Minnesota Unraveled

EP107 - Logging the Northwoods: Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox in Bemidji

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Chantel Rodríguez:

While on vacation in Northern Minnesota, I decided to take a drive on Highway 197. As I got near Bemidji, I drove over the bridge that spans the headwaters of the mighty Mississippi. Lake Bemidji's sparkling blue waters sprawled out on my right, ringed by the trees the Northwoods are famous for.

As I got closer to the center of town, I spotted some red plaid that stood out against the clear blue sky. As I got even closer, I could make out that the red plaid was part of a lumberjack shirt, an 18-foot tall statue of one to be specific. Next to him I could see a huge bright blue ox.

I pulled off to get a better look. The two figures were right at the center of Bemidji's Tourist Information Center complex and a rustic wood sign between them said, "Paul Bunyan." I myself grew up far from the Northwoods in Texas, but even I'd heard of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox. All I knew about the guy was that he was a super strong lumberjack with an ox for a sidekick, but I wanted to know more.

What's the full story of Paul Bunyan and how did he come to hold such a prominent place in Bemidji? For that, I spoke with librarian and MNopedia author, Jennifer Kleinjung.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

My name is Jennifer Kleinjung. I am a librarian and educator and Minnesota history aficionado. My background, I was born and raised on the Iron Range in Minnesota in the 1980s and '90s, so that's where I ground myself in the history of our state. I have worked as a high school educator, as a museum educator and later in life as a librarian.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Associate Professor Kasey Keeler.

Kasey Keeler:

My name is Kasey Keeler. I am a citizen of the Tuolumne Band of Miwok Indians, which is in California. I'm also direct descendant of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and I am an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin. I hold a joint appointment in the Civil Society and Community Studies Department, which is located in the School of Human Ecology. I also have a 50% appointment in American Indian and Indigenous Studies, which is in the College of Letters and Science.

Chantel Rodríguez:

At this point, I had a clear place to start, these statues, why are they here? Why were they built?

Kasey Keeler:

They really are they're mascots, they're icons. I think the interesting thing really about the Paul and Babe statues in Bemidji is they were created in 1937. We're in the Great Depression. They were created as part of this winter carnival in Bemidji. That happened first in 1932, but then went on a bit of a hiatus, was coming back in 1937.

It was really these community boosters who wanted to do something big. It was the Rotary, it was some local business people who said, "We need a giant statue of Paul Bunyan and a giant statue of Babe the Blue Ox, and that's what's going to make this carnival amazing. That's what's going to get this attention. The bigger, the better."

Chantel Rodríguez:

At long last, the winter carnival was going to be back in Bemidji. Of course, organizers wanted to make sure its return was something special. This pair of giant statues would be the centerpiece. You'd think they would put time and special care into creating them, right? According to Jennifer, that wasn't quite how it played out.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

The fascinating thing to me that makes how those statues came to be unique is it happened so fast. The construction happened within three weeks, 700 and some man-hours to make them. As far as I can tell, the people involved in creation did not have any previous history in building giant statues.

We're not talking about hiring sculptors or things like that. It was people who worked for a local lumber company and a local electrical company, and they were just going at it and created two giant statues. One of which the Babe the Blue Ox statue was

mounted on a truck and driven around, which is really wild when you look at the statues today and you see giant statue on the shores of Lake Bemidji.

The first thought that occurs to you is not that I bet that ox was mounted on a car and driven across the state of Minnesota.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Were they made with a model in any way, shape or form? Did they have an ox that they brought in like, "Please model for us ox from the farm." What did they do? How did they do this?

Jennifer Kleinjung:

No, it was really interesting. The model for Paul Bunyan was the mayor of Bemidji at the time, Earl Bucklen, who was a strapping man that apparently fit the bill. One of the fascinating things about this particular Paul Bunyan statue though, because obviously they took the proportions of their model and they increased the size for the purposes of creating an 18-foot statue.

They forgot when they were multiplying the proportions, they neglected the neck, which partially I can understand you're not really thinking about the neck as key to telling this story of a giant lumberjack, but it does become important.

It's definitely how you can tell you are looking at the Bemidji statue of Paul versus other iterations. He has little to no neck. His head is there, his very broad shoulders are there. His neck is much shorter than one would imagine that it would need to be.

