

OUR OWN GODS ARE ALWAYS COMIC

By JULIAN LEE RAYFORD

THE trouble with Paul Bunyan is that nobody wants to respect him for what he is. People harbor a perpetual desire to start laughing as soon as his name is brought up. For the greater portion of the American people think Paul Bunyan is a great big overgrown buffoon. Well, he was no comedian, not by a damn sight!

A great many people think that Paul Bunyan used to sit around exaggerating the facts of everyday life in an unending series of wind-blown stories and tall tales. Well, Paul was not a story teller. Paul was not a talker. He did the things his men talked about in their yarns, but he did not tell stories. That is one of the main things to remember about Paul. He never told stories. His men told the stories about him.

You say to the average person, "You know Paul Bunyan?" and generally, the immediate reply is, "Sure, he wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*."

Well, Paul Bunyan never was John Bunyan.

So, there, we've cleared up three things that Paul was not.

Then what was he?

He was a great deal more than he seems. He was a god.

Now, the trouble with that statement is that I get into difficulty as soon as I make it, for somebody always chimes in with, "There is only one God," etc. You see, in spite of all the publicity attending the American sense of humor, a lot of us haven't the humor necessary to admit the truth about Paul Bunyan. And we need a little more than humor, too, for it is high time we began seeking the profundity that lies within this chief figure of the greatest myth produced by the mind of the American people. I am not saying that Paul is Jehovah God Almighty; I am simply saying that Paul was a god.

In America, there are many gods—the god of machinery, the god of politics, of business, and Big Business, and among many more, there are the little gods of the movies. But no one ever admits it, of course, for with all our frivolous pursuits, the people of America never admit any god except the one in their churches. Yet, reference is made every day, in sermons, in editorials and in conversations to the

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old gods of the Romans, the Greeks, the Scandinavians, even the Egyptians. But of course, those fellows were pagan and . . . and this is one of the principal things that has kept us inferior to Europe so long.

Our painters, poets, sculptors and musicians and all our intellectuals in every field have been shuttling back and forth between Europe and the United States for two hundred years and more, admiring the things of Europe, the folklore and the mythology of Europe, and all the time telling us that there was nothing like it in this country. Sure, it's all different, now, for we are told that we are witnessing, at last, the birth of an American art. At least we hope we are.

But for years, we have had Bullfinch's *Mythology* and Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs* and the *Quest of the Grail*. Those things had dignity and profundity, and we received them in that spirit. But in the United States to this day, some people think that all American folk song and folk story are hillbilly with a raucous laugh. Only recently, a man asked me if *Pistol Packin' Mamma* was not one of our most typical folk songs. It is this loud laugh that must be removed from our reception of American mythology. It is time we looked at it with insight and profundity.

Maybe, after all, it is just as well that the American people will not admit that Paul Bunyan is as much a god as old Thor and Zeus and Apollo and Baldur and Heimdall and Loki

and Hermes and Ares. Still, we have come pretty close to it. For in the catalogue of American folk heroes, we find them under the title "Comic Divinities," or "Heroic Demigods." The American folklorist is at liberty to call European mythological figures by their right names, but those that are native to this country he must call "comic." Isn't it about time we ceased being comic and looked to our own dignity?

Paul Bunyan was not comic. I know the stories about him, and I know how people get a big laugh out of them every time they are told, but, remember, the comedy lies in the telling of the story, not in Paul Bunyan. I have looked at Paul Bunyan, now, for fifteen years. I have talked to people about him, I have read everything I could lay hands on. I don't know if you will agree with what I see in Paul Bunyan, but I have formed my own concept of him, and I feel that in it lies some of the truth concerning him.

II

First of all, Paul took the flat world into his hands and made it into a sphere so Columbus could sail around it and discover the New World.

Then, Paul invented America. He piled up the mountains; he dug all the rivers and lakes and creeks and bayous and bays and gulfs. He planted all the flowers, fruits, vegetables and grass. He made the trees grow. And he taught civilization to the people.

When his work was done, he went away to the North Pole and made his home there, but promised that when America needed him, he would come back and help us in our great hour of need. This promise makes him a part of the universal mythology of mankind.

