Thomas Bangs Thorpe’s Backwoods Hunters: Culture Heroes and Humorous Failures

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A puzzling fact in the publication history of "The Big Bear of Arkansas"—acclaimed for the past half century as one of the most successful humorous sketches of the Old Southwest—is that its author Thomas Bangs Thorpe did not choose to reprint it in his first collection of articles and short stories, The Mysteries of the Backwoods (1846). The misadventures of Jim Doggett had delighted his contemporaries since 1841 in numerous partial and complete reprints. Yet, when choosing which of his sketches to include, Thorpe must have recognized that his backwoodsman was the antithesis of the hunter he wished to present as a culture hero in Mysteries. For apparently the same reason, he also passed over his previously published story of the backwoods hunter Bob Herring in "The Devil's Summer Retreat, in Arkansaw" and the humorous correspondence of a gentleman sportsman P. O. F. entitled "Letters from the Far West." Instead, he wrote five new accounts of the wild animals and field sports on the Southwestern frontier and substantially reworked another. These he joined with ten pieces that had already appeared in print. This collection forms what is best classified as a sporting book, despite its inclusion in 1848 in Carey and Hart's Library of Humorous American Works.¹

Mysteries presents successful frontier hunters who are models of skill, intellect, courage, and endurance. Moreover, they embody the perfections of the American character which was free to develop only in such a region beyond the constraints of civilized life. Thorpe's frontier reflects the American myths of successful self-reliant individualism and the unspoiled western wilderness divinely ordained for human domination. His humorous hunters, on the other hand, reveal an ambivalence toward these popular myths. They either fail in pursuit of game or else achieve questionable success. Nonetheless, the frontiersmen Doggett and Herring remain as admirable as the other hunters. They suggest a counter-definition of the hunter as culture hero, one grounded in the realities rather than in the ideal conceptions of frontier experience. For the humorous hunters, aware of failure, rely on the power of backwoods tall talk rather than on verifiable physical skill and material gain to achieve their successes. The only one of
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Thorpe's hunters to remain a failure in all respects is the genteel traveler P. O. F., who cannot master the backwoodsman's yarn-spinning. As an examination of the diverse hunters in Thorpe's sporting and humorous sketches makes clear, the tall-talkers possess an ability indigenous to the frontier, yet one which contradicts the American myth of success based on material accomplishments. A brief survey of Thorpe's sporting sketches precedes the discussion of his three humorous hunters. Thus, the individual works familiar to students of American humor can be examined within the context of sketches he was writing at the same time which also focus on the relationship between the hunter and the western frontier.

Known now for his skill as a humorist, Thorpe was equally popular in his own day as a writer of sporting sketches about the game and hunting practices on the Southwestern frontier. Because southern Louisiana was his home from 1837 to 1854, he had the opportunity to become acquainted with its wild animals and field sports. "We have been no idle participants in the wild sports of the woods and field," he recalled in a Harper's article after having returned to his native New York City. An invitation to join a fox hunt "was one of the first marked adventures of our Southern life."^2 The sporting sketches Thorpe wrote during the early 1840s appeared frequently in the New York Spirit of the Times, from which they were reprinted in sporting magazines in London and even in Calcutta. Characteristic of the genre, they not only provide information to readers unacquainted with the region's animals and hunting practices, but also entertain through descriptions of particular hunts. One noteworthy tribute to Thorpe's mastery of this genre is the number of pieces by him in the first American edition in 1846 of Peter Hawker's popular British sporting manual, Instructions to Young Sportsmen. Among the volume's thirty-eight sketches about field sports on this continent, the American editor William T. Porter included five by Thorpe. In contrast to popular contemporary sporting authors, Thorpe gave careful attention to the cultural significance of the frontier hunter. The figure of the hunter is central in each of his sketches describing a menagerie of regional beasts: bear, wild cats, deer, buffaloes, wild turkeys, alligators, opossums, woodcock, and several varieties of fish. More than reporting pursuits after game in the Lower Mississippi Valley, his writing reflects a belief that the frontier hunter embodies the truly American character.

