

**A REVIEW OF ORAL HISTORY INFORMATION
OF THE CONFEDERATED TRIBES OF THE
UMATILLA INDIAN RESRVATION**

By

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Introduction

Upon the Columbia Plateau, oral histories have been and will always be an integral part of Indian life. They are highly valued, sought after, and exchanged by people during gatherings. They are passed down from one generation to the next, usually in the language of the tribe. They are told and retold without embellishment, for to change an oral history or legend would be to interrupt the flow of things, cause something evil to happen, and change the story's meaning.

Each legend or "story" has a specific place or time to be told. Some are winter stories, not to be related during any other time of year. Some are used to teach the morals and disciplines of the tribe to the young people. Some are used to relate and explain the history of the people. Others are even older and more important, these explain the geography and geology of the land and how it is related to the spirit world.

The science of studying Native Americans

To many of the readers, it is inconceivable that people could possibly know what happened 12,000 years ago without going to school or reading an encyclopedia. Non-Indian people believe that we only learn past events from people living on earth. For generations, they have forgotten who their real teachers are. They have lost what the Indians have retained since the beginning of time. They have forgotten to listen. To fill that void of knowledge, they depend on science to organize their world and tell about major geological events. They have come to depend on science as the only way to know things. They believe it is truth. Science is a very selfish thing. It rules out all other ways of knowing the world, is constantly hungry for resources, and is never satisfied. It depends upon the curiosity of individuals and the unknown for its survival. For Indian people science is a greedy monster feeding on our truth but seeing it through different eyes. Science comes up with few answers, but always more questions. The confusion of a few people seeking unknown answers can cause a great amount of pain and suffering for the Indian people. This is why we call science a monster and in our oral histories the monster is always defeated. Our intentions are not to insult, but to share the way we feel.

These stories were pulled out only to show the reader that our lives and teachings go back before the time of the claim we are making. They are not meant to convince the reader of the credibility of our teachings. But, they are there to show the relationships of our beliefs to the land. This is what you call "cultural affiliation".¹

Creation, We Are the Land

In the beginning, there were no people on the land, but the world was filled with animal spirits who walked upright. One important animal being was Coyote, the son of the Great Spirit. He was a wise being, but was always playing tricks on others, and had a habit of getting himself into trouble. The tribes of the CTUIR, as other Plateau tribes, explain their origin and their relationship to the area through creation legends that center around Coyote.

In one such story, Coyote fought with a monster Porcupine who called himself a Great Killer. Porcupine had killed many animals and was touting how important and strong he was. Coyote fought with him, and killed him. Then he said:

"You cannot be a 'Killer' all the time because human beings will soon arrive and take possession of the land. Women fold will be after your quills. They will corner you and club you to death. They will dye your quills with colors to decorate their buckskin dresses and leggings, as well as bags. It will also be used to decorate the shirt and leggings of the men fold. Your body will rot where you lay as your flesh cannot be eaten."

He then told Porcupine that from that time on his kind will always be weak and humbled.

Explaining the creation of the tribes upon the Columbia Plateau, a chief was quoted as saying:

"God created the Indian country and it was like he spread out a big blanket. He put the Indians on it...and that was the time the river started to run. Then God created fish in this river and put deer in the mountains...Then the Creator gave us Indians life; we walked, and as soon as we saw the game and fish we knew they were made for us...we grew and multiplied as a people."

How the people were created is told with only regional geographic variation. In all aspects of the legend, Coyote was the one who brought the tribes into being. Many times after that, he was to save the people from destruction by other monster spirits. One widely-told creation story was about Coyote and the Swallowing Monster:

Coyote was building a fish ladder by tearing down the waterfall at Celilo, so the salmon could go upstream for the people to catch. He was told a monster had swallowed all the people upriver. So, Coyote went to the Clearwater and was inhaled by the monster. There he found all the animals and people that the monster had consumed. In his clever

¹ Translating and explaining the legends in modern Euro-American language terms is very difficult, and sometimes will create errors. To help in our understanding of these legends, brackets [] will be included where needed.

ways, Coyote had the people build a fire in the monster's body with bones, while he cut at the monster's heart with stone knives he had brought along. Eventually, the monster died and the people and animals escaped threw the creature's orifices. Coyote sprinkled the monster's blood on the bones of those people who had died and brought them back to life. Then he carved up the monster and through the parts to the various areas, destining and forenaming the people: Coeur d'Alene, Cayuse, Pend Oreilles, Flathead, Blackfeet, Crow, Sioux, et al. He washed his hands to create the Nez Perce and gave them power.

