

The Jayhawk

A puppet discusses tall tales.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- understand that the jayhawk is a mythical bird: it doesn't really exist
- know that the jayhawk is an image that people from around the country associate with Kansas
- be exposed to the type of story called a "tall tale" and will understand that the story is not the real explanation for why something happened

MATERIALS FROM TRUNK

Object

Jayhawk Puppet

Graphic

#25 - Mushroom Park

#26 - Rock City

TEACHER PREPARATION

- Memorize the basic outline of the puppet script between the jayhawk and the teacher. Be familiar with the script but do not read it verbatim. Just follow a rough outline of the story. It may be useful to use a different "voice" for the jayhawk instead of your normal voice.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The terms "jayhawk" and "jayhawker" have been associated with Kansas since before Kansas became a state. Possibly the first reference to the jayhawk as relating to Kansas came in 1856. When asked what he was doing raiding across the border into Missouri, Pat Devlin, an Irish immigrant living in Kansas, replied, "You know, in Ireland we have a bird we call the Jayhawk, which makes its living off of other birds. I guess you might say I've been Jayhawking!"

Thus the jayhawk traces its roots to the territorial years and Bleeding Kansas. Originally, the term probably applied to raiders on both sides of the Kansas-Missouri border. Eventually it referred only to free-state raiders from the Kansas side. The proslavery raiders from



Missouri became known as bushwhackers. Fortunately for citizens of the state directly east of Kansas the nickname "Missouri Bushwhackers" never caught on.

During the Civil War the term jayhawk was attached to Colonel Charles Jennison's regiment of Kansas cavalry. "Jennison's Jayhawkers" continued the jayhawk tradition of raiding into Missouri. By the end of the Civil War, the term jayhawk had already been used for nearly a decade. It has been connected ever since in the minds of Americans with the state of Kansas.

Following the years of the American Civil War, the image of the jayhawk changed. It no longer applied to someone who raided into Missouri. It became transformed into a mythical creature, a blue and red bird with qualities unlike any other bird.

Kirke Mechem in his booklet, *The Mythical Jayhawk*, states that the jayhawk "not only could change its size at will but could make itself invisible, and was immortal." Obviously, these are qualities of a fantastic creature and not a real one. Mechem related many stories of the jayhawk that expand on these traits. Below is one example.

"When the Jayhawks first came to the plains...all the country was a desert, without water or vegetation, and even without wind. For many moons whenever a Jayhawk wanted a drink he had to fly to the Great Lakes. One hot summer day several million Jayhawks started northeast for water at the same time. The tremendous force of their flight started a strong breeze from the southwest. From that day the wind has never ceased. Since it blew the first clouds across the plains the Indians always credited the Jayhawk with bringing rain and vegetation to Kansas."

It is evident that this story is made up (and not by the Indians). It falls into the category of a "tall tale". A tall tale is a story that explains some regional feature or phenomena in a fantastic way. For example, in the story above the predominant southern Kansas wind is explained by saying it was created by millions of jayhawks all flying at once. Did this really happen? No. Does it teach us something about Kansas? Yes, it makes us aware of the predominant south wind (which, by the way, is what the Native American word "Kansas" means: people of the south wind).

Tall tales are abundant. The story of Paul Bunyon and Babe the blue ox having a harmless tussle up north and creating the northern lights and story of Pecos Bill straightening out the Rio Grande River are just two such examples. In the following lesson you will introduce your students to some of the tall tales of the jayhawk, have them determine what is not true about the story, and what regional or geographical lesson the story is trying to tell.

For more information about the jayhawk see *The Mythical Jayhawk* included in the trunk.



VOCABULARY

Jayhawk Mythical bird of Kansas. No such bird ever existed. Now the mascot of the University of Kansas.

Petrified Turned to stone, such as petrified wood.

Symbol Something that stands for something else. Symbols are used to communicate words, emotions, directions, etc.

Tall Tale A story that explains the creation of some real physical feature in an imaginary and unbelievable way.

ACTIVITY

1) Have the students gather together and introduce the Jayhawk puppet to them.

Jayhawk Hello, boys and girls. I'm a special bird called a jayhawk, and I'm one of the things that people think of when they think of Kansas. Now have you ever seen me before today? You have? Where?

Oh, yes. I'm sure you've seen me at basketball and football games. The University of Kansas has made me its mascot, but actually I'm a symbol for the entire state of Kansas. I was here before there was a University of Kansas. Have you ever been to Rock City over in Ottawa County or maybe Mushroom Park over near Lake Kanopolis? *Hold up graphic #25, Mushroom Park and #26, Rock City.* Well, a lot of people think those are big rocks and boulders but, nope, they're jayhawk eggs that have long since petrified, turned rock hard over lots and lots of years.

Teacher Now, Mr. Jayhawk are you sure your not telling a tale?

Jayhawk *Bend the Jayhawk toward the teacher.* Of course, I'm telling a tale. Its called a tall tale. You kids know what a tall tale is, don't you?

Teacher No, Mr. Jayhawk. I don't think they do.

