

## Pecos Bill

Tall Tale Retold by Mary Pope Osborne

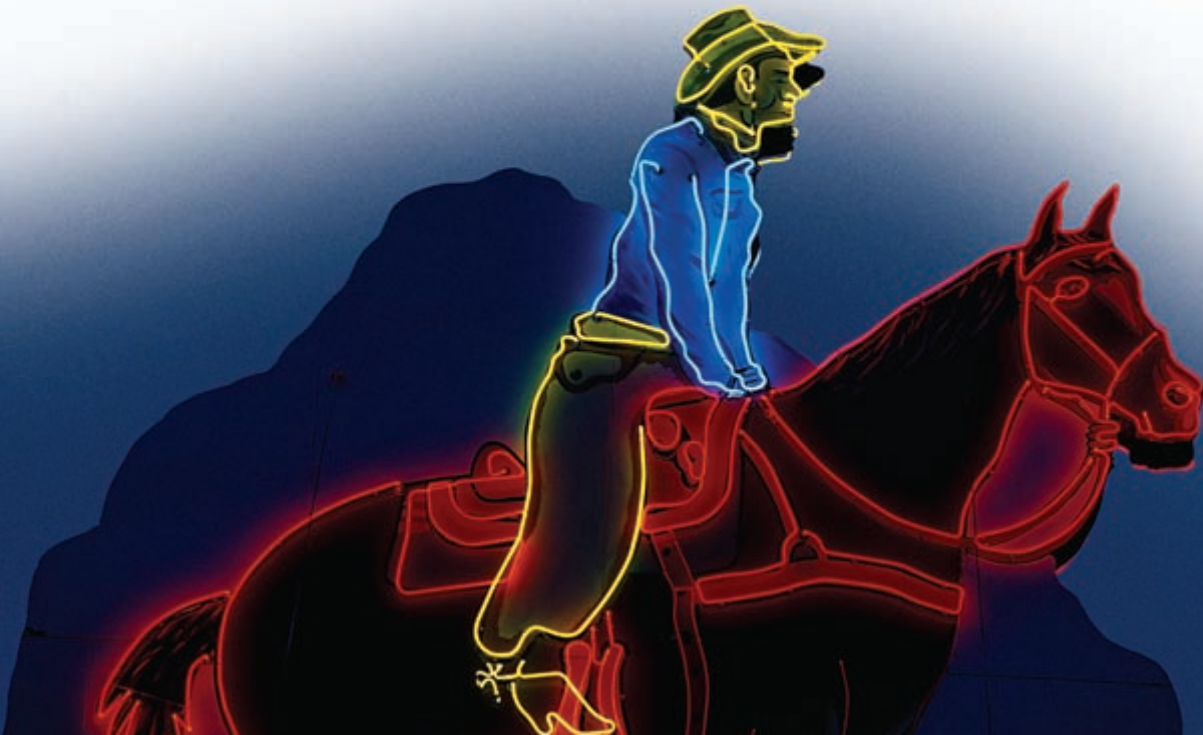
# What is a FOLK HERO?



**READING 3** Draw conclusions about genre in different cultural and historical contexts. **3C** Explain how the values and beliefs of particular characters are affected by the historical and cultural setting.  
**RC-8(C)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension (creating sensory images).

A steel-driving man who defeats a machine through hard work and perseverance. An outlaw who steals from the rich to give to the poor. A cowgirl who can circle the moon. Every culture has its folk heroes, characters whose courage, generosity, or accomplishments inspire ordinary people. Some folk heroes are real people or are based on the lives of real people; others are invented to symbolize the values of a particular culture. In the tall tale you are about to read, you will meet a fictional American folk hero known for his strength and bravery.

**DISCUSS** Imagine you were on a committee to select a folk hero to speak at your school. In small groups, choose a real person or a character you've read about who would inspire you and your classmates. What qualities does this person possess that make him or her a folk hero? What topics would you like to see this person address at your school?



