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Niagara: Miracles, Myths and Magic

By Ben Burt

No one knows when man
first came to Niagara.
His beginnings are shrouded
in mystery and myth.
They worshipped
the Great One...
creator of all things
but their lives were directed
by the spirits of nature.
To the ancient people
of Niagara
the greatest of the spirits
were the Thunder Beings
who lived under
the Great Falls.
Their history
is lost in legend
their traditions
are but whispers
on the lips of the very old.
Lingering still
from the ancient times
is the story of Lelawala
the maiden of the mist.
Lelawala was a strange
and beautiful maiden
who lived in the land
of thundering water.
The Chief gave her as wife
to the oldest and wisest man
in the village.
It was a great honor
but Lelawala
could not love him.
He was disagreeable
and smelled much like a bear
in the springtime.
Lelawala did not wish
to bring shame to her family
and dishonor
to the wise, old elder.
The spirits spoke
to her heart.
She knew

she must leave the village.
She was driven by a force
she could not understand.
Some say
she was the chosen one.
The Thunder Beings
called out to her.
Her name was whispered
on the winds.
The legend says it was Hinum
greatest of all
the Thunder Beings
who called to Lelawala.
He caught her
in his mighty arms
and she became one
with the spirits.
Is it only legend?
Perhaps
but there are those who say
you can see her still
in the rainbow of the mist.
History beings
where legends die.
It was 2,000 years before
the white man came to Niagara
but he would come.
History remembers French
explorer Robert Cavelier
as La Salle.
He was searching
for passage to China
when he became snowbound
at the Great Lakes
in the winter of 1678.
Jesuit priest
Father Joseph Hennepin
recorded the extraordinary
events of the expedition.
The waters of the gorge are
too treacherous to navigate.
We have abandoned our ship.
We have entered
that portion of the river

Captain Caveller
supposes to be
the route
to his China passage.
By our calculation,
it connects two great lakes
but it is clear
God has deemed these passages
not to be gained with ease.
The Indians tell us
of another land route
to the lake above.
The trail traverses
a 300-foot escarpment
the natives call
"Crawl or No Fall."
Once on top, we will build
a new craft and go on.
For three days now
the wind has carried
a most frightful noise.
The Indians murmur
among themselves
"There are spirits
that inhabit this place."
The camp is beset with fear.
What Gad has willed for us
we know not
but we shall march forward,
sustained by our faith.
In all our journey
nothing I've seen or imagined
can be referenced
to compare
with the wonder of this place
the Indians call
"Thundering Water"-Niagara.
With the coming
of the Europeans
the white man learned what
the Indians had always known.
Water was the way West.
Whoever controlled Niagara
controlled the riches beyond.

What happened?
Terrible. It's terrible.
Two regiments backed up
by artillery.
How many
artillery pieces?
Field? Stationary?
They brought them
down from the falls.
I couldn't tell
you for certain.
We-we got a couple
of them, but...
just couldn't get...
Grab your muskets!
From light section!
Fire in two ranks!
Light infantry ready!
Fire at will!
Retreat! Retreat!
The struggle
to control Niagara
raged on a hundred years.
By 1850, it was over.
The frontier was gone.
Explorers, Indians
and the men at war
had pushed on
to the western wilderness.
Niagara became the mecca
for the ordinary folk
of a civilized America.
For a dime,
you could ride the steamboat
right under the falls
and see them as they were never
seen before.
How do you do?
Welcome to Niagara.
Your Highness.
Thank you.
Princes, presidents,
painters and poets-
they all came

to the mighty falls...
It's Blondin!
But so did
another kind of men-
men willing
to risk their lives
to prove
that they were greater
than the power of Niagara.
Let Blondin through.
Let him through.
Let Blondin through.
Excuse me.
Let Blondin step through.
Make way for...
Excuse me.
Excuse me, ladies.
Blondin, Blondin...
Blondin, the prince.
Good luck and
best wishes to you.
It's an honor.
Now, may I extend
an invitation?
You go on my back
and, uh, we work together?
No.
I will work alone.
Let's go.
Ladies and gentlemen...
the Great Blondin of France
is about to perform
an act of true daring...
a feat never before attempted
by mortal man.
Your attention, please.
He is about to begin.
There he goes.
The steamship Lelawala
was only seven years old
when the Civil War broke out.
Tourism died
and the boat was sold.
Captain Joel Robinson faced

the most extraordinary challenge
of his life.

I bought her on condition

I get her downriver.

That means taking her
through whirlpool rapids.

They claim it's
the most dangerous stretch
of white water in the world.

It's never been done.

They say I shouldn't try,
but, hell, impossible is a word
that old steamboat and I
ain't never heard of.

