

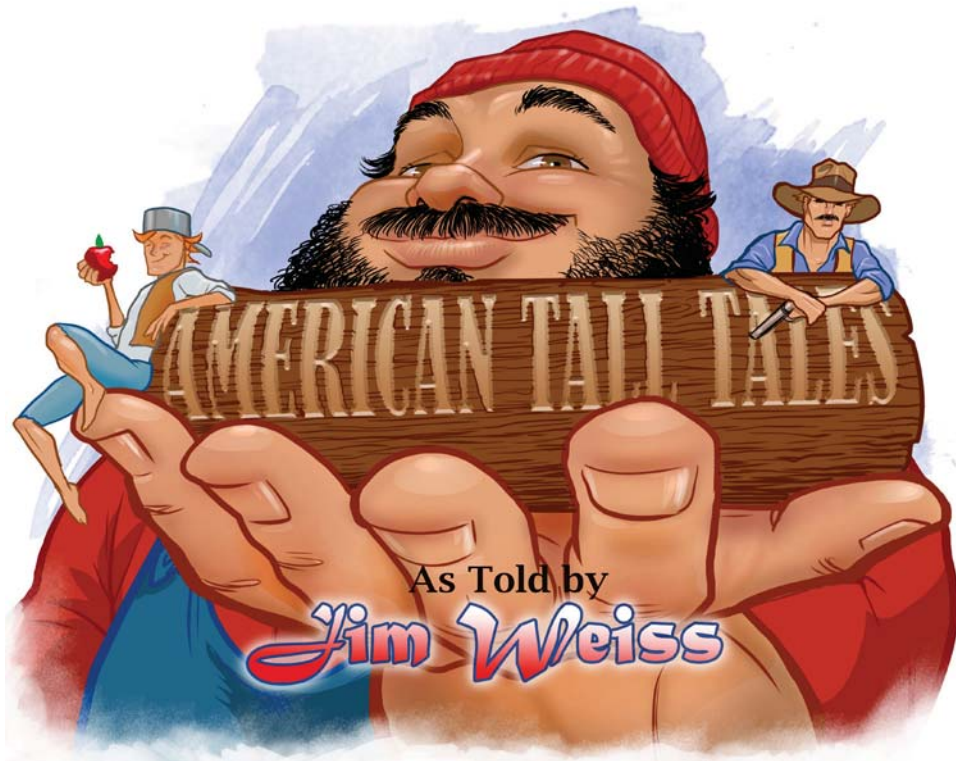
AMERICAN TALL TALES

As Told By

Jim Weiss



*A Companion Reader
With Dramatizations by Chris Bauer*



— A Companion Reader —

With Dramatizations by Chris Bauer



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For Dave, Laura, Shane, Colin, Luke and Katie McLaughlin,
who never run out of their own tall tales.- Jim Weiss

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Preface

This illustrated Companion Reader is an exact transcript of Jim Weiss’s award-winning storytelling performance, *American Tall Tales*.

For decades, Jim Weiss has entertained his many listeners with gripping plots, vivid characters, and beautiful words. But his performances are much more than mere entertainment. Jim’s stories build language skills by filling young minds with wonderful vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and rich images.

Now, our Companion Readers bring these language-learning benefits to a new level.

Language, both written and oral, is most easily and thoroughly learned when *heard, read, and spoken*.

Listen to the Jim Weiss performance on CD or MP3. (See welltrainedmind.com for a full listing and instantly downloadable digital versions!)

Read along with the performance. The first half of this book is a word-for-word transcript of Jim Weiss’s performance. Students can improve their reading fluency, their vocabulary, and their understanding of punctuation, sentence structure, and grammar by following along as Jim performs these words. Even students who are not reading at the level represented in this book can be moved forward in reading competency by reading along as Jim speaks the words.

Note: To help you follow along with the audio performance, we’ve placed Track Numbers into the text wherever a new track begins on the CD or MP3 recording. They look like this:



Say the words. The final element in language learning is to *speak* great words and sentences out loud. Each one of these performances has been turned into a short, accessible dramatic version that can be performed by two or more actors. The plays can be memorized or read from the scripts; either way, students will begin to gain confidence in their own language use and in their ability to speak in front of others.