Jayhawk A tall tale is a story we tell that explains something that is real in an imaginary or pretend way.

Teacher So is it a lie?

Jayhawk Not really. It's just a fun way to explain something.



Teacher Can you give us another story? Maybe the students can pick out what is real from what is imaginary?

Jayhawk I'd love to! Let me see... hmmm.... okay, I got a good story. A really good tall tale. It takes place a long, long time ago when jayhawks first came to Kansas. In fact, we were the first things to ever come to Kansas. When we first came there was nothing here and I mean nothing! It was just a barren desert and still and hot as can be. There were a lot of us jayhawks, maybe a million or more. You know how many a million is?

Jayhawk stops and looks at the students. Lots! and there were more than a million of us. Maybe even two or three million. Well, we got real thirsty. Remember, I said it was real hot and not a breeze. Then somebody in the flock got the idea to fly over to the Great Lakes to get a drink. Well, up he went and everybody else followed.

I bet over ten million birds at once took off, a-fluttering their wings and pulling up air as they soared into the sky. Imagine, over twenty million birds in the air. We darkened the sky, there was so many of us. That tremendous pull on the air from all those wings created a southern breeze and its been a blowing from the south ever since. And guess what else happened?

Well, I'll tell you. The wind whipped up some clouds and with clouds there was rain. And that's all Kansas was really missing. Just wind and rain.

Well, before you know it, all sorts of plants were a-sprouting and animals were living in Kansas. You see if it wasn't for those fifty million Jayhawks getting thirsty, Kansas would still be a desert. All the farmers have us to thank for their great wheat crop.

Teacher Now, wait a minute! You say it was because of the jayhawk that the wind blows in Kansas?

Jayhawk Well, doesn't the wind blow in Kansas?

Teacher Yes, it does.

Jayhawk See! There's proof.

Teacher Proof of what? Just because the wind blows doesn't mean you jayhawks started it. And you say you made it rain in Kansas, too?

Jayhawk Yep.

Teacher I don't believe it.



Jayhawk Well, that's why they call it a tall tale. Its short on believable and tall on the unbelievable. Its your job to figure out what is believable and what isn't.

Teacher O.K. students what did you believe about the story? (*The wind often blows from the south, it does rain now and then in Kansas.*)

Teacher What don't you believe about the story? (*Millions of imaginary birds created the wind and rain in Kansas.*)

Teacher Mr. Jayhawk?

Jayhawk Yes?

Teacher How many jayhawks took off to get a drink that day they made the wind blow?

Jayhawk Well, how many did I say?

Teacher At first, you said about a million but as your story went along, you kept saying a bigger and bigger number. You ended with fifty million.

Jayhawk I'm sorry, I was just being modest. There was one hundred million!!!

Teacher Oh! I see! That's part of what makes it a tall tale. Do you have any other tall tales? Students, would you like to hear another jayhawk story? Mr. Jayhawk, would you like to tell another tall tale?

Jayhawk I'd be glad to. Well, let me see. Ah! yes! After we made the wind blow and the rain fall in Kansas things kind of settled into a dull routine. The millions of jayhawks were getting kind of bored. Every day the sun shined bright as it moved across the sky and then, bang, suddenly, it was night. Dark as can be except for the stars and occasionally the moon shining. Well, late one day about five million of us Jayhawks.....

Teacher Here we go again!

Jayhawk *Looks at the teacher then turns back to the students....*about five million of us jayhawks decided to have a little fun. We flew over to the setting sun and started swooping and flying around. We were moving together in groups. On some of us you could see part of our yellow beaks. On others, you could see our red heads. And on others, you could see our blue bodies. As we flew around the sun, we could hear the people down on the ground ooh and ah. They really liked the way we were painting the sky. So we decided to fly around the sun



almost every evening.

Teacher You mean that's why Kansas has such pretty sunsets, because jayhawks are swooping around the setting sun.

Jayhawk Yep!

Teacher What are my students going to think about you. That's not true.

Jayhawk *Ask students.* Doesn't Kansas have beautiful sunsets?

Teacher But its not because jayhawks are flying around the sun.

Jayhawk Well, believe what you will. It's getting late and us jayhawks have to discuss what kind of sunset we're going to make this evening. I've got to go. Good-bye everyone.

Teacher Good-bye, Mr. Jayhawk.

The teacher should then have the students remember the stories the jayhawk told, making it clear that the students understand that only certain parts are true about a tall tale.

EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

- 1) Pick one of the symbols or images of Kansas discussed in this trunk and make up a "tall tale" about it using the Jayhawk as the main character. Have the students draw a picture illustrating the story. Older groups may be able to incorporate this idea into their computer lab time by typing the story in a "Writing to Read" program.
- 2) Find other North American tall tale books in the library and read them to the class. Topics may include Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyon, and John Henry.
- 3) Have the class draw a picture about one of the stories the jayhawk told in this lesson.
- 4) Ask the class if they are familiar with other mythical creatures. Discuss these and introduce others they are not yet familiar with such as the unicorn, jackalope, snipe, big foot, elves, and trolls.

