Paul Bunyan: Maine’s Mythical Monument

Why is it that we create monuments in the form of statues? Surely there’s the reasonable conclusion that a person depicted by a statue is thought to be deserving of praise. Building a statue is a very labor-intensive project, indeed, so there’s no sense in putting that much time and effort towards sculpting someone unless they did something remarkably good or impressive. Such an accomplishment must be the main reason why a group of people agreed to honor them through this medium. But is this always the case? Do these monuments commemorate heroes of the past and their great feats without fail? What if a statue serves as a monument to someone who never even existed?

Here in Bangor, Maine, there just so happens to be such a monument. Behind me, you can see a 31-foot-tall statue of a man known as Paul Bunyan. Paul Bunyan is an entirely fictional character famous for many larger-than-life endeavors. He originated in literature and folklore as a massive American lumberjack, often accompanied by his equally imposing companion, Babe the Blue Ox. Together, they were able to accomplish all sorts of seemingly impossible tasks, including--but not limited to--digging a drinking hole for Babe, which we now know to be Lake Michigan, fixing a two hundred foot high log jam that stretched a mile upstream, and cooking flapjacks in a kitchen that occupied ten miles of territory. But despite the fact that Paul Bunyan is a century-old myth, reminiscent of an era that has come and gone, he has been immortalized in the form of a statue, here, and elsewhere in the United States. Why is this?
Well, there’s no denying the rich logging history of the city of Bangor. Thus it’s not out of the question that they view Paul Bunyan as a symbol for their previous role as the number one lumber harvester and distributor of the United States. Having the massive Bunyan statue erected not only serves as a proud reminder of this history, but Bunyan’s prominent presence on the Bangor waterfront helps the city claim him as their own, which is a very important distinction to make for those involved in Bunyan’s history. In fact, it is so important, that in the nearby city hall, onlookers can spot a sign detailing some of the lumberjack’s history, including his supposed birthplace of Bangor, ME. Despite there being no way of knowing exactly where or when the tale was first invented, ownership of Bunyan is a hotly contested issue among six different states, Maine included, as they all claim to definitively be the birthplace of the famed man. Clearly, all of these states recognize his imaginative, rich history, and widespread influence on American folklore, as well as the value in being the place where the tale originated.

And it goes without saying that a 31-foot-tall statue approximation of Paul Bunyan is certainly in line with the outlandish stories about his height and feats of nature. This is one aspect of many that shows how the sculptor, Normand Martin, had every intention of encapsulating the essence and absurdity of Bunyan within his depiction. You’ll notice that the statue also boasts a large two-bit ax that rests over its right shoulder, as well as an absolutely massive peavey in his left hand. Even the inclusion of such pieces of equipment is likely a reference to Bunyan and Bangor’s logging history. Joseph Peavey, a local resident from the 19th century, was responsible for the creation of the peavey, an ingenious device that allowed lumberjacks to more easily separate logs that became stuck together on their trip downriver to the mill. So, wielding both of these tools, Bunyan is presented as an even more convincing and physically astonishing
lumberjack, ready to fell any tree or unjam any log, much like the lumberjacks of Bangor a century and a half ago.

It’s also worth noting that the statue is one of the more realistic and true-to-life versions of Paul Bunyan ever to be made, especially in comparison to some of Minnesota’s artistic creations. This statue’s well-defined facial features, and reasonable bodily proportions, given its size, make for an especially believable rendition. Not to mention, Paul Bunyan was said to be sixty-three ax handles high, which would make him about three times as tall as the statue before me. Thus, this statue is, in fact, a downscaled depiction. It’s reasonable to conclude then that these choices were made to slightly humanize the massive lumberjack, who in his stories might otherwise seem out of touch with humanity, while maintaining some historical and folklore accuracy. After all, Paul Bunyan was supposed to be a human lumberjack, albeit a huge one.

For all of the statue’s impressive and noteworthy features, however, there is one glaring issue that many take with Bangor’s Paul Bunyan. Bunyan is almost always accompanied by his trusty companion, Babe the Blue Ox, given the close connection between the two within the folklore. This is why most statues of the man place the two side by side, although this Bunyan has never been accompanied by Babe, and thus fails to convey the same culturally significant message. It’s worth mentioning that Babe’s absence has not been taken lightly by Bangor residents either.

Back in 2015, there was a push by designer Normand Martin and others to add Babe alongside Bunyan, once again reuniting the pair; this addition would then highlight not only Bangor’s rich lumber industry but its agricultural history as well. Unfortunately, this proposal never came to fruition, and because Martin has since passed away, it is unlikely that this Paul Bunyan will ever be reunited with Babe.
Even though this is a potential shortcoming of the statue, there is clearly a lot to be said for its significance as a monument to Bangor, the lumber industry, and American folklore. It has caught the attention of many visitors and locals alike, and--despite Paul Bunyan and all of his accomplishments being completely fictional--it is one of the city’s most famous landmarks. Its towering presence and detailed features alone are sure to add to its longevity, and it will undoubtedly continue to entrance many more passers-by to come. This goes to show that even monuments dedicated to made-up people can make a real impact.