Each Companion Reader play has a slightly different emphasis.

“Paul Bunyan” has been transformed into a stick-puppet play; this allows young performers who may be self-conscious or shy to experience the fun of live performance without the pressure of being seen. The puppet construction is particularly rewarding for readers who have an artistic bent, and the play can easily be performed by just two or three puppeteers.

“Johnny Appleseed” is a dramatic monologue, a wonderful way for aspiring actors to practice a form they’ll need to use in later auditions; it is also a valuable way for students working on their own to develop dramatic skills.

“Pecos Bill” emphasizes physical action—stage fighting, miming animal motions, wrestling with props, and simple stunts. The dialogue also employs dialect, giving students an opportunity to try out new accents and ways of speaking.

“The Fastest Draw in the West” focuses on quick-fire dialogue, short speeches with puns, alliteration, and tongue-twisters. The dialogue is simple to memorize—but requires a lot of practice to say quickly and well!

In these stories, Jim Weiss uses *dialect*. Dialect is when words are spelled in unusual ways in order to give you a sense of how people with strong accents (western, southern, northern, or elsewhere!) would say them.

Introduction



What makes a tale a tall tale is not the length of the story—nor the height of the main character.

In a tall tale, it's the *truth* that gets stretched.

And the further it gets stretched, the funnier, or more dramatic, it seems.

Just about every country and every culture has its own tall tales. In the United States, the tall tale became especially popular in the 1800s and early 1900s. During those years, millions of immigrants moved here from all over the world, bringing with them stories from their native lands, and spinning new stories based on their dreams of success in their new country.

Somehow, all these stories got mixed together with just a bit of truth, and we suddenly had ourselves

heroes—male and female—who could meet even the wildest challenges with talents and skills that went way, way beyond what could ever really happen.

Some were based on real people, such as Davy Crockett, Annie Oakley, or John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed. The true stories of such colorful figures became the basis for later, fictional stories.

Other tall tales started in the imagination of writers or storytellers, as in the case of Pecos Bill or Paul Bunyan.

Either way, over a century later, these heroes and their outlandish adventures have become a part of our popular culture. And their stories give us a picture, however exaggerated, of how people were living and working during those years.

So here are a few of the most popular American Tall Tales.



Paul Bunyan, King of the Northern Forests



Paul Bunyan was born in a little fishing village in the state of Maine. Mr. and Mrs. Bunyan, and their neighbors, were plenty surprised at the birth of a baby that weighed 70 pounds.

Now the neighbors didn't like to gossip, but they couldn't help commenting just a little.

“Well, Mr. Bunyan is mighty strong for his size.”

“Yep, and Mrs. Bunyan's family's all sturdy folks.”

“But who'd a-thought they'd have a child who'd eat five dozen eggs, seven sacks of potatoes, three cookin' pots full of oatmeal mush, and then wash it down with nine gallons of milk?”

“He ate all that in a day?”

“Course not, that was breakfast. Paul weren’t fully awake yet; lunch and dinner are his big meals.”

