

Folk Tale Examples



Pecos Bill

Pecos Bill was born in the wide-open land of eastern Texas. When he was about one year old, his parents decided it was getting too crowded out there, (another family had just moved in fifty miles away) and that they would move west. Now the trip was rather bumpy in their wagon and at one point young Bill flew right out. Unfortunately, Pecos Bill was one of a dozen children and nobody even noticed he was gone 'til one month later.

Pecos Bill was lucky though—a pack of coyotes found and raised him. He had a great time huntin' and howlin' with 'em. Bill would have lived as a coyote all his life if a cowboy hadn't ridden up one day. The cowboy spent three days with Pecos Bill teaching him English and trying to convince him he was a twelve-year-old boy—not a coyote.

“I know I'm a coyote. I got fleas and can howl,” pleaded Bill.

“All Texans have fleas and howl! But a coyote's got a tail, and you don't have one.”

Pecos Bill checked his backside and figured the cowboy was right. “Okay, I'll be a cowboy!” he hollered.

Pecos Bill turned out to be a great cowboy. He gained a reputation as the best cowboy in all of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. He invented the lasso (Bill used a rattlesnake instead of a rope) and the six-shooter. He showed horses how to buck so he could invent bronco-busting. Pecos Bill taught other cowboys how to round up cattle and sing cowboy songs. He could ride anything from a horse to a mountain lion. Bill's favorite animal to ride was his beautiful mustang, Widow-Maker. No one else could last three seconds on Widow-Maker, but that horse was as gentle as a Gila monster with Pecos Bill riding him.

One day Bill was wading through the Rio Grande when a woman riding a catfish as big as a whale flew by.

“Whoa, that's my kind of woman!” he exclaimed. Two hours later Pecos Bill and Slue Foot Sue were married.

They had a fine life together and raised their eight kids to be cowboys and cowgirls. Bill and Sue even adopted a bunch of orphan coyote pups. One of those pups grew up and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

No one knows for sure if or how Pecos Bill died. One story says that a man from New York City showed up one day wearing a mail-order cowboy outfit. He asked so many silly questions that Pecos Bill laughed himself to death.

Paul Bunyan's Birth



If what they say is true, Paul Bunyan was born down in Maine. And he must have been a pretty husky baby, too, just like you'd expect him to be, from knowin' him afterwards.

When he was only three weeks old he rolled around so much in his sleep that he knocked down four square miles of standin' timber and the government got after his folks and told 'em they'd have to move him away.

So then, they got some timbers together and made a floatin' cradle for Paul and anchored it off Eastport. But every time Paul rocked in his cradle, if he rocked shoreward, it made such a swell it came near drownin' out all the villages on the coast of Maine. The waves was so high Nova Scotia came pretty near becomin' an island instead of a peninsula.

That wouldn't do, of course, and the government got after 'em again and told 'em they'd have to do somethin' about it. They'd have to move him out of there and put him somewheres else, they was told. So they figured they'd better take him home again and keep him in the house for a spell.

But it happened Paul was asleep in his cradle when they went to get him. They had to send for the British Navy, and it took seven hours of bombardin' to wake him up. Then, when Paul stepped out of his cradle, it made such a swell it caused a seventy-five foot tide in the Bay of Fundy. Several villages were swept away, and seven of the invincible English warships were sunk to the bottom of the sea.

Well, Paul got out of his cradle then, and that saved Nova Scotia from becomin' an island, but the tides in the Bay of Fundy are just as high as they ever were.

So I guess the old folks must have had their hands full with him, all right. And I ought to say, the King of England sent over and confiscated the timbers in Paul's cradle and built seven new warships to take the place of the ones he'd lost.

When Paul was only seven months old, he sawed off the legs from under his dad's bed one night. The old man noticed when he woke up in the mornin' that his bed seemed considerable lower than it used to be, so he got up and investigated. Sure enough, there were the legs all sawed off from under it and the pieces layin' out on the floor.

Then he remembered he'd felt somethin' the night before, but he'd thought he must be dreamin'-the way you dream that you're fallin' down sometimes when you first go off to sleep. He looked around to see who could have done it and there was Paul layin' there sound asleep with his dad's cross-cut saw still held tight in his fist and smilin' in his sleep as pretty as anythin'.

He called his wife, and when she came in, he said to her, "Did you feel anythin' in the night?"

“No,” she said. “Is anythin’ wrong?”

“Well, just look here,” he said. And he showed her the four-by-eights layin’ there on the floor and the saw in their kid’s hand.

“I didn’t light the lamp when I went to get up this monin’,” she said, “and I guess I didn’t notice it.”

“Well, he’s done it, anyway,” said the old man. “I’ll bet that boy of ours is goin’ to be a great logger someday. If he lives to grow up, he’s goin’ to do some great loggin’ by and by, you just see-a whole lot bigger than any of the men around here have ever done.”

And they was right, all right. There ain’t never been loggin’ before nor since - like Paul Bunyan done.