Chantel Rodríguez:

As for Babe the Blue Ox, the modeling and construction went a bit differently.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

Okay. So Babe the Blue Ox was based on a pair of oxen from the Headwaters camp, and I think the fascinating thing about Babe is that she was very much created to be mobile, and so she is chicken wire and wool. Originally, later when she ceased being mobile in 1939, they did do some updates with Plaster for Babe, but it was fascinating because she was mounted on a car.

She had headlights that shone through her eyes. They had the car's exhaust coming out her nose, which was very apropos for a winter carnival ox that was just traveling as this ambassador throughout the city. Her horns were so big that they had to actually remove the horns when they were taking her through the city because the

horns would've tore down the Christmas decorations that were in downtown Bemidji.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I know that this is supposed to sound like a really exciting tour of Babe, but it sounds terrifying with these lights coming out of the eyes and these huge horns and steam. I think I would've been terrified as a child if I had watched that.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

That's fair. I think a lot depends on how big or how old you were at the time, and they talk about Babe greeting people coming into town by rail coming into town by bus. Babe was this ambassador. The Babe statue was pulling sleds around as well. So fascinating, all depending on your perspective.

It's really this enthusiasm. People were very proud of their city. They wanted something to draw people to the city and it worked. I think it worked much better than they thought it would because these statues were not built to last. It was kind of a big publicity stunt. People came from the surrounding area.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Somewhere around 100,000 people attended the 1938 winter festival, the year after Paul and Babe statues were built. The statue's popularity was amplified in part due to Paul and Babe's road trip that Jennifer mentioned. The pair even received a police escort when they traveled on Minnesota Highways, but these statues are more than just landmarks.

Their popularity is rooted in part in who they represent. The stories of Paul Bunyan, stories that have captivated the imaginations of Minnesotans for generations to understand why that is, I needed to know more about the Paul Bunyan folktales. Kasey and Jennifer both grew up in Minnesota and remember hearing Paul Bunyan's stories as children.

Kasey Keeler:

I mean for me growing up in Minnesota, I think that we're all familiar with the Paul Bunyan, this really general story of, "Minnesota, the land of 10,000 lakes." We have all these lakes because they're Paul Bunyan's and Babes footprints, right? Crisscrossing the states. We have the Mississippi River because that's where Paul Bunyan drag his ax and carved into the earth. I think just these really general stories that you hear, they're lighthearted, they're kind of humorous.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Here's Jennifer again.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

I think it's a story of strength and it's just for lack of a better term, a story of bigness. There's something to say, "You have the biggest, best talking to kids who grow up in Bemidji and what their connection is with the Paul Bunyan legend and they're like, "Well, that Lake Bemidji is just one of Paul's footprints." I think it's people seeing themselves as part of something larger, quite literally larger than life.

Chantel Rodríguez:

When you grow up steeped in Bunyan tales, it can be difficult to parse out what is historical truth and what is historical myth. This is something that Jennifer and Kasey have come to realize as they've delved deeper into Paul Bunyan folklore in adulthood.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

There's something intriguing and appealing about these stories because there is a level of control and resolution and uncomplicatedness. If you're really not going to dissect it, we know that's not the whole story. The story actually is very complicated in terms of who's represented, who's not. What are you saying about industry? What are you saying about the community?

Chantel Rodríguez:

Back to Kasey.

Kasey Keeler:

My parents certainly were not bringing books home and reading Paul Bunyan stories to me as a child, and there's quite a plethora of Paul Bunyan children's literature. I know that absolutely does happen, but that was not the case for myself and my family. It was more so seeing things, the visual aspect, reading signage here and there.

Seeing Paul Bunyan on the landscape and thinking about what are these stories telling me that are fictional in nature and again, meant to be humorous, if anything.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I feel like there's just so many ways that we unconsciously are processing stories through just seeing stuff in the landscape or I can't even put my finger on it, but I remember some cartoons like just Paul Bunyan would show up randomly in cartoons. He was legible to me as a child, even though like you, my parents weren't telling me Paul Bunyan stories at night. Somehow it made sense to me because I had seen it somewhere else.

Kasey Keeler:

I think we see it so much that even as a child what that stands for. You see Paul Bunyan and you think immediately to log in, but not in a negative way.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Yeah, in a very romanticized way perhaps.

Kasey Keeler:

Yes.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Signage, statues, cartoons, maps, Paul Bunyan and his tales have a prominent place in the American cultural landscape. Perhaps a part of that is how firmly grounded Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox are in the historical landscape. The Northwoods or the northern portions of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan and the lumber industry they were once home to.

