

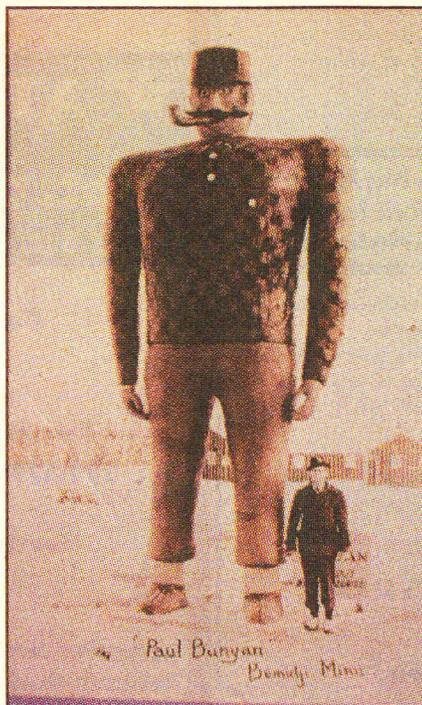
MINNESOTA

WHERE SMALL TOWNS THINK BIG—JUST ASK PAUL BUNYAN

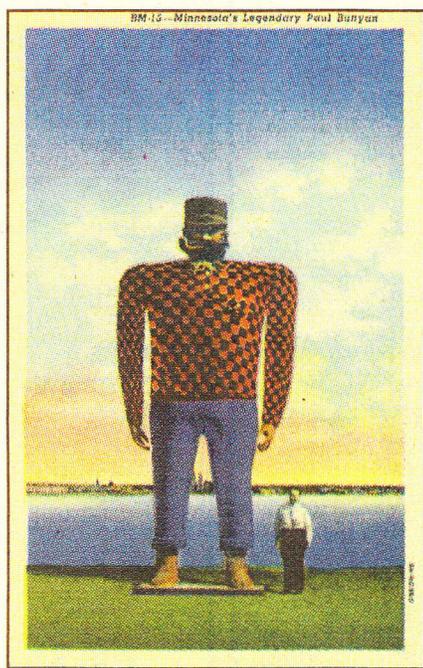
by Cynthia Elyce Rubin

The state of Minnesota offers a lot to the visitor. Its largest urban center, the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, blends big city appeal with small town charm, but not far from the cosmopolitan hubbub is the sheer beauty of rural scenery with over 12,000 lakes and prairies in abundance. Here lush corn-carpeted farmlands and waving grasses afford a rolling patchwork of natural textures. For me, the highlight of a recent Minnesota journey, aside from the luxuriant view, was the periodic discovery of giant animals and fish, gargantuan mythic creatures and larger-than-life foodstuffs by the roadside. Obviously, Minnesotans like to fiddle with scale. Small towns, particularly in the northern and central portion of the state, erect statues of people and things of extraordinary size, public art bigger than it's ever supposed to be.

Exaggeration to prove a point has seemingly been a factor in America's visual and storytelling heritage forever, and postcards have long depicted the story, but here in rural America the concept takes on particular meaning. Communal celebration, local identity, and civic pride have a lot to do with it. Small towns like to think of themselves as being worthwhile. Their citizens, straightforward but special, in an attempt to give feelings reason, vote to erect giant colossi commemorating just about anything. Ordinary people populate these towns, and their boosterism of showing off the biggest and the best is integral to the American vision. And where boosters reign, competition is never far behind. The Minnesota State Fair is a good example. Highlighting the biggest fruits and vegetables, it is



Probably the first postcard of the Paul Bunyan statue in Bemidji, postmarked 1937.



A linen postcard demonstrates the size of legendary Paul Bunyan on the shore of Lake Bemidji. Curteich.

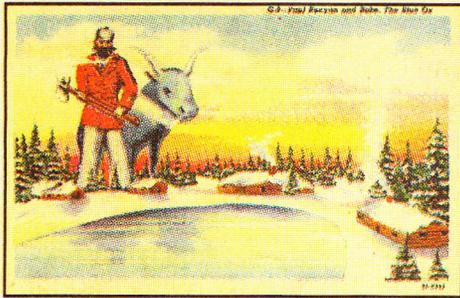
an ultimate American event—that special place—where blue ribbons are awarded to the best pies and pickles, and prizes go to the largest horse and the biggest pig, both of which pale in comparison to the Fair's longstanding symbol, a giant cow, fashioned from real butter.

Minnesota also spawned the quintessential American folk hero, Paul Bunyan, the mighty logger. Born in 1910, he emerged as a national frontier demigod when W.B. Laughead, a Minneapolis adman and ex-Minnesota-lumberjack, was hired in 1914 to promote products for Akeley's Red River Lumber Company, one of the largest sawmills of its day. Laughead wrote a 32-page pamphlet of postcard-size with the title, "Introducing Mr. Paul Bunyan of Westwood, Cal." in which he included lots of advertising copy among stories of Paul and his ox, Babe, who pulled the water tank with which Paul iced roads from Dakota to Lake Superior. When the tank burst, the Mississippi River was born. (The reference to Westwood applied to the California town built by the Red River Lumber Company for its employees after the company began logging its California land holdings.)

