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Patrick Garner's HISTORY'S ALIVE presents

AMERICAN TALL TALES

STUDY GUIDE

Thank you very much for inviting me to perform for your students. I formed HISTORY'S ALIVE! in an attempt to present history in an exciting, interesting context in which your students don't merely learn history, but learn from history. It's my hope that they will leave the assembly program with life and learning tools they can use that very day. And the fact that those "life lessons" propelled these ordinary people into the pages of history shows that they do indeed work!

Okay, so Tall Tale characters weren't real people... or were they? Some were definitely based on real people. And what can children learn from "larger-than-life" fictional characters? Remember "American ingenuity?" And not just native-born Americans... Many of these characters were foreign-born! How about "overcoming impossible obstacles?" And all these folks knew how to enjoy themselves!

The most important themes I try to introduce to your charges are:

- Do your best with whatever life has given you.
- Don't accept limitations on what you can achieve.
- Look for unique solutions to your problems.
- Have fun doing your very best.
- You can change the world!

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

IF THIS IS THE ONLY PART OF THE TEACHERS GUIDE YOU READ... READ THIS!!!

For most of my shows, the volunteers selected are a little specific as to size and such. For "American Tall Tales," I just need two boys to play Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill, and two girls to play Annie Christmas and Bess Coll. Never heard of some of them? No problem: you will.

I'd appreciate it if you didn't give me your class clowns. As a reformed class clown myself, I know what a handful we can be. Pick some kids who will take part but not take over. I'm sure, as teachers, you know exactly the type of children I'm hoping for.

There will be absolutely nothing embarrassing for them to do. Nor will any jokes be directed at them. They don't need to come early. Just point them out to me as you come in. Don't tell the kids beforehand. I only need four for the whole show so I may have filled the slots before you arrive.

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH.
I HOPE YOU ENJOY THE SHOW!**

IMMIGRATION & WESTWARD MOVEMENT

In the show, it is pointed out that the lack of modern electronic media (i.e. television, movies, etc.), lack of books, and the illiteracy of the general public led to a great oral tradition. Stories were literally told “around the campfire,” especially as America continued to expand westward. An influx of immigrants brought together story elements from many lands, as well as a dash of national pride. Tales had already become more secular with the Protestant Reformation, and this was further reinforced by America’s “separation of Church & State.”

WHOPPERS

Just as a fish you caught grows bigger and bigger with each retelling (so that the minnow you caught in May becomes a whale by December), the stories around the campfires grew. And among friends, the exaggeration became a competition. With tongue firmly planted in cheek, folks vied to see who could tell the biggest whopper. I stress that these whoppers were never meant to deceive but to entertain. You weren’t supposed to believe them. You were meant to enjoy them! In some parts of the country annual lying contests are held. (No teacher has yet told me that the show has led to a rash of lying in their classroom. PLEASE let me know if this ever happens!)

THE UNOFFICIAL RULES OF WHOPPERS

- Of course, the bigger and more nonsensical, the better.
- An unwarranted preciseness lends credibility.
- Unusual units of measurements keep it interesting.
- If you’re ever questioned about the veracity of your story, you can always claim you didn’t see it but you know someone who did.

WHY SO FEW WOMEN CHARACTERS?

In researching this show, I saw very early on that there was a dearth of female characters in American folklore. Luckily I found *Cut from the Same Cloth* by Robert D. San Souci. His preface explains that there were quite few women characters but storytellers were predominately male. So you know what eventually happened; as I tell the kids, history isn’t always fair. But San Souci’s book does a wonderful job bringing together these women characters from many diverse cultures.

CHARACTERISTICS

Tall Tale characters share many common traits:

- **Their exploits are always larger than life.**
Everything is larger-than-life for a Tall Tale character. Paul Bunyan carried an axe that looked as if it had been made by hammering two steam locomotives together!
- **When faced with problems, they always find a unique way to solve them.**
Paul Bunyan straightens out a river by freezing its mouth with captured blizzards and fastening Babe the Blue Ox to it with a chain!
- **They face opposition from the status quo.**
In every story I've read someone is telling the hero he/she can't do what they're attempting. Bess Coll vs. the Englishman, Annie Christmas vs. the steamboat captain.
- **The problems they face are extraordinary as the character.**
Paul Bunyan has to clear the entire Dakota Territory in one year! Annie Christmas is the only person who can paddle her raft back up the Mississippi!
- **The characters use everyday language.**
Language and exaggeration are one of the most fun parts of Tall Tales. Whoppers run wild:
"Great honney-toads! Those were good pancakes. I've spent the last six months eating nothing' but beans!"
"Aw, you're fulla soup!"
"No. Now I'm fulla pancakes!"

ADVERTISING

The real widespread popularity of some Tall Tales began at the beginning of the 1900s with the advent of advertising. Although the stories had been around for years, the characters became ingrained in our minds when manufacturers chose them to be their mascots. Paul Bunyan was selected to promote a lumber mill early in the last century.

Pecos Bill's history may be a little shorter! He was introduced in the 1920s, a time when there were still a lot of cowboys out west. He was later made the fictional spokesman for a brand of beef jerky.

I think some of you may remember Brer Rabbit molasses? Disney's movie *Song of the South* brought Uncle Remus's Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox characters to life for children of the 1940s. And Disney's efforts in early television reintroduced Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett to a whole new generation of children.

