

STEVENS: I was born November 15, 1892, on a rented farm near Albia, the county seat of Monroe County, Iowa. That is in the second tier of counties north from the Missouri border. At the age of four I was taken to live with my grandmother in a little town in Appanoose County -- just south of Monroe County. This little town was named Moravia. It was a place of 500 people in the 1890's, and it was some 20 miles from the Missouri border in the middle of the State of Iowa, 15 miles from the Appanoose county seat, Centerville. I lived there with my grandmother until I was 10 years old.

My father and mother had separated in my early infancy. My father went to Idaho where he had relatives. My mother worked out. She was a hotel cook and was paid \$3.50 a week and board. Out of that she contributed to my grandmother for my upkeep. My grandmother's income was \$8.50 a month from the old family estate in Virginia -- all but ruined in the War Between the States.

My grandmother's influence on me as a story writer came through two channels. First, she remembered a great many of the Negro stories, songs, and sermons from her youth. She had been brought up by a Negro

woman on a backwoods plantation in the hills of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Her mother had died when my grandmother was born.

MAUNDER: Was this your maternal grandmother, Jim?

STEVENS: Yes. In that area of Virginia the people were mostly Hardshell Baptists, but the correct name for this denomination was -- and is -- the Primitive Baptist. They did not believe in sending missionaries to the heathen, in Sunday School or instrumental music in the church. In their creed one could not become a member of the church until one was chosen and called; and when one was chosen and called one would be old enough to understand what was meant -- really at about 18 years of age. The Hardshells were quite Calvinistic; they believed in the election of the saints and that God, with His own reasons -- which might not be perceived by men -- actually made his own selections. So in that sort of environment I grew up in this little town of Moravia to the age of 10.

My grandmother was a born storyteller. My most vivid recollections from those times are when she would tell me Bible stories. The family said that even when I was only three years old I would sit spellbound while

my grandmother told me stories out of the Bible in her own way. Going back to my earliest memories, the stories that I recall as my favorites had a great deal of human interest and usually quite a little violent action.

Abimolech, the murdering villain who made himself king as related in the Book of Judges, remains one of my best memories. You will remember Abimolech's being made king was prophesied by Jotham who told a story about the trees. The trees went forth to make themselves a king and they nominated first one tree and then another, but for some reason each tree refused to be made king; and finally the useless, thorny, worthless briar accepted, and was made king; and then the briar was the cause of fires being started which destroyed all the trees. And that fate was prophesied for Israel under Abimolech.

Abimolech nevertheless was made king, after a series of murders and plots, and he went on in his malodorous and murderous way; organizing war; taking one city after another with great slaughter; always a very cunning tactician. Abimolech was the first recorded example in history of a general leading an

attack by having his men cut branches and disguise themselves as shrubbery, then moving forward very slowly until they had crept up on a city and were in a position to storm and take it.

Then at the next city that Abimolech tried to take there was a very strong woman who stood atop the wall; and as Abimolech drew close, leading his attacking hordes, she lifted half a millstone and cast it down on Abimolech's head, as the Scriptures put it (King James Version), "to brake his skull." I can still see my grandmother's face and hear her voice of exultation as she repeated, "and she surely did 'brake his skull'." That was the end of Abimolech. My grandmother frequently complained because the prophet, or psalmist -- whoever it was that wrote that account in Judges -- did not, as a good reporter should have done, secure the name of the strong woman. Then she might have become famous in history by name and had a lot of folklore gather about her.

I started school when I was four years old and was already able to read McGuffey's FIRST READER. Soon I was reading the Bible, the story of Joseph and his

brothers and oh, so many others of that kind -- Abraham and Isaac -- all of them with kids in them, and strong men, and great leaders who were chosen by God. It was my delight to start reading about them myself, as soon as I was able, although there were many of the words that I couldn't understand.

When I was seven years old I was converted at a Methodist revival. They had many camp meetings in southern Iowa. At the age of nine I began to preach. One of my favorite stories came from the Tenth Chapter of Revelation, where it tells about the angel, this great shining angel, with a voice of seven thunders. I really got visions out of that; I was uplifted. I didn't think of making stories then. This was the Holy Book and it had to do with sin and righteousness and I must make a sermon that would at least condemn sin even if it didn't exalt righteousness.

There was this passage -- I don't recall the verse -- but the angel gave the man a book, and the man took the book and ate it and in his mouth it was sweet as honey, but in his belly it was bitter. Well, the sermon that I devised at the age of nine was to the effect that this was interpreted to mean that to people, human beings

who engaged in sin while they were living on earth, sin might be sweet as honey in their mouths; but when they died and went to hell -- that was even as the man who swallowed the book and in his belly it was bitter -- and so their sins were, after they had died and gone to hell. That was my sermon.

MAUNDER: Do you recall the circumstances attendant to your conversion and your being called to the ministry?

STEVENS: Yes, very much so. There were two brothers -- the Monkman brothers -- who were travelling revivalists, very handsome young men, and one was a fine exhorter who told many exciting stories. He would seldom make a sermon without telling of the little golden-haired girl who went regularly into the barroom to rescue her father and one time she was badly injured. Things then happened so that her father was lead to repentance.

The exhorter's younger brother was a wonderful singer, he played a guitar, and he sang a good many popular songs that were "fitten" to hear, as well as the old revival hymns. The storyteller, who was really a folklorist, made stories out of the Bible. He made stories of his own about Jesus and the disciples, and every part of the Old Testament that he preached from;

he made stories about sin; he made stories about righteousness. He was wonderful to hear.

Dreaming always of what I wanted to be when I would grow up, at first I dreamed of becoming a locomotive engineer. Then I decided I wanted to be a revivalist, one who could preach like Jesse Monkman; but I also wanted to be a revivalist who would not only preach like Jesse Monkman, but who could sing and play a guitar like his brother, Bert. And so I preached from my daydreams, but of course I didn't have a guitar, and couldn't have played it if I'd had one, so I just did this preaching and exhorting from a Scripture text. That lead to my downfall.

It started one Saturday afternoon when there was to be a ball game. The visiting team was coming in by horse and wagon from another town, and they didn't arrive on time. There was a bunch out on the ball field waiting, The pitcher for our town team had heard me preach, so he thought it would be a good idea for me to give my sermon to this bunch. I guess there were about a hundred people out there, and so I preached my sermon. Then Billy Schrock, the pitcher, went around to take up a collection and he got 65 cents.

Well, some of the roughest and toughest boys in town -- all older than I -- were there, and they at once became my close friends when they saw I had this 65 cents. We wound up by going uptown after the ball game to a place where they could buy tobacco. The 65 cents went for Duke's mixture and Bull Durham and Virginia Cheroot cigars and not a little soda pop. They took me in hand. We'd go down to the trains, and there'd be drummers or other sports waiting for the train, and they'd have me preach my sermon to the drummers and then take up a collection. We could nearly always gather 10 or 15 cents. So I went from bad to worse and backslid terribly. I got too hot for my grandmother to handle so I was sent out to my father in Idaho.

MAUNDER: Were you doing any legitimate preaching at this time in the church at all?

STEVENS: Yes, in the United Brethren church I'd preach every Sunday afternoon, a little sermon of 15 minutes or so to the Juniors' Union -- that was their organization for kids of the primary and elementary grades. That was about it. Most of the ministers in the little town -- three or four Protestant ministers, Presbyterian, Methodist,

United Brethren, and the Disciples -- the Christians -- called at our house, in their concern for my future. All thought that I might grow up to be a preacher; but my grandmother gave them a pretty cool welcome because they were definitely not of "the chosen;" they were not of "the elect." If they had been, they would of course have been Hardshell Baptists. So that hope of the ministers didn't go very far.

By the time I was sent out to Weiser, Idaho, my preaching days were over. There, of course, my father's associates were mostly rough and tough cow hands, harvesters, shepherders, copper miners, loggers, and other breeds of free-roving, hard-living people, so my religion slipped away from me very fast. Also, I was exposed to an uncle there, an uncle by marriage, who was a very strong Debs Socialist, and he helped me lose my religion too, which I didn't really regain, that is, in the terms I'm speaking of. I don't mean that I really lost religion, as I kept pure in my inward being a true love for the Bible and a soul-tie with Jesus Christ, ever thinking of him as a teacher and guide, a friend of children, greatest of men.

A dozen years or so ago I experienced a full change for conversion, and came back into the life of the Christian church with a mature view on what the churches represent in our world of today and the world of the future.

In 1904, when I was 11 years old, I had my first job away from home and spent the summer in a little logging camp and sawmill in the pines of southern Idaho. There I heard tall tales of the West that began with the fur trade and were carried on in the great immigration of the 1840s, the folklore of the frontier as it grew and changed with the advance of the American people to the settlement of the West.

