



Tall Tales



A tall tale starts out like a regular story, but it tends to stretch the facts a little.

Well, actually, it stretches the facts a lot.

Where was the first tall tale told? Probably around a campfire. Out on the frontier of the 1800s, American settlers liked to exaggerate. They created heroes and heroines who were larger than life, capable of amazing deeds. In a big land with wild weather and wild animals, the stories had to be just as big and just as wild.

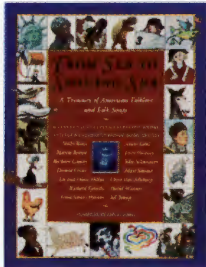
Tall tales are still being told today. In fact, after you read these examples, you're invited to add to the tradition and write your own!

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As loggers changed the landscape of America in the 1800s, they told tales about a giant lumberjack of incredible strength. Paul Bunyan quickly became a folk legend from Maine to the Pacific Northwest.



Paul Bunyan, the Mightiest Logger of Them All

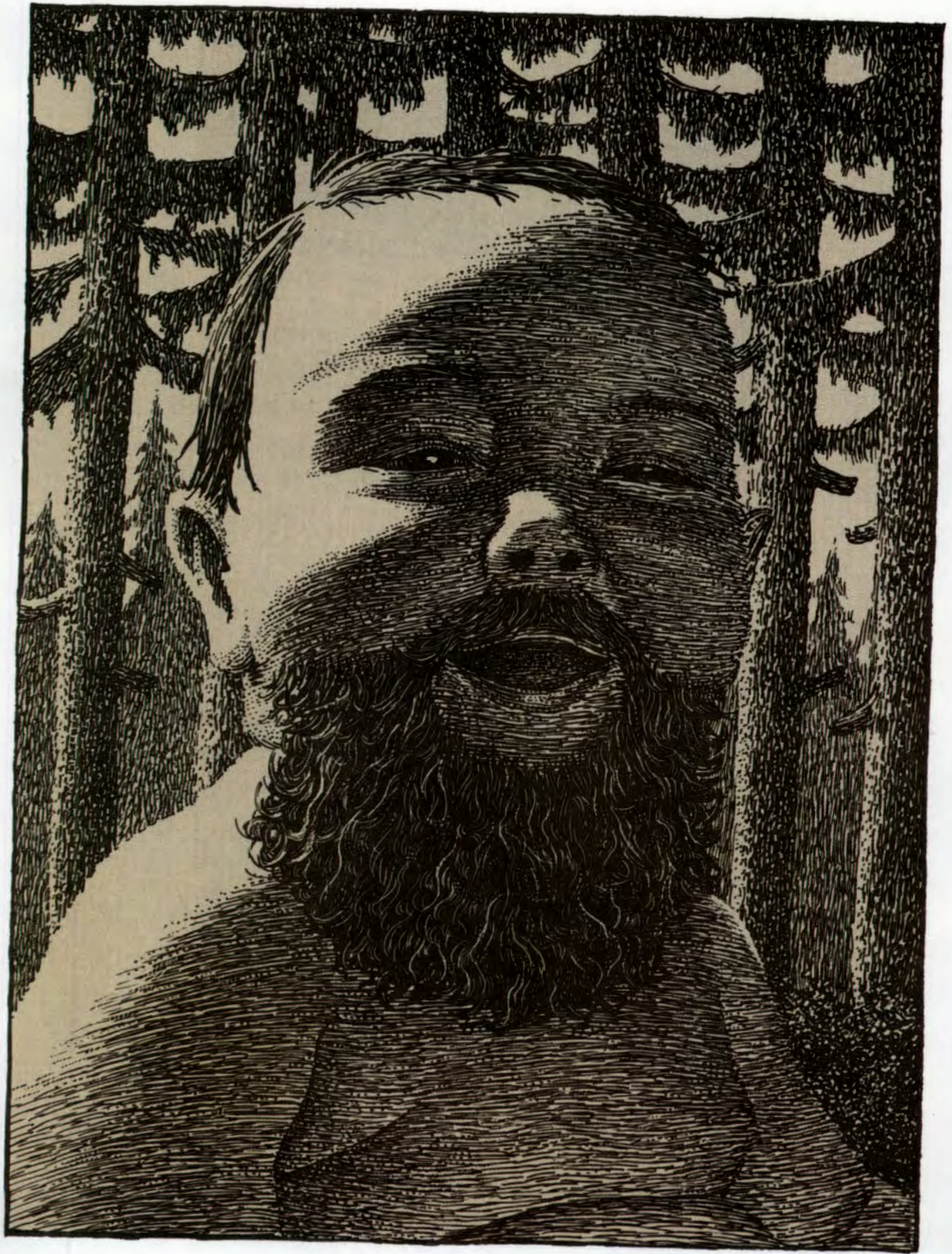
Retold by Mary Pope Osborne

Illustrated by Chris Van Allsburg

It seems an amazing baby was born in the state of Maine. When he was only two weeks old, he weighed more than a hundred pounds, and for breakfast every morning he ate five dozen eggs, ten sacks of potatoes, and a half barrel of mush made from a whole sack of cornmeal. But the baby's strangest feature was his big, curly black beard. It was so big and bushy that every morning his mother had to comb it with a pine tree.

Except for that black beard, the big baby wasn't much trouble to anybody until he was about nine months old. That was when he first started to crawl, and since he weighed over five hundred pounds, he caused an earthquake that shook the whole town.

