

Native American Stories, Myths, and Legends

Iroquois Creation Myth

Long before the world was created there was an island, floating in the sky, upon which the Sky People lived. They lived quietly and happily. No one ever died or was born or experienced sadness. However one day one of the Sky Women realized she was going to give birth to twins. She told her husband, who flew into a rage. In the center of the island there was a tree which gave light to the entire island since the sun hadn't been created yet. He tore up this tree, creating a huge hole in the middle of the island. Curiously, the woman peered into the hole. Far below she could see the waters that covered the earth. At that moment her husband pushed her. She fell through the hole, tumbling towards the waters below.

Water animals already existed on the earth, so far below the floating island two birds saw the Sky Woman fall. Just before she reached the waters they caught her on their backs and brought her to the other animals. Determined to help the woman they dove into the water to get mud from the bottom of the seas. One after another the animals tried and failed. Finally, Little Toad tried and when he reappeared his mouth was full of mud. The animals took it and spread it on the back of Big Turtle. The mud began to grow and grow and grow until it became the size of North America.

Then the woman stepped onto the land. She sprinkled dust into the air and created stars. Then she created the moon and sun.

The Sky Woman gave birth to twin sons. She named one Sapling. He grew to be kind and gentle. She named the other Flint and his heart was as cold as his name. They grew quickly and began filling the earth with their creations.

Sapling created what is good. He made animals that are useful to humans. He made rivers that went two ways and into these he put fish without bones. He made plants that people could eat easily. If he was able to do all the work himself there would be no suffering.

Flint destroyed much of Sapling's work and created all that is bad. He made the rivers flow only in one direction. He put bones in fish and thorns on berry bushes. He created winter, but Sapling gave it life so that it could move to give way to Spring. He created monsters which his brother drove beneath the Earth.

Eventually Sapling and Flint decided to fight till one conquered the other. Neither was able to win at first, but finally Flint was beaten. Because he was a god Flint could not die, so he was forced to live on Big Turtle's back. Occasionally his anger is felt in the form of a volcano.

How Maple Sugar came into the World

After Nanahboozhoo had given the Wild Roses their thorns, he wandered about the world playing pranks on the Little People of Darkness, so that they determined to be revenged on him and kill his old Grandmother Nokomis. Nanahboozhoo loved his grandmother dearly, and when he knew that the Little People wished to hurt her, he took Nokomis upon his strong back, and flew away with her to a forest.

Wonderful was the forest, for it was in the Autumn of the year, and the Maple Trees were all yellow, green, and crimson. From a distance they looked like a great fire. It happened that the Little People followed after Nanahboozhoo, and when they saw the bright colors of the Maples,

through the haze of Indian Summer, they thought the whole world was in flames, and turned back and hid in their holes.

Nanahboozhoo was so pleased with the beautiful Maples for having saved his grandmother from the Little People that he decided to live among the trees, and he made old Nokomis a wigwam of their brightest branches.

One day, some Indians came seeking Nanahboozhoo to ask for help. They found him in his grandmother's wigwam among the yellow, green, and crimson Maples, where he received them kindly.

"O Nanahboozhoo," said they, "the Indians of the Far South have a delicious sweet thing they call Sugar, and we have nothing of the kind. We sent runners with gifts to the South to get an abundance of Sugar for our people; but some of the runners were killed and others wounded. Tell us, therefore, O Nanahboozhoo, how we may make Sugar for ourselves."

At first Nanahboozhoo was greatly puzzled, for he had been in the Southland and knew how hard it was to make Sugar. But old Nokomis, when she heard what the Indians asked, added her pleadings to theirs, for she too had tasted Sugar and longed for more. Of course Nanahboozhoo could not refuse to help, so he thought a while, and said:

"Since the beautiful Maples were so good to Nokomis, henceforth in the Spring of the year they shall give the Indians sweet sap. And when the sap is boiled down thick and delicious, it will cool and harden into Sugar."

Then Nanahboozhoo gave the Indians a bucket made of Birchbark, and a stone tapping-gouge with which to make holes in the tree-trunks; and he shaped for them some Cedar spiles or little spouts, to put in the holes, and through which the sap might run from the trees into buckets. He told them, too, that they must build great fireplaces in the woods near the Maple groves, and when the buckets were full of sap, they must pour it into their kettles, and boil it down. And the amount of Sugar they might boil each Spring would depend on the number of Cedar spiles and Birchbark buckets they made during the Winter.

