





Paul Bunyan



“Timber!” With a booming crash, the enormous white pine falls to the forest floor. A two-man team swarms over it, removing the smaller branches. Another man wraps a chain around the base of the tree to haul it away on the go-devil, a sled-like machine pulled by... a blue ox? Suddenly, a giant man, ten feet tall at least, appears out of the woods. He picks up the giant pine in one hand, and he and his ox Babe head toward the river...



Or at least, that’s a tall tale you might hear about Paul Bunyan, the legendary logger of the Northwoods. Who or what was Paul Bunyan? Did he really exist? If not, where did all those stories come from?



When Europeans first arrived in what is now Wisconsin, over one-third of the land was covered in forests. These forests were a valuable resource that Europeans, and later the Americans, wanted. Native nations in Wisconsin were forced to cede their land to the United States government. With the Native peoples removed from their ancestral homes, the lumber industry grew quickly. Logging companies bought the land and hired men known as timber runners to survey it. Logging crews were sent into the heart of the Wisconsin forests to log the old-growth white pines.



Logging was dangerous and lonely work. Trees were cut in the winter, and lumberjacks stayed at camps in the Northwoods all season long. They worked in freezing temperatures, blizzards, and howling rainstorms. In the spring men surfed floating logs down flooded rivers to sawmills. There wasn’t much in the way of entertainment, so loggers and lumbermen had to invent their own. Telling Paul Bunyan stories was a way to pass the time. Who was the original Paul Bunyan? No one really knows. But plenty of men claimed to have worked with him. Or worked with someone that worked with him. And on and on.



Whoever told the best stories and jokes usually earned the respect of the other lumberjacks in camp. If one storyteller had Paul cutting down a tree with one stroke of his axe, then another might say he took two trees down, one with his first swing, and another on a return swing. Or three. Or five! The stories about Paul Bunyan passed from storyteller to storyteller, each retelling adding a bit to Paul’s legend. This is how folklore grows.

Eventually, people wrote books about Paul Bunyan, expanding on his myth, and made up friends for him. His most famous companion was Babe the Blue Ox. In those later stories Paul went from being a great lumberjack to a magical being! He was so huge he created the Great Lakes with his footprints! He was tired one day and dragged his axe home, accidentally creating the Mississippi River!

You can find Paul Bunyan stories all over the United States, but his home is in the Midwest, where they were first told. As the lantern lights dim and the wolves begin to howl, the lumberjacks gather round the hot wood stove to play cards, make music, and laugh at the crazy stories of Paul Bunyan, the greatest lumberjack of all time. Or so they say.

Research for this article was based partly on Michael Edmonds’s [*Out of the Northwoods: The Many Lives of Paul Bunyan*](#) from the Wisconsin Historical Society Press.