

How got their



people mouths



By Penelope Kielpinski

Long ago in the Columbia River Gorge of the Pacific Northwest, there lived some huge animal-people called demigods. The most clever and powerful of all the demigods was Coyote the Trickster. Coyote had been given magical powers by the Great Spirit. He could change himself into any form, appearing as a young maiden in one instant or a sly fox in the next.

Coyote had helped to prepare the land for the coming of people by stealing fire from a nearby volcano. Knowing that the people would have no fur to keep them warm, Coyote also stole summer, to warm the frosty earth for a few months each year.

When the Cascade Indians came to live by the Columbia River, their faces were smooth from their noses to their chins. They had no mouths. The men hunted and fished, and the women prepared the food, but they did not eat. Their bodies were nourished by smelling food, and so they developed a keen sense of smell. The Indian people were not unhappy, but they wondered why they were the only creatures in the land without mouths. They discussed their fate in sign language.

When Coyote saw these people without mouths, he was very distressed. He thought that it was not right that these people would

never know the pleasures of tasting or using their voices or laughing. The Great Spirit had created plants and animals before people, so that the humans would have something to eat. Coyote did not believe that people without mouths could be a true part of the Great Spirit's plan. Perhaps the great Spirit was hurrying so to finish creation that he forgot their mouths.

Coyote stood before the Indians and said, "Let me cut mouths into your faces for you. Then you can

howled in broad daylight.

Coyote was obviously so pleased to have a mouth that he finally convinced the Indians to let him carve mouths in their faces. He gathered the squaws, chiefs and children far up the Deschutes River at the base of Mt. Multnomah. Coyote ordered the men to build a huge fire at the base of the black cliffs. The squaws threw pots of cold water from the river onto the hot cliffs, which made the black rocks explode into tiny splinters. It was these pieces

It took Coyote many days to complete his work. His right hand became so tired that it would often lean against the Indians' faces, flattening their noses. At last he awakened the people and warned them not to eat or talk until their mouths were healed. Those who were impatient and tried to talk found that their mouths drooped at the corners permanently.

The Indians developed a language of sounds for speaking with their new mouths. Mothers heard their babies cry. A great celebration feast was prepared. With pointed sticks, the women gathered wappato roots and camas roots along the river. The children picked huckleberries, salmon berries, mushrooms, ferns, thistles, and skunk cabbage. The men fished for salmon and hunted for elk and deer.

The Indians were so delighted with their new mouths that they elected Coyote as their spokesman to the Great Spirit. They praised him in summer, the season in which the sun had brought strong odors to their food, and again in winter, when they could enjoy eating the food that they had stored.

The Great Spirit, well pleased with Coyote's helpfulness to the Cascade Indians, gave him an extra-wide mouth to complement his long, pointed nose.

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taste your food and hear each other's laughter."

"No," signed the biggest chief with his hands. "We are afraid that you might make mistakes and injure us."

"You see," answered Coyote with a twinkle in his eye, "I can put these huckleberries in my mouth and let the juice run down my throat. I can talk to the beavers about the white man's boat. Or I can throw my head back and sing to the moon." Whereupon, he tossed his nose into the air and

of chert that Coyote used to carve the new mouths for the Indians.

Coyote ordered the Indians to lie down in groups, according to tribes and families. Using his magic powers from the Great Spirit, he put all the people into a deep sleep. At first he cut only straight lines, but as he studied each individual face, he realized that the person's soul was reflected there. So Coyote began to vary the shapes of the mouths so that they might reflect the kind of soul within.