The baby's parents tried putting him in a giant floating cradle off the coast of Maine; but every time he rolled over, huge waves drowned all the villages along the coast.



So his parents hauled the giant toddler to a cave in the Maine woods far away from civilization and said good-bye. His father gave him a fishing pole, a knife, some flint rocks, and an axe. "We'll think of you often, honey," his mother said, weeping. "But you can't come back home — you're just too big."

That's the story of how Paul Bunyan came to take care of himself in the Maine woods. And even though he lived alone for the next twenty years, he got along quite well.

In those times, huge sections of America were filled with dark green forests. It would be nice if those trees could have stayed tall and thick forever. But the pioneers needed them to build houses, churches, ships, wagons, bridges, and barns. So one day Paul Bunyan took a good look at those trees and decided to invent logging.

"Tim-ber!" he yelled, and he swung the bright steel axe his father had given him in a wide circle. There was a terrible crash, and when Paul looked around, he saw he'd felled ten white pines with a single swing.

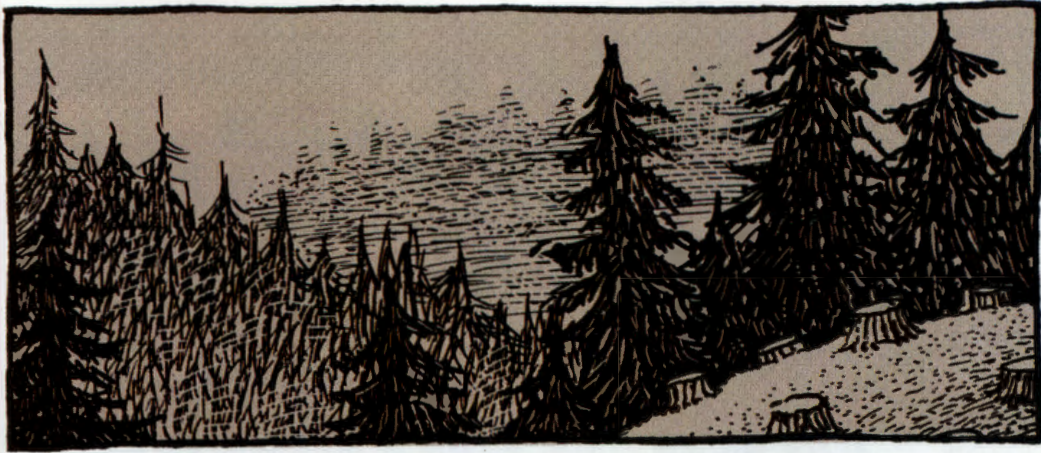
After that Paul traveled plenty fast through the untamed North Woods. He cut pine, spruce, and red willow in Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin. He cleared cottonwoods out of Kansas so farmers could plant wheat and oaks out of Iowa so farmers could plant corn.