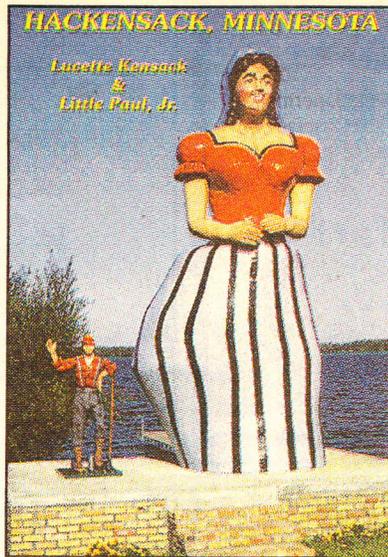
The popularization of the legend first took visual form with a giant statue in Bemidji, Minn. It probably first appeared in print, as my own research uncovered, in the Feb. 1, 1937 issue of *Life* magazine in which a headline read, "Paul Bunyan and Babe, his Blue Ox, go to a Winter Carnival at Bemidji, Minn." To advertise itself as a winter resort, Bemidji held its first annual Paul Bunyan Carnival in 1937, and, of course, Paul and Babe, appeared as huge models. "Paul Bunyan lived near Bemidji in the Winter of the Blue Snow when it was so cold that cuss words froze in the air, thawing out the next Fourth of July with a great din. It was there that he found Babe, an animal so big and hungry that it ate 50 bales of hay between meals, and required six men to pick the bale wire from its end. With Babe's help, Paul cleared North Dakota of timber in one winter." Today, this legendary woodsman stands beside blue Babe on the shoreline of Lake Bemidji.

Like Paul Bunyan, the Jolly Green Giant in Blue Earth is a superhero that

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Paul and Babe, the blue ox, are American icons. Babe is credited with creating thousands of Minnesota lakes when he broke out of camp one night and ran, his tracks filling with water. Curteich.



Hackensack is home to Paul Bunyan's sweetheart, Lucette Kensack since 1952 and birthplace of little Paul Jr. in 1992.



The Loon is Minnesota's state bird.



Big Ole commemorates Minnesota's Scandinavian heritage.

towers over the landscape. Invented in 1925 as the trademark for peas packed by the Minnesota Valley Canning Company, today he is well-known for an assortment of vegetables packed by the Green Giant Company in Le Sueur. The former, a giant of logging, and the latter, a giant of processed vegetables, help to give visual presence to the Midwestern reality of Minnesota as a land of plenty.

Of course, Paul was so heroic that several additional communities wanted to call him their own so today you see additional giant statues in other communities. Brainerd bills itself as Paul Bunyan's Playground, and it was here that Paul met Sport, the "reversible dog," an outstanding hunter with legs pointed straight up. Not to be outdone, tiny Akeley not only displays Paul's wooden cradle, but it has also erected a 33-foot kneeling Bunyan, holding shovel and with arm outstretched and hand ready to accept the passing tourist for a "big" photo opportunity. Hackensack boasts statues of Paul's girlfriend, Lucette D. Kensack and his son, Paul Jr., while Ortonville displays Paul's anchor.

Since Minnesota is a multi-cultural state, numerous statues reflect the eth-

nic backgrounds of a town's inhabitants. Big Ole, the Viking, views Alexandria's highway. St. Urho, who drove the grasshoppers out of Finland, is doubly feted with huge likenesses beside the highway in Finland as well as in Menahga, and Herman the German, a depiction of Hermann the Chruscan, who triumphed over the Romans in 9 A.D., lives atop an elaborate base in New Ulm, founded by German immigrants. A giant Dala Horse, identical to the ever-popular Swedish folk toy, defines Mora's ethnic

heritage; the World's Largest Lefse in Starbuck commemorates the delicious potato flatbread, omnipresent on every upstanding Norwegian dinner table; and Madison boasts itself the "Lutefisk Capital" of the USA in reference to its Scandinavian population who love this "aromatic" cod specialty.

In Thief River Falls, homage is paid to Chief Mon Si Moh, the last Indian owner of city land. The loon, Minnesota's state bird, is commemorated with a statue, weight of 6,500 pounds and 21 feet tall, that rests on the shores of Long Lake in Vergas. Rothsay unveiled itself as "The Prairie Chicken Capital of Minnesota" in 1976, and in 1959 Wheaton promoted the ducks on Lake Traverse with a homemade colossus. Robert Bruns, its creator, in a newspaper interview described how he came up with the design for the big duck: "I designed it from a paperweight duck, a Grain Belt Beer ad and a dime-store statue...People maybe won't remember Wheaton, Minn., but they'll remember, 'Oh, yeah, that's where we saw the duck!'"

In *The Colossus of Roads*, author Karl Ann Marling writes that these fiberglass or cement wonders "mark off a stretch of time and a node of place from the continuum of the summertime highways. Colossi locate the edge of town, the route to the business district, its principal attractions." Attracting tourists is undoubtedly an important function of these Midwestern giants. Northern Minnesota Novelties in Crosslake, home of some four million postcards and a primary provider of the larger-than-life variety, stocks over 20 different views. They continue to sell well reflecting the wholesome Minnesota sentiment, "Having a wonderful time, wish you were here."

Peripatetic deltiologist, Cynthia Elyce Rubin, is a curator, writer, and lecturer. She has a Ph.D. in Folk Art and has written numerous articles and books including the text for Larger than Life: The American Tall-Tale Postcard, 1905-1915. In the November 1998 issue of Postcard Collector, she reported on Alaska's tall-tale postcards. You may reach her at 20 West 72nd Street, New York, NY 10023-4100; e-mail: cynthiaelyce@earthlink.net