PAUL BUNYAN AND THE BLUE OX

By JAMES J. MCDONALD

SOME say Paul Bunyan (spelled Bunion north of the Canadian line) was born down in Maine. Others equally as truthful claim his birthplace was Quebec, while still others insist that he first saw the light of day on Prince Edward Island. In any event, we know that he was born somewhere, that he cut his teeth on a peavie handle, drove logs on the Kennebec river in his first pair of pants, grew to be the greatest logger of all time, and in his early manhood came to Wisconsin.

In stature Paul was a giant, as is evidenced by the thousands of small lakes scattered throughout northern Wisconsin which any lumberjack will admit are nothing more than Paul’s tracks, made in the spring of the year when the ground was soft and filled with water from the melting snow. It took all the time of a swamper with a scoop shovel to keep Paul’s pipe filled.

His lung capacity was tremendous. Even as a youngster he could kill a whole pond full of bull frogs with one “holier”. He could spit two hundred fifty feet up hill and against the wind, and when he spoke in anger limbs fell from trees. When he called his men for lunch, he yelled so loud that they rode out of the woods on the echo.

Sourdough Sam, one of Paul’s cooks, used to call Paul’s men to dinner by blowing through a woodpecker hole in an old pine stub, but Paul devised the idea of a large dinner horn. Big Ole, the blacksmith, made the horn of sheet iron, and the first time that Paul blew it he knocked down ten acres of pine. To better matters he pointed the horn straight up in the air, but the result was a tornado that blew down three of his camps. After this, Paul let Sourdough Sam return to calling the men to dinner by blowing through the woodpecker hole in the old pine stub.

Not only was Paul a large man but he loved to work with large men. The winter he logged on the Big Onion he didn’t hire a single man that measured less than six and a half feet sitting down and weighed less than three hundred pounds in his undershirt. The food he furnished his men added mightily to their strength and endurance, as is shown by the fact that the chipmunks that ate the prune pits that were thrown out of Paul’s camps grew so large that they ate up all the wolves and were later shot by the settlers for tigers.
In spite of Paul’s size, he was unusually fast on his feet. It is said that he could spin a log until the bark came off and then would run ashore on the bubbles, and that he could ride a log on water so rough that it would tear an ordinary man in two just to take a drink out of the river. It is a well known fact that he could stand at the end of an eighty-foot sleeping shanty, blow out a candle, and then run the entire length of the camp, jump into an upper bunk, and have his head covered up before it was dark.

But it wasn’t Paul’s size or speed alone that won him undying fame. It was his uncanny ability to meet successfully the difficulties that overwhelmed the ordinary logger. On one occasion a tote teamster was bringing into one of Paul’s camps a load of pork and beans with a team of eight oxen. As darkness came on, the tote teamster de-

![Image](chipinazia-camp-of-j-s-and-john-obrien-near-stinnett-washburn-county-1887.jpg)

cluded to take a short cut across a small lake near the camp. The ice was not so thick as it appeared, and in went the teamster, the oxen, and the pork and beans. The teamster alone reached shore. That night there came up a big snow storm, the tote road was blocked, and it looked like starvation for Paul and his crew. But Paul met the situation promptly. He sent his men down to the lake with orders to cut down all timber within one hundred feet of the shore. He then set fire to the slashings and boiled the lake. For the rest of the winter the men had pork and bean soup, with an ox tail flavor. When a man wanted soup he merely took his bowl and ran down to the lake. Some took the soup out in the woods for lunch. Those that liked it cold stuck a stick or a piece of rope through a hole in the ice and later in the woods, gnawed off the frozen soup. Those that liked it hot bored holes in their peavie handles and, filling the hollows, heated the soup as they worked by the friction of their buckskin mittens on the peavie handles. Without doubt, this was the beginning of the thermos bottle, but of course Paul never got any credit for the invention. He was always too busy to get a patent.
On another occasion, Paul's men insisted on flapjacks in such quantities that it was impossible to supply the demand; so Paul had Big Ole, the blacksmith, make a griddle so large that you could not begin to see across it when the smoke got thick. It took almost a forty of dry pine to make a real fire under it. Paul got some twenty-odd negro boys, as they could best stand the heat, to put on roller skates, and with pork rinds on their heels, skate over the griddle to grease it. He had several contraptions for getting the batter out on the griddle, but to get the flapjacks off after they were done was the problem. To meet the situation, Paul put a popcorn under each flapjack so that when it was done the popcorn popped, throwing the flapjacks off the griddle where they were caught in bushel baskets.