When next heard of, Paul was headed to Arizona. He dragged his pickaxe behind him on the trip, not realizing he was leaving a big ditch in his tracks. Today that ditch is called the Grand Canyon.

When Paul got back from the West, he decided to start a logging camp. Word spread fast. Since all the woodsmen had heard of Paul Bunyan, thousands of them hurried to Paul's headquarters at Big Onion on the Big Onion River in Minnesota to be part of his crew.

"There's only two requirements," Paul announced to the men who'd gathered to apply for the job. "All my loggers have to be over ten feet tall and be able to pop six buttons off their shirts with one breath."

Well, about a thousand of the lumberjacks met those requirements, and Paul hired them all. Then he built a gigantic logging camp with



bunkhouses a mile long and bunks ten beds high. The camp's chow table was so long that it took a week to pass the salt and pepper from one end to the other. Paul dug a few ponds to provide drinking water for everyone. Today we call those ponds the Great Lakes.

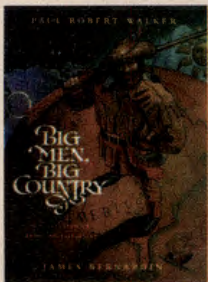
Things went pretty well at the Big Onion Lumber Company until the Year of the Hard Winter. One day Shot Gunderson, the crew boss, complained to Paul, "Boss, it's so cold that the flames for all the lanterns are freezing. And, Boss, when I give orders to the woods crew, all my words freeze in the air and hang there stiff as icicles."

"Well, haul away your frozen words and store them somewhere next to the lantern flames," Paul advised. "They'll both thaw out in the spring."

Sure enough, they did. The only problem was that, come spring, the melting lantern flames started some mean little brush fires. And when Shot's frozen words thawed, old cries of "Timber!" and "Chow time!" started to echo throughout the woods, causing all sorts of confusion. But other than that, things ran pretty smoothly.

Well, there's stories and stories about Paul Bunyan. For many years, old loggers sat around potbellied stoves and told about the good old times with Paul. Those loggers are all gone now, but many of their stories still hang frozen in the cold forest air of the North Woods, waiting to be told. Come spring, when they start to thaw, some of them might just start telling themselves. It's been known to happen.

Stories and songs about John Henry have been around since the 1870s. He became famous as the steel driver who hammered faster than a machine. Did John Henry exist? No one knows for sure. But like Paul Bunyan, he stands for the deeds of many others.



John Henry Races the Steam Drill

Retold by Paul Robert Walker

The Big Bend Tunnel was the longest tunnel in America — a mile and a quarter through the heart of the West Virginia mountains. The C & O Railroad started building it back around 1870. There was plenty of hard work for everyone, but the steel-driving men worked the hardest. And the hardest-working steel-driving man of them all was John Henry.

Now, John Henry was a powerful man — six feet tall and two hundred pounds of rippling muscle. He swung his nine-pound hammer from sunup to sundown, driving a steel drill into solid rock. Little Bill, the shaker, turned John Henry's drill between hammer blows and pulled it out when the hole was done. When there were enough holes, the demolition boys filled them with nitroglycerine and blew the rock to kingdom come. Then John Henry drove more steel — day after day in the heat and darkness and stale air of the tunnel.





John Henry always sang while he drove the steel — and at the end of every line he brought that nine-pound hammer down like a crash of thunder.

