



Genre


Tall tales are humorous stories with characters who have superhuman abilities. As you read, think about how the exaggerated details help explain many of the natural features of the American frontier.

PAUL BUNYAN

BY MARY POPE OSBORNE
ILLUSTRATIONS BY HARVEY CHAN



Question of the Week
**What causes changes
in nature?**



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 poor mother had to comb it with a pine tree.

Except for that 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.

When the neighbors complained, the baby's parents tried putting him in a giant floating cradle off the coast of Maine. But soon a delegation of citizens went to the baby's parents and said, "We're sorry, folks, but you have to take your son somewhere else. Every time he rolls over in his cradle, huge waves drown 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. "We'll think of you often, honey," his mother said, weeping. "But you can't come back home—you're just too big."

"Here, son," his father said. "I'm giving you my ax, my knife, my fishing pole, and some flint rocks. Good-bye and good luck."

After his parents left, the poor bearded baby cried for thirty days and thirty nights. He was so lonely, he cried a whole river of tears. He might have cried himself to death if one day he hadn't heard *flop, flop, flop*.

When the baby looked around, he saw fish jumping in his river of tears. He reached for his father's fishing pole and soon he was catching trout. He used his father's knife to clean and scale what he had caught and his father's ax to cut wood for a fire. He started the fire with his flint rocks and cooked his catch over the flames. Then he ate a big fish dinner and smiled for the first time in a month.

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. He hunted and fished. He cut down trees and made fires. He battled winter storms, spring floods, summer flies, and autumn gales.



Nothing, however, prepared Paul Bunyan for the wild weather that occurred on the morning of his twenty-first birthday. It was a cold December day, and when Paul woke up, he noticed gusts of snow blowing past the mouth of his cave. That was natural enough. What was **unnatural** was that the snow was blue.

“Why, that’s beautiful!” Paul said. And he pulled on his red-and-black mackinaw coat, his corn-yellow scarf, and his snow boots. Then grinning from ear to ear, he set out across the blue hills.

The snow fell until the woods were covered with a thick blanket of blue. As Paul walked over huge drifts, bitter winds whistled through the trees and thunder rolled in the sky. But he soon began to hear another sound in the wind—“Maa-maa.”

“Who’s there?” Paul called.

“Maa-maa.”

“Who’s there?” said Paul again. His heart was starting to break, for the cries sounded as if they were coming from a baby crying for its mother and father.

“Maa-maa.”

“Where are you, baby?” Suddenly Paul saw a tail sticking right up out of a blue snowdrift. When he pulled on the tail, out came the biggest baby ox on Earth. Except for its white horns, the creature was frozen deep blue, the same color as the snow.

“He-ey, babe!” Paul shouted.

“Maa-maa-maa.”

“Hush, hush, hush, babe,” Paul whispered as he carried the frozen ox back home.



“There now,” he said, setting the blue creature gently down in front of his fire. “We’ll get you warmed up all right.”

Paul fell asleep with his arm around the giant baby ox. He didn’t know if the frozen babe would live or not. But when the morning sun began shining on the blue snow outside the cave, Paul felt a soft, wet nose nuzzling his neck. As the rough tongue licked his cheeks and nose and eyelids, Paul’s joyous laughter shook the earth. He had found a friend.

Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox were inseparable after that. Babe grew so fast that Paul liked to close his eyes for a minute, count to ten, then look to see how much Babe had grown. Sometimes the ox would be a whole foot taller. It’s a known fact that Babe’s full-grown height was finally measured to be forty-two ax handles, and he weighed more than the combined weight of all the fish that ever got away. Babe was so big that when he and Paul trekked through forests, Paul had to look through a telescope just to see what Babe’s hind legs were doing.

In those times, huge sections of America were filled with dark green forests. And forests were filled with trees—oceans of trees—trees as far as the eye could see—trees so tall you had to look straight up to see if it was morning, and maybe if you were lucky, you'd catch a glimpse of blue sky.

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 all those trees and said, "Babe, stand back. I'm about to invent logging."

"*Tim-ber!*" he yelled, and he swung his bright steel ax 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.

Paul bundled up the trees and loaded them onto the ox's back. "All right, Babe," he said. "Let's haul 'em to the Big Onion and send 'em down to a sawmill."