And every Springtime since, when the Frost is going out of the ground and the Arbutus blossoms under the snow, the sweet sap mounts through the trunks of the Maple Trees, and the Northern Indians gather the sap, and say, "This is the way Nanahboozhoo taught us to make Maple-Sugar!"

Coyote and Turtle Run a Race

One time, as Coyote was returning from a long and unsuccessful hunt for game, he passed the home of his old friend Turtle. Being weary and hungry and in no hurry, he decided to stop and make Turtle a visit. Turtle invited him in and offered him something to eat, as Coyote had hoped that he would. While Coyote ate, Turtle stretched himself out to rest, saying, "I am tired out. I have just come back from the races." Coyote asked "what races." "Our people have been having foot races down by the river. Have not you heard of them?" Coyote smiled at the thought of Turtle's racing and said that he had not heard of the races, and if he had he surely would have

been there. "Who won?" he asked. "I did," said Turtle. "I have never yet been beaten in a race with my people." Coyote answered, "I have never been beaten either. I wonder how a race between us would come out." "The way to find out is to have a race," Turtle said. "I am willing, if you are. When shall we have it?" Coyote answered. They determined to run the race two days hence. In the meantime Coyote had finished eating, and so, promising to come on the second day to run the race, he departed.

When he arrived home Coyote sent his son to call all of the Coyote people and announce to them that his father was going to run a race with Turtle, and that he wanted them all to come and bet heavily on the race, for of course he would defeat Turtle. As soon as Coyote had gone Turtle sent his son out to announce that his father was going to run a race with Coyote, and that he wanted all of the best runners to come to his lodge. They all came and listened to Turtle's plan to beat Coyote in the race. Turtle arose when they came in and said: "We all know that Coyote is a good runner, but he is also a cheat. He has cheated us in many ways. Let us now cheat him out of this race. Will you help me do it?" Every one present agreed to help him. Then he continued: "This is my plan. I want each one of you to put a white feather in your hair just like the one I wear, and paint yourselves to look just like me. Then station yourselves at intervals along the course. Coyote will run with his head down, as he always does. One of you will start with him, but when he has left you far behind drop down in the grass. Then the next one will jump up and run. Coyote will look up and see you ahead, then he will run until he passes you. Then the next one will jump up and run, and so on until the last one. I will be the last, and beat him over the goal." The Turtles talked over the plan, then arose and went home to prepare for the race.

The first day passed, and then the day came when they had to run the race. Early in the morning the Turtles stationed themselves along the way in the tall grass, and soon Coyote came. They began to discuss the distance they should run. Turtle wanted to run a long distance, but Coyote did not want to go a very long distance; he thought that he could beat Turtle in a short distance just as easily as in a long distance, and he did not care to tire himself. Turtle insisted, and so Coyote said that he would agree to any distance that he would mention. Many Coyotes came and began to bet on Coyote.

They started to run and all the Coyotes began to laugh, for their man was far ahead, but soon to their surprise Turtle was ahead. Coyote overtook Turtle, and then they began to laugh again. Soon they heard the Turtles cheering, and to their amazement Turtle was far in the lead. Again Coyote overtook Turtle, and again Turtle came up far in the lead. The Coyotes cheered one moment and the Turtles the next. Just as Coyote had passed Turtle and was near the goal, Turtle crossed the line, and all the Turtles set up a loud cheer. Coyote ran off in the grass, and is wondering yet how Turtle beat him in the race, and all the other Coyotes are angry at him because he lost the race and caused them to lose so many bets.

"When Bear Lost Fire"

Bear roamed through thick forests, eating sweet honey from bee hives, fishing in rushing streams, and sleeping through long winters in deep, warm caves. Strong and powerful, Bear owned Fire. Bear carried Fire everywhere, but one day Bear grew distracted by an abundance of tasty acorns. Bear set Fire on the ground, then gobbled up acorns with no thought to Fire. Soon Fire burned low and grew afraid, for Bear moved farther away under ancient trees, tossing acorns into massive jaws. "Help me!" Fire tried to burn brighter but with no success. Bear didn't hear, having spotted a beehive. Thoughts of a thick yellow comb dripping with sticky sweetness

danced in Bear's head.