One of Paul's chief accomplishments was the logging of the pyramid forty. This forty, according to old loggers, was located on section 37, up near where the Little Auger empties into the Big Gimlet. The forty was so high that it took fourteen men a solid week, all looking together, to see the top of it, and its sides were so steep that the birds that inhabited it laid square eggs to keep them from rolling down the sides of the hill. Yet in spite of these seeming difficulties, Paul and his crew in less than five weeks cut off the back part of the forty, and they would have cleared the entire forty in less than four months had it not been for the fact that Paul lost a lot of his men through their becoming short-legged on one side from working continuously on the side of the slope.

It was while logging off this forty that a very interesting incident happened. Paul had a man known as Double-jawed Murphy, who had two sets of teeth of such strength and capacity that he could saw through anything. One night while walking in his sleep he encountered Paul's grindstone and, before he woke, had chewed it up. Paul promptly ordered another by drawing a circle on a pine board to represent what he wanted (Paul couldn't write), but when the order came back Paul had a cheese. "There," said Paul, "I forgot to make a square hole in the center of the circle!" But Paul overcame the loss of the grindstone by sending his men up the side of the forty where they loosened up large boulders. As these rolled down the side of the hill, the men ran beside them and sharpened their axes on the revolving stones.

Another of Paul's great experiences occurred in the spring that he drove on Round River. He started with his drive as soon as the ice was out, and in about three weeks he noticed on the left bank of the river a camp. "That's funny," said Paul, "I didn't know anybody was logging on this river but me." The logs were running fast, so they passed the camp and at the end of about three more weeks Paul again noticed a camp on the left bank of the river. "This certainly is funny," said Paul, "three of us logging on the same river!" As it was getting dark, they continued the drive, but in about three weeks, to their surprise, they again saw a camp on the left bank of the river. This time Paul sprang ashore only to find it was his own camp! He was on Round River and had been going around in a circle for nine
weeks. The best authority has it that Paul siphoned the logs out of Round River into the Wisconsin by means of the big dinner horn. Others claim that he had Sourdough Sam mix up an extra large batch of sour dough and thus lifted the logs out of the river and over the ridge into the Wisconsin.

But Paul, in spite of his size, speed, and ingenuity, would have fallen far short in his accomplishments had it not been for his ever-present helpmate, Babe, the blue ox. Babe was born the winter of the blue snow, which accounts for his color, and it is believed that Paul smuggled him while still a mere calf across the Canadian line into Maine in a gunny sack in order to save the duty. His size can

best be appreciated when you consider that he was actually forty-two axe handles and a plug of tobacco between the eyes. For a long time the matter was in dispute, some insisting that he was six axe handles between the eyes; others, that he was forty-two. The dispute arose out of using different standards of measurements. Those that insisted that he was six axe handles between the eyes were talking in terms of Paul's axe handles, which were slightly more than seven times as long as the ordinary axe handle.

Babe had a tremendous appetite. In fact, it took three tote teams a week to haul enough hay to provide him a full meal. For a snack between lunches, he would eat fifty bales of hay, wire and all, and when the old fellow was really hungry it took six men with long poles with hooks on the end of them to keep the wire out of his teeth. The first winter that Paul logged in Wisconsin, it was impossible to shoe Babe as there wasn't room in Wisconsin for him to lie down and he was too heavy to raise in a sling. The following winter, Paul logged
off North Dakota in order to get room for Babe to lie down so that Big Ole, the blacksmith, could shoe him. Big Ole claims that on one occasion he carried one of Babe’s shoes on his shoulder a half mile across solid trap rock and that he sank to his knees at every step. It has long been recognized that every time they put a new shoe on Babe they had to open up a new iron mine in Michigan. Babe could pull anything, and Paul often used him to great advantage by hitching him to the end of a crooked logging road and having Babe jerk it out straight. On one occasion Babe pulled so hard that you could see his tracks in the ice the next winter.

