MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Selected by

Katharine Berry Judson

Introduction by Jay Miller

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by Jay Miller

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INTRODUCTION

Jay Miller

This entertaining sampler brings together stories from all over Native North America. The majority are from northern California, where the Klamath, Shastan, and Pit Rivers (Atsugewi, Achomawi) still live. Only the Cowlitz, Klickitat, Yakima, and Okanogan are in Washington State, while the Tillamook and Modoc are in Oregon. The Chinook, including the Clatsop, occupied the lower Columbia River, the border between these two states.

Katharine Berry Judson, the compiler, was born in Poughkeepsie, New York, and received a B.A. from Cornell in 1904, before earning a librarianship degree in 1905 and an M.A. in history at the University of Washington in 1911. Between these dates, she was a librarian in Kalispell, Montana, for a year and then head of periodicals for the Seattle Public Library, where she assembled four collections of native stories.

As she explains, these stories were collected during her quest to find an "authentic" native version of the story of the bridge of the gods, a stone span across the Columbia that collapsed in punishment for some thwarted love. It is symptomatic of European attitudes toward Native Americans that she did not stop to realize that stone bridges were never a part of local native technology. Similarly, she treats all natives as though they lived in tipis, wore leather clothing, and called their women squaws. Such stereotypes are, of course, derogatory because they deny the complex richness of native life. In particular, photo captions calling attention to grave goods (facing page 77) or blaming the Whitman massacre solely on victimized Cayuse (facing page 103) are no longer acceptable.

Many tribal names have now been changed to accord with what people call themselves instead of how some outsider first wrote down a name for them. Thus, Nootka are again properly Nuchahnulth, Kwakiutl are Kwakwaka'wakw, Nez Perce are Numipu, Yakima are Yakama, and Puget Salish are Lushootseed.

In all, Washington and Oregon natives partook of four different lifeways. Called "culture areas" by scholars, each of these ways of living was an intermesh of climate, local foods, social institutions, and beliefs. The shores of the Pacific Ocean from Alaska to California is known as the Northwest Coast, with salmon, canoes, cedar plank longhouses, and masked feasting. Across the Cascade Mountains to the east is the Plateau, with salmon, tubers, rush mat longhouses, and winter enactments of encounters with spirit immortals. Further to the east is the Plains, famous for bison, small skin tipis, and elaborately costumed dances. However, the most famous feature of the Plains, its horse-riding warriors, lasted only two centuries after Spanish herds spread throughout American grasslands in the late 1600s. During that time, the attraction of horse, tall tipis, and fancy trade goods spread Plains features across the continent so that all natives are now expected, unfortunately, to wear a feather headdress. Further to the south was native California, whose northern province was noted for salmon, acorns, plank houses for families, plank sweathouses for men, and the display of exotic goods, valued for their beauty and rarity, such as red woodpecker scalps, albino deerskins, and colorful obsidian blades a yard long.

While this book includes a scattering of words that are attempts to render native languages, a nearly impossible task because of the severe limitations of the English alphabet, the majority of unusual terms come from "chinook jargon," a list of words adopted to encourage intertribal trading among native people visiting towns along the lower Columbia River. Taking simplified terms from local Chinook and from the Nootkan languages of the west coast of Vancouver Island, Judson added other words as needed. For example, *boston* became the designation for all Americans because many of the early ships sailed from that port and natives were

primarily identified by their home towns. By contrast, English were *kinchachman*, from King George man.

Among the chinook terms in this collection are *Tyhee Sahale* (8), meaning Lord Above or God; *Tatoosh* (8), "breast(s), milk," not Thunderbird; *skookum* (40), "strong," especially a dangerous spirit; *tomanowos* (48), more often *tahmanowas*, from *tah* "spirit," meaning "spiritual, magical, supernatural, extraordinary"; *kloochman* (74), "woman, wife"; *ikta* (74), "thing, goods, package"; *hiaqua* (74), often *hiqua*, "dentalium, tusk shell money"; and *tum* (125), "heart, mind, soul, pulse, pounding," hence *tum-tum* "waterfall."

All of these stories clearly originated in native tellings, although they have been recast for an American audience. Among those features carrying a sense of native literature are the use of a pattern number, often five in these stories according to the Plateau manner; the role of mouse as go-between; and the firm conviction that animals are people too. Regional features of the Northwest are the psychotic character of Mrs. Grizzly, Crane using his leg as a bridge, mention of an all-copper canoe, and the many adventures of Coyote.

