



Bigger Than Life

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America's TALL TALES

by Katherine Follett
Illustrations by Steve McInturff

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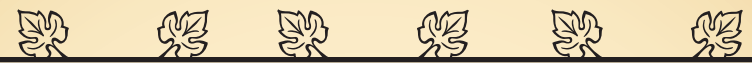
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Introduction

On a cold winter evening in 1855, a family gathers around the fireplace. The wind whistles around their small sod house on the lonely Missouri plains. The mother and grandmother knit and mend clothes while the father whittles a new handle for the ax he broke last fall. Tonight is a special night: Uncle James is visiting from the gold mines of South Dakota. He looks down at the three children gathered at his feet, and he begins to tell fantastic tales of huge bears, mighty miners, and fierce battles between settlers and Native Americans. Even the adults lean in to listen. Some of the stories are scary, some of them are funny, and all of them are truly amazing—almost too amazing to be believed. Once in a while, Uncle James winks and smiles, letting the astonished children know that he’s just kidding.

Today, we call these amazing stories tall tales. The name “tall tale” is an old-fashioned term for an exaggeration or a silly lie told to trick and amuse an audience. But it might as well describe the enormous height and strength of the heroes of these stories. Many tall tales were spread just like this, by storytellers, families, and friends gathered around a campfire, huddling close against the fearsome weather and the lonely wilderness of the American landscape. Others were passed along in small books, short pamphlets, and newspapers that Americans read during their spare time. After a person heard or read an amazing or hilarious story, he or she passed it along to someone else. In this way, through telling or writing, tall tales have been passed down from the 1800s all the way to today.

Many tall tales have certain features that set them apart from other kinds of stories. Almost all tall tales are about a hero who is, literally and **figuratively**, larger than life. It’s been said that Paul Bunyan was so big that he carved out the Grand Canyon by dragging his ax along the ground. Some people swear that Annie Christmas,



Heroes of the North Woods

to have fun. Family and friends didn't just make work easier. They also helped people stay happy, hopeful, and emotionally healthy. Storytelling brought families, working teams, and groups of friends closer together, allowing them to get to know one another and work in harmony.

In this book, you will read seven tall tales. You'll learn about the unique American history and culture that surround each one. You'll read about cowboys on the plains, riverboat drivers on the Mississippi, and firefighters in New York City. Some of the stories are purely fictional, while others started out as descriptions of very real people. But each of these tales helped a group of people come together, keep strong, and have a good time. These tall tales are part of American history.

When the Pilgrims first came to New England, they landed on a wild-looking shore covered with dense forests. The forests were so forbidding that the Pilgrims lived on their ship, the Mayflower, for many weeks after they anchored. But the Pilgrims soon found a use for the forests. The woods provided food in the form of cranberries, blueberries, and chestnuts. There was excellent hunting, including deer, bear, and moose. The trees made great timber for building houses, boats, and tools. The Pilgrims quickly learned to see the woods not as a thing to be feared, but as a thing that would make their fortune.

Today, a large part of the northern forests is gone. They have been replaced by the towns, cities, farms, and roads we see across America. This was no accident. After the Revolutionary War, the United States quickly began expanding westward from New England. Soon, Americans came up with an idea called Manifest Destiny. This idea stated that the United States would eventually stretch from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. The U.S. government encouraged people to go to the frontier, chop down the forests, and turn the land into towns. To do this, the government sent out explorers and sold land very cheaply. Little by little, the forests were transformed into farmland and industrial areas.

But this transformation was not easy. It took many years of hard work. The first people to pass through the northern woods were explorers such as Samuel de Champlain and Lewis and Clark. They mapped the land, met with Native Americans, and often "claimed" the land for the United States or a European government. The second wave of settlers included the "mountain men" — the hunters and trappers. Fur was an incredibly rich resource in these north woods. Trappers sold beaver, raccoon, buffalo, otter, and other pelts. Furs were so plentiful that for a time they were used as money.



There were hundreds of ways for a logger to die or get hurt. Trees fell in unpredictable ways, sometimes crushing bystanders. Even if the tree fell correctly, it might tear the limbs off nearby trees or throw a branch backward as it crashed into the ground, hitting someone who thought he was safe. The saws and axes were sharp, and the loggers swung them with great force. Given that the only medical care was a bit of alcohol and a sewing kit, many men died of minor wounds or infections. If the logging road sloped downhill, the skidder had to be extra careful that the logs didn't start rolling or sliding too fast. If they did, they could overwhelm both the skidder and his trusty oxen, killing them all. The river hogs may have had the most dangerous job of all. They leaped from floating log to floating log, keeping their balance on the rolling tree trunks so as not to fall in the frigid water. If they did slip and fall, they were likely to be crushed by the pile of logs.