After Coyote met and killed another monster, *Wish-Poosh*, the Big Beaver (which is related later in this report), he carved up the body of the monster and created the tribes, designating where they were to live and what they were to be.

From the body he made the people who live along the shores of the Big River and the streams that flow into it. From the lower part of the body he made the Chinook Indians of the coast. Clark (1953: 172-176) quotes Coyote: "You shall live near the mouth of the Big River and shall be traders. You shall always be short and fat and have weak legs.

From the legs he made the Klickitat Indians, Again Coyote spoke (ibid): "You shall live along the rivers that flow down from the big whit mountain north of Big River. You shall be swift of foot and keen of wit, famous runners and great horsemen."

From the arms he made the Cayuse Indians, and Coyote said (ibid): "You shall live along the Big River. You shall be powerful with bow and arrows and with war clubs."

From the ribs he made the Yakima Indians. Coyote declared: "You shall live near the new Yakima River, east of the mountains. You shall be the helpers and the protectors of all the poor people."

From the head he created the Nez Perce Indians. Coyote decreed: "You shall live in the bellies of the Kookooskia and Wallowa rivers. You shall be men of brains, great in council and in speechmaking. You shall also be skillful horsemen and brave warriors."

Then he gathered up the hair, blood and waste and hurled them far eastward over the big mountains. Coyote decreed: "You shall be the Snake River Indians. You shall be people of blood and violence. You shall be buffalo hunters and shall wander far and wide."

We Hunted the Monsters

Mammoths and mastodons roamed the land, and the people knew them and hunted them. Over and over again archaeologists are finding proof that megafauna and humans co-existed. Many Paleo-Indian kill sites have been found throughout the North American continent to support this theory.

A simple pictograph on a basalt boulder in a remote spot overlooking the Snake River near the Oregon-Idaho border, sports the image of a tusked elephant. The pictograph is old, the image faint but recognizable².

On the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation stands a tall, basalt rock that has the general shape of an elephant. Oral histories of the Cayuse tribe explain the rock by telling of a battle between the great god Coyote, king of the gods, and the king of the elephants.

According to Tribal Elders, this story was handed down from the great god Coyote directly to an old Chieftain, whose wisdom was beyond any other members of the tribe, and who had the good of man in his heart. The story relates the happiness of the Cayuse people in the land along the Umatilla. Then there was plenty to eat: venison, wild berries, salmon, birds, and roots.

One day, as the hunters were tracking game, they saw all the animals fleeing to the south in great fright. The earth beneath them began to tremble and trees began to fall, then vast shapes came into view. These great things were waving snake-like shapes in front of them and making terrible trumpeting sounds as they crashed through the forest. The strange creatures tore huge trees from the canyon tops and hurled them into the valley below.

The warriors were brave, but as the creatures came closer they fled in panic to higher ground. The creatures took possession of the land and plunged into the Umatilla River. They tossed water high in the air and churned the current into mud until the frightened salmon threw themselves on the banks to die or were trampled beneath their great feet.

The Cayuse fled to the River of the North [Columbia River?] and spread the news of the strange demons that had turned the Umatilla River into a sluggish creek of mud and destroyed the land. The salmon were dead, the deer scattered, berries and roots had been uprooted and eaten by the creatures.

Coyote had been watching from his high mountaintop and had seen the beasts coming from the North to wreck havoc on the Umatilla River. He knew they had been sent by an evil spirit to harass the Cayuse. He came to the aid of his children and confronted the elephant herd, demanding that they leave the land of the Cayuse. In fear of Coyote's power, the herd obeyed and returned North. The salmon soon returned to the river, the land healed, and the people were content and fed again.