I don't know whether you have ever read an article in the 1920s in the SATURDAY EVENING POST by Mary Roberts Rinehart. She and her husband were national park enthusiasts and she would write about the national parks quite often. This article was called "Whoppers." It was about the western whopper -- stories of Jim Bridger, you know -- the ones in the early 1830s that came out of his discovery trip through the Yellowstone country telling the wonders of the future park area. He came to St. Louis and the people there laughed at

him, ridiculing him. So as long as they didn't believe the true tales he had told about the wonders of Yellowstone, he began to tell real whoppers -- tall tales. Perhaps the most celebrated one was about the petrified forest, in a country where everything was completely petrified. "Even the grass," said Jim Bridger, solemn as a deacon, "was petrified and around there you could look off and see deer and elk that were petrified, feeding off the petrified grass. Why, even up in the petrified trees there were petrified birds singing sweet little petrified songs." That was one of the Jim Bridger whoppers told in St. Louis. Then there was the Telescope Mountain -- you know, the obsidian mountain in the park -- where he suddenly sighted a deer as he was going along. And he drew a bead on it and he shot but the deer just kept on grazing. He loaded again and he shot again, but still the deer kept on grazing. Finally he decided to make an examination, and he discovered that here was a whole mountain of telescope glass -- and this deer that he'd been shooting at was a full 25 miles away. Of course his bullets were only hitting Telescope Mountain.

I first read stories like that somewhere in the period

before I got on my own (which was in 1908). They were in Hiram Chittenden's HISTORY OF THE FUR TRADE. It may have been my uncle who had those books -- but anyway the Chittenden work has a chapter about Jim Bridger and his tall tales, and that was where I first read all of them. At that time I also read, many times, Hawthorne's TWICE-TOLD TALES and TANGLEWOOD TALES.

MAUNDER: Was your father a great storyteller, too?

STEVENS: No, he wasn't. He was a man that wouldn't talk very much about anything unless it was to argue politics; he was always arguing politics with someone. But, of course, that's a form of folklore, too, and no man who was a political arguier would ever trouble about holding fast to the pure and simple truth. He was only interested in winning the argument.

MAUNDER: What was his political persuasion?

STEVENS: He was a Democrat; he was a Bryan Silver Dollar Democrat but always in all cases a Democrat. He, with his father, would say over and over again that they'd vote for a yellow dog on the Democrat ticket before they'd vote for the best man in the world on the Republican ticket. But that all came out of Virginia;

my father's people were from Virginia, too.

MAUNDER: What schooling were you having at this time?

STEVENS: A country school in Idaho, and I got through the eighth grade by being sent from back in the sagebrush Well, I should say that my father became a section boss in the Pacific and Northern Idaho Railroad that ran then from Weiser up to Middle Valley and on up into the Seven Devils Range. We lived in quite an isolated place and he was able to get me into a school, a private Presbyterian school, near Weiser, that had been founded by a minister. This minister gathered money from Eastern sources to start a school at which kids from families who lived back in the sagebrush, or up in the mountains in the pines, and children from mining families, could receive a high school education. They also taught the eighth grade there, so that students could move naturally into the high school courses.

So I finished the eighth grade and started to take a commercial course. I worked five hours a day seven days a week to pay for my board and tuition at that school and did my studying at night. In this commercial course I learned the proper operation of a typewriter,

which has always stood me in good stead. November 15, 1906, I was 14 years old. All that fall, winter and spring I got up at half past three every morning to go milk in the dairy, then I attended school during the day, and at half past three in the afternoon went milking again. In the evenings I was free to study or otherwise enjoy myself. Sunday, of course, I had to do the milking just the same, and then there was Sunday School and church.

MAUNDER: Did this have any tendency to bring you back into the church again?

STEVENS: No, it had a tendency to alienate me yet more from the church. This school had been started and all the funds for it were collected on the basis that it was for the kids back in the sagebrush, to give them the opportunity to go through high school. Well, they had an awfully good faculty that came out from Eastern colleges, and all were dedicated to the purpose of helping poor ranch boys get preparation for a college education. The faculty was so good -- our principal was a Yale man and the head of the dairy department was a graduate of Cornell Ag. -- that kids began to be admitted from good families that could have afforded to send their offspring

to elegant preparatory schools in New England; but here was the finest high school faculty anywhere in Idaho. So some of the wealthiest merchants in Idaho had their kids going to a school that was advertised as an institution for the under-privileged. The real sagebrushers, the working students for whom the money had been collected and the school built, were a class apart. We were really a very profane, cigarette smoking, tobacco chewing, cursing, raring-tearing, rip-snorting bunch. It was not unusual for a 16-year-old who was big and tough-looking for his age to come back from town with a pint of whisky and Sweet Caporals in his overalls, meaning me. I fell away more and more from church. Then they had a school government to teach the students civil government by example and practice. They had a mayor, and a council -- everything as in a little town -- a police force, chief of police, and so on. Of course, the school government was dominated by the kids that were getting their tuition paid.

MAUNDER: Those who came from the wealthier families?

STEVENS: Yes. And we felt a lack of democracy in that respect.

It wasn't that the sagebrush kids were not treated well

enough and given consideration, but after all, five days' labor is considered today pretty close to a full work day, and those growing teen-agers had high-school studies besides. Anyhow, I was caught twice chewing tobacco, arrested, and I was properly expelled before I got through the ninth grade. I then went out on my own, running away from all my relatives. My father was a dry land homesteader. That was the most horrible life imaginable to me, living up in the lonesome sagebrush hills. He'd married again and I had two stepbrothers by that time, but more relatives were no attraction to me. I just ran away from it all and got into the construction camps. I'd had all this experience handling horses and was quite big for my age -- 15 years. From then on I was able to work as a teamster all over the Northwest.

The Idaho Industrial Institute, or Intermountain Institute as it was later called, was a very remarkable institution; it did a lot of good in that region and certainly a great many poor boys and girls, too, got a very fine high school education that they wouldn't have gotten otherwise. The teachers were all dedicated people. I think there was some purpose in enrolling kids from wealthy families too -- that associations

with children from such families would do the kids from the sagebrush a great deal of benefit and make them realize that a finer social sense was desirable, with good manners and the things of gentility. But there were tremendous social conflicts developed from the associations of rich and poor too.

I learned enough about dairying and how to test milk, make butter, pasteurize milk, and the like so that I was kept on by the dairyman in the summer of 1907 and paid \$30 a month and board. That was a man's wages -- what they paid a grown man.

MAUNDER: This was after you were expelled?

STEVENS: No, this was in the summer after I'd graduated from the eighth grade and I was kept on there. Then I was expelled when school started again and I'd gotten into the ninth grade. But I'd proved to myself in holding that job that I could go out on my own.

Construction of railroads and irrigation projects were going on at that time so I naturally headed for a construction camp, going into what's now the Twin Falls district of Idaho on the Snake River.

MAUNDER: And you didn't have any trouble getting a job even though you were how old?

STEVENS: I was 15 years old. It was winter. No, I had no difficulty. I got a chance first as a flunky in a camp operated by D. Grant & Company on the Twin Falls North Side Land and Water Company project. My experience in the Institute's milk house washing utensils and all that sort of work had made me quite handy at kitchen work, so I made good there. When the outfit needed a teamster, I was able to take a mule team and handle it because I'd done so much work of that kind from the time I was 10 years old on my father's Idaho ranches. D. Grant and Company was from Minnesota. Some men that had come out with the company from Faribault, Minnesota, owned their own horses and had brought them along. They worked for wages and were paid so much for a day for the use of their horses by the company. That was where I first met Lake States loggers; these men had worked in the woods with their horses in Minnesota. Now, I haven't any recollection of any of them telling Paul Bunyan stories as such, but they certainly told plenty of tall tales about themselves and about other characters in the woods.

I went on working in Idaho through 1908 and then in 1909 in Montana, out of Armstead, Montana, on the old

Lewis and Clark Trail and the freighting road that ran up to Salmon City, Idaho, the big mining camp over the Beaver Heads and into the mining camp at Salmon City. That was the last western road where they had the old-time, six-horse Concord stagecoach making a trip every day and changing horses every 20 miles, and they had jerk-line freight teams. It was still a bit of the old West.

There were many cowboys and old-type western characters, some of them fugitives from the law, that came out and worked in the construction camps. There was one giant called Keen-Heel Sam, a Texan, and he was a terrific storyteller and knew all the old cowboy ballads. He had some wonderful ones that I know have been lost to posterity because I've never heard them since. He didn't have a guitar or musical instrument along but he would sing them solo and tell wonderful stories, many of them about himself and his prowess. He really could lift enormous weights. 250 pounds he weighed, this raw-boned, mighty muscled, huge red-headed fellow. He frankly admitted that he had done time in the Deer Lodge Penitentiary and other abodes of the kind.

Well, the point of this is that in 1924 I wrote

an article for Century magazine and told about a camp storyteller. I didn't like the name Keen-Heel very much -- you had to go into an explanation of it -- and something about him I remembered tied him up with the Shawnees, so I called him Shawnee Sam. I told how he would come into the big bunk tent after supper, the sort of stories he would tell, and what he was. Lo and behold, when that article was printed, the next thing I knew, I got a letter that was dated from so-and-so hospital in Washington, D. C. and here was this Sam Myers, the old Keen-Heel Sam, yet alive, snorting and kicking. Old as he'd been, he'd gone through World War I and lost a leg. And he was still full of high old stories and still sure that he could become a western story writer. He wanted my help in his writing of stories for Western Story magazine, a popular pulp weekly of that time.

