

Spinner Of Tall Tales

By JAN HAROLD BRUNVAND

Readers of the Lewiston Morning Tribune are helping to reconstruct the tall-tale repertoire of one of the most colorful pioneers of this area. The project stems from a course in American folklore which the present writer taught last summer at the University of Idaho.

Lorenzo Henry, better known as "Len," last of the Nez Perce reservation squawmen, settled north of Sweetwater in 1895 on the land allotment of his Indian wife. He had a long career in the West as prospector, pioneer farmer, stock raiser, and freighter. By the time he made his home in Idaho, Len Henry must already have accumulated many of the anecdotes and experiences that he was to elaborate and weave into a personal oral saga for the rest of his life. He claimed to be 104 years old in 1946, the year that he died; the Tribune obituary also noted, "He was known in the reservation as a great storyteller."

Seventeen years later summer school folklore students discovered that "Len Henry stories" still survive in the Lewiston area. Beginning with a dozen or so tall tales collected by the class, the collection has grown to nearly 50 stories through my correspondence and interviews with people who remember Len Henry and his tales.

A typical description of Len Henry's style is included in the following account sent by Mrs. Esther Sweeney of Lewiston Orchards.

"Mr. Henry was not a talkative man, but very droll and slow of motion and speech. He didn't tell these good stories often, but would listen to the other men spin yarns; then he could always tell one better. Here is one of the stories I remember best:

"In the early days I was driving a six horse team with two wagons up a very steep, narrow, and crooked trail. During rainy weather the wagons had cut deep ruts in the road. I came to a very sharp turn and had a devil of a time getting all those horses and both wagons around it. It took some doing, but I made it. After a bit I missed my dog, so thought I better see about him; and do you know, I walked back a piece and golly if he wasn't cramped in that turn."

Author Brunvand, assistant professor of English at the University of Idaho, set out some time ago to collect the many tall tales for which Len Henry was famous in the Lewiston country, and this article results in part from responses to a call for help in the letters column of this newspaper several months ago.

His search continues, and readers having personal recollections of Len Henry and his yarns — if they differ from those recounted here — are invited to write to Mr. Brunvand at the university.

On The Tall Side

Like all of the tales of Len Henry, this one (of which I now have six versions) is just a wee bit on the tall side, and it has the narrator in the starring role. As R. G. Bailey wrote in his popular book "River of No Return," in 1947, Len Henry "was an inveterate story teller. His were always 'true' stories, and he was invariably the hero."

Len Henry's tall-tale headquarters seems to have been the store at Sweetwater. In his old age Len Henry was in the habit of strolling or riding horseback from his home, one-half mile or so down to the store, there to entertain whoever might be on hand to listen. Some of his fans, I am told, would even schedule trips to the store to coincide with Henry's appearance.

Phil Crawford, now 81 and living in Clarkston, built the original Sweetwater store in 1929, operating it until he retired in 1944; he recalls how Len Henry used to attract a knot of men around him as soon as he started to tell stories. Sometimes he would sit cross-legged on the floor as he spoke. Crawford relates, and occasionally he would sing a song. "He would tell stories any time, any place, anywhere," Crawford reminisced.

Despite his age, Phil Crawford had been making branding irons at his home blacksmith forge the day I interviewed him; it brought to mind how Len Henry told him he had managed to shoe a fiery stallion one time by screwing its nose fast in a vise. "I had an Indian helper then," Len said, "and when that stallion moved around too much, I just shouted, 'Screw it up a little tighter!' to that Indian."

Gene Crawford, manager of the Deer Flat Wildlife Refuge in Nampa, wrote me, "As a child I often listened to old Len Henry as he sat beside the pot-bellied stove in my dad's store in Sweetwater. Who but Len Henry could have ridden horseback over the Grand Tetons! Not once but many times! Not skirting the jagged peaks, but up and over them! As I recall his story, he was a scout for the army at the time."