However, in the Northland, the king of the herd brooded, remembering the lush grass and the cool river where he had bathed. He slipped away on a dark night and returned to the land of the Cayuse. Coyote saw the elephant had returned and confronted him again. The King of the elephants refused to leave, testing Coyote's authority, and threatening to send for the rest of the herd. Coyote was insulted by the elephant's impudence and cursed the bull, saying that he would stand upon this spot forever, through winter's cold and summer's heat. He would be a warning to any animal that may come into the land to

² Photographed and broadcasted by Oregon Field Guide, Oregon Public Broadcasting.

harm the Cayuse. The elephant would be chained to the mountainside in solid rock, "to suffer forever and forever the pangs of remorse and the pain of great disobedience to the god Coyote of the Cayuse" (Searcey 1986:6). **To this day, there is a name in the local Sahaptin dialect, *K'walallii*, which means *big, furry monster*. Also, an old song and dance is known among the people of the CTUIR that coincides with *K'walallii*. The dancers stomp slowly and heavily along like a great herd of elephants, swaying and singing as they go.**

It is of great interest to note, in conjunction with this story, that there is a site on the Umatilla Indian Reservation known as the Mammoth Site (temporary number 96UM01FA). Two mammoth teeth were uncovered during construction of the Wildhorse Resort Golf Course. The first tooth was discovered by a tribal monitor after it was scraped by heavy construction and unloaded into a spoil pile. It has been radiocarbon dated at 11,260 years BP (Below Present). The second tooth was found *in situ* in an eroded gully approximately 40 meters from the first. It has been dated to 14,650 years BP. The association of basalt flakes of human manufacture and other bone fragments that have been uncovered in levels with these teeth has not been proven scientifically. The site is on a hill, and the teeth were buried no more than 1 - 2 m (3 to 6 ft) beneath the surface. It is quite possible that the artifacts were incorporated into the deposit at a much later time than the mammoth remains. What the site does show is the spatial if not the temporal overlap of mastodons and the people of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. The story of Elephant Rock, however, strongly suggests contemporaneity of mastodon and people.

We Lived Through the Great Floods

Geologically, the Columbia Plateau is constantly at change. The melting of the glaciers caused massive floods that scoured out the land and changed the course of the Columbia River between 12,000-20,000 years ago. These floods drowned the land, the animals and the people. Old areas were washed away, and new geographic landforms were created.

The tribes of the Columbia Plateau moved to higher ground, this being the mountain tops that rose above the glacial lakes. The legend of Coyote (Speel-yi) and Wish-Poosh (Big Beaver) explains how it was to live on the land in the times of the floods (Tucker, 1940).

As the legend goes, the country was covered with water. Only a few high ridges and the tops of the Cascade Mountains were dry. These areas were where the Indians lived. Canoes were their transportation and fish their main food. The water gradually receded until there were only lakes separated by ridges. Lakes covered the Kittitas Valley, the Selah area, Mok-see and Ahtanum, and another covered Pa-ho-ta-cute [Union Gap] to Tap-tat [Prosser] in Washington.

An evil monster, Wish-Poosh, lived in Lake Cle-Eum. He devoured everything that passed his way. He would not allow the people to fish from the lake, causing famine among the Indians.

Speel-yi in his wanderings came to the lake and heard the cries of help from the people. He fashioned a spear and tied it to his wrist. He found the monster asleep on the lake shore. Never being one to leave a sleeping monster alone, Speel-yi drove the spear into Wish-Poosh's body.

The Big Beaver, wounded and enraged, plunged to the bottom of the lake. Speel-yi was dragged along by the rope bound to his wrist. They tore a gap through the mountain and came swimming into the Kittitas Valley. They again broke through a mountain, leaving a canyon behind. They swam through the lake covering Mok-see and Ahtanum, and crashed through Ahtanum ridge, forming Union Gap. They plowed through the valley, creating the Yakima River channel. All the while Speel-yi was grabbing at trees and rocks to slow the pace of the monster as it tore its way along. When they reached the great icy mountains, they knocked a great hole completely through it (Bridge of the Gods) and created Cascade Falls.