There were many other personalities I was exposed to. Some of them were just wind-bags, others would want to sit and yarn away about their personal exploits, and if they'd make them interesting they were listened to. Some of them would frankly tell tall tales, some of them would sing ballads. Old Keen-Heel Sam, he would

spread out everything. He was the nearest true example of the old-time bard and storyteller that I remember. Of course, in the old West, on the frontier, they didn't get newspapers, they seldom had anything but stories and songs and stag dancing, jigs or square dances, so the storyteller was still the prized person in the camp, no matter whether he'd lie or preach, if he could hold his audience. There were some awfully good camp bards, and the art hasn't really died out yet. You'll still find one every so often who can just go on and on, hour by hour, night after night.

MAUNDER: Like Billy Welch of Crown Zellerbach?

STEVENS: Oh, yes. Anyway Keen-Heel Sam was the best of the tribe. There was another one, Old-Time Sandy, who was also up on the Armstead road, as we called it, there in the Beaver Heads.

From there I went back to Boise and wintered until after my 16th birthday. There I had a dual education in storytelling, folklore. I became acquainted with Homer, Homer's Odyssey and Iliad, in the Boise Public Library. I'd become more and more a lover of poetry and I found the library's poetry section, a treasure, and I'd go to it in the library each winter day. I had enough money to rent a

room and get 15-cent-a-meal meal tickets, so during the worst weather I wouldn't have to go out and work. The library women made me welcome; and so I would go in there during the stormy weather away from my little old dark room and read Homer and the other poets.

Then in the evening I'd meander into the Silver Bell Saloon; they wouldn't sell me anything over the bar, but I could sit in a corner and look and listen. The Silver Bell Saloon had a sawdust floor and a big long bar and was just full of miners, cow hands, loggers, and everybody else of ranch, mine, woods and mill. Everywhere that you'd sit along the chair rows you'd hear great stuff being told. If somebody was a bore in one place you could go on to another. You would hear something interesting at one place or another. By being very quiet and well-behaved at least I was never thrown out of the Silver Bell Saloon and night after night during the week I got my education at the Silver Bell. Then day after day, except Sunday, I got my education at the Boise Public Library. That was the way it went on.

When I went on to Portland in the spring of 1910,

the first place I headed for was the library in the old building on Stark Street. No, that was the second place. The first place when I got off the old stern-wheel river steamer, the J. N. Teal, in Portland on a rainy week-day night in March, was the old Erickson Saloon on Burnside Street. Erickson's was the most famous saloon in either Oregon or Washington at that time -- a great long bar with about 20 bartenders, that wound all around, you know, and was always full of men from the sticks, and from the mines, and ranches.

Then I found the Library. I liked Portland and was able to get a job there. I couldn't get a job driving horses or mules. It was a hard labor job, very hard labor -- loading wheel-scrappers -- and I wasn't quite big and rough and tough and ambitious enough for it, so pretty soon I shipped out to a railroad job in southern Oregon out of Klamath Falls. There I went to work in the woods again. It was a little outfit and it got to be pretty much of a hard labor job, too; so I earned enough money to go over the hills and through the timber to Medford and Ashland and then hobo my way back to Portland.

There I bought a \$5 ticket on the coastal steamer, Rose City -- steerage ticket or third class -- to San Francisco. I ran short of money about the second day I was there. The Barbary Coast was still in operation then, you know -- the big Bella Union and Thalia Dance Halls and all that sort of stuff -- San Francisco was terrific and I sort of lost my head. About the third day anyway, I had just enough money to go over to Mission Street to the Murray and Reddy employment office and buy a job ticket. It took me to the McCloud River Lumber Company in Northern California. McCloud was not far from Weed and Klamath Falls that I'd started from not so very long before.

It was in the spring of 1910 in Camp 4 of the McCloud River Lumber Company that I heard my first Paul Bunyan story. The old Minnesota lumberjacks told the stories just the same as they had in the Lake States, in the old Red River Lumber camps in Minnesota. Bill Laughead tells of having heard Bunyan gags at an earlier time than that, even back in the 1890s.

MAUNDER: Do you recall the first stories that you heard?

STEVENS: No, I don't. I just recall that there were gags passed around about Paul Bunyan. There weren't any long

stories. The only long stories that I heard around the bunkhouse stove or around the smudge fire in the camp yard in the summertime were stories of personal deeds of prowess and adventure, when the teller knew that his hearers knew that he was drawing the long bow.

MAUNDER: That was in what year?

STEVENS: 1910. But I didn't hear enough of the Paul Bunyan stories to make any impression on me. I didn't hear of the Blue Ox or anything of that kind. There were many other heroes. There was Silver Jack, of course. I heard many more stories about Silver Jack than I did about Paul Bunyan. Silver Jack was the great fighter. All the stories about him were about the terrific fights he had in Michigan and the other Lake States.

MAUNDER: Are they set down as Silver Jack Stories anywhere?

STEVENS: No. Steward Holbrook has some stuff about him in HOLY OLD MACKINAW, but as I found out later when I spent a couple of years in Michigan, there were seven or eight Silver Jacks. Some of them wound up in the penitentiary and others were just names that were hung on able fighters. It seemed that after the first Silver Jack -- I'm sure that he's never been tracked down by any researcher -- anyone who was a big, tough fighter in a

sawmill or logging town would be called Silver Jack.

There was an exception, a champion welterweight fighter from Saginaw City in the 1890s -- I can't be sure of his name now -- but he fought the first Jack Dempsey, the great old-time middleweight champion. It was some sort of French name -- Kid Lavigne or Levine. Anyhow, he became famous all over the United States; he came up as a lumberjack and he was for a short time the welterweight champion. He was a famous character for storytelling among those old lumberjacks. I heard old Michigan loggers talk more of him than of Silver Jack or Paul Bunyan.

I went down to Los Angeles and got a job in a construction company there and became interested in the theater, in books and in the musical life of the city although I was still just a 60-hour-a-week mule skinner. I drove first four and then six mules on a truck in Los Angeles at that time for a construction firm, hauling baled hay, oats, cement and other materials used in street construction jobs. In May of 1912 I went back to the woods at McCloud and started driving a set of big wheels -- a two-horse, stiff or stinger, tongue rig. In 1914, '16 and '17 I

was in the woods driving big-wheel for the McCloud River Lumber Company, and it was in 1914 that I first heard, or remember distinctly hearing, the Paul Bunyan stories told. And there was a memory at that time of having heard them before from the old-timers, most of all in 1910.

MAUNDER: Do you remember the person or persons who related these stories?

STEVENS: No. When I think of them I see two or three whiskered faces.

MAUNDER: They were all former Lake States loggers?

STEVENS: Yes, old-timers, great storytellers. Now, one of the items I should have mentioned first, but I never verified this -- I don't know to this day and I don't like to look into it because I like the story as I heard it -- that the principal owner, as they told it, of the McCloud River Lumber Company was Helen Gould, Jay Gould's daughter. She was a good, true Christian woman.

When a strike broke out in the McCloud River Lumber Company in 1906, Miss Gould came out and investigated it in person, I was told. She found conditions were foul in the camps and that the men were being treated like tramps. So she laid down a set of specifications that

had to be met. She held fast to them and had them checked on every so often. And it was one of the very best logging camps that I ever worked in.

After 1914, when the new state regulations for sanitary conditions in the camps, for sheets and shower baths and everything of that sort, were put into effect and enforced by the authorities, McCloud River Lumber Company operated, I'm sure, the best camps anywhere. The lumberjacks, however, still gave all the credit to Helen Gould, not to Governor Hiram Johnson. Helen Gould stories really became a sort of folklore in that pinetop outfit. There were stories told about Helen Gould as the friend of the working man, friend of the logger in the woods, friend of the sawdust savage, and all of that. I don't even know to this day whether she was actually the principal owner, or even a part owner, of the McCloud River Lumber Company. It was a story that got started either in reality or somebody's imagination and the timber beasts kept building it up because it was good. They like to put a woman like that on a pedestal, you know.

MAUNDER: Did you see her when she came to McCloud?

STEVENSON: Oh, no. I don't know that she ever came out there.

She was kept pretty remote, if she did. I never can remember of anyone telling of having seen her. It was just that they'd tell about her, this good that she'd done, Jay Gould's good daughter. That was the story.

MAUNDER: Let me ask you a question here, Jim. When you first heard the Paul Bunyan stories, was Paul Bunyan ever identified as being anything more than just a very strong man who worked in the woods? What I'm getting at is where did he come from, what nationality was he? Was anything like that ever involved in the stories?

STEVENS: Not that I remember in specific terms. The strongest impression I carried all the way through was -- and when I first started working on Paul Bunyan myself, there wasn't any question in my mind -- that he was French-Canadian, that he'd come down from Canada. That's why I stuck to the pattern of Canadian origin when I did my own Paul Bunyan stories, because I felt that was the way it was in the stories that had interested me. Paul Bunyan had come down across the border.

Then there was some memory of talk that he'd been in the Papineau Revolution of 1837. I tried in various ways to verify that by appealing to authorities -- even to the priests of a Catholic college in Quebec

who knew history and would take the pains to do a little research. I don't know just how much they did, but they couldn't find any trace of Paul Bunyan anywhere in the records of the Papineau Revolution -- or Rebellion.

