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Worldviews And The American West

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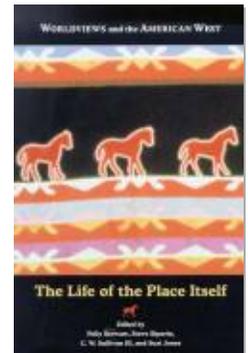
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Tall Tales and Sales

Steve Siporin

Is there anything significant left to say about tall tales? The apparent simplicity of the genre and the vast literature already written about it, some of which will be addressed below, might lead one to think that the answer must be no. Yet, as is the case with folklore generally, just when we think our “simple” subject has been exhausted, we discover new layers of meaning tucked away in a tale, in silence, or in newly emerging uses.

In this essay I will argue that in spite of the attention scholars have paid to tall tales, a fascinating function remains unexplored—the mercantile function of marketing a region. My hypothesis is that in North America, tall tales have traditionally served economic ends and continue to do so today. Before I demonstrate this hypothesis, I want to bring the literature on tall tales into focus in order to contextualize my ideas within the discussion about the special role of tall tales in North America.

Tall tales—also known by such local terms as windies, stretchers, yarns, whoppers, and lies—comprise one of the best known and best loved folklore genres in North America. Richard Dorson, in his *Handbook of American Folklore*, went so far as to say that “as the *Märchen* characterizes European storytelling, so the tall tale exemplifies American storytelling” (1983, 290).

The Norwegian folklorist Gustav Henningsen, while acknowledging that “America became for one reason or another a liar’s paradise,” considered American folklorists’ perspective on tall tales to be a distortion, reflecting publication history and national political publicity more than storytelling reality:

While the European hunter, fisherman, and skipper stories . . . have led a decidedly unnoticed existence . . . the genre in the U.S.A. has been an object of attention and of study without parallel right from 1829 when the tall-tale teller and hero Davy Crockett was elected to Congress; and while all of Munchhausen’s [sic] undiscovered cousins at home in Europe sat entertaining a small local audience,

Abraham Lincoln as president in the 1860's could illustrate the political situation with tall tales which he had learned in his youth in the Midwest. (1965, 181)

Jan Brunvand qualified Dorson's statement, noting that *tales of lying* (types 1875-1999 in the Aarne-Thompson index) are thought of by Americans as "a peculiarly American product, just as Turks, Germans, and Scandinavians each think of [tall tales] as peculiarly *their* national invention, all of them forgetting that there were tall tales before any of their nations was thought of" (1998, 246). Brunvand was certainly correct. Dan Ben-Amos, for instance, has identified tall tales in the Talmudic-Midrashic literature (1976), and others have found tall tales in Herodotus (Parton 1864, 468) and Plutarch (Henningsen 1965, 185-86). The most famous collection of tall tales (recently given new life in a popular movie) is from Germany—*Singular Travels, Campaigns, and Adventures of Baron Münchhausen*, first published in English by Rudolph Eric Raspe in 1785 (Dégh 1972, 71).

It is hard to know if North Americans really do favor tall tales more than other peoples do or if the numerous and extensive American tall-tale collections simply reflect American folklorists' collecting habits, ideas, and expectations. Cecil Sharp, after all, during his famous field trip in Appalachia, asked for ballads and got ballads; he didn't ask for Jack tales, and he didn't collect any. Other field workers collected Jack tales from the same informants nearly a decade later (Dorson 1964, 164-65). Thus, as many scholars have pointed out, folklore archives do not necessarily reflect local or national repertoires—how can they when personal preference, enthusiasm, the seeking of excellent rather than average performers, and chance rather than random sampling shape folklore collecting?

This much, however, *is* clear: tall tales were told and recorded in North America from colonial times onward, and today they remain vital and lively, particularly in the form of postcards and other objects.

What is a tall tale? Suzi Jones, in her landmark article "Regionalization: A Rhetorical Strategy," defines the tall tale as "a humorous exaggeration of some aspect of the local environment, told by an insider to an outsider for the amusement of the insider, . . . a ludicrous image which rests on truth" (1976, 115). To further clarify the nature of the tall tale, let's compare it to the legend. Structurally, these two forms operate in amazingly similar ways for such different genres. A legend is a story about something out of the ordinary, something that challenges belief. Its teller usually believes that the story is true and tries to convince his/her audience of its truth. A tall tale is also about something unusual, but in the case of the tall tale, the narrator definitely does not believe his/her own narrative, yet he/she wants the audience to believe it, at least for a while:

Once a stranger stopped to ask about the country. His interest was stirred by the utter absence of anything in sight to show it had rained around Fort Rock. He said, "Has it *ever* rained here?"

