The Spirit of America:

American Folk Heroes in Fact, Fiction, and Function

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The “Losers:” Dissent and the Legacy of Defeat in American Politics

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Storytelling is the world's oldest form of entertainment, and is often cited as primary historical source material. The United States is no exception, and though its postcolonial history is relatively short, it is rich with stories of incredible feats performed by average citizens. Tall tales and folklore in particular have the tendency to exaggerate. Whether a story is completely falsified, or based in facts with embellished features, the stories that traveled through generations are quite telling of American culture. As William Kerrigan put it, "A compelling tall tale will always have more sticking power than a careful rendering of facts. But myths have their uses and their value. They teach us about ourselves, or at least the values we aspire to…"[1] Songs, poems, books, and movies have ensured that many of these tales will live on forever in public memory, however the use of these stories is questionable. While the aim for many of these characters might be to show a mystical version of the nation we inhabit, perhaps they are too idealized and end up characterizing the realistic and ordinary nation as valueless. If the heroes that Americans put on pedestals are imaginary or gilded caricatures, what does that say about American values?

It has been said that folklore, tall tales and their protagonists capture the true "American Spirit," but if that is the case, the American Spirit itself must be overstated. Figures like Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Davy Crockett, and Johnny Appleseed have slated their spots in history. This mixture of fictional and historical characters provides a wider investigation into the appeal of American folklore. Regardless of their truth, folk tales will always tell something of historical climate, and for that reason they remain relevant. These figures in particular all seem to have

[1] William Kerrigan, "The Invention of Johnny Appleseed," *The Antioch Review* 70, no. 4 (2012): 625.

some relationship to expansion and Manifest Destiny, a time when the American identity was coming to fruition as it is known today. On this idea, C. Grant Loomis writes,

> "The novelty of fresh lands to conquer encouraged imaginative beliefs. Always there was the possibility of marvels in some undiscovered tomorrow… The bases of exaggeration under these conditions were not alone contained in a desire to escape from the commonplace, but were also stimulated by the need of self-inflating courage in the face of dreadful odds. The growth of the American cult of wonder had a good deal of prayerful hardihood and teeth-gritting cheerfulness."[2]

The unexplored lands provided a mysterious setting for many of these tall tales to take place, as well as a sense of anticipation for what could happen in these uncharted territories. Exploring the history surrounding examples of American tall tales gives insight to their development as well as a better understanding of cultural history.

The recurring issue with folklore is trying to find the origin. Paul Bunyan's story, for example is one of those whose origin is widely contested. Even if an absolute origin could be named, it is difficult if not impossible to verify the claim with certainty. Regardless of when the tale originated, there are milestones to mark its entrance into public memory. By the mid-twentieth century, Paul Bunyan had carved his way into American pop culture by way of

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[2] C. Grant Loomis, "The American Tall Tale and the Miraculous," *California Folklore Quarterly* Vol. 4, no.2 (April 1945): 110.

books, songs, plays, and paintings. Walt Disney Studios released the animated short film, *Paul Bunyan,* giving the character a full background and heroic storyline. However at the time of this rise in popularity, Bunyan's namesake had been around for at least a quarter of a century, and likely longer. In the early twentieth century, Paul Bunyan's tales were passed along mainly through oral tradition, and eventually his likeness was used in advertising for the Red River Lumber Company.[3] Bunyan's mythology was wide ranged, but typically held onto the giant lumberjack narrative. Whatever a story imagined about Bunyan, it usually revolved around his life as a giant man, processing lumber with his blue ox, Babe. Gladys Haney writes about the transformation of Bunyan stories, twenty-five years after his likeness was first published by the Red River Lumber Company. Haney writes,

> "The Paul of old was a giant in stature, a super-lumberjack, and a recognized leader of men in the woods. Today, he is credited with digging Puget Sound, being an oil man in the Southwest, building the Panama Canal, and being in service overseas with the A.E.F. At least three writers interpret Paul Bunyan as the spirit of America. Another goes so far as to make him a villain, and a fifth pictures him as of ordinary stature to most, but a giant to those who believe in him."[4]