## Meet the Author

### LITERARY ANALYSIS: TALL TALE

Folk heroes often appear in **tall tales**, which are humorous stories about impossible events. Many of these stories originated in the American frontier and were passed down from generation to generation by being told out loud. Some of them even started off with a kernel of truth, but as you'll see, they aren't exactly realistic. Tall tales have these characteristics:

- The hero or heroine is often larger than life, which means he or she is bigger, louder, stronger, or stranger than any real person could be.
- Problems are solved in humorous ways.
- **Hyperbole**, or exaggeration, is used to emphasize the main character's qualities and create humor.

Review the Background on this page to learn more about how the conditions of the frontier affected the stories that were told there. Then, as you read, note how these characteristics apply to "Pecos Bill."

### READING STRATEGY: VISUALIZE

Tall tales are funny and action-packed. To enjoy them fully, it helps to **visualize**, or picture in your mind, the incredible events in the story as you read about them. To visualize, focus on descriptions that appeal to your senses, especially those of sight, sound, and touch. Use these sensory details to form a mental picture of the characters and action. As you read, use a chart like the one shown to note descriptive words and phrases that help you visualize the tall tale.

Character or Event	Descriptive Words or Phrases
Little Bill falls out of the wagon.	"sat there in the dirt" "rattle off in a cloud of dust"

## Mary Pope Osborne

born 1949

### Finding Her Way

After graduating from college, Mary Pope Osborne decided to explore the world. She traveled around Europe, the Middle East, and southern Asia. She slept outdoors and bathed in rivers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and India. And, she says, she was "terrified" almost the whole time. She survived an earthquake and a riot, only to end up sick in a hospital, all alone and far from home. While she rested, she read J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series. She identified with Tolkien's hero, Frodo, whose dangerous journey seemed to resemble her own. Says Osborne, "Ultimately Frodo's courage and powers of endurance became mine," which helped her recover from her illness and make her way home. Eventually, she began writing children's stories for fun and discovered her new career.

### BACKGROUND TO THE TALL TALE

#### Tall Tales and the American Frontier

Tall tales are often set on the American frontier—large parts of the West and Southwest that had small populations in the 19th century. Life on the frontier was often adventurous and free-spirited, and sharing stories became an important social activity. Tall tales may have started as bragging contests held by ranch hands. As the workers tried to outdo each other, they exaggerated stories about their abilities more and more. The achievements described in tall tales often center around the characteristics of courage, determination, and cleverness, all of which were needed to survive on the frontier.

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Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

# Pecos Bill

RETOLD BY MARY POPE OSBORNE

**A**sk any coyote near the Pecos River in western Texas who was the best cowboy who ever lived, and he'll throw back his head and howl, "Ah-hooo!" If you didn't know already, that's coyote language for *Pecos Bill*.

When Pecos Bill was a little baby, he was as tough as a pine knot. He teethed on horseshoes instead of teething rings and played with grizzly bears instead of teddy bears. He could have grown up just fine in the untamed land of eastern Texas. But one day his pappy ran in from the fields, hollering, "Pack up, Ma! Neighbors movin' in fifty miles away! It's gettin' too crowded!"

Before sundown Bill's folks loaded their fifteen kids and all their belongings  
10 into their covered wagon and started west. **A**

As they clattered across the desolate land of western Texas, the crushing heat nearly drove them all crazy. Baby Bill got so hot and cross that he began to wallop<sup>1</sup> his big brothers. Pretty soon all fifteen kids were going at one another tooth and nail.<sup>2</sup> Before they turned each other into catfish bait, Bill fell out of the wagon and landed *kerplop* on the sun-scorched desert. **B**

The others were so busy fighting that they didn't even notice the baby was missing until it was too late to do anything about it.

Well, tough little Bill just sat there in the dirt, watching his family rattle off in a cloud of dust, until an old coyote walked over and sniffed him.