"Feed me!" Fire called desperately, almost extinguished from lack of fuel. The people gathered pecans under nearby trees. They heard Fire cry out, but they knew it was dangerous to go near Bear who owned Fire. Still they could not ignore the helpless cries. "What do you eat?" the people asked, "Wood. I need wood." The people quickly gathered a piece of wood from each direction, then returned. They laid a stick across Fire toward the north. They laid a stick across Fire toward the west. They laid a stick across Fire toward the south. They laid a stick across Fire toward the east. And finally Fire blazed up. "You saved me." Fire burned brightly.

A loud roar came from under the oak trees, and Bear rushed into the clearing. The people scattered in all directions, dropping their baskets of pecans. Bear reached down to take back Fire but jerked away, burned for the first time. "Go away," Fire said. "You forgot me so I no longer know you." Bear rose up high on two legs, growling and whining, but to no avail. Fire no longer knew Bear, so the mighty beast lumbered unhappily away with no interest in acorns or honey now. "Come get me," Fire called to the people. "If you take care of me, I will take care of you." And the People came for Fire.

Corn Mill Coyote

A woman pounded corn in a favorite corn mill made from a tree trunk. Smooth with age, it was about two feet wide and three or four feet tall. She dropped corn inside and pounded it with a pole into fine meal.

As she pounded she noticed the corn disappeared faster than meal was ground. She pounded harder and faster, but she still lost more corn than she made meal. After pounding all her corn, she gathered her small portion of meal.

She waited for the next woman to pound her corn to see if the same thing happened. This woman pounded her corn but made very little meal. Now both were suspicious. They waited for the next woman. She pounded her corn, then gathered a small amount too. Now three women waited to watch the next one. This woman pounded and pounded, but the corn disappeared and little meal replaced it.

They discussed the situation, then decided something must be wrong with the corn mill. They turned the mill this way and that, and then realized it was not the same old mill they always used. One woman called for an axe to split the mill in half so they could see inside. As a woman ran to get it, the mill fell on its side and rolled around on the ground. The women jumped back in astonishment.

Coyote leaped up from what had been the corn mill and ran away.

All the women laughed. Now they understood that Coyote had hidden the old corn mill and then turned into a mill to eat all their corn.

Deer Medicine

One time the People camped at the base of a mountain near a rushing stream. Over time a person disappeared, then another. The band grew troubled and took their worries to their medicine

makers. After sweat lodge purification, after sage and sweet grass cleansing, the medicine makers held council. "I do not trust those deer," Medicine Man said. "I trust them less than you." Medicine Woman looked up at the mountain where the deer lived near a large cave. "I suspect they are stealing our people." "And keeping them in their cave." "To eat," Medicine Man said. "Our people depend on us to care for them." "And we must do so. Medicine Man and Medicine Woman walked up the mountain to the cave of the deer. Guard Deer stood near four sticks at the dark hole of an entrance. "Good morning," Medicine Woman said. "How are you?" "You look plump and well," Medicine Man said. "What food do you eat?" Medicine Woman asked. "We eat good food," Guard Deer said. "Would you like to see?" "Yes, we would." Guard Deer picked up one of the sticks and knocked on the entrance. "One fat buffalo." A buffalo trotted out. "That is impressive," Medicine Woman said. "Watch this." Guard Deer hit the entrance again. "One buffalo calf." A buffalo calf walked out. "I am really impressed," Medicine Man said. "Now you know how we get our food," Guard Deer said. "You may see no more." "Thank you," Medicine Woman said. As the medicine makers walked away, they whispered to each other. "I do not believe that is all in their cave," Medicine Man said. "I agree. We must find out what else is in there." They hid behind a large rock while they considered their problem. "Maybe we could change the sticks when Guard Deer looks the other way," Medicine Man said. "Guard Deer is too sharp." "That is true." "They must change guards soon and the entrance will be unguarded for a brief time," Medicine Woman said. "We must strike then." "Yes." Without making a sound, they worked their way back to the entrance. Concealed behind rocks and plants, they watched and waited. Soon Guard Deer stepped away to consult the next Guard Deer. They raced to the entrance. Medicine Woman grabbed a stick and hit the cave. "Two people." Two warriors walked out. Medicine Man placed his hand on the stick, and they struck again. "More men." Many men ran out of the cave. All of them carried bows with arrows in quivers on their backs. Deer erupted from all directions, but the warriors fought together to drive them back. When the battle was won by the People, most of the deer lay dead. The medicine makers turned to the deer still alive. "We are the strongest so hereafter we will eat you," Medicine Man said. "Your skin and bones, all of your body, will be used to help the People," Medicine Woman added. Guard Deer raised a head. "So be it."