True to the conventions of the genre, the sporting sketches in Mys-
teries recount successful hunts. Yet, Thorpe goes beyond the conventions by elevating the hunter to mythic proportions. For example, “A Grizzly Bear Hunt” states that “the hunter...presents one of the most extraordinary exhibitions of the singular capacity of the human senses to be improved by cultivation.” He “calculates the very sex, weight, and age [of the bear] with certainty” merely from the trail it leaves. In this article Thorpe draws a sharp distinction between hunters and sportsmen: “The hunter follows his object by his own knowledge and instinct, while the sportsman employs the instinct of domesticated animals to assist in his pursuits.” The sentimental idealism of these statements shows the high regard in which Thorpe held the hunter. But the man deserves such esteem who, as the article goes on to explain, can kill a hibernating bear in his den by arousing him with a lighted candle and then shooting him through the eye when he comes to investigate.

The arrow-fisher, the subject of “Piscatory Archery,” is another hunter who must read the physical signs as he searches for his prey, for only the bubbles rising to the surface of the water in a particular manner indicate the location of the fish. This type of fishing is practiced in the so-called dry lakes which form along the Mississippi River after it floods in the spring. As one man paddles the canoe, another stands ready to shoot the fish with an arrow. Like shooting a bear in his cave, arrow-fishing exhibits what Thorpe called “the spirit of true sport” because it is “a rare and beautiful amusement” which increases the difficulty of killing the game. The sketch concludes with an explanation of the origin of the sport in the words of the region’s oldest piscator, an explanation indicating that in Thorpe’s mind it represents the native frontier spirit: “Uncle Zac...know’d fishes amazin’, and bein’ natur-ally a hunter, he went to shooten ’em with a bow and arrer, to keep up yearly times in his history, when he tuckinguns, and yerther varmints in the same way.”

The wild turkey hunter also deserves mention here. “Wit of the Woods,” which Thorpe predicted to his publisher would one day become “classical,” describes this sport as a contest between “the perfection of animal instinct, and the superior intellect of man.” With his bird call, the hunter may temporarily deceive the instinct of this “wildest of game,” but only those “very few hunters who may be said to make a science of their pursuit” succeed in overcoming its wildness and wisdom. Thorpe found the distinctive character of the Southwestern frontiersman, and in turn of the American, embodied not in the
“pot-hunters” who killed as many animals as easily as possible, but rather in men such as these who recognized that the method of the chase is as meaningful as the death of the game. These were hunters confident that their own abilities could rise to nature’s greatest challenge.

Mysteries closes with “Tom Owen, the Bee-Hunter,” Thorpe’s first published piece which was as famous at that time as “The Big Bear of Arkansas.” Although widely reprinted during the nineteenth century after its initial appearance in the Spirit of the Times in 1839, it has not been anthologized since 1904. It is unlike the preceding sketches because it excludes description of the game. Also, it offers a full portrait of an individual backwoods hunter rather than a more general composite picture. In fact, Tom Owen was a real settler near Jackson, Louisiana, who engaged in topping trees and hunting bees.

In the literature of the day, the bee hunter was frequently associated with the frontier because, according to popular belief, honey bees preceded civilization as it moved westward across the continent. “Tom Owen, the Bee-Hunter” opens by identifying the relationship of this figure to the region that was rapidly changing: “As a country becomes cleared up and settled bee-hunters disappear; consequently they are seldom or ever[sic] noticed. Among this backwoods fraternity have flourished men of genius in their way, who have died unwept and unnoticed...” At first, the urbane narrator is amused by Owen and comments that “the difference between him and ordinary men was visible at a glance”:

His head was adorned with an outlandish pattern of a hat — his nether limbs were ensconced in a pair of inexpressibles, beautifully fringed by the brier-bushes through which they were often drawn; coats and vests he considered as superfluities; and hanging upon his back were a couple of pails, and an axe in his right hand.

