

Native American Legends

Many different people have told stories about the Salmon, people who were here a long time ago and who lived close to the land and water. Many of the legends were told by special story tellers at special times of the year. The stories were full of magic and spirits and symbols. They were full of meanings for the heart and for the head. Many of the stories were lessons that were told by parents to their children.

These stories are adapted from legends and traditions about the salmon told by people who lived a long time ago.

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COYOTE BUILDS WILLAMETTE FALLS AND THE MAGIC FISH TRAP

A legend from the Clackamas Chinook

Coyote came to a place near Oregon City and found the people there very hungry. The river was full of salmon, but they had no way to spear them in the deep water. Coyote decided he would build a big waterfall, so that the salmon would come to the surface for spearing. Then he would build a fish trap there too.

First he tried at the mouth of Pudding River, but it was no good, and all he made was a gravel bar there. So he went on down the river to Rock Island, and it was better, but after making the rapids there he gave up again and went farther down still. Where the Willamette Falls are now, he found just the right place, and he made the Falls high and wide. All the Indians came and began to fish.

Now Coyote made his magic fish trap. He made it so it would speak, and say Noseepsk! when it was full. Because he was pretty hungry, Coyote decided to try it first himself. He set the trap by the Falls, and then ran back up the shore to prepare to make a cooking fire. But he had only begun when the trap called out, "Noseepsk!"

He hurried back; indeed the trap was full of salmon. Running back with them, he started his fire again, but again the fish trap cried "Noseepsk! Noseepsk!" He went again and found the trap full of salmon. Again he ran to the shore with them; again he had hardly gotten to his fire when the trap called out, "Noseepsk! Noseepsk!" It happened again, and again; the fifth time Coyote became angry and said to the trap, "What, can't you wait with your fish catching until I've built a fire?" The trap was very offended by Coyote's impatience and stopped working right then. So after that the people had to spear their salmon as best they could.

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THE COMING OF THE SALMON

A Story From the Haida Tribe

The little daughter of the chief cried and cried and cried. She cried because no one could give her that for which she cried. Neither her father, who was a powerful chief, nor the wisest men of the tribe could give her the great, shining fish that she desired. Even the oldest of the tribe had never seen such a fish. As the little girl cried day and night and grew sick by crying, the chief ordered a great Council Fire.

All of the tribal medicine men sat around the fire, and the wisest of them rose to speak. "The maiden cries for a thing which she has seen in a dream," he declared. "Many fish have we in our Inlet, big fish, but none are like the one of which the daughter of our chief speaks. Such a fish may prove big medicine for our tribe if we can find it. Let our wise men speak. Maybe one of them may know where such a great, gleaming, leaping fish may be found."

Only one medicine man stood up. After saluting the chief he spoke, "The Raven, who lives among the cedars, is my good friend. He is very wise and knows many things that the wisest among us know not. Let me bring him to this Council Fire, that he may counsel us."

The chief gave his permission, and the old medicine man left the Council Fire and soon returned with the Raven seated on his shoulder. The great bird croaked as he spoke, and only the wisest could follow his talk-trail.

"What the daughter of the chief asks for is a giant fish, known as a Salmon. In this moon, they are to be found far from here at the mouth of a mighty river, which flows into the other side of our Inlet. Because those of your tribe are my friends, I will fly swift and far to bring one of these fish to your village."

Before the chief could thank it, the big bird was high in the air. It flew far, and fast as a harpoon travels, until its keen eyes saw, far beneath, many Salmon swimming together at the mouth of the river. The Raven dived quick as a hawk and, by chance, caught the little son of the Salmon Chief in his talons. Rising high in the air, with the fish held firmly in his claws, the Raven flew toward the distant village of his friends.

Salmon Scouts, leaping high from the water, in great flashing arcs, saw the direction in which the Raven flew. A horde of Salmon, led by their chief, swam rapidly in pursuit. Speedily as the fish swam, the fast-flying bird reached the village far ahead of them.

The Raven placed the great fish before the little daughter of the chief. She smiled, and cried no more. Then the bird told his friend, the old medicine man, that many Salmon would be sure to swim into the river inlet, in pursuit, to try and rescue the young Salmon which he had caught.

The medicine man told the chief what the Raven had said, and the fishermen and women were told to weave a huge net. This they did swiftly, and when the Salmon came, all of the fish were caught in the net. To hold them prisoner, a long, strong leather thong was passed through their gills. One end of the thong was tied to a big rock and the other end was fastened to this great totem pole, which then grew as a tall cedar. Ever since, it has been called the 'Nhe-is-bik', or tethering pole. On this pole - a totem pole - there was carved a mighty Thunderbird, an Indian Chief, a Raven and a Salmon, carved in that order from the top of the great cedar pole. The end of this story tells of great magic. Year after year, from that time, the Salmon passed on that side of the river Inlet, and the people were glad.

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LEGEND OF THE LOST SALMON

A legend from the Yakima Tribe

(This story is about when the people ignored the directions of the Creator about caring for the salmon, the salmon disappeared. All of their attempts to bring the salmon back failed until Snake used his powers to revive the salmon. The people were not fooled by Coyote's pretentious effort to revive the salmon.)