Wind and Thunder Quarrel

"On this green Earth, I keep all in order," Wind said. "I do every bit of the work." "No," Thunder said. "I keep this world in proper shape. I do the work." "My power is greatest." Wind blew hard, scattering leaves and twigs to prove the point. "The Earth needs me." Thunder grew angry. "Not so much as me." "Prove it." Thunder rumbled away into the distance, refusing to remain around Wind any longer. Wind howled for a moment at being left alone, then thought better of it. "I can work by myself. I keep all in order anyway. I make the plants grow." To prove this, Wind began to blow. And blow. And blow. Yet no plants grew. Earth slowly turned from green to brown, parched by the wind and lack of rain. Finally Wind admitted that those hastily spoken words were not true. Earth needed Thunder. Wind went to Thunder. "I cannot do this alone. Earth needs us both. Together. I want you to work with me again." Thunder rumbled in agreement, then louder and louder. Soon rain fell on Earth. Plants turned green with new growth. Wind followed Thunder, happy to rustle the stalks of tall grass again. From that moment onward, Thunder and Wind worked together to take care of Earth.

The Origin of Day and Night

In the beginning the people all lived in darkness. After a time they became dissatisfied and wanted light. They called a council to discuss how they could get light. Coyote was the first to speak, and he said: "We have had enough darkness; we must now have light. It is right that we should have both and not all darkness." There was a man at that time who was a prophet, and Coyote said that he appointed the prophet to investigate and see how the people might obtain light. The prophet thought over the question and then reported:

"There are yellow, black, spotted, half-spotted, and white deer upon the earth. These deer are here for some purpose. If you kill the yellow deer, everything shall be yellow all the time. If you kill the white deer, everything shall be white all the time. If you kill the spotted one, everything shall be spotted and very bad. If you kill the black one, everything shall be black as it is now. But if you kill both the black and the white deer, then we shall have day and night. During the day everything will be white, and we can go about and hunt and visit, and during the night we can return to our homes and rest."

The people accepted the prophet's words and started out and hunted until they killed the black and white deer, and from that time we have had day and night.

Why the Turkey Gobbles

In the old times, the animals and birds liked to play ball, and they shouted and hallooed just as players do to-day.

Well, the Grouse used to have a fine voice and could shout very loud at the ball-game; but the Turkey could make no noise at all.

One day the Turkey asked the Grouse to teach him how to use his voice, and the Grouse agreed to do so in return for a ruffle of feathers to wear about his neck. The Turkey gave him a fine one, and that is how the Grouse got his collar of feathers.

Well, they began the lessons, and the Turkey learned very fast. By and by the Grouse thought it was time to try the Turkey's voice at a distance, to see how far he could shout.

"Now," said the Grouse, "do you go over by yonder tree and I'll stand on this hollow log. When I give the signal by tapping on the log, do you shout as loud as you can."

The Turkey was so eager and excited that, when the Grouse gave the signal, he tried to shout, but could not raise his voice, and all he could say was, "Gobble! Gobble! Gobble!"

And since that day, whenever the Turkey hears a noise, he can only gobble.

Lightning and the People

In the beginning Lightning lived upon the earth with the people, but he became so powerful and killed so many of the people that they feared and hated him. One time after he had become angry

and killed a number of the people, the chiefs of the tribe called a council to determine what to do with him. They decided that he could no longer live with the people, but would have to go away. Lightning pleaded to stay, but the chiefs would not change their decision and told him that he would have to go.

Not long after Lightning had gone a great monster that lived underground among the rocks began to carry away the people. They tried in every way to kill him, but could not, for he always disappeared under the ground where they could not reach him. Lightning appeared to them and told them that he