20 "Goo-goo!" Bill said.

Now it's an amazing coincidence, but "Goo-goo" happens to mean something similar to "Glad to meet you" in coyote language. Naturally the old coyote figured he'd come across one of his own kind. He gave Bill a big lick and picked him up by the scruff of the neck and carried him home to his den.

## Analyze Visuals ▶

What **details** make this illustration humorous?

### **A** TALL TALE

Which of young Bill's and his father's qualities are exaggerated?

### **B** VISUALIZE

Reread lines 11–15.

What words and phrases help you picture the scene?

1. **wallop** (wɒl'əp): to beat up.

2. **tooth and nail**: very fiercely.



Bill soon discovered the coyote's kinfolk were about the wildest, roughest bunch you could imagine. Before he knew it, he was roaming the prairies with the pack. He howled at the moon, sniffed the brush, and chased lizards across the sand. He was having such a good time, scuttling about naked and dirty on all fours, that he completely forgot what it was like to be a  
30 human. **C**

Pecos Bill's coyote days came to an end about seventeen years later. One evening as he was sniffing the sagebrush, a cowpoke<sup>3</sup> came loping by on a big horse. "Hey, you!" he shouted. "What in the world are you?"

Bill sat on his haunches and stared at the feller.

"What *are* you?" asked the cowpoke again.

"Varmint,"<sup>4</sup> said Bill hoarsely, for he hadn't used his human voice in seventeen years.

"No, you ain't!"

"Yeah, I am. I got fleas, don't I?"

40 "Well, that don't mean nothing. A lot of Texans got fleas. The thing varmints got that you ain't got is a tail."

"Oh, yes, I do have a tail," said Pecos Bill.

"Lemme see it then," said the cowpoke.

Bill turned around to look at his rear end, and for the first time in his life he realized he didn't have a tail.

"Dang," he said. "But if I'm not a varmint, what am I?"

"You're a cowboy! So start acting like one!"

Bill just growled at the feller like any coyote worth his salt<sup>5</sup> would. But deep down in his heart of hearts he knew the cowpoke was right. For the last  
50 seventeen years he'd had a sneaking suspicion that he was different from that pack of coyotes. For one thing, none of them seemed to smell quite as bad as he did. **D**

So with a heavy heart he said good-bye to his four-legged friends and took off with the cowpoke for the nearest ranch.

**A**cting like a human wasn't all that easy for Pecos Bill. Even though he soon started dressing right, he never bothered to shave or comb his hair. He'd just throw some water on his face in the morning and go around the rest of the day looking like a wet dog. Ignorant cowpokes claimed Bill wasn't too smart. Some of the meaner ones liked to joke that he wore a ten-dollar hat on a  
60 five-cent head.

The truth was Pecos Bill would soon prove to be one of the greatest cowboys who ever lived. He just needed to find the kind of folks who'd appreciate him. One night when he was licking his dinner plate, his ears perked up. A couple of ranch hands were going on about a gang of wild cowboys.

### **C TALL TALE**

Baby Bill gets separated from his family. What's humorous about the way this problem gets solved?

### **D TALL TALE**

Reread lines 39–52. Which lines, if any, are funny to you? Explain why.

3. **cowpoke**: cowhand; cattle herder.

4. **varmint**: wild and/or vicious animal.

5. **worth his salt**: worthy of respect.

“Yep. Those fellas are more animal than human,” one ranch hand was saying.

“Yep. Them’s the toughest bunch I ever come across. Heck, they’re so tough, they can kick fire out of flint rock<sup>6</sup> with their bare toes!”

“Yep. ’N’ they like to bite nails in half for fun!”

“Who are these fellers?” asked Bill.

70 “The Hell’s Gate Gang,” said the ranch hand. “The mangiest, meanest, most low-down bunch of low-life varmints that ever grew hair.”