I [Reub Long] told him, "Yes, once. Do you remember how Noah, the first long-range weather forecaster, built the ark and floated it during forty days and nights of rain?" He said he had knowledge of that. I told him, "That time we got a quarter of an inch." (Jackman and Long 1964, 348)

Jones's approach focuses on the rhetoric of the tall tale. Exaggeration, for instance, cannot be random; usually some true aspect of the local environment is "stretched" in order to fool the outsider. As she says, referring to Mody Boatright, "the liar's art is essentially realistic" (Jones 1976, 115). (And note that if Reub Long, the narrator, believed that it had really rained only a quarter of an inch in Eastern Oregon during Noah's Flood, we would call his narrative a legend.)

Jones also defined the tall tale partly through the social interaction surrounding its narration, demonstrating how the telling of a "windy" can be a way of drawing a boundary between insiders and outsiders in a given social context—ultimately to invoke and strengthen the bonds among insiders, who may feel threatened by outsiders and may desire to exclude them.

Patrick Mullen, in *I Heard the Old Fishermen Say: Folklore of the Texas Gulf Coast*, also sees more to the tall tale than just exaggeration. He identifies characteristic artistic devices and areas of specialized style such as (1) the use of concrete detail (in description and dialogue) to create a sense of reality; (2) the use of ludicrous imagery (the main device) which is vivid, appropriately incongruous, and absurd; and (3) the manipulation of point of view—a tendency to narrate in (or even shift to) the first person, creating a sense of immediacy and involvement. Mullen's fourth fictive device is the teller's adoption of a narrative persona that is not the personality of the actual teller himself but a standard character-narrator role he takes on.¹ This persona is a wide-eyed naïf—what Mullen calls "The American Everyman." The American Everyman bears witness to the unending bounty of nature in America through tales like "The Wonderful Hunt," in which a hunter kills an elk, a bear, a snake, several quail, and dozens of geese and ducks with one shot. His boots fill up with fish when he retrieves the geese and ducks from the river (Mullen 1988, 140–44).² Such tall tales express the idea of "unlimited good" and are an attractive symbol of the "limitless" natural resources of North America.

In terms of function, Mullen agrees with Jones about the creation of insider group solidarity through the telling of tall tales, although he sees this function as something that moved west as the frontier moved west. Tall tales

provided a kind of initiation rite, bringing greenhorns into the group, and this function was contemporaneous with the frontier period as it transpired in each American region. In the 1960s, on the Texas Gulf Coast, Mullen observed a bait-shop owner, Ed Bell, telling tall tales to his customers—not so much as initiation but for the customers' entertainment and as a way to attract them and thus promote his business.

Both Jones and Mullen discuss the tall tale in its immediate, oral, interactional context. Mullen turns to a less context-bound, purely textual meaning of the tall tale when he interprets it as symbolizing the "limitless" bounty of North America and projecting the idea of "unlimited good." How that dimension relates to the marketing of region through tradition brings us back to the hypothesis of this essay.

Today, recycled folklore is used to attract individuals to an area in the hope that, as tourists, potential home-buyers, investors, and consumers of all stripes, these individuals will spend money and thereby benefit the local economy. Mullen describes Ed Bell's tall tales functioning in this way on a small scale for his bait-shop business; but any folklorist who has worked for an arts agency since the late 1970s probably has heard a lot about the "multiplier effect" of arts audiences on local economies and has felt the pressure to justify folk arts budgets in the same economic terms that are used to justify arts expenditures in general. The multiplier effect is the notion that if people come into a region to see a play or visit a festival, for example, they will also spend money on lodging, food, and other services and commodities. Thus, tax money invested in the arts or in heritage as a means of attracting tourists is multiplied in the local economy. The burgeoning industry today called cultural tourism shows that the new economic argument of the 1970s has by now become a standard arts-and-heritage argument. It is not news that a region can be made attractive to outsiders through evocation of its distinctive traditions—or that the resulting revenue can be enormous.

Not only is it not news, the multiplier effect (though never called that until recently) may be an old idea among ordinary people. As is often the case, folklore is ahead of mass culture, which perhaps only plays out folk ideas on a large scale (Dundes 1971). In North America, recounting tall tales may have sometimes acted as a *traditional* way of marketing a region. And it may still do so. This hypothesis of the tall tale as an elementary marketing device may explain its widespread popularity in the commerce-driven United States and incidentally reveal the real divergence between the American and European tall-tale traditions. I can demonstrate this most readily with tall tale postcards and related paraphernalia.

