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The Birth of Paul Bunyan

William B. Laughead with W. H. Hutchinson

HUTCHINSON: How did you make the transition from working in the woods to being a cartoonist and an artist and an advertising man?

LAUGHEAD: I don't know. I was one of these kids who always liked to doodle with a pencil, draw little pictures, and it came out of that. I never had any art education, so that's still a handicap to me.

HUTCHINSON: I wouldn't say that. I've seen what you've done.

LAUGHEAD: It came from doodling around, and then I got into advertising largely through experience selling machinery and sales work of that kind. I didn't know a hell of a lot about the advertising business, but there were no survey jobs to get and I had to eat. So I'd draw up a

brochure or a folder or something and try to sell it to somebody, and if I sold it I'd make a deal with the printer and get a scrap out of it.

It was on that basis that I went in and saw Archie Walker. Archie was an officer of the Red River Lumber Company. He said that an idea he wanted to get over was that "we're operating in a big way out here so we have a big production, and it will be a reliable source of supply for wholesalers and buyers to hook up with. That's the idea that we've got to sell — not only to our old customers in the Mississippi Valley but the new territory we've got to break into, east on the Atlantic seaboard, that we've never had contact with before. We want them to know it's the same kind of pine that they've been using, and that we can handle business in a big way with a big manufacturing capacity out there." So I said to him, "That's kind of a big message to get over in a short time. Maybe we could get ahold of some kind of a slogan that would tie us up with the old traditions of the eastern white pine and carry them right over into the West. They're getting the same thing."

Mr. Laughead was a well-known author of Paul Bunyan. He worked as a logger and in advertising for the Red River Lumber Company of Westwood, California. This company, like many others, migrated to the West from the Lake States. Mr. Hutchinson is professor of history at California State University, Chico. He interviewed Mr. Laughead in 1957 for the Forest History Society, portions of which are published here.

We cast around for ideas and didn't seem to 45

be getting anywhere and finally Archie says, "Say, you've heard a lot of this Paul Bunyan stuff in the camps, haven't you?" I said I'd heard some of it, yes. "Well," he said, "there must be an angle there." "Well," I said, "yes. So far, Paul has come, as far as we know, from the old white pine camps in New England out to the Lake States, so he's a white pine figure. And he always did things in a big way; no matter how big a story we tell, we can say Paul Bunyan did it." So Archie said, "You go ahead and write up something and let me see it." That was our first Paul Bunyan book.

HUTCHINSON: How big was that book?

LAUGHEAD: It was postcard size. It ran about thirty-two pages or something like that.

HUTCHINSON: And you illustrated that one yourself?

LAUGHEAD: Yes. It was a very crude affair. In the front of it it said, "Introducing Mr. Paul Bunyan from Westwood, California." And then we started out with a statement that what we told them about Paul Bunyan was fiction based on old lumber camp traditions, but what we told them about lumber would be the gospel truth. That was the spirit in which it was written. It was mailed out to whatever mailing list they had available to cover the eastern trade from the Mississippi Valley east.

HUTCHINSON: That first book, then, was sent out only actually to the lumber trade?

LAUGHEAD: That's right. At the same time we had salesmen going through the eastern territory to spread the news and make them acquainted with the Red River Lumber Company.

HUTCHINSON: Did they have copies of the booklet for distribution?

LAUGHEAD: Yes. And then they reported back from people who had received this card. Well the thing wasn't going over very well, and we thought no one had ever heard of Paul Bunyan. So the Paul Bunyan figure didn't carry any significance.

HUTCHINSON: He belonged to the woods, the camps, and not to the trade.

LAUGHEAD: That's right. There were even a lot of people in the logging business who had never heard of Paul Bunyan, and when it got to the sawmill and then to the wholesaler and the lumber dealer and the manufacturer who was buying the lumber for factory purposes, they didn't know anything about Paul Bunyan. There was all kinds of confusion. The salesmen were getting

inquiries, "Who is this man Paul Bunyan? I thought the Walker people were running the Red River Lumber Company." And the letters came in.

HUTCHINSON: What did you do then?

LAUGHEAD: I talked it over with Archie. We had never run any systematic trade journal advertising, and I said, "We'd better start some trade journal advertising to back this thing up and tell the people what it's all about." I think the first publication of Paul Bunyan advertisement was in *The Mississippi Valley Lumberman*, a weekly published in Minneapolis. Then we got in touch with *The American Lumberman* in Chicago, which at the time was the big shot in national coverage from coast to coast. We signed up for a full-page schedule. It was a weekly so we could use the same copy in *The Mississippi Valley Lumberman*. Later on we expanded into other trade journals, regional and national journals, to carry the Paul Bunyan message.



