary and editor of the Burton Historical Collection in the Detroit Public Library. The gist of his letter was given in the June number of *Minnesota History* (*ante*, p. 178), where mention was made of an article, published on February 11, 1939, in which he reached "conclusions substantially identical" with those of Mr. Ames. Since Dr. Quaife's article appeared in a local publication of limited circulation, the *Detroit Saturday Night*, it is reprinted herewith in order to make it accessible to readers of this magazine. *Ed.*

Paul Bunyan is the hero of the lumberjacks, and most readers are familiar with the marvelous exploits which with the aid of Babe, his blue ox—42 axe handles and a plug of tobacco wide between the eyes—he was wont to perform.

In recent years there has developed a tendency to identify Paul and Babe with the Saginaw River Valley, "greatest of all lumbering streams." James Stevens began it in 1932 with his widely heralded *Saginaw Paul Bunyan*, and Dell McCormick with his *Paul Bunyan Swings His Axe* has followed in Stevens' steps, until now the association of Paul Bunyan with the Saginaw River is definitely fixed in the public mind.

Comes now Mrs. Grace S. McClure, State Librarian of Michigan, with a more remarkable story than any related by Paul's admirers. Mrs. McClure is a native of Saginaw and a keen student of current literature. She has investigated the Bunyan tales on their supposed native heath, and strangely enough she reports that the old-time lumbermen of the Saginaw region deny all knowledge of Paul and his blue ox. "Within the last few days," she relates, "I have again discussed *Paul Bunyan Swings His Axe* with one of our older citizens of Saginaw, who referred to it as 'just like those tales of Baron Munchausen.'

“He believes they may have originated in the Wisconsin camps, or even later in the camps on the Pacific Coast, where they were told by the lumberjacks as tall tales, and were fictitiously placed by them in the Saginaw Valley, which was used simply as a peg on which to hang them. His son tells me that the first he ever heard of Paul Bunyan was as late as 1915, when, while overseas in the war, he began to hear these stories which were supposed to have happened in Michigan.

“He and others who have spent their lives in the lumber industry, and who in their early days at least actively worked in the lumber camps, say they have never heard of any of these stories around any of the Michigan camps. This of course does not prevent those who were not original settlers in Saginaw from claiming they are Saginaw and Midland lumber camp stories. I have heard men talk of them thus before luncheon clubs, etc., but they were invariably those who came to Saginaw long after the lumber days, and had no direct or indirect association with that time whatsoever. Honorable W. B. Mershon, Dr. C. H. Sample, James B. Peter, and George Grant, among the older citizens, agree that Paul Bunyan tales were not told around the Saginaw camps to their knowledge. I can only say that I have heard stories of lumber camps since my very earliest childhood and Paul Bunyan and his exploits were not among those stories. My first acquaintance with them was after 1930.”

So bang goes another great illusion. No one who is acquainted with Michigan will question either the intelligence or the integrity of Mrs. McClure. Her testimony discloses that Paul and Babe, the blue ox, were strangers to the Saginaw, “greatest of all lumbering streams,” until they were foisted upon it by a group of story tellers of the post-lumber-camp era.

She definitely fixes the time when she first heard them as “after 1930,” which centers the spotlight of this investigation upon Stevens, whose *Saginaw Paul Bunyan*, was published in 1932. In his introduction to the book, Stevens relates that after years of familiarity with the Bunyan legends as they were related in the camps of the Pacific Northwest, he longed to trace them to their native habitat. In this worshipful attitude he came to Saginaw, where he evidently fell into the hands of someone who did a swell job of spoofing. The

trustful stranger wanted information; the obliging native was glad to supply it — a comedy endlessly repeated in American history.

In the present case, we need not regret the result, for Stevens produced a fine book; but Mrs. McClure discloses that Paul Bunyan and his fabulous ox were not imported to the valley of the Saginaw until long after the day of the lumberjack had ended there. In such fashion is popular history written.



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