When Paul was logging up near Rhinelander, Babe broke loose early one spring morning when the ground was soft, and went off on a jaunt of his own. Of course his tracks were so far apart that it was impossible to follow him, so Paul merely waited figuring that he would be back for dinner. Babe ran diagonally across the state, jumped the Mississippi at Prairie du Chien, continued across northern Iowa, crossed into South Dakota, and then circled back through Minnesota and, as Paul had anticipated, was back at noon. During the summer of that year, an emigrant crossing South Dakota in an old-fashioned covered wagon with his wife and baby, fell into one of Babe’s tracks. The baby finally got out to tell the story, but when he did he was fifty-seven years old. On another occasion Chris Crosshall, one of Paul’s straw bosses, got Paul’s logs down to New Orleans by mistake, when Paul expected to market them on the upper Mississippi. As there were no mills in New Orleans to saw the logs, it looked as though Paul would go broke if he couldn’t get his logs
back to market. No one had ever heard of logs being driven upstream, yet Paul solved the difficulty. He took Babe up near St. Paul, gave him seven carloads of salt and a drink out of the Mississippi, and back came water, logs and all.

Another difficulty that Paul encountered was the year of the two winters, when it was winter all summer and in the fall it got colder. It warmed up to 62 below a couple of times that winter, and Paul lost a lot of men from sheer exhaustion, due to carrying around so many clothes trying to keep warm.

Paul was no slouch as a hunter either. With his old muzzle loader he could shoot so far that he had to rub salt on the bullets to preserve the game until he got there. One day Paul at a distance of three miles saw a deer stick his head up over a log. Paul shot the deer square between the eyes, and down he went, but only to stick his head up over the log again. Again Paul hit him square between the eyes, and again the deer went down. Twenty-four times did the deer come up and twenty-four times did Paul knock him down. Finally, when the deer failed to reappear, Paul rushed up to see what kind of creature it was that he had been dealing with, when to his surprise he found twenty-four dead deer behind the log, each one shot square between the eyes.

Paul threw the twenty-four deer over his shoulder and took them back to camp. Next morning Brimstone Bill took the deer skins and made a buckskin harness for the blue ox. About noon the cookie took Babe in the new harness out in the woods to bring back a load of wood for the cook. It was raining at the time and, as it was hard hauling, the cookie didn't turn around until he reached the cook shantie, when to his surprise all that he could see was the tugs of the buckskin harness stretching as far as he could see down along the logging road. The green buckskin had stretched in the rain and the load of wood hadn't budged an inch. The cookie cussed (as cookies sometimes do). He then unhitched Babe, threw the harness over a stump, and went in to dinner. While he was there the sun came out and dried the tugs of the harness, so that when the cookie came out there was the load of wood right in front of the cook shanty.

Paul was ignorant of geography, yet he created a great deal of it. It is admitted that he scooped out Lake Superior in order to get a place to give Babe a bath in, and that he actually started the Mississippi River. It seems that Brimstone Bill, with the blue ox hitched to a big tank mounted on an immense sled, was hauling water from Lake Superior to ice Paul's logging roads in North Dakota when suddenly, in making a sharp turn in the road at terrific speed, the sled tipped over. It was the outrush of the water from this mighty tank that started the Mississippi River. Any lumberjack will tell you that this must be true as the Mississippi is still running.

Paul's camps were in keeping with the rest of his operations. They were so large that one of Paul's cooks in going from the cook stove to the flour barrel got lost and they didn't find him for a week. Another time, Joe Mufferon, one of Paul's cooks, put a loaf of bread in
the big cookstove and started around to the other side to take it out, but when he got there the loaf had burned black. Before Paul hired Sourdough Sam he had great trouble finding good cooks. One of his cooks used so much grease that he had to wear caulked shoes to keep from sliding out of the cook shanty, had to rub sand on his hands before he picked up anything, and at night had to sleep between sandpaper blankets to keep from slipping out of his bunk. In his camp on the Big Onion it took seven men with seven wheelbarrows just to keep the cook shanty clear of prune pits, tea leaves, and coffee grounds.