Reading this list of accomplishments as factual is objectively preposterous. While the list contains acts that could have been true—serving with the AEF, being an oil man—the other acts

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[3] Gladys J. Haney, "Paul Bunyan Twenty-Five Years After," The Journal of American Folklore 55, no. 2017 (1942): 155-68.
[4] Ibid., 155.

discredit the plausible ones. There are facts that invalidate the claim that one man—giant or not—built the Panama Canal. Perhaps one cannot factually dispute the claim against Bunyan digging the Puget Sound, but to believe the claim would border on the side of religious fantasy, begging the question: is Paul Bunyan a god? Regardless of what he form he takes, Paul Bunyan is a fictionalized character, yet some writers go so far as to call him the "spirit of America." Does this mean the spirit of America is fictional? Further, if the "spirit of America" looks like Paul Bunyan, what does that mean for a post-industrial revolution America? Strength and brauns used to define the success of a man, especially in the time of Paul Bunyan's fantasy existence, but fifty years later, such is not the case. The themes may have worked well for wartime propaganda, but certainly not as much for everyday life. Whether or not a real Paul Bunyan ever did exist, his legacy tells more about his followers than it does about the man himself. Haney goes on to say, "Critics are of varying opinions concerning Paul Bunyan and his place in folklore. Some compare him with Hercules and Thor; others prefer to call him a Munchausen."[5] Paul Bunyan as an American hero falls into the fictional category where he is joined by countless others. One in particular, John Henry, bears a very similar narrative.

The history behind the story of John Henry is even more ambiguous than Paul Bunyan's. Though his origin may be unknown, the story of John Henry is fairly solidified in retellings. As the ballad goes, "John Henry was a hard-workin' man/ He died with his hammer in his hand."[6] The legend says Henry was so confident in his physical ability, he challenged the new steam drill to a contest to cut what would become the Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia. Man beat

[5] Haney, 157.
[6] Richard M. Dorson, "The Career of 'John Henry.'" Western Fokllore 24, no. 3 (1965): 155.

machine, and John Henry died right there after claiming victory. Again, the tale is unbelievably hyperbolic. The only truth may have been the fact that if a man was able to single-handedly plow through a mountain, he would die of exhaustion right there. Yet, John Henry's story gets passed down from generation to generation and inspires the whole lot of books and artistic renderings including the Disney treatment in 2002. Contrary to Paul Bunyan, John Henry is a black American in a time when that would likely disqualify him from the American hero trope. But perhaps, that is part of his charm. Disney painted John Henry as a freed slave, who fought for land owed to him and his companions, including apparently Irishmen. He becomes an American hero among the likes of Paul Bunyan, despite his race. While his race does not seem to be a key component of the story's conflict, to ignore it would be unjust. In Richard Dorson's analysis of John Henry, he points out the facets of race that become amplified in later retellings. Dorson writes,

> "The whole narrative is written in a repetitious, rhythmic stage dialect, interspersed with plaintive little songs and centering around Negro literary stereotypes. The sporting man, the hell-busting preacher, the woman of easy acquaintance, the old conjure mammy are all present. John Henry is a new stereotype for the Negro gallery, but a well-established one in American lore-the frontier boaster-and he reiterates his tall-tale outcries on nearly every page."[7]

[7] Dorson, 157.

Dorson seems to question the efficacy of using John Henry to create a new idea of the Black American. He later goes on to highlight the comparisons critics made between John Henry and Paul Bunyan, citing the public as imagining John Henry as the "negro Paul Bunyan."[8] On the contrary, Disney chose to highlight John Henry as a black hero. In the DVD collection, *American Heroes,* the actor James Earl Jones narrates an anthology of animated shorts about John Henry among other figures and on Henry, he says, "In a time when African-Americans had just begun to make their place in the world, he was a towering example of leadership and determination."[9] While the film is recent, it seems to be retrospectively promoting the idea of black equality, which is important to note. However, the short somewhat fails is outright promoting this idea by ending the parable with a happy song about how you can do anything if you just believe in yourself, like John Henry, as if to say African-Americans can achieve success if they just believe hard enough.