Judge Parker, the Hanging judge



Judge Parker was the first of the frontier judges to make a difference. Before he came out to Fort Smith, Arkansas, just after the Civil War, there wasn’t a judge for a thousand miles who lasted more than a few months. The problem was that every man the judges found guilty had friends who usually took the law into their own hands, and many a judge was known to disappear overnight. But old Judge Parker wouldn’t stand for any nonsense and he faced down all those who didn’t see the lasting value of law and order. Parker sent eighty-eight men to the gallows and he became known as “the hanging judge.”

One story that’s told about Judge Parker isn’t about a hanging, but it involves a very slick man from back East who was a first-rate thief. This man stole cattle, horses, and a lot else, but he never got caught. Never even got his hands dirty. Many men went to jail or were hanged in this fellow’s stead, but never this man. He was always too smart to make a mistake-until one night he got arrested for disturbing the peace and was hauled into Judge Parker’s court.

Parker knew all about the man, but he also knew that disturbing the peace was a misdemeanor, so the judge gave the man a tongue-lashing and fined him fifty dollars. The slick man smiled and pulled out a roll of bills. “Sure, Judge,” he said. Parker fined him another hundred dollars for his insolent and insulting behavior. Again, the man smiled and kept pulling bills from his wad. With that, Judge Parker quickly added, “And twenty years in prison, and let’s see you peel that out of your pocket.”



The Death-Watch Tick



A miner was buried alive by a pillar of coal, which he was robbing. After his body was dug out, it was discovered that his watch was still in the mine. It was not hanging on a timber in the heading, where he usually kept it, but was buried in the gob, where it ticked away unseen.

It soon gave evidence of being the most amazing timepiece. Its chief function seemed to be to forecast the approach of death, and so uncannily accurate was it that miners feared it more than the devil. It flitted all through the mine, going from one working place to another and inflicting itself upon this miner or that, depending upon whom fate had marked for death. No one could learn in advance, where or when it would appear. Always it announced its arrival by ticking. The ticking was slightly louder than that of an ordinary watch but marked by the same relentlessness. There was no use trying to smash it with one's pick, or to blow it up with a stick of dynamite. Sooner could one smash or blow up one's shadow. The death watch eluded all measures of force and merely mocked men's curses. It was as inevitable as death itself. There were stretches of weeks or months when it kept silent. Then, with the suddenness of a fall of top rock, there would come the fateful tick-tock . . .

One night, while on his accustomed tour of inspection, the fire boss was astounded to hear the death-watch tick. It sounded so weird and awesome in that empty mine! There were fear and pity in his heart for Jim Kelly, in whose working place the watch was ticking.

When morning came, the fire boss was in his station along the gangway and waved Jim aside when he came up for his brass check.

"In the name of God, Jim, go back home," he said.

"What's the matter?" asked Jim.

"Now, in the name of God, do as I tell ye. You'll be thankful to me later on."

But Jim, with seven hungry little mouths to feed, could not afford to miss a day, and for that reason insisted on knowing why he was being called off.

"Well, if I must tell ye, Jim, I heard the-the death-watch tick in your heading last night as plain as ever I heard anything. Don't go in there or its kilt you'll be."

"The death-watch tick!"

Jim, turned deathly pale. The dinner pail trembled in his hand. He turned back.

Now, there was gratitude in Jim's heart for being spared the fate, as he thought, of so many of his fellow miners, and he knew of no better way to celebrate his defeat of the death-watch tick than by attending church. Looking at his watch, he found that he could still make the eight o'clock mass and so hurried

home to change his clothes. To reach the church from his home he had to go over a railroad grade crossing. When he got there, he found the gates down. Rather than wait and take a chance of missing the mass, he ran across the tracks. But he was not fast enough. The 7:55 flyer mowed him down.



The Death Of A Mountain Man



You may have heard of old Bill Williams, though he wasn't as well known as Jim Bridger or Daniel Boone. He was a mountain man, broad-shouldered and strong, with blue eyes and fiery red hair. He lived most of his life among the Osage Indians, because he disliked the company of white men, and fathered two half-breed daughters who carried his bright hair like a birthright. Some say he knew Greek and Latin, though no one knows for sure. He was a tireless walker and a tough fighter who talked to himself when he wasn't talking to his beloved mustang pony and this fostered the notion among some trappers that Bill Williams

was crazy as a coot. Crazy or not, his life was full of adventure, and his long career established him as one of the greatest of the mountain men. No one knows for sure how he died, but this is one story they tell that sounds like the truth.

Old Bill disappeared in the fall, and was last seen on his pony with a trail of mules shuffling behind. His traps, with "William S. Williams M.T. [Master Trapper]" carved on them, hung on the mules like ponderous decorations. After some months when no one had seen a trace of him at any of the posts, rumors started that he had died and that his bones rested somewhere off in the mountains. Stories began circulating of his end---old Bill losing his hair to the Sioux, or the Blackfeet, one of his wives shooting him, Bill falling off a cliff with all his mules loaded with prime pelts---you know how people talk.

