

## Tall tales in the Lumberjack Region

[6?]

TALL TALES IN THE LUMBERJACK REGION

By May Swenson.

"It Was So Cold That", John River's story.

Here is another job where the interviewer's work and the content are both 100 per cent.

[The?] [??] [interviewer's work?]: perfect selection of informant; witty and vivid descriptions; excellent [obsevation?] observation ; perfect reproduction of informant's language, mannerisms, humor, odd expressions.

[Rating 100?]

[In the story?] the humor and imagination are excellent throughout; story holds interest; works to good surprise climax; the occupation picture is clear and interesting; strong feeling for the social group. [Rating 100?]

(NOTE: As a personal prejudice I rate tall tales' slightly below humor based on no exaggeration. For this reason I put the Medicine Show ahead of Tall Tales as my first choice.)

(Hatch) [??] [??] [2450?]

Swenson

#701127

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September 29, '38

Informant: John Rivers 656 West 179th St. 3rd floor

Subject: Tall Tales in the Lumberjack Region Description informant's house and surroundings:

John Rivers lives in a four-room walk-up apartment with his daughter-in-law and her husband. Back room, apparently his quarters, ( window looking on alley ) containing iron bedstead, table with blue and white checked linoleum cover; [Newspapers?], two [?] "bicycle" decks of cards, pipes, copies of Western and Adventure mags, a copy of "Call of the Wild", National Geographic mags. A copy of latest issue of "Esquire" also on table, strikes incongruent note. High-backed chair of spring-rocker type, with faded cordoroy upholstery, contraption extending from arm holding ashtray, standing near window. Three calendars on walls, all of different years; the largest [?] [with?] dramatic picture in color, of railway engine and train hurtling round the bend, flaming smoke trailing over top, switchman leaning out of window. A framed photograph of a [?] stud horse hanging over bed. 2 Description of Informant

John Rivers is a man 72 years old. Stocky, square build. "I'm six foot four [?] if I straighten up," he told me. A hunch in his shoulders makes his neck thrust forward sharply. He is big-sculled, has prominent cheekbones and a flat, broad nose which gives his face a bulldoggish appearance in profile, especially since the lower jaw has a forward thrust. He has no visible teeth and his wide, flat underlip continually sucks at a pipe, making a wheezing sound. Hair black, close cropped up the back, leaving a shaggy tuft in front. The tuft is a yellowish grey. Eyebrows black. Hands large, crooked and gnarled, with flat uneven nails. The forfinger on his right hand is missing two joints.

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He was wearing worn black trousers and vest (unbuttoned), no coat; a soiled white shirt further set off in its shabbiness by a clean starched detachable collar. Wearing a spotted white knit string tie, the ends of which must have been dunked in his soup[! /?]

Talks ramblingly in order to tease listener and create suspense; story interspersed often with, his a husky chuckle. [?] His small alert brown eyes dart up and down over listener as he talks, and he gets huge appreciation out of listener's response to a joke or sly [?] thrust . 3 FORM C New York May Swenson 228 W. 22nd St. NYC. September 29, 1938  
Tall Tales in the Lumberjack Region Text of Interview

“IT WAS SO COLD THAT.....”

Wal, it was back in '83 or 4, that cold spell we had. Nothin been seen like it since. And it gets pretty cold every winter up, in Wisconsin— plenty cold every year in the mountains buckin\* logs. Y' gotta buck the timber durin winter so's when the thaw sets in early spring, they're ready to send down the river. Th' logs go down the river soon's the ice breaks... Course that was them days— now they skid\* the logs down diff'rent ways, by rail in some parts, by team and [trestle?]— but mostly in the north around the Lakes there, the river's still the best way for skidding timber ever invented.

By golly that year—'83 I believe it was— it was so cold that— that the [?] lumberjacks ain't quit talkin about it yet.... And that reminds me of Happy Jack— he was in our outfit.

Bet you never heard of Happy Jack and his Derby hat. The boys always kidded this feller Happy Jack about how he was [alwayswearing?] a derby. Wherever he went he would have this derby stuck onto his head— wouldn't matter if it was morning or night or if he was in a parlor or a poolhall or out buckin timber or what— winter or summer, rain or shine, this feller Happy Jack had on his derby. And some said he slep in his derby too, because he'd feel like he was takin a arm or ear off if he took (\*) lumberjack jargen for falling or sawing trees, and hauling or floating the logs.

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off his derby which was just like some part of himself like an arm or a foot— see?

Wal, and some said Happy Jack musta been born with that derby on, and couldn't take it off. And the boys around the logging camp was always kidding him about it like that.

By golly, one feller a close pal of this here Jack even used to say he remembered how when Happy Jack got married and they had the church wedding down to town, how he just simply balked at taking off his hat in church. And that old greasy old derby nodded up and down when he said “I do.” And after that his wife couldn't make him ever take it off either, and sure enough it sure looked like he'd worn it in bed— it was so bent and buggled and battle-worn...

Hey! I started out to tell how cold it was that there year, didn't I? Golly, I almost forgot about how cold it was, 'splaining about Jack and his derby. But well, you'll see how this here derby of his came to be the most important part of the story. Yup — if it hadn't been for Happy Jack's derby—!

Wal, you see around the logging camp in 'Consin back in them days, that winter that it was so cold— coldest winter I've ever seen— Nobody yet can tell you the exact temerature because of course it was so cold that any thermometer couldn't hold together for a minute — the thermometers they all just went out of commission for 200 miles around. But the very coldest spot in the whole district was right there in camp where we was holed up in our [?] bunkhouse almost two month, and not a single tree was bucked during that time —we couldn't do no work 5 it was so cold. And as for getting down canyon to town to get mail or provisions or anything, it was just out the question. You step two paces away from the fire— just two or so feet away and you darn near paralyze with the frost.