“Sounds like my kind of folks,” said Bill, and before anyone could holler whoa, he jumped on his horse and took off for Hell’s Gate Canyon. **E**

Bill hadn’t gone far when disaster struck. His horse stepped in a hole and broke its ankle.

“Dang!” said Bill as he stumbled up from the spill. He draped the lame critter around his neck and hurried on.

After he’d walked about a hundred more miles, Bill heard some mean rattling. Then a fifty-foot rattlesnake reared up its ugly head and stuck out its  
80 long, forked tongue, ready to fight.

“Knock it off, you scaly-hidden fool. I’m in a hurry,” Bill said.

The snake didn’t give a spit for Bill’s plans. He just rattled on.

Before the cussed varmint could strike, Bill had no choice but to knock him cross-eyed. “Hey, feller,” he said, holding up the dazed snake. “I like your spunk. Come go with us.” Then he wrapped the rattler around his arm and continued on his way.

After Bill had hiked another hundred miles with his horse around his neck and his snake around his arm, he heard a terrible growl. A huge mountain lion was crouching on a cliff, getting ready to leap on top of him.

90 “Don’t jump, you mangy bobtailed<sup>7</sup> fleabag!” Bill said.

Well, call any mountain lion a mangy bobtailed fleabag, and he’ll jump on your back for sure. After this one leaped onto Bill, so much fur began to fly that it darkened the sky. Bill wrestled that mountain lion into a headlock, then squeezed him so tight that the big cat had to cry uncle.<sup>8</sup>

When the embarrassed old critter started to slink off, Bill felt sorry for him. “Aw, c’mon, you big silly,” he said. “You’re more like me than most humans I meet.”

He saddled up the cat, jumped on his back, and the four of them headed for the canyon, with the mountain lion screeching, the horse neighing, the rattler  
100 rattling, and Pecos Bill hollering a wild war whoop. **F**

When the Hell’s Gate Gang heard those noises coming from the prairie, they nearly fainted. They dropped their dinner plates, and their faces turned as white as bleached desert bones. Their knees knocked and their six-guns shook.

“Hey, there!” Bill said as he sidled up to their campfire, grinning. “Who’s the boss around here?”

6. **flint rock**: a very hard, fine-grained quartz that sparks when struck with steel.

7. **bobtailed**: having a very short tail or one that has been bobbed (cut short).

8. **cry uncle**: give up fighting; admit that one has been beaten.



TEKS 3C

### **E TALL TALE**

When you read a work with a historical setting, you can often learn what was important to the people who lived then by paying attention to the main character. What this character thinks and feels can reflect the attitudes of the general population. Reread lines 55–73. What qualities does Bill seem to value? Consider why these qualities might have been desirable on the frontier.

### **Language Coach**

#### **Figures of Speech**

When words are used to express something other than their usual meaning, they are called figures of speech. In line 82, the expression “didn’t give a spit” is a figure of speech that means the snake didn’t care.

### **F VISUALIZE**

Reread lines 98–100. What words help you see and hear the action?

A nine-foot feller with ten pistols at his sides stepped forward and in a shaky voice said, “Stranger, I was. But from now on, it’ll be you.”

“Well, thanky, pardner,” said Bill. “Get on with your dinner, boys. Don’t let me interrupt.”

110 Once Bill settled down with the Hell’s Gate Gang, his true genius revealed itself. With his gang’s help, he put together the biggest ranch in the southwest. He used New Mexico as a corral and Arizona as a pasture. He invented tarantulas and scorpions as practical jokes. He also invented roping. Some say his rope was exactly as long as the equator; others argue it was two feet shorter. **G**

Things were going fine for Bill until Texas began to suffer the worst drought in its history. It was so dry that all the rivers turned as powdery as biscuit flour. The parched grass was catching fire everywhere. For a while Bill and his gang managed to lasso water from the Rio Grande.<sup>9</sup> When that river 120 dried up, they lassoed water from the Gulf of Mexico.

