

American Tall Tales: Values and Videos

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INTRODUCTION

Definition of a Tall Tale

A tall tale, by definition, is a story that the narrator himself does not believe but which is supposed to fool the naïve listener. In the United States, tall tales were passed on to the city dweller (“greenhorns”) in a straight-faced manner for the purpose of presenting “true” pictures of life in the nineteenth century Wild West. During this time, the real and the legendary exploits of the frontier heroes were inseparable. Tall tales achieve their comic effect by illustrating the incongruity between sober narration and fantastic and exaggerated elements in the stories themselves. They often feature two protagonists whose character traits are frequently interchangeable: the Roarer, a bragging, swearing, hard-drinking brawler; and the Yankee, a quick-thinking trader who is a rogue beneath a bland exterior. Although most of these stories feature a hero, some of them merely describe phenomena, such as corn that grows so fast it knocks people down, or food that rains down from the sky. An essential trait of tall tales--and all folk literature--is their diffusion. These tales are spread from one generation to another by word of mouth, and eventually, they are recorded. (1)

Unit Design

This unit on tall tales is designed to be taught throughout one nine-week grading period to elementary school students in fifth grade during two 45-minute weekly sessions. The first week will introduce my students to the genre of tall tales. We will spend the first class outlining and defining the American tall tale in children’s literature, and why it is so peculiar to our culture. They will be taught how to recognize a tall tale, how to define one, and how one is created. In the following weeks, eight American nineteenth century tall tale heroes and heroines are to be taught in sequence, one (or two) per week. We will encounter their exploits in books and on film, and define their importance in children’s literature today. One of the final sessions will be devoted to review of the tall tale vocabulary and characters that have been covered. We will spend the last class reading a modern tall tale called “Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs,” along with its sequel, “Pickles over Pittsburgh,” and watching filmed versions. Activities for the final week include possible revisions of the more familiar tall tales, changing their endings, and accumulating criteria for the selection of modern-day tall tale heroes. In our last class, students will attempt to compose their own tall tales, incorporating American values that we have discovered and discussed over the semester.

Student Audience

The audience for this curriculum unit will consist of two fifth grade classes at my elementary school. One class is composed of one-third regular education students and two-thirds students who are classified as ESL (English as a Second Language). The alternate fifth grade class is composed of bilingual students who are being “transitioned” from primary Spanish language speakers into speakers of English as a second language. Almost all of the students at my school are classified as LEP (Limited English Proficient) which entitles them to special consideration in lesson plan design, and which exempts them from certain aspects of the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) and other state-regulated English vocabulary tests.

TEACHING STRATEGY

Vocabulary

A unit on tall tale children’s literature has to be taught with great attention to the vocabulary that is unique to the tall tale literature genre. This must be a primary focus with my students in order for them to understand the significance of these tales to American children’s literature. Bilingual and ESL students will not easily recognize the names of certain animals and occupations that were pertinent to this time period in American history. Therefore, it is important to take steps to familiarize my students with this very strange vocabulary. Vocabulary words that are relevant to a particular lesson will be discussed as part of the pre-teaching process before each lesson begins. In addition, a map (Figure 1) will be provided to establish the correct American geographic location for each one of the tall tale characters. Students will be expected to duplicate this map from memory at the end of the course.

Video

The Importance of Video

The use of video performance will add extra enrichment to our task because visual learning provides an extra dimension that contributes toward student comprehension and understanding. Students who cannot understand a spoken language often gain vital context clues from the visual stimuli provided by films. Peer teaching is also an invaluable asset. Students who are fluent in the film’s language are pleased when asked to translate partial segments of a film to their peers. This added benefit lifts the burden from the teacher who can then “pause” a film during critical junctures. In fact, the use of film will be considered crucial to the design of this curriculum unit. Application of the concentric circles found in Venn Diagrams (Figure 2) will compare and contrast book and filmed versions of tall tales. This will consume a major portion of the class activities.

It is also a very important part of my presentation to convey the idea that tall tale legends were based upon the lives of actual people. It is not a critical matter if historians cannot prove the existence of an actual person named John Henry. Books and videos will reveal that our fictional tall tale characters were derived from certain facts that were written *about* real people who lived and flourished during the nineteenth century of our American history. The storytelling and the live performances depicted in films about tall tales will make these characters become like real people in the minds of my students. In addition, iconographic videos will demonstrate how easily book illustrations can be transferred to the movie screen. Consequently, tall tales familiar to our American children's literature can be retold in a modern visual format. Students can identify with these characters and relive their stories on film as well as in books.