Huh?! Ed! Ed!

Ed!

What?

Look.

Oh...

They'll never believe it.

I've been telling
stories for so long
they're coming true.

No chance you got a bit
of baling wire, hey?

Where in larnation have
do you come from, boy?!

Upriver, Niagara Falls.

I think maybe the
spirits sent you.

Maybe they did, old timer,
maybe they did.

Annie Taylor was
a 63-year-old schoolteacher
when she thought
of a novel idea...

an idea that would become
synonymous with Niagara.

Now, Hector, you've looked
at every inch of that barrel.

Yes, ma'am.

It's just as strong
as we always said
it was going to be.

Does the lid fit
tightly?
That's the most important thing.
How's that lid?
It's fine.
Well, let's see.
Yes, that looks pretty tight.
Well, put the mattress in.
Take the cat, Miller.
No, no, no!
I want that for my head.
Get the mattress in, though.
And I'll need
lots of stuffing
around my feet.
I'll need to
be braced there.
Okay.
And make sure
it's all nice and flat.
Do you think that
it's all going to fit in there?
Sure.
No, no, no!
I've got to
get in first.
I've got get in
before I get towed out
or I'll get my skirt all wet.
I want to look nice
for the photographer.
The photographer!
The photographer...
did you remember
to order the photographer,
for down below, I mean?
Yes, Annie...
And you be sure
he's to have no shots
until I've had time
to straighten my hair.
Oh, I'm not going
without Henry. Henry?!
Bring her the cat!

Henry?! Come on, darling.
OH, now, don't fuss.
The Indians used
to do this all the time
to show how brave they were.
And when we're finished
you're going to be
as famous as I am!
Put in that pillow.
And I tell you
it's going to be my good-bye
to Mr. Phipps and all those
misbehaving youngsters
at the East York school.
What will they think
of their Miss Taylor now, eh?
I'd like to see their faces.
Well, bon voyage,
Annie.
Thanks, Miller.
Oh, don't push!
Ooh! Ooh!
Don't forget, I'm going
to need lots of air.
Put the lid on, but air!
Don't forget the air!
I got the air, Annie.
I got the air.
Annie, are you okay?
We got to move
fast, Annie.
It's your air!
Air. You sure
the pump will work?
And hurry up.
Give me that.
Now, make sure
those newspapermen
spell my name right.
Bon voyage, Annie!
Bon voyage, Annie.
There she goes.
I think that's the end
of her, I'll tell you.

Yeah.
Hector?
Miller?
The old gal was crazy.
Sure was.
Hey, mister, look over there.
Hold the old bald-headed boy,
Frisco!
Get that barrel!
There it is!
Get a hold of it!
I can't believe it!
...barrel in the river.
They got it.
Come on.
Haul that thing in there.
I got her!
Open it up right quick!
Pull it in closer.
Come on. Pull it over here.
I got it.
Pull her in here.
Open her up!
Let's hope for the best.
You okay, Annie?!
We got you here.
You okay?
Annie? Annie?
She all right?
She is! She's alive!
Oh, Annie!
Take it easy.
Annie!
Take it easy.
Steady on, Bryce.
Look at this.
There you go now.
Bring her along, boys.
Bring her along now.
Steady, steady.
Annie Taylor risked her life
for fame and fortune
but like so many others
that challenged Niagara

she died in oblivious poverty.
That she lived at all
was more than a miracle.
Time is a circle.
The past is not past
but eternally present.
The time of sacred things
is a circle returning
to itself again.
It is summer, 1961.
The day
on the upper Niagara River
has begun like any other.
Dad, what's wrong?
It's okay.
It's all right
I'll get it going.
Can't you get it going?
Get back, get back!
Hey, look over there!
What is that?
What is it?
It's over there!
There's a boat
in the water!
Swim! Swim for shore!
Come on!
Try to swim in!
Come on, kick! Kick!
Help!
Help me!
Hang on, hang on, hang on!
Got her?
Where's Ben? He's gone!
He's gone!
Oh, he's gone!
Look! Over there!
Captain, Captain!
There's a kid
in there!
A kid in the
water, a boy!
He's in the water.
He's in the water over there!

There he is.
Hay! Over here!
Come get me!
Over here! Hey!
Help me!
Stand back.
Let him breathe.
Come on, give him air.
How is he?
He's all right
He's all right?
Time has created the myths.
Man has created the magic
but the miracles
remain a mystery.
Some say it was luck,
some thank God
and both are probably right,
but for those who feel
the rhythms
of their own heartbeat.
In the thundering water
of the great Niagara
and see the rainbow appear
in the mist
it is a mystery no longer.