



# American Tall Tales

ADRIEN STOUTENBURG

Illustrations by  
Richard M. Powers







## **Paul Bunyan**

### **Sky-bright Axe**

Some people say that Paul Bunyan wasn't much taller than an ordinary house. Others say he must have been a lot taller to do all the things he did, like sticking trees into his pockets and blowing birds out of the air when he sneezed. Even when he was a baby, up in Maine, he was so big he knocked down a mile of trees just by rolling over in his sleep.

Everyone was nervous about what might happen when Baby Paul grew older and started crawling. Maine wouldn't have any forests left.





Paul's father, who was an ordinary-sized man, was a bit nervous about it all himself. One night he had wakened to find his bed down on the floor. There beside it sat Baby Paul, a crosscut saw in one hand. In the other hand he held one of the sawed-off legs of the bed. He was chewing on it to help his teeth grow.

"I'll have to put him somewhere safe," Paul's father decided, "where he won't be a public nuisance."

He cut down some tall trees growing near his own cabin and built a boat shaped like a cradle. Paul's mother tucked Paul into it. Then Paul's parents put a long rope on the floating cradle and let it drift out to sea a little way.

It was a lovely, blue-green place for a cradle, with fish flashing around and the waves making small, humpbacked motions underneath. Baby Paul sucked his thumb and watched the sea-gulls flying over, light shaking from beneath their wings. Paul smiled, and then he hiccuped. The hiccup started a gale that nearly blew a fishing boat all the way to the North Pole.

Finally, Paul went to sleep. He snored so loudly the gulls went flapping toward land for they thought a thunderstorm was coming. Then young Paul had a bad dream, brought on by the extra-large ham his mother had given him for breakfast. He tossed about in his sleep and started the cradle rocking. Each time the cradle rocked it sent a wave as big as a building toward shore. Paul tossed harder, and the waves grew even larger, bigger than cities. They smashed against the shore and threatened to drown everything on land.

People scampered up church steeples. They scrambled onto roof tops. They clawed their way up into trees, and they yelled for the government to save them. The settlers for miles around put rifles on their shoulders and marched up to Paul's father.



## *Paul Bunyan*

"Get that baby out of here!" they shouted. "He's a danger to the whole state. A baby like that is against the Constitution!"

Paul's father, and his mother, too, couldn't help feeling a bit proud of how strong Paul was. But they knew that the smartest thing to do was to move away. No one seems to know exactly where they went. Wherever it was, Paul didn't cause too much trouble for the rest of the time he was growing up. His father taught him certain things which helped.

"Don't lean too hard against smallish trees or buildings, Son," his father told him. "And if there are towns or farmers' fields in your way, step around them."

And Paul's mother told him, "Never pick on anybody who isn't your own size, Son."

Since there wasn't anyone his size around, Paul never got into fights. Being taller than other boys, by about fifty feet or so, he was naturally the best hunter, fisherman, walker, runner, yeller, or mountain climber there was. And he was best of all at cutting down trees and turning them into lumber. In those days, when America was new, people had to cut down a lot of trees. They needed the lumber for houses, churches, town halls, ships, bridges, ballrooms, stores, pencils, wagons, and flag poles. Luckily, the trees were there, stretching in tall, wind-shining rows across America. The trees marched up mountains and down again. They followed rivers and creeks. They massed up together in purple canyons and shoved each other out of the way on the shores of lakes. They pushed their dark roots down into rock and their glossy branches into the clouds.

Paul liked to flash a sky-bright axe over his head. He loved the smell of wood when it was cut and the look of its sap gleaming like honey. He didn't chop trees down in any ordinary way. With four strokes he would lop all the limbs and bark off

# **AMERICAN TALL TALES**

## **by Adrien Stoutenburg**

*Illustrated by Richard M. Powers*

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