From Paul Flind of Bonners Ferry came this information:

"Through the 1930's I was residing at Sweetwater at the state game farm, and knew Len Henry and many of his relatives. One of Len Henry's favorite tales had to do with his escape from the Indians after capture. He often related how an Indian girl cut a slit in a lodge and freed him, after which he roped a large bull elk and escaped."

Mr. and Mrs. Dick Alfrey have operated the Sweetwater store since Crawford's retirement. They recall that in Len Henry's last years there would sometimes be as many as 15 or 20 listeners sitting around to hear him tell stories. "He chewed tobacco, and he would spit in the general direction of the stove while he spoke," Mr. Alfrey said, "and after he had been around for awhile, I would get out the mop and clean up."

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The Alfreys told me several stories having to do with Len Henry's hard, fast riding in his younger days, and Dick Alfrey remembers with wonder how the old man continued, even in his later years, to sit cross-legged — Indian style — on the floor as he told tales. "Two weeks before he died," Alfrey said, "he could still get up from the floor without touching it with his hands."

In a small home right next to the Sweetwater store lives Frank McIntire, now close to 86 years old, who gave me this version of a popular Len Henry story:

"He was taking a ride up along a steep hillside after a storm had washed the trail out, and there was quite a wide gap across there. He was horseback, and he couldn't turn around; so what did he do? Well, he looked up, and there up the hillside a ways was a big stump. So he went to work, untied his rope, tied it up over that stump and took a hitch on the saddle horn. Then he got back and took a run and just swung himself and horse and all, and they landed right on the other side."

Later, in his home across the highway from the store, Bert Ankney, age 70, told me a different version of the same story. According to him, Len said he was being pursued by Indians the time he swung himself and his horse across a washout.

Among six other tales that Bert Ankeny dictated for me were more about Len Henry's riding ability and also the first one I had heard of Len's brags concerning fast and remarkable automobiles he had owned or ridden in. Ankeny reported that Len Henry's personal saga extended from the age of autos all the way back to the first recorded history of Idaho:

"I introduced him to some student teachers here one time, and to get him lined out I said, 'You taught school here too, didn't you?'"

"Len said, 'Yes, I was teaching at Spalding when Lewis and Clark came up the river.'"

Others gave me similar stories in which Len Henry linked his own deeds with those of western heroes. In several of his scout stories he represented himself as serving one or another noted commander, and he even told the story that he had arrived barely in time to see the end of "Custer's Last Stand." As Bert Ankney tells it, using Henry's style:

"There was a young squaw that killed Custer, and she was riding a Pinto pony. I saw her a couple days later, and I just pulled my old forty-five, and let her have it. I never took no sympathy for her."

In the same vein, Phil Crawford remembers Len Henry saying that he helped with the camp outfit for Alice Fletcher when she was sent by the federal government in 1889 to begin settling Nez Perces on reservation claims. There is no historical record that this is true.

Several old-timers referred me to Barney McGovern, who is married to a granddaughter of Len Henry's brother, Noble.

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Len Henry Was A Tall Tale Spinner

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McGovern, now 74, is retired and living in Lewiston. He rewarded my visit by relating ten Len Henry stories into my tape recorder.

Barney McGovern, years before, lived directly across the road from Len Henry's farm, and had heard him spin yarns many times. Often, he recalls, stories would arise from an innocent question or remark by a bystander, to which Len Henry would return a sober narrative that quite clearly had no basis in fact. One of the best examples is this one:

"One time there was a fellow came to our place to buy a cow, and Len was up. He was telling about a time he pulled in to his brother Noble's place on Asotin Creek and they wanted some fish.

"Well," he says, "there was about six or eight inches of snow on the ground, and I just went and kicked around and I got a couple dozen grasshoppers, and in no time why I had 10 or 12 fish. I went back, kicked around and got another dozen or 15 grasshoppers . . ."

"About that time the fellow happened to think that grasshoppers — when snow's on — there's no such thing you know!"

"And Len said, 'That was the damndest year for grasshoppers I ever seen!'"

Barney McGovern remarked, "You couldn't make a liar out of him."