Coyote fell unconscious. When he revived, he found himself on the shore of the Great Salt Water (mouth of the Columbia River). Wish-Poosh was dead. He cut the monster up into small pieces and threw them to the four cardinal points saying that from then on all of the Big Beaver's descendants would be small and helpless, scattered all over the continent. Their skins would be sought after by the people who would pursue them in every clime until they are wiped from the face of the earth.

On his way back to Lake Cle-Elem, Speel-yi saw the mighty muddy river flowing through the tunnel he and the monster had made. All the waters from all sides were flowing into this great channel and making land visible everywhere. The lakes that had covered the valleys of the Yakima had disappeared, leaving the ground wet. Indians were wading in the mud to the new ground.

This story of Beaver and Coyote relates how the Bretz Floods would have looked to those who witnessed them over 12,000 years ago (Baldwin 1976:52). Relating about Beaver and his death throws; how the trees and rocks were being destroyed along the river, can be interpreted as the roaring and rolling of the flood waters down the Columbia River Gorge. How many villages were destroyed and how many people were killed and swept away by the floods is not known, but can be imagined through these oral histories.

Geologists today will tell you that the glacial floods were not a one time event, but occurred many times in the past 20,000 years. Other stories tell of valleys filling with water, and the Nez Perce taking refuge on Steptoe Butte, which they called *Yamustus*, or "*Holy Mountain*". Many people were drowned, but those who climbed the mountain were saved. A water line used to be below the top marking where the high water crested (Clark 1953:51-52).

Some of the people along the Clearwater River were saved because they climbed a high mountain east of them. However, those many who could not or did not reach the top drowned. The crest of that mountain is hollow, like a bowl. The water came nearly to the rim of this bowl but stopped there. All who reached the bowl were saved. Stone mortars, pestles, and other grinding implements have been found there, as well as horn spoons and other daily use items.

The Nez Perce have another, similar mountain they call *Ya-ma-tas*. It is located near Moscow, Idaho, and it is where the Nez Perce took refuge at the time of the great flood. All the other places but that one were under water. You can still see up on that mountain the stone in which they pounded their *kouse* roots. People say it looks just like one of their old mortars.

A Tribal Elder related the following story about this mountain (Clark, n.d.).

"Steptoe Butte stood above the waters at the time of the great flood, and many Indians were there saved from drowning. Below the top, there used to be a water line, the mark of where the water had once been. The Nez Percés call the butte *Yamustus*, which means "Holy Mountain." About 1910, I went by train to the Spokane Fair. As we approached Steptoe, the old people crowded to one side so that they could see *Yamustus*."

Another Tribal Elder relates a similar story about a mountain called *LaLec*, now known as Rattlesnake Mountain on the Hanford Reservation.

"This man, here, he said and told his people, 'It's gonna be flood! It's gonna be flood all over the country! You're gonna get punishment. We must make a boat or something.'

"And the one man he make a boat and some of them help him. And he made some kind of boat and then it rained and rained. Pretty soon water was all over. And he put that in the water and got on. All the land flat, flat, flat all over. And none of them lived. And you see, this side of Richland, that big hill?

"I call that hill, I don't remember... '*LaLec*'. All over, and we used to go up on horseback there. Everything was there. Everything it was there, even huckleberry bushes. I was about 8, 7, 9 years old. We used to go up there by horseback. We used to live by Horn Dam."

The reference this elder made of huckleberry bushes being on Rattlesnake Mountain tells us that the climate and ecology has changed drastically in the past century. Today this area is sagebrush shrub steppe.

The early missionaries who lived and worked among the tribes during the immigration of White settlers to the Columbia Plateau heard many of these legends and stories. When the missionaries spoke to the tribes about the deluge of Noah, they were not telling the people anything new. The legends of Coyote and the mountaintop villages were things the people knew about, so another flood in another land was something they could relate to.

The Reverend Myron Eells reported in 1878, "When the earliest missionaries came among the Spokanes, Nez Percés, and Cayuses, they found that those Indians had their traditions of a flood, and that one man and his wife were saved on a raft. Each of those three tribes, also, together with the Flathead tribes, had their separate Ararat in connection with the event. In several traditions the flood came because of the wickedness of the people."