*This old hammer (Bam!)
Rings like silver (Bam!)
Shines like gold, boys, (Bam!)
Shines like gold. (Bam!)*

*Ain't no hammer (Bam!)
In these mountains (Bam!)
Rings like mine, boys, (Bam!)
Rings like mine. (Bam!)*

One day, Captain Tommy interrupted John Henry in the middle of his song. “John Henry,” he said, “the company wants to test one of those new steam drills. They say a steam drill can do the work of three or four men. But I say a good man can beat the steam. And I say you are the best man I have.”

John Henry rested his nine-pound hammer on his broad, muscular shoulder. “Captain Tommy,” he said, “a man ain't nothin' but a man. Before I let that steam drill beat me down, I'll die with my hammer in my hand.”

“Son,” offered Captain Tommy, “if you beat that steam drill, I'll give you one hundred dollars and a new suit of clothes.”

“That's mighty generous,” said John Henry, “but don't you worry about that. Just go to town and buy me a twenty-pound hammer. This nine-pound maul is feeling light.”

The news of the contest spread through the camp like a strong wind whipping down the mountain. The company men said John Henry was a poor working fool who didn't stand a chance against that mighty steam drill. Some of the working men thought the same. But the steel-driving men knew John Henry — and they believed in the power of a mighty man.

That night, John Henry told his wife, Polly Ann, about the contest. “Don't you strain yourself, honey,” said Polly Ann. “Course we could use that hundred dollars — and you need a new suit of clothes.”

John Henry smiled and kissed Polly Ann. "I ain't worried about money or clothes," he said. "Don't y' see sugar — a man ain't nothin' but a man, and a man's got to beat the steam."

The next morning, the steel drivers crowded into the Big Bend Tunnel. It was hot and dusty, and the air was so foul that a man could hardly breathe. The only light was the flickering of lamps burning lard oil and blackstrap molasses.

The company man wheeled the steam drill into the tunnel and set it up against the rock. It was nothing but a machine — all shiny and modern and strange. Then John Henry walked in and stood beside it. He was nothing but a man — all black and fine and natural.

Captain Tommy handed John Henry a brand-new twenty-pound hammer. "There ain't another like it in West Virginia," he said. "Good luck, son."

John Henry held the hammer in his hand and felt its fine natural weight. In the flickering light of the tunnel, the head of that hammer shone like gold. "Gonna call this hammer Polly Ann," he said.

Little Bill sat on the rock, holding the six-foot drill in his hands. John Henry towered above the steel, just waiting to begin. It was so quiet in that tunnel, you could hear the soft breathing of the steel-driving men.

Captain Tommy blew his whistle. The company man turned on the steam drill. John Henry swung his twenty-pound hammer back and brought it down with a crash like thunder. As he swung it back again, he began to sing:

This old hammer (Bam!)
Rings like silver (Bam!)
Shines like gold, boys, (Bam!)
Shines like gold. (Bam!)

John Henry kept driving steel and the steam drill kept drilling. Pretty soon the whole mountain was rumbling and shaking. John Henry's muscles bulged and strained like they never bulged and strained before. Sweat cascaded down his powerful chest, and veins protruded from the sides of his handsome face.

“Are you all right, John Henry?” asked Captain Tommy.

“Don’t you worry,” said John Henry. “A man ain’t nothin’ but a man — and a man’s got to beat the steam.” Then he went on singing:

Ain’t no hammer (Bam!)

In these mountains (Bam!)

Rings like mine, boys, (Bam!)

Rings like mine. (Bam!)

When they hit the end of the six-foot drill, Little Bill pulled it out and shoved in a longer drill — and then a longer one and a longer one still. John Henry swung his twenty-pound hammer and drove that steel. He swung and drove faster and harder, and faster and harder, until that Polly Ann hammer caught fire. The whole Big Bend Tunnel glowed with the blue flame of John Henry’s hammer.

“Time!” shouted Captain Tommy.

“Time!” cried the company man, shutting off the steam drill.

“Time,” gasped John Henry, leaning on his hammer. “I need a cool drink of water.”