MAUNDER: Are you of the opinion that there was at one time a real person by the name of Paul Bunyan?

STEVENS: I'm sure there was, that there was a name something like "Paul Bunyan" -- "Bon Jean," perhaps. I'm sure of it because those things aren't just spun out of thin air. They take root; the seed falls somewhere on fertile soil and the conditions are right and it grows. The right person gets it, builds it up out of reality. H. L. Mencken, the old editor of the American Mercury, and I had correspondence on that proposition. It was his conviction that there was no such thing as folklore per se, but there would be stories that people would tell back and forth and exaggerate on them somewhat, then here would come a born storyteller. He would belong to the people but own a rare gift as a creator of stories. This natural story-creator would take bits of simple lore and start creating them just as the cave men artists took the hunt and began to create from it the first primitive art. That was Mencken's conviction

and I believe it myself to this day. In its spirit I wrote my Bunyan books.

MAUNDER: Do you still have Mencken correspondence at home?

STEVENS: It wasn't extensive but I have some of it, I think.

MAUNDER: It should be preserved with the other things I mentioned to you earlier.

STEVENS: I haven't looked into that lately. There have been three different calls on me for that correspondence. I think it's all been safely returned. If you think there's any purpose in it, I'll try to dig it out.

MAUNDER: Jim, can you tell us a little about how you started to write about Paul Bunyan?

STEVENS: My first recollection of trying to write about him was in France in 1918. I had my first important publications in 1916 when I was driving mules in Los Angeles. It was in the winter. I always went down to Los Angeles for the winter. I got down early in October, 1916, and I sent four poems to the editor of The Saturday Evening Post, and they were bought. Two of the four poems were published along in November, 1916, the others some time in the winter of 1916-1917.

One of them was a long poem that was featured, that is, all framed up on about page 14, and it was called,

"An Old Fashioned Ode." Another poem, a sonnet, was called "An Ode to Beefsteak" and I remember the last two lines, which went, "Oh, poets sing the beauties of beefsteak. If more men had it fewer hearts would ache." But the big one was "An Old Fashioned Ode." It was an ode to toil and it was inspired by Byron and was done flamboyantly in the Byronic manner. It denounced the War that was raging at that time and sort of personified it and then personified toil as the mother of humanity and the mother of all human good. She, Mother Toil, was grim and hard and rough and tough. She was the stuff though, the real quill, and we'd all be coming back to her when this war was over with. The ode began,

Who lights them, Toil, your altar fires?
Where are your sons, your mighty men?
How have you held their strong desires?
To build a world with spade and pen?
Who worships 'round your dusty throne,
Queen mother of the weak alone?
Grim thunder rolls o'er crimson waves
And makes with frenzy on the shore.

and so on like that and then it ended:

But you, grim mother, still will reign

When men have thrown the sword away....

I can't remember the rest of it. After all, it was a 1916 poem, but that was the effect, that we'd all come back and work with Mother Toil again and really love her no matter how rough and tough and stingy and mean she might be.

MAUNDER: How much did you get paid for those poems, Jim?

STEVENS: Fifty-five dollars -- and that's still good money for poetry.

MAUNDER: Who was the editor who bought them?

STEVENS: George Horace Lorimer. He was one of the greatest Americans that ever lived. He's really waiting for his proper appreciation. Instead of all these reformed gangsters and movie stars and television stars and other flimsy characters who are being written up in The Saturday Evening Post and other magazines today, some top editor really should try to get a proper biography written of George Horace Lorimer, great writer, great editor, great American. He edited the magazine so that a working stiff in overalls, out West in a logging camp, knew that if he could write something

that had a spark in it, whatever the quality of its English, his manuscript would be picked up from the slush pile of the thousands of submissions each week.

In January, 1924, I sold my first article to H. L. Mencken. I was then working for the Brooks-Scanlon sawmill in Bend, Oregon. Mencken opened for me the opportunity to write a book of Paul Bunyan stories. I wanted to have enough money so I could feel secure in taking five months to write it and I didn't have much savings. I had a Ford sedan which I sold for \$450. Then I sat down and wrote an article called "By a Laborer." I had studied the Post since 1916, and I knew this was in their format. Well, that 5,000-word article was picked up by a reader for the Post named Wesley Stout, who later became an editor, and he shot it right on in to George Horace Lorimer. Within the year 1924 I sold them two other articles. I sold the Post seven articles all told. I had a number turned down, of course.

Lorimer was one of the first to recognize Paul Bunyan as a prime story character. I have already mentioned Mary Roberts Rinehart's article, "Whoppers," which was about the western whoppers, tall tales of cattle,

ranch and range. It was featured by Lorimer in the 1920s. He published a long series of stories by a writer named Victor Shaw, who was a silver lead miner. While Shaw was still working in the mines he started selling the Post stories about a character called "Seattle Slim." Shaw was also familiar with the woods; he'd done a lot of logging. He'd come over to the West Coast from the mines in the summertime. So when Shaw wrote another series of stories, logging stories -- I can't remember the name of the character -- but the scene was around Coos Bay. And each logging story started with a Paul Bunyan anecdote which was in italics as a heading for the story proper. As far as I know, those were the first Paul Bunyan stories to be published in a big national magazine for general readers. That was in 1920 or 1921.

I had been drafted into the Army in 1917, and landed in France in January, 1918. Then in April the newspaper of the AEF, the soldiers' newspaper, Stars and Stripes, began publication. I wrote a mess of verse for the paper, about an infantry soldier who was standing guard at a seaport and who spoke his feelings as he was walking at night in the rain -- about how he wanted to

get up to the Front where the fighting was going on.

He walked his post at midnight

And the night was dark as mud

And the wind and rain were mixing

In a way to freeze his blood.

He came up to attention,

Presented arms, then port

And then he said a prayer which the poem quoted.

Stars and Stripes featured that in April or May of 1918.

Then I sent them more rhymes, and they published a poem or two; then I got a Paul Bunyan story in on a series of letters to the editor.

Some Minnesota lumberjack over there in the AEF wrote a letter to Stars and Stripes about how quick Paul Bunyan could end this war if they'd only get him over there. A whole series of Paul Bunyan stories was run in Stars and Stripes. Of course, by that time they were quite familiar. All this stuff had been published in the timber trade publications. It was familiar in my outfit anyhow, which was an Oregon National Guard Regiment, and Paul Bunyan stories were old stuff to all the lads. I don't remember what time of the year it was that my first Paul Bunyan story was published.

I came out of the Army at Fort Lewis in March, 1919, and went to work in the sawmills, first at the Eastern and Western Sawmill in Portland. I worked on the night shift and haunted the public library by day. I was determined to become a writer.

The work got too rough for me there -- I had a housekeeping room, doing my own cooking -- so I shipped down to the Westport sawmill, 25 miles up the Oregon side of the Columbia River, from the Pacific Ocean. The company ran an excellent hotel. While I was there in 1920 a series of Paul Bunyan stories was gathered up from contributors by a Portland Oregonian columnist. DeWitt Harry was his name. These Paul Bunyan stories came from all over. I submitted three or four myself -- not from any tales that I'd heard before, but which I'd made up -- created. I should emphasize that from 1910 and even before I was a habitual tall-tale teller around the camps and after I really began to hear them up around McCloud a great deal, I invented many Paul Bunyan stories of my own.

MAUNDER: Jim, can you tell us about some of these stories that you invented and what characters you invented that have since become legendary?

STEVENS: I took Bill Laughead's Sourdough Sam and McGillwray's Pea Soup Shorty as patterns and invented Creampuff Fatty and Hot Biscuit Slim. I invented Hels Helson, the bull of the woods, who was a sort of offshoot of Bill Laughead's Big Ole, the Blacksmith. I used all of Laughead's principal characters. I thought up a number of rivers, then John Shears, the boss farmer, Shanty Boy, and the Iron Man of the Saginaw, Joe Fournier, Little Meery, Mark Beaucoup -- invented in France, 1918 -- Jonah Wiles, who was the enemy of Sourdough Sam. Offhand, I just can't remember any more.

MAUNDER: What specific stories do you recall inventing?

STEVENS: Well, the first one of all was "The Black Duck Dinner" which I wrote in February, 1924, and sold to the American Mercury. That was my first published full-size Paul Bunyan story, 5,000 words. I had heard the original anecdote at Bend, Oregon. Every story that I did was around some original bit of folklore, which was simply an anecdote in the first place -- or "a gag," as Bill Laughead says. The story of how Blackduck, Minnesota got its name -- I don't know whether it was one of the original Minnesota stories or not. Bill

Laughead didn't use it. I heard an old Minnesota lumberjack tell it at the Brooks-Scanlon sawmill in Bend while I was working there. I worked there for two years, 1922, 1923, and up to March, 1924

This story was that Paul Bunyan was out hunting game for a big Thanksgiving dinner and he just didn't find game anywhere, until he saw that black duck were in flight over the woods and lakes, migrating south. Of course, they'd come down and rest in the lakes at night. Paul Bunyan had his tarpaulin spread out and it rained on it and he got the idea there at nightfall when it was all still that he could make it look like a lake. So he got out and began to ripple it around, with shakes from the edges, and sure enough, here came these flights of black ducks overhead and they took the tarp for a lake and they all dived down on it and broke their necks, and pretty soon Paul Bunyan had his tarpaulin full and put the corners together and carried it into camp and they had their Thanksgiving dinner despite the fact that game generally was so scarce. Well, that was at the present site of Blackduck, Minnesota, and that was how Blackduck got its name. How the place really got its name I've never yet heard

but I was very thankful for the gag because that was the germ of the story that I wrote and elaborated on and sold to American Mercury.