In the early 1800s, giant white pines, some 150 feet tall and several feet across covered the Northwoods. As cities out west and around the country grew, builders were eager to get their hands on as much of the strong lightweight wood as they could. Scandinavian, German, and Irish immigrants as well as French Canadians sought their fortunes as lumberjacks in Minnesota's white pine forests.

The work was brutal, but the pay was good and for good reason. The work of a lumberjack was not just strenuous but dangerous. Working sunrise to sunset, six days a week during the winter months, lumbermen would regularly fell 2,000 pound trees. Then they'd have to get those logs onto sleds, packing them till they weighed up to 20 tons then haul them all to the closest riverbank.

The days were long and at the end of them, the men would tell stories to pass the time. Here gathered around the crackling campfire is where historians believed the Paul Bunyan Folktale was born.

As we're talking about these Paul Bunyan stories, I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about when Paul Bunyan folk stories began or how they originated.

Kasey Keeler:

This is one of the aspects of Paul Bunyan that's very hotly debated apparently, but some of the Paul Bunyan origins are a little bit hard to pin down. We're talking about late 1800s, early 1900s, and not a super intense effort to document these histories, but the earliest accounts of Paul Bunyan actually come out of Wisconsin in a town in northern Wisconsin, Tomahawk, Wisconsin are where some of the earliest stories of Paul come out of via a lumber guy named Bill Mulholland.

This is coming again out of Tomahawk, Wisconsin, which is up near Monico, Wisconsin. Some stories were circulating in the lumber camps, and that is really where Paul Bunyan as a narrative of a figure in a story comes out of. People telling stories, men telling stories in these lumber camps. It's largely recognized that these Paul Bunyan stories came out of these logging camps where it's a combination of traditional folktales.

Brought over from men who are descendants or immigrants from Europe, Scandinavian countries, Germany. Those kinds of folktales stories and then this bringing in new stories. They're in a new place, they're engaging in new logging and the creation of new stories, which is continuously happening across all cultures is the creation of new stories. Blending some of the old with some of the new.

Chantel Rodríguez:

So, was Paul Bunyan real? Historians say that the folklore character was probably a combination of a few real-life lumberjacks. One French-Canadian Fabien Fournier was said to have been six feet tall with giant hands and two sets of teeth. Historians believe Paul Bunyan's name might've come from another French-Canadian lumberman Bon Jean. Over time, it's possible the French pronunciation of Bon Jean morphed into the last name Bunyan.

Whether or not Paul Bunyan once lived and breathed the Lumberman's stories all painted the same picture. Bunyan was a Titanic figure with stamina, grit, and strength. He embodied the best of the Lumberman. There's an important thing to notice about the Paul Bunyan stories. In all of them, the Northwoods are an abundant forest of pine that is empty unoccupied by people.

We know from native knowledge and the countless histories that have been written since that this isn't true. Native Nations and people lived and continue to thrive on the land we now call Minnesota.

Kasey Keeler:

When I approach this work, I think about these stories that we grow up with in Minnesota as children, right? Everybody knows who Paul Bunyan is. We can identify them. We can tell a few stories that we know and juxtapose that alongside children growing up in the exact same places at the exact same time who are able to identify the tribal nations of the state of Minnesota.

There is a complete disconnect in a lack of awareness or recognition of one history that's completely made up, but children have no problem talking about it and are identifying these made up characters and then an accurate history on the other hand where children and adults struggle to recognize a real history and also a very devastating history.

For me, part of my work and interest in this Paul Bunyan is to really lay visible this Indigenous history and the work of these Paul Bunyan stories to really mask that Indigenous histories of the same places at the same time. Of course we couldn't have these stories of Paul Bunyan and logging in general without this opening up of land across the Northwoods.

All of the Northwoods are home to the Anishinaabe peoples. There's Ojibwe, Ottawa, Potawatomi, I'm here in Wisconsin now and there's Ho-Chunk and there's Menominee. We have all these and others of course, but we have all these tribal nations that are working to hold onto their land in the 1800s, the 1830s, 1840s, 1850s, 1860s. At the same time, the federal government's working to acquire this land.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In the early 1800s, the fur trade was beginning to decline. Land rather than furs became the more valuable resource. The US government was interested in harvesting the lumber on native lands as well as building settlements. For years, Ojibwe and Dakota refused offer after offer to purchase their lands. In spite of that, illegal logging on native land started as early as the 1820s.

