

A Fresh Look At Nebraska

-Isms

By LuAnn Schindler

When my fourth grade teacher introduced tall tales of Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan and his famed Blue Ox, Babe, I learned to appreciate creative writing and how these stories weaved folklore and legends.

Folklore, fables and tall tales identify the traditions of a culture. Whether in the form of beliefs, dance, music or oral traditions, folklore examines the narrative of our lives.

What stories are uniquely Nebraskan?

Nebraska pioneers fought extreme weather conditions. The sun scorched the plains, clouds rolled without moisture's release, and residents grew weary of the drought. Legendary Swede Febold Feboldson couldn't locate fish in any water body, so Febold collected firewood and lit a fire around the lakes in the area. He reasoned if the flames burned hot, the lake water would evaporate, form clouds, and bring rain. The character was successful, but the lakes dried up, resulting in a lack of swimming holes.

Feboldson appeared in Gothenburg newspapers, and soon, his exploits were printed in papers across the state. His cleverness led to his longevity and showed other Great Plains farmers that although life was tough, perseverance paid off.

Another well-circulated Nebraska story tells the tale of Nathaniel and Robert Martin, who lived southwest of Grand Island. As the story goes, the boys, helping their father in the hayfield, were trapped by bands of Sioux and Cheyenne.

The boys jumped on a pony and took off, but an arrow plummeted through Nathaniel's arm and ended up in Robert's back, pinning the two together. Luckily, the boys survived.

Have you heard about the railroad fireman who saved a 19-month-old from certain tragedy? A Nebraska folk tale tells the story of the Dixon family, who lived a mile from Seward. Gladys, the toddler, followed her siblings to school, but when the older children ran away, Gladys was left on her own near the railroad tracks.

The bulky black engine chugged toward Gladys, but the engineer couldn't stop the train. The fireman, named Lux, saw Gladys, ran out of the engine and when he reached the pilot, leapt into the air and caught her.

The railroad rewarded Lux with a gold watch. The Dixons gave him a diamond charm. And Mr. Lux presented Gladys with a blue sapphire.

Fables about paranormal activity surfaced in 1884 near Max, Nebraska. A group of cowboys conducting a roundup heard a whirring noise and watched a fiery object of metal collide with Nebraska soil.

Perhaps it was a UFO: observers described it as a railroad engine without wheels.

Essayist Terri Windling wrote, "One of the best things about folklore and fairy tales is that the best fantasy is what you find right around the corner, in this world."

It's these fantasies – the legends and tall tales – of our past that connect Nebraskans with the present, as well as the future. What stories will our children and grandchildren remember and recount about the land named 'flat water'? Which legends should we preserve and promote through storytelling?

The answer waits around the corner.

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