Types of Video

Three types of film videos will be presented: animated, iconographic, and live action performance. *Animation* films will reveal the tall tale personalities as cartoon characters. The storytelling action is swift and entertaining. *Iconographic* films, however, are more sedate. Their design has lifted actual illustrations from books and superimposed them on the screen with a narrator telling the story. This type of storytelling will be faithful to the old familiar legends, and the tall tale characters will appear to be colossal in size. In the *Live Action* performances, however, the legendary tall tale characters will be portrayed on film as ordinary people using real actors. These characters will have the familiar tall tale names, but it can be observed that the plots are often totally different from the original familiar stories.

Evaluation of Video

Teaching students how to evaluate a film is very basic to the content of this course. Film techniques will be explored and questioned. For every video that is presented to the class, students will be expected to complete a short survey (Appendix) to test their powers of observation and to help them identify certain aspects of filmmaking that are unique to the message contained within each film. For example, how does the background music contribute or influence the setting? Or, do you think that colorization is an important element? The teacher will ascertain which type of video format is more appealing to student viewers. In addition, students will be required to evaluate each film in terms of how it reflects American values, past and present.

BACKGROUND

History

Tall talk, or exaggerated storytelling, began in the 1800s as a way for American immigrants to come to terms with their hostile environment. (2) In those days the American frontier was filled with huge forests teeming with ferocious wildlife, arid

deserts and plains, towering mountains, and uncharted seacoasts. It was also inhabited by Native Americans who were viewed as “savages”. The immigrants believed that the natives, the land and all of the wild animals needed to be tamed and conquered in order to make the place habitable. It was a scary business. That is why the heroes and heroines in the tall tales were as huge and ferocious as their enemies. The primary task for the pioneer men and women was to carve a life out of the wilderness. They had to build cabins and clear land for planting. They hauled water from springs, grew cotton for clothes, and hunted wild animals. In other words, they had to be a cut above your ordinary folk and be filled with almost superhuman strength. Tall tales had their origin as a reflection of this circumstance.

Conservation and preservation of the wilderness were unknown and unnecessary concepts during the early 1800s. Instead, the wilderness and its wild animal predators were perceived as the natural enemy. As Kenneth S. Lynn wrote in this extraordinary insight:

Every time Davy Crockett triumphed over “man, varmint, and the cogwheels of the universe,” the ordinary backwoodsman felt an identification with his own efforts to tame his part of the American woods. (3)

The incredible feats of courage and endurance attributed to the tall tale characters helped our American pioneers to cope with the overwhelming tasks facing them on a daily basis. The tall tale “yarns” served to justify the crudeness of the frontier and to repudiate old-fashioned gentility. Society went a step further and developed a new code of conduct to explain their actions. Since the people were trying to conquer the wilderness of America, they thought that the best way to do it was to cut down every tree in sight, take whatever land they needed, and use every human resource to help the country grow. These rights of expansion became incorporated into the infamous American doctrine of “manifest destiny”. It is ironic that today we are taught to do things just the opposite, or at the very least, to question our “right” to take such impulsive actions.

Importance in Children’s Literature

Tall tales are the very essence of the American spirit. The newness of the land and its bigness inspired the storytellers of tall tales who were nineteenth century American immigrants. Today the tall tales continue to instill a sense of wonder for our land and the mighty endeavors it has taken to tame it. They form a locus of pride in being an American citizen and they portray the indomitable pioneer spirit that built this nation. That patriotic spirit can be sustained by teaching and reteaching the tall tales. In addition, American values of the nineteenth century are revealed in these tall tales. Such values form an integral part of our American history. Many of them have been absorbed into our modern American culture and continue to be portrayed in children’s literature and films today.

American Values

Two distinctly American values were seen to develop from the early tall tales: gargantuan physical courage and a sense of humor for the truly absurd. The heroes and heroines of the tall tales were unique American pioneers and, like the land itself, they were gigantic, extravagant, restless, and flamboyant. They had no use for modesty. They bragged outrageously about their capacity for fighting, drinking, lovemaking, swearing, and hard work. Some of the tall tale characters were actual men of history, such as Davy Crockett, John Henry, and Johnny Appleseed. Other characters, like Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan, were born from various combinations of historical fact, the storytelling of ordinary people, and the imagination of professional writers. They are creations of American mass media and we see all of them being continuously recreated and reborn in books and films.

Another example of an American value is “The Code” which is frequently referred to in a 1999 Walt Disney film entitled *Tall Tale: The Unbelievable Adventure*. This code is distinctly American because tall tale heroes from all parts of the country are seen to adhere to its standard. Paul Bunyan refers to it as the “Code of the North” and Pecos Bill refers to it as the “Code of the West.” John Henry refers to it as the “Code of the East” and the youngster in the film who is defending his parents’ farm is taught to refer to it as the “Code of the South.” The Code consists of three sacred promises that appear to provide both independent motivation and male bonding for the tall tale characters in this movie:

1. Respect the Land;
2. Defend the defenseless;
3. Never spit in the presence of women and children. (The act of spitting is clearly a bonding experience for the men in this movie!)