Now, the story of his making the world into a sphere, as I learned it from Hugh Rigsby, goes this way. One day, Paul met up with a real Indian Chief named Kick-in-the-Shin, a Flatfoot Indian from the famous reservation over at Fallen Arches, Arizona. Paul decided to make the flat world round and he wrapped his arms around the world and the Chief braced his feet on the Moon and helped by pulling Paul's wrists together. And to this day, astronomers say those blue spots on the Moon are mountains and craters of extinct volcanoes, when as a matter of fact, those of us who have heard Hugh Rigsby's story know that they are simply the footprints of Chief Kick-in-the-Shin.

In another Hugh Rigsby story, I found that Paul had done other things to the world besides make it round. Paul put in the North Pole and the South Pole, attached the North Pole to the top of the universe and the South Pole to the bottom of the universe. He anchored the Earth that way, and the other planets went sailing round and round it. How those Poles were broken so that our planet was liberated to wander out through the universe, is told in the story that

follows. But first I'll tell you something about Hugh Rigsby.

Hugh was a big fellow, six-foot four, wide and strong, endowed with a vast capacity for humor and love of America. He had been a welder, a lumberjack, a cowpuncher and an oil-field worker. Once, he was a strong man with a circus. He offered \$25 to any man in the tent who could fight four rounds with him. He had always saved the circus twenty-five bucks by the end of the third round.

Hugh had picked up his stories about Paul Bunyan from workers in the forests and the oil fields. He called on me one day and said, "Here, you're a storyteller, take these stories and tell 'em. I'm giving 'em to you." Since then, I have told these stories to all kinds of people in all kinds of places — Chicago, New York, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Washington, New Orleans, Nashville, Mobile — through half the nation.

Do you know how Paul Bunyan's famous Blue Bull, Babe, kicked the world off into space? Well, one day Paul was standing down in Mexico, pretty close to Guatemala. He was daydreaming, when all of a sudden he got a brilliant idea. He'd punch holes in hotcakes and make 'em into doughnuts! Babe was standing there sound asleep beside Paul, and Paul was so happy over his idea that he reached over and slapped Babe on the rump. Scared hell out of Babe, and he jumped. He jumped so hard that he broke the world loose from its Pole Axes, and the world floated

out into space. Then Babe began to run, and he ran so hard that the world began to spin round and round, and we started revolving around the Sun. Up to that time, the Sun had floated around the Earth, else how could Joshua have made the Sun stand still in the Bible?

Well, Babe ran and he ran, with Paul right behind him. Babe hit Canada so fast that he ran up onto a glacier, slipped and sat down and slid sitting down all the way to Siberia.

III

Back in 1934, Henry Wallace, at that time Secretary of Agriculture, asked me to come to the home of a friend in Virginia and recite some of my own poems and tell a few Paul Bunyan stories. Four of us were present that night: Henry Wallace, Charlie Roos, who worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, myself, and a man whose name I do not recall. We sat out in the yard and I told them a group of Paul Bunyan stories. Charlie Roos said I should forget about Paul and devote my time to the heroes of history. Henry Wallace said, no, it was a good thing to deal with the epics of America.

Charlie said, "Henry, I know that Paul Bunyan was a fake. It can be proved. I can give you the name of a man in Minneapolis who will tell you that the whole Bunyan legend is a fake."

I said, "Give me the name, and I'll write and find out."

So Charlie gave me the man's name. I can't recall that name, either, but I do remember that he was the publisher of a paper. I wrote and received an answer. Yes sir, Paul was a fake. He was a legend invented by the Chamber of Commerce or the Boosters' Association of some town called Thread Needle or Split Basket, I forget which. Anyway, this man said that Paul was doubtless invented in the back room of some pool hall to induce tourists to come and see that part of the country.

I was not discouraged, for it makes no difference to me where Paul was conceived. The truth is, he is far and away the most magnificent, the most superbly typical and creative American ever known. There is in him an instinct of America; he has the most titanic reach of any figure ever created by the mind of the American people.

We know they are not Chamber of Commerce boosters' yarns, for James Stevens, author of two books on Paul Bunyan, says he first got the stories from Michael Quinn, lumberyard superintendent in Hoquiam, Washington, who had heard the stories from Len Day, a Minnesota lumberman who got them in Canada in the 1840's.

These attempts to prove that our myths are not so wonderful as we think they are, are not only futile, but they also tend to destroy something astonishingly precious that we need and will always need. There is bound to be something of the American people in the stories about Paul

Bunyan, for in him is all the imagination that has caused us to build the most gigantic things known to man.