The narrator quickly discovers that Owen does not differ from “ordinary men” in his idiosyncratic dress alone. More importantly, the skills which make him a successful hunter are beyond normal, therefore earning him respect despite his ungenteel appearance. He spots a bee in the distance far beyond the sight of anyone else in the group and boasts, “In a clear day I can see a bee over a mile, easy!” When Owen and his helpers disturb the bees as they chop down the tree containing the hive, his extraordinary qualities again amaze the narrator:
There might have been seen a bee-hive of stingers precipitating themselves from above on the unfortunate hunter beneath...His partisans, like many hangers-on about great men, began to desert him on the first symptoms of danger; and when the trouble thickened, they, one and all, took to their heels, and left only our hero and Sambo to fight their adversaries. Sambo, however, soon dropped his axe, and fell into all kinds of contortions; first he would seize the back of his neck with his hands, then his shins, and yell with pain. “Don’t holler, nigger, till you get of the woods,” said the sublime Tom, consolingly; but writhe he did, until he broke and left Tom “alone in his glory.”

Symbolically, this hunt conforms to the myth of the American frontier as a garden ordained by God for human domination. It shows that a successful hunter can literally make the land flow with an abundance of honey. Although Owen’s prey is much smaller and much less powerful than that of such famous hunters as Davy Crockett, the narrator concludes that he possessed “an unconquerable genius which would have immortalized him, had he directed it in following the sports of Long Island, or New-Market.” The last sentence of the sketch glorifies this hunt because “the grandeur visible was imparted by the mighty mind of Tom Owen himself.”

Milton Rickels has written that Thorpe’s “attitude toward his backwoodsman was still unformed” when he wrote this sketch and that “in consequence the tone shifts unsurely from the reportorial to the condescending.” In his view several passages are mock-heroic because they amuse by elevating the trivial. Yet, the piece as revised for Mysteries probably does not deserve such harsh criticism. For example, deleted from the original description of Owen’s dress is the comment that “part of his ‘linen,’ like a neglected penant, displayed itself in his rear,” thus creating a more favorable response in the minds of genteel readers. Furthermore, the preface to the volume reminds readers that the author felt “there was an intrinsic merit in the subjects associated with the forests” of the Southwest. The treatment of other frontier hunters in the collection suggests that the elevation of the seemingly trivial might rather be viewed as an indication of Thorpe’s exuberant, sentimental admiration for a particular frontier hunter and what he represented. While such persons might have been merely amusing to genteel society, Thorpe was setting them forth as culture heroes because of their visible success on the frontier where the American character was being nurtured.

Two humorous sketches — not reprinted in Mysteries — show backwoods hunters as unsuccessful. Even though the bears they have
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chased are dead at the end of each narrative, this turn of events is brought about by chance, not woodcraft. Because these hunters fail to overcome nature, the exclusion of their adventures from *Mysteries* suggests Thorpe's ambivalence about his optimistic interpretation of the frontier experience in it. These sketches, although humorous, leave readers with an unsettled feeling about nature and the frontiersmen. By presenting hunters with insufficient skill, Thorpe forces himself to look at the settlers' actual hardships and to offer an alternative definition of the qualities a hero must possess. His re-definition is based on the recognition of failure rather than on the achievement of success.