The federal government was impatient. They wanted full access to the millions of acres of white pine trees. To compel the native people to sell, the US encouraged inflation of necessary trade goods. This drove up Native debt leaving land sale as the only option. In 1837, the Ojibwe signed the White Pine Treaty ceding millions of acres to US control. In exchange, they were meant to receive annual payments as well as retain land use rights for hunting, fishing, and gathering. The US government, however, never held up their end of the deal. To this day, Ojibwe are advocating for the US to honor their treaty obligations.

Kasey Keeler:

Once the United States acquires the land from the tribal nations, it wasn't long before logging took over and swept the region as well, where we see millions of acres of land being opened up, falling into the hands of logging companies who over a matter of decades came in and clear cut the forest across what is today, northern Michigan, northern Wisconsin, and northern Minnesota.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Paul Bunyan Tales has spread far and wide across the country. According to Kasey, the spread of the stories wasn't entirely organic. Surprisingly, a marketing campaign had a lot to do with it.

Kasey Keeler:

Right about the time these Paul Bunyan stories, the origin of these Paul Bunyan stories are being hotly debated mid-1880s, northern Wisconsin. In 1884, the Red River Lumber Company was founded in Minnesota. About 1915, the Red River Lumber Company was preparing to leave Minnesota to move west to California. Much of the trees in northern Minnesota had already been logged and the companies moving to the west, which is perhaps not surprising.

It was in 1914 right before this company's move to California that William Laughead, who was the advertising manager for the Red River Lumber Company, created the first pictorial representation of Paul Bunyan. From there everything else is history, right?

Chantel Rodríguez:

Yeah.

Kasey Keeler:

The first pictorial representation of Paul Bunyan comes in 1914, as the company Red River Lumber Company gets ready to move to California. The sole purpose of this pictorial representation is to put this image Paul Bunyan's face essentially on promotional materials as the company moves. It was a marketing campaign.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Could you describe visually what he looked like in this early advertisement?

Kasey Keeler:

I feel like this could be on a pop quiz because we all, I think could describe Paul Bunyan today with no problem, what he's wearing, what he looks like, but this first pictorial representation of him in 1914, I would say it looks nothing like this version that we imagine today. It really does look like a hand-drawn cartoon almost, like a sketch. It's a face of a man basically from the shoulders up. You don't see really the full body. You see, I think a very circular face and what jumps out to me are the whiskers on the man's face more than anything.

Chantel Rodríguez:

When you say whiskers are we talking about a full-on beard or just a wispy, small twirly kind of mustache?

Kasey Keeler:

Yes, definitely the latter. Not the full lumberjack thick beard that we think of today.

Chantel Rodríguez:

On top of this marketing campaign in 1925, a man named James Stevens collected and published a book of Paul Bunyan stories.

Kasey Keeler:

At this point, 1925, that's 11 years after the first promotional materials with Paul Bunyan came out. I think all these forces are coming together. People are still working to claim space across the Northwoods of Minnesota, becoming more familiar with the stories. They have a visual representation to look at. It's just becoming popular for purposes of tourism. People are reading. These stories are gathered together and told by James Stevens and it becomes a best-selling collection of Paul Bunyan stories.

Chantel Rodríguez:

That wispy whiskered torso evolved over time through other ad campaigns, folk art, and more stories to become the burly, plaid clad lumberjack. We know today, Paul Bunyan and Babe are more than just folklore characters. They have long played a role in reinforcing a particular story in shaping the meaning of place of the Northwoods. Back to Kasey.

Kasey Keeler:

Part of my interest in Paul Bunyan is the way that these stories are used by non-Native settlers to claim space. Part of the attachment to these stories and what you're getting at, I assume, is who can claim to be the first person to tell the stories? I think for people in this timeframe, again, late 1800s, there was a lot of value in that because they were looking for a way to claim that space for their family, for the logging industry but also for tourism.

We see that today with small towns across Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Maine, the Pacific Northwest, having some sort of claim to Paul Bunyan. For me, I think part of the vested interest in being able to pinpoint the first Paul Bunyan story is that claim. The claim to place, but also this claim to some sort of notoriety. I think these early stories, there wasn't really an attempt to include Native peoples because that then would defeat the purpose of the stories, right? They're trying to claim this space as their own, as having come to this land, and it was just there and available for them.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For Kasey, that claim to space is still a part of the appeal of Paul Bunyan stories.