Recently, *Fortune* Magazine published a feature on Paul Bunyan that I consider the most detestable attack ever made on an American hero. The article began by saying that the great folk heroes of Europe and Asia lived when dragons breathed fire, when wizards cast spells, before learning and facts and statistics “placed gentle curbs on the imagination.” Still, when Paul Bunyan was born, early travelers through the United States brought back stories that the rattlesnake was a dragon of enormous size that flew through the air and killed people with its breath.

The writer of the *Fortune* article says that Paul was born when people could read and write, that he was created in bunkhouses by grown men. Does he think that the amazing myths of Zeus and Thor were created by kindergarten children? He says that Paul was a dwarf compared to historical heroes — that he was not so practical as Elias Hasket Derby, a Salem merchant who sent ships “where no ships dared to go”; not so ingenious as Peter Cooper, who made innumerable inventions; not so stubborn as John Peter Altgeld, who wandered 100 miles looking for a job. He says Paul was not so audacious as Mad Anthony Wayne, who opened the way westward; not so courageous as John Paul Jones, who defied the whole British Navy; not so modest as Thomas Jefferson. The nature Paul knew

was not the nature of Henry David Thoreau, and he did not glimpse the spiritual essence of American life.

It is a foolish thing to compare a mythological figure to the men of history. Paul Bunyan is a reflection of all the heroes of America. He would never have been imagined had they not lived. But those same heroes might not be nearly so precious to us had Paul not been born in the minds of the old storytellers.

Paul was no dwarf — compared to anybody or anything of any people on earth. We cannot even say that he was the size of a Douglas fir, for who knows how big a mythological hero ever was? He changes his size with the scale of the task he is performing.

As for being practical and ingenious — remember the time Paul and his men were logging off the Onion River and the wild onions and the wild garlic made his men weep so that they couldn’t work? You know what Paul did? He made an arrangement by correspondence with the King of Italy. He shipped boatload after boatload of wild onions and wild garlic to Italy. And the Italians were ecstatic! They were so grateful that the King sent Paul the first shoots of the spaghetti and macaroni trees that Paul planted in the Great American Paradise.

So John Peter Altgeld was stubborn because he wandered 100 miles to find a job! Paul Bunyan set out walking one day on snowshoes, and one snowshoe got warped in the heat

going through the desert, and by the time he got to Seattle that night, he had been thrown off his course and wandered up the Pacific Coast through San Francisco.

Not so audacious as Mad Anthony Wayne? There was a fellow named Tangle Eye Ty (Ty was short for Titanic), who used to skulk around Paul's camps. He shot a revolver that had to be loaded on a hay frame and fired only crokay balls. Three times a day, always at mealtime, Ty attacked Paul's men with crokay balls until they fed him. If one of those balls hit a man on a slant when he was stooped over, the splinters would fill him with rosin poison which might kill him. Paul used to take a tree trunk and bat the balls back at Tangle Eye Ty, but Ty's gun shot 'em out in a barrage like a solid plank, and after a while, Paul generally collapsed from over-exertion. Then they'd load Paul on a flatcar and haul him home. Babe would pull the flatcar, for the locomotive never lived that could have budged Paul Bunyan. And Ty got another meal. . . .

As for being modest, I never heard that Paul ever said much about anything he ever did. Surely, no man ever boasted less over doing more. Here we have an instance, in the *Fortune* writer, of a person who thinks that Paul told the stories. *Paul did not talk; his men talked about him.*

It may be that Paul did not see the spiritual essence of American life, but since, in his labors, he did the most colossal, superhuman things ever

known, such as piling up the Rockies and the Alleghanies while he dug the Mississippi River with his watch fob, then surely he has instilled enough essence into the American people to be forgiven the lack of that quality in himself. And of course Paul Bunyan's nature was not the nature that Thoreau knew. Paul was never anchored to one spot. He was too busy arranging the whole face of the continent to turn philosopher beside one obscure pond.

In the statement about John Paul Jones, who *defied* the whole British Navy, the *Fortune* writer exhibits a singular ignorance of Paul Bunyan. For Paul did not *defy* the British Navy, he just up and *sank* the whole damn thing with his foot! It happened when Paul was just a little baby in the cradle. He rocked the whole house as he rocked in his cradle, rocked the whole county, rocked the whole State of Maine. So his old man put Paul in a cradle on a raft out in the ocean. Here the baby held a whale by the tail with each hand, and rocked in such glee that he created tidal waves all along the Maine coast. The people appealed to the King of England, and the King sent Admiral John Bull over here with the British Navy to put a stop to it.