There were dangers besides the work, too. Frostbite and **hypothermia** always threatened people who worked outside during the bitter northern winters. Hungry bears were drawn to the smells of beans and bacon from the camp kitchen. Loggers could get lost in the vast wilderness, and diseases spread quickly in the filthy, crowded conditions.

Storytelling was essential to the loggers of the northern woods. The jokes let them blow off steam, have fun, and relax after a fifteen-hour day of work. Shared tales allowed them to become friends with their fellow workers. This was very important; in the crowded conditions, dangerous work, and high stress of a logging camp, teams had to get along. If they argued, they might do less work (and get less money). Fighting increased the risk of deadly accidents. And the tales of strength, daring, and good humor encouraged the loggers to be brave and hardworking. After hearing a tall tale, a logger might drift off to sleep thinking, "Someday, someone could tell a story about what I did." When the loggers returned home, the stories helped them reunite with their families, helping them share the impossible adventures and hard work they had done over the winter. It also made the loggers seem even more impressive to their neighbors, earning them respect in the community. The bigger and more fantastic the tale, the bigger and more fantastic the logger himself seemed.

These stories eventually gave rise to the legend of Paul Bunyan. According to the story, Paul Bunyan was a logging camp boss of incredible size and strength, who could fell a whole forest with a swing of his ax. Paul was always accompanied by his giant blue ox, Babe. The tales almost certainly began as true stories passed around in the dim light of a logging camp, stories of a certain logger who was so big that a single swing of his ax could drop a tree, or an ox that was so tough, smart, and loyal that it could draw a log to the river without a guide. In the tradition of tall tales, these stories grew more and more fantastic with each telling. Some of the stories



Balancing on river logs was extremely dangerous, but loggers tried to show no fear.





Chapman's Travels

The only settlement in the area was the tiny town of Warren, Pennsylvania. At the time, the land was available for farmers to settle, but few had arrived. When the storm was done, Johnny fashioned himself some homemade snowshoes and trudged down the mountain to Warren. This town may be where the Johnny Appleseed legend truly began. The residents must have been astonished at the starving, barely-clothed figure appearing out of the snowy woods in the dead of winter.

But Johnny saw a business opportunity in Warren. The land was rich and fertile, and people were just starting to trickle westward to settle this part of the frontier. He knew that once they got there, the people would need food and crops to grow. So Johnny quickly found a piece of land and planted his apple seeds. By the time new settlers got there, the young trees would be ready to sell. Apples were an ideal food on the frontier. One apple tree could produce hundreds of apples year after year. The sweet fruit was high-energy, and could be eaten in dozens of different ways. They could be eaten fresh, baked, dried, stewed, canned, cooked into a sweet spread called apple butter, or crushed into cider, and that cider could be fermented until it made vinegar. A man like John Chapman could quickly become wealthy selling such a valuable resource—but this wasn't what he had in mind.

For the rest of his life, John wandered the frontier planting apple trees. He canoed up and down the Allegheny River, traveled by horseback, or simply walked barefoot to save his shoes for cold weather. He did not wander endlessly planting seeds, however. Once John had found a likely spot for a nursery, he would plant his seeds, fence them in to keep animals out, and tend the tiny trees for a few years until the **seedlings** were ready to sell. He often had several nurseries going at once. Since the nurseries were so far apart, John rarely had a permanent place to live, preferring to camp along the trail. He got much of his food from the forest and from the hospitality of Native Americans, and their knowledge of the forest helped



John Chapman started apple nurseries in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

him survive. Much of his so-called odd behavior—traveling lightly, never staying in one place—was so he could spend all of the precious summer months caring for every little patch of tiny trees.

When the little apple trees were a few years old, John sold them to newly arrived settlers. But generosity and good will were always more important than money. He would often barter or trade for his seedlings, accepting clothes, food, and other supplies. If a family was especially poor, John simply gave the little trees away for free.

John's quiet, generous spirit helped contribute to the odd stories that were already circulating about him. On the frontier, European American settlements were few and far between, and John was often the first to visit a family at its new cabin. He read from his book collection, did odd jobs, and shared stories of his simple life in the woods. Many of his stories taught settlers to be generous and gentle to all, including to Native Americans and wild animals, two things that most European Americans feared. His **humility**, generosity, and kindness were legendary. On the rough frontier, people could become selfish, greedy, and cruel simply in order to get what they needed to survive. Stories about this odd, quiet man who gave away even his most basic supplies quickly passed from town to town along the north woods, growing more and more exaggerated as they went.