HUTCHINSON: With that first booklet of yours you found that Paul Bunyan — outside of the camps and maybe in some of the sawmills — was not a known figure in the lumber business.

LAUGHEAD: No, they didn't know who we were talking about.

HUTCHINSON: And you did your advertising to try to tie up . . .

LAUGHEAD: That was the year that the Panama Canal was opened. I think the first thing I did was show Paul Bunyan straddling the Panama Canal, and there was a tie-up with the old stories, you know.

Archie said, "We don't know just how our lumber's going to move. It's a new deal." He says, "Maybe we'll be shipping a lot through the Panama Canal." Which later we did, but the bulk of the shipments were by rail. But we did use the canal to some extent.

HUTCHINSON: What did you do after that first booklet sort of backfired in your face?

LAUGHEAD: We started trade journal advertising to educate the public. Then I provided some stuff for the salesmen who were traveling. I gave them a card that announced, "The Paul Bunyan man is coming." And some handouts — little folders and things of that kind like a salesman would need with his customers when he's breaking the ice and first getting acquainted. They wrote in and told me it was a big help. Before, they would just go in and nobody'd heard of them. "Oh, Red River. Are you a wholesaler?" or something like that. They had never heard of it although the Red River had been a big operation.

Our trade territory was up and down the Mississippi Valley and the big sash and door mills in Iowa and so on. When we started running trade journal ads and gave the salesmen some handouts, advance appointment cards and things of that sort that called him the Paul Bunyan man from Red River, why chances are the customer had seen some of these advertisements and identified him as a manufacturer's representative.



HUTCHINSON: In this first booklet in 1914, isn't that the first time that Paul Bunyan was ever drawn? And how about Babe the Blue Ox?

LAUGHEAD: Yes. I had never seen anything in print about Paul Bunyan up to that time. Some things had appeared, but I hadn't seen them and I don't think they were illustrated. There was a story of the Round River Drive. Later on researchers dug that up. It had appeared first about 1910, and then Douglas Malloch wrote it in verse in *The American Lumberman* in 1914. There was a man named Sheppard — he was no relation to the Esther Shephard that later wrote the Paul Bunyan stories. He lived in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, and he was a noted wit and was quite a character. He had told a lot of Paul Bunyan stories. I think some of them were probably printed in Wisconsin papers, and had gotten into print that way, but they hadn't reached beyond that territory. I had never seen any of his stories,

and I don't know that any of them were ever illustrated. So probably that picture was the first picture of Paul Bunyan.

HUTCHINSON: And the first picture you used in that first booklet was the one that you later registered as your copyright?

LAUGHEAD: Yes, with some modifications. You know, the thing went through periods of evolution. In making the drawing for the trademark, I tried to simplify it and conventionalize it as much as I could, because it would have to be reproduced in so many different ways, something that would be legible in all kinds of reproductions. It might be made as a stamp iron on something, or reproduced very small, so I conventionalized it and used that face as the trademark.

HUTCHINSON: Where'd you get that face?

LAUGHEAD: Oh, Lord, ask me! The general expression of it was a memory of a face of a logging contractor in Minnesota, Pete Dick, one of the greatest fellows that ever lived. The mustache that stuck out sideways — I knew a loud-mouthed French cook in the camps by the name of Charlie Revoir, and he had a mustache like that. I kind of stuck the two of them together. It gave me an idea to start with. And the rest of it was just fixed up like you do those things.

HUTCHINSON: Then you put the first drawing of Babe the Blue Ox and named him in there. Where'd you get the name Babe?

LAUGHEAD: I don't know. I had never heard the names of any characters in connection with



Big Ole



Johnny Inkslinger

Paul Bunyan, except Paul himself. I was making a picture of this big ox, and I thought he ought to have a name. About as cute a name as you could get for a great big ox would be Babe, and that's where he got his name.

HUTCHINSON: You named virtually all of the most prominent characters in the Paul Bunyan legend that we have today. Those names are yours from that first booklet, aren't they?

LAUGHEAD: Yes, they're the same names. Whether it's a matter of coincidence or whether other authors read my book or what, I don't know. But ever since authors have used Johnny Inkslinger, and Big Ole, and Chris CrossHaul, Shot Gunderson, Sourdough Sam, and other names. These were fragmentary memories of people, characters I'd known in the woods that had those names. The names Shot Gunderson and Chris CrossHaul were just kind of gags used in the woods. That was where those names came from. I had to call them something.

HUTCHINSON: Because you were working then, you were trying actually to lift these fragmentary anecdotes you'd heard and put them into a readable shape.

