



The Febold Feboldson Legend

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: Wayne T. Carroll wrote the first published stories about Feboldson in the 1920s. He had felt that the Gothenburg area, settled by Swedish immigrants, needed a native folklore.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Wayne T Carroll, Paul R Beath, Don P Holmes, Louise Pound, Paul Bunyan

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THE FEBOLD FEBOLDSON LEGEND

BY ROBERT F. CHAMBERLAIN

THE Nebraska legend of Febold Feboldson is unique in that its originator is known and is still living. He is Wayne T. Carroll.¹ In answering an inquiry as to whether he was the originator or not, Mr. Carroll replied: "I will have to admit I created this character."²

However, because Wayne Carroll did not make his creation very widely known, others who have written tales about Febold, or who have gathered stories about the great "Swede" together into books, have been said to have created the hero of the Great Plains. This is particularly true of Paul R. Beath, who, while living for a short time in Gothenburg, Nebraska, heard and read and contributed many of the tales, and later on collected a number of them into a book entitled *Febold Feboldson: Tall Tales from the Great Plains*. That he is the originator of the legend he has denied:

Because I have published Febold more widely than either of his champions, Carroll and Holmes, I have been credited with creating him. I did not. Febold . . . [was] in existence when I came upon the legend.³

¹ Mr. Carroll lives at 555 North Chester Avenue, Pasadena 4, California. (Mrs. E. E. Evans to the writer September 30, 1950.)

² Wayne T. Carroll to the writer, November 6, 1950.

³ Paul R. Beath, *Febold Feboldson: Tall Tales from the Great Plains* (Lincoln, 1948), p. viii. However, as Louise Pound says, it would seem that Mr. Beath is greatly responsible for the growth of the legend. She writes: "The fact is that Febold . . . owes most of his fame . . . to Mr. Paul R. Beath, who, though not his creator, has spun many stories about him and floated him into fame." (Louise Pound, "Nebraska Strong Men," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, VII [September, 1943], 135.) See also her review of Beath's *Febold Feboldson: Tall Tales of the Great Plains, Nebraska History*, (March, 1949), 77-80.

Consequently, there is no doubt that Wayne T. Carroll is the originator of Febold Feboldson.

Legends, like everything else, have to have a beginning. If one would study them, he could probably get some general idea when most of them began; but a definite date would be hard to establish. This is partly true of the legend of the mighty "Swede." No exact date can be set, but a fairly close idea of it can be arrived at.

Mr. Carroll, in reply to an inquiry as to whether the legend began in 1928, and whether the beginning of the depression in 1929 had anything to do with the starting of the legend, answered: "Febold dated quite some years before the depression. . . . I can't give you more accurate dates but I would guess 1923 or 1924."⁴

Don P. Holmes, however, the man who continued weekly to write stories about the mighty "Swede" in *The Gothenburg Times* after the Carrolls moved away from Gothenburg, Nebraska,⁵ says that the legend began in February 1928.⁶

But, from the statements that other people have made who have written about the legend, it would seem that Febold Feboldson had been in existence prior to 1928. In "Nebraska Strong Men," Louise Pound maintains that the "Febold stories 'caught on' about 1928."⁷ If the stories "caught on" around 1928, it would seem that they would have to have been circulating prior to this date, as it would take some time for the "hero" to become popular among the people.

Furthermore, in looking through the issues of *The Gothenburg Times* for the year 1928, one finds that when Wayne Carroll first mentioned Febold in his column "The Two by Four," he said:

Eldad Johnson's⁸ great uncle, Febold Feboldson, came to this country in the early days. It would be interesting

⁴ Wayne T. Carroll to the writer, February 6, 1951.

⁵ The Carrolls moved from Gothenburg, Nebraska, to California in August 1928. (*Ibid.*)

⁶ Don P. Holmes to the writer, February 14, 1951.

⁷ Pound, *op. cit.*, p. 135. Paul R. Beath also holds this view. (Beath *op. cit.*, p. ix.)

⁸ It seems that Wayne Carroll also created some minor characters, nephews of Febold. Some of them were Bergstrom Stromberg,

to collect the stories told about him as part of the history of this country. If you know of any stories, we will be glad to publish them. . . . [signed] W. T. Carroll,⁹

It would seem from this, then, that tales about Febold were being told before 1928; otherwise the people would not have been acquainted with the legend, and would not have been able to submit stories.