The content of the remaining books and films I am planning to teach will reflect more conventional American values that I have identified as follows:

- Frontier expansion
- Independence, male bonding
- Chivalry
- Control of the environment
- Dominance by physical strength
- “One-ups-man-ship”

The very nature of “one-ups-man-ship” is another American trait and critical to the spreading of tall tales. It means that each successive storyteller tries to add something more outrageous to the tall tale as he or she is telling it. The Yankee storyteller tries to outdo the Southern storyteller and the Southern storyteller tries to outdo the Eastern

storyteller. Thus, the stories continue to be circulated and diffused. Carolyn S. Brown explains that “while there is a folk tall tale and a literary tall tale, we can never completely disentangle the oral from the written. (5)

These values are what allow the tall tales to maintain their place in modern-day children’s literature. Exaggerated storytelling is just as popular today as it was in the 1800s. It has been said that the United States is too young a country and its inhabitants too diverse in character for a folk tradition to have had time to sprout. Yet we find that even young nations have their own folklore, and the United States is no exception. The tall tales and their set of values are distinctly American.

Popular Tall Tale Characters

Male American Folk Heroes

The roots of much of America’s tall tale literature are to be found in the stories that fill the *Davy Crockett Almanacks*, which were published from 1834 to 1856. (4) The real Davy Crockett was a backwoodsman born in the mountains of Tennessee in 1786. He rose from backwoodsman to congressman, gained fame and made political capital out of the braggart tradition. He became a legendary figure after he died at the Alamo in 1836, fighting for Texas in its struggle for independence from Mexico. After his death, a series of small paperbound books were published that contained comically exaggerated vignettes and woodcuts about Crockett’s life. Nobody knows who wrote these first American tall tales, but their exaggerated comedy and wit are still popular today.

A unique American legendary folk character is Johnny Appleseed. In 1871, W. D. Haley, a writer for *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, wrote the first biographical essay about a pioneer named John Chapman. He came to represent the immigrants who made amazing contributions to North America by introducing and growing new crops. He was a throwback to early Native Americans who were the first to domesticate and breed wild plants. Like other frontiersmen, he was credited with extraordinary powers such as immunity to rattlesnake bites. No unit on tall tales would be complete without stories of this barefoot, seed-sowing eccentric wanderer.

Starting in the 1870s, a black steel driver named John Henry became the subject of many of the work songs sung by railroad gangs. He was a hero to the men who drilled steel spikes into solid rock to build railroad tracks and tunnels through the mountains. He competed against a steam drill and won the contest, although the effort caused his death. As late as 1883, work stoppages in the area continued to occur because workmen actually thought they heard John Henry’s hammer ringing on steel. Regardless of whether John Henry was real or mythical, he has been a strong and enduring role model to southern black laborers. He became known to the general public after the radio was invented and after songs about John Henry became popular in the South.

Paul Bunyan was the folk hero of the Pacific Northwest lumberjack industry. He has been called the Thor and Hercules of American folklore. The general public first heard about Paul Bunyan in 1910, when the mythical giant was mentioned in a Detroit newspaper story by James McGillivray. In 1922, an advertising copywriter named W. B. Laughead wrote a pamphlet for the Red River Lumber Company of Minneapolis to promote its products. Inserted within advertising copy for the company was a collection of Paul Bunyan stories, including the introduction of Babe the Blue Ox.

The “greatest cowpuncher ever known on either side of the Rockies, from Texas through Montana and on into Canada” was cowboy Pecos Bill. This outrageous assertion came from Edward O’Reilly in an article printed in 1923 in *Century Magazine*. Although Mr. O’Reilly invented Pecos Bill, many other people expanded the yarns over campfires and in dozens of books, articles, poems, recordings, and plays. Pecos Bill at his best seemed to capture the spirit of the Old West: wild, untamed, and unsocialized. No tall tale curricula would be complete without this popular character.

Female American Folk Heroines

During my research, it became obvious that American tall tale folk heroes of the fictional variety were predominately male figures. There seemed to be a lack of female tall tale heroines who might be kin to a Paul Bunyan or Pecos Bill. There were many historical women from that century who were popular and the subject of numerous books and journals. The exploits of women such as Calamity Jane and Annie Oakley were legendary. But none of these women achieved the “larger-than-life” status of a Johnny Appleseed or Davy Crockett. There had to be reasons why these characters failed to achieve the fame of their male counterparts. Why were they ignored?