JOHNNY APPLESEED

Perhaps you'd like to spend a little more time exploring Tall Tales with your class. Johnny Appleseed has always been a favorite of mine. As you may already know, Johnny Appleseed is one of the Tall Tale characters who actually lived! (Others include Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and in many respects, young Washington & Lincoln.)

Young John Chapman entered the newly opened Ohio Territory around 1798. The picture history paints of him entering with two bags of apple seeds is pretty much true. But here is where history and Tall Tales tell a different story. Chapman did not travel through the Midwest scattering seeds willy-nilly. He searched for lands around likely sites for future settlements, generally near well-traveled rivers. He would then find a clearing, plant his seeds, erect a makeshift fence of scrub to mark the area, and then move on to another area. He would return to these nurseries several times throughout the year to tend to his seedlings. After about five years the apples were ready to be distributed to the arriving settlers.

But John Chapman did not give the young trees away simply because he loved apples: he was an entrepreneur. Settlers were entitled to a certain amount of cheap land but only under certain provisions to discourage land speculators. For instance, settlers were required to have fifty fruit trees on their property within two years. Guess who was there to sell them their apple trees?

The apple was a wonder crop for American settlers! The last fruits of the fall would stay fresh in a root cellar until spring. Dried apples were used all winter long. Apple cider, apple butter and applejack were staples. Cider vinegar not only flavored food but also pickled other crops. Apples could be shipped long distances, too.

Other parts of the Johnny Appleseed mythos are entirely true. He roamed throughout what is now Ohio and Indiana. He was known to never wear shoes. Legend says a rattlesnake was unable to bite his foot due to his toughened skin. Only during the worst winter weather did he accept shelter from his hosts. As a lover of all animals, he was a strict vegetarian. He wouldn't even shoo a mosquito lest he hurt one of God's creatures.

Johnny traveled through lands that had not yet seen settlers, and he became a great friend of the Native Americans. Their trust in him allowed him to warn settlers of an imminent attack by the British in the War of 1812.

An interesting side note: he became a member of the Swedenborg church, distributing their materials to his customers. Their main tenets were an inquiry and an acceptance of others' beliefs. (I know we're touchy about religion in schools, but how can you find fault with those precepts?)

JOHNNY APPLESEED ACTIVITIES

- Cut an apple crossways to discover the apple's hidden star!
- Have a tasting of the different types of apples available at your store.
- Research which types are best for pies, cider, applesauce.
- How are the trees with the best fruit propagated? Not by seeds but by grafting!
- Apple arts & crafts.
- Find an orchard near you for a field trip.

For more ideas, visit www.allaboutapples.com

OTHER TALL TALE CHARACTERS

There are many more characters that people American Tall Tales. In fact there's a lot more to be discovered about the four we were able to cover in the presentation. Here's a partial list to which I'm sure you can add a few of your own:

- SLUE-FOOT SUE
- MIKE FINK & SAL FINK
- DAVY CROCKETT
- DANIEL BOONE
- JOHN HENRY
- CASEY JONES
- ANNIE OAKLEY (NJ native!)
- JOE MAGARAC
- SWAMP ANGEL
- FEBOLD FEBOLDSON
- ALFRED BULLTOP
- STORMALONG: THE JERSEY DEVIL!
- SALLY ANN THUNDER ANN WHIRLWIND CROCKETT

UNCLE SAM

Uncle Sam became an icon for the United States of America as far back as the War of 1812. Origins are uncertain but the prevailing theory is that he was modeled after a beef supplier known for sending quality meats to troops, a rarity at the time. The barrels of salted meat were stamped U.S. to label them for army distribution. The soldiers joked that U.S. stood for "Uncle Sam."

His image varied until the late 1800s when political cartoonist Thomas Nast gave him his familiar stars & stripes outfit and white hair & goatee. These cartoons had a tremendous impact on a largely illiterate public: many crooked politicians were forced out of office due to public outcries. Nast's caricatures were so biting that they inspired the word "nasty."

SUPERHEROES

Are superheroes our modern-day Tall Tales characters? In movies, television and comic books, their adventures are always larger than life. Early on, superheroes appeared in fictional cities like Metropolis and Gotham City, but more and more are set in real settings like New York City.

Superheroes always seem to have unique occupations: Superman = reporter Clark Kent, Spiderman = student photographer Peter Parker, Batman = carefree millionaire Bruce Wayne (Where do you apply for that job?). And even in a world dominated by male characters (again like Tall Tales), Wonder Woman spent her off-time as Diana Prince, Lieutenant Nurse in the U.S. Army.

FEEDBACK

I am constantly changing my shows to accommodate the needs and concerns of you, the teachers. Your feedback, negative and positive, is always appreciated. There's no reason for me to come into your schools if I'm not helping you in our common goal of producing better students. Every little bit of feedback helps me develop better shows, so I hope you'll do me the great favor of providing your thoughts on *American Tall Tales*.

(When I first started with my Thomas Edison show, the phonograph would heckle a poetry reading Edison by shouting, "Shut up!" After two years a teacher pointed out that they didn't tolerate that type of language in their school. In trying to find a replacement phrase, I found out that "Put a sock in it" was actually how people muffled their phonographs... by putting a sock in them! Now my show not only complies with school policy: it's historically accurate!)

So if you'd like to send along any feedback please contact me
by email Edison@historysalive.com
or by phone 973-420-5268.

THANKS AGAIN!