The discussion on representation here seems to be happening somewhat ahead of its time. While Disney's commentary is more recent, the topic was not as widely discussed as it is today. More surprising, Dorson was writing in the heat of the Civil Rights Movement, and reflecting upon John Henry, whose mythology dates back to the late-19th Century. Dorson goes event further to examine the intersectionality of themes within the John Henry story while comparing it to Paul Bunyan. Yet, as Dorson points out, the comparison is dangerous as a racial narrative. He writes, "So for American children John Henry unites the Negroes in faithful service to their white employers and accepts the machine."[10] Once again the issue of idolizing these fictitious

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[8] Dorson, 158.
[9] *American Legends*. Directed by Lara Shapiro (2002; USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation, 2002), DVD.
[10] Dorson, 159.

characters is presented. While having a black hero is an important move for racial acceptance, there must be a danger in putting a fictional man on a pedestal before a real one. Is the John Henry narrative fantasizing and thereby commodifying the black body? Further, if the Disney version truly captures the meaning of the story, and it is supposed to be a narrative about "believing in yourself," a prime opportunity to speak to the importance of equality was definitely missed. Of course, John Henry is not necessarily viewed as a pioneer for Civil Rights, but his place in literary history is no less important.

Stories like Paul Bunyan's and John Henry's belong in a category separate from actual historical figures. They have a place in history as being that—fictitious narratives set in real timelines, but perhaps their purpose is different than the real figures. Both figures have unifying narratives in that the mere act of telling a story about Bunyan or Henry created a community across the nation. Interestingly enough, these two figures in particular promote very specific characteristics of what an American hero should be, and they are all hyperbolic or superhuman traits. If Paul Bunyan or John Henry were actually being idolized, perhaps that says something about the American identity. The 19th century was turbulent for Americans, but if they could rally on a united front as a strong and powerful nation of supermen, the world would accept them as such. However, there is a bit of a gray area when discussing folk heroes. The line between fact and fiction becomes blurred when examining figures like Davy Crockett and Johnny Appleseed—men who did exist and contribute to society, but receive fantasized mythology during their lives and after their deaths, furthering the idea that simply being American and existing was not enough.

Born on a mountain top in Tennessee

Greenest state in the land of the free

Raised in the woods so he knew ev'ry tree

Kilt him a be 'are when he was only three

Davy, Davy Crockett, king of the wild frontier![11]

Davy Crockett is arguably one of the best known American folk heroes of history, due in part to this song and the Disney-produced television series it themed. He was actually born in the Nolichucky River valley in Tennessee. He probably did not kill a bear when he was three, but he was a skilled hunter and would go on to kill some in his lifetime.[12] Crockett, "King of the Wild Frontier," as Disney coined him, lived a somewhat extraordinary life, but he was not objectively valiant. He was a hunter, a pioneer frontiersman, eventually a congressman, and died at the Alamo. He was an associate of Andrew Jackson which should be telling of his symbolism. Like Jackson, Crockett was regarded as an American icon because of their narratives of brawn and self-making. Crockett, however, receives more and more fictitious narratives and is thus a more malleable symbol. In truth, Davy Crockett both fought against the Indian Removal Act and brutally battled Indians in the Creek War. The contradictory roles he played add to the mystery behind the man. It was arguable that he was not fighting the Indian Removal Act for the natives in actuality, but more for his own benefit. Regardless, he fought on both sides of the war on natives, and that flexibility played to his fictional characterization.

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[11] Tennessee Ernie Ford, *The Ballad of Davy Crockett*, Streaming Audio. 1954.

[12] Olivia B. Waxman, "The Ballad of Davy Crockett and Real History: A Fact-Check," Time.com. Time Magazine, August 17, 2016, http://time.com/4450210/davy-crockett-ballad-factchecking/. Accessed February 22, 2017.