In late winter, a group of trappers made their way with their horses high up into the Rockies, higher than any of them had ever been before. Pushing ahead in the freezing weather, one of the trappers discovered that a thicket of dwarf pine and cedar trees gave way to a protected clearing. Filled with relief, they thought it was a perfect place to camp, safe from attack by Indians. It would be difficult to find even if you knew where to look for it.

To their astonishment, when the trappers made their way through the trees, there in the middle of the clearing stood a horse. They rode up to find an old grizzled mustang shivering with cold and fatigue. Its ears were cropped, its tail was ragged, and its bones poked through stiffened skin. The cold had nearly finished its deadly work.

One of the trappers came forward and said to no one in particular, "I know that horse. It belongs to Bill Williams." The others knew he was right, for this pitiful mustang was the proud Nez-Percé pony that had carried Bill out of a thousand scrapes in the past.

"If you are right and that is his horse," said another, "then Bill ain't gonna be far off." They searched only a moment before they found the remains of a fire, charred pine logs sticking through the snow. Beyond it, half covered with snow, was the reclining figure of the old mountaineer. Here was Bill Williams-his snow-crested head bent far over his chest; his hunting coat of fringed elk, made by one of his red-haired daughters, was stiff and discolored. Strewn about him were his packs and traps. His rifle rusted away at his side.

Awestruck, the trappers approached the body and found it hard, as stone-there was no way of knowing how long he had been frozen there. A jagged rent in the coat and the dark stains around it showed he had been wounded before his death. But had the wound killed him or had he frozen to death in the majestic cold? What caused the solitary end of Bill Williams? None of them knew, and as Bill himself might have said, "It surely weren't nobody's business."

A friendly bullet cut short the last remaining hours of the trapper's faithful pony. Then, after burying Bill as well as they were able, the trappers agreed to move on, for they had no wish to make a bed on a fellow trapper's grave. There they left Bill Williams, in a spot so wild and remote that only the wind and the stars would know the secret of his last remains.



Michigan Bedbugs



The hero of this story stopped at a hotel in Kalamazoo. When he retired for the night, the fun began. "Well, just as the shivers began to ease off, I kinder felt suthin' tryin' to pull off my shirt and diggin' their feet into the small of my back to get a good hold. I wiggled and twisted, doubled and puckered-all to no use-and it kept goin' like all sin. By-an'-by I got up and struck a light to look around a spell found about a peck of bedbugs scattered around, and more droppin' off my shirt and runnin' down my legs every minit. Swept a place on the floor, shook out a quilt, lay down, and kivered up for a nap. No use-mounted right on to me like a parcel of rats on a meal tub - dug a hole in the kiver, and crawled through and gave me fits for trying to hide. Got up agin, went downstairs, and got the slush bucket from the wagon, brought it up, and made a circle of tar on the floor-lay down on the floor on the inside, and felt comfortable that time, anyhow. Left the light burnin' and watched 'em. See them get together and have a camp meetin' about it, and they went off in a squad

with an old grey-headed one at the top, right up on the wall, on the ceiling, till they got on the right spot, then dropped right plump into my face. Fact, by thunder. Well, I swept them up agin and made a circle on the ceiling, too. Thought I had 'em foul that time, but danged if they didn't pull straws out of the bed and build a bridge over it-and some of them walked across on stilts."



Nail Soup



A beggar man once was passing through a town and he stopped at the richest man's house in town to beg for something to eat. The man wasn't at home and his wife was stingy and selfish and didn't have no love for anybody but herself. When the beggar knocked on the door she came out and he said, "Could I please have a piece of bread and maybe a bowl of soup?"

"Not a thing in this house to eat," she said.

"Well, never mind," he said, "but I guess you have a nail in the house you would give me."

She said, "What do you want with a nail?"

Said, "Why, I can make some purty good soup off of a nail."

The old woman was in a quandary about that and he went on and told her he could make good soup with a nail and a pan of water. So she wanted to know how it could be done, figured it would be a cheap way to have something on the table. She went in and hunted a nail and brought it and a pan of water out to him. He took it and put the nail in the water and went to stirring it. The old woman bent right over him watching every move he made. Then he said, "If only I had just a pinch of salt to go in now," and she went and brought that out and went to watching him again.

After while he said, "Looks like it needs just a few cabbage leaves, that would set it off just right." She went in the garden and got a few leaves. He stirred them in. Purty soon he had her to bring a few little 'taters and then just a carrot or two. She brought them to him and he kept on stirring the pot over the fire.

At last he said, "It's getting about done." Said, "Why not throw in a few green peas and then some butter to season it all just right." She went and got them and kept watching the pot. Then he called for some bowls and spoons to eat it with. She brought them and he dipped out two big bowls of the soup, said, "Now just taste that." She began to eat it and he asked her if that wasn't purty good soup.

She ate her whole bowl and said, "Yes, that's a good soup, very good." She studied a minute and then said, "But what about the nail, what did it do for it?"

He said, "Oh, the nail?" Said, "Why it seems to be purty hard yet. You'll have to keep on cooking it. Goodbye, and thanks for the soup.

He took out the back door and left her there cooking the nail.

