

Legends Defined

WHEN ASKED WHAT A LEGEND IS, most people pause for several moments, uncertain. The word *legend* conjures up everything from legendary heroes—real people who performed heroic deeds—to Michigan’s beloved legend of the Sleeping Bear islands, to a host of other stories that fall somewhere between actual history and total fantasy. Clearly, barring a quick trip to a dictionary, the concept of “legend” is difficult to pin down with precision.

For the record, the 2003 *Oxford Dictionary, Thesaurus, and Wordpower Guide* defines the noun *legend* as “myth, saga, epic, (folk) story, (folk) tale, fable.” It defines the adjective *legendary* as “1. Mythical, traditional, fabled, storybook, fairytale. 2. Famous, celebrated, acclaimed, illustrious, famed, renowned.”

Given the age of many of the tales in this Michigan-centered book, it seems only fair to check a much older source as well. The 1916 *Webster’s Home, School, and Office Dictionary* defines *legend* as “a romantic or non-historical story; myth; fable; inscription, as on a coin, coat of arms, etc. (Latin).” It defines *legendary* as “fabulous; mythical.”

These definitions are fine as far as they go. But those who have originated, written, or retold legends will tell you that defining legends is just not that tidy. The very nature of legends defies any real

categorization, any attempt to declare a given tale as truth or fiction, exaggeration, actual history, or creative narration.

In fact, two major sources used for the stories in this book took the time to offer their own definitions of *legend*. In her classic 1884 book *Legends of Le Détroit*, author Marie Caroline Watson Hamlin offered this preface:

The word “Legend” explains itself. Historical and romantic souvenirs hang like tattered drapery around the fair City of the Straits. Interest and curiosity have only to shake its venerable folds to scatter fragmentary history and legendary lore.

These weird tales, quaint customs and beautiful traditions have been handed down from generation to generation as sacred trusts. Originally brought from their cradle in Normandy, they are still tenderly cherished in the homes of old families of Norman descent settled along “le Detroit.”

It has been my good fortune to hear many of them from loving though aged lips of ancestors whose memories extend back into the last century.

It seems a befitting tribute to these noble and hardy pioneers that a descendant of theirs should gather and preserve in an imperishable form these mementoes they valued so highly.

In contrast, Richard Dorson, whose research on Michigan folklore is renowned and, arguably, unequaled, waited until the final paragraph of his 1952 book, *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers: Folk Traditions of the Upper Peninsula*, to discuss his definition of *folktales* and *folklore*—terms that are, as we have seen the Oxford Dictionary put it, considered synonymous with *legend*.

What about these stories, how do they fit into the patterns of folklore? They are not folk tales in any accepted sense, although it may be noted that all the storytellers did know some traveled tales. Neither again are they chronicles for the conventional historian, who would reject their extravagant

touches in favor of the sober, deadline accounts of pioneer home-building. These are, I would say, folk narratives, folk documents of a sort, filled with the raw stuff of life and filtered through imaginative minds. All these narrators were intensely sincere; all were mentally keen; they are folk historians on the highest level, precise in fact, but seeing experience in heroic and fantastic outlines.

It seems clear here that the definitions of *legend* or *folklore* are as compelling as the stories these terms seek to define. It is also impossible to ignore the respect that legend gatherers have for their subjects; indeed, it seems that the longer the gatherers gather, the more they respect the tellers and the tales. This book reflects such sentiments.

The state of Michigan is rich with history, dating back through the European colonization of the 1600s and thousands of years in Native American history. Detroit, with its 1701 founding, qualifies as one of the Midwest's oldest cities—a fact often overshadowed by the more recent, lumber- and auto-centered history of Michigan.

By its longevity alone, the land that would become known as Michigan has hosted many different traditions from all kinds of people—all against the backdrop of the state's incredible natural beauty. When studying Michigan in any way, it is crucial to acknowledge that all of these things have led to who and what we are today.

Therefore, either trying to judge those who tell the tales in this book or attempting to render true or false the stories they relate undercuts the attempt to share these tales, to “hear” our ancestors' voices, to listen to their stories as they knew them and in the way that they wanted to share them; this is one reason this book attempts to adopt the very “voices” of each of these legends. The chapter on Paul Bunyan requires the tall-tale-telling voice of those who shared and still share these tales. “Yoopers,” as our Upper Peninsula residents are affectionately called, also tell stories with a certain flare known to that region. These hearty voices contrast significantly with the more spiritual voice in the story of the Sanilac Petroglyphs, which differs

from the mysterious tone in the chapter about the boy who becomes a wolf and the sailor talk involved in the story of *Le Griffon*. In the same way, to separate the tellers from their own “Michigan”—a reality far different than the place we know by that name today—is to dishonor those who have come before us and who forged the paths we now take for granted. It also prevents the true adventure of encountering the times and lives that these legends represent.

Suffice to say, then, that legends are meant to be shared in their original historical and cultural habitat, with willing suspension of disbelief at the ready. Let them fall where they may upon the reader’s imagination, so that the reader can decide where to go from here.