

Legends—



Lessons for living

Before the arrival of human beings, "animal people" inhabited the world. In many ways they were like human beings, except they often had unique animal powers.

The "animal people" prepared the world for the coming of human beings. They helped make the world habitable for humans and established fundamental moral and social patterns that characterize human life as Indian people know it.

Legends recount the activities of the "animal people" as the world was being formed and made ready for humans and the stories also show interaction between humans and the "animal people" as humans begin to inhabit the world.

Legends are accounts of personal experience, varying from person to person in the telling. Some of the legends are historical narratives while others are popular tales or jokes. Many have their content and telling fixed by tradition.

Most prominent among the characters in legends is Coyote. He has two sides: one is a self-indulgent buffoon, always seeking food or women and foolishly getting himself into one comical scrape after another; the other is a shaper and transformer of the world, changing the environment so that it is fit for human beings. In many legends, he is actually the law-giver, laying down the code by which human beings are to live. He can be both of these in a single story.

Legends are often referred to as "Coyote Stories" because of Coyote's distinction. This term is applied even when Coyote does not appear in the story.

Traditionally, legends are told only during the winter months. If told out of season some retribution for violation of the tradition may occur. The practicality of this seasonal activity correlates with the work of the people. Legend-telling during the spring, summer or fall would be a

distraction when it is time to gather and prepare food and time to maintain life and culture in other aspects. In winter, time was available to listen to the tales about Coyote and the "animal people."

In the past, legends were told by older members of the extended family. Children were the primary audience although adults also listened. The audience was expected to be attentive to the story and respond appropriately after sentences and phrases were spoken. When the narrator no longer heard the responses, the story ended and the children were sent to bed. Children were expected to remember the stories and to retell them accurately the next morning.

Legends were sometimes very long, extending over several nights. Only within the past few decades have they been abridged.

The telling of legends is an art, offering many possibilities for expression and drama that often cannot be attained in writing. Legend tellers are performers, acting out their legends.

Entertainment was a primary reason for telling legends, but they do more than that. Legends did and still do help inculcate moral and social values. They embody lessons that young people are expected to learn and live by. The scrapes that Coyote gets himself into, for instance, are invariably the result of his own foolishness. Legends warn against such behavior. In legends, the audience can hear about wild and licentious behavior and still retain notions of the limits of proper behavior. The legends also provide positive role models such as Eagle, who is always shown to be virtuous and reap the rewards of good actions.

Legends also help to explain natural phenomena and geographical features. Questions such as, "Why do bears have short tails?" or "Where did the hot springs at Kah-Nee-Ta originate?" are explained in these stories. Although the stories cannot provide a scientific explanation, the natural

features provide an opportunity for storytellers to offer moral lessons. Natural phenomena furnish an anchor for the stories.

A story of Bear's short tail will be easily remembered, and the warning against vanity and laziness recalled along with it. The rock formations at Kah-Nee-Ta and the stories related to them will remind those who heard the legends of the moral lessons implied in the stories. The legends endow the natural world with great moral and spiritual significance.

Unfortunately, legends are no longer a regular part of children's upbringing and family life, although many people still remember the stories and pass them on to their children. When legends are told, they are often told in English rather than in the Indian language.

The importance of legends as both entertainment and moral instruction is still recognized, however. At the Warm Springs Culture and Heritage Department, legends are being recorded in both Indian language and in English. The collected legends are then being taken into the classroom in a curriculum guide which teachers can use when telling stories to children. According to Early Childhood Education curriculum coordinator Normandie Phelps, legends in the classroom "help maintain, preserve and create appreciation" for the Indian culture as well as provide entertainment and help teach moral lessons.

Teachers are encouraged to become familiar with the moral lessons of a legend and to make students aware of those lessons as the story is told. Indian words are incorporated into the legend to help students become familiar with them.

The expressions of culture and society found in legends help young people know their own tribe and other Indian tribes, and to know people around the world. Legends also give relevance in the modern world to traditional Indian wisdom.

Illustrations and information found in this special Spillyay Tymoo insert are part of the Warm Springs Early Childhood Curriculum developed by the Warm Springs Culture and Heritage Department and Interface Network, Inc. of Portland. Warm Springs contributors include: Nina Rowe, former Culture and Heritage Department director; Hank Morrison, tribal linguist; Art McConville, Jr., legend illustrator; Indian Language Consultants Betty Lou Lucio, Ada Sooksooit, Margaret Boise, Alice Florendo, Madeline McInturff, Gladys Thompson; and, storyteller Phillip Kah-clamat.