

The First Paul Bunyan Story in Print



INTRODUCTION

BY MARY JANE HENNIGAR

Reason a log rolls? 'Cause she's round
Pervidin of course that she's
 perfec'ly sound.
If you want a good dog—get a hound!

This verse served as the epigraph for a Paul Bunyan tale, first of a long and ever-broadening stream of Bunyan anecdotes. And here follows the story of that first printed tale:

In 1906 the twin towns of Oscoda and Au Sable, Michigan, planned to hold their first homecoming to celebrate their origins in the lumbering of the nineteenth century and to call home many who had worked in the woods, on the river, and in allied industries of those years.

The two towns “fell to” with gusto and planned a fine and varied program of entertainment. The local weekly, the *Oscoda Press*, ran lists of homecomers; results of events; and addresses, pictures, and biographies of the dignitaries who would be attending. A booklet, made up of galleys from the weekly, was printed and sold or given to persons in attendance.

The editor of the paper, William McGillivray, had also been named secretary of the homecoming. At least one ex-resident who wrote later about the week of festivities thought that Will “more than any person” should receive the “credit for the consummation of our home gathering.”¹

1. The author of this praise, C. R. Henry, was a lawyer living in Alpena, Michigan, and had served as vice-president of the event. His account, “Home Coming a Success,” appeared in the *Oscoda Press* for 10 August 1906.

This huge statue of Paul Bunyan is one example of the way the stories once told in logging camps became part of tourist attractions in the mid-twentieth century, starting a debate among folklorists over whether Paul Bunyan was authentic “folklore” or really commercialized “fakelore.” FHS collection.

Both Will McGillivray and James MacGillivray (each brother spelled his name according to his own lights, and not always consistently even so) were talented and honorable men. Will, in addition to being the publisher and editor of the local paper, served the district in the Michigan legislature from 1916 to 1920, where he was a member of committees concerned with public lands and forestry interests and with state public schools. He also served his town as postmaster under three administrations.

Brother James worked in lumber camps in his youth in Michigan and in other states and on various newspapers across the country as a writer. He also, upon returning to Michigan, worked for the state's Conservation Department, as it was then called. He made early studies and movies of beaver, the American bald eagle, and other animals. My husband and I well remember pets of both these species that he kept at his home for study. He also did early studies for the department on the Kirtland warbler. This small bird, an endangered species, nests only in certain burnt-over forests of jack pine in Michigan. James MacGillivray was elected treasurer of Oscoda township in 1932–33; he was then elected supervisor of the township in 1934 and served in that capacity through 1939.

In one of the homecoming issues of Will's paper, for Friday, 10 August 1906 (volume 13, number 34), which features the above-mentioned lists and pictures and events, there appeared, on an inside page, an unfeatured anecdote with no byline. It was entitled simply, "Round River," and has been reprinted exactly as it appeared in the 1906 paper (the complete version follows this introduction).

This unsigned tale was undoubtedly first published merely to amuse the lumberjacks and company owners with a story they had probably heard in the camps. Although Bunyan tales may have been printed before 1906 in other local newspapers in the timber regions, this is the earliest one to come to light. As it was unsigned, it might never have claimed an author, but that was not to be.

In 1910, four years after the story's first appearance in his brother's hometown paper, James MacGillivray rewrote the tale with some minor changes and it was printed on July 24, in the *Detroit News Tribune* where he was employed at that time. It was then titled "The Round River Drive."²

Douglas Malloch, a poet whose writings regularly appeared in other publications, including the *American Lumberman*, had a much elongated, rhyming verse of the anecdote published in the 25 April 1914 issue of the latter journal. The author was not identified nor was any other credit given.

Just two months after the *Lumberman* publication, the poem, complete with cartoons, was published on page 9 of the 5 June 1914 "Auld Lang Syne Number" of the *Oscoda Press*. In this version, for the first time, Will McGillivray stated, "From prose story by J. H. McGillivray, Home

James MacGillivray the Poet

Like Douglas Malloch, who based his rhymed version of "Round River" on James MacGillivray's story, MacGillivray himself was a poet of no mean caliber. His 1930 copyrighted poem "A Tale of the Mackinac Trail" set forth the history of an actual Michigan forest trail—undoubtedly Indian in origin—that meandered from southeastern Michigan up through the state to the Straits of Mackinac. The poem appeared in a booklet entitled *OSCODA on the AuSable and Lake Huron*, published by the town of Oscoda in cooperation with the State of Michigan Tourist Association in 1931.¹ The pamphlet was replete with promotional cuts of photos and drawings. The tale was about early followers of the trail from the nomad Indians through missionaries, French, English, and American occupation. Through nine verses it brought the reader into the twentieth century, when the trail was paved for motorized travel. Its beginning and ending stanzas were:

Aye! Ponder this tale of the Mackinac Trail!
Of the *wigwam* and *Sieur* and *bateau*!
Of the moose in the veldt and the beaver's dark pelt
And the moccasin tracks in the snow—
For the moccasin tracks signaled packs on the backs
Of those who came here long ago.
Aye! Ponder this tale of the Mackinac Trail
And the moccasin tracks in the snow!