As a result of that I got an order from Knopf for my first book. My own story of the Blue Snow began the book, and I invented Hels Helson as my own character in every respect. I made a character of my own out of Johnny Inkslinger. Of course, Johnny Inkslinger was an old frontier term for anybody who was a scribe and could write letters for the illiterate, or who could keep books and serve as timekeeper in logging or construction camps. That name was used by sailors, too. Sort of like Johnny Appleseed for a farmer, Johnny Inkslinger was a natural name to tag onto a timekeeper. Then the Sourdough Drive -- there again was this old gag about Paul Bunyan wanting to get his logs out of a lake and the lake water was low, so he dumped the sourdough barrels into the lake and that made the water rise until the logs could be floated out the outlet. So I made a story about that. I'd say that 95 per cent -- not of the story ideas -- but 95 per cent of the material in my first Paul Bunyan and my second Paul Bunyan were my own invention and it was quite frankly stated

that way in the book.

MAUNDER: In other words, you just took a gag or a small anecdote and built up around it a more rounded tale?

STEVENS: Yes. Well, say for example when I was working for McCloud, anybody'd start telling the story of the Round River, especially after it's printed in *The American Lumberman*, they'd say, "The hell with that. That's old stuff. Tell us something new." And you were supposed to invent and extemporize. It was exactly in that spirit and character that I wrote my book, except I was trying to create in a literary way instead of just the way of the yarn spinner on the bunkhouse deacon seat.

MAUNDER: How long did it take you to write your first book?

STEVENS: Five months. And I was absolutely green, of course, as a writer. I didn't really work too hard at it. I spent a great deal of time looking up old loggers. I wrote the 1925 *Paul Bunyan in Tacoma* and found lots of old-timers there, old Minnesota men with the great St. Paul and Tacoma Lumber Company which had Minnesota origins, as did Weyerhaeuser and others of the area. I heard tell from several of them about Len Day, the famous old lumberman and storyteller

of the early log rafting on the Mississippi River;
what a storyteller he was.

MAUNDER: What reaction did you get from Knopf when you sent
the manuscript in?

STEVENS: There wasn't any particular reaction. With all of my
later books I had a good deal of reaction in terms of
things to be redone, but the 12 stories of my first
book were just taken and put into type, and the next
thing I knew I received the galleys.

MAUNDER: Did you get an advance from the publisher?

STEVENS: No, I was too green to ask for an advance. In fact,
the idea that the publishing firm of Alfred A. Knopf,
the publishers of Thomas Mann, H. L. Mencken and
so many other great writers, would want to publish a
book by me -- why, they could have had my stuff for
nothing.

MAUNDER: What did you finally end up getting out of that book?
I suppose you're still getting royalties?

STEVENS: Yes. At last count the book had sold, as near as I
can figure -- of course, I don't have a lot of the old
statements, especially from its sales in the dollar
edition -- but as close as I can calculate the 1925
Paul Bunyan has sold 252,000 copies, first at \$2.50,

then in the dollar edition, and now in the \$3.00 edition. (It isn't in the dollar edition anymore.) About 30,000 of that number is to be classified in the trade edition -- that is, the first printings at \$2.50 and the \$3.00 edition in recent years since the War. And 140,000 of that 252,000 were in the pocket books that were sold in the post exchanges during World War II.

I figured it out at one time that all the various returns, stories and different uses of it, made me around \$18,000. That's all. The 1925 Paul Bunyan has been made into two grand opera librettos and two very noted composers have done the music. The first was in the 1920s by Richard L. Stokes, who was then music critic for the New York Post, and it was published in book form by G. P. Putnam and Sons. It was made altogether from my book. Dr. Howard Hanson, the head of the Rochester Conservatory of Music, who has composed several grand operas, wrote the music for it. It was produced once in Rochester, but in no other place. Then in 1941 W. H. Auden, the English poet whose reputation has been climbing by leaps and bounds since -- the author of

The Age of Anxiety -- used my book. He wrote his libretto, and Benjamin Britten, the celebrated English composer, composed the score for a grand opera that was produced once at Columbia University. Auden has used some of the lyrics from it, to include in his published poems, but otherwise the Stevens-Auden-Britten opus gathers dust. The libretto and score are still in the Archives of Columbia University. I don't know if Auden is ashamed of it now or not. Maybe he's ashamed of his neglect in failing to give me any credit whatsoever, pretending that everything in my book was in the public domain. I don't know what Auden's reasons were but there they are -- just a great gap of silence in his record.

MAUNDER: Let me go back a little bit, Jim. Bill Laughead, as you know, had a part in this contemporarily with you. What would you have to say about appraising his contribution?

STEVENS: I'd say that Bill Laughead's is the basic, sound, natural, characteristic folklore, the native folklore, as nearly as you can reproduce it. The things that the professors have dug up, where they've taken recordings of old-timers and the like, are all very dull and stupid stuff that these old heads have remembered -- and obviously

they're not natural storytellers.

First of all, Bill Laughead was a logger. That was the first essential to produce the kind of book that he did. He was a logger and a lumberman. Second, he was a man of marked artistic talents. If he'd tried other fields, other characters, he could have done them just as well -- I shouldn't say "just as well" because, as I said, first of all he was a logger and he had the basic stuff. He'd heard the stories; he knew the tall tale; he had the flavor of it all. The music of those bunkhouse and campfire narrators had gotten into his bones and their remembered words sang through his bones, into his blood and into his mind, and so his work remains real creativity of a true "folk" kind. Bill used the basic anecdote that a storyteller in the bunkhouse would take -- one of these gags, as Bill himself calls them -- and he would extemporize on it, or he'd state it and someone else would try to do something better and then he'd try to outdo the other fellow. Certainly in the earlier times when there were no newspapers or little music or anything like that in camp and they were all locked in the woods all winter long, the 'jacks were glad to sit around the fire and listen to somebody who

could tell a good story in rare style. That was still a tradition of Laughead's time in the timber -- the old long-told story.

In fact, you know, in early America a real honest-to-God native country American wouldn't bother to go to church on Sunday if the sermon was to last less than an hour. And if he was a true Christian who wanted to get all that was to be had out of Sunday morning in church, he'd demand a sermon for an hour and a half. And he didn't want music with his hymns; he wanted long hymns -- like the old Hardshell Baptist hymns -- that told stories like "There was a Romish lady brought up in Coventry," and then they'd go on and tell this story of this Romish lady and how she finally broke away from the priest in the old faith and became a Hardshell Baptist. They liked the long ballads and they liked the long sermons and they liked the long stories.

At camp meetings the preaching continued around the clock -- "protracted meetings" they were called. Of course, when American life came down to Lincoln's time there were newspapers, magazines and books a-plenty. Then the anecdote came into being. They had

the Davy Crockett Almanacs as printed versions of the tall tales of the frontier in Crockett's time, and they were anecdotes, gags, very short stories. Nearly every Davy Crockett story was short.

And Bill Laughead -- I'd say that he was the Davy Crockett of the logging frontier. He told logging stories, Paul Bunyan stories, in much the same way that Davy Crockett told frontier stories. Then later on after Crockett, Ned Buntline was out on the frontier and he created a type of printed American folklore in his weekly fiction stories -- his Buffalo Bill weeklies and things of that kind. Well, Buntline was a frontier character and a frontier storyteller but he was able to write his stuff into longer stories in the art form of fiction as it had developed in the America of his day.

But to me Bill Laughead is the genuine folklorist because he just didn't remember something that someone else had told but he converted idea, anecdote and narrative into something that is folklore in print. And he did it very naturally with true-to-nature illustrations for the stories, too -- very simple and clean cut. He wasn't a political character or anything of that kind, but he was certainly an able advertising man, just as

Davy Crockett was an able politician. I think that Bill Laughead, properly -- when you get him in the proper perspective -- will be measured alongside Davy Crockett in American history and folklore.

MAUNDER: Jim, yesterday in our opening series of tapes we got to talking a great deal about the origins of the Paul Bunyan literature. I wonder if you would go back and tell us a little bit about the research that you did in the Lake States and in Maine and elsewhere in connection with writing this material.

STEVENS: The research that I did before I wrote my first Paul Bunyan book was the research that one would do working in the woods -- in all the logging camps where I worked and in the construction camps where I heard various kinds of whoppers or tall tales. Later I learned to look back on those experiences of listening to folklore -- from the horse's mouth, so to speak -- folklore from the grass roots.