Johnnie Inkslinger, who invented bookkeeping about the time that Paul invented logging, was one of Paul's chief helpers. Johnnie had a big fountain pen that Big Ole, the blacksmith, made for him. By means of a garden hose the pen was hitched in series to three barrels of ink that sat up on a shelf back of Johnnie's desk. One winter, through failing to dot his i's and cross his t's Johnnie saved Paul nine barrels of ink.

Mrs. Bunyan, who was also of immense size, occasionally came to camp. Paul (when she wasn't around) complained considerably about the cost of dressing her. He said it took seventeen four point Hudson Bay blankets to make her a skirt, the main sail of a full rigged ship to make her a waist, and four extra big moose hides to make her a pair of shoes. Paul also had a daughter, Teeny, who married Big Ole, the blacksmith, and a son Jean who at an early age started logging on his own hook.

Paul loved dogs and usually kept several around camp. First, there was Elmer, the moose hound, that died of heart failure. Before his heart got bad Elmer could catch a full grown moose on the run and finish him with one shake. When meat got low the cook would say, "Elmer, bring a moose." In a moment Elmer would be back with a moose, and would continue the process until the cook called him off. The cook forgot one day to stop Elmer until he had brought in so many moose that he overdid. This was the beginning of Elmer's heart trouble. Paul also had Skookum, who was one ax handle high in front and seven behind, and was always running down hill. Skookum could run a week straight and never feel tired. Paul also kept handy Fido, the shaggy haired watchdog. To Fido he fed all the tramps, watch peddlers, and tailor's agents that happened to show up at camp.

But Paul's prize dog was Sport, the reversible hound. Sport was half wolf and half elephant hound, and Paul brought him up on bear's milk. One night when the dog was about four weeks old Paul came back home and, seeing something moving in the hay at the farther end of the hovel, threw his hand axe at it, thinking it was a rat. Rushing up, he found that he had cut Sport in two. Paul quickly picked him up, stuck him together, and wrapped a gunny sack around him. That night Paul worried so much about the pup that he wore out four pairs of moose hide shoepacks just walking around the big stove. To Paul's surprise, the pup got well. But when
he unwrapped him he found that he had put him together wrong; his hind legs were up and his front legs down. You might think that this was a great disadvantage, but the opposite proved true, for Sport turned out to be the best dog that Paul ever had, never failing to get what he went after. He would run on his front legs until they were all tired out; then he would flip over and run on his hind ones. Sport would have grown to be a considerable dog if it hadn't been for the fact that while still a pup he broke through six feet of ice on Lake Michigan and was drowned.

Paul also had a cow named Lucy. According to Paul she was half wolf and half Jersey, and the assertion is supported by the fact that she had a ravenous appetite and was of a roving disposition. When feed was scarce around camp Paul would fit her out with green goggles and a pair of Babe's old snow shoes, and with an old church bell around her neck would send her out to feed on the snow drifts. Yet in spite of this poor diet she gave so much milk that it took seven men to skim the cream. On one occasion, she ate up a whole forty of balsam. The rest of the winter the men used her milk for cough medicine.

Paul also had a little ox that he called Benny. Benny was born on an eighty-acre farm down in Maine and when he was but three weeks old had eaten up everything on the place. The farmer wrote Paul to come and get the calf. Paul at the time was logging out near Bismarck, North Dakota, and as he needed a mate for Babe, he walked down to Maine that afternoon and, starting back the same evening, reached camp about midnight. Benny grew so fast on the road that every time Paul looked back Benny had grown two feet. When Paul got back to his camp he put Benny in the biggest barn he could find, but next morning Paul couldn't find the barn. Benny had outgrown it and was scampering around with the remains of it on his back. But Benny had one great fault, an insatiable desire for flapjacks. Sourdough Sam and one hundred cookees couldn't make them fast enough for him. So to keep Benny away from the cook shanty Paul tied him up. One night Benny pawed, and thrashed his tail, and bellowed until he had knocked down half of Paul's remaining pine in North Dakota. In the morning he broke loose, rushed the cook shanty, and while bolting flapjacks, in his haste swallowed the red hot stove. Indigestion set in and in spite of everything that Paul could do, Benny died.