The tribes know of animals that were made extinct by the cleansing glacial floods. This class of animals are called "*anakwi Kakyama*" or "thrown down animals". The Creator cleansed the earth of these "*anakwi Kakyama*" by sending a great flood, or "*Yaway naat*" to kill all evil. This water, the "*anakwi Chuush*" or "thrown down water" washed away the evil animals. Some of those animals who were saved and returned were: *wilaaps* (sturgeon); *K'astila* (crawfish); *Kwashla* (sculpin); and *xlithlawit* (horned toads). In legend, these "survivors" were *Twatima* or shamans of immense power.

We Lived Through Volcanic Eruptions

Volcanoes may have contributed to many climatic changes that have occurred on the Columbia Plateau and elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest. Major eruptions of Mt. Hood have occurred:

Old Maid Period, 1760-1810,

Zig Zag and Sandy Period, 600-400 years ago (debris flows),

Timberline Period, 1800-1400 years ago (pyroclastic and debris flows),

15,000-12,000 years ago (major mountain building, pyroclastic and debris).

This story, related to a U.S. Army Lieutenant by an Indian Scout (Scott 1929:75-80), is about the eruption of Mt. Hood. It most likely refers to the oldest of these eruptions because the ecological changes brought about by the eruptions are very extensive. The story is quoted directly, and spellings of Native American terms have been retained.

"The *Sh-shu-le-pus* (Cayuses) are a branch of the great Nez Perce nation (Ne-me-pus), who call themselves *Te-Taw-ken* (we the people), and they say at one time all the fire in the world was inside of Mt. Hood. From the top of the mountain fire and smoke used to come as from a chimney, and all inside of the mountain was a great lake of fire. *Hon-ea-woat* (the Creator) had given this fire into the care of an old demon, and he had under him many demons--more than can be counted or even thought of. He and his devil army kept fire away from everyone; from all animals and from all men. The animals and birds did not need fire, and the Ne-me-pus did not need fire while they were animals; and they did not need fire while they could change from animals to men and back to animals."

The Ne-me-pus had a great dance and feast and shed their animal skins on the prairie. *Hon-ea-woat* sent a great eagle down to carry away the skins. The eagle darkened the sky with his wings and made the air shake [ash covering the sun and earthquake from an eruption?]. The Ne-me-pus ran for their skins but they were gone. They began to kill each other and take the skins of the dead to wear for warmth [cold from volcanic greenhouse effect?]. Two *Sh-shu-le-pus* men decided to steal fire from the demon of the fire mountain. At that time the country was "bare of trees, covered only with grass, as the Snake River country is now."

Disguising himself as a log, *Ipskayt* crept close enough to the fire in the mountain to steal some fire. He ran back through the tunnel [lava tube?] with demons following. "They crowded into this tunnel so it was like a swollen stream under drift logs; no more could come till the first had gone through [liquid lava flow?]. *Ipskayt* burst into the light and gave the fire to his friend *Takhstspul*." *Takhstspul* fled down the mountain side with the

fire. "After him followed the Fire Demon, still calling his devils; and they flocked from everywhere, thicker than blackbirds or bees. They darkened the sun [ash cloud from volcano?]. Takhstspul fled so fast he melted the snow as he ran [pyroclastic event]. The John Day river marks his path. But very fast also came the Fire Demon." Where Takhstspul stepped the Columbia river flowed into it. Takhstspul made his stand and raised his hands for help from the Great Spirit. Instantly, the Great Spirit turned all the fire demons into pine trees, "that is why the trees are so thick high up on the mountains; those which scatter out toward the river are the demons that were ahead of the others [a change in the ecology of the area, from grasslands to pine forests: climatic change and soil change].

As we can see today, with the eruption of Mt. Saint Helens and other major volcanic events, the time of the major volcanic eruptions is a time of colder climate. Oral histories support this with stories about the tribal people needing fire for warmth, but not knowing how to find it. This story is called "How the Nez Perces Got Fire," and was told to Charles Erskine Scott Wood, U.S. Army Lieutenant by Reuben, an Army dispatch runner (Wood, 1929: 47-49).