It is interesting to note that for Native American Indians, stories about their warrior women constituted an important and distinct part of their heritage. But in nineteenth century American society, women were expected to limit their concerns to home and family. The storytellers spinning a yarn around a campfire would portray female characters as the type to stick close to home, playing a supporting role to their men. It was a “macho” society, and women could not be categorized as hunters and explorers (although they were actually filling these roles). Powerful women made people feel uncomfortable, so their stories were simply not told. Thus, even the outrageous and oversized wives of such figures as Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill were often overlooked or ridiculed for being unfeminine. Some books about John Henry have mentioned his devotion to his pretty wife, Lucy (who is also known as Polly Ann). However, in all of these stories she is a minor character whose sole achievement was to cradle John Henry in her arms as he lay dying. Regrettably, in the award-winning video version, her character was completely eliminated.

In the twenty-first century, we feel it is time to bring these overlooked heroines back to life. Their stories are just as “tall” as those of their men, and just as full of excitement

and humor. An excellent tall tale has recently been published about the fearless Sally Ann Thunder Ann Crockett, who was Davy Crockett's wife. Certainly, no selection of tall tales would be complete without the exploits of Slue-Foot Sue, the catfish-riding cowgirl. Her marriage to Pecos Bill inspired many additional exaggerated adventures. Unfortunately, I was unable to find videos on either one of these women, but I designed one lesson entitled "Women of Tall Tales," so that their contributions would not be ignored.

OBJECTIVES

Environmental Issues

Nineteenth Century Approach to the Environment

Over the course of the unit, for each tall tale legendary hero presented the student will compare and contrast the nineteenth century approach aimed at conquering their natural environment, with twenty-first century beliefs about preserving it. In the nineteenth century, immigrants were committed towards conquering the wilderness at all costs. It was a hostile land that had to be tamed. Pecos Bill in particular is renowned for his ability to lasso unfriendly critters and tornadoes. Students will discuss other reasons why these early pioneers took such a dim view of their environment. For example, a land covered with trees was impeding their homebuilding progress. That is why loggers were so desperately needed and why Paul Bunyan stories became so popular.

Twenty-first Century Approach to the Environment

In the twenty-first century, major efforts of the environmentalists have been devoted to insuring the survival of our planet at all costs. This movement is called "conservation" and has targeted specific policies to preserve our environment and resources here on Earth. A specific example of conservation is our current dedication to the three Rs: repair, reuse, and recycle. In accordance with this discussion, fifth grade members of the Recycling Club will be introduced and they will discuss the importance of their mission on our campus.

In the twenty-first century, trees are no longer our enemy but are considered a most valuable resource. Trees are still cut down in limited quantities, but their products (newspaper and roofing materials) are being recycled. In fact, today many homebuilders are required to obtain city permits before trees can be cut down at all on their properties. Christmas trees are still a popular seasonal item, but great care is taken to replant new trees to replace the ones that have been cut down. It appears that new books and videos about Paul Bunyan are duplicating this trend. In the past, Paul Bunyan and the other loggers were congratulated for their amazing feat of eliminating all of the forests and turning them into prairies so that homes could be built. In class, a video about Paul Bunyan will be shown that has a new twist. In this latest video, Paul Bunyan becomes

fanatical about replacing and replanting the trees he has cut down. We will observe and discuss how this story reflects a strong environmentalist theme and how it shares an eerie similarity to the tales about Johnny Appleseed going around planting apple trees!

Violence as an Issue

Another objective will be to discuss the role of violence in these stories. In the nineteenth century, heroes were often very violent. Many of the tall tale characters had to be “humanized” for twenty-first century readers and moviegoers. The question remains: Are these male characters still too sexist and brutal? Students will be asked to discuss the role of censorship and to decide if the tall tales should be censored. It can be observed that many modern authors have changed and rewritten these characters to make them more palatable. It will be debated if these “distortions” of tall tales are necessitated by the current state of our American culture. Is it true that without these changes the tall tale literature genre would have died a natural death?

The Purpose of Tall Tales

The student will be asked to explain why we needed these characters in the nineteenth century, and if we still need them in the twenty-first century. What is their contribution to our unique American history and values? Do we still need to hear their stories? What makes American tall tales different from other folktales?

Racism and Prejudice as Issues

It will be emphasized that in the 1800s, the American tall tales poked fun at African Americans, Native Americans, women and animals. We will discuss the reasons for this. Was the racism and prejudice ever acknowledged? We already know that there was a double standard between the male and the female tall tale heroes and heroines. If it’s true that the women were as strong as the men, has their status been elevated in recent years? Do the current books and videos show this or do they gloss over it?

OCCUPATIONAL ROLE MODELS

Nineteenth Century Tall Tale Heroes and Heroines

The classification system traditionally used by academic scholars prefers grouping folklore into categories such as occupations, fractions of history and geography, and calamities. The story of American folklore, however, is best told by following her historical development. In line with this viewpoint, it should be noted that there is a tall tale hero to represent almost every nineteenth century occupation that contributed to the development of our country:

Pioneers-----Johnny Appleseed
 Sea captains-----Mike Fink
 Cowboys-----Pecos Bill
 Cowgirls-----Slue-Foot Sue/Annie Oakley
 Railroad workers-----John Henry
 Loggers-----Paul Bunyan
 Miners-----Darlin' Clementine
 Frontier men-----Davy Crockett/Daniel Boone
 Frontier women-----Sally Ann Thunder Ann Crockett
 Steelmakers-----Joe Magarac
 Whalers-----Stormalong
 Firefighters-----Mose Humphreys
 Farmers-----Febold Feboldson
 Baseball players-----Casey at the Bat

People of every trade and background have mixed together to form a “melting pot” of popular consensus, values, and tradition in the format of American tall tales.