In 1835, the *Downing Gazette* began publishing letters between a man named Jack Downing and Davy Crockett. Whether or not the real Davy Crockett was ever a part of the writing is undetermined. But the attention was beneficial to him nonetheless. In his biography on Andrew Jackson, John William Ward writes about this correspondence. Ward writes,

> "The important thing is that to attack Jackson the opposition had to assume the pose in which Jackson had been standing for some time. This is more obviously the case with Davy Crockett than with Jack Downing. And as with the down-easterner, the confusion about who was the real Davy Crockett was caused by unmerciful exploitation of Crockett for political purposes. Crockett provided excellent propaganda, at first for Jackson, later against Jackson…"[13]

As stated, Crockett and Jackson had comparable storylines, which helped build Andrew Jackson's and possibly Davy Crockett's political characters. Their illiteracy and woodsman histories catered to the desires of a growing population. However, much of that charm did not come until after Crockett's death.

> "Of course, the historical Crockett did have a reputation for illiteracy, including what must be one of the first recorded dependencies on Congressional speechwriters. This, combined with his origins as a child of an impoverished

[13] John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age (1815-1845)* (London, Oxford University Press, 1953), 88-9.

> taverner, and his own notoriety for drinking, womanising and telling 'tall tales', made him into rather a different figure than the Disney Davy. Before his death in 1836, Crockett was well on his way to becoming a caricature rustic, whose comic exploits were retailed in almanacs, ballads and minstrel shows. Not until the 1870s did his image modulate into respectability when, as the wilderness receded and the myth of the American hunter took hold, his backwoods persona was converted into the chivalrous hero of stage melodrama, the unschooled-but-sensitive suitor who rescues an heiress from an arranged marriage."[14]

The image of Crockett as an uneducated man of the land began to play to a new American identity founded by Andrew Jackson and men like him. Suddenly education was less important, and the ability to survive in the woods was vital. This image was set to last for years, and gets rebooted in the 20th Century with the revival of the "Crockett craze" thanks to the Disney television series. Merck writes about her experience with the Davy Crockett mythology growing up. She remembers knowing some facts about him, and then becoming obsessed with him along with all the other kids at school. She cites a Crockett biography that became popular among children at the time saying,

> "He didn't know much about his country. He didn't know how big it was or what lay beyond it. But something about that flag made him feel good all over. And he

[14] Mandy Merck, "Davy Crockett," *History Workshop Journal* no. 40 (1955): 187-8.

knew suddenly that his country would never do anything wrong if he could help."[15]

Crockett's identity as not just an American, but a bleeding-heart American patriot exploded. But Davy Crockett was not just a lover of his nation, he was a defender of it in a time when that meant moving West, and Manifest Destiny. Merck writes, "Indeed, the Crockett legend, as commentators more critical than Meadowcroft have noted, became a rallying cry for Manifest Destiny, with his death attempting to wrest Texas from Mexico the perfect ending."[16] In Merck's time, and the release of Disney's Davy Crockett series, the United States is being completing with the official statehoods of Hawai'i and Alaska. There is no need to teach children the excitement of westward expansion—it's basically over. So why does Davy Crockett become an icon all over again for a new generation? Patriotism and nationalism are always an agenda for the United States. Yet Davy Crockett is an interesting figure to use for this agenda because of his questionable narrative. While in truth it seems he was overall an American-minded patriot, but is his fantasized narrative even relatable to children of the 20th century and beyond?