Tall-tale postcards, or "boastcards," as well as other mass-produced tall tale objects, may not be folk artifacts themselves, but they are based on the folk tradition of the tall tale and often meet most of the criteria discussed by Jones and Mullen above. Such postcards, as mass-produced commercial



Figure 1. Postcard

items, provide a clear example of marketed traditions themselves: they are for sale. But their true economic impact may derive from their hyperbolic promotion of states and regions through the use of traditional tall-tale imagery.

The mermaid (figure 1), for instance, may promote travel to the destination that has been coupled with her image. No one today believes that mermaids actually exist, but the image deploys an old tall tale to convey a warm sense of welcome for (male) travelers to the region. A positive feeling lingers in the male mind: “Southern New England would be a good place for a vacation. . . .”

But catching the mermaid is also related to catching other dream fish (figures 2 and 3), parallel expressions of desire and fantasy. The big fish is probably the most common and one of the oldest of boastcard images around. It may sound far-fetched to hypothesize that such advertisements attract fishermen to a region, but the big fish possibility may operate like the mermaid, linking a positive association with a particular region. And note that—just as Jones and Mullen suggest for oral tales—sometimes it may be difficult for the outsider to know if the image of the fish is an exaggeration or not.

When I saw the postcards photographed in figures 4 and 5 during my first trip to Alaska, I was unsure if there really were fish of this size or if I was being taken in by a tall-tale postcard like those in figures 2 and 3. The ambiguity I experienced recalls the greenhorn’s confusion and disorientation on the frontier and/or the West, where fertility was believed to be great and animals sizable and strange and the outsider was not quite sure if—or



Figure 2. Postcard. Caption reads, "Catch and Release Fishing in Montana."



Figure 4. Postcard.



Figure 3. Postcard. Caption reads, "Low-Water Fishing Gear, Montana."



Figure 5. Postcard.



Figure 6. Postcard.



Figure 7. Postcard.



Figure 8. Postcard.



Figure 9. Mosquito trap.



Figure 10. Postcard.



Figure 11. Postcard. Caption reads, "Oregon Toothpick."



Figure 12. Label from apple crate.



Figure 13. Postcard.

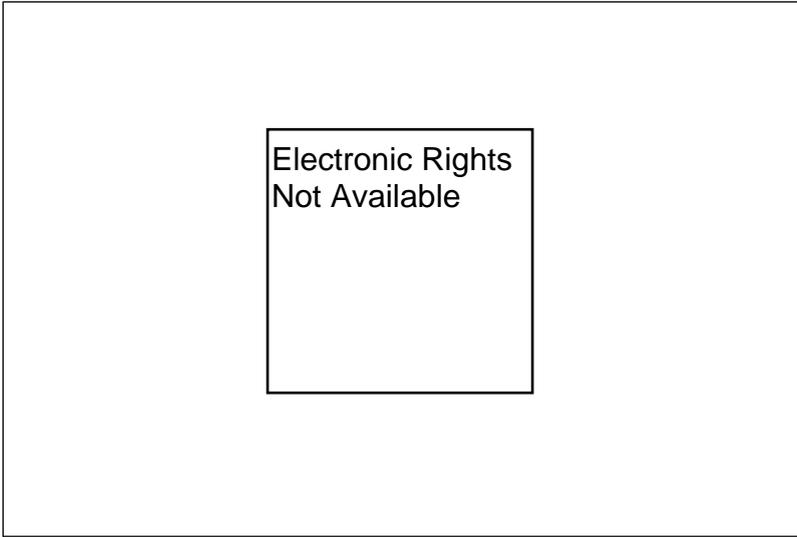


Figure 14. Postcard.



Figure 15. Postcard.



Figure 16. Postcard of jackalope.



Figure 17. A can of jackalope milk.



Figure 18. Stuffed and mounted jackalopes.



Figure 19. Postcard of *Wolpertinger*.

when—his leg was being pulled. Alaska remains one of the few frontiers where the greenhorn can still be confused because reality actually *is* so much bigger than elsewhere. What I thought was fake turned out to be genuine—salmon and halibut *can* weigh over a hundred pounds. Learning that fish could be unbelievably large in Alaskan waters made me vulnerable: what I might now be ready to accept as real, though unusual, could turn out to be a tall tale. In Alaska, and earlier western frontiers, reality sets you up to be fooled by a tall tale. The huge cabbages in some postcards (figure 6) are not tall tales, although the moose in the cabbage patch (figure 7) is.