The Admiral sailed up to Paul with the entire Navy, and he said a lot of things you ought not say to a little baby, but Paul was asleep and remained pure. So the Admiral gave the order to fire away; and from every ship they shot gun shot, bb shot,

cannon shot, rifle shot, sling shot and every kind of shot ever heard of. The noise was so loud it awakened this tee-ninacy little baby. Paul got up and stepped overboard, and his foot splashed in the water and created a tidal wave in reverse that sank the whole British Navy. You know how the King got his Navy back? They took Paul's raft and built enough ships out of it to give England the biggest fleet in the world!

IV

Do you not see that it is silly to compare an epic hero of mythology to any figures of history? With the flick of a finger he defeats you at every turn. That is part of the divinity of Paul Bunyan.

But you know what Paul did that is the greatest thing ever done in America? He invented a Paradise, the Great American Paradise. Hugh Rigsby told me about it. It was a Paradise bigger and better than the one in the Bible. But Paul lost it and nobody knows how he came to lose it, and nobody ever has known where it is. A fellow in England by the name of Milton heard about Paul's losing it, and he wrote *Paradise Lost*. Then his wife died and he wrote *Paradise Regained*.

Hugh said to me, "I never did understand how that fella Milton

could say he had seen a Paradise in England. Because England is small. It ain't big enough to hold a Paradise. Even Arkansas ain't big enough to hold a Paradise; and England ain't as big as Arkansas. So how could you get it into England in the first place? Anyway, this Great American Paradise was 100 per cent, boy, all the time! It was the Pore Man's Dream. . . . Paul sent all his good lumber-jacks to it. If you was a good worker, when you was retired, that's where Paul sent you with your whole family. But if you was lazy and never worked, when it come time to retire you, you was sent to the Farm.

"And on the Farm, you was worked the living hell out of you. Only time you ever seen yourself on the Farm was gittin' up goin' to bed or goin' to bed gittin' up, because Old John Wheatley was in charge of it, and he was so mean, he was the meanest man in America. That's a fact! He made Simon Legree look like Little Lord Fauntleroy.

"But that Paradise, boy! It had cigarette bushes and ice cream caves and hot soup springs and Christmas Dinner trees and Thanksgiving Dinner trees and Easter egg plants. And the best thing of all—it had an Anheuser-Busch that always gave cold beer from a spigot in the root. Boy, that Great American Paradise, it was 100 per cent all the time!"



THE LIBRARY

This is Soviet Russia

By WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

IN an unusual burst of confidence a high Soviet Foreign Office official once told me his impression of American newspapers and magazines. "There are illiterates in all countries," he said, "but they keep quiet. In America they are writing, and talking all the time."

There would have been some basis for this criticism if it had been limited to writing and speaking about Russia. Our intellectual showing on this subject has been pretty bad. I tried the experiment of counting and listing errors of fact about Russia, past and present, which appeared in print. I did not include questions of opinion and I excluded propaganda publications. By my own unaided effort, restricted to a short period of time and covering a rather narrow range of books, magazines and newspapers, I counted over thirty "howlers" on every conceivable aspect of Russian life, from Stalin's correct name to the figure of literacy in prewar Russia. A research bureau could easily turn up hundreds, or even thousands of such blunders, appearing in print all the time and being repeated over the air.

Now this is an unfortunate situation. There is room for wide difference

of opinion about the Soviet Union. But no one can brush it off as unimportant. Accurate, realistic knowledge of the character, aims and institutions of the Soviet régime is a prerequisite to any intelligent American foreign policy.

So it is fortunate that amid the flood of superficial impressionism and propaganda one finds a book so honest, so informed and so uninhibited as Dr. Dallin's.¹ The author is well-known to students of Russia through his earlier works on Soviet foreign policy, *Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy, 1939-1942* and *Russia and Europe*. His predictions in the latter book about the fundamental aims of Soviet foreign policy have been almost uncanny in their correctness. The book was published over a year ago; the predictions are verified in the newspaper headlines almost every day.

Obviously, Dr. Dallin is a man worth listening to when he takes up a wider subject: the politics and economics of the Soviet Union. Changes in Soviet life and customs have attracted widespread attention abroad.

¹ *The Real Soviet Russia*, by David J. Dallin. \$3.50. Yale.