Wal, so after two or three weeks we was all out of grub and starvin. Alright, something had to be done— something had to be done about getting some food. Wal, the most possible

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thing we hit on was to go out to the river, down around there a little ways— where the logs were floated down—a half mile from camp it was— and bore a hole in the ice and let down a line and [?] snub some fish. So it might work and it might not, but anyhow the men cut cards to choose who should try it. Wal, Happy Jack got the deuce of spades— and that being the shortest number, old Happy Jack saw how right there he was in a “deuce of a fix!”

But anyhow, being good-natured and willing to try anything to get his bellyfull especially, he said OK get me a piston drill and get me a hacksaw, I'm goin. Wal, we gave him a drill case the ice wouldn't give to the saw, and first we rigged him up in all the coats and jackets and woolen shirts we could spare and still keep ourselves from freezin. And he put on all these duds and four pairs woolen socks and his leather boots and top o' them a pair hightopped rubber boots— and when Happy Jack was ready to go out he looked like something to make your eyes bung— he looked like something stuffed up and bloated out and 6 was as big as a brood mare and musta weighed pretty near as much. Yes sir, being not 'xactly/ a lean sort of a feller to start with, and all togged out like that, he musta weighed about 350 to 400 pound.

Wal, Happy Jack picked up the torch and the saw in his mits— he had 6 pair mits on, 3 wool and 3 leather, furlined— and muffled up to the ears. And on top of his ears o'course was settin that little old derby. That was all he would wear on his head was [?] his same old derby. And Jack took a long swig out the bottle to keep his gut warm and said OK so long, and he opened the door and was barely able to edge through sideways, and he went out the bunkhouse.

Now we waited and waited for Jack to come back. And it was three days we waited th'out knowin what might a happened out there. Course we knew it might take some time to get through that thick floor of ice and some more time for the fish to bite— but we figured if Happy Jack couldn't make a go of it, he'd show up to tell us so— and as for his having perished of cold— if Happy Jack with all that pertection went and froze to death, where

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would be the sense of any of us leavin the fire and going out to find him and sure get froze to death too?

So we just waited, taking turn cuddling the bottle, and playin 21. And it was hard playin too on account our fingers would stick to the cards, they was so cold [??? ???] It was hard shufflin em, they was like hunks of glass, and every card you could hardly see the numbers or colors they being filmed white with frost.

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Anyhow, after three days the cold let up a little—mjust a little. We could tell by rubbing our beard and hair. The [?] tinkle of the icicles in our hair and beard had a different sound — and by this we knowed the spell was lettin up some. So it being not quite so bad, the bunch of us decided to take and wrap around us the blankets and things we had, and padding with newspapers and one thing another around the house, to keep us as warm as possible— and go out to the river and look for Happy Jack.

Wal, it was a sad procession, we running out there— we all of course expectin to have to skid Happy's corpse back with us. And one of the boys I 'member said kinda mournful, Jack's gonna look mighty queer in his coffin with that derby hat on him— but I for one am here to see that no one tries to take it away from him... Might happen his Maker wouldn't recognize him without it!

We all ran out there to the river [?] feeling fearful sort of— and looked around for Jack. Well the ice on the river stretched clean across and it was as solid as a bridge of steel 50 inches thick— and clean swept— not a mark [or?] a sign of a human foot on it.

Then far out near to the middle, one of the boys spotted a little black object— and when we got close we saw it was Happy Jack's hat layin there on the ice. Just his hat layin there alone-looking on the ice.

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Wal, golly, it looked mighty funny to see that derby without its owner stuck on to it. In fact it made tears come to our eyes. And that wasn't so good because the wetness right away froze over our eyes before it had time to trickle down, and made everyone of us a pair of goggles, so we looked like a bunch of near-sighted professors!

But anyway we ran fast as we could up to there and one [?] the boys reached down for the derby. But it 'peared to be froze fast to the ice— and nobody could budge it. [? ??] Still an all you could hear a sort of burbling sound underneath there and around that hat the ice was a darker color like water near the surface, and we came to conclude that Happy Jack had fell in the hole he'd made and the ice had frozen over again, but not had time yet to freeze so thick.

Wal, what with kicking at that derby and hacking at the ice around, finally a piece broke away around the rim of that ol hat and as many hands as could grab hold got a hold of that derb and all yanking together, we lifted er up, and the ice making a screeching and-crackling as it busted loose.

And what was rammed on to the rim of that derby hat but Happy Jack hisself ! frozen hard as a clinker. Yes sir, that derby was rammed on so tight it held up a man weighing about 400 pound, and more with the coat of ice on him. [?] Yup, it had held him up and kept him from drowning.

Wal we all started a-slappin his back and rubbin his face and pumpin his arms and legs up and down, and he finally came to and cracked a smile. I mean he worked his jaws [?] till a couple inches of ice cracked loose, and we could see him grin. Then he reaches down in his boots and drags out a string of fish 14 yards long— nuff to last us ample over the cold spell.

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“When I was hangin there by my hat, they came and swam into my boots,” Happy Jack said. “Guess the poor critters was glad to find a place some warmer than that river in this weather.”

So, wal, course we went back to the bunkhouse and had us a right smart juicy fish dinner. [?] Yup, and it seemed like right from that day the thaw set in and the cold spell was broke. But it never did get warm enough to thaw that derby off ol Happy's head. Nope, Happy Jack couldn't let go of his derby no way— [??????] it stuck to him through thick and thin. Yup, through thick and thin ice that derby stuck, and that was one time it even saved his life, by golly. [?] [?] [?]