The Creator taught the people how to care for this food which was created especially for them. He said, "Do not neglect this food. Be careful that you do not break the rules in taking care of this salmon. Do not take more than you need". He told them if they observed these rules, the salmon would multiply several times over as long as they lived.

At first the people diligently obeyed the rules, and they lived happily without problems. All along the river there were different bands of people living in their fishing villages, busy catching and drying their supply of salmon.

But one day something strange happened. The people became careless and they neglected to follow the instructions made by the Creator. They became greedy. They did not take care of the salmon. They let them go to waste when they caught more than they needed for their families. They would not listen to the advice from those who were trying to follow the rules. Suddenly the salmon disappeared.

When the salmon were no longer coming up the stream for the people to catch everybody frantically searched the rivers, but all in vain. There was not one salmon left to be found. Soon they became hungry, their little children were crying and the old people were forced to beg for food.

One day, while they were searching the river, they found a dead salmon lying on the bank of the river. They stared down at it in disbelief when they realized what had happened. They began to cry out in shame and lament their mistakes, "If we are given one more chance, we will do better. If only we could awaken this salmon, the other salmon might come up the stream."

The people called a council and they talked about how they could give life back to the salmon. In legendary times those with supernatural powers could revive a lifeless creature by stepping over it five times. The people tried to use their own spiritual powers to revive the salmon. One by one they each stepped over the salmon five times, but to no avail.

There was a recluse named Old Man Rattlesnake. He never went anywhere always staying off by himself. He was very ancient and all the people called him "Grandfather". Somebody said, "let's ask Grandfather to help us! He is a powerful man. Let him revive the salmon!" A messenger was sent. "Oh Grandfather, would you come and help us revive the salmon. Everybody has failed." Old Man Rattlesnake listened and said, "What makes you think I am capable of reviving this lone salmon after everyone else has failed? I am an old man, how do you expect an old man like me to possess powers to do the impossible!". The messenger was sad. "You are our last hope. Please help us, Grandfather". Finally Old Man Rattlesnake agreed, "I will do my best". He was so old it was very painful for him to move fast. He moved ever so slowly and it seemed like such a long way for one so old.

While Grandfather was on his way, Coyote tried desperately, using all his wily skills to convince the people he possessed supernatural powers. He was thinking to himself, "If I revive this salmon I will be a very famous person." He stepped over it four times, and just as he was stepping over the fifth time, he pushed the salmon with the tip of his toe to make it appear as though it moved. He announced

loudly, "Oh, look, my people, I made the salmon come to life. Did you see it move?" But the people were wise to the ways of Coyote and they paid him no attention.

Finally, Old Man Rattlesnake arrived. Painfully he crawled over the salmon four times. The fifth time something magical happened! Grandfather disappeared into the salmon and the salmon woke up and came back to life and the salmon came back to the rivers. The people learned their lesson well and took care to protect their salmon from then on.

Today when you catch a salmon, and you are preparing it for eating or preserving, if you break the spine you will find a white membrane inside. That is old Man Rattlesnake who gave life back to the salmon.

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WHY THE SALMON COME TO THE SQUAMISH WATERS

A story from the Squamish Indians in British Columbia

Long ago when animals and human beings were the same, there were four brothers who went about doing good.

Coming to the Squamish Indians one time, they were persuaded by the chief to stay a while in his village. Knowing the wonder-working powers of the brothers, the chief said to them, "Won't you bring the salmon people to our shores? We are often short of food. We know that salmon is good, but they never come to our waters."

"We will persuade the salmon People," replied the oldest brother, "if we can find out where they live. We shall have to ask Snookum, the sun."

After a good deal of struggle and using a few tricks, the brothers got the Sun to tell them where to look for the Salmon People. "The home of the salmon is a long way off in that direction," replied Sun, pointing toward the west. "If you want to visit them, you must first prepare much medicine and take it with you. Then all will be well."

The brothers let the Sun go and he flew off into the clouds. After gathering many herbs and making much medicine, they said to the Squamish people, "Get out your canoes and make ready for a long journey. At sunrise tomorrow we will set out for a visit with the Salmon People."

Next morning they all started westward. For many days they paddled, and finally they came near an island. There they saw what seemed to be a village. Smoke of all colors rose into the clouds. "This seems to be the country we are looking for," said the brothers. "Sun told us that this is the home of the Salmon People."

So the paddlers took the canoes to the beach, which was very broad and smooth. All the Squamish people went toward the village, the four brothers carrying the medicine with them. They gave some of the medicine to Spring Salmon, the chief of the village. As a result, he was friendly toward the whole party.

In the stream behind the village, Spring Salmon kept a fish-trap. Shortly before the visitors had landed, the chief had directed four of his young people, two boys and two girls, to go into the water and swim up the creek into the salmon trap. Obeying his orders, they had drawn their blankets up over their heads and walked into the sea. As soon as the water reached their faces, they became salmon. They leaped and played together, just as the salmon do in the running season, and frolicked their way toward the trap in the creek.