McGovern's other stories included several of the best known Len Henry tales, including how he once jumped a horse from the "Swallow's Nest" overlooking the Snake River, but when he saw some Indians on the other side, he turned around in midair and went back. There are at least eight versions of this anecdote still going the rounds in the

Lewiston area. Sometimes the hero is mounted, and sometimes on foot; in one version he simply is not able to make the jump all the way, and in others he retreats from Indians or from a rattlesnake. To Len Henry, such a tale provided merely a framework upon which to improvise a story to suit the moment.

The single most fruitful recording session I have had in my search for Len Henry stories was in Lapwai at the home of Corbett Lawyer, prominent Nez Perce Indian, where I interviewed his daughter, Mylie Lawyer, and neighbors Mr. and Mrs. James Maxwell. Together they told me 17 different tales as well as variations of several of them.

The Frozen Echo

Mylie Lawyer had heard stories directly from Len Henry, in contrast to the experience of most women who had only heard them retold by the men of their families. As a high school student, Miss Lawyer, had to write one theme a day for English class; when she ran out of original material, she used to walk up to the Henry farm and ask for stories that she could use. Two of her favorite tales were about a frozen echo.

"He was going along in a canyon where he camped overnight, and he knew that there was an echo there. So he hollered, 'How are you?' No answer, because it was real cold. So he banked up his fire, and lay down and went to sleep. He got up the next morning and he listened, but no echo. So he left. But in the summertime he came back there to the same place, fixed his campfire and everything, just as he started to eat his supper somebody said, 'I'm fine!'"

In the second version of the tale, as Mylie Lawyer remembers it, Len Henry used the frozen echo as an alarm clock. He yelled "Wake up!" three times before retiring, and he was awakened by the returning echoes just as the sun came over the cliff the next morning.

Mylie Lawyer tells several other tall tales of Len Henry's that center on exaggerations about nature. Corn popped in the fields on a hot day, and Len Henry's plow mules froze to death, thinking it was snow; a buggy whip was forgotten in a snowbank, and Len Henry picked apples off the tree that sprouted from it the next spring; a watch was lost in the river, and Len Henry recovered it a year later, still ticking.

Other people contributed stories of the same type: a snake as big as a log, a hoe handle that swells up after being bitten by a rattler, remarkable hoop snakes, and marvelous weather. James Maxwell tells this Len Henry story about wild-life:

"I saw two snakes fighting one time, and I sat down on a large boulder to watch them. They would coil and strike and coil and strike again. Finally the larger snake got hold of the smaller one's tail and began to swallow him. I watched closely, and then the smaller one managed to get hold of the larger one's tail too, and he began to swallow. Then, right before my eyes, they ate each other up.

Many of Len Henry's tales about his imaginary adventures as a scout for army units are known to white acquaintances of his. However, only the Nez Perce Indians I talked to had heard those of his stories that were based on their culture. Mylie Lawyer and James Maxwell agreed that Len Henry was one white man who "always wanted to be an Indian,"

and stories the Indians tell bear this out.

Len Henry is reported to have told tales while participating in the Indian "sweathouse" custom, but I have not yet met an Indian who remembers such a tale first hand. Mylie Lawyer has heard one story about Len Henry jumping up to dance and sing in a Nez Perce "long-house" meeting, when, to the great amusement of the Indians, his Nez Perce song turned out to be a missionary translation of a Christian hymn.

According to tradition, Len Henry told the following story, Miss Lawyer said, when asked if he had a guardian spirit like the Indians did:

"I stayed on that mountain over there for five days and five nights alone, with nothing to eat or drink, seeking my guardian spirit. Finally a big gray wolf came and began to talk to me, but I was so hungry I said, 'Wait just a minute; I have to go home to eat first.' And I never saw the wolf again."

For an Indian, such actions as these of Len Henry's would have been completely out of the question; related as a white man's tall tales, however, they became outrageously funny. Few facts from Idaho pioneer days picture the mixing of cultures as well as such stories.

The collecting of Len Henry stories has barely begun. The tales quoted and mentioned here are only a fraction of the texts already recorded, and my notebook is full of further leads to track down and names of informants to contact. Furthermore, this is only one of numerous types of Idaho folklore that await collection and study.