.....

Amic still slaps his tail by the Mackinac Trail,
As he dives to lodge portal below.
The otter still slides and the fox still derides
Foiled trap. Gone are *Sieur* and *bateau*!
Yet in pine colonnades are the shades of decades
Of those who came here long ago—
Those who won us the Grail of the Mackinac Trail
With their moccasin tracks in the snow!

1. Although the booklet as printed did not include a publication date, it did include a copyright date of 1930 for the poem (p. 7) as well as an illustration of a proposed lumberman's memorial, which was actually dedicated in 1932.

Coming Edition 1906. Transposed to verse by Douglas Mallach [sic], assoc. editor, *American Lumberman*."

Given James MacGillivray's achievements as a published author (see box), it would not be surprising to find that he had, in fact, in 1914 encouraged his brother William to identify the 1906 story as the original version of Malloch's Bunyan poem. In addition, a number of references in the Malloch poem hinted at a northeastern Michigan region.

2. Malcolm Rosholt gave James MacGillivray credit for the 1910 story in his letter to the editors of the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 65 (Autumn 1981): 37–38.

Malloch started the loggers' journey as follows: "west by north they made their way, one hundred miles." He then had the crew find their camp again, many years later, "west of Graylin' 50 miles." Grayling is about 120 miles west and 15 miles north of Au Sable and Oscoda as the crow flies. Also, at the end of the poem, "For of the past we found a trace, a peavey loggers know so well, a peavey with a Circle L, which as you know, was Bunyan's mark." Circle L was the H. M. Loud Sons' company mark, the longest continually running lumber company on the Au Sable River in this area. Malloch's own bailiwick was the western side of Michigan, suggesting perhaps that MacGillivray had col-

laborated, or at least corresponded, with Malloch on the verse. MacGillivray had in fact worked in lumber camps on the Au Sable River's North Branch in Crawford County (which surrounds Grayling), where he may have heard the "Round River" tale told.

The charm of MacGillivray's original story was that it did not launch into exaggeration immediately, as did subsequently published Paul Bunyan exploits. Instead, it built on germs of truth to foster gullibility, not stretching credibility in an obvious way. MacGillivray only caught his readers smiling at the end, when they realized they had been had, shaggy-dog style.

THE BIRTH OF PAUL BUNYAN—IN PRINT

BY DANIEL HOFFMAN

It was serendipitous that I received a letter from Mr. Steve Bell, editor of the *Bay City (Michigan) Times*, just before the new edition of my *Paul Bunyan, Last of the Frontier Demigods* (first published in 1952) appeared. Mr. Bell sent me a feature from his issue of 6 February 1983 and a photocopy of the typescript of the text now reproduced in the *Journal of Forest History*. The *Bay City Times* and its editor informed me that "the member of the local historical commission" who claimed this version to be the first appearance of Paul Bunyan in print had "misplaced her sole surviving copy of the original; files of the *Oscoda Press* were destroyed in a fire."¹ No doubt the omission of the original printing led to a misdating, 20 August instead of 10 August 1906.

Lacking proof positive, I remained a bit dubious, noting that the alleged 1906 text was almost identical to James MacGillivray's "The Round River Drive" in the *Detroit News-Tribune* for 24 July 1910, minus its first nine paragraphs and final seventy-five words. Since the *Oscoda Press* was owned by MacGillivray's brother, I inferred his authorship. All that remained in doubt was the date of its appearance.

Now we do have conclusive proof—the photographs reproduced with the accompanying article show the first page and the page containing the unsigned "Round River" (on page 1 is another feature of interest to students of forest folklore, "The Birling Match"). The 1906 text is differently paragraphed from the latter version, and in a few places slightly different language is used: "used to" in 1906 becomes "use to" in 1910, along with a few other dialectal changes. The main differences are in the added material. The 1910 text may be conveniently consulted in Howard

Felton, *Legends of Paul Bunyan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), pg. 335–41.