So much of the understanding of these stories depends on context and immersion in community life that readers can miss the motivation for an act. For example, the great humor in the story about Kemush's robe is that he jumps ahead of himself and literally counts his chickens well before they are hatched. Tearing up his rabbit blanket before he had even aimed at a lynx was very poor planning, as was attacking an antelope without a weapon at the ready. Moreover, appeals to fashion were not the way to slow down an animal fleeing for its life.

Throughout the Northwest, both twins and salmon (who are often called by the same exact word) express in a poetic sense the two sides of things, such as the life and death played out each year by the returning fish, the growing crop, and the very twoness of humans born at the same time and place. So serious was and is this connection, however, that the parents of newborn twins could not go near water for a year until the babies had become more human. Thereafter, as long as they lived, twins had a special relationship with salmon and could summon them to ease a threat of starvation.

This collection also hints at greater tribal epics. The first story about the theft of daylight from Gull by Raven is but a flicker of the great epic of how Raven stole the sun, moon, and stars from the Grandfather at the Head of the Nass River. When, after his hard work, those fishing in the dark refused to give Raven any of their catch, he threw open the box so that a blinding flash transformed the entire world, changing beings without definite form into modern species, places, and sounds. Only the frogs remained close to their primordial shape, shifting throughout their lives from wiggling tadpole to lumpy hopper.

Similarly, when Coyote made Spokane Falls (118) or released salmon from a trap owned by Skookum women at the mouth of the Klamath River, these were incidents of a longer epic. Throughout the Plateau, people tell of how Coyote liberated salmon from a trap belonging to seabirds, and brought these fish up the length of the Columbia River. The size and quality of the salmon left in each tributary depended on the beauty of the "wife" Coyote visited in the nearest town (Miller 1992:93–98). The wonderfully ironic twist to the account published herein is that Coyote says he is looking for the "key" to the trap dam, a thoroughly foreign notion.

While this collection ends with a tale of Coyote's death, do not believe it. Coyote never dies, although he goes to sleep for a very long time until a relative such as Red or Silver Fox steps over the last shred of his bone and he immediately jumps up, as whole and guileless as ever.

The most problematic feature of the entire book is Judson's preface. She begins with a lone native and his few tools, instead of, more correctly, with a vibrant and living world populated by communities of beings, some human, some plant, some animal, some localized, and some immortal. Each of these beings was a person, often with an essential human form under the cloak of their species. Over all, there was indeed a "benevolent deity," variously known as Heaven, Creator, or Lord Above, who took much more interest in leading families and so was infrequently mentioned in popular accounts. In their dealings with all of these beings, natives were neither fearful nor contrite since the animated world also

shared their emotional sense of purpose. Their world was humane, based on dignity and responsiveness (not on cunning). After generations of observation, accumulated wisdom was passed on, often in stories. Thus, Loowit was given fire, as confirmed each century by the volcanic eruption of Mount Saint Helens, most recently on 18 May 1980.

In all, the tales represent a distillation of tribal memory, apt negative examples to teach native children what not to do, and a personification of environmental wisdom.

The theft of fire, destruction of primordial monsters, implanting of waterfalls, and first instruction in useful arts are details along the way of "marking the landscape to prepare the world for human arrival." The connectedness of everything was illustrated by stories of how things came to be as they are. Particular hills, streams, food sources, and events like earthquakes are explained by human-like actions by Animal People at the beginning. These people were shape shifters, shimmering between humans, species, space, and time. Often in the Northwest, only the immortals kept their shimmering character after the world changed forever, sometimes by capsizing just like a canoe.

Along some rivers, ancestral beings arrive by canoe, settling towns along that route, much as certain Greek city states regarded their founder as a named crew member of Odysseus (Ulysses) or of Jason and the Argonauts. Other places traced their origins to the acts of Hercules, leaving lasting features like any other tribal culture hero. Like Prometheus stealing fire, so the shimmering immortals of American belief also acted out of compassion for human needs.

Among the people at the beginning were some who later became mountains. The peak south of Seattle, near the city of Tacoma, was named by Captain George Vancouver for British Admiral Peter Rainier (jokingly spelled rainy-er because of the climate), again in the distinctly European notion that each mountain should have its own name. Local natives also had several names for different kinds of mountains, both separately and together. For those few, such as Rainier or Baker, which were permanently snow capped, the term *taq^{w}oba* is used, making specific reference to frozen fresh water.

Over a century ago, Lushootseed shifted some sounds from /m/ to /b/ and from /n/ to /d/, which explains why early settlers spelled this word Takoma. During much of that time, writers uninformed about this Salishan language have sought highly romantic translations instead of the ecological precision of the native term.