While John Henry drank his water, Captain Tommy and the company man measured the holes. The steam drill had done nine feet; John Henry had drilled fourteen.

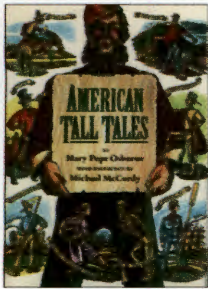
“John Henry!” shouted the steel drivers. “John Henry beat the steam!”

“Congratulations, son,” said Captain Tommy, slapping him on the back. “I don’t care what you say — I’m gonna give you a hundred dollars and a new suit of clothes.”

John Henry leaned heavily on his hammer and sucked in the stale air of the tunnel. “That’s mighty generous, Captain Tommy. But you give that hundred dollars to Polly Ann. And you bury me in that suit of clothes.” Then he slumped to the ground, clutching his hammer in his hand. “I beat the steam,” he gasped, “but I broke inside.”

As his eyes closed, John Henry lay back against the black earth and whispered, “A man ain’t nothin’ but a man.”

The Tennessee frontiersman, Davy Crockett, was the real-life subject of many a tall tale. But there is no truth to the story that he had a wife named Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind. Good thing for Davy, because in her he would have met his match!



Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind

Retold by Mary Pope Osborne

One early spring day, when the leaves of the white oaks were about as big as a mouse's ear, Davy Crockett set out alone through the forest to do some bear hunting. Suddenly it started raining real hard, and he felt obliged to stop for shelter under a tree. As he shook the rain out of his coonskin cap, he got sleepy, so he laid back into the crotch of the tree, and pretty soon he was snoring.

Davy slept so hard, he didn't wake up until nearly sundown. And when he did, he discovered that somehow or another in all that sleeping his head had gotten stuck in the crotch of the tree, and he couldn't get it out.

Well, Davy roared loud enough to make the tree lose all its little mouse-ear leaves. He twisted and turned and carried on for over an hour, but still that tree wouldn't let go. Just as he

was about to give himself up for a goner, he heard a girl say, "What's the matter, stranger?"

Even from his awkward position, he could see that she was extraordinary — tall as a hickory sapling, with arms as big as a keelboat tiller's.

"My head's stuck, *sweetie*," he said. "And if you help me get it free, I'll give you a pretty little comb."

"Don't call me sweetie," she said. "And don't worry about giving me any pretty little comb, either. I'll free your old coconut, but just because I want to."

Then this extraordinary girl did something that made Davy's hair stand on end. She reached in a bag and took out a bunch of rattlesnakes. She tied all the wriggly critters together to make a long rope, and as she tied, she kept talking. "I'm not a shy little colt," she said. "And I'm not a little singing nightingale, either. I can tote a steamboat on my back, outscreech a panther, and jump over my own shadow. I can double up crocodiles any day, and I like to wear a hornets' nest for my Sunday bonnet."

As the girl looped the ends of her snake rope to the top of the branch that was trapping Davy, she kept bragging: "I'm a streak of lightning set up edgeways and buttered with quicksilver. I can outgrin, outsnort, outrun, outlift, outsneeze, outsleep, outlie any varmint from Maine to Louisiana. Furthermore, *sweetie*, I can blow out the moonlight and sing a wolf to sleep." Then she pulled on the other end of the snake rope so hard, it seemed as if she might tear the world apart.

The right-hand fork of that big tree bent just about double. Then Davy slid his head out as easy as you please. For a minute he was so dizzy, he couldn't tell up from down. But when he got everything going straight again, he took a good look at that girl. "What's your name, ma'am?"

"Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind," she said. "But if you mind your manners, you can call me Sally."

From then on Davy Crockett was crazy in love with Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind. He asked everyone he knew about her, and everything he heard caused another one of Cupid's arrows to jab him in the gizzard.



“Oh, I know Sally!” the preacher said. “She can dance a rock to pieces and ride a panther bareback!”