No matter what he did, though, Bill couldn’t get enough water to stay ahead of the drought. All his horses and cows were starting to dry up and blow away like balls of tumbleweed. It was horrible.

Just when the end seemed near, the sky turned a deep shade of purple. From the distant mountains came a terrible roar. The cattle began to stampede, and a huge black funnel of a cyclone appeared, heading straight for Bill’s ranch.

The rest of the Hell’s Gate Gang shouted, “Help!” and ran.

But Pecos Bill wasn’t scared in the least. “Yahoo!” he hollered, and he 130 swung his lariat and lassoed that cyclone around its neck.

Bill held on tight as he got sucked up into the middle of the swirling cloud. He grabbed the cyclone by the ears and pulled himself onto her back. Then he let out a whoop and headed that twister across Texas.

The mighty cyclone bucked, arched, and screamed like a wild bronco. But Pecos Bill just held on with his legs and used his strong hands to wring the rain out of her wind. He wrung out rain that flooded Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, until finally he slid off the shriveled-up funnel and fell into California. The earth sank about two hundred feet below sea level in the spot where Bill landed, creating the area known today as Death Valley. **H**

140 “There. That little waterin’ should hold things for a while,” he said, brushing himself off.

After his cyclone ride, no horse was too wild for Pecos Bill. He soon found a young colt that was as tough as a tiger and as crazy as a streak of lightning. He named the colt Widow Maker and raised him on barbed wire and dynamite. Whenever the two rode together, they back-flipped and somersaulted all over Texas, loving every minute of it.

### **G TALL TALE**

Which of Bill’s characteristics and achievements are exaggerated in lines 110–115?

### **H TALL TALE**

Tall tales sometimes explain how natural phenomena came to be. What do lines 134–139 explain?

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9. **Rio Grande** (rē’ō grănd’): a river that forms part of the U.S.-Mexican border.

One day when Bill and Widow Maker were bouncing around the Pecos River, they came across an awesome sight: a wild-looking, red-haired woman riding on the back of the biggest catfish Bill had ever seen. The woman looked  
150 like she was having a ball, screeching, “Ride ’em, cowgirl!” as the catfish whipped her around in the air. ❶

“What’s your name?” Bill shouted.

“Slue-foot<sup>10</sup> Sue! What’s it to you?” she said. Then she war-whooped away over the windy water.

Thereafter all Pecos Bill could think of was Slue-foot Sue. He spent more and more time away from the Hell’s Gate Gang as he wandered the barren cattle-lands, looking for her. When he finally found her lonely little cabin, he was so love-struck he reverted to some of his old coyote ways. He sat on his haunches in the moonlight and began a-howling and ah-hoing.

❶ **TALL TALE**

What **traits** do Bill and the woman have in common?

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10. **slue** (slōō): to rotate, turn sharply, or pivot.





160 Well, the good news was that Sue had a bit of coyote in her too, so she completely understood Bill’s language. She stuck her head out her window and ah-hooed back to him that she loved him, too. Consequently Bill and Sue decided to get married.

On the day of the wedding Sue wore a beautiful white dress with a steel-spring bustle,<sup>11</sup> and Bill appeared in an elegant buckskin suit.

But after a lovely ceremony, a terrible catastrophe occurred. Slue-foot Sue got it into her head that she just had to have a ride on Bill’s wild bronco, Widow Maker.

170 “You can’t do that, honey,” Bill said. “He won’t let any human toss a leg over him but me.”


“Don’t worry,” said Sue. “You know I can ride anything on four legs, not to mention what flies or swims.” **J**

Bill tried his best to talk Sue out of it, but she wouldn’t listen. She was dying to buck on the back of that bronco. Wearing her white wedding dress with the bustle, she jumped on Widow Maker and kicked him with her spurs.

180 Well, that bronco didn’t need any thorns in his side to start bucking to beat the band. He bounded up in the air with such amazing force that suddenly Sue was flying high into the Texas sky. She flew over plains and mesas,<sup>12</sup> over canyons, deserts, and prairies. She flew so high that she looped over the new moon and fell back to earth.