From these facts it may reasonably be deduced that the legend of Febold Feboldson had begun prior to 1928. Consequently, the statement of Mr. Carroll, the originator, that the legend began somewhere around 1923 or 1924 would have to be accepted, it seems.¹⁰

Having established the originator and when the legend began, it would seem proper to show next how the legend came about.

During the years prior to 1925, Wayne Carroll occasionally wrote a column for *The Gothenburg Independent*, which was edited and published by Charles Botkin.¹¹ It seems that Botkin had quite a struggle in getting enough material to fill the columns of his paper without a little outside help. So, occasionally Wayne Carroll wrote a half column or so for him.¹²

This half column was intended to be humorous, and at times it was somewhat satirical. According to Mr. Carroll:

The problems of the day, except a possible shot at a local politics [*sic*], were entirely ignored Now and then we would curl the hair of some local activity and no

Herebold Farvardson, Hjalmar Hjalmarson, Kjontvedt Peterson, and Eldad Johnson. The exploits of Febold were usually recounted by these nephews who knew Febold in the old days. (Beath, *op. cit.*, p. viii.)

⁹ *The Gothenburg Times*, March 7, 1928, p. 6.

¹⁰ When Don P. Holmes says that the legend was started in February of 1928, it may be that he means it was that year that tales about Febold Feboldson first appeared in *The Gothenburg Times*; for in 1925 *The Gothenburg Independent*, for which Wayne Carroll occasionally wrote under the pseudonym of Watt Tell, merged with *The Gothenburg Times*. (Don P. Holmes to the writer, February 14, 1951.)

¹¹ No relation to B. A. Botkin, who edited *A Treasury of American Folklore*. (Wayne T. Carroll to the writer, February 6, 1951.)

¹² *Ibid.*

one knew who "Watt Tell"¹³ was and we had a bit of fun.¹⁴

It was while he was writing this column that Mr. Carroll got the idea that the Great Plains needed some folklore.

For a long time Wayne Carroll had been interested in folklore, and he had noticed for quite some time that the Great Plains, and in particular Nebraska, were without any native folk hero. Tales of strong men had come in from all sides. Stories of Paul Bunyan and his ox had come down from the lumber camps of the North; Easterners moving West had brought in the tales of Johnny Appleseed; and tales of the colorful hero, Pecos Bill, had drifted up from the South. There was Nebraska, surrounded by all types of folklore, but without any of its own. That is the reason why Wayne Carroll decided that some sort of character should be created.¹⁵ But that posed a problem. How would one go about creating a folk hero?

Writing for Wayne Carroll was only an avocation. By occupation he was a lumber dealer.¹⁶ Since he was a lumberman, it was evident that he should have sooner or later heard of Paul Bunyan; for in whatever stage lumber is handled—whether it be in the lumber camps, in the planing mills, or in the lumber yards where the finished products are sold—there the tales of Paul Bunyan eventually make their way. The stories of Bunyan appealed to Mr. Carroll, and he thought that there should be someone like him on the Plains. That Febold Feboldson was patterned after Paul Bunyan, the originator affirms: "He [Febold Feboldson] grew somewhat after the manner of Paul Bunyan. . . . His early life included some training under Paul. . . ."¹⁷ The

¹³ Rather than use his own name, Wayne Carroll used this pseudonym. (Don P. Holmes to the writer, February 14, 1951.) This pseudonym was arrived at by the rapid pronunciation of "What the hell." (Statement of Don P. Holmes, personal interview.)

¹⁴ Wayne T. Carroll to the author, February 28, 1951.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* February 6, 1951.

¹⁶ Statement of Don P. Holmes, personal interview.

¹⁷ Wayne T. Carroll to the author, November 6, 1950.

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The Editor of The Two-By-Four
dropped into our private office last
week and together with the Editor
of the Squirrel Food Column, ran
through the back files of The Times.
In the papers of the period of about
1840-45 much mention was made of
Febold Feboldson. Feats of his were
mentioned. No, 'feats,' not 'feets.'
It seems Febold was the earliest
settler in these parts, and it was
through his influence that the gov-
ernment decided to run the Platte
river through Nebraska instead of
Kansas. Febold, by the way, was a
great-uncle of Eldad Johnson, of
Etna, whom you have all read so
much about. Several of these stories
of Febold's feats were copied from
The Times' files and will be related
now and then. Best keep an eye on
the 2x4 2. I mean two. No, to. Too.