So when the time came to welcome the strangers with a feast, Chief Spring Salmon ordered others of his people to go to the salmon trap, bring back the four fish they would find there, and clean and roast them for the guests. When the salmon were cooked, the chief invited his guests to eat.

"Eat all you wish," he said, " but do not throw away any of the bones. Be sure to lay them aside carefully. Do not destroy even a small bone"

The Squamish and the brothers gladly accepted the invitation, partook freely of the roasted salmon, but wondered why they were asked to save the bones.

When all had finished eating, some of the young men of the salmon village carefully picked up the little piles of bones the guests had made, took them to the beach, and threw them into the sea. A few minutes later the four young people who had earlier gone into the water re-appeared and joined the others. For four days the Chief thus entertained his guests with salmon feasts.

The care taken with the bones at each meal excited the curiosity of one of the visitors. On the fourth day he secretly kept back some of the bones and hid them. At the close of the meal, the rest of the salmon bones were collected in the usual manner and cast into the sea. Immediately afterwards, four young people came out of the white water. But one of them was covering his face with his hands.

Approaching the salmon chief the youth said, "Not all of the bones were collected. I do not have any for my cheeks and nose." Turning to his guests, the salmon chief asked, "Did any of you mislay any of your salmon bones? Some are missing." And he pointed to the face of the young man.

Alarmed by the result of his act, the Squamish youth who had hidden the bones brought them out, pretending that he had just found them on the ground. Now all the visitors were certain that their hosts were the salmon people.

"We have come to visit you, Salmon Chief, for a special purpose," explained the oldest brother. "We came to ask you to let some of your salmon people visit Squamish waters, come up the streams of the Squamish people. My friends are poor, and they often go hungry. We shall be very grateful if your people will sometimes visit them". "I will do as you request," replied the salmon chief, "on one condition: they must throw all the bones back into the water as you have seen us do. If they will be careful with the bones, my people can return to us again after they visit you."

"We promise," said the four brothers.

"We promise," said all the Squamish people.

Then they made preparations to return to their home across the water, toward the rising sun. As they were leaving, the salmon chief said, "I will send Spring Salmon to you first in the season. After them I will send the Sockeye, then the Coho, then the Dog-Salmon, and last of all the Humpback."

Ever since that time, long ago, different kinds of salmon, in that order, have come to the Squamish waters, to the sea, into the straits, and into the streams. And in the days of old, before the coming of the white people, the Indians were always very careful to throw the bones of the salmon back into the water.

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TSI - LAAN (Deep Water)

A Yakima Indian legend

(Once there was more than enough game, plants, and fish of every kind for the people. to eat. But they took their wealth for granted and were rude to Spilyay (coyote) when he offered them more food. Consequently, they lost almost everything they had. This is the story I will tell you.)

There was a time that coyote was going around telling the animal world that there was going to be a change. He told them, "We are going to be reduced in power. There are others coming who are going to be rulers over all of us, and over all this country." Coyote was talking about the new people, the people with two legs - people we now call native Americans.

So he began to prepare. One day, coyote came up the Columbia River to the Chelan River. He looked it over and felt there was something he should do here. He asked his "power" what he should do (the power or counselors were his five sisters which he carried around inside of him). The sisters told him that there were no fish in the Chelan River that he should fix it so the fish could swim up the river. At that time the Chelan River was too swift and the salmon could not go up the river.

Coyote decided to build steps with rocks for the salmon to swim up the river. He widened a narrow gorge for them to swim through. He made a deep pool under the falls so the salmon could rest up before they swam up river.

And that is not all the coyote did! When he came up to Mud Flats, he found that the river was too shallow, so he built a high rocky cliff and a rapids and made another little pool for the fish to rest. Coyote was very busy. He traveled to many places, fixing streams

and rivers so that the salmon could come and spawn. He did this for the new people.

But one day while coyote was working on a place called Dry Lake, he left his canoe on the shore. He had seen a pretty girl living with the new people. He told the people, "I want the most beautiful princess you have in your village and I'll fix up a lot of places where you can catch many fish. I'll even make places where you can dry your own fish." But the people told him, "We don't need your fish. We will not give you our prettiest girl. We have enough game here to live on. We have mountain goats, mountain lion, game birds, quail, grouse and turtle doves and we have bear and deer. We don't need your fish."

Coyote (who was known for a having a very bad temper, as well as being a trickster), grew angry. He had worked very hard to make places for the salmon to live so that the new people would have fresh fish to eat. So he started back and began destroying everything that he had created. He destroyed all of the fishing sites, drove out all the fish from the spawning grounds, and he made the water holes dry up. He left his canoe in the Chelan River, but so that no one would get any use out of it, he turned it into stone (there is a cliff there now). He took back everything that was worthwhile.

Now most of the lakes have only small fish. Coyote said, "they can have a few minnows, but there will never be any more big fish". This is why many places in North Central Washington are without Salmon. The only way to get fish in many lakes is by planting them there.

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