It is true that Benny was notional. For instance when there was no snow he wouldn't pull a pound, so to get any work out of him in the spring they had to fool him by whitewashing the logging roads. Still, old loggers claim that, had Benny lived, he would have been a fair rival for Babe. In fact, the winter that Paul used Benny in the woods the seven axemen had to get up twenty-six hours before daylight to get logs enough on hand to keep both Babe and Benny busy. And it cannot be denied that the seven axemen were good choppers. Their axes were so large that it took a week to grind one of them. Each axeman had three axes and two helpers, whose main duty it
was to carry the axes to the river to cool them off when they got red hot from chopping.

One of the greatest dangers faced by Paul's lumberjacks was the many wild, but happily now extinct, animals that haunted the woods in the vicinity of Paul's camps. Take first the snow snake. It came across from China the year of the two winters when Bering Strait was frozen over. They were pure white with pink eyes, and many

were the young lumberjacks that were "froze stiff" of fright just thinking about them. And then there was that most ferocious of ferocious animals, the hodag. A hodag in his prime, according to the best authority, weighed not less than two hundred sixty-five pounds, and possessed of heavy jaws, sharp claws, and a row of sharp spears extending along its back, it was something to be respected. Forty full-grown hodags attacked Paul's camp one night when Paul was alone, and if it hadn't been that he had presence of mind to throw snuff in their eyes, he would undoubtedly have been overcome.

Down the St. Croix.
by the beasts. Nor was the danger from the hoop snake to be entirely discounted. With its tail in its mouth it loved to roll at midnight along deserted logging roads. Paul lost a valuable yoke of oxen one early morning. The tote teamster was bringing in a load of supplies to the camp when he suddenly met a hoop snake traveling at breakneck speed. As the snake passed the sled it disengaged itself and struck at the nearest ox, but missed and struck the pole of the sled. In a moment there was a terrific explosion and both oxen dropped. The poison from the fangs of the snake had caused the pole to swell so quickly that the oxen were killed by flying iron from the breaking of the ring that bound the outer end of the sled pole.

The hide-behind also claims attention. It lived by stealth, and was large, powerful, and covered from head to foot with long, black, shaggy hair. Its habit was to stand on its hind legs behind a tree, and scare its victim to death with a terrifying and fiendish howl.

Nor did the hide-behind have anything on the sliver cat. The sliver cat weighed usually not less than three hundred pounds, and had the peculiarity of an eleven foot tail with a large, hard ball on the end of it. One side of the tail was smooth, while the other side was covered with a burr-like growth similar to that found on the common burdock. Standing on a low hanging limb, the sliver cat made its kill with a swing of its tail, and then by means of the prickly stickers dragged its victim up in the tree. Paul has said that it was a most inspiring sight to see, silhouetted against a full moon in a cloudless sky, a full grown sliver cat balanced on a limb, with its magnificent tail poised ready to strike its unsuspecting supper.

There were also several animals that, though not dangerous, were annoying. Chief among these was the axe handle hound that prowled at night in search of axe handles—its only food. The runtifusel had a most ugly disposition, but was slow on its feet. The side hill dodger, or side hill badger as it was sometimes called, was peculiarly adapted to life on a side hill in that it had two short legs on the up-hill side.