“Sally’s a good ole friend of mine,” the blacksmith said. “Once I saw her crack a walnut with her front teeth.”

“Sally’s so very special,” said the schoolmarm. “She likes to whip across the Salt River, using her apron for a sail and her left leg for a rudder!”

Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind had a reputation for being funny, too. Her best friend, Lucy, told Davy, “Sally can laugh the bark off a pine tree. She likes to whistle out one side of her mouth while she eats with the other side and grins with the middle!”

According to her friends, Sally could tame about anything in the world, too. They all told Davy about the time she was churning butter and heard something scratching outside. Suddenly the door swung open, and in walked the Great King Bear of the Mud Forest. He'd come to steal one of her smoked hams. Well, before the King Bear could say boo, Sally grabbed a warm dumpling from the pot and stuffed it in his mouth.

The dumpling tasted so good, the King Bear's eyes winked with tears. But then he started to think that Sally might taste pretty good, too. So opening and closing his big old mouth, he backed her right into a corner.

Sally was plenty scared, with her knees a-knocking and her heart a-hammering. But just as the King Bear blew his hot breath in her face, she gathered the courage to say, "Would you like to dance?"

As everybody knows, no bear can resist an invitation to a square dance, so of course the old fellow forgot all about eating Sally and said, "Love to."

Then he bowed real pretty, and the two got to kicking and whooping and swinging each other through the air, as Sally sang:

*We are on our way to Baltimore,
With two behind, and two before:
Around, around, around we go,
Where oats, peas, beans, and barley grow!*

And while she was singing, Sally tied a string from the bear's ankle to her butter churn, so that all the time the old feller was kicking up his legs and dancing around the room, he was also churning her butter!

And folks loved to tell the story about Sally's encounter with another stinky varmint — only this one was a *human* varmint. It seems that Mike Fink, the riverboat man, decided to scare the toenails off Sally because he was sick and tired of hearing Davy Crockett talk about how great she was.

One evening Mike crept into an old alligator skin and met Sally just as she was taking off to forage in the woods for berries. He spread open his gigantic mouth and made such a howl that he nearly scared himself to



death. But Sally paid no more attention to that fool than she would have to a barking puppy dog.

However, when Mike put out his claws to embrace her, her anger rose higher than a Mississippi flood. She threw a flash of eye lightning at him, turning the dark to daylight. Then she pulled out a little toothpick and with a single swing sent the alligator head flying fifty feet! And then to finish him off good, she rolled up her sleeves and knocked Mike Fink clear across the woods and into a muddy swamp.

When the fool came to, Davy Crockett was standing over him. "What in the world happened to you, Mikey?" he asked.

"Well, I — I think I must-a been hit by some kind of wild alligator!" Mike stammered, rubbing his sore head.

Davy smiled, knowing full well it was Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind just finished giving Mike Fink the only punishment he'd ever known.

That incident caused Cupid's final arrow to jab Davy's gizzard. "Sally's the whole steamboat," he said, meaning she was something great. The next day he put on his best raccoon hat and sallied forth to see her.

When he got within three miles of her cabin, he began to holler her name. His voice was so loud, it whirled through the woods like a hurricane.

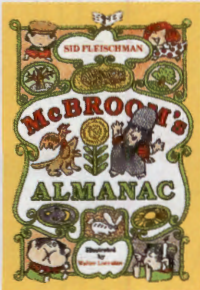
Sally looked out and saw the wind a-blowing and the trees a-bending. She heard her name a-thundering through the woods, and her heart began to thump. By now she'd begun to feel that Davy Crockett was the whole steamboat, too. So she put on her best hat — an eagle's nest with a wild-cat's tail for a feather — and ran outside.

Just as she stepped out the door, Davy Crockett burst from the woods and jumped onto her porch as fast as a frog. "Sally, darlin'!" he cried. "I think my heart is bustin'! Want to be my wife?"

"Oh, my stars and possum dogs, why not?" she said.