As in "Tom Owen, the Bee-Hunter," Thorpe uses a gentleman narrator in "The Big Bear of Arkansas" who gains insight from his encounter with a backwoodsman. This man does not observe the hunter tracking his prey, but rather listens to him, in the comfort of a steamboat cabin, telling about his adventures. Because the narrator's ride up the Mississippi River from New Orleans is to last only a few hours, he "made no endeavors to become acquainted with my fellow passengers...and more critically than usual examined" the newspaper. Just as he isolates himself from the others, they are in their separate groups at the beginning of the sketch. When Jim Doggett enters the cabin from the bar, all turn their attention to him because of his captivating skill at yarn-spinning. He amuses his listeners by laughing at the city folk he has met who "were real know-nothings, green as a pumpkin-vine — couldn't, in farming, I'll bet raise a crop of turnips — and as for shooting, they'd miss a barn if the door was swinging, and that, too, with the best rifle in the country." However, in his clever answers to questions designed to put him in his place, readers of Thorpe's sketch notice that this backwoodsman's pose curiously resembles the genteel New Orleanians who would be failures on the frontier according to him. By his own admission he is unsuccessful at farming. Because his beets grew as large as cedar stumps and the potato hills came to look like Indian mounds, he learned that "the sile is too rich, and planting in Arkansaw is dangerous....I don't plant any more; natur intended Arkansaw for a hunting ground, and I go according to natur." Furthermore, despite numerous comic boasts that he is "decidedly the best bar hunter" in the district, the chase he recounts at the encouragement of the narrator does not support these claims. Doggett admits that his neighbors began to tease him because his pursuit of the Big Bear dragged on and on. They
would taunt him with the question, "How come on that individual that never lost a bar when once started?" The inability to kill his prey finally made Doggett physically sick: "Well, missing that bar so often, took hold of my vitals, and I wasted away. The thing had been carried too far, and it reduced me in flesh faster than an ager." Although the Big Bear finally died and Doggett made a bed spread of his skin, the backwoodsman refuses to claim that he was successful. Rather, mystified at the cause of his foe’s death, Doggett concludes he was "an unhuntable bar and died when his time come." What upsets him, as he points out to the narrator, is that "I never liked the way I hunted him, and missed him." These details from Doggett’s narrative highlight the struggle against nature’s harshness which overtaxed settlers’ physical resources, leaving them ultimately no more successful than city dwellers would have been on the frontier.

Given Doggett’s stories of failure, then, it is somewhat surprising that he is such a likeable character. The narrator says, "He appeared to be a man enjoying perfect health and contentment — his eyes were as sparkling as diamonds, and good natured to simplicity." Furthermore, he notices Doggett’s "perfect confidence in himself." What is the source of such robust self-confidence? According to Doggett’s pose, he is a man lacking trust in his own power. He is fully aware that he can be defeated by nature. However, knowing the dangers of frontier life, he is neither a ragged squatter nor a gaunt back-trailer, exhausted by disillusioning experiences. Doggett’s self-confidence springs from a far different source than that of Tom Owen. For he is playing a different game. His joke about "calling the principal game in Arkan­saw poker, and high-low-jack" suggests that he has an alternate measure of success from the hunting trail. Doggett pursues his game on the turf of backwoods tall talk where the comic strategies of boast­ing and self-derision successfully transform failure into entertainment. The narrator calls particular attention to Doggett as a talker. He "rambled on from one thing to another with a volubility perfectly astonishing." And furthermore, "his manner was so singular, that half of his story consisted in his excellent way of telling it, the great peculiarity of which was, the happy manner he had of emphasizing the prominent parts of his conversation." From the point of view of his audience, Doggett’s style of talking is of equal importance to the subject he discusses.

Yet, such tall-talking is not idle escapism. It contributes to a social well-being which mirrors Doggett’s robust health. He is able to draw
the widely diverse passengers away from their isolated groups and concerns. Even the urbane narrator lays aside his newspaper because “there was something about the intruder that won the heart on sight.” Sonia Gernes has pointed out that Doggett quickly creates a community by means of his story-telling. At the end of his tale, he invites everyone to the bar “to socialize on an equal plane.” As audience, they share an experience to which they also contribute; their verbal responses urge Doggett to pile whopper on top of whopper. The narrator, in particular, is transformed by this event. Although taken in by the tall tale, he still has been drawn out of his isolation. He continues to recognize a distinction between the genteel and frontier societies even at the end when he classifies Doggett as one of the superstitious “children of the wood.” Yet, the final sentence reads: “...I can only follow with the reader, in imagination, our Arkansas friend, in his adventures at the ‘Forks of Cypress’ on the Mississippi.” Doggett’s words accomplish what he says his actions were unable to do; they win him the admiration of his listeners — the rough and the urbane alike.

