

# **Jack in the Blue Ridge Mountains**

## **Dramatizing Traditional Folklore of the Blue Ridge Mountains**

*Collected and adapted by R. Rex Stephenson*

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**STORY OF THE PLAY**

Gather 'round, friends. Here are four Appalachian folktales your audiences will love ... and your actors will love performing, too! Our favorite folk hero, Jack, appears in all four stories: "Jack's Mother's Second Marriage," "Jack and the Mean Old Man," "Foolish Jack," and "Soldier Jack."

All four tales are fast paced and humorous, and still hold true to the oral traditions of the Blue Ridge Mountains. In fact, playwright R. Rex Stephenson gathered some of the material from the archives of the WPA Virginia Writer's Project and some tales from interviews with local story tellers.

The casts are widely flexible, from 9 to 30 actors, and can be any gender. The plays need almost no costuming except for one mask (for Death) and simple props such as a broom or cardboard hatchet. Many props can be mimed.

Enhance your performances with the *Jack Tales Study Guide and Songbook* which includes many Appalachian folksongs as well as additional background information and games. Please contact the publisher to order.

## **Prologue**

*(The show begins with several ACTOR-MUSICIANS on stage singing or playing a traditional ballad like “Barbara Allen” or “In the Pines,” while the children enter the theatre. The rest of the ACTORS should be in the audience welcoming and greeting teachers and students.)*

**ACTOR:** *(From the back of the house.)* We welcome you to this play of mountain folklore and music.

*(The MUSICIANS on stage now play something livelier, like “Mountain Dew” or “Cumberland Gap.” There may be a variety of stringed instruments, such as the fiddle, autoharp, and banjo, but the most important ones are the homemade ones: a washtub bass [a washtub with a rope through the center attached to a hoe handle], a washboard, spoons, a jug, a limber-jack [a wooden doll that dances on a thin board], a cowbell, and woodblocks.)*

**NARRATOR:** The instruments that you see here are the types that you would have seen a mountain family band playing a hundred or more years ago. There was a strong tradition in the Blue Ridge Mountains that all members of a family made their music together. Most would have played store-bought instruments, but often the children played either homemade or pick-up instruments.

*(Several ACTOR-MUSICIANS explain briefly about their instruments and demonstrate them. For example, the player of the washtub bass might say, “People years ago took baths in these. When the tubs got old, people used to just punch a hole in them, attach a rope to a hoe handle, and create an instrument that sounds like this.” The washboard player might say, “A washboard is used for rhythm. It is called a pick-up instrument, because you just pick it up and play it.” At the end of this section, the group sings one verse and two choruses of another traditional mountain song, such as “Cripple Creek” or “The Wreck of the Old ‘97.”.)*

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**NARRATOR:** *(After the song.)* The worst bad man in the old West was a fellow by the name of Jesse James.

*(The GUITAR PLAYER puts on a cowboy hat and walks forward, becoming JESSE JAMES.)*

**NARRATOR:** He had a brother who was just as ornery. And his name was Frank James.

*(The BANJO PLAYER puts on a different type of cowboy hat and walks forward, assuming the character of FRANK JAMES.)*

**NARRATOR:** Now these boys were so mean that, if they saw somebody they didn't like...

*(An ACTOR comes forward and tries to shake hands with JESSE and FRANK.)*

**NARRATOR:** They would just shoot him.

*(FRANK and JESSE turn their instruments on the ACTOR, while the NARRATOR makes two banging sounds on the washboard. The ACTOR is shot and falls dead. FRANK and JESSE beam with pride.)*

**NARRATOR:** Why, if two young ladies were riding a train...

*(Two ACTORS put on bonnets, come forward, and assume the two characters.)*

**NARRATOR:** Jesse would not only steal their money...

*(HE crosses and, in mime, takes money from the LADIES. One LADY points to JESSE.)*

**LADY:** He took our money!

**NARRATOR:** But he would also shoot them.

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*(HE makes two banging noises on the washboard again. Shot, the LADIES fall dead.)*

**NARRATOR:** Now, old Frank James was a man that could be economical with bullets. If he had one bullet and three *(Depends upon the number of ACTORS left.)* folks to shoot...

*(JESSE hands FRANK one "bullet" and looks to the rest of the ACTORS left onstage. They have lined up in a straight row. When FRANK aims at them, they begin to poke fun at the idea that one bullet could get them all.)*

**NARRATOR:** ...Frank would make do.

*(The NARRATOR makes the gun sound again. The FIRST ACTOR falls; then the LAST ACTOR falls. The one in the center, believing he is safe, laughs at JESSE and FRANK. However, the bullet strikes him from the back, and he falls. FRANK and JESSE beam again. NARRATOR crosses center.)*

**NARRATOR:** There wasn't anybody or anything those boys wouldn't shoot if they took a notion to.

*(THEY aim their instruments at him.)*

**NARRATOR:** Oh, darn!

*(HE falls. FRANK and JESSE sing the song "Jesse James." At the chorus, all the ACTORS rise and sing with them. At the end of the song, they strike the stage and set up for the first story.)*

**NARRATOR:** In addition to playing music, the family also told tales. Those told most often in the Blue Ridge Mountains were the Jack Tales. These stories describe the adventures of a young boy named Jack.

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**“Jack Tales Song” (tune of “Old Joe Clark”)**

*BILL AND TOM WERE BOUND TO STEAL,  
JACK WAS BOUND TO TRY.  
MADE A MESS OF EVERYTHING,  
MADE THEIR POOR MA CRY.  
JACK AND BILL AND TOM—  
THEY WERE THE SMARTEST BOYS AROUND.  
BAD LUCK FOLLOWED EVERYWHERE,  
BUT NEVER BROUGHT 'EM DOWN.  
TIME OR TWO THEY NEAR GOT CAUGHT,  
'COURSE THEY'D ALWAYS RUN.  
LAUGHING, JOKING ALL DAY LONG,  
'CAUSE IT WAS ALL IN FUN.*

*(Lyrics to songs by Gail Epps, Ronnie Davis, Laura Davis  
and Rex Stephenson.)*

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