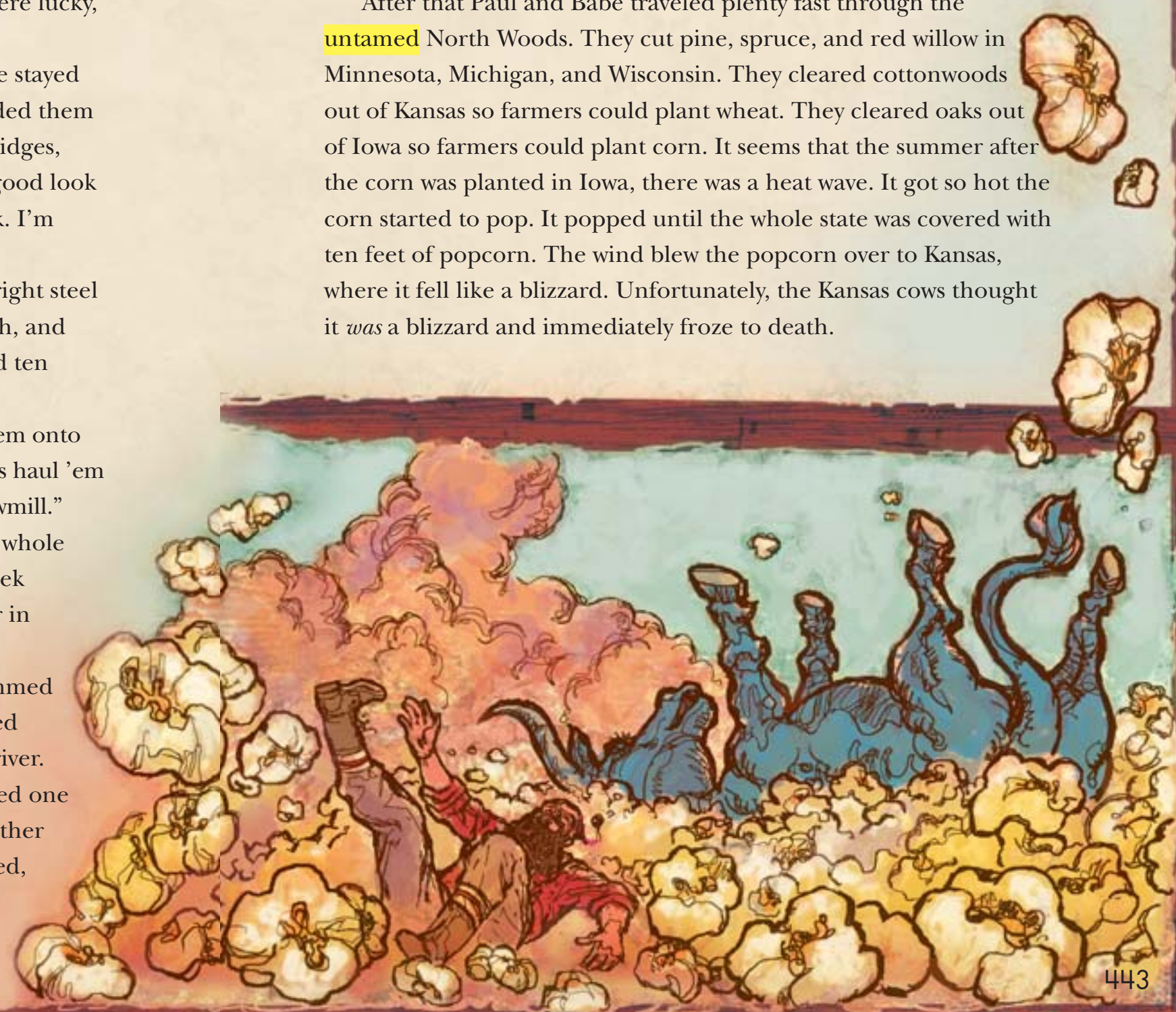
Since both Babe and Paul could cover a whole mile in a single step, it only took about a week to travel from Maine to the Big Onion River in Minnesota.


"She's too crooked. Our logs will get jammed at her curves," Paul said to Babe as he peered through his telescope at the long, winding river. "Let's see what we can do about that." He tied one end of the rope to Babe's harness and the other around the end of the river. Then he shouted, "Pull! Pull!"

And Babe huffed and puffed until he pulled all the kinks out of that winding water.

"There! She's as straight as a gun barrel now," Paul said. "Let's send down these logs."

After that Paul and Babe traveled plenty fast through the **untamed** North Woods. They cut pine, spruce, and red willow in Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin. They cleared cottonwoods out of Kansas so farmers could plant wheat. They cleared oaks out of Iowa so farmers could plant corn. It seems that the summer after the corn was planted in Iowa, there was a heat wave. It got so hot the corn started to pop. It popped until the whole state was covered with ten feet of popcorn. The wind blew the popcorn over to Kansas, where it fell like a blizzard. Unfortunately, the Kansas cows thought it *was* a blizzard and immediately froze to death.





When next heard of, Paul and Babe were headed to Arizona. Paul dragged his pickax behind him, not realizing he was leaving a big ditch in his tracks. Today that ditch is called the Grand Canyon.


When they got back from out west, Paul and Babe settled down on the Big Onion River. One night, after the two had spent the day rolling thousands of logs down the river, Paul was so tired he couldn't even see straight. As he lay under the stars, his giant body aching, he said, "Babe, it's time I started me a logging camp. I'm gonna hire a bunch of fellers to help me."