Twenty-first Century Tall Tale Heroes and Heroines

Superheroes in Comic Books

Students will be asked to consider what current occupations are missing from the list. In conjunction with that, if we were to begin writing twenty-first century tall tales, students can be thinking about some of the modern characters that could be named. At first, it may seem that cartoon characters are the only ones suitable to this genre. It is easy for students to come up with the names of modern tall tale heroes and heroines that have been glorified in comic books and video games and can be purchased as action-hero collectible figures. An example would be Marvel Comic's *The Mighty Thor* who was introduced by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby in August of 1962. He bears a striking resemblance to a tall tale hero, John Henry, because both wielded a “battle” hammer with mystical power. But if Thor's background from Norse mythology does not fit the American ethnic criteria, there are other enduring American comic book superheroes to be considered. Spiderman and Superman already have several live action films to their credit.

Superheroes in Books

It is a slightly different task to find tall tale heroes and heroines in twenty-first century children's books and journals. For example, students will be asked to decide if Harry Potter is a modern tall tale hero. The phenomenal book sales are an indication of his popularity, but this commercial success is still so recent its effects have not been fully documented. An initial glance would indicate that Harry Potter's character traits seem to be completely opposite those of a braggart, a giant and/or a storyteller. However, the

story of Tarzan might fit the definition. His legendary exploits have been told and retold in many books and films, dating back to the original book by Edgar Rice Burroughs which was published in the 1920s.

Superheroes in Film

In conclusion, what are the criteria for modern tall tale superheroes? For example, should they be loveable? We may not be comfortable with the vision of Arnold Schwarzenegger's violent Terminator as a tall tale hero. Lara Croft is a possible candidate, but she is still too new. Her stories have not had time to become legendary. Her success (or lack thereof) at the conversion from video game superheroine to live action film star has not yet been evaluated. The genre might conceivably be stretched to include sports heroes whose exploits have been captured on film. Michael Jordan comes immediately to mind as a potential tall tale hero. His great height and legendary record on the basketball court could easily lend itself to fit the definition. Muhammed Ali is another sports hero whose legend has spread since he began his pro-boxing career in the 1960s. He also possesses the requisite braggart characteristic of a "Roarer." Certainly, no one has forgotten Ali's infamous claim that he "floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee," which makes a terrific punch line for any tall tale storyteller!

SAMPLE LESSON PLANS

Week #1: What is a Tall Tale?

Films: *The Ballad of Paul Bunyan* (Spanish 1990)
The Legend of Paul Bunyan: An American Folktale (1992)
Pecos Bill: King of the Cowboys (American Tall Tales and Legends 1998)

Objectives:

TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge Skills) for fifth grade
12F. The student understands literary forms by recognizing and distinguishing among such types of text as stories, poems, myths, fables, tall tales, limericks, plays, biographies, and autobiographies.
TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) for fifth grade
R.5.2.A. Recall supporting facts and details.

Introduction/Warm up

Hold up a series of books by Steven Kellogg and ask what they have in common. After all are identified as tall tales, ask students for a definition of a tall tale.

Concept Development (Instructional Input)

Correct and expand student definitions of tall tales using the curriculum unit. Discuss the role of films in connection to tall tales. Display three types of films: *animation*, *iconographic*, and *live action* performance. Show a short clip of each one. Display the Film Questionnaire (Appendix) using a transparency on the overhead projector. Explain that students will be expected to answer these questions each week after we view a video about a tall tale character. With the attention of the whole class, fill out the questionnaire for *one* of the film clips that was viewed.

Student Practice

Using a Venn Diagram (Figure 2), compare and contrast the three types of films. How are they similar and how are they different?

Independent Practice

Pass out blank Film Questionnaires (Appendix) to each student. Students will answer questions about the two remaining film clips that were not covered in class discussion.

Week #2: Johnny Appleseed

Films: *Johnny Appleseed: A Poem by Reeve Lindbergh* (1990)
Johnny Appleseed (American Tall Tales and Legends 1998)

Objectives:

TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge Skills) for fifth grade
5.25.B. The student compares and contrasts print, visual, and electronic media such as film with the written story.
TAAS (Texas Academic Achievement Skills) for fifth grade
R.5. Compare and contrast.