Perhaps like Paul Bunyan and John Henry, the lessons learned from Davy Crockett are not supposed to be literal. Bunyan and Henry encourage the image of superhuman strength and physical impossibilities, to say that is the ideal image would be destined for failure. But perhaps, they are encouraging messages of working hard and persevering. Paul Bunyan's giant stature is maybe actually a metaphor encouraging Americans to be giant in terms of inner strength and

[15] Enid LaMonte Meadowcroft, *The Story of Davy Crockett* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1952), 42.
[16] Merck, 188.

character. John Henry not only overcomes physical impossibility, but overcomes adversity, which is an attainable attribute, and important lesson. Similar to Paul Bunyan and John Henry, perhaps Davy Crockett is supposed to just be a fun folk hero children can idolize. His factual failures in Congress do not support the idea that he was a hero by most standards, but maybe his death at the Alamo does. His death in the infamous battle was nothing extraordinary, but it does in unadulterated fact, give him a tragic hero's ending.

It would be easy to dismiss these narratives as silly and childish if they stayed within the parameters of children's media. However, the kind of fictionalizing that happens to Davy Crockett happens throughout much of American history to even more significant figures. Perhaps the stories are more appealing to children because of a trait many of these stories share. Like Davy Crocket killing a bear when he was three, figures like George Washington receive mythology like confessing that he lied about chopping down a cherry tree. Loomis describes,

> "All heroes have stories told about a precocious youth. The development of this aspect of their fame is usually subsequent to their lives. Not until they have become great do people look backward and remember all the signs which indicated the inevitable advance of their fortunes… Their earliest days are characterized by feats superior to those of the common man. In a mild fashion, similar materials have become associated with our national heroes, particularly

> Washington and Lincoln. The cult of our braggart heroes also has suggestions of a similar development."[17]

Calling Lincoln and Washington and the likes a "cult of braggart heroes," Loomis alludes the notion that these narratives and those who perpetuated them were chauvinistic and arrogant. Loomis goes on to quote Davy Crockett as he glorified his own childhood as something miraculous, claiming things like "the first teeth I shed war taken to build our parlor fireplace."[18] Later, Loomis concludes, "By nature, the grandeur of these terrific characteristics is more related to Hercules and Gargantua than to any of the saints."[19] Loomis comes to the conclusion that the fantasization of the characters is closest to Greek mythology because of the way they accentuate physical feats. But the final figure in discussion would throw that argument for a loop.

John Chapman, or Johnny Appleseed, as he became known, probably had the least mystical life based on the facts, yet like Davy Crockett, he received plenty of fantasized narratives that turned him into a folk hero. William Kerrigan summarizes,

> "Many [stories] focused on his meekness, his monomania for apple-tree planting, and his benevolence, but others contained elements that were common to frontier folk traditions in the trans-Appalachian west. These included stories about his extraordinary abilities: that he could chop down more trees in one day than most men could in two, or his ability to endure pain and cold without emotion. Some

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[17] Loomis, *American Tall Tales and the Miraculous*, 114-15.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

> spoke of his religious conviction in admiring tones, while others poked fun at his peculiar and unconventional religious beliefs. His habits of dress, and his extreme reluctance to harm any living thing, even a mosquito, were the subjects of derisive stories. Some declared him to be mad, others suggested he was lazy, and one described him as an impractical man whose haphazardly planted nurseries were mostly destroyed by browsing deer and cattle, and made no meaningful contribution to the horticultural history of Ohio."[20]

Right away, Kerrigan uses language like "haphazardly" to describe Johnny Appleseed's feats. While many who know the name today would likely offer some knowledge of him planting apple trees, but not much else. And in truth, there may not be much else, if his horticulture was even worth the story. Kerrigan examines the history of Johnny Appleseed, and points to a couple of sources for all the legends. Kerrigan explores the timeline following Appleseed's death and his rise to cultural relevance through two main sources—a woman, Rosella Rice, who claimed to know John Chapman personally, and W.D. Haley who may have had ulterior motives for sharing the story of Johnny Appleseed following the Civil War.

> "Haley's Grange activism and his sympathy for the new challenges faced by America's rural communities formed a backdrop for his depiction of John Chapman… In recounting John Chapman's story he sought to celebrate "sublimer heroisms than those of human torture, and nobler victories than those of the

[20] William Kerrigan, "The Invention of Johnny Appleseed," *The Antioch Review* 70, no. 4 (2012): 611.