Kasey Keeler:

A concept that I've been thinking a lot about in doing this work is this settler nostalgia. As people arrive to America and they're working to claim space and make that place home, they tell these stories, Paul Bunyan stories, other stories about place. These stories are fictional, of course. I think part of it is this settler nostalgia, this hearkening back for the glory days.

For a lot of places across the Northwoods, the glory days were the logging days that came at the expense of course, of Indigenous people. This nostalgia for an earlier time, which again culturally we seem to continuously have as well hearkening back to the earlier days, whatever those earlier days may be 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 50, 100 years ago. In this case, it was the glory days of logging as they were known across so many parts of northern Minnesota and northern Wisconsin, northern Michigan.

That, of course, is closely tied to this opening of the land. Having done a fair amount of research on this topic, it really has startling to think about how much of the materials on Paul Bunyan reference the glory days of logging. I would never use this combination of words as a scholar of American Indian Indigenous histories, I would never use the phrase the glory days of logging. I do now in quotes, of course, to call attention to this era, but it really was a celebrated time.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Paul Bunyan stories are more complex than they seem at first glance. Going deeper into the history made me think a bit differently about those statues in Bemidji. They'd been built for one winter carnival back in the 1930s, but quickly took on a new life. In the years and decades following their construction people still flock to see them, partially because of Minnesotans fondness for Paul Bunyan tales. Partly because of one other reason, roadside tourism.

Starting around the 1920s, automobiles were getting more and more accessible to everyday Americans. Thanks to mass production, the new vehicles were more affordable than ever before. At the same time, highway systems were expanding across Minnesota and across the country. This era was the birthplace of the family road trip and with it the roadside economy. Municipalities sought to find a way to draw travelers into their towns in hopes that they'd spend a bit of money while they stopped, whether on food lodging or a photographer.

There's something called roadside tourism that is happening in automobile tourism that's happening. It's really in its heyday in the 1930s. I'm hoping that you can actually speak to how these statues fit into this broader movement of roadside and automobile tourism that was being promoted really in the '20s and in the '30s.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

One of the interesting things about context moving forward from the statues' creation, and as that goes throughout time is how the land was developed around the statues to accommodate people coming in on cars. The Tourist Information Center that was created in the 1990s is there by Paul and Babe. Also, the original location there was next to a place called The Fireplace of States, which was a tourist attraction made in 1934.

Paul and Babe kind of latched onto an existing tourist attraction that was already there. What else is happening in that area? How are maps being made? There are so many maps in the collections at the Minnesota Historical Society. If you want to dive in and really see these are maps that are being promoted in gas stations all over the place, anywhere you're getting tourist information map of Paul Bunyan country for both Brainerd and Bemidji pointing these out as focal points.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Giant roadside statues weren't necessarily new. They'd begun popping up ever since the 1880s. Giant roadside statues as tourist attractions gained more momentum in the 1930s plus the Great Depression made American families eager to find more affordable vacation options. Bemidji's Paul and Babe were able to ride this new wave of popularity through one lucky break in publicity. One month after the winter

carnival where the statues made their debut in 1937, Life Magazine ran a photo spread on the pair. It was a publication with a national audience and other towns paid attention.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

Paul and Babe are often cited as the beginning of what I would call Minnesota's big statue movement. There is a whole book about it by Carol Ann Malling of the University of Minnesota, calling Paul and Babe, the Roadside Colossus that just really spurred this moment in Minnesota and also in the upper Midwest as a whole. Like, "Wait a minute, Bemidji did this and they did it really well and it worked. Maybe our town can do it. Maybe our town can create giant statue of fill in the blank."

Chantel Rodríguez:

Part of what made these giant statues so successful was the connection they were able to spark with everyone who came to see them, or maybe more importantly to take a photograph with them.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

I think for those how the statues were promoted as come and see these giant statues, take your picture by these giant statues, measure yourself over the years, and you hear a lot of stories of people who visited the statues as part of almost an annual pilgrimage type thing. This is me by giant statues at age seven. This is me by giant statues at age 10. There's a very personal connection in that way.