Introduction/Warm up

Who was John Chapman? If nobody knows the answer, hold up a red apple for a hint and ask the question again. Keep giving more hints until you get the right answer. Show students a book about Johnny Appleseed.

Concept Development/Instructional Input

Read the poem, "Johnny Appleseed," by Reeve Lindbergh, and discuss it. Using the overhead projector, show a transparency of Film Questionnaire (Appendix). Explain that after the movie has been shown, students will be expected to answer these questions. Next, show the animated video *Johnny Appleseed* by Reeve Lindbergh. Discuss how the

video brings the poetry to life. Students will be given a copy of the Film Questionnaire (Appendix) to complete.

Student Practice

Using a Venn diagram (Figure 2), compare and contrast the poem with the video. Divide up students into six tables, with five or six students per table. One student from each table will serve as group leader and present their group's collaborative findings.

Independent Practice

Watch the live performance video "Johnny Appleseed" as presented by Shelley Duvall. Discuss how this humorous version of the story is in sharp contrast to the reverential treatment of Johnny Appleseed which is afforded by the poetic video. Add another circle to the Venn Diagram with these new findings.

Week #3: Paul Bunyan

Film: *Paul Bunyan* (Rabbit Ears 1990)

Week #4: Pecos Bill

Film: *Pecos Bill* (Rabbit Ears 1988)

Week #5: John Henry

Film: *John Henry* (Rabbit Ears 1992)

Week #6: Davy Crockett

Film: *Davy Crockett* (American Tall Tales and Legends 1998)
Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier (Walt Disney 1955)

Week #7: Women of Tall Tales: Annie Oakley, Slue-Foot Sue, and Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett

Film: *Annie Oakley* (American Tall Tales and Legends 1998)

Week #8: Review of American Tall Tales in Children's Literature

Film: *Tall Tale: The Unbelievable Adventure* (Walt Disney 1999)

Objectives:

TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge Skills) for fifth grade

12D. The student interprets and uses graphic sources of information such as maps.

13G. The student draws conclusions from information from multiple sources.

5.23C. The student uses media to compare ideas and points of view.

11H. The student analyzes characters including their traits, relationships, changes.

TAAS (Texas Academic Achievement Skills) for fifth grade

R.5.5.A. Use graphic sources for information.

R.5.5.B. Draw logical conclusions.

R.3.5.A. Understands the feelings and emotions of characters.

Introduction/Warm Up:

Going down the list of all of the tall tale characters we have discussed, think about which one would be your favorite.

Concept Development/Instructional Input:

On the chalkboard, write down the names of the eight tall tale characters that were covered in this curriculum unit. Take a poll of the students (using tally marks) to see which one was the class favorite. Show the live action video starring Pecos Bill having an adventure with his friends, Paul Bunyan and John Henry. Complete the Film Questionnaire (Appendix).

Student Practice:

Develop an historical timeline for Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan, and John Henry. Would it have been possible for these three characters to work together? Students may also be given an oral matching exercise to connect each tall tale character in our curriculum unit with some identifying phrase about him or her. An illustration of each character can be superimposed on the overhead projector to facilitate visual identity.

Independent Practice:

Provide each student with a map of the United States (Figure 1). Students will locate the geographic location for each tall tale character discussed and color it using a map key.

Week #9 *Rewriting and Composing Modern American Tall Tales*

Films: *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (Live Oak Media 1987)

Pickles Over Pittsburgh (Live Oak Media 1999)

Objectives:

TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge Skills) for fifth grade

5.25.B. The student compares and contrasts print, visual, and electronic media such as film with the written story.

10B. The student demonstrates understanding of informational text through writing, illustrating, developing demonstrations, and using available technology.

TAAS (Texas Academic Achievement Skills) for fifth grade

R.5. Compare and contrast.

R.5.3.A. Identifies the stated or paraphrased main idea of a selection.

Introduction/Warm Up:

We have modern tall tales in our literature today. Remember our definition of a tall tale. It does not always have to be about a person. Some of the stories are about phenomena. The video I am going to show you today is a story about weather gone haywire. Can anyone think of the name of this book? (Display the book after the title has been determined.)

Concept Development/Instructional Input:

Explain that the plot of this film consists of a grandfather telling a tall tale to his two grandchildren. Note the contrast between the black-and-white and color sections of the movie. When the grandfather is speaking to his grandchildren, the scenes are filmed in black and white. When the actual tall tale begins, the scenes become colorized. Show the video and discuss why it qualifies as a tall tale. Answer the questions from the Film Questionnaire (Appendix).

Student Practice:

Students will place events from both films in their proper sequence. Then they will rewrite or change the ending(s).

Independent Practice:

Students will be given the opportunity to write their own tall tales. Give them some sentence starters such as:

- The hail that came down from the sky was as big as _____.
- The puppy was so small that _____.
- The flowers grew so quickly that _____.

