

LIFE INTO LEGEND: STORIES OF BENNY AMBROSE

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Benjamin Quentin Ambrose was a true historical figure, a rugged individual who lived out his dream in Minnesota's north country. Yet interwoven in his life story are the strands of legend and history, two kinds of narrative not always easy—or useful—to distinguish.

Folktales and legends about Ambrose and other heroes flourish in Minnesota's north woods. The rugged landscape, long, cold winters, and sense of remoteness from the everyday world set the stage for larger-than-life characters and unusual adventures.

Best known among these stories are the preposterous yarns of Paul Bunyan, the tall-tale lumberjack immortalized in storybooks and statues. Lesser known and more human in scale are the legends of men like Otto Walta, the Finnish lumberjack-trickster who lived near Virginia, Minnesota, in the early 1900s and always managed to triumph over people of greater wealth and social power. These kinds of characters and settings are enduring parts of national and regional folklore, for strongmen-heroes play an important role in American culture. They embody a traditional glorification of strength, initiative, and rugged independence, existing in a pure, uncorrupted state of nature.

In piecing together the story of a man who left almost no written record, author Ralph Wright-Peterson examined known sources of information. The broad outline and certain details of Ambrose's life can be researched and verified. Land-purchase papers, correspondence filed in federal offices, legislation, and photographs tell one kind of story. The words of his friends and family and, no less, the tales he spun about himself tell another; oral accounts amplify and animate the historical record. Many of these stories are believable, and some can be documented by historical sleuthing. But others verge on the apocryphal, perhaps exaggerating his strength and endurance beyond the limits of reality. Benny Ambrose and the stories that circulate about him



Ben Ambrose, documenting his triumph over a bear, 1923. While one hand holds the rifle, the other pulls a string attached to his camera shutter.

are a good example of the legend-making process, for legends are made, not born. At what point does an unusual person become a "character"? When does such a character's reputation begin to attract old stories or spawn new ones that *could* have happened, even if they didn't? At what point does life veer into legend and legend into life?

Rather than try to sort the so-called facts from fiction, we might consider the interrelationship of history and legend. When we hear or tell or enjoy

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Benny Ambrose stories, we might pause to wonder why they hold such power. What is their larger, even spiritual, significance? Why does Ambrose's life interest people who never knew him? What elements of his story instruct, inspire, warn, or entertain those who could never hope or wish to live as he did? These are questions that good history and good storytelling can answer together.

Beginning with his "wicked stepmother," Ambrose's life echoes many themes of European-American folklore and legend. He ran away from home at a young age; folk tradition is replete with cast-out or runaway children who live by wit alone. A chance encounter brought him to northern Minnesota, where his life fit a pattern tailored from the lives that became stereotypes in American legend: the rugged frontiersman, riverman, lumberjack, or mountain man. He routinely performed feats of remarkable physical strength and endurance. Like the frozen logger of song ("The weather it tried to freeze him/It tried its level best/At 100 degrees below zero/ He buttoned up his vest"), Ambrose reportedly traversed the north country in shirtsleeves when the temperature dipped well below zero. And, like many American heroes, he first rejected and then fought the system.

While his lifestyle and exploits may have earned Ambrose legendary status in the borderlakes community, it was his running battle with the government that, as Wright-Peterson says, turned him into a folk hero. Once again, his life replicated larger cultural themes, as his efforts to keep his homestead cast him into the role of David doing battle with Goliath. In the process, he nearly acted out another cherished American folk tradition, the outlaw-hero. As continued fascination with men such as Jesse James shows, violence—or the threat of it—does not tarnish a hero's image; on the contrary, aggressive action enhances reputations. Unreasonable demands

require desperate deeds. And whether it's David and Goliath, John Henry and the steam shovel, or Pretty Boy Floyd and the bankers, Americans root for the underdog.

Ben Ambrose, a man who lived most of his life in the north country, made history. His 80-some years spanned the birth and evolution of federal conservation policy. Through ingenuity and perseverance, he became one of only two individuals allowed to live out their lives in the protected Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Aside from this personal accomplishment, Ambrose left a legacy of stories that will continue to circulate long after the people who helped or hindered him are gone. Little matter if the tales grow a bit in the retelling. As Jacob Grimm, the famous German fairytale collector, wrote in 1844: "The fairy tale flies, the legend walks, knocks at your door . . . has almost the authority of history. As the fairy tale stands related to legend, so does the legend to history, and . . . so does history to real life."

FOR MORE READING

Marjorie Edgar, "Imaginary Animals of Northern Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 21 (December 1940): 353–56.

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Franz Rickaby, *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty-Boy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926).

Irwin Silber, ed., *Songs of the Great American West* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

For an overview of Minnesota folklore collected before 1980, see *Minnesota Folklife: An Annotated Bibliography*, compiled by Pamela J. Mittlefehldt (St. Paul: Center for the Study of Minnesota Folklife and Minnesota Historical Society, 1979).

The photograph is courtesy Ben Ambrose's daughter, Bonnie A. Wasmund.



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