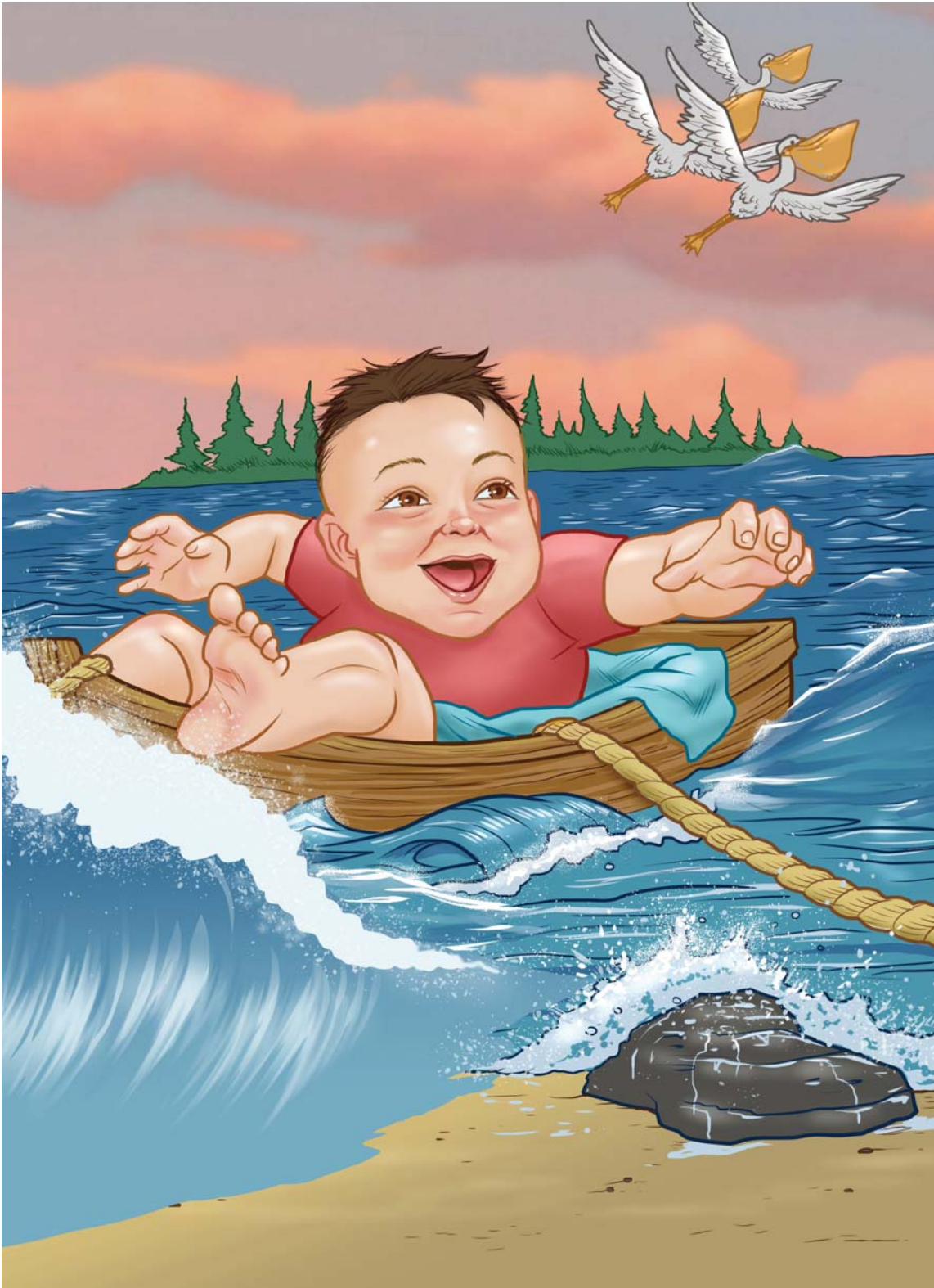
Two weeks after Paul Bunyan was born, he was too big for the Bunyans’ house. The neighbors, all of whom liked the Bunyans and wanted to help, converted a fishing boat into a giant cradle for Paul, and anchored it to the shore with long ropes.

But one day, a flock of pelicans flew over the cradle and the baby stuck his arms out and started to flap them, imitating the birds. Well, the cradle started rocking, faster and faster and harder and harder, and before you know it, Paul Bunyan started a tidal wave that roared up and down the coast and flooded half the coastal villages in Maine.

After that, the neighbors said to Mr. and Mrs. Bunyan, “We’re sorry, but we have enough to deal with, with the ocean and all, without having to deal with Paul Bunyan too.”

So the Bunyans left the coast for the forests of inland Maine. Paul grew up in those woodlands, far from any town, and learned to know them as his home.