By the time John Chapman passed away at the age of 70, he had already acquired the name Johnny Appleseed. There were dozens of tales—some tall, some true—about him. Many of the stories were published in books and articles, further spreading his fame. In 1948, the Walt Disney Company made an animated film that featured the character of Johnny Appleseed. But even as John Chapman's tale grew taller and taller, the last of his apple orchards still bore fruit across the Great Lakes states. Both the legend and the true story of Johnny Appleseed gave people hope and reminded them to be kind and generous to people in need.

THE TRAVELS OF JOHNNY APPLESEED

If you happen to travel out west beyond the Thirteen Colonies and settle in the fertile land near Ohio and Indiana, you're bound to run into an odd character by the name of Johnny Appleseed. Johnny wasn't much like the other folks you hear about in tall tales. For one thing, he was normal-sized, even a bit thin. He wasn't extra strong, and he didn't holler or fight or go to war. Instead, Johnny made his legend through hard work and a kind heart. And one of the kindest things he ever did was to plant apple trees all over the frontier so the **pioneers** would have something to eat when they got there.

Johnny Appleseed started out as a citizen of Massachusetts, but he soon found that land to be too crowded for his liking. For Johnny Appleseed loved the wilderness, and he loved growing things and wild places. So when he was a young man, Johnny set out from his hometown with nothing but a knapsack full of apple seeds and an old tin pot, which also made a very nice hat.

When Johnny first set out, he was caught by a terrible snowstorm at the top of the Allegheny Mountains. As he settled down in the hollow of a tree, barefoot and with nothing to cover his head but his dented pot, shivering and afraid he might die, Johnny suddenly had a vision. The vision was of a beautiful valley filled with apple trees. The pink and white blossoms glowed in the warm spring light, buzzing with bumblebees. Children played under the flowers, catching the petals as they fell. He dreamt he saw the trees growing lush and green over the summertime. As fall came, the apples swelled red and ripe and sweet, giving all the families plenty of food to last them through any harsh storms like this. When the storm finally ended, Johnny Appleseed had made up his

mind: He would devote his life to planting apple seeds for the new families who were settling the frontier.

The citizens of Warren, Pennsylvania, must have thought they saw a ghost when starving, frozen Johnny Appleseed trudged out of the woods on his homemade snowshoes. They were the first to see Johnny Appleseed as we know him today; bearded, thin, with a kind, quick smile and a quiet voice. Johnny immediately set to work planting his apple seeds. And everywhere he went, orchards sprang up behind him.

Johnny never cared much for living indoors. He was just as happy to sleep in a hollow log, under his birch-bark canoe, or just out under the stars. No matter what, Johnny was always kind to the animals he met in the woods. Johnny loved honey, but when he came upon a beehive, he would always make sure to leave enough for the bees to eat that winter. One night during a blizzard, Johnny sought shelter in a hollow log. Peeking in, he saw a mother black bear and her two little cubs snuggled up against the storm.

"Who am I to shove that mama bear out of her house on a cold winter night?" Johnny thought. So he spent that night outside in the snow. One legend says that even mosquitoes came under Johnny's care. As he was sitting by his campfire, Johnny noticed that the mosquitoes didn't seem to like the smoke rising from the burning logs. So he dipped his tin-pot hat in the river and doused the flames. Sitting in the dark, he thought to himself, "Imagine if I was trying to get my supper and someone kept blowing smoke in my face!"

But Johnny's kindest feelings were always for apple trees and the people who depended on them. Johnny traveled far and wide, never wearing more than rags, and planted apple seeds wherever he went. When he came upon a little cabin, occupied by a lonely family who was new to the frightening frontier, he always made sure to visit, bringing whatever food, seeds, and good



advice he could. Johnny especially loved children and would sit around a fire telling them all sorts of tales, some from his own adventures, and some from the books he always carried with him. Johnny would even leave some of his beloved books behind, tearing out single chapters, one for each child, if he didn't have enough to go around.

Johnny paddled up and down the rivers of Pennsylvania and was recognized everywhere he went. Who else would be riding in a canoe full of apple seeds, his wild, long hair trailing out from under his metal hat, and nothing but mud on his feet? The settlers welcomed him wherever he went, especially because he was

~ Daredevils of the Wild West ~

The “Old West”. . . those words bring up images of open plains, cactus-filled deserts, and towering mountains. We imagine herds of buffalo, long wagon trains, and cowboys riding into the sunset. These images are all accurate. During one part of American history, the Old West was a lawless place of exploration, opportunity, and real-life adventure. But the Old West also became the setting for tales taller than the Montana sky. It was a place of legend even before western movies and cowboy shows made it world-famous.

