

# GREAT AMERICAN FOLKLORE



COMPILED BY  
KEMP P. BATTLE





# Great American Folklore

LEGENDS, TALES,  
BALLADS, AND  
SUPERSTITIONS  
FROM ALL ACROSS  
AMERICA

*Compiled by*  
*Kemp P. Battle*

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To Carolyn Battle, partner in all things,  
and Cicero Griffin, my friend.



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## INTRODUCTION

AMERICA IS ALIVE with folklore. She is a country of yarns and legends, ghosts and superstitions, teeming with tradition and song. Her people have more folklore in their heads than a hundred books could hold. Wander from Maine to Oregon and you will see this is true. Go to Bangor, where the fog gets so thick that a woman has to shovel herself out of her house; or Dallas, where the ranches are so big the sun sets somewhere between the back porch and the stables. In Arizona you can see where the legendary Pecos Bill rode a cyclone bareback, using a lightning bolt as his quirt. Along the Mississippi you will find the place where Mike Fink, king of the flatboatmen, raced the steamers with his log-lashed raft and pole. Follow the endlessly winding country roads and you'll pass through towns like Dime Box and Duck Sneeze, Fancy Gap, Hog Eye, Looneyville, Oatmeal, Toadsuck, and Bug Scuffle. If you find yourself in Carrolltown, Alabama, visit the old courthouse known for the mysterious face in the windowpane. They say it is the face of a man who was lynched nearby, and no matter how many times they replace the glass, the face returns. Or perhaps if you're lucky, you might catch sight of one of America's ghosts: Billy the Kid with his deadly smile, or Wild Bill Hickock with his long dark hair blowing in the wind. Some folks in Ohio say they've seen a barefoot boy they swear is Johnny Appleseed, casting his apple seeds like rain on the springtime earth, while others claim the great John Henry, mighty hammers in his hands, still stalks the countryside around the Big Bend Tunnel, where he lost his life.

In any event, when your wandering is done, you will know that America's folklore is endless, that there is no place without its distinctive stories and characters; and you will feel certain that if there is anyone who can outboast a Texan, outfight a Rebel, outwit a Yankee or outwork a cowboy, he hasn't been heard of yet in America.

Folklore has always been too impatient, too spontaneous to stand still for definition. The term is elusive and has caused no lack of mischief among the very scholars who claim to know it best. Folk-



lore is primarily, though not exclusively, an oral tale or tradition passed from one person to another, one generation to the next. Taken as a whole, it represents a people's culture as seen through the changing prism of its stories, beliefs, legends, superstitions, and songs. Taken in its parts, folklore is as varied and unending as the people who create it.

Folklorists have always had a difficult task in following the tenuous oral migration of a legend or tale as it trekked across the years, miles, and cultures. They know better than most that great stories and songs often die with the passing of local raconteurs and folk-singers, so they travel the land with their notebooks and tape recorders, collecting the authentic folk voice before it disappears. They find, with astonishing regularity, that tales transform themselves and adapt constantly to new surroundings.

Vast amounts of American folklore, of course, are not American at all in origin. Her scant three centuries are but a blink to the older cultures that have had time to refine their lore into a measurable body of work. American folklore is a rich inheritance of hundreds of different traditions. Every time a Greek or a Scot, an African or an Arab made his home in America, he brought his folklore with him. The devil tales, and so many of the superstitions about snakes and dogs, fishes and weather that flourished here, sprang from seeds blown from across the seas. Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox were tricking each other in Africa long before they met up with Uncle Remus. Even the exploits of Davy Crockett have their parallel in the feats of the Celtic and Norse heroes. One needs only to browse through Stith Thompson's monumental *Motif Index of Folk Literature* to realize that what seems a wonderful American yarn was told a thousand years ago in Italy, while the ballad hummed yesterday in Kansas was sung in London when Shakespeare was a boy.

There are further difficulties in identifying America's folklore. America was unique in being semiliterate at the very moment she was shaping some of her most enduring legends. Kit Carson was scouting and path-finding the West, for example, while back East they were turning out stacks of dime-novel biographies acclaiming the new hero, the fearless Mountain Man. It is small wonder that when a friend read to Carson one of these dramatic accounts of the



reticent explorer's life, he is said to have remarked, "That feller laid it on a leetle thick, I think." So too, Davy Crockett, one of America's earliest frontier heroes, was largely a creation of the newspapers and popular almanacs of his day. They reported his folksy speeches in Congress and recounted the most fabulous frontier tales under his name. By the time of his death at the Alamo, Crockett's enormous legend, midwived by the growing power of print, was fully grown.