Some exaggerations—like the mosquito as state bird (figure 8) or the mechanical mosquito trap (figure 9), based on a huge body of oral tall tales about mosquitoes—probably don't fool many people (Halpert 1990; Taft 1983, 42–45). And although giant mosquitoes are certainly a negative exaggeration, they have acquired a positive function through the tall tale because they allow the outsider a feeling of insiderness by being in on the joke. That sense of insiderness, no matter how ill-founded and unconscious, forms a subtle bond between the tourist and the Alaska of his/her imagination—and thus markets the region. An actual drawback has been turned into a draw by being converted to a joke, a cause for camaraderie.³

Fertility, in the form of giant agricultural products, is still among the most positive images western regions project in their postcards.⁴ Typically, there is a one-to-one correlation between a hyperbolic product and a state or region, much as a logo identifies an institution. For Idaho there are dozens of different giant-potato postcards (figure 10); for Oregon it is logs⁵ (figure 11). Washington State produces massive apples⁶ (figure 12), while in Nebraska and

Iowa corn grows not only tall but wide (figure 13). Montana claims the fur-bearing trout (figure 14), and although pictures of gigantic fruit have appeared on California tall-tale postcards for perhaps a century, at least one recent card depicts giant marijuana plants (figure 15) as the regional crop of choice today.

The jackalope, however, must be considered the dominant pan-regional tall-tale image in the West. The jackalope has become ubiquitous throughout the western states (figure 16). According to the text reproduced on a variety of widely available postcards,

the Jackalope is perhaps the rarest animal in North America. This strange little fellow defies classification. Were it not for the horns it might be a large rabbit. Were it not for its shape and coloring it might be a species of deer. It is not vicious usually, although coyotes have a fine respect for the sharp menace of its horns. . . . An odd trait of the Jackalope is its ability to imitate the human voice. Cowboys singing to their herds at night have been startled to hear their lonesome melodies repeated faithfully from some nearby hillside. The phantom echo comes from the throat of some Jackalope. They sing only on dark nights before a thunderstorm. Stories that they sometimes get together and sing in chorus is discounted by those who know them best.⁷

The jackalope also demonstrates the economic significance of today's regional tall tales. A resident of Douglas, Wyoming, claims that he and his brother created the original jackalope in 1934 to increase business for the La Bonte Hotel in Douglas. The jackalope seems to have succeeded in luring more tourists to the area, at least according to a 1977 newspaper article with the headline, "Tourists Love Jackalope: Hoax Jacks Up Town's Economy" (Dorson 1982, 51). A jackalope festival continues today as Douglas, Wyoming's major annual event.

The economy of the jackalope is fairly impressive at the micro-level, too. Today one can purchase not only jackalope postcards, but also jackalope hunting licenses (from the Douglas, Wyoming, Chamber of Commerce, allowing the hunting of one jackalope on June 31 between midnight and 2 A.M. only), cans of jackalope milk (figure 17), jackalope t-shirts, jackalope banks, jackalope eggs, and even stuffed and mounted jackalopes (figure 18).

The *Wolpertinger* (figure 19), a figure similar to the jackalope, exists in Bavarian folklore (Petzoldt 1995, 192–93). Although it looks like a jackalope, it has the additional features of wings, a coxcomb, and fangs. Maybe the *Wolpertinger* is an antecedent (or ancestor!) of the jackalope. Whatever its origin, the jackalope draws on earlier traditions of gigantic rabbits and their implicit, unstoppable fertility. In the North American West these soft creatures gained antlers and became oxymoronic symbols for the attractions of a region that can be both menacing and gentle, tough and sentimental—like the image of *the* regional icon, the cowboy himself.

These contemporary examples, from giant potatoes to antlered rabbits, are the latest versions of tall tales that have thrived in North America, not just in isolated pockets, but as part of the mainstream economic ethos that is central to American national character. Marketing America began early. Dorson wrote that “colonists readily credited accounts of New World fertility and fecundity, lushness and abundance, and transmitted them to their transatlantic kinfolk who waited cautiously before investing in or emigrating to these newborn settlements. . . . The historian of the Carolinas, John Lawson, told of a tulip tree so large that a lusty man moved his bed and household furniture inside” (1959, 9–11).

