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# MY PROBLEMATIC CLAIM TO FAME

BY SANDY SCHUMAN

*I*t's just not fair! I was a winner of the Liars Contest at the 2019 Susquehanna Folk Festival. But no one will believe me!

To avoid exposing the true liars, the Liars Contest was not recorded. However, since my story was an accurate presentation of what actually happened, I am happy to present the following transcript.

## A Few Details

*Please note:* The attendees at the Susquehanna Folk Festival needed no explanation of local details. For others, a few explanatory notes may be helpful.

1. The Susquehanna Folk Music Society's Susquehanna Folk Festival took place on July 26–28, 2019, at the Roundtop Mountain Resort in Lewisberry, York County, Pennsylvania. I was one of 10 individuals selected in advance to compete in the Liars Contest on Sunday, July 28.

2. On local roads, you can hardly turn a corner without seeing a road sign that says, "Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful."

3. "Muskie" (muskellunge) are among the largest freshwater fish in North America. Some of the best musky fishing is in the Susquehanna River.

4. Kudzu and purple loosestrife are among the most troublesome invasive plant species in Pennsylvania.

5. A 25-foot replica of the Statue of Liberty can be found in the Dauphin Narrows section of the Susquehanna River, a few miles upstream from Harrisburg.

6. Yellow Breeches Creek forms the northern boundary of York County.



Illustration by Kevin Kuhne, from Schuman's book, *Welcome to Chelm's Pond*.

*Here is my report, as given from the stage at the Susquehanna Folk Festival Liars Contest:*

I suppose you all know we're in York County, but I didn't know until I had a run-in with the York County Sheriff. He was going to fine me for littering. "Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful." Hoping he would relent, I explained everything.

He said, "Mister, I'm taking you in. I know just the place for you."

And he brought me here and said I had to explain it all to you. So, here I am.

You see, I've been reading a book

entitled, *The Pioneers*, subtitled, *The Sources of the Susquehanna*. It was the first of five best-selling novels by James Fenimore Cooper, with a character called "Leatherstocking." I can see from all the heads nodding that you know what I'm talking about. *The Leatherstocking Tales*.

Anyway, reading this novel about the famous Leatherstocking, I wanted to see his cave, located on the steep mountain-side above Otsego Lake in the part of New York that the old-timers call "Leatherstocking Country." If you've made the

pilgrimage to the Baseball Hall of Fame, you've been there, even if you didn't know it. So, I hiked up there, and just as I got to Leatherstocking's cave, what comes charging at me but a polar bear! Now I met this polar bear once before, up in the Adirondacks, and I knew he was making his way from the North Pole to the South Pole. You see, that bear was bipolar.

I didn't want to be that bear's breakfast, so I had to act quick. I could try to outrun him, or I could jump off the mountain. Luckily, I jumped off the mountain. As I was falling the 600 feet from the mountain down to the shore of Otsego Lake, suddenly I knew the answer to the great question about life, the universe, and everything. I wanted to write it down right away, because once I smacked into the ground, I was apt to forget it. So, I reached into my backpack for a sheet of paper. That paper was fluttering so wildly I



New York State historical marker on County Road 31, near Cooperstown, for "Natty Bumpo," the *Leatherstocking* character in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Photo by author.



The beginning of the Susquehanna River, with Otsego Lake in the background. Photo by author.



Marker at the source of the Susquehanna. Photo by author.

had to hold onto it with two hands, and it billowed up above my head and glided me down to a gentle landing on the shore of Otsego Lake.

I looked back up the mountain, but I was feeling pretty low. So, I reached into my backpack for my pot. I selected a nice hand-sized rock from the shore of the lake, and I hammered that big aluminum pot into a canoe and flattened my cook spoon into a paddle.

I paddled that canoe down Otsego Lake and there, at the southern end, was a sign said this was the source of the Susquehanna. It was such a tiny stream, I couldn't believe it. I don't believe anything unless I read it on the Internet, because "the Internet is a credible and reliable source of information," and that's a direct quote from Abraham Lincoln. So, I figured I'd paddle down this little creek and see for myself if it turned into the mighty Susquehanna.

After a distance, I got tired of paddling, and hungry, too, so I was not displeased when the creek turned into Goodyear Lake. I figured I would catch me a fish. I saw a nice walleye down there, so I reached into my backpack and got my magnifying glass. Now a lot of old-timers use the magnifying

glass to concentrate the rays of the sun directly onto the fish, and cook it down there in the water, but I have found that it tends to cook the fish unevenly. The way I do it is to focus the sun's rays just below the fish, so's to heat up the water under the fish, and the upwelling of that warmed water lifts the fish right up. As it broke the surface, I reached out and caught that fish in my hand, filleted it with the sharp edge of my paddle, and played the magnifying glass across it so it cooked up evenly. It was the best magnifying-glass-caught-and-cooked fish I'd ever had. OK, that might be an overstatement. It was maybe only the second-best.

Fortunately, my attentiveness to that fish kept me from being distracted by all the people waving and hollering something about the Collier's Dam at the end of Goodyear Lake. The 35-foot drop over the dam and the rushing rapids below presented a welcome change of pace and speeded my journey considerably.

I won't bore you with how I trained a pair of muskies to tow the canoe, or the recipe I developed for a kudzu and loosestrife burrito. I will tell you this. As the river got bigger, I began to think this really was the Mighty Susquehanna and I had paddled down from

its very source! But, as I was coming close to what I thought was Harrisburg, right there in the middle of the river, was the Statue of Liberty! I got suspicious and thought I'd better check my whereabouts. So, I paddled over to the shore and beached the canoe just past Yellow Breeches Creek.

That's when the sheriff fined me for littering. I give him credit. I'd be lying if I didn't admit my hand-rock hammered canoe and paddle looked like garbage, even though you and I know different. Anyway, I explained it all to the sheriff, and that's when he brought me here. He offered me a piece of advice.

"Mister," he said, "if you say you paddled upstream from the Chesapeake, it will make a better story."

"Sheriff," I replied, "I wouldn't lie just to tell a better story." ▼



Sandy Schuman <http://www.ny-tales.com/> is fascinated by familiar things and their unfamiliar stories. He brings remarkable historical tales to life ("some of our folklore is truly unbelievable, some of our history is even more so") and reveals the little-known stories behind some of our best known songs. A winner of the Susquehanna Folk Festival Liars Contest and the St. Louis Jewish Storytelling Contest, he has been featured at the Northeast Storytelling Conference, Riverway Storytelling Festival, Caffè Lena, Proctors, Tellabration, and Limmud Boston. His stories have been published in *Tablet*, *Memoir Magazine*, *Distressing Damsels*, *Stories We Tell*, *Story Club Magazine*, *New Mitzvah Stories*, *Storytelling Magazine*, and in his book, *Welcome to Chelm's Pond*. Sandy is a member of the Story Circle of the Capital District, Northeast Storytelling, National Storytelling Network, Jewish Storytelling Coalition, and Lifetime Arts Creative Aging Roster. Photo courtesy of the author.

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