

# Me and the Jack Tales

By Orville Hicks

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*Editor's note: The author has written the article as he would tell the story.*

Most of the Jack tales come over from England. My great-grandpa Council Harmon brought some of them when he come here to the Mountains. My mother was Sarah Harmon, the granddaughter of Council. Her daddy was Kel Harmon, so she learned the tales from them. The tales have been in my family for nearly eight generations—more than 150 years.

The tales are about a boy named Jack, who has two brothers, Tom and Will, who are always trying to get the best of Jack. But Jack always comes out on top. Some of the tales are about Jack and the king. Jack works for the king sometimes. Sometimes he kills giants, wild boars, and lions for the king. And it always seems like he ends up with the king's girl.

In the early 1900s, the Jack tales were told throughout the Mountains of North Carolina. Beech Mountain, where my mother lived, was where a lot of the tales come from. I grew up in the Mountains of North Carolina in the 1950s and 1960s. I was fourteen years old before we got electricity in the house. My daddy, Gold Hicks, was a Baptist preacher. He wouldn't let us have a TV, so in the evening time, Mama would set on the porch with us and tell us Jack tales while we would work. We would shell peas or break beans and listen to Mama. That's how I learned the Jack tales, by setting and listening.

Now I am married to my wife, Sylvia, and we have five sons. When they were little, sometimes I told them three or four Jack tales at night to get them to go to sleep. I do a lot of traveling now, telling the tales to schools, festivals, radio stations, TV stations, and birthday parties. I have two cassettes, a CD with a book, and a video out. I never thought that I would be doing all of this and going all of these places telling these tales forty years ago when I was a boy listening to Mama when she told them to me.

Now here is one of my favorite Jack tales:

## *Jack and the Varmints*

*Now Jack lived way back up in the Mountains with his mother. They got up one morning and looked in their cupboard for something to eat. They didn't have anything left. She told Jack, said, "Son, you will have to go find some work so you can buy us something to eat."*

*Well, Jack didn't like to work, but he didn't want to starve to death, either. So Jack headed down the road looking for work.*

*Jack found a board aside of the road that had fell off an old wagon. Jack picked up the board, got out his knife, and began to whittle that board into a big old paddle.*

*Jack went down the road till he came to a mudhole. There was some flies a-flying around that mudhole. In a few minutes, the flies lit in the mudhole. Jack snuck up on that mudhole with that paddle. Wham! Jack came down with that paddle right in the middle of that mudhole. Jack picked the paddle up and looked under it. He had killed seven flies!*

*Now Jack thought that he had done something big. He went on down the road till he come to a blacksmith shop. He went in there and got that man to make him a belt. Jack put that belt on. It read, "Big-Man Jack killed seven at a whack."*

*Jack went on till he came to the king's house. The king seen Jack's belt. He read it: "Big-Man Jack killed seven at a whack." He said, "Jack, you are the man I've been looking for." He said, "There's a big lion loose. If you can get it for me, I will give you a thousand dollars." Jack said that for a thousand dollars, he would give it a try.*

*The king took Jack back in the woods where they last seen the lion at. The king left Jack there, and the king got out of there. "If that king that scared of that lion," Jack said, "I ain't going to mess with it." He said, "I am getting out of here."*

*Jack started home. He came around the bend of the road. Right in the middle of the road set that big lion—its mouth open, and its teeth a-hanging out. It roared so loud, it scared Jack nearly to death. Jack clumb up a big old tree. The lion got under the tree, and with its big old teeth, it cut the tree nearly down.*

*Then the lion got tired and sleepy. It fell to sleep. Jack said, "I am getting out of here." Jack put his foot on a brittly limb. It broke. Jack fell out of the tree right on top of the lion's back. The lion got up. It tried to bite Jack. It tried to knock Jack off its back. But Jack hung on to the lion for dear life.*

*The lion took off running. Right into town it went. The king seen that lion a-coming, with Jack on its back. He said, "Gosh, what a man Jack is, riding a lion like that." The king grabbed his old rifle, shot that lion, and killed it.*

*He went over to it. Jack was getting up. Jack looked at the king, and he said, "I am mad, good and mad."*

*The king said, "What are you mad at?" He said, "I shot the lion."*

*Jack said, "That's what I'm mad about." He said, "I caught that lion up on the mountain. I was training it for your riding horse. You up and shot it. That makes me mad. You being king, you would have looked big riding that lion through town."*

*The king felt sorry for Jack and give him an extra thousand dollars. Jack went home with two thousand dollars in his pocket—tickled to death.*

Storyteller Orville Hicks has received the North Carolina Folklore Society's Brown-Hudson Folklore Award for his role in continuing our state's narrative traditions. He performs at schools and festivals.