LAUGHEAD: As a matter of fact, I never heard anyone in the camps or anywhere else mention Paul Bunyan in a narrative form, that is, start out to tell you a story about something that Paul did.

HUTCHINSON: How had you heard them then?

LAUGHEAD: They would just be gags referring to something that everybody knew all about — like Columbus crossing the Atlantic. They wouldn't have to start out and tell you the story of Columbus. They'd just mention him and you'd know who he was. And the way they'd mention that — it would be just in a gag about something that came up, some job they were doing — the big blue ox or something. Or else it would be in the presence of some tenderfoot that they'd be trying to put something over on, maybe some green kid in the crew. A lot of the stories began in barrooms where a couple of the loggers had gone broke and were trying to spear some drinks, get somebody to buy them some drinks. They'd start a great big argument about Paul Bunyan or something like that, you know, just to get themselves into the picture. Or they'd mention the big griddle with the men skating around with hams tied to their feet or pulling the crooks and kinks out of the logging roads. But nobody ever started out to tell a story to impress the audience that they were working on — it was something that everybody knew all about.

HUTCHINSON: That is very interesting because people have the impression that in every logging camp there was some master storyteller who, after the work was done and the socks were hung over the stove, would sit in the deacon seat and spin these long connected narrative epic stories.

LAUGHEAD: Any crews that I ever came in contact with in the woods, or any place else, wouldn't let any one man monopolize the conversation very long. Even if he was telling them something they were interested in, they'd be interrupting him with questions and arguments all the time. He didn't just sit there and put in the evening just talking and everybody else in camp listening to him.

HUTCHINSON: You mean there wasn't any Homer in the logging camps?

LAUGHEAD: No, if there had been I don't think anybody would have listened to him. I've heard a lot of interesting things developed in the camps, but a man never told a continuous story; even if he had had an outstanding experience or been present at some big disaster or something of the kind. He didn't have a chance to tell that straight through. Somebody would say, "Shorty, wasn't you at such and such a place at the time of the big flood?" "Yeah, I was there." And then they'd ask him some more questions, and he'd tell them some more. And then maybe somebody'd have an argument and say, "Well, I heard it this way." And he'd straighten it out according to his experience. He was part of the general conversation instead of some outstanding figure dominating the rest of

them by telling them something they'd never heard before.

As the men traveled around, of course, they were picking up this stuff everywhere. The thing would — if there was a discussion on Paul Bunyan — it would wind up as an argument with each fellow trying to spring a gag that was a little bit bigger than the other one. I tell this, now you beat that, you know. And, that's where so many discrepancies come in that puzzle the folklorists. They say, well, this is not authentic because it disagrees with the other version here, and they have Paul Bunyan using the concrete mixer for his pancake dough and the concrete mixer wasn't invented until such and such a year so it couldn't have been. That was something somebody else stuck in later on. It was just an exchange of gags.

HUTCHINSON: Bunyan being the loggers' national hero, or whatever he was, he was keeping pace. I don't know whether Paul kept pace or whether you're the one who made him keep pace with the technology and so forth.

LAUGHEAD: After he got into general circulation, everybody was writing about him in all sorts of ways, and a lot of it had nothing to do with the woods character. They had him doing all kinds of things, moving mountains, straightening out oceans, and things of that kind that had nothing to do with the lumber industry.

HUTCHINSON: Some of the folklorists have begun to say now that Paul Bunyan is entirely a manufactured product of Mr. W. B. Laughead's imagination.

LAUGHEAD: Yes, I know. My book went through a total of thirteen editions, and we distributed, free of charge, about 110,000 or 125,000 copies.

HUTCHINSON: Good Lord! All in response, except for that first mailing, all in response to individual requests?

LAUGHEAD: Oh, yes. After Paul Bunyan became known to the public, we developed quite a fan mail to Paul Bunyan. A lot of old-timers would write in saying they'd seen the story or something, and here's one that I heard. Requests came from all kinds of people all over the world. In fact, an inquiry came in after Red River was out of business. Somebody had heard that the Paul Bunyan Lumber Company was carrying on in Susanville. This lady wrote a letter and said, "Have you any of the Red River Paul Bunyan books? We'd like to get one to replace the one we have which is all worn out, which we got in Manchuria in 1927.

HUTCHINSON: Manchuria is a long way from Westwood.

Rockwell Kent illustration from *Paul Bunyan* by Esther Shephard courtesy Rockwell Kent Estate.



Allan Lewis woodcut from *Paul Bunyan* by James Stevens courtesy Garden City Publishing Company.