A lot of people look back at themselves and can see the history of their family, can see the history of how things changed in their family, can see how they physically changed. The bigger story of who Paul Bunyan is and who Babe the Blue Ox is, becomes really secondary because it's about them. That's the interesting thing I think about these statues and their tourism bent is they were meant to be photographed.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Today, the statues of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox are still going as strong as ever for an installation that was meant to be temporary, the statues have become a foundational part of Bemidji. Much of the town has been built up around these statues, both thematically and literally.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

In the 1950s, there was an amusement park that was built up around there. The area around there is called Paul Bunyan Park. Various things have come and gone, but it serves as an anchor for the town, I would say

Chantel Rodríguez:

The amusement park wasn't just close to the Paul Bunyan and Babe statues. The rides were Bunyan themed. Think small county fair kid-friendly rides with Paul and Babe towering over the outskirts. The real kicker, the park was built on fill new land created by filling in bits of the lake shore. That tells you just how much of a hot commodity Bunyan adjacent property really was just how much the community valued these statues in this spot.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

One of the things that I would say is that's most fascinating to me in the history of this statue was in 1989, which would've been after the statues had been accepted into the National Register of Historic Places, they'd celebrated 50 years of Paul and Babe. There was an editorial by author Kent Nerburn that ran in the Bemidji Pioneer that basically said, "Aren't we done with this Bemidji community? These statues aren't particularly artistic.

They're not great works of art. Don't we want to focus more on the natural beauty of this area? Let's change our focus. It's kind of hokey." The backlash was immense. It was national. There was a response from the author's wife months later that was basically a large mea culpa. We did not realize the long-lasting impact of what was said. It was an idea. It was an idea that was being introduced, but it definitely struck a nerve for citizens of Bemidji and also people across the nation who felt a connection to these statues. It was getting national media coverage.

Chantel Rodríguez:

People came to the statues with ideas about who Bunyan and the Ox were. Those ideas existed in their imagination thanks to Bunyan stories circulating in popular culture. We all know that tall tales aren't meant to serve as a substitute for history, but the Paul Bunyan stories blend a real historical setting, the Northwoods in a real historical period, the era of logging and lumbermen with imagination.

There are elements of truth abundant forests, a thriving lumberjack industry interwoven with the myth. There are key parts of lumbering in the Northwoods that aren't included in the Paul Bunyan folk tales. One of which is the crucial roles native people played in the logging industry, whether willingly or through coercion.

Kasey Keeler:

My colleague, Chantal Norrgard, has written about Ojibwe labor, her book Seasons of Change, I really, really enjoy. She in that book, talks about the native labor in logging camps, particularly men, and that that labor is largely unrecognized by folks in general. It certainly isn't appearing in Paul Bunyan's stories, but there was quite a bit of native labor in logging camps across all levels of the logging industry.

It makes sense. We know that these logging companies, as they arrived in areas that were recently acquired, it makes sense that these logging companies were working with Native people in particular because they needed guides, they needed to know where they were going and who better than Indigenous peoples who had always been part of that land. Native people were part of the logging industry.

It was also a way for them to enter the wage-based economy and make money at a time when the economy is rapidly transitioning to all-out capitalism. We also know, and I made reference to this as previously in terms of the violence perpetuated in these camps, we also know that there was a form of labor engaged in with Native women in particular, particularly through sex work. We can assume that a large portion of that labor was coerced.

Think about what that labor, if we want to call it that, what that does in the history of logging camps as well. It's this history that's then not told in any Paul Bunyan stories. It's like, "Here comes Paul Bunyan. He just happened upon this land and he did such good service for America and settlers because he cleared the land and opened it for settlement. He made way for people to settle and build houses." What's not told in these stories is the violence that unfolded in the decades preceding Paul Bunyan's presence and violence from that point forward.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The violence Kasey's talking about wasn't just against native peoples. The environment of the Northwoods, its ecology was forever changed by the logging industry.

Kasey Keeler:

Then we have this aspect of violence through the actual logging industry itself, the violence on the landscape, the destruction of ecosystems, the clear-cut logging and the devastation that reeks across the environment over millions and millions of acres that lasts generations, of course. Then also the violence that comes with the men in the logging camps, the violence perpetuated particularly against Indigenous women by men associated in working in these logging camps.

There's multiple forms of violence that are occurring in this history, beginning with the treaties and the separation of land from Indigenous peoples, the environmental violence, and then the physical violence perpetuated by men in the logging camps as well.