From that day on, Davy Crockett had a hard time acting tough around Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind. His fightin' and hollerin' had no more effect on her than dropping feathers on a barn floor. At least that's what *she'd* tell you. *He* might say something else.

Sid Fleischman has created his own tall tale characters in his stories about farmer Josh McBroom. In this tale, the McBroom family has to cope with unpredictable weather and, as usual, neighbor Heck Jones.



February

by Sid Fleischman

Illustrated by Walter Lorraine

I t's not generally known, but I invented air conditioning. I read in the paper the idea has already spread to the big cities.

But, shucks, everyone is welcome to it. Folks around here call it McBroom's Natural Winter Extract & Relief for the Summer Dismals. You can make your own, same as us.

February is about the last month you can lay in a supply of prime Winter Extract.

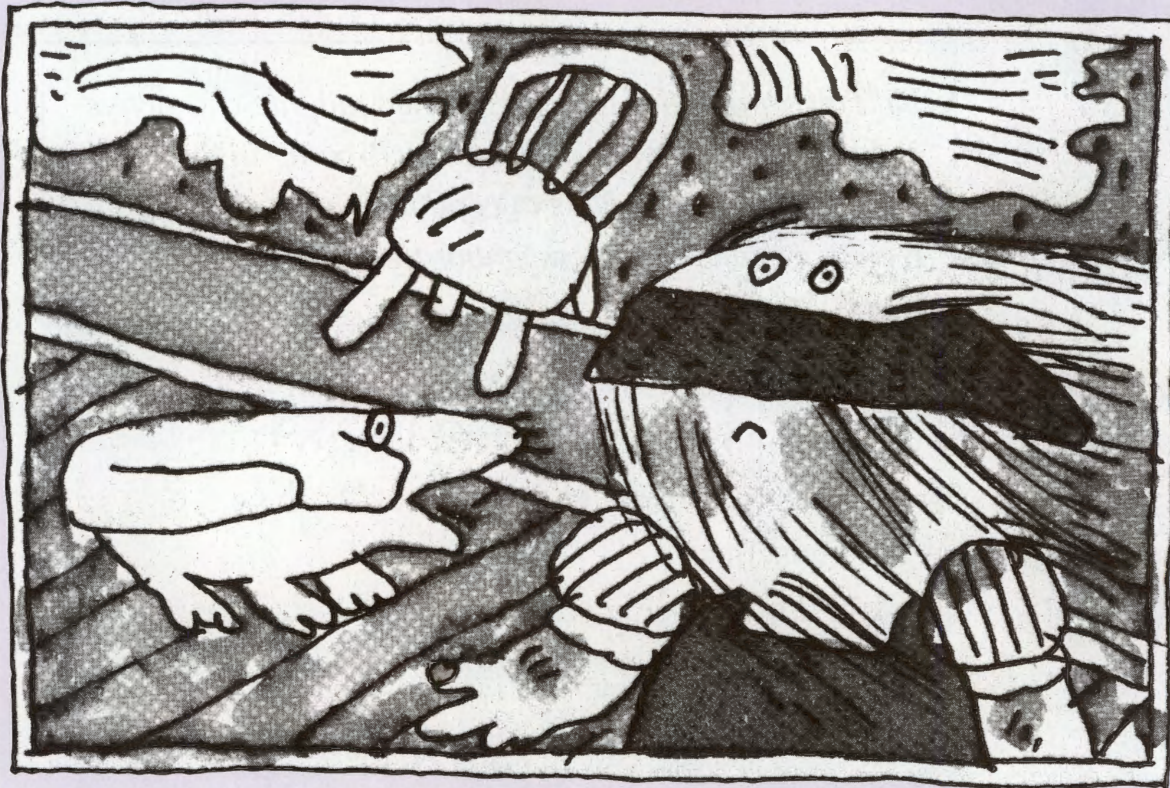
Wait for an infernal cold day. When the mercury in the thermometer drops to the bottom — you're getting close. But the weather's still a mite too warm.