■—sf—■

No, mamma, no! I don't want to
kiss Miss Jones. She just slapped
Daddy for it!

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NOW
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want
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please

- BAYE F
- BAYE F
- NUJO F
- MILK F
- MILK F
- RUBE F
- Lydia F

The Gothenburg Times, February 29, 1928

SOME FEBOLD FEBOLDSON ORIGINALS

The Gothenburg Times, March 14, 1928

THE TWO BY FOUR

Vol. I March 14, 1928 No. 29

Febold Feboldson,
the first white man
to settle in this
territory, was a
direct descendant
of Lief the Lucky,
who discovered
North America be-
fore Columbus. He
settled in what is
now Nebraska in
1806 and was in-
strumental in get-
ting the Govern-
ment to buy this
territory from the
French. If he had
not done this we
would all be
Frenchmen now.
We are going to
drive up northwest
of Gandy soon and
see Bergstrom
Stromberg, who is
97 years old. He
has some informa-
tion about Febold
we would like to
get.

—2x4—

Mr. Martin Krone
and Mr. Joe Lind-
berg are hauling
out A Hog Houses
this week

—2x4—

er is fixing up the
farm house of Mr.
Kenneth Schriver.
C. Booth and Son
doing the work.

—2x4—

Mr. Jess Quinn has
completed his three
way garage.

—2x4—

Mr. Ned Ward is
staying close to
home. 69 sows, he
says, require some
attention.

—2x4—

A man whose father
had been hung,
was filling out a
blank for life in-
surance. Under the
question "Cause of
Death" he wrote:
He met his death
while taking part
in a public func-
tion, during which
the platform on
which he was stand-
ing gave way.

—2x4—

We are preparing
plans for a couple
of nice houses
which we hope will
improve the city.

—2x4—

Mr. Harvey Jen-
kins is fixing up
the house he re-
cently purchased on
Eighth St.

—2x4—

A nervous youth
hastened into Fras-
sier's the other eve-
ning and said: "I
want some cot pop-
ped butt corn—
I mean I want
some cot buttered
hop corn; that is,
corn hottered pop
butt—er rather—
hop cuttered pot
born — oh, well,
gimme some pea-
nuts."

—2x4—

This is the time to
fix up the brooder
house. If you will
line it with Rock-
lath it will cut out
all drafts and not
cost much. Rock-
lath is cheaper than

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similarity between the two strong men can readily be seen once one has read stories about both of them.¹⁸

It is evident, however, that this new hero could not be patterned exactly after Paul Bunyan, because Bunyan has always been associated with lumber camps. At the time when Febold is said to have made his appearance (around 1858),¹⁹ the Plains were a treeless, desert-like region.²⁰ Thus, Febold could hardly have "become a lumber hero because there [were] so few trees on the Great Plains. Instead, he wrestled with regional adversities which beset the early settlers—tornadoes, hostile Indians, drouths, extreme heat and cold, unsavory politicians and floods."²¹

The next thing was to find a name. The name of this folk hero, as probably did the names of all other folk heroes, arose from the locale in which he originated.

Gothenburg, Nebraska, the town where Mr. Carroll lived when he first started writing stories about Febold Feboldson, was mostly settled by Swedes who had come directly from Sweden. It had been "settled by many Swedes mostly [around] 1880 and 1890 and [was] named after that famous Swedish city."²² For this reason Wayne Carroll "thought a Swedish name . . . would be appropos [sic]."²³

At one time or other, Mr. Carroll "knew a young Swede by the name of Febold something or other, and in copying John Johnson, Nels Nelson, etc., hit upon Febold Feboldson,

¹⁸ Paul R. Beath to Louise Pound, July 1, 1943, as quoted in B. A. Botkin (ed.), *A Treasury of American Folklore* (New York, 1944), p. 177.

¹⁹ Wayne T. Carroll to the writer, February 6, 1951. Don P. Holmes maintains that he arrived on the Plains prior to this, somewhere around 1800-1810. (Statement of Don P. Holmes, personal interview.)

²⁰ Wayne T. Carroll to the writer, February 6, 1951.