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Readings for the Teacher

Moore, JoEllen and Evans, Joy. *American Tall Tales: Posters and Reproducible Pages*. Monterey, CA.: Evan-Moor Corp., 1987. Grades 2-5

A mini-unit of five American tall tales with posters, paper folding activities, crossword puzzle, word search, map.

Osborne, Mary Pope. *American Tall Tales*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

A collection of tall tales about such American folk heroes as Paul Bunyan, Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind, Pecos Bill, and John Henry, with Notes on each story and a map showing where they lived. (Wood engravings by Michael McCurdy)

San Souci, Robert D. *Cut from the Same Cloth: American Women of Myth, Legend, and Tall Tale*. New York: Puffin Books, 1993.

A collection of 20 stories about legendary American women, drawing from folktales, popular stories, and ballads. (Illustrated by Brian Pinkney)

Readings for the Students

Aliki. *The Story of Johnny Appleseed*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963.

Retells the wanderings of John Chapman, whose devotion to planting apple trees made him a legendary figure in American history.

Aliki. *La Historia de Johnny Appleseed*. New York: Lectorum, 1992.

A retelling in Spanish, of the legend of John Chapman who wandered the American countryside planting apple seeds.

Barrett, Judi. *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. New York: Atheneum, 1978.

Life is delicious in the town of Chewandswallow, where it rains soup and juice, snows mashed potatoes, and blows storms of hamburgers until the weather takes a turn for the worse.

- Kellogg, Steven. *Paul Bunyan*. New York: Mulberry Books, 1984.
 Recounts the life of the extraordinary lumberjack whose unusual size and strength made him legendary.
- Kellogg, Steven. *Pecos Bill*. New York: Wm. Morrow and Company, 1986.
 Recounts incidents from the life of legendary cowboy Pecos Bill, from his childhood among the coyotes, to his unusual wedding day.
- Kellogg, Steven. *Mike Fink*. New York: Morrow Junior Books, 1992.
 Recounts the exploits of legendary braggart and King of the Keel boatmen, Mike Fink.
- Kellogg, Steven. *Johnny Appleseed*. New York: Morrow Junior Books, 1988.
 Presents the life of John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed, describing his love of nature, his kindness to animals, and his physical fortitude.
- Kellogg, Steven. *Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett*. New York: Morrow Junior Books, 1999.
 Sally Ann, wife of Davy Crockett, fears nothing--and proves it when braggart Mike Fink tries to scare her.
- Lester, Julius. *John Henry*. New York: Dial Books, 1994.
 Recounts the exploits of legendary black character and railroad worker John Henry, who is said to have contested a steam drill and won. (illustrated by Jerry Pinkney)
- San Souci, Robert D. *Larger Than Life: the Adventures of American Legendary Heroes*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.
 A collection of five short tales about such legendary American heroes as John Henry, Old Stormalong, Slue-Foot Sue, and Paul Bunyan (illustrated by Andrew Glass).
- Stoutenburg, Adrien. *American Tall Tales*. New York: Puffin Books, 1976.
 Featuring eight American folk heroes: Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, Stormalong, Mike Fink, Davy Crockett, Johnny Appleseed, John Henry, and Joe Magarac; these tales are told with a poet's ear for the impact of words.
- Wood, Audrey. *The Bunyans*. New York: Blue Sky Press, 1996.
 Paul Bunyan, his wife, and their children do some ordinary things which result in the formation of Niagara Falls, Bryce Canyon, and other natural monuments.

ANNOTATED FILMOGRAPHY

From American Tall Tales and Legends Series:

Annie Oakley (Shelley Duvall, 1998)

Cowgirl Annie Oakley, her husband Frank Butler, and Buffalo Bill Cody form a Wild West Show that becomes renowned the world over. Starring Jamie Lee Curtis and Brian Dennehy. Narrated by Shelley Duvall. (Live action; 52 minutes)

Davy Crockett (Shelley Duvall, 1998)

Born in 1876 in Tennessee, the famous frontiersman has many adventures with his pet bear, Deathhug. Starring Mac Davis, McLean Stevenson, and Adam Carl. Directed by David Grossman. (Live action; 49 minutes)

Johnny Appleseed (Shelley Duvall, 1998)

When Johnny Appleseed teaches the people of Smithville how to plant and harvest apples, it doesn't sit well with Ol' Jack Smith, the town tyrant. Starring Martin Short, Molly Ringwald, and Rob Reiner. Directed by Christopher Guest. Narrated by Lewis Arquette. (Live action; 52 minutes)

Pecos Bill: King of the Cowboys (Shelley Duvall, 1998)

Petunia City, Texas, is a quiet, peaceful little town until legendary cowboy Pecos Bill shows up. Starring Steve Guttenberg, Martin Mull, Rebecca DeMornay., and Dick Schaal. Directed by Howard Storm. (Live action, 49 minutes)