The worth of these cultural remains from an earlier period lies both in the recording of popular entertainment of pioneer days, and also in the gathering of data for the broad study of man's oral traditions and their dissemination.

No Mere Liar

A storyteller like Len Henry was much more than a mere liar and boaster among his contemporaries. He provided his neighbors with the wit, wisdom and lore in homely language that we get today in more sophisticated terms from the professional comics and commentators of the printed page and the airwaves.

Only a few decades ago storytelling was a mainstay of social life in America, particularly in the far West. The expert raconteur was held in high regard for his skills and listened to with delight and respect.

Genesee pioneer John A. Platt in his book of reminiscences, "Whispers from Old Genesee" (Kendrick, Idaho, 1959) described the lively stable office as "Joke Headquarters — the center at which the men of the neighborhood met to play checkers, swap yarns, or spring jokes." Platt recalls Len Henry as being "a very noted storyteller," but, he chuckled, "there was some pretty good competition sometimes."

Folklorists have discovered many local Munchausens in different regions of the United States, but none has been reported previously from Idaho. Professor Richard M. Dorson delineates the type this way in his book "American Folklore" (Chicago, 1959): "... a spinner of tall tales adopts an autobiographical approach and casts himself in the role of conquering hero . . . to the extent that listeners repeat his wonders, he makes himself a folk hero." Despite the popular im-

age and the commercial propaganda to the contrary, invented figures like Paul Bunyan have no authentic credentials as folk heroes to compare with the likes of Len Henry.

Len Henry fits the pattern of a typical American tall-tale specialist perfectly. He kept himself in the background of story sessions until other men had spoken their piece, only to emerge triumphant at the end with a yarn to top them all. He could deliver a story to suit any occasion or any topic, often beginning with a believable episode and concluding with a whopper. Many informants reported his ability to tell story after story without repeating himself or lacking for plots. The folklorist uncovers a fascinating personality and astounding tal-

ents on the part of such a man.

Another aspect of the folklorist scholar's interest in the repertoires of regional yarnspinnings stems from the recognition that hardly any of the tales turn out to be original with their tellers. Comparative study usually indicates that a large part of America's tall-tale stock was imported from the Old World. Thus, one of my aims in collecting Len Henry stories is to trace the histories of the individual texts as far as possible into the past.

The comparison with the 18th-century German stretcher of the truth, Baron von Munchausen, whose name has become synonymous with tall tales, is appropriate. Several of the delightful Baron's best stories, which he plucked from tradition and attributed to himself, still survive orally in Europe and the United States. A tale of Len Henry's, as told by Mylie Lawyer, provides an example:

"He said one time he was going out hunting to get meat for the winter. So he took his gun and his dog and his fish pole, and he came to the riverbank and threw his line in. He put his gun beside him and his dog on the other side. All at once a fish got on his hook, and right away another fish came and grabbed its tail and another fish! He pulled it out and saw that there were three fish, and he hit his gun and it shot and killed a buck deer. And, he said, over on the other side was a blue grouse, and that grouse got so scared it fainted, and his dog went and got it for him. So he had his fish and meat both."

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The tale of "The Wonderful Hunt" was an old wheeze some 200 years ago when Baron Munchausen retold it. The story was first recorded in this country in "The Farmer's Almanac" of 1809, and it has been adopted and adapted ever since by American storytellers in every region. Len Henry's version comes down to us hoary with age, and a bright testimonial of the enduring humor in man's nature.

Countless Bits

The reconstruction of the life, the stories, the style, and the influence of an artist of the oral tale depends upon fitting together countless bits and scraps of information from every available source. Readers who can

add anything to these facts about Len Henry are urged to write to me at the University of Idaho. I am interested in more versions of these tales, texts of other stories, and in firsthand descriptions of Len Henry and his way of telling stories.

I would especially like to know about any other photographs of Len Henry that may exist. All letters will be promptly acknowledged and gratefully received for a longer study of this notable Idaho pioneer.