You might say this was a turning point for Paul Bunyan. Not for thirty years, since the day his parents had left him crying all alone in that Maine cave, had he asked a single human being for help. But the next day Paul and Babe hiked all over the northern timberlands, posting signs that said: LOGGERS NEEDED TO WORK FOR PAUL BUNYAN. IF INTERESTED, COME TO BIG ONION, MINNESOTA, TO APPLY.

Word spread fast. Since all the woodsmen had heard of Paul Bunyan, hundreds of thousands of them hurried to Big Onion, eager to be part of his crew.

Paul wanted the biggest and brawniest men for his camp, so he made an **announcement** to all the men who'd gathered to apply for the job. "There's only two **requirements**," he said. "All my loggers have to be over ten feet tall and 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 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 and Babe dug a few ponds to provide drinking water for everyone. Today we call those ponds the Great Lakes.

But feeding that crew of giants was a bigger problem. One day Paul's cook, Sourdough Sam, said to Paul, "Boss, there's no way I can make enough flapjacks for these hungry fellers. Every morning the ones who don't get seconds threaten to kill me."

The next day Paul built Sam a flapjack griddle the size of an ice-skating rink. Then he lit a forest fire underneath that burned night and day.

"But how'm I supposed to grease this thing?" Sam asked.

"Every morning before dawn we'll get a hundred men to strap bacon fat to the bottoms of their shoes and skate around the griddle till you're ready to cook," Paul said.

Well, after Paul got the flapjack griddle all squared away, he figured he needed a bookkeeper to keep track of all the food bills. So he hired a man named Johnny Inkslinger. Johnny kept the payroll, and he took care of Babe's hay and grain bills, and about ten thousand and two other things. He used a fountain pen that was twenty feet long and connected by a giant hose to a lake filled with ink. It's said that Johnny figured out he could save over four hundred and twenty gallons of ink a year just by not crossing his *t*'s and dotting his *i*'s.



**TIMBER!
TIMBER!**

“Great idea,” said Shot.

“What else?” said Paul.

“Just one more thing—when I give orders to the woods crew, all my words freeze in the air and hang there stiff as icicles.”

“Oh, well, get Babe to haul your frozen words away and store them next to the lantern flames. They’ll **thaw** out in the spring too,” Paul said.

Sure enough, the beard socks kept the men’s feet from freezing and falling off, and the lantern flames and Shot’s words all thawed out in the spring. The only problem was that when the lantern flames melted, they caused some mean little brushfires. 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 at the Big Onion Lumber Company until the spring of the China Rains.

Everything at the Big Onion Lumber Company ran pretty smoothly until the year of the Hard Winter. That winter it was so cold that one day Shot Gunderson, Paul’s foreman, rode up to Paul’s shanty on his saddled bear with a whole list of problems.

“Boss, we’ve got trouble!” he said. “When the fellers go out to work, their feet are getting so frostbitten, they’re starting to fall off.”

“That’s bad,” Paul said, scratching his beard. “Well, tell the fellers to let their whiskers grow. Then when their beards get down to their feet, they can knit them into socks.”

“Good thinkin’,” said Shot.

“What else?” said Paul.

“The flames for all the lanterns are freezing!”

“Well, just take the frozen flames outside and store them somewhere,” Paul said. “Then wait for them to melt in the spring.”





One day that spring, Shot Gunderson burst into Paul's shanty with his pant legs soaking wet. "Boss, we've got a problem! The rains are starting to come *up* from the ground instead of down from the sky."

"They must be coming from China," said Paul. "Order two thousand umbrellas. When they come, cut the handles off and replace them with snowshoe straps."

Shot did as Paul said, and soon all the loggers were wearing umbrellas on their shoes to keep the China Rains from shooting up their pant legs.

Unfortunately, the China Rains caused a crop of ten-foot mosquitoes to attack the camp. The men tried using chicken wire for mosquito nets. Then they started barricading the doors and windows of the bunkhouse with two-ton boulders to keep them out. Finally they had to vacate the bunkhouse altogether when the mosquitoes tore off the roof.

"Get some giant bumblebees," Paul ordered Shot. "They'll get rid of the mosquitoes."

Shot did as Paul said. The only problem was, the bees and the mosquitoes fell madly in love, and soon they were having children. Since the children had stingers on both ends, they caught the loggers both coming and going!

But Paul finally outsmarted the bee-squitoes.

"If there's one thing a bee-squito loves more than stinging, it's sweets," Paul said. So he got them to swarm to a Hawaiian sugar ship docked in Lake Superior. And when the whole bunch got too fat to move, he shipped them to a circus in Florida.

Well, there's stories and stories about Paul Bunyan, Babe the Blue Ox, and the Big Onion Lumber Company. For many years, old loggers sat around potbellied stoves and told about the good old times with Paul. They told how Paul and Babe logged all the trees in Minnesota, then moved on to Washington, Oregon, and Alaska. And when last heard of, the two were somewhere off the Arctic Circle.

The old 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.