After the American Civil War ended in 1865, much of the eastern United States was either destroyed by war or crowded with business-people, industry, and extra workers. Meanwhile, the land west of the Mississippi River was relatively unsettled. But while New England and the Midwest had forests, rivers, cold winters, and warm summers somewhat like those of Europe, the endless plains, sculpted deserts, and canyons of the West were strange and frightening to most European Americans. The grasslands had no trees with which to build homes, fences, or other structures. The deserts were forbiddingly hot and dry, with strange land features that looked like they could have come from the moon. The Rocky Mountains were higher and steeper than any mountains back east. No one was quite sure how to settle these lands. Traditional small farms were hard to maintain in the rough climate. There were few rivers or roads along which people could move supplies. Almost nothing would grow in the salty desert soil. Nonetheless, many Americans looked to leave the East and seek their fortune.

To encourage people to move west, the U.S. government gave away land for little or nothing. The Homestead Act of 1862 guaranteed any pioneers 160 acres of land, totally free. Soon, pioneers from the eastern United States, Europe, and other areas were flooding into the West, setting up new homes, businesses, and towns.

The West quickly became a “boom” place. **Prospectors** discovered gold and silver in many areas. Once the plains were finally plowed, they became amazingly fertile for growing grain. The deserts of the Southwest could support enormous cattle ranches. These riches created conflict; everyone wanted a piece. Often, settlements arrived faster than the law. Many parts of the Old West were territories, not states, with no official government, police force, or military. Violence was common. Sometimes, the only law was “might makes right,” meaning the most powerful person took what he or she wanted. Though this was true in only a few places, horrific or exciting stories such as the shootout at the O.K. Corral spread like a prairie fire. The West quickly got a reputation as a wild, dangerous place.



Buffalo Bill, a hunter and pioneer of the Old West, hired cowboys, Native Americans, and other westerners for his Wild West show. The touring show demonstrated horse riding, cattle roping, sharpshooting, and other activities of the Old West. There were also plays and reenactments of legendary Old West stories. It was one of the most popular shows of its time, touring both America and Europe.

the family settled, a house might be made of wood, bales of hay, or simply slabs of grass, dirt, and mud called *sod*. A sod house was sturdy and snug, but it was also **notorious** for its bugs and snakes.

On the homestead, it was usually a woman's job to cook, clean, take care of the children, make and mend clothing, and store food for winter. As always on the 19th-century western frontier, all of this work was done by hand or animal power, which took enormous time and effort.

But many women found that life on the frontier suited them better than life in the cities or in Europe. In most of 19th-century America, women's lives were very restricted. They could only work in the home or in certain jobs such as teaching or nursing. Poorer women could work as maids or in factories. It was considered **scandalous** for unmarried women to be out alone, or to meet up with male friends. All the decisions of a household were up to a woman's husband or father. And every day, women were expected to dress from head to toe in layer after layer of stiff and delicate lace, silk, ribbons, and beads.

But on the frontier, a woman could do any job needed. While men were usually expected to be the ones to clear land, plant and grow crops, take care of livestock, hunt, and fish, most families found that there was simply too much work for one person. Many women, some who were from cities and had never seen a farm, quickly learned to plow and plant, to milk cows and tend chickens, to rope calves and ride horses, and to hunt and fish for their own food. Men were often away on hunting trips or fetching supplies, leaving women to do all the work of the household, inside and out. With men often away and the Homestead Act giving them more rights, women could make decisions and run their own lives. They didn't have to worry about looking dainty, keeping clean, or maintaining proper manners. Women on the frontier got tough and wild, just like the American landscape.

Many women wrote long and **vivid** letters back home to their families, describing all the dangers, adventures, and work of the West. Many parents back east were astonished to hear that their delicate

How Hard Can It Be?

Even simple chores on the frontier took great time and labor. Compare what it's like to do laundry in the 19th-century West and today.

19th Century	Today
Haul water from river to house	Put laundry in washing machine
Build fire under pot	
Make soap: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build fire • Boil animal fat • Add lye to animal fat • Stir until smooth • Let cool and cut into bricks 	
Pour hot water from pot and soap into washtub	Put soap in washing machine
Scrub laundry in washtub on washboard or beat with sticks	Turn washing machine on
Refill washtub with fresh water	
Rinse laundry	
Put sheets, diapers, underwear, and other white clothes into pot and reheat fire until it boils	
Hang laundry to dry	Put laundry in dryer
Iron laundry	Turn dryer on
Fold laundry	Fold laundry

daughter had become a horse-wrangling, tough-talking, sharp-shooting pioneer. Amazing stories quickly passed among the pioneer lady's friends and relatives. On the trail, too, stories about the brave accomplishments of pioneer women were shared around the fire. Women on wagon trains took great comfort in each other's friendship, and those friendships surely included stories about a woman who had killed a rattlesnake with her bare hands or who floated her wagon across a river when her husband fell ill. Like all tall tales, these stories helped the women of the frontier face the tremendous fears they must have felt as they arrived in the American West. And as each tale was told over and over, the dangers got a little more dangerous and the woman's strength got a little stronger.