By the time he was a young man, he was off on his own. Where he got the huge, heavy axe he slung over



his shoulder, we're not sure. But we know his overalls were ships' sail canvas, his suspenders were woven together from massive anchor ropes, his shirt took up the annual cotton crop from North and South Carolina, and if his boots had been any bigger, that year, there wouldn't have been any leather left in New England.

Now, in those days, vast forests covered much of North America. America was a growing nation, with people moving west, building houses and stores, schools, and factories. With new towns and cities springing up all over, people needed building materials, and all this lumber was just the thing. Luckily, by now, just about the only thing taller than the trees was Paul Bunyan. He had powerful muscles in places where other people didn't even have places, and he had a big, dark beard.

When Paul would get up in the morning and stretch (ahh!), he would cut down a spruce or fir tree to use as a comb—being careful, of course, to gently set any birds' nests into other trees before he started combing. (“Here you go, Mama Bird. We don't want those little eggs of yours to get scrambled.”)

Well, one morning, Paul spied in the distance a group of people clearing away space for a new village. That's when he got his big idea.

The Ballad of Johnny Appleseed



In the cool grey mist of dawn, a mother deer and her fawn moved through the forest. Suddenly, sensing danger, the mother sniffed the air and glanced hurriedly about. Then she saw the man sitting on the ground, and the deer's eyes glistened, for she knew there was no need for alarm.

The man was Johnny Appleseed.

Johnny Appleseed yawned and stretched, and then, seeing the doe and her fawn, he smiled. "Good morning, little mother, and to you too, youngster." He built a fire and began to brew himself some coffee, pulling his

breakfast of fruits and berries from trees and bushes around his camp. Soon he would be on his way again, leaving hardly any indication that a human had stopped there.

Born in Massachusetts in September 1774, two years before the American colonies declared their independence from Britain, John Chapman (as he was then known) grew up during the Revolutionary War.

A few years later, the Chapmans moved to western Pennsylvania. There, on the farm near his family's cabin, grew wide, spreading apple trees whose red fruit they used to make cider or bake pies—or just to munch on.

Later, as a young man, John moved to Ohio, which in those days was still the heart of the western wilderness. Native Americans moved among the valleys and hills where their people had hunted, fished, and harvested for generations. Now, settlers were moving in from the eastern states, building cabins, clearing land for farm fields, and traveling up and down the rivers.

One day, John Chapman decided, "I'm going to help these folks live in these new places and, at the same time, keep the places looking like what they are—natural and beautiful. If I can figure out which routes the

Well, Bill just leaped onto Widow-Maker's back and took off in pursuit of that Texas twister, grabbing his rattlesnake lasso as he went. Bill grabbed a-hold to that cyclone, swung himself up on top, and let loose with a good ol' "Yippee!" He rode that cyclone just where he wanted it to go, squeezing water out of it 'til he'd watered all the ranches in the state. And then, just for fun, he rode it all the way to California, where Bill finally dropped off, hitting the earth so hard that he sank his landing spot about 200 feet lower than the surrounding land. Today they call that place Death Valley.

When Bill got home, his neighbors all thanked him for doing something about their dry weather.

Then one day, when Bill and Widow-Maker were down at the banks of the river so they could get a drink, Bill heard a voice cry, "Yipee-ki-i-ay!" Reflected in the water before him was a spectacular sight that made him look up in wonder. Splashing up the river was the biggest Texas catfish that Bill had ever seen—and it's a well-known fact that Texas catfish make other catfish look like minnows. But what really got to him was that on the back of that fish, riding him the way Bill had ridden the cyclone, was the purtiest gal Bill had ever seen.



Paul Bunyan: A Stick-Puppet Play

Dramatized by Chris Bauer

You are about to perform a stick-puppet play! It is an adaptation of Jim Weiss’s story “Paul Bunyan: King of the Northern Forests.”

Cast

First, you need a “Cast.” The Cast are the people who play the different characters. The fun thing about a stick-puppet play is that it’s very easy for one person to play several parts. All you have to do is change your voice and the puppet.

How many parts each person plays depends how many actors you have. Usually actors who play more than one part will play the smaller parts. For example, in this play, whoever played Paul Bunyan would probably not play anybody else . . . unless there are only two of you! The fun of a stick-puppet play is that you can do it with just two or three people.