In sharp contrast to Doggett, Thorpe’s successful hunters are, on the whole, silent and solitary. While in “A Grizzly Bear Hunt” he does acknowledge having listened to the tales of hunters, they were always told by one “who had strayed away from the scenes once necessary for his life.” These narratives contained neither boasts nor exaggerations. In fact, Thorpe condemns such additions to the story of the chase as characteristic of sportsmen, but never of the true hunter. Yet, he was ambivalently attracted to frontier tall talk, and in “The Big Bear of Arkansas,” it is admired as a necessary strategy for dealing with reality.

Bob Herring in “The Devil’s Summer Retreat, in Arkansaw” is another backwoods hunter who is more verbally than physically adept, despite a reputation for “his knowledge of the country and his hunting exploits.” He remains admirable even though one evening at camp he tells about a bear hunt which brought him no glory and then the very next day has great difficulty killing a bear as the narrator looks on. These chases take place in a region called the Devil’s Summer Retreat, the description of which highlights the malignity of nature. The cane brake

is interwoven with vines of all descriptions, which makes it so thick that it seems to be impenetrable as a mountain. Here in this solitude, where the noon-day sun never penetrates, ten thousand
birds...roost at night, and at the dawn of day,...darken the air as they seek their haunts, their manure deadening, for acres around, the vegetation, like a fire, so long have they possessed the solitude.

Yet, Herring has lived in this inhospitable territory at what he calls the "Wasps' diggins" long enough to have "become the ancientest inhabitant in the hull of Arkansaw." A braggart similar to Doggett, he boasts that "he was made on too tall a scale for this world, and that he was shoved in, like the joints of a telescope." Despite an appearance which attests to the rigors of his life, he is strong and healthy: "Poor in flesh, his enormous bones and joints rattle when he moves, and they would no doubt have long since fallen apart, but for the enormous tendons that bind them together as visibly as a good sized hawser would." As the hunting party settles down to sleep, Herring rouses them by asking

very coolly...if any of us snored "unkimmonly loud," for he said his old shooting iron would go off at a good imitation of a bear's breathing...then there commenced a series of jibes, jokes, and stories, that no one can hear, or witness, except on an Arkansas hunt with "old coons." Bob, like the immortal Jack, was witty himself, and the cause of wit in others, but he sustained himself against all competition, and gave in his notions and experience with an unrivalled humor and simplicity.

To end the evening, Herring tells the tenderfoot narrator one more story about how he came upon a bear, "blazed away, and sort a cut him slantindicularly through the hams,...not a judematical shot." After a second shot missed, the wounded animal began chasing Herring: "If I ever had the 'narvious' that was the time, for the skin on my face seemed an inch thick, and my eyes had more rings in them than a mad wild-cat's." In trying to fire again, Herring "stepped back and fell over." However, the bear also fell into a root hole in trying to attack his pursuer, thus allowing the hunter time, at last, to get off a successful shot.

Events the next day confirm this backwoodsman's pose of ineffectuality. In the chase Herring is "a foot taller than usual, stalking over the cane, like a colossus." But after the dogs bring the bear to bay, his first shot strikes it in the nose. He then tries twice to stab it with a knife; the animal knocks the first one out of his hand, and the second is too dull to penetrate the skin. Finally, someone hands him a rifle which fires properly. In self-justification Herring immediately comments, "I saw snakes last night in my dreams...and I never had any
good luck the next day, artersich a sarcumstance; I call this hull hunt, about as mean an affair as damp powder.” Maintaining his good humor, he jokes about what he affirms is his perpetual bad luck. The narrator closes the sketch by recalling that the meal of bear meat along with “Bob Herring’s philosophical remarks, restored me to perfect health, and I shall recollect that supper, and its master of ceremonies, as harmonious with...the Devil’s Summer Retreat.” Thorpe would never have praised such a failed hunter in his sporting sketches. Yet, here the hero captures his listeners’ admiration for a story-telling victory more difficult to achieve than Doggett’s because they have witnessed unquestionable evidence of his insufficient prowess in the chase.

