

AMERICAN FOLKLORE AND LEGENDS

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American Folklore and Legends

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THE LEGENDS LIVE ON

. . . in which we learn how one story may be the
work of too many authors to count!



Words We Need to Know:

character	[<i>KAR ak ter</i>]—person in a story Buffalo Bill is a <i>character</i> in one of our stories.
cyclone	[<i>SY klone</i>]—a very strong wind The <i>cyclone</i> went spinning along, blowing down trees, lifting the roofs off houses.
imagination	[<i>im aj in AY shun</i>]—the power to see pictures in one's mind It takes <i>imagination</i> to write a story.
lumberjack	[<i>LUM ber jak</i>]—a man who cuts down trees for a living The <i>lumberjack</i> may use an ax or a saw for his work of felling trees.
probably	[<i>PROB ub lee</i>]—likely, likely to happen Pat will <i>probably</i> be asked to be in the play.
swap	[<i>SWOP</i>]—trade, give one thing for another Bill and John <i>swap</i> books with each other when they finish reading what they have.
version	[<i>VER zhun</i>]—one side of a story, a different report of the same story Bob and Joe each told a different <i>version</i> of the tale.



Have you ever heard the old saying: “Too many cooks spoil the broth”? What is the meaning behind this famous statement?

Try to imagine your whole class writing a story together. Would it be right to say, “Too many authors spoil the story”? Why or why not? Might this be true of all stories that have more than one author?

Some of the stories you will read in this book have had hundreds, perhaps *thousands*, of authors. How can a single story have had thousands of authors? Read the introduction to find out.

CASEY JONES! JOHN HENRY! DAVY CROCKETT! The names of heroes like these are special to all Americans. Songs about them are sung all across the country. Stories about them reach us through books, movies and television shows.

Some stories are told a few times and then forgotten, but the tales about our great heroes never die. These wonderful stories are called *legends*. They have come down to us from early times. In fact, some of the legends were already very old when our grandparents were only children.

Perhaps you are wondering just how some of these legends came into being. The truth is that different legends got started in different ways. For instance, take the stories about Harriet Tubman. In books about the Civil War we read that she was a small woman of great courage who faced danger many times to lead her fellow slaves to freedom. She was so brave that people began to tell wonderful stories about her, just as they told exciting tales about Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and other people.

Sometimes a storyteller stretched the truth about a hero's

deeds just a little. Sometimes he stretched the truth a mile or two or three. When the truth in a tale was stretched too far to be believable, the story became known as a *tall tale*.

Some tall tales were also made up about characters who had probably never really lived. Many of these stories may have gotten started when people began to wish out loud. For instance, there might have been an early settler in the West who wished that he could stop the terrible cyclones that often ruined his crops. Perhaps, as wishful thinking, or to make himself feel better, he may have made up the story about Pecos Bill riding the cyclone as if it were a horse.

Other stories about mighty characters who did wonderful deeds were made up or added to by people who came to America from other lands. These people brought along with them more than just the desire to do well. They brought along their own customs, ideas and, above all, their imaginations—rich, wonderful imaginations! And when these people wanted a hero to talk about, they sometimes made up one of their own.

That's probably why the settlers who came here from Hungary told their stories about Joe Magarac, the greatest steelworker of them all! They wanted everyone to know about the great things this giant worker with the Hungarian name could do for his new country. And the tales about Joe got better and better as different storytellers added details and made changes in them over the years.

Can we now begin to see why it may be said that a story can have many, many authors?

Characters like Joe Magarac and Pecos Bill pleased Americans everywhere. People liked to feel that one of their fellow countrymen, even a made-up one, could take care of any

problems that might come along. And they often liked some of their heroes to be big people, so they could tell big stories about them.

Perhaps another reason why Americans liked to make some of their heroes “larger than life” was that our country is such a big place. Wide rivers! Rolling plains! Mighty mountains! Giant forests! All these are ours. And with our giant forests, it was natural to have at least one giant lumberjack like Paul Bunyan.

Some people say that there really was a Paul Bunyan. They say that he was a giant of a man who came to America from Canada. But whether or not he really lived, the stories about his great deeds live on in our legends. Even today, people enjoy making up new tales about him. These stories help to give the Paul Bunyan legend new life. In this book, you will read a brand new Paul Bunyan tale.

Another American hero who is supposed really to have lived is John Henry. The legends do not describe him as a giant. They speak of him as a man—a wonderful man who was stronger than ten ordinary men put together! This was a man with a will to work harder than any machine. Americans have always been proud to tell his story over and over again. He reminds us that a man can do just about anything he sets out to do, if his will is strong enough.

John Henry, Buffalo Bill, Ethan Allen—the list goes on and on. And the stories about our heroes go on and on, never dying out. This is because early Americans liked so much to sit around and swap stories with their friends, just as you probably do today.

Try to think what life was like, of how it was, for the American people long ago. They had no television sets or

radios. Their work was hard, and when it was done they often had no special way to pass the time. So lumberjacks told each other tall tales about Paul Bunyan. Cowboys sat around their campfires and traded stories about Pecos Bill and other heroes of the West. Men who lived in towns gathered around in the local store and took turns telling story after story. And on many a warm night, neighbors sat out on their front steps and traded tales.

We know that Americans still love to hear and tell good stories, so it shouldn't surprise us to learn that in some towns a "Liar's Contest" is held each year. The winner is the person who can make up the best "whopper." (That's a polite word for any story that someone pretends is true, but really isn't.) Some people in the contests just change or add things to stories that most people already know. By doing this, these storytellers often make old tall tales grow even taller.

As you read the tall tales and other stories in this book, you may remember having heard some of them told differently. There's nothing really strange about finding different versions of the same tale. We already know that as the years went by many storytellers made changes in the old tales as they passed them along. We must also keep in mind that many of the tales have traveled around a great deal. They went from state to state and from one end of the country to the other. This happened because so many early Americans were people "on the go."

As these people moved from place to place, either to visit or settle down, they took their stories with them. The stories were then told and retold in different places by different people. And, of course, changes were made as this happened.

You can see now how many, many authors helped put