And, of course, in terms of the Paul Bunyan stories, I'd heard them out of the mouths of hobos from the Lake States and out of the talk of lumberjacks who'd come west to new fields with Lake States lumber companies -- just as Bill Laughead did with the Red

River Lumber Company in its move to Westwood, California. Then two years before I wrote my first Paul Bunyan I was working for another one of those transplanted Lake States companies, the Brooks-Scanlon Lumber Company at Bend, Oregon. One of the Lake Staters gave me the idea one night when I was working on the green-chain night shift for my first published Paul Bunyan story, "The Black Duck Dinner." When I was writing Paul Bunyan in 1924 and my succeeding books -- the novel, Brawny Man, in 1925, a novel, Mattock, in 1926, a book of short stories in 1927, and my second Paul Bunyan book in 1930 and '31, during this time I was looking up old-timers and searching through previously published material. Research led into Paul Bunyan books that were piracies of my material -- my inventions. I counted nineteen, all told, that were published between 1925 and 1932. Others have been published since, but I haven't kept track of them.

When my wife and I went to the Lake States early in 1930, we spent the summer in Bay City, Michigan, which was the old sawmill capital of the 1880s when Michigan was the leading lumber producing area of all

the world. Of course, in 1930 there were old-timers who survived, from even back into the 1870s, who had heard the Paul Bunyan stories in the logging camps and remembered them in some detail and how they were told; but the majority of the old 'jacks did not. They just had them all confused in their minds with the whoppers, the tall tales, the talk of the ring-tailed roarers -- like Mike Fink and Davy Crockett -- the lore and the lies that were prevalent everywhere on the frontier in the times of their youth.

MAUNDER: Paul Bunyan did not emerge as a very clear-cut figure, in other words, among these men?

STEVENS: No. Some of them would say for sure that they'd remembered the stories, that Paul Bunyan was just a regular big man; and others would relate with a great deal of fantasy bunkhouse tales that they said they remembered. That is, the ones who would tell of Paul Bunyan in terms of the Winter of the Blue Snow and in reference to the Spring when the Rain Came up from China, would picture Paul as a Hercules, a Colossus on the earth. Their tales matched the western stories that tell how Paul Bunyan dug Puget Sound, gouged out the Grand Canyon and otherwise

operated as a Colossus in human form on the earth.

MAUNDER: This research was done in Michigan in what year, Jim?

STEVENS: In 1930 and '31. Some was carried on in Detroit during 1932 and 1933.

MAUNDER: Don't you suppose that a good bit of these recollections might have emerged out of their reading of your books, and of the previous things that had been published by Laughead?

STEVENS: Oh, there's no doubt about it. I had to be on the lookout for that all the time. My wife, Theresa, who helped me enormously in research as in many other areas of my work, was a newspaper woman from the age of 18. In World War I she became Society Editor of the Gary Post -- Gary, Indiana, the steel town. She came from a steel family and so our marriage was, in a sense, a union of lumber and steel. She was highly trained through years of experience as an investigator and a reporter -- one who could take facts or material that was gathered and select what was important and what was not. She also was a very good judge of a person she was interviewing, you know, as to whether he was telling it straight or not.

Theresa did a great deal of research while we were

in Bay City, in the public library. They had a very good public library there and the librarian was a woman of an old pioneer family. She had a French name which I can't recall, but her antecedents went way back to the 1860s, soon after the Civil War, soon after Bay City was really started as a timber town. She had complete files of the old Lumberman's Gazette, which was the lake States lumber trade magazine. As I recall the first issue was published about 1868 -- soon after the Civil War, anyhow. And there was that complete file. Well, my wife found a great many tall stories, big lies, characteristic frontier whoppers on the Davy Crockett order and the Jim Bridger breed, but nowhere was there mention of the name of Paul Bunyan. And that is what we looked for most closely. My wife would say a little prayer every evening as she'd go over to the library that this time she would at least come on a name of someone connected with the lumber industry or logging who had a name that would sound or seem like "Paul Bunyan." This was one prayer that remained unanswered. We just found nothing of that kind. Later I secured the cooperation of a woman on the staff of the American Lumberman in Chicago, so that

she spent much time in going back through the files of the American Lumberman and the old Northwest Lumberman, which was also started along in the 1860s. She found accounts of strange and fearsome animals of the lumber woods -- the dismal sogger and the hemlock-eating hodag, that appeared in the 1880s, and many other tall tales, but nothing on Paul Bunyan until 1914.

And this was true of material that we looked up in Bay City. When we got to 1914 and later issues of magazines and newspapers, then there was a great deal of Bunyan stuff in print everywhere, in all the lumber trade publications and in the old newspaper files around Michigan. I venture to say one could find Paul Bunyan stories in the old timber town newspapers -- in the files of the Detroit Public Library or the libraries of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, or at Lansing at Michigan State University (Michigan State College, as it was then) -- from 1914 on -- perhaps from 1910 when the very first thing to be printed on Paul Bunyan was published in what is now the Detroit News (then News Tribune).

The long poem by Douglas Malloch -- the Michigan

lumberman's poet, as he was popularly termed; gave readings of his poetry and then he lectured -- he wrote the poem, about a hundred-line poem. But this account in the Detroit News was not a poem. It was an article about Paul Bunyan stories that had been told by lumberjacks in the early days. I tried very hard to dig it up when I was living in Detroit but failed to do so and I've never seen it; I just know it by repute from the record.

MAUNDER: And that dates to 1910 and it was an account of Paul Bunyan tales told in the woods?

STEVENS: Yes.* This is the earliest printed record that any of the researchers have been able to locate. Ben Botkin for years had all the resources of the Congressional Library at his daily disposal but he failed to dig up the Detroit News of 1910, and he did not even include the "Round River Drive" of Malloch's that was published

*NOTE: I've since looked up the record. It was a single feature article entitled "Paul Bunyan's Round River Drive," and was published July 24, 1910, p. 6, illustrated section. It was by James McGillwray; Douglas Malloch simply rewrote it in verse.

in the April 12, 1914 issue of the American Lumberman. Daniel Hoffman, with all the resources of the great Columbia University -- and I assume Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania, too, because all three universities have their imprints on his book, Paul Bunyan, The Last of the Frontier Demi-Gods -- had no references, as I recall, to the 1910 publication. He had only passing reference to Malloch's poem, which he treated very lightly although he was quite familiar with it because he severely criticized books in which that poem was republished.

To get back to this point of reference of my own research, we went through those two phases, and I believe that Bill Laughead and I are the only Paul Bunyan writers who sort of grew up in the lumber camps themselves with a consciousness of these stories as unique, valuable material that were really a chapter in the life of a large and important group of working people of American outdoor industry, who developed a peculiar folklore of their own.

Of course, many of these professors, because they haven't found what they were looking for, have written

articles and books since then on the thesis that there was no such lore in the logging camps except just very commonplace stuff. What they reproduce to substantiate their claims that there were only little anecdotes and observations here and there are the dullest tripe imaginable. If any logger in my time had tried to pull it in a bunkhouse someone would have heaved a calked boot at him. They take the position, which I denounced in my various prefaces, that the run-of-the-mill logger was an ignorant lout and lughead, a retarded mind, one who could speak nothing but jabber -- and so it was not to be supposed that he could have any fantasy of literary quality work up in his imagination and come forth in the form of a story. All of them -- Fishwick, Hoffman and several others who have taken the same track and imitated one another in it -- stand in opposition to H. L. Mencken, the great critic and editor who published my first literary Paul Bunyan story, "The Black Duck Dinner." His view of the whole matter was that in every group of the common people, the plain everyday man in history, whether soldier group, farm group, groups of migrants, herdsmen, artisans, woodsmen, or sailors -- whatever

the folk group -- someone would come up from it, a creative storyteller or a creative ballad maker. This would hold true, Mencken believed, even on the lower social levels. Loggers used to be called "timber beasts" -- that was the common name for them -- or "woods beasts." This creative individual would come up in a group or tribe and begin to create, perhaps using some unusual character. He would then build the character up, create him anew, according to his own concepts and ideas and inspirations -- make him rare and amazing, attribute qualities to him of a kind which would make him an exceptional and exciting story character. And that happened in the lumber woods, all right. In that era of the Jim Bridger stories and the Davy Crockett stories and the Mike Fink and other tall tales of the Wild Frontier there came some person or persons who began to tell similar tales up in the lumber camps -- the early lumber camps in the Lake States, of course, because all the researchers and all the authorities agree that they haven't tracked anything of that kind in New England or the South or the Far West forests of 1838-1880. It was all in the Lake States.

MAUNDER: There is this difference, isn't there, that Davy Crockett and Jim Bridger are real men that you can get hold of in history?

STEVENS: Yes, because they made themselves historical characters in other ways. In Mencken's point of view that was accidental. Davy Crockett ordinarily would have been just a hunter of the woods, say perhaps even less famous than Daniel Boone, but he owned this rare creative faculty -- very, very rare for a man of those origins, and in that kind of life -- for the creation of stories. The first camp bard to tell of Paul Bunyan was a fellow of Crockett and Bridger and Mike Fink -- even of Mark Twain. That's what Mencken visualized as the typical creator of Bunyan lore among the Lake States "timber beasts." You see, Crockett became so popular as a storyteller, so much of a character, as well as a creative spirit because he had the mind for public affairs and could grasp those things and he was a personable and magnetic public speaker who became nationally famous. Jim Bridger was also a great explorer, trader, scout and guide; he built a fort on the Oregon Trail and in the great immigrations West he became a public benefactor. All of this

enhanced his simple gift and fame as a storyteller.