Thorpe’s burlesque of numerous accounts of frontier expeditions, the “Letters from the Far West” series, appeared in his Louisiana newspaper and in the Spirit of the Times at irregular intervals during 1843 and 1844. The twelve letters were not reprinted until 1978 and, therefore, have not yet received the attention they deserve.25 P. O. F., the gentleman sportsman-author, lacks the native abilities which Thorpe applauded in Doggett and Herring. Although his characterization is not unified throughout the series, he consistently suffers a double failure. Touring the prairies with a party of experienced hunters, P. O. F. soon learns that, because of his powerlessness, he is actually the pursued rather than the pursuer. This inversion also appears in the above two humorous sketches, but unlike the backwoodsmen in them, he cannot speak the language of the frontier and cannot refashion defeat into victory. On one chase he becomes stuck in the mud and cannot get out of the path of an enraged bear that “rushed on me, seized hold of my deer-skin breeches, and shook them as clear of mud as if I had been laying on a feather bed.”26 Numerous similar experiences during the five-month expedition lead P. O. F. to conclude, “This frontier life, ain’t what it is cracked up to be.”27 One night he proposes a toast to “the Indian hunting grounds ...more interesting in ladies' books, than any where else.”28 Seeing an opportunity for practical joking, the frontiersmen in his party imitate the animals in giving him a chase. P. O. F.’s deerskin clothing allows them an excuse to frighten him which in his naiveté he will not question. “Six times since I wore them,” he writes, “have I been near being shot for an Elk, which makes my situation very pleasant indeed.”29 The half-breed Spaniard from Santa Fe, Don Desparato, also chooses him as prey at an exhibition of his lassoing skill. After
several make the suggestion, P. O. F. agrees to ride the horse whose hind foot is to be the target. The men, however, do not have the pleasure of seeing him thrown from the galloping horse because Desparato misses. Foolishly, P. O. F. joins in the general derisive laughter at this failure. To recover from the humiliation, Desparato lassoes the rider on the next throw. Amid shouts and laughter, P. O. F. finds himself “on the ground, the lasso round my neck, and he holding on the opposite end of it, grinning at me like an enraged monkey.” Instead of being dragged across the prairie, he is released after letting his captor take a plug of tobacco from his pocket. “‘Don’t get mad, that was a Spanish joke,’ said somebody. ‘And he don’t understand the language well enough to enjoy the wit of it,’ said everybody.”

The letters are filled with instances in which P. O. F. records as facts the outlandish comments and tall tales which the others tell him. Thorpe’s satire of his genteel illusions is sometimes heavy-handed. Because P. O. F. never becomes adept at decoding exaggeration, he never masters the art of tall-talking. Confronted with physical failure, P. O. F. cannot transform his experiences imaginatively and cannot rescue himself linguistically. Characteristically imperceptive, he bemoans his lack of time for literary pursuits while traveling, unaware that, even if he had the time, the appropriate language for communicating his mis-adventures would be frontier tall talk and not the written word. Notably, P. O. F. is the only one of Thorpe’s hunters who is not a native frontiersman. His failure as both a good shot and a good talker, therefore, indicates that the strengths of the American character are native to that region alone — a belief which runs throughout Thorpe’s writings.