Paul also had trouble from mosquitoes. Remember that the mosquito of Paul's time was not the degenerate of today but weighed as much as twelve to fifteen pounds, measured eighteen to twenty inches from tip to tip, and when in search of human blood advanced with the speed and roar of the "Spirit of St. Louis." Early one spring, a swarm of these winged pests attacked without warning Paul's main camp on the Little Tadpole. Luckily, the assault did not start until sundown, which gave the men an opportunity to retreat from the woods under cover of darkness. It is claimed that the mosquitoes were so thick that night that the blue ox, who covered the retreat, killed as many as three hundred twenty-six with a single switch of his tail. After reaching camp, the men were besieged for seven days, where, under most trying circumstances, they defended themselves as best they could with cant hooks, peavies, pick poles, and double bitted axes. The din of battle, it is said, was heard for more than sixty miles. Suddenly and
Giant Silver Maple near Confluence of Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers.
unexpectedly, the mosquitoes disappeared as quickly and mysteriously as they came. Some claim it was because their dead were piled so high around the camp that they could no longer fight effectively. Others insist that it was due to a stampede of the big buck mosquitoes who, in their madness to escape a rumored charge of the blue ox, trampled to death the weaker members of the swarm. At any rate, for some reason or other, they suddenly retired, leaving Paul and his men the freedom of the woods.

Log Jam on the Chippewa at Falls, 1869.

The attack over, Paul started plans to avoid a future catastrophe by sending Sourdough Sam to Louisiana to bring back several dozen yoke of extra large bumble bees, particularly noted for their ferocity and the length of their stingers. Sam made each bee check his stinger with him; then fastening their wings down with sureingles, he brought them back on foot. We have Sam’s statement for it that he never lost a bee. As soon as Sam arrived, Paul turned the newcomers loose to destroy the mosquitoes, but, to Paul’s surprise, the bees and the mosquitoes made a hit with each other, immediately intermarried, and their offspring, inheriting the bad tendencies of both parents, appeared with stingers fore and aft, getting their victims going and coming.

There is some conflict among authorities as to how Paul actually rid the woods of this new terror. Some say that the bee instinct of the new hybrid caused them to fly across Lake Superior, where in attacking a fleet of Paul’s ships bringing sugar to his camps they ate so much sugar that, being unable to fly, they drowned. Others claim
Virgin Hardwood Near Laona.
that Paul sent at night some fifty volunteers to tap all the trees in a sugar bush near the camp and that these hybrids smelling the fresh sap attacked the sugar bush by sinking their bills deep into the trees to get the sap, and that the trees writhing in pain retaliated by tightening on the bills. The hybrids, in attempting to extricate themselves, drove their stingers far into the trees, and again the trees, groaning in agony, tightened around the stingers. With the bee-mosquitoes held fast at both ends, it was an easy matter for Paul and his crew to dispatch them. This, according to some authorities, explains the phenomenon of the birds-eye maple.

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The tales here related by no means complete the Bunyan tales, yet I feel they include most of the “key” stories and many that were at one time told with variations in Wisconsin lumber camps. The details of the telling always differed, for these depended on circumstances, including the ability and mood of the teller, and the gullibility of the audience.

It is rather difficult to determine exactly when or where the Paul Bunyan stories began. James Stevens, in the introduction to his book, *Paul Bunyan*, presents a convincing argument that the stories are of French-Canadian origin having their beginnings as early perhaps as the forties. If this is a fact, it is not hard to understand how the Bunyan tales were carried from the lumber camps of Quebec and New Brunswick to those of Maine, and from there to the Great Lakes pineries. From the Great Lakes, they followed the logger to the Pacific coast as the industry moved westward. They probably came to Wisconsin in the eighties or early nineties, when lumbering was the leading industry of the state, and were going the rounds of most of the camps by 1900, when Wisconsin was leading the nation in the production of saw logs.

Mightily have these tales been improved upon since the days of the inception of Paul. Thousands of lumberjacks have added their mite to this creation as they gathered about the fires of far flung lumber camps. And it would seem that, as they vied one with the other concerning the greatness of Paul and the wonders of the blue ox, they were building better than they knew, until lo, there stands to their ingenuity, their love of exaggeration, and the vastness of the once great American forest, an enduring memorial in these delightful yarns. Long may they be told and retold, and kept forever fresh in this workaday world.

**SOME PAUL BUNYAN LITERATURE**

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