From The Rabbit Ears American Heroes and Legends Series:

John Henry (1992)

B.B. King's music is the highlight of this production of the John Henry legend. King's music powers the story of the steel-driving man from birth to his great race of man against machine. Directed by C. W. Moss; Narrated by Denzel Washington. Written by Brad Kessler. Illustrated by Barry Jackson. (Iconographic; 30 minutes)

Paul Bunyan (1990)

The saga of that quintessential tall-tale hero and his blue ox, Babe, is told through the hilariously exaggerated exploits of Paul's logging adventures in the Northern United States. Directed by Tim Raglin; adapted by Brian Gleeseon. Narrated by Jonathan Winters. Received a Grammy Award nomination as Best Recording for Children. (Iconographic; 30 minutes)

Pecos Bill (1988)

The Grammy-winning story of the legendary cowboy who tamed the West with his cougar and rattlesnake. Narrated by Robin Williams. Produced by Mark Sottnick. Illustrations by Tim Raglin, music by Ry Cooder. (Iconographic; 30 minutes)

Modern Tall Tales:

Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs (Live Oak Media, 1987)

The town of Chewandswallow has to be abandoned when its delicious weather takes a sudden turn for the worse. Based on the book by Judi Barrett. Illustrations by Ron Barrett. (Iconographic; 13:15 minutes)

Pickles over Pittsburgh (Live Oak Media, 1999)

Sequel to *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*. Based on the book by Judi Barrett. Illustrations by Ron Barrett. (Iconographic; 14 minutes)

Other Films:

The Ballad of Paul Bunyan (Spanish, Lucerne Media, 1990)

An animated version of the life of legendary lumberjack Paul Bunyan, as told by a guitar-strumming balladeer. Produced and directed by Arthur Rankin, Jr. and Jules Bass. (Animated; 23 minutes)

Davy Crockett, Kind of the Wild Frontier (Walt Disney, 1955)

Starring Fess Parker as the famous frontiersman, and Buddy Ebsen as his sidekick George Russel. Their adventures take them from Tennessee to Washington D.C. to the Alamo. (Live action; 68 minutes)

Johnny Appleseed: a poem by Reeve Lindbergh (Scholastic, 1990)

The legacy of Johnny Appleseed remains strong today—not only for his botanical achievements, but also for the stories that he shared with children, presented here at in verse and art. Paintings by Kathy Jacobsen. Narrated by Mary McDonnell. Music by Randy Scruggs. (Animated; 18 minutes)

The Legend of Paul Bunyan: an American Folktale (Bosustow Entertainment 1992)

The familiar tale of Paul Bunyan is extended to include modern-day exploits. Music performed by Roberta Flack. (Iconographic; 25 minutes)

Tall Tale: The Unbelievable Adventure (Walt Disney, 1999)

The dynamic Pecos Bill teams with larger-than-life heroes Paul Bunyan and John Henry to help in the fight against a greedy land-grabber. Directed by Jeremiah Chechik. Starring Patrick Swayze and Scott Glenn. (Live action; 97 minutes)

WEBSITES

<http://www.amazon.com>

Amazon.com online bookstore (has film reviews)

<http://www.audreywood.com>

Individual author website.

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com>

Barnes and Noble online bookstore.

<http://www.msc.cornell.edu/~weeds/SchoolPages/Appleseed/welcome.html>

Johnny Appleseed Homepage.

<http://www.falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyvil/folkunit.htm>

American Folktales Unit (lots of activities).

<http://www.germantownacademy.org/academics/ls/4/1a/4r/talltale/ttintro.htm>

Introduction to the Study of American Tall Tales.

http://www.inform.umd.edu/UMS+State/UMD-Projects/MCTP/Technology/School_WWW_Pages/TallTales/TitlePage.html

Commemorative stamps to honor tall tale characters.

<http://www.rainbowhorizons.com/pages/pdf1503.html>

Tall Tales lesson plans for sale.

<http://www.educ.ucalgary.ca/litindex/>

K-12 literature-based teaching ideas.

<http://www.imdb.com>

An excellent database on movies.

FIGURE 1

Map of the United States

Select a blank outline map of the United States from the following Internet website:

<http://www.geography.about.com>

FIGURE 2

Venn Diagram

Select a Venn Diagram worksheet from the following Internet website:

<http://www.venndiagram.com>

APPENDIX

Film Questionnaire

1. Is the film animated, iconographic, or a live action performance?
2. What is the setting? Why did the director choose this setting?
3. Who are the Tall Tale characters in this film? Is it obvious? Why?
4. Do you like the background music? How does it help or hurt the movie?
5. Do you understand the language that the characters are using? If not, how can you know what is happening?
6. What do you notice about the colors used in this movie?
7. Who is the narrator? Is he or she famous?