The Play

When you perform the play, you will see each character’s name followed by a colon, like this:

PAUL BUNYAN:

After the colon will be some words. These are the character's lines. When you play that character, you say whatever comes after the colon. So if you saw this;

PAUL BUNYAN: No!

and you were playing Paul Bunyan, you would say "No!"

If you see more than one character's names, like this:

TOWNSFOLK 1 and 2: Look at him go!

it means both characters say the line at the same time.

One more thing; if you see something in parentheses after the name, it's an instruction that tells you how the line should be read. For example,

PAUL BUNYAN: (Angrily)

that means that whatever he says, he should say ANGRILY!

When you do this stick-puppet play, make sure that you make it your own. What does it mean to make it your own? Don't just copy the voices that Jim Weiss uses. Make up your own voices! Read the words and think about all the different voices the character or characters you are playing might have. Make some interesting choices!

Making the Puppets

Stick puppets are easy to make. All you need are popsicle sticks, paper, glue or tape, and drawing materials.

Draw each character on a sheet of paper, then cut the characters out and glue or tape each one to a popsicle stick. To perform, you just need something to hide behind, like a curtain or a sofa. Then, hold the end of the popsicle stick and put the paper figure up where your audience can see, moving them around to create the play.

There are also some effects that you can make puppets for, like the tidal wave. Just draw a big wave on your paper, color it blue, and cut it out. If you need a bigger puppet like the tidal wave, you can use two popsicle sticks instead of one to support it.

To know what the puppets should look like, read or listen to Jim Weiss's descriptions. For example, we know Paul has a huge heavy axe, overalls made of ships' sail canvas, suspenders woven from anchor ropes, etc. But don't be afraid to use your imagination!

Here are the puppets you will need. Be sure you read through the whole play before you begin making puppets! You'll want to know, for example, that Paul Bunyan should be taller than the trees!

Giant Baby

Mr. Bunyan

Mrs. Bunyan

Paul Bunyan

Babe the Ox

Townfolk/Neighbors (3-4)

Lumberjacks (3-4)

Roller Skaters (3-4)

Johnny Inkslinger

Big Oley

Flock of Pelicans

Axe

Fire

Tidal Wave

Trees (8-10)

(There will also be a Narrator, but the Narrator is not a puppet. The Narrator can be a person that the audience can see, or the Narrator can hide with all the people doing the puppets and just be a voice.)

Using the Puppets

There will be instructions, like (Paul Bunyan enters.) When you see that, it means the Paul Bunyan puppet pops up into view. If the instructions say (Paul Bunyan exits), then the Paul Bunyan puppet goes back down and disappears.

When any puppet is talking, you should move it back and forth to show that it is the one talking.

Staging

There are some theater terms you should know.

The most important ones are “Stage Left,” “Stage Right,” and “Center Stage.” If the play says a character should stand Stage Left, it means that if you are using a puppet that is facing your audience, it should be to the left of the “stage.” The reason it’s called “Stage Left” is that for the audience, who is facing you, it’s the right! It can be a little confusing, but just remember, when you are facing the audience Stage Left is *your* left and Stage Right is *your* right. Center Stage means, very simply, that you move your puppet to the center of the stage.

It's also important to remember that you don't have to be using an actual stage to use these terms. If you're doing this play from behind your couch, you can still say you are "Stage Left" or "Stage Right" or "Center Stage" depending on where your puppet is in the space you are using to perform.

Another term you should know is "Stage Directions." In the play you will see some sentences in parentheses. These are your Stage Directions. They tell you where the puppets should be, and sometimes what they should be doing.

In the play at the beginning you will see an instruction that says "Lights Up!" which means the lights come on. At the end it will say "Lights Down!" which means just the opposite; the lights go out because the play is over.

One Last Thing

The most important thing is that you have fun. Anything you can think of that you want to change is absolutely fine. You can even rewrite some of the lines if you want to. We just want to create something that you are proud of, and have a good time doing it.