Thorpe’s contradictory assessments of the precise skills and qualities which make the backwoods hunter culturally significant are impossible to resolve. Such ambivalence might be expected from a man who was never a permanent resident of the frontier himself. Yet, Thorpe’s careful attention to the literary tastes of his day probably contributed more powerfully to his inconsistency. Needing to support his growing family, he was eager to write books that genteel Eastern readers would purchase. Shortly before Mysteries was to be issued, he inquired about full-time literary employment with his Philadelphia publishers Carey and Hart. The letter calls attention to his “judgment with regard to books that will please the public without sacrificing anything to depraved taste. I feel very competent to compile books, select popular subjects....” The sketches collected in Mysteries show
Thorpe's ability to embody conventional American myths about the frontier in highly polished examples of the sporting sketch. A book praising as heroes those hunters who subverted such notions through their failure and yarn-spinning might not have been a financial success in Thorpe's opinion. So, he shaped his writing to popular taste. Censoring himself, Thorpe stopped exploring the cultural significance of the backwoods humor which he himself enjoyed, leaving himself neither more wealthy nor more famous than when he published his first humorous sketch. It would take Mark Twain to succeed in the literary marketplace with the materials Thorpe declined to pursue.

NOTES


2 "About the Fox and Fox-Hunters," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 23 (1861), 750, 752.

3 Porter reprinted "Woodcock Fire-Hunting in Louisiana," "The Wild-Cat," "Opossum Hunting," "Grizzly Bear Hunting," and "The Devil's Summer Retreat, in Arkansaw" (under the title "Bear Hunting in Arkansas"). The last of these is discussed as a humorous sketch in this article.


5 Mysteries, p. 148.

6 Mysteries, p. 44.

7 Mysteries, p. 45.


9 Mysteries, pp. 64 and 62.

10 The most recent reprinting is in Alexander DeMenil, ed., The Literature of the Louisiana Territory (St. Louis, 1904), pp. 140-143.


12 Mysteries, p. 185.

13 Mysteries, p. 186.

14 Mysteries, p. 187.
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15 *Mysteries*, p. 188.

16 *Mysteries*, pp. 189-190.

17 Rickels, p. 39.

18 *Spirit of the Times*, 27 July 1839, p. 247.

19 *Mysteries*, p. 8.

20 *Spirit*, 27 March 1841, p. 43.


22 J. A. Leo Lemay has argued that the "supercilious" narrator condescends to Doggett throughout and "learns nothing." See "The Text, Tradition, and Themes of The Big Bear of Arkansas," *AL*, 47 (1975), 321-342. Sonia Gernes agrees on this point. Neither discusses the implications of the closing sentence. Even though the narrator takes the tall tale literally, he does comment perceptively and approvingly on the style of Doggett's delivery. Therefore, one should not conclude that he is merely condescending. His response is more complex, an indication of Thorpe's belief in the recognizable heroic qualities of the frontier tall teller.

23 *Mysteries*, p. 146.

24 *Spirit*, 20 August 1842, p. 295.


26 *Concordia Intelligencer*, 25 November 1843 [no pagination in this periodical]; *Spirit*, 16 December 1843, p. 497.

27 *Concordia Intelligencer*, 19 August 1843; *Spirit*, 9 September 1843, p. 333.

28 *Concordia Intelligencer*, 4 November 1843; *Spirit*, 18 November 1843, p. 445.

29 *Concordia Intelligencer*, 14 October 1843; *Spirit*, 4 November 1843, p. 421.

30 *Concordia Intelligencer*, 16 December 1843; *Spirit*, 27 January 1844, p. 569.

31 In only one letter does P. O. F. tell his own tall tale to readers. He claims to have observed two wolves and a buzzard contending for the same buffalo carcass, which unexpectedly rolled down the hill, killing all three of the greedy animals. See *Concordia Intelligencer*, 2 September 1843, and *Spirit*, 23 September 1843, p. 356, P. O. F.'s ability to use language ironically
here does not carry over into the other letters to allow him to interpret the yarns which the others tell him.

32Letter to Abraham Hart, 5 December 1845. Quoted from Rickels, p. 112.