> tomahawk and scalping-knife." In Haley's mind, John Chapman deserved to be remembered as a saint of the farmers' frontier, as one of "the heroes of endurance that was voluntary, and action that was creative not sanguinary."[21]

Authors like Haley began to use Johnny Appleseed as propaganda for their own causes if they could get away with twisting John Chapman's the slightest in the direction of their cause. Haley uses him for the Populist political movement. Other authors start imagining Chapman as a mediating figure between white citizens and waning Indian populations. Since he was as far as record can show, a peaceful man, it was easy to manipulate a story about him where he crosses boundaries and treatises with the natives. Kerrigan writes,

> "Johnny Appleseed, too, became part of this celebration of the nation's origins, but his story was free from the taint of that violence. As such, he became for sentimental reformers who were unsettled by the vulgarity and violence of the Crockett myths a more appealing champion. Johnny Appleseed, after all, was a man of extraordinary gentleness and peace."[22]

Here, Kerrigan points out the dichotomy between Johnny Appleseed and Davy Crockett. Again, both have factual lives with interesting stories, but nothing like the incredulous myths that become associated with their names. And no one could even say whether or not these figures would have appreciated being a mascot for a cause they may or may not have supported.

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[21] Kerrigan, 612-13.
[22] Kerrigan, 616.

Kerrigan explains that the only real evidence of any interactions John Chapman had with Indians were negative. Though there were no native accounts of Chapman, there were some white folks' accounts of Chapman barely escaping the wrath of one tribe, or being robbed by another, and fighting against Indians in the War of 1812.

> "Despite these facts, the vision of Johnny Appleseed as a unifying figure, beloved by both Indians and whites, continued to grow in its importance as Johnny Appleseed became a central part of the American origin myth. For white reformers, Johnny Appleseed, who befriended Indians and remade the continent with a hoe, not a rifle, was a more palatable hero."[23]

The "palatable hero" that Kerrigan calls Johnny Appleseed is alluding to the notion that folk heroes are just permeable outlines for public memory to shape for a given agenda. All historical accounts kind of lead to the conclusion that Johnny Appleseed was a bum. He planted apple seeds, then left them to fend for themselves. He may have spread Christianity is some form or another, but perhaps that act was just an extension of Manifest Destiny.

So, in some regards John Chapman might be seen as heroic, or someone who performed small heroic deeds. However one sees him or Davy Crockett, or other mythicized figures, he or she must take into account the fictionalization of these figures. While Johnny Appleseed is different from the other figures because he is not known for superhuman strength or

[23] Kerrigan, 616.

extraordinary toughness, he is still known for a hyperbolic amount of tranquility. He "wouldn't harm even a mosquito," after all. Further, one must look critically at the meaning behind these fictionalized narratives and see how they reflect on the setting from whence they came. In the formation years of American identity, did the population strive to only achieve the extremes of moral peace or physical strength? If an American is to be considered a hero he either has to be a titan or a saint, according to these narratives.

The "American Spirit" is something intangible, but we can get a little closer to the idea through the narratives of figures like these. Though they may be fictional or simply fictionalized, their morals and metaphors prove to be prevalent throughout much of American history as something the population wishes to attain. While it does seem silly and maybe even dangerous to promote narratives revolving around completely fictionalized characters, their stories and the way they were distributed did play a role in unifying an American experience. Beyond that, their stories could offer some inspiration towards positive values like Paul Bunyan's work ethic or John Henry's perseverance. As for the real figures who become mythologized, it would seem better to study them for their factual accomplishments. In the case of Davy Crockett, there is a rich history surrounding him, Manifest Destiny, and the Alamo that is important to understand. Johnny Appleseed additionally lived in a very transitory period in the nation, and though his contribution may be smaller than Crockett's, his alleged kindness is admirable. While the American Spirit is often contrived, there certainly is one that comes through in the creation of such stories or other media that shows how we as a nation want to portray ourselves. These characters give a forth expectations, though often unrealistic, for which to strive.

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