But when Sue landed on her steel-spring bustle, she rebounded right back into the heavens! As she bounced back and forth between heaven and earth, Bill whirled his lariat<sup>13</sup> above his head, then lassoed her. But instead of bringing Sue back down to earth, he got yanked into the night sky alongside her!

190 Together Pecos Bill and Slue-foot Sue bounced off the earth and went flying to the moon. And at that point Bill must have gotten some sort of foothold in a moon crater—because neither he nor Sue returned to earth. Not ever.

Folks figure those two must have dug their boot heels into some moon cheese and raised a pack of wild coyotes just like themselves. Texans’ll tell you that every time you hear thunder rolling over the desolate land near the Pecos River, it’s just Bill’s family having a good laugh upstairs. When you hear a strange ah-hooing in the dark night, don’t be fooled—that’s the sound of Bill howling *on* the moon instead of *at* it. And when lights flash across the midnight sky, you can bet it’s Bill and Sue riding the backs of some white-hot shooting stars.  **K**

### **J** TALL TALE

Do you think Sue will succeed in riding Widow Maker? Why or why not?

### **K** VISUALIZE

Reread lines 191–198. Note the descriptive details in this passage. What do they help you picture?

11. **bustle** (bŭs’əl): a springy steel framework worn under the back of a woman’s skirt to make it puff out.

12. **mesas** (mā’səs): high, flat-topped areas of land.

13. **lariat** (lār’ē-ət): a rope with a slip-knotted loop at one end that a cowhand throws over an animal’s head or body and pulls tight.

## Comprehension

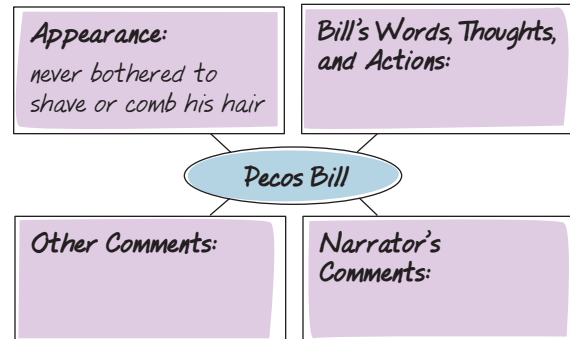
- 1. Recall** Why does a coyote decide to take care of Bill?
- 2. Clarify** How does Bill become the leader of the Hell’s Gate Gang?
- 3. Summarize** How do Bill and Sue end up leaving Earth and living in the sky?



**READING 3** Draw conclusions about genre in different cultural and historical contexts. **3C** Explain how the values and beliefs of particular characters are affected by the historical and cultural setting. **RC-8(C)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension (creating sensory images).

## Literary Analysis

- 4. Examine a Tall Tale** In what ways does “Pecos Bill” exhibit the characteristics of a tall tale? Review the characteristics on page 823. Give examples from the story to support each one.
- 5. Visualize** Review the chart you filled in as you read. What person or event did you picture most clearly? Tell what descriptions and sensory details helped you. Overall, how well do you think the author helped you visualize the story? Explain.
- 6. Analyze Characterization** How does the author help you get to know what Pecos Bill is like? Use a character map to show what you learn about Bill through each of the four methods of characterization.



## Extension and Challenge

- 7. Creative Project: Comic Strip** The incredible characters and events in tall tales have much in common with cartoons. Choose one of the events described in “Pecos Bill.” Create a three-to four-panel comic strip that illustrates this event.
- 8. SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION** What were the lives of cowboys in the 19th century really like? Research the topic, and then compare your findings with the life of Pecos Bill in the story. Are there similarities?

### What is a FOLK HERO?

Why do you think Pecos Bill became a folk hero in American culture? Consider what his personal characteristics and achievements might represent to people.