Forbidden during summer when much work had to be done, stories were told on long, rainy winter nights. Alternating serious and comic incidents, storytellers entertained an audience of all ages. For the older members, moreover, stories were comfortable, familiar ways to justify customs and consensus. For the curious, they also hid rich symbols, such as a volcano disguised as a woman, star orbits treated as dances, or long abandoned towns returned to life. By pondering these deeper significances, bright minds explored ancient understandings. Lastly, stories allowed everyone to agree on how they should act and how things should be done. By carefully selecting and retelling this impressive range of stories, Judson enables the reader to share native concerns in many times, places, and dimensions.

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PREFACE

IN the days of the first grandfather, when the earth was young, the Indian, armed only with stone knife, stone hatchet, and bows and arrows, found himself confronted with the work of Some One far greater and stronger than himself. This Power, or Powers, for there came to be many of them, had uplifted snowy mountain peaks, had cut deep cañons through the solid rock, had carved out mountain passes, and had blocked the passage of mighty rivers by great rocks and bowlders. These Powers were strong and brutal. They had enormous strength and men of only human size were their prey, as helpless as "flybug" under the heel of the Indian. Tatoosh, the Thunder Bird who lived in the sky, was one of these Powers. He shook the mountains with the flapping of his wings. The flashing of his eye was the lightning. He caught great whales instead of salmon for food. Only by crumbling a rock into powder so small that he could not even see it, could he secure a piece small enough

for the Indian to use as a salmon spear. Because Tatoosh is so terrible and the enemy of red men, his picture is painted and carved on their houses, their canoes, and canoe paddles, indeed everywhere, to soften his anger. Often Tatoosh, as shown in the photograph of the Chilcat blanket, is represented by a single eye — the terrible eye that flashes fire. There is no beneficent deity among these Indians of the Northwest. Sahale does not represent the same idea as that of Manitou, the Great Spirit, among the eastern Indians. Yet Tyhee Sahale, along the Columbia River, and Old Man Above, among the California Indians, represent the clearest idea of a single governing spirit living in the sky. But they are not sure of his friendship. Among most of the tribes, on the other hand, there is an utter lack of any friendly deity, as among the Blackfeet, of Montana, with whom Old Man is simply a trickster, half human, who nearly always gets the worst of it in his encounters with Coyote.

So the Indian felt powerless against the gods who made the earth — the forces of nature which he could not understand. In his helplessness, he was influenced by the animal life he saw about him. In the tragedies of the forest he saw the weaker, smaller creatures escape the larger ones only by cunning. So must he

by cunning escape the anger of the gods. The crafty animals became his earth gods and in time his helpers. Coyote, the weakest but craftiest of all the animals, became, on the coast, "the chief of all the animals." Fox ranked second.

The adventures of Coyote, like those of Yehl, the Raven, of Alaska, are "so many that no one could tell them all." Professor F. S. Lyman, however, groups them around three or four main heads: the theft of fire, the destruction of monsters, the making of waterfalls, and the teaching of useful arts to the Indians.

Now the animal people lived before the days of the first grandfather, long, long ago, when the sun was new and no larger than a star, when the earth was young, and the tall firs of the forest no larger than an arrow. These were the days of the animal people. People had not "come out" yet.

"Then Coyote said, 'I want it to be foggy.' So it was foggy. Then all the people came out. No one saw them come. Coyote said, 'I want the sun to shine.' So the sun shone and the fog drifted away. Then the people were there. No one saw them come out."

But with people there must needs be fire.

Where did fire come from? This question which

has puzzled every tribe and nation, each has solved in its own way. With the Greek, as with the red man, fire was first only on a mountain top, carefully guarded as a precious possession, and to be secured only by theft. Among the Greeks, a god took pity on shivering, unhappy mortals. Among the Indians it was an animal god, usually Coyote, who stole it. With both peoples, mountains were the homes of supernatural beings. A comparison between Greek and red men may seem far-fetched to Greek scholars, yet there is a striking similarity, and it is one which is of peculiar interest to those who live within full view of the wonderful "White Mountain." Olympus, rising above Homer's "sounding sea" on which rode the "black ships," was peopled with the immortal gods. Takhoma, lifting its snowy head above the waters of Whulge on which rode the frail Indian canoes, was the home of the dreaded tomanowos. With both peoples the mountains were sacred. Avalanches and volcanic eruptions on Takhoma were caused by the tomanowos and nothing could tempt the red man to climb high above the snow line. If encamped below it, the Indian, awakened in the darkness by the sound of falling ice and snow, started from his blanket and sang a dirge-like song to appease the wrath of the spirits. Takhoma was associated with