One pioneer woman whose story became famous was Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett. Sally Ann was the fictional wife of the famous Davy Crockett, who was a real pioneer, hunter,



Out West, women worked as hard as the men on the homesteads.

adventurer, and legend in his own right. Davy Crockett, or David, as he was actually called, was born in 1786 in Tennessee, in a cabin on what was then the frontier. The young Davy quickly learned to love the outdoors, and he spent much of his teenage years hunting, trapping, and exploring in the Appalachian Mountains. As an adult, Crockett served in the U.S. Congress, and his rough backwoods style quickly made him a celebrity. He fought for the rights of settlers who farmed land they didn't own, and battled against a plan to force the Cherokee Native Americans to leave their homes in the eastern United States and march to Oklahoma. Because of his tough style, he wasn't reelected.

Instead, he settled in the territory of Texas, where he fought alongside other American settlers against Mexico in the Battle of the Alamo in 1836. No Americans survived.

Davy Crockett's life, career, and death made him a huge celebrity. Davy wrote fantastic stories, some true and some not, about his adventures. Soon, cheaply printed stories about Davy Crockett were popping up all over. Some even claimed to be written by him after his death. One type of Davy Crockett story was the *Davy Crockett Almanac*. Many almanacs also included funny stories for entertainment. Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett was one hero of these adventures, and she was nearly as tough as Davy Crockett. Publishers claimed her stories were "written" by Davy himself. The tales told of a pioneer woman who was so fearless she would swing an alligator by its tail and so tough she could scream the feathers off an eagle. Sally Ann was certainly no dainty Eastern lady in a beaded dress. She wore a snake for a belt and a beehive for a bonnet. Sally Ann came to symbolize all the new roles that women played on the frontier. For the proper ladies back east, her story was amusing and maybe a little scary. But for the pioneer women themselves, Sally Ann was a hero to be looked up to. She taught pioneer men the true value of a wife who was brave, strong, and full of humor. Her tales showed how women could make it under the toughest conditions.

THE ADVENTURES OF SALLY ANN THUNDER ANN WHIRLWIND CROCKETT

When Davy Crockett met Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind, he was in a very embarrassing situation. He was out on a long hunting trip when he decided to settle down for the night. Not having a pillow, he rested his head in the fork of a split-trunked tree. Well, sometime during the night, either Davy's head got bigger or the fork got smaller. When Davy woke up the next morning, he couldn't get his head unstuck for the life of him. What was worse, Davy Crockett had a full head of soft, curly hair. A pair of eagles thought his hair would make a mighty fine nest. So they perched right on top of Davy Crockett's forehead, ripping his hair out by its roots.

Suddenly, Davy Crockett heard a yell so loud that the whole tree shuddered with his head inside it.

"Get off that poor man's head!" shouted the voice. The eagles looked up, but then they returned to plucking his poor hair.

"I said," screamed the voice, so loud Davy's ears hurt, "GET OFF THAT MAN'S HEAD!" The voice thundered so loud that the feathers were blasted right off those eagles' heads, and their skin was left as white as snow. And that was the beginning of bald eagles.

The owner of the voice stood above Davy Crockett's head and looked down.

"Now, how did you get yourself in that pretty predicament?" she asked. Davy Crockett had never seen a woman like her before in his life. She was tall and strong, dressed head to toe in bearskin. She wore a humming beehive as a bonnet, and she was picking her teeth with a Bowie knife.



"I'm not quite sure how this happened, to tell you the truth," Davy said rather shyly. Now, Davy Crockett normally wasn't shy at all. But you see, he'd fallen head-over-heels (or as it were, tree-over-heels) in love with this strange wilderness woman.

"Well, I'd better get you out," the woman said. She parted the forked tree trunk like other ladies would part a curtain, and Davy Crockett was free.

"My name's Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind!" Sally Ann said with a grin that flashed like lightning.

"My name's Davy Crockett, and I'd appreciate it if you would be my wife!" Davy said. Well, Sally Ann's grin lit up like a whole