

Kansans Talk Tall

by

Neil Byer

Once upon a time, some years ago, when Joe McCarthy was manager of the New York Yankees, a horse came to the stadium and said that he'd like to try out for the ball team. Now Joe knew in his heart that no horse could play baseball, but to spare himself further annoyance on a busy day, he decided to give the horse a try-out. Horse will soon make a fool of himself, he thought, and go away. Then I can get on with my work.

So he tossed Horse a glove. "Here, Horse," he said; "get on out there and let me see how you can handle yourself in the field."

Horse obediently donned the glove and moved out into the field. McCarthy signaled a batter to move in. "Hit a few right to him," he told the man wielding the bat, "so he can make a fool of himself and we can get rid of him." The batter did, and to everyone's surprise, Horse fielded every chance with almost spectacular ease.

McCarthy's earlier annoyance gave way to surprise. "Make it tough on him," he told the batter. The batter drove balls far to Horse's left, then to his right, deep and shallow. Horse muffed nary a chance. By now, the Yankee manager was getting excited.

"Horse," he called, "come on in here." Horse dutifully trotted in to the dugout, where McCarthy was standing, and doffed the glove. McCarthy handed him a bat. "Let me see what you can do up at the plate," he said.

Horse moved into position at the plate and began slamming everything thrown at him out of the park. By now the Yankee manager could scarcely contain himself. "Let 'em talk about the 'House that Ruth built,'" he said; "with Horse in the starting line-up, the Yankees will draw like they've never drawn before." As Joe reflected, Horse contentedly continued to knock every ball thrown anywhere near him over one fence or other of the stadium.

"Horse," McCarthy called, "come over here." Gingerly he took the bat from Horse's forefeet. "Take this glove and ball," he said; "I want you to get out on the mound and pitch a few."

Disdainfully, Horse threw the glove and ball to the ground at McCarthy's feet. "Who the devil ever heard of a horse that could pitch?" he said.

This is the end of the story.

And the point is that it is the best I can do by way of introducing this number of the *Heritage of Kansas*, a number whose substance is Mary Francis White's talk on "Tall Tales in Kansas Newspapers." For I think Horse and Joe McCarthy combine to give us the essence of the tall tale.

Stith Thompson, pre-eminent folklorist, thinks the folktale "as an important art, vital to most of the race and underlying all literary narrative forms." And one of the subdivisions he considers is the tall tale, a type he says is the most popular of all to American story-tellers. Yet, so far as I can tell, Mr. Thompson does not specifically define the characteristics of the tall tale. He treats them in a section of at least one book under the title of "Lies and Exaggerations." And he specifies what they are by example. He suggests as a type this one: a hunter may go wading and catch his boots full of fish. Or further: one of the best known of them (the tall tales) tells of all the game killed by a hunter who accidentally fires his gun. The gun kills a bird which falls on a loose limb of a tree. The tree then falls on a bear, etc., etc.

Mr. Thompson's province is the world. Our immediate objective here is the heritage of our limited province, Kansas. Yet I think it is important to note that the tales Miss White tells us of have their wellspring in a universal tradition, the very thing Thompson talks about. Whatever else we might be excluded from as Kansans, certainly she shows us that we are capable—in Thompson's terms—of telling lies and exaggerating. This is no bad thing, I think, as the text of this number will show.

Perhaps I should leave it here, the subject of the tall tale, amorphous and ill-defined, and send you on to the text. But I think it is important that you know what you are dealing with, how important a part of our culture it has been—if ill-defined, or not defined at all—and how needful it is that the spirit which gives rise to the tall tales be born again.

Will you pardon me a digression? I think it will make my point better than anything else I might say. It will prove the final humanity of the kind of thing that Miss White talks about.

Each of us always wants to be just a bit more. If your capability is "x," then you like to think that your potential, at least, is "y." And if you think you are a "y," then you know that you were meant to be a "z."