MAUNDER: Paul Bunyan, in a sense, is more in the same category with Johnny Appleseed, isn't he?

STEVENS: Yes, that's right. Historians gave him a place in our real history. Or take Hiawatha. The creative genius of Longfellow gave us Hiawatha.

Now, you understand, I'm speaking not on my own -- I'm not scholar enough really to build scholarly opinions -- I'm only speaking from knowledge of the Mencken point of view. In it, the man who first created the story of Johnny Appleseed, which might have been Johnny Appleseed himself, did not have these other qualities about him -- as Crockett and Bridger did -- that made him a prominent personality in the life of his time. Think of Abraham Lincoln; imagine that there'd been nothing left of him in popular recall but that he was a country lawyer who rode a circuit on the Illinois frontier, and that he was a marvelous storyteller. He was a good enough lawyer to have stories created about him as a lawyer -- as the moonlight story wherein it was testified to have been the full of the moon when the crime was committed and he proved that there wasn't any moon shining that

night. Well, of course, that's America's legal folklore, lawyer group folklore.

MAUNDER: Jim, I wonder if you'd care to comment on this. You and Laughead both came out of the woods, so to speak, and here was an area of America's pioneer life which had a folklore which you were familiar with because you'd come into intimate contact with it in your work, but which was not generally known throughout the community the same way that, let's say, Bridger and Davy Crockett folklore was known. Now, I'm sure that some of your contemporaries in this field of writing have probably suggested that you have created this folklore a good bit out of imagination and perhaps out of a desire that your field of lumbering should have a recognized folklore which should be known to a lot of other people in the community. Did that ever enter in in any way? Were you ever conscious of such a feeling? Would you care to comment on that?

STEVENS: I was very, very conscious of it. In fact, I made it clear in the prefaces of my Paul Bunyan, 1925, and Saginaw Paul Bunyan, 1932, both published by Knopf as literary works, works of the imagination. And I may mention without appearing to brag -- I don't mind bragging

but a person isn't supposed to -- that they received some excellent reviews. William Rose Benet and Stephen Vincent Benet, who both knew the Frontier and knew the tall tale, knew the West and everything of that sort, wrote of my books in high terms of praise. In fact, one of their quotes was on the cover in 1925 and Knopf still keeps it on the jacket today. When I was working in the sawmill at Bend and wrote "The Black Duck Dinner," I was taking just these little bits, these fragments, anecdotes, gags, of Paul Bunyan woods lore, of which my mind was full, and I was using them as a sort of pattern, or as material to use in creating my own literary work. I didn't give a hoot about advertising loggers' folklore or promoting it. Always it was different, an individual version, as I heard it.

MAUNDER: You were trying to write a book?

STEVENS: And I didn't give a hoot about how much good it might do the lumber industry. I had an entirely different objective than Bill Laughead's. Mine was personal. I'd sold poems to The Saturday Evening Post, I'd had poems in The Stars and Stripes, and I'd had other poems published. Although I'd been expelled from school for

chewing tobacco -- from the eighth grade -- and had never gone back again, still I presumed to want to be a writer, and to think I could be one.

MAUNDER: A writer who got paid?

STEVENS: Yes, a real pro. In the fall of 1923, before the American Mercury was launched, I had written to H. L. Mencken. In my letter I'd simply told him that since 1910 I'd been a reader of his, and that I'd worked since 13 around logging camps. There was no thought of Paul Bunyan or other folklore, no thought of the lumber industry. I had only one thought and prayer: may this letter help me somehow to become a writer, a creator of the written word. I'd written Mencken this letter telling him something of my experiences, and I got a letter back from him telling me that the American Mercury was to be started, the first issue in January, 1924. Then the next paragraph said, "Your experiences have filled you with capital material and you write so well that an idea occurs to me: why not try something for our new American Mercury, which will cover a much more general field than the Smart Set did." So then I was inspired and thought I could just sit down at my typewriter -- and dash out an

article in no time at all. But it was three months before I really put an article in the mail. Mencken accepted it although I had to do a little rewriting of it, and it was published in the February or March, 1924 issue of the American Mercury under the title "The Uplift on the Frontier." Mr. Mencken asked me for another and the only thing that would come in my mind -- and I couldn't drive it out -- was to write this "Black Duck Dinner" Paul Bunyan story. My own feeling about it -- in regard to my dreams and my ambitions and that sort of thing -- was only that I wanted to write in terms of essay, short story, novel and poetry. Now Paul Bunyan was completely foreign to all this in my outlook, because I thought what in the world could a great intellectual like H. L. Mencken see in all these big, tough lies that the loggers and the cowboys and other groups of working stiffes would tell, what possible interest could a man like that have in common stuff? He surely is looking to me for something that's at least sociological in character or that has some related kind of intellectual content. But I couldn't help myself. I had a compulsion just to sit down and write this story about "The Black Duck Dinner" and I sent it

on without any hope from it at all. No one could have been more surprised than I was when the letter came back that they wanted -- no, he didn't even say that they were accepting the story -- but asked if I was sure that it hadn't been published before and if there had been anything that I knew of published on Paul Bunyan and that if not, Knopf was interested in publishing a dozen stories like this one, making them all into a book. Well, that lit me up sky high. Here was H. L. Mencken, there was Alfred A. Knopf, and all of the authorities that I read and respected put Knopf right at the top of the intellectual, literary publishers as Mencken was at the top of such editors. Well, to me this was just suddenly a lighting on the peaks of glory itself. It was the whole thing! Here was my chance to work up from laboring man to literary man. I had succeeded in taking all this rough stuff of Paul Bunyan and working it over and getting it into a form of literary art. It was literary art that I had achieved, that appealed to Mencken and Knopf.

This was the spirit, then, in which I wrote my first book of Paul Bunyan stories. Mine was the method that I knew Homer had used; that is, the basic stuff of his

Iliad and Odyssey was the common folklore of the people of Greece, just as the folklore of the Mississippi River formed the basic material of Huckleberry Finn. I thought of it in those terms because my hero and master, H. L. Mencken, considered Huckleberry Finn the greatest American work of literary art.

There was no thought in my mind, no pretension that I was a folklore collector, that I was a researcher or that I had an academic or scientific interest in the loggers' lore of Paul Bunyan. To me it was material for the creative artist to use, and that's the only way I thought of myself and my art. Well, that was recognized by the Benets and other critics.

Now, I'd like to refer again to the book by Daniel Hoffman, a Columbia University professor -- Paul Bunyan, The Last of the Demi-Gods. He has 65 references to me in his index and nearly all of them are unflattering. He charges that my Paul Bunyan books were written to glorify "the American timber barons." He calls me the arriere-garde -- a rear guard, a reactionary -- and says I wrote my stories from a reactionary philosophy of economic and social thought, and that my Paul Bunyan was a defense all the way through of laissez faire among

the timber barons and of all their works. In my books I gently satirize many of the characteristics of American life in much the same terms that Sinclair Lewis employed. Dr. Hoffman ridicules these efforts of mine. In short, Hoffman has tried hard to take Paul Bunyan apart and burn up the pieces -- that is, my Paul Bunyan.

Hoffman comes to the point of admitting, "But now it was to James Stevens and his defense of laissez faire in his Paul Bunyan to which strangely enough Auden turned as the source for his grand opera." This had been true also of Mr. Richard Stokes, the New York Post music critic, who had in the 1920s written the first grand opera libretto on Paul Bunyan. Hoffman also praises Louis Untermeyer's Paul Bunyan. Well, Louis Untermeyer's was just a making over, in the Untermeyer style, of my whole Paul Bunyan book.

I could cite a couple of other examples that Hoffman has words of praise for -- as the two Dell McCormick books, Paul Bunyan Swings His Ax and Tall Timber Tales. McCormick frankly confessed to me, and begged forgiveness, that he had lifted his main stuff for his first book from my Paul Bunyan and his second from my Saginaw Paul Bunyan. And yet Hoffman stoutly

maintains that my Paul Bunyan books have no literary value whatsoever. A fellow names Fishwick in a Yale Review article has dealt just as unfairly with my work.

MAUNDER: Let me ask you a question, Jim. Did any of these critics ever write to you or come and talk to you personally about this matter before writing these books?

STEVENS: No, none of them at all except one man named Richard Dorson, who did a collection of Davy Crockett stories out of the Almanacs. That is Dorson's one claim to fame. He was an instructor from Amherst, as I recall, and he did make a trip out West, stopping by to call on me and talking in a very friendly fashion -- but then he denounced my work without mercy -- which was his privilege, of course. I can cite evidence in rebuttal from Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, the Benets, Carl Sandburg and other mighty men of American letters. The values they have attributed to my Paul Bunyan books in terms of literary art give me to think that I at least made some sort of achievement in what I started out to do in this life. The task I set myself was to take the rough stuff of these old bunkhouse tales and mould it

into the shape of the art of beautiful letters. In this regard I should note that my story, "The Great Hunter of the Woods," was chosen by O'Brien for his 1931 volume of *The Best Short Stories*. No, let's see, it was 1932. In 1928 he put another story of mine in the Best 20.