Fertility and fecundity, lushness and abundance—these are the themes of many tall tales, even if they are exaggerations, even if they are told, or visualized, in jest. These themes are communicated subliminally whether the tale is believed or not; for in the playfulness of the communication, an invitation has been extended. For those already in America or on the frontier, the motivation to attract new immigrants is easy to appreciate: as newcomers arrived, old-timers’ property increased in value, transportation improved, the tax base grew, and markets developed. Americans still believe that the only good economy is an expanding economy. The tall tale, consciously or unconsciously manipulated, was an advertisement, an open invitation to draw in newcomers and to benefit the old-timers, the pioneers.

The ideas of bounty and unlimited good that we see in the tall-tale postcards of today were already present in nineteenth-century American oral tall-tale-telling contexts. Abraham “Oregon” Smith pioneered in Oregon from 1852 through 1859, but he regaled audiences in Indiana and Illinois with his Oregon tall tales until nearly the end of the century:

One time when I was out in Oregon walkin along the foot of a hill, I came to a little cold stream. About halfway across I started noticing little bits of yaller stuff floating on the top of the water, and a bit further on down I saw a small pool of pale yaller churning around slowly. Well now, that interested me considerable.

I looked at it and then, thinks I, it won’t hurt none to taste the stuff. Well, I did and, do you know, it tasted just like butter—unsalted butter. (Halpert and Robinson 1942, 164–65)

Oregon Smith goes upstream until he finds a herd of buffalo cows stomping around in the water to keep flies away and, in the process, churning the milk that overflowed from their udders and creating a land perhaps even more fertile than the one that flowed with mere *milk* and honey.

Jacqueline Simpson remarks that a related motif was used nine centuries earlier. A mid-ninth-century Viking claimed that butter dripped from every blade of Iceland’s grass (Jones 1968, 274). And according to *Eirikssaga*, Erik the Red called Greenland “Greenland, [because] he maintained that men

would be much more eager to go there if the land had an attractive name” (Jones 1988, 129). That sounds like smart marketing. Simpson calls it a “bit of boastful advertising” (personal correspondence, July 4, 1994). In the twentieth century the same genre, tall tales, markets regions to tourists more often than settlers, largely by reasserting, through humor, that “pervasive feeling of optimism and enthusiasm” that cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky found to be so characteristic of North American worldview (1992, 63).

Wyoming’s jackalopes, Montana’s fur-bearing trout, Oregon’s watermelons and pumpkins that grow so fast they have to be placed on skids to keep from getting bruised, and other instances of regional tall tales may suggest that using folklore to sell a region has a longer tradition than we had previously thought. Telling tall tales and selling tall-tale postcards and other tall-tale paraphernalia may be considered *applied* folklore in a fundamental way—as a traditional act of insiders, to benefit themselves, not an imposition of outsiders.

Today, we are deeply concerned about “the marketing of tradition,” the “commodification of culture,” and other materialist reductions of heritage. And we should be. But this tendency runs much deeper in our own culture than we might have suspected and is indeed traditional itself.

Notes

1. Using the first person over a long career of tall-tale telling can make one into a “Münchhausen,” a person with a reputation for telling tall tales about himself, like the original baron. American folklorists have studied several Münchausens in depth—Len Henry of northern Idaho, Abraham “Oregon” Smith of Indiana, John Darling of New York, Jim Bridger of the West, Gib Morgan of Pennsylvania and Oklahoma oilfields, and Hathaway Jones of Oregon, to name a few.
2. “The Wonderful Hunt” is “one of the most widely collected folktales in America” (Mullen 1988, 141). It combines one or more versions of tale types 1890 A–F, 1894, and 1896 in Aarne-Thompson (1987).
3. Oregon’s “ungreeting cards” of the 1970s—which exaggerated rainfall through phrases like “Last year eighteen people drowned in Oregon.” [open card] “They fell off their bicycles”—are other instances in which an unattractive regional characteristic was turned into an attraction through hyperbole.
4. For collections of early twentieth-century American tall-tale postcards with images of agricultural fertility, see Welsch 1976, Rubin and Williams 1990, and Henry 1995.
5. The Oregon tall-tale image is a bit different from the others because the exaggeration comes only in the language describing the logs as toothpicks. The logs themselves are not exaggerated in size as are most other tall-tale images.
6. This image is a label from a crate of apples rather than a postcard.
7. This identical phrasing appears on many jackalope postcards with a variety of images. I have not been able to identify the origin of the description.