Chantel Rodríguez:

It's important to note that Paul Bunyan's aren't the only tales that have come out of the Northwoods. Native communities have their own stories. Over time, the two have overlapped engaging with one another.

Kasey Keeler:

For me, I like to think about stories again, across all cultures. They're continuously evolving. We're continuously creating stories. We have these Paul Bunyans that come out of these white male logging camps in the 1880s. At the same time, Indigenous peoples Ojibwe people in this case are also continuously telling stories and not just about Paul Bunyan, but about other things.

There was a postcard that was published by the Minnesota Historical Society. This image exists, and it is just that Paul Bunyan fighting with the Nanaboozhoo figure, who's this figure common in Anishinaabe stories. I believe on this postcard, there's a little story that accompanies the image and the accounts that I've been able to trace. The story gets longer and longer.

The version from the early 1960s has maybe like a standard paragraph long, and then it gets longer over time depending on which version you're reading, and it becomes more and more embellished. Essentially, Paul Bunyan's presence on the landscape is being challenged by the animals, by the Indigenous peoples, by the creepy crawlies and the birds, right by everything. Nanaboozhoo is called upon essentially to save the day.

He makes his way to where Paul Bunyan is in northern Minnesota. The location differs based on who's telling the story or the account that you're reading. But essentially, Nanaboozhoo and Paul Bunyan get in a fight, a physical fight, and after a certain period of time fighting, and again, this differs based on the version that you're reading, Nanaboozhoo essentially wins the fight and forces Paul Bunyan out and makes him leave because of this devastation he has caused, particularly on the environment, this clear cut logging.

For me, this really shows the way cultures work to really challenge new issues that come up and to resist certain narratives that get told and retold, and are in many ways problematic, which I would argue Paul Bunyan is.

Jennifer Kleinjung:

Sometimes I'm used about this as an adult. What does the figure of a mythical lumberjack do for a community, particularly as that community moves farther and farther away from lumber, logging being a primary industry? That speaks to me, some people may find this connection strange, but I'm going to go for it. Thinking of the Iron Range, which isn't that far from Bemidji, and how do we conceptualize ourselves in relation to the statue of a giant iron miner? What does that mean?

What are we saying about our past? What are we saying about that industry, about the strength of that industry, about the material prosperity that came from that industry, and almost a pride, I think that can be familial. I'm willing to say that can be extended to a mythical lumberjack as well, just based on so many letters to the editor over the years in the Bemidji Pioneer, seeing how passionately people feel about the Paul and Babe statues.

One might surmise, it sounds an awful lot like someone talking about a member of their family, the closeness that they express. Perhaps that really is, if you start taking it apart, this has become an icon of my town. It does lead to economic prosperity within tourism. It's recognized for this. Does it also harken back to the economic prosperity of another industry that's not here anymore or that's not here in the same way? And do I need to hold onto that idea and do I need to perpetuate that idea? I do that through Paul Bunyan.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Here on the shore of Lake Bemidji, the crowds around the pair of statues had grown people pulled off the road, piled out of the car, and snapped selfies. Maybe it was their first time or maybe it had become an annual family tradition. After talking with Kasey and Jennifer, I had a new appreciation for just how complex Paul Bunyan is as a figure in Northwood's storytelling. Communities in their own ways are working to contend with how Paul Bunyan folktales shaped their understanding of the past.

He is a symbol of an industry that caused harm and destruction to existing peoples and ecologies, but that same industry is responsible for much of what has made the Northwoods what they are today. Paul Bunyan is at once a unifying and ostracizing character. The story of Paul Bunyan and Babe is one that's firmly rooted in a specific place, the Northwoods. The act of placemaking of storytelling to help establish a sense of belonging has involved the blending of history and myth through the tales of Paul Bunyan.

The challenge for students of history is parsing through what is fact and what is fiction. It requires paying careful attention to historical records and Native knowledge. It's a task much easier said than done, but it is one that can make for a

more robust and holistic understanding of our present through a clear-eyed view of our past.

You've been listening to Minnesota Unraveled, pulling on the threads of Minnesota history. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources, and MNopedia articles at our website mnhs.org/unraveled.

Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Pod People. Special thanks to our production team, Rebecca Chaisson, Angela Yih, and Brett Baldwin. Sound design and editing by Erica Huang. Lead research by me, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. Our theme music is Careless Wanderer by Arthur Benson.

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