The role of printed material has long been at the center of the debate over what constitutes our authentic folk heritage. The tale your grandfather told you, the same one you spun for your children, certainly passes as folklore, but what of the tales read between the covers of a book, adorned with the special touches of the writer? American folklore is full of great figures whose origins are not derived solely from oral sources. Paul Bunyan, mighty logger of the Big Onion Camp, was invented by an enterprising copywriter for a lumber company who thought Paul might help sell lumber. Pecos Bill, greatest of all the cowboys, came from the pen of Edward O'Reilly in a *Century Magazine* article in 1923, and Tony Beaver, the Bunyanesque lumberjack from Pennsylvania, owes his life to Margaret Montagu's *Up Eel River*. Folklorists may have dismissed all of the above, and many more, as lacking authenticity, but they cannot ignore the popularity of these characters among people all over America.

For if there were no Bunyan, there would still be a race of magnificent loggers for whom Bunyan stands as a symbol. If there was no proof that John Henry ever challenged the steam drill with his twenty-pound hammers, he is, nonetheless, immortal for thousands of laborers, black and white, whose dignity has been threatened by machines. And perhaps, as some historians will say, Billy the Kid was shot stealing a side of beef, but once you've read Walter Noble Burns's account of the Kid's last night, will you still believe he was a thief? When I tell my children the Burns version, surely they will not ask me my source.

The fact remains that American folklore flows from mouth to print and back again. History blurs with folk legends and folklore feeds off history. Outside the strict boundary set by the folklorists is a crowd of zesty figures of dubious folk ancestry determined to enter.



From Mickey Mouse to Casey and his bat, from Paul Bunyan to Superman, the figures are already among us, populating our favorite stories. And they are here to stay.

The American imagination has created a very particular lore, not so much of kings and fairies or wishes from a lamp, but a treasury of knee-slapping humor and outrageous invention. Wherever we look—at the wisdom of the frontier woman, the yarns of the trapper, the ironic wit of the black man—we find vital clues to our national character that suggest why Americans are so impatient and restless, so determined to find bigger and better dreams.

A book on classic American folklore is, at best, only a selection. It is bound to reflect the compiler's own taste and experience, no matter how diligent he or she might be about covering the diverse forms of our folklore. For every tale that follows, every song or superstition, there are a dozen more that others will swear go one better. And they are probably right. Such is the delight and challenge of American folklore that a story's best purpose is to inspire the telling of a second and a third and so on—until the voice cracks, the child sleeps, or the jug runs dry.

The following chapters are broad baskets for a wide harvest. The material chosen follows no strict method, nor is it intended to represent any precise geographical or historical consistency. A contemporary story might be placed alongside a tale popular a century before, provided the two have a common theme. The goal is, above all, to entertain. Yarns of explorers and travelers, hunters and cowboys, preachers and gunslingers, have been gathered together in their appropriate places along with chapters on the boundless activity of folk life: love and marriage, boasting, jesting, and fighting. If an entry was too regional it was discarded in favor of something more national in its appeal, and entries more properly classified as history were avoided, no matter how interesting or relevant they might have seemed.

In the main, my sources are scores of books, almanacs, folklore journals and quarterlies, newspapers, and folk archives. Sometimes I have retold tales from these sources, and often I have spun a number of the tales I myself heard. I served an odd apprenticeship to the



study of American folklore during years of travel across America. As I dug ditches, slaughtered hogs, stretched fences, primed tobacco, and did a thousand odd jobs from one coast to the other that earned me a bed or a meal, I had occasion to hear many great stories. One learns quickly to recognize the familiar rhythms of a true storyteller. Some, like Shotgun Charlie, a black tenant farmer with a booming laugh and an endless repertoire of legend and humor, appear in the following pages attached to a few of their favorite tales.

I have concentrated on lore that bears most directly on the general life in the United States, with the result that certain ethnic minorities have been bypassed as too regional in their appeal. The rich folklore of dozens of ethnic groups in cities and towns across America must be left to the admirable scholarship of professional folklorists. The black man, on the other hand, has had an immense influence on American folklore and is well represented throughout the collection, as is the native American Indian who, though not as influential, receives some well deserved attention.

Wherever possible I have left the dialect of a story unchanged. There are some people who claim that there is something demeaning in reproducing dialect, as if there were some mockery intended in the use of the untutored and local tongue. Perhaps this was true in another age, when stories were written with an unfortunate tone of condescension, often with needless misspelling, which suggested an added ignorance on the part of the speaker. Any sensible person need not be reminded today, though, of the beauty and the clarity of folk speech. To edit it is to translate it, and there are few translators worthy of the task.

One last reminder: never forget that folklore is all around us. We have heard its voice in the songs our mothers sang us at bedtime or the tales our fathers told while waiting for the fish to bite. We can hear it in the voices of the old when their memories return to them full of mystery and power. Folklore lurks behind the names we choose for our streets and baseball teams, hound dogs and race-horses. It is in the traditions that bring dried corn husks to every door in November or encourage the child to write his dreams to



**Santa Claus.** Like a river that is fed from innumerable tiny streams and brooks, folklore takes its strength from many sources, and as it grows it carries all of us, young and old alike, along its wayward journey.



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