²¹ Beath, *op. cit.*, pp. vii, viii. In this Febold had enough to do, for according to a history of Nebraska, Nebraskans have suffered floods, drouths, and some of the greatest extremes in weather. See Federal Writers' Project, *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* (New York, 1947), pp. 9, 10.

²² Wayne T. Carroll to the writer, February 6, 1951.

²³ *Ibid.*

and later added Bergstrom Stromberg²⁴ as a bit of humor, a satellite of Febold."²⁵

So, with an idea of what this character was going to be like, and having given him a name, Wayne Carroll began to write stories about Febold in the column which he wrote for *The Gothenburg Independent*.

Febold first appeared in this column with maybe a couple or three paragraphs of some of his exploits and early history. Now and then he would reappear until he became a habit.²⁶

However, the legend was not an "overnight success." It took a while for the stories about this new character to catch on, and it seems that about the year 1928 he became a part of the people. In that year tales of the mighty "Swede" began to appear regularly every week in *The Gothenburg Times*, with which, as stated before, *The Gothenburg Independent* had merged in 1925.

The first mention of Febold in *The Gothenburg Times* was made on February 29, 1928, in the column known as "Squirrel Food," which was written by Don P. Holmes. It is as follows:

The Editor of The Two-By-Four dropped into our private office last week and together with the Editor of the Squirrel Food column, ran through the back files of *The Times*. In the papers of the period of about 1840-1845 much mention was made of Febold Feboldson. Feats of his were mentioned. . . . It seems Febold was the earliest settler in these parts. . . . Several . . . stories of Febold's feats were copied from *The Times'* files and will be related now and then. Best keep an eye on the 2x4 2.²⁷

The following week Wayne Carroll made mention of Febold in his column "The Two by Four," and he said that he would be glad to print any tales that the readers might

²⁴ According to Beath, Bergstrom Stromberg is the only one of the characters that Wayne Carroll created that has any possible historical basis. (Beath, *op. cit.*, p. viii.)

²⁵ Wayne T. Carroll to the writer, February 6, 1951.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, February 28, 1951.

²⁷ "Squirrel Food," *The Gothenburg Times*, February 29, 1928, p. 10.

send in.²⁸ From then on, stories of the mighty "Swede" were printed almost weekly in this column until Don P. Holmes took over the job of writing weekly tales. So the legend began.

The following presents the facts about the beginning of the legend more briefly:

Originator.....	Wayne T. Carroll
When legend began ..	around 1923 or 1924
Why legend began.....	Mr. Carroll thought that there was a need of native folklore.
How legend began.....	Mr. Carroll wrote for a small town newspaper. He had heard the tales of Paul Bunyan; and while writing for <i>The Gothenburg Independent</i> , he began to write stories about Febold Feboldson, who was patterned after Paul Bunyan.
Origin of name.....	taken from the locale in which the legend originated.
Where the legend first appeared.....	in <i>The Gothenburg Independent</i> , later in <i>The Gothenburg Times</i> .

In August of 1928 the Carrolls moved to California, and Don P. Holmes took over where Mr. Carroll left off.²⁹ Tales of Febold appeared weekly from then until 1935. They fell off then, and were printed "spasmodically until 1940 or 1941 when service men asked for [them]. [They have been] continuous since."³⁰

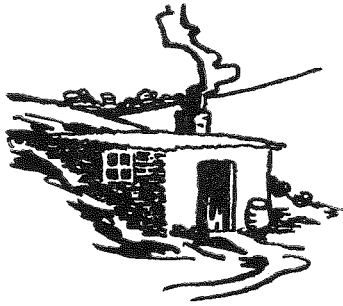
However, it might be stated in conclusion that if the legend had depended entirely upon its being printed in a newspaper for its existence, Febold Feboldson might have died an early death. It was the people in and around Gothenburg, Nebraska, who kept the legend alive once it got started. In the words of Beath, it was "around the barber shop on summer Saturday nights—around the parlor furnace on long winter evenings—at the tables of the threshing crew and at the church ice cream social—[that the] stories of a

²⁸ *The Gothenburg Times*, March 7, 1928, p. 6.

²⁹ Wayne T. Carroll to the writer, February 6, 1951.

³⁰ Don P. Holmes to the writer, February 14, 1951.

legendary Swede were remembered and retold across the prairies and in the small towns of Nebraska."³¹ So the legend of Febold Feboldson lives on.



³¹ Beath, *op. cit.*, p. 14.