One way to get where you want to be is to improve your condition by dreaming. You can dream silently, thus remaining one of us and unobtrusive. Or you can dream aloud—tell tall tales, lie and exaggerate, create a Paul Bunyan, or experience at least vicariously "Keelboat Life" as Mark Twain was able to.

You may remember the Twain passage; you should look it up if you don't.

Huck Finn, attracted by a keelboat floating the Mississippi, has swum

to the raft. Two dreamers are argufying in the most practical language their dreams can supply.

One of the dreamers becomes offensive in his dreams, and this follows:

“Set whar you are, gentlemen. Leave him to me; he’s my meat.”

Then he jumps up in the air three times and cracked his heels together every time. He flung off a buckskin coat that was all hung with fringes, and says, ‘You lay thar tell the chawin-up’s done’; and flung his hat down, which was all over ribbons, and says, ‘You lay thar tell his sufferin’s is over.’

Then he jumped up in the air and cracked his heels together again and shouted out:

‘Whoo-ooop! I’m the old original iron-jawed, brass-mounted, copper-bellied corpse-maker from the wilds of Arkansaw! Look at me! I’m the man they call Sudden Death and General Desolation! Sired by a hurricane, dam’d by an earthquake, half-brother to the cholera, nearly related to the small-pox on the mother’s side! Look at me! I take nineteen alligators and a bar^l of whiskey for breakfast when I’m in robust health, and a bushel of rattlesnakes and a dead body when I’m ailing! I split the everlasting rocks with my glance, and I squench the thunder when I speak! Whoo-ooop! Stand back and give me room according to my strength! Blood’s my natural drink, and the wails of the dying is music to my ear! Cast your eye on me, gentlemen! and lay low and hold your breath, for I’m ’bout to turn myself loose!’ ”

So he turned himself loose, in Mark Twain, and was answered by his dreaming counterpart, who suggests, “Smoked glass, here, for all! Don’t attempt to look at me with the naked eye, gentlemen!” And so on and on.

So much for the digression. What does it mean?

I actually think that the suggestion of the digression has more significance than any serious attempt on my part to define the importance of Miss White’s talk might have.

She came here last summer to talk during a Heritage workshop. Her talk, as you will see, demonstrates principles that I have been trying vaguely to illustrate, to define, to give some meaning to. Those of you who follow this publication with some attention will see immediately that there is a number of points of overlap between what Miss White has to say about the history of Kansas as recorded in “Tall Tales in Kansas Newspapers” and Bob Richmond’s talk, “Highlights of Kansas History,” the core of which appeared in the last *Heritage* number. I don’t know which talk is truer. But I am reminded of something J. Frank Dobie once told me: sometimes you’ve got to change facts just a little bit to make them true. I wonder if the “changed facts” of what Mary has to say aren’t at least equally true

with what Bob had to say. There is a real importance to both their efforts, I know.

Well, so much for it. I know I haven't properly introduced Miss White. Further, I have deleted parts of her talk in which she introduces herself. Mary teaches in the English Department at Kansas State College. She completed her Ph.D. in English under the late Levette Davidson at the University of Denver several years ago. Davidson was perhaps the outstanding academic folklorist hereabouts. Before she switched to English and folklore, Mary was a student and teacher of mathematics. (This is incidental, I think, and I offer it only incidentally and by way of further introduction.)

The final point is that she eventually found herself involved in a study of tall tales. That she studied well is manifest in the reprint of her talk which follows. I take full responsibility for errors which appear, though I hope none do. Mary loves these stories she tells. She knows they make sense of Stith Thompson's attempts at definition and Mark Twain's utilization of the tall tale told in tall talk. In some ways, she defines the tall tale best of all.

Certainly she knows that at one time, at least, natives of the state might stand up and say, "Kansans talk tall."

Dr. Mary Francis White, who has been a member of the English faculty at Kansas State College for a number of years, does not claim to be a native Kansan. "After all," she says, "I didn't come to the state until I was a couple months old." But she has adapted quite well, as the following lecture shows. On the facing page is Miss White as she appeared on the Emporia State Teachers College campus last summer.