When the mercury busts the glass bulb and rolls over to the fireplace to get warm — that's Extract weather.

"Willjillhesterchesterpeterpollytimtommarylarryandlittleclarinda!" I shouted to our young'uns. "Bulb's shattered. Fetch the rip-saws, the crosscut saws, and let's get to work!"

Cold? Mercy, it was so cold outside *the wind had frozen solid.*

Didn't we get busy! We began sawing up chunks of frozen wind.



Now, you got to do the thing right. Wind's got a grain, just like wood. So be positive to use the crosscut saw against the grain, and the rip saw along with it.

It fell dark before we finished harvesting and hauling that Winter Extract to our icehouse. And there stood our neighbor Heck Jones. That skinflint is so mean and miserly he brands the horseflies over at his place for fear someone will rustle 'em.

"Are you hidin' my left sock, McBroom?" he asked.

"Of course not," I said.

"Someone stole it off the clothesline. My best black sock, too! It only had three holes in it. If I catch the thief, I'll have him in a court of law!"

He loped away, grumbling and snarling.

We finished packing sawdust around the chunks of wind to keep them frozen. "Good work, my lambs," I said. "We're all set for the Summer Dismals."

Well, Heck Jones walked around in one sock the rest of winter, and summer, too.

As soon as the days turned sizzle-hot, we'd set a chunk of Winter Extract in the parlor. In a second or three it would begin to thaw — just a cool breeze at first. But when that February wind really got whistling, it would lift the curtains!

One hot night I fetched in a nice chunk of frozen wind without bothering to scrape off the sawdust. A few minutes later I saw a black thing shoot across the room. Something had got frozen in our Winter Extract.

"Heck Jones's sock!" I declared. "I can smell his feet!"

He was sure to think we'd stolen it. He'd have us in a court of law! I made a grab for it, but the February wind was kicking up such a blow it shot the sock past the curtains and far out the window.

I could see Heck Jones asleep in his hammock, one sock on, the other foot bare. The left sock hoisted its tail like a kite in the air and started down.

I declare, if I didn't see it with my own eyes, I'd think I was scambly-witted. That holey black sock had the instinct of a homing pigeon. It returned right to Heck Jones's left foot and pulled itself on. I think it navigated by scent.

What Heck Jones thought when he awoke and looked at both feet — I can't reckon.





Narrating

Write Your Own Tall Tale

Now that you've read a few tall tales, write one of your own. Think of a heroic main character with amazing abilities. Think of a problem that the character has to solve. Then write a tall tale about how the character solves the problem. The postcard images on this page might give you some ideas for your tall tale.

Tips

- Exaggerate qualities or features of your character, such as size or strength.
- Exaggerate features of the setting, such as the weather, landscape, or animals.
- Have your character change something in nature — for example, end a heat wave or create a river.



More Tall Tales to Read

Swamp Angel

by Anne Isaacs (Dutton)

A brave woodswoman in Tennessee saves the community from the dangerous bear, Thundering Tarnation.



The Gullywasher

by Joyce Rossi (Northland)

Leticia's grandfather tells her how a gigantic gullywasher changed him from a daring young vaquero to the old man he is now.



Pecos Bill

by Steven Kellogg (Morrow)

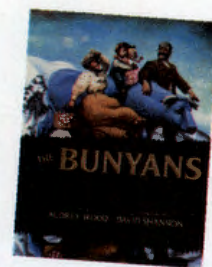
The most famous cowboy in Texas grew up among the coyotes, invented many useful things such as the lasso, and married the equally famous Slewfoot Sue.



The Bunyans

by Audrey Wood (Scholastic)

Meet Paul Bunyan's giant wife, Carrie, and their enormous children Little Jean and Tiny, who helped Paul create many famous American sites.



Cut From the Same Cloth

by Robert San Souci (Philomel)

This collection features tall tales about legendary women from all corners and populations of America.