MAUNDER: Jim, to what extent do you feel indebted to Laughead for his preliminary writing of Bunyan stories?

STEVENS: Oh, I've always felt enormously indebted to him. I wrote to the Red River Lumber Company to make sure that I was free to use those stories in my first Paul Bunyan book. Strangely enough, I first read them in *Century* magazine either very early in 1923 or 1922. Here was this story or article about Paul Bunyan and his Big Blue Ox. It filled up a number of pages. And I recognized the name of the writer as one who was notorious in the I. W. W. movement out West, both in California and the Northwest, and I wondered what his stuff could be.

MAUNDER: Who was that?

STEVENS: I can't recall his name now. Oh, yes. I had a copy of that magazine with those stories. I forget just how it came about but anyhow, the response that I got from

the Red River Lumber Company was written to me by Bill Laughead. I'd made some statement that this article in Century magazine was the only place I'd seen Paul Bunyan stories in print before I wrote my "Black Duck Dinner" for the American Mercury. Then he told me that this was a complete plagiarism, that without his knowledge or consent this man had simply taken the booklet and typed it over and submitted it as an article.

MAUNDER: You didn't see the booklet then that came out about 1916 and then there was another a few years after, a revision?

STEVENS: No, the one that I first saw in booklet form was the 1922 or 1923 edition, I'm sure, and I don't remember where I picked it up.

MAUNDER: Perhaps it came about the time you wrote to them asking for their permission?

STEVENS: Probably Bill Laughead sent me a copy. Or I might have picked one up even sooner in the Brooks-Scanlon office. That was another pine operation. And at that time I hadn't seen the Douglas Malloch poem either.

MAUNDER: Jim, you certainly have made over the years in doing your writing a good many notes. Have you kept

notebooks at all?

STEVENS: No, I haven't, and I haven't really made so many notes except where I was out on a story or doing research in the library and then I would jot down just what I wanted, and I've kept very little of that stuff. I have some of my original manuscripts. Almost all of my first Paul Bunyan book was written with pen, and I have quite a few things like that. But with moving around so much and the time we were living in the Lake States where moving was all done in a Model-T Ford sedan -- and try to take everything along in a Model-T -- why, you'd just throw everything away at a time like that.

MAUNDER: I hope you'll take care and preserve this stuff and see that it gets to some reputable collecting agency.

STEVENS: Elwood, I'm going to make a little confession here and I hope you keep it between us until the thing goes through because another writer might hear of this and get in ahead of me on it -- you know, because Paul Bunyan's in the public domain. Just as of the first of this month I signed a contract with Random House to write a book of Paul Bunyan stories intended for children of nine, ten and eleven years of age, and

it's to be the first of a new series that Random House will publish called Legacy Books, and they want Paul Bunyan to be the first one in that series. That will go along with their series for older children called Landmark Books. Are you familiar with them? Daniel Boone, and Stewart Holbrook has written Wild Bill Hickok and Davy Crockett, and Wyatt Earp for them. I don't know how Stewart Holbrook wrote Wyatt Earp without resisting the temptation to debunk him, the way my revered grandfather used to debunk Buffalo Bill, Earp and others of related fame. That's in a stage now where if it gets around, suddenly, at the same time this book is published, out will come the same sort of Paul Bunyan book by another publisher. I've had that happen all through my career.

MAUNDER: Well, this record is a matter of private concern to you and to the Foundation alone up until the time that it gets into finished form and we agree as to where it shall be placed. And that's at least a couple of months away.

STEVENS: Well, I just wanted to get it on the record that at least I have the contract. You know that things can happen. The book might not be published, but I've got the

contract. The thing is, the point right here is that I started out with Paul Bunyan, I reach the retirement age the day after tomorrow on my 65th birthday, and I retire from the West Coast Lumberman's Association on December 1st. Well, in terms of my writing career, I began it with a contract to write a Paul Bunyan book in 1924, and I'm ending it with a new book contract on Paul Bunyan now, in the first year of my retirement so in spite of all this stuff, in spite of the professors, in spite of all the rival Paul Bunyan writers -- old Paul and Babe the Blue Ox and your Uncle Jim still keep going along the same old trail together -- into the sunset, just like in the movies.

MAUNDER: You speak of the critics as the professors. Do I detect a certain feeling of antagonism towards academicians on your part?

STEVENS: Oh, no, because they've been awfully good to me. Numerous academicians in Forestry, Geography, History and in English and other departments -- they've been wonderful friends. Let me put my attitude on "the professors" this way in terms of a situation I'm in now. In 1952 things worked around so that a committee of historians that had been

trying to agree on a book, a short book telling in a popular way the history of how Washington was first made a territory and times for the Territorial Centennial Year of 1953, just could not agree. They could not get anywhere at all and finally the lay committee that had to do with it insisted that it be turned over to some professional writer. The governor, Governor Langlie, agreed on that and I was the writer chosen. I got the copy turned out in a short time but debate by the professors on it went on and on. There was one consideration after another by this committee of historians. There was one from the University of Washington, and the head of the History Department at Washington State College, and around through the colleges of education, and I think one from Gonzaga University. We could just get nowhere with those professional historians. There was nothing that I could write that they would accept even where they couldn't show that it was false or anything else really wrong with it. My way was just not the way this sort of thing should be written, they said, so they wound up with no Territorial Centennial booklet at all. There were certain attitudes there -- stubborn, tough,

unreasoning, inflexible, inexplicable attitudes.

I felt that in the way I wrote the Paul Bunyan stories that I would not get involved with the specialists in folklore because by the time I got into the field a little bit I realized that that was a distinct academic field; and so, in writing my Bunyan tales as my own stories I wouldn't get into any conflict with professional, academic folklorists at all. But here came these violent objections from one professor after another -- they objected to my touching the Bunyan material in any way whatsoever. So there is a certain attitude of that kind -- I won't say that it's a taint -- but nearly every professor in whatever field is "tetched" with it a little bit. You find it among the foresters.

On the other hand, I'll say that as a professional writer, I was not a professional writer very long before I was drawing a very broad line between myself and the amateur writer; that is, between myself and the professor of English who would presume to try to write an article for the Saturday Evening Post or a short story for the American Mercury. In these fields I was a real "pro" and all the English professors I knew were

amateurs. Well, I just thought, as a professional writer, that it was all right for the professor to make a try but he was still an amateur in my book. Maybe he could stand up in class and teach writing of the article, the novel or the short story, but he can't do it himself for a living and if he does it once in a great while, he ain't got no right to do it by the holy old Mackinaw! Now that was and is my "attitude."

MAUNDER: In other words, you have a feeling that the professors' criticism of your work is a little bit of professional jealousy?

STEVENS: Their criticisms are, as within the academic bounds of folklore. I make it very clear that my writings on Paul Bunyan are my own inventions, only seeded from the stories that were told in the woods. I'm following the old bunkhouse pattern where there was a law against twice-told tales, that you could sit down and tell a story as long as you wanted to, but you must not repeat yourself. If you were to start repeating them night after night, why, you'd get called down.

MAUNDER: Isn't folklore, Jim, stories which grow with the telling from one teller to the other?

STEVENS: Yes, that's the natural thing.

MAUNDER: Well, if that is the case, how does what you did with the Paul Bunyan stories differ from the usual pattern of the creation of folklore? You were just doing what came naturally in folklore creation. You were telling the stories.

STEVENS: When I was working in logging camps and sawmills and telling my share, it went on for years, and then when that splurge of Paul Bunyan story-telling broke out in the old Third Oregon National Guard over in France -- the 162nd Infantry it was there -- why, that was the ancient process of folklore. This evolved into the ancient literary process, however, when I began to think in terms of Homer and Mark Twain. Then my effort was to create according to the great traditional literary patterns -- with all due appreciation of my own inability to create in as great a sense as they did. The point is that when I followed their pattern and process, I was moving out of folklore and into creative art in what I was trying to do. I was no longer concerned with folklore per se. I was simply utilizing folklore to try to create something of artistic literary quality.

MAUNDER: Do you have anything more that you'd like to say about Lovejoy's part in the creation of the Paul Bunyan

literature or anything else?

STEVENS: Well, Lovejoy was a professor or an associate professor of forestry at Michigan State College (now Michigan State University) about the same period that Laughead and I were circulating around the camps and then starting to bring Paul Bunyan stories before the public, that is, from around 1900 to along in the 1920s. While my wife and I were living in Michigan, things didn't work out so that I could go to Lansing and really explore what Lovejoy had left there. As I recall, he was no longer living, or if he was, he was very ill, but everyone spoke about the stories that Lovejoy had told, the stories that he had gathered, and that he had published in one form or another.

It should still be interesting, and possibly of value to the historical record of the growth of the Paul Bunyan folklore, to make a study of all correspondence and other materials left by Lovejoy, particularly in the 1909-1923 period -- first of all, whatever relationships he may have had with MacGillwray in 1910 and Malloch in 1914. Surviving students and associates of Lovejoy's should be interviewed -- not only on Paul Bunyan but on

Lovejoy's part in Lake States conservation education
and in Michigan reforestation and fire control.*

*NOTE: This final paragraph is a postscript added
by Mr. Stevens after reading the rough draft typescript
of his oral history interview.