"There was a time when the *Chu-te-pa-lus* had no fires. They tore raw flesh as the wolf does and ate the raw camas as the bear does; and in the winter they were very cold. Fire belonged to the Great Spirit. He kept it in the sky in the fire bags, which were black clouds. When the great bags bumped against each other there was terrible thunder, and through the rent made in the cloud the fire inside could be seen. All the tribe cried out for fire; and especially the little children who were cold, and the women, who were sorry to see their children freezing to death. The medicine men drummed the great drum and tried to get even a spark of fire; but they could not, and the people were very angry."

Oral histories and stories come from area tribes about the explosion of Mount Mazama and the subsequent creation of Crater Lake. Lalek, a Klamath chief, told a legend to a young soldier in 1865. He emphasized that the story was ancient, told when his people lived in stone houses.

The story is about *Llao*, Chief of the Below World; *Skell*, Chief of the Above World; and *Loha*, a beautiful young woman. Llao begged Loha to return with him to his lodge in the Underworld. He promised her eternal life, but she refused to go. Her people would not force Loha to go, so he thundered angrily and threatened to destroy them with fire. Skell saw what was going on and descended from heaven to Mt. Shasta.

In the battle between Llao and Skell the sky glowed and turned dark, the earth shook and fire flowed from Llao's mountain to burn the forests. The people were driven from their homes and forced to flee into the waters of Klamath Lake to the south. Two brave medicine men hurled themselves into the fiery mouth of the mountain in an attempt to save their people. Skell shook the earth many times and finally caused Llao's mountain to crash down upon him. When the dark clouds of ash cleared and light returned, the peak of the mountain was gone and was replaced by a giant hole. The fire was also gone, and the caldera gradually filled with rainwater, forming Crater Lake. The maid Loha became what is now known as Wizard Island.

This story closely relates the geologic event that occurred to form the caldera of Crater Lake. It states that Mt. Mazama did not blow itself apart, but emptied much of its magma reservoir, allowing the volcanic cone to collapse into itself. It also interprets the frequent eruptions of Mt. Shasta over the last 10,000 years as frequent visits to earth from Skell (Lund 1995:3). It is of interest to note that the Klamath word for the Chief of the Below World, *Llao* is similar to the Sahaptin word for "it burns," or "*Ilusha*," or the derivative "*lu*".

Another area story about Mt. Hood relates the devastation that occurred to the land after a major eruption. It also tells about the tenacity of the people who live in such a geologically dynamic area (Clark, 1953).

"Years and years ago, the mountain peak south of Big River [Columbia] was so high that when the sun shone on it south side a shadow stretched north for a day's journey. Inside the mountain, evil spirits had their lodges. Sometimes the evil spirits became so angry that they threw out fire and smoke and streams of hot rocks. Rivers of liquid rock ran toward the sea, killing all growing things and forcing the Indians to move far away.

"In those days the Indians also were taller than they are now. They were as tall as the pine and fir trees that cover the hills, and their chief was such a giant that his warriors could walk under his outstretched arms. He was the bravest and the strongest of his tribe.

"One night a voice spoke to the chief in a dream, 'If you do not conquer the evil spirits that live in the mountain, they will some day throw out a river of fire. The river will flood the land, all the people will be drowned, and your country will be ruined.'

"The chief knew that he must protect his people. He would fight the demons alone. So he took the long journey to the top of the mountain. There he found a crater, a big hole, which was the home of evil spirits. Scattered around it were some large stones. The chief picked them up and threw them into the crater.

"Muttering with anger, the mountain spirits heated the rocks red hot and hurled them back again. The rocks rose toward the sky and then fell a long distance away. The chief hurled more stones into the crater. The demons spewed up hot rocks and smoke and fire.

"For many days the battle continued. Then the chief, resting for a moment, looked down upon the land he had left—the land that had once been green and beautiful. The rivers were choked, the forest and the grass had disappeared, the animals and the people had fled.

"The heart of the chief broke with sorrow. He had failed to protect his people, and his land was a blackened ruin. He sank upon the ground and was soon buried by the streams of hot rocks.

"But some of his people had fled to the tops of the near-by mountains and so were not covered by the rocks. When the earth cooled and the grass grew again, they returned to their country. In time there was plenty of food once more. But the children, starved and weak for so long, never became as tall and strong as their parents and grandparents had