Writing for a Detroit newspaper, MacGillivray, evidently an experienced journalist, knew he could scarcely start *in medias res*, as in his earlier text for a paper in the logging country. Now he sets the scene by pretending to instruct Idaho woodmen in the lore of Paul Bunyan, known of course in "Maine or Michigan where they learned to do real drivin'." Establishing the time—"the winter of the black snow"—MacGillivray then names the crew:

They was me, and Dutch Jake, and Fred Klinard, and Pat O'Brien—P-O-B—and Saginaw Joe, and the McDonalds—Angus, Roy, Archie, Black Jack, Big Jack, Red Jack, Rory Frazer, Pete Perube—oh, we were there some! There was three hundred men all told.

This roll call gives specificity to Bunyan's crew, but none of these names recur in later versions from other typewriters. Four years after the *Detroit News-Tribune* story, W. B. Laughead produced the first of his Bunyan pamphlets advertising the Red River Lumber Company of Westwood, California, which played the major role in popularizing Paul Bunyan. It is notable that none of MacGillivray's fourteen tales mention Babe, the Blue Ox, who first appears in Laughead's 1914 pamphlet.

MacGillivray in 1910 added two folktale motifs to his original version: the stove so big it took two Negro cooks "skatin' round the stove with hams tied to their feet, greasin' the lid for the hotcakes," and the explosion that occurred when a chore boy mistook gunpowder for baking powder which blew "the coons" out of sight, not to be found until the very end of "The Round River Drive."

As I observed in 1952, quoting MacGillivray's yarn about the tree so big two teams sawed it from the opposite sides of the trunk for three days, neither knowing the other

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1. Daniel Hoffman, *Paul Bunyan, Last of the Frontier Demigods* (Lincoln: University Nebraska Press, 1983 [1952]), p. viii.

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was there, "This seems fairly close to the way the tales were actually told by the lumberjacks. . . . [T]he narrator is a participant in the action, and he does not scruple to use such terms peculiar to the logging industry as 'the fellin' cut' and 'cross-cuts brazed together'."² When popularizers retold Bunyan yarns for a general audience such bits of loggers' lingo were replaced by less colorful terms that readers unacquainted with woodsmen's ways would understand.

It is not only from such internal evidence that we may credit the genuineness of MacGillivray's yarns. They are of a piece with the other early records of Bunyan tales from oral tradition which I gathered for my study: Edward O. Tabor and Stith Thompson's recollections of "Paul Bunyan in 1910"; the fieldnotes of the folklorist Herbert Halpert's interviews from 1941-49 with six old-time lumberjacks remembering their youthful days in the camps; and record-

2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

ings from the Library of Congress of Alan Lomax's fieldwork with Michigan lumberjacks.³ Edith Fowke's recent article "In Defence of Paul Bunyan"⁴ buttresses the case for the authenticity of the early reports of Paul Bunyan as genuine folklore. Having been first set down in 1906, the motifs must have been in oral tradition for some time before that. In my study of the legend I cite many earlier instances of the motifs in folk and literary tradition prior to their localization in Paul Bunyan's camp.

Perhaps the present publication of MacGillivray's first version will set to rest the question, when was Paul Bunyan first seen in print?

3. Edward O. Tabor and Stith Thompson, "Paul Bunyan in 1910," *Journal of American Folklore*, 59 (April-June 1946): 134-35. Lomax's interviews with one storyteller, Perry Allen, are preserved on Library of Congress recordings 2265-B2 and 2266-B2. The bibliography in Hoffman, *Paul Bunyan*, lists Halpert's interviews with six informants, along with some of Halpert's published work (see pp. 54-55, 193, 198).

4. Edith Fowke, "In Defence of Paul Bunyan," *New York Folklore* 5 (Summer 1979): 43-51.

THE FALSE ISSUE OF FOLKLORE VS. "FAKELORE": WAS PAUL BUNYAN A HOAX?

BY ELLEN J. STEKERT

If there ever was a "real" Paul Bunyan, I think he would have had a long and rowdy laugh over how the question of his "authenticity" has caused many a miniscule scholar to dance on the head of a pin. From the 1950s through the early 1980s Paul Bunyan became the focal point for academics to argue over who was, or was not, a bona fide folk hero. Richard M. Dorson, infused with a zeal to protect the public from itself and determined to show the importance of true folklore scholarship, went so far as to coin the word "fakelore" for material written by "money writers" who "falsified, abused and exploited . . . the [deluded] public with Paul Bunyan nonsense and claptrap collections."¹ "Fakelore," the catchy term Dorson coined in 1950, was widely used among folklorists until recently when, it seems, they recognized that the word confused the intent of the "popularizers" with both the content and worth of their products.

"Fakelore," according to Dorson, was what money-minded popularizers of folk materials produced. He felt that such writers were greedy and insincere. In short, he assumed that he understood the intent of these writers.

1. Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore and the Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 8.

Even though some scholars recognized that works by "popularizers" of American folk tradition need not be regarded as illegal, sinful, or fattening, many have agreed with Dorson's stance. Jan Brunvand expunged Paul Bunyan from his list of genuine American folk heroes in both editions of his widely used text on folklore, where he refers to the hero as "fakelore. . . . [the] writers' contrived invention."²

Even Daniel Hoffman, after carefully dealing with the complex sorting out of verifiable tradition from changes made by the popularizers, seemed to assign all popularizers to the nether-world to be punished for aesthetic indiscretion. He argued, as Richard Dorson did, that "popularizers" today create for a public "that does not directly contribute to their [the works'] creation." He continued, "The author's intention in writing popular literature is primarily to satisfy the demands of a public; as esthetic considerations are often hindmost, the devil usually takes them."³ But the question of popularization is not so simple. Is not public "demand" a direct influence on what is produced? And do not "art" writers know the needs and understandings of their audi-

2. Jan Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 2.

3. Daniel Hoffman, *Paul Bunyan: Last of the Frontier Demigods* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983 [1952]), p. 63.

ence, which inevitably influence what and when they write? Many authors today who are “popular” have also had the worth of their art attested to by the “elite.”

If popularizers are responding to public need in a manner (if not medium) similar to people who work in oral tradition, how can we call their products “fake”? Popularizers may make claims that are not “correct,” and this is important to know, but does that mean we must become public censors and use a value word to describe their products? If popularized material is not pure folklore, does this imply that we should not study its appeal or how it reshapes the unprinted kind of folklore? To do as Dorson and many others have done, to equate “popularization” of folklore materials with greed, knowingly false representation, and necessary aesthetic inferiority (and then call the product “fakelore”), is hardly a clarification. It muddles an already complex question and only adds one more value-laden word for “not nice” to our vocabulary. Where Dorson meant to describe a process he ended up judging it.

In the first place, the claim that Paul Bunyan stories resulted from a figment of the dollar sign in the mind of some evil popularizer is based on assumptions which are not only illogical, but erroneous. Paul Bunyan could easily have existed both in tales *and* as general knowledge well before the first known printed source of the material. He might have been much like Kilroy was to the fighting men of World War II. I have collected stories from lumbermen who knew the “idea” of Paul Bunyan when they worked in lumber camps before the turn of the century. Paul was one of those free-floating folk beliefs from which ever-new stories could be created by an ingenious tale teller or joker as the situation presented itself. Also, there is good evidence that an oral tradition of narratives did exist before the earliest known printed sources. Edith Fowke has recently shown that there was a Paul Bunyan narrative tradition well before the first “popularizers.”⁴

4. Edith Fowke, “In Defence of Paul Bunyan,” *New York Folklore* (Summer 1979): 43–51.

Beyond the chicken-and-egg question of the popular written versions and the oral tales, however, the popularizers whom some have abhorred have transplanted the tradition of Paul Bunyan; a new tradition has taken root in the minds of urban Americans. The concept of Paul Bunyan, and many of the ideas in those “fakelore” stories, may now constitute the authentic folklore of another group, the urban or urban-influenced Americans. Go to Bemidji, Minnesota, and see how the population will react if you suggest taking away Paul Bunyan from them! And if the “folk” idea that urban people have of loggers does not square with the “facts” about loggers, who are we to tell people what to believe? Is this not new and fertile soil in which the scholar can work, just as he or she has worked with the image of the cowboy, so interestingly “distorted” by “popularizers”?

Why shouldn’t we allow anyone to do whatever she or he wishes with folk traditions without calling them nasty names? Why, instead, can’t we look to see why people feel the need to rewrite and publish material scholars might (correctly) feel not to be authentic? Does not this very fact tell us something about our own culture? Richard Dorson even seemed to agree, thus contradicting the value judgment implicit in the very term he created. After lambasting the folklore “popularizers,” and calling Paul Bunyan a “pseudo folk hero of twentieth-century [American] mass culture” in one chapter of his book *American Folklore*,⁵ he devoted the very next chapter to “Modern Folklore,” proclaiming (correctly) that “American [folklore] owes much to the mass media of radio, television, and journalism. . . . The folk can on occasion feed the mass media, and equally the media can feed back into oral lore. . . . [F]olk and mass culture coexist peaceably and on friendly terms.”⁶

So print, popularizers, and pinheads aside, we can be proud to have MacGillivray’s “first” version about Paul Bunyan in print. Paul would be pleased, I think, to find yet another aspect of him reaching out (again) to us “literate folk.” ▲

5. Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 225.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 246–47.