

The Legendary "Paul Bunyan" once lived in Gander v2

(by Robert G Pelley, 2021-03-06)
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Many have heard stories about the giant lumberjack who once haunted (and maybe still haunts) the woods of North America. Some say he originated in Quebec, his name being a corruption of "Paul Bon Jean". Some think he then headed south through Vermont, with his legend later spreading out west.

Somewhere along the way he picked up a companion, a huge blue ox called Babe, as seen in this photo from Wikipedia.



Paul Bunyan spent a number of years in Gander. But it wasn't a person. It was a thing.

During the World War II, around 10000 military aircraft ferried through Gander en route to Europe and after the war, an estimated 60-70 % returned. Gander was also the base for anti U-boat operations and had Hawker Hurricane fighters for local air defence. Accidents and mishaps were sure to happen.

One single aircraft in difficulty could block a runway and hamper a 100-plane ferry departure.

Some tool was needed to get them immediately out of the way. The United States Army Air Force had the solution. It was huge mobile crane, named after the legendary Paul Bunyan.

The earliest date found for the use of this machine was a photo from Dayton, Ohio, USA, dated August 1942, where it can be seen easily lifting a B-25 Liberator bomber, weighing around 35 tons. Apparently the Gander Paul Bunyan arrived around that general time.

The official name of the crane was a "LeTourneau Tournacrane Model B". The maker, Robert Gilmour LeTourneau (1888-1969) was born in Vermont and probably quite aware of the Paul Bunyan oral tradition. He was pretty much self-taught but held almost 300 patents related to earth-moving equipment, machine tools and the manufacturing methods needed to make them. One of the reasons for his success was the development huge low-pressure rubber tires to be used on two-wheeled and four-wheeled pull tractors.

He started his business in the 1920s by buying a used tractor and renting an earth scraper. By the end of the war, almost 70% of the Allied earth-moving and engineering vehicles came from LeTourneau factories. Over half the 1500-mile Alaskan Highway was built with his equipment. In 1953, the business was sold to the Westinghouse Air Brake company.

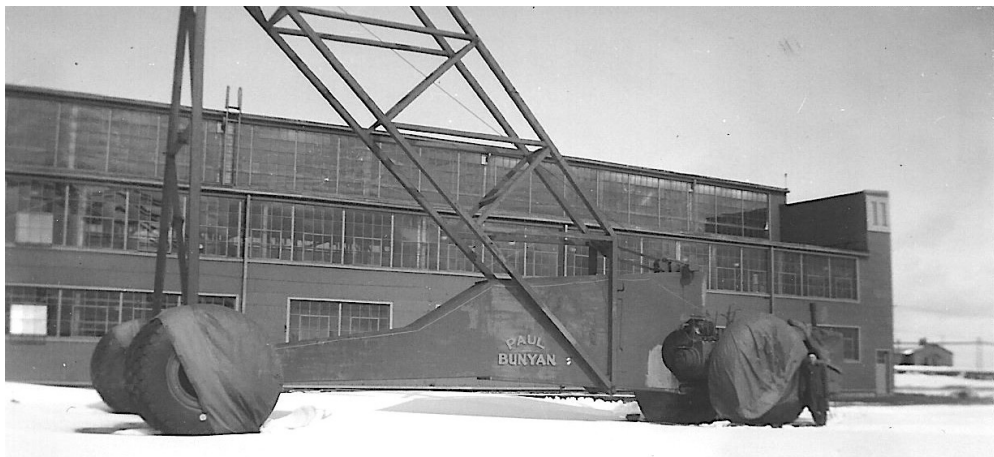
After the war, as we know, Gander became the Crossroads of the World with heavy civilian air traffic. The Paul Bunyan remained useful. The following is a good overall view. The huge size of this machine can be deduced from the height of the man standing near the left front tire.



Here are two more photos to illustrate the size:



The next photo shows the crane near hangar 11, which was on the "American side", next to the hangar adjacent to the first post-war hockey rink. It is hard to see but on the body of the crane, halfway between the wheels, one can make out the words "Paul Bunyan".



Once again we can see a man standing near the right-hand tire, possibly the same as in the first photo. The verso of the photo has the following hand written note: " April, 1946 Gander Arpt, Wakeham keeping up crane by Hangar #11".

The next two shots show the Paul Bunyan in operation. The first shows a TWA Constellation being prepared for lifting after an accident in August 1954.



The second photo below shows a Seaboard & Western DC-4 in an actual lift in November 1955.



No information has been found as to when the Paul Bunyan left Gander. Estimates varied from late 1950s to a more probable early 1980s. It would appear that this great machine, property of the Canadian Department of Transport since confederation, was simply parked in a wired-off area waiting disposition.

It was finally bought by a DOT employee who planned to scrap it for the metal. It did not work out well as it was discovered that it was full of concrete. On hindsight, this is quite logical as the crane can be envisaged as a large lever, with front wheels as the fulcrum. It took a heavy weight in the back to counteract the load in front. If the boom and cables are strong enough, it could in theory lift the equivalent of the weight over the rear wheels if the fulcrum was completely centred.

What could not be taken off as scrap metal ended up in the dump on what was called locally "Burner Road".

DOT decided to get rid of the Paul Bunyan because by that time there were no accidents of any consequence on Gander's runway. The reason for relatively fewer accidents is simple - there were relatively fewer airplanes using Gander.

Sources of information:

- ° General conversations with residents of old Gander
- ° Internet notes on the manufacturer
- ° photos collected by the author, as well from Darrell Hillier, Fred Smeaton jr and the North Atlantic Aviation Museum

NB The Burner Road recycling is described here:
<http://bobsganderhistory.com/Recycle.pdf>