

James Stevens – Paul Bunyan and the Frozen Logger Stewart Hendrickson

October 19, 2020, Seattle

Since logging played a big part in the history of the Pacific Northwest, it is not surprising that there are local folk songs about logging. One of the most well-known of these is [*The Frozen Logger*](#). It was written in 1929 by James Stevens, who lived in Seattle during his later years. Who was this guy and what other things did he do? How did Paul Bunyan fit into this?



James Stevens (1892 – 1971) was born on a rented farm in Iowa. His "gypsy father" left home and decided to roam. His mother worked as a hired girl for \$12 per month, so he was raised by his grandmother. At age 10 he was sent to live with his father in Midvale, Idaho, where he learned to handle horses and cattle. In 1907 he attended the Idaho

Industrial Institute near Weiser, but left school – was expelled – and hopped a train to Boise, Montana. There he discovered the Carnegie Free Public Library where he began his self-education. He called public libraries "the poor man's universities."

He worked summers in lumber camps in Idaho, Minnesota, and Washington, where late at night around the bunkhouse stove he listened to the lore of the woods and tall tales of Paul Bunyan. He also hopped trains to work harvesting wheat and picking fruit. As he traveled around he loved to fight in street brawls and was remembered as "a damned tough customer."

Later he traveled to Northern California, working in logging around Mt Lassen, and started writing and publishing poems – he sold one to the San Francisco Examiner for \$50. During World War I he joined the Oregon National Guard. He was first stationed at Ft. Lawson in Seattle and then sent to France, but saw no action in the war. However, at the end of the war, he received a scar in a street brawl.

He developed an interest in books and characterized himself as "a hobo laborer with wishful literary yearning." He sent an article *By a Laborer* to the Saturday Evening Post and the editor, George Lorimer saw promise in him. H.L. Mencken took his story *The Black Duck Diner* to publish in the American Mercury. Mencken then became his mentor. Stevens settled in Portland, Oregon, and began writing for H. L. Mencken's *American Mercury* magazine. One of his stories was about the mythical giant Paul Bunyan, which later evolved into a best-selling book.

According to Stevens, “The Paul legend has its origin in the Papineau Rebellion in 1837.” This was a revolt by French-Canadians against their young English queen. Among them was a “bearded, mighty-muscled, bellicose, rebellious giant named Paul Bunyon” (note the French spelling). His slaughters became legend. He later operated a logging camp where he became the most famous camp chief in Canada. At nights around the fire in logging camp cookhouses, songs and tall tales about him abounded.

By 1860 Paul Bunyan became a genuine legendary folk hero. Lumber companies used these legends in their promotional literature. But it was Stevens who, in his book *Paul Bunyan* (published by Alfred Knopf in 1925) and in later writings, established Paul Bunyan stories as a significant part of American literature.

By the end of his literary career, Stevens had produced nine books and more than 250 stories and magazine articles. Among his works were *Brawny Man* (1926), *Mattock* (1927), *Homer in the Sagebrush* (1928), *The Saginaw Paul Bunyan* (1932), *Paul Bunyan Bears* (1947), *Big Jim Turner* (1948), and *Tree Treasure* (1950). He became the dean of Northwest writers. He was also a protector of the Northwest forest industries and worked to preserve the rich heritage of the woods.

[Hear Jim Stevens talk about his books and songs and Don Firth singing The Frozen Logger](#) (recorded from a KCTS-TV show, Jan. 20, 1959). In another segment of this same show, [Jim Stevens & Ivar Haglund talk about songs from the Keep Washington Green Campaign](#)

The Frozen Logger. The original text of The Frozen Logger, from Bunk Shanty Ballads and Tales. [Hear the song](#) as sung by Andy Blyth.

*As I set down one evening in a timber town cafe,
A six-foot, seven, waitress, to me these words did say*

*I see you are a logger, and not a common bum,
For no one but a logger, stirs his coffee with his thumb*

*My lover was a logger, there's none like him today
If you'd sprinkle whisky on it, he'd eat a bale of hay*

*He never shaved the whiskers from off his horny hide
But he'd pound 'em in with a hammer, then bite them off inside*

*My lover came to see me one freezing winter day,
He held me in a fond embrace that broke three vertebrae*

*He kissed me when we parted so hard he broke my jaw
And I could not speak to tell him he'd forgot his mackinaw*

*I watched my logger lover going through the snow
A sauntering gaily homeward at forty-eight below*

*The weather tried to freeze him, it tried its level best
At a hundred degrees below zero, he buttoned up his vest*

*It froze clean down to China, it froze to the stars above
At ONE THOUSAND DEGREES BELOW is froze my logger love.*

*They tried in vain to thaw him, and if you'll believe me sir
They made him into ax blades, to chop the Douglas fir*

*That's how I lost my lover, and to this cafe I come
And here I wait till someone stirs his coffee with his thumb*

*And then I tell my story, of my love they could not thaw
Who kissed me when we parted, so hard he broke my jaw*

The Frozen Logger was recorded by Odetta on *Tin Angel* (1954), Cisco Houston on *Hard Travelin'* (1954), Walt Robertson on *American Northwest Ballads* (1955), Jimmie Rogers on *At Home with Jimmie Rodgers: An Evening of Folk Songs* (1960), and many others including The Weavers and Oscar Brand, and was even sung (although never recorded) by Bob Weir of The Grateful Dead.

In his later years, Stevens moved to Seattle with his wife, Theresa Seltz Fitzgerald, where he was active in Plymouth Congregational Church, the local American Legion, and the public relations committee of the Chamber of Commerce. He retired in 1957 as public relations director for the West Coast Lumberman's Association and died in Seattle at age 79 on Dec. 31, 1971.

“Bunk-Shanty Ballads and Tales:” The Annual Society Address, by James Stevens, *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Dec. 1949), pp. 241-242, published by [Oregon Historical Society](#)

My first book was an effort to create art in literary form out of American folklore, specifically out of the shanty nights. The book is Paul Bunyan. It is on sale at all bookstores and it has the stories. (Every sale will buy me at least a loaf of bread.) Now what I want to do is to look back only to the year of 1929 and to a literary business in which I was associated with Stewart Holbrook and H. L. Davis. This was a radio program of Paul Bunyan sketches. Holbrook supplied the ideas and I provided the lies, and Davis and I together composed for the program, trying to hold true to the creative spirit of the old-time bunk-shanty bards. One that is now in the stock of American folk songs by Burl Ives, Allen Lomax, and other authorities, is "The Frozen Logger."

Six thoughts on “James Stevens – Paul Bunyan and the Frozen Logger, by Stewart Hendrickson”

Bob Nelson says:

March 28, 2018, at 12:26 pm

Wonderful article Stew. I well remember watching and listening to Jim speak of writing this song during the live TV show on KCTS TV, in January of 1959. You have written some details about his life that I didn't know. Thanks ... Bob Nelson

Royvia says:

September 13, 2019, at 7:15 am

Great post.

Creel says:

November 19, 2019, at 5:37 am

I was looking for up to date information on this theme for a few days. Now I am satisfied like I have finally reached your article.

BREANN FORTI SAYS:

NOVEMBER 20, 2019, AT 4:32 AM

Thanks for your post. Hunting accurate information is among the biggest issues for its younger generation.

Roseann Bonilla says:

November 20, 2019, at 4:41 am

Wow, looks good, especially the conclusion. I was looking for that topic for a few times across the nest, however there was not anything valuable. So happy to reach your post at the end. I'm keen on that theme, and I need to be constantly conscious of the latest news. That's a pleasure to read your post and finally clarify myself.

Shellie Roseman says:

November 21, 2019, at 6:43 am

I've been searching for a post similar to this for quite a long time. I was looking for someone who'd be able to definitely browse me about this problem and was lucky enough to locate you. Thank you a lot for the detailed reason, you drew attention to an extremely common matter! Though I share your opinion for the most part, I presume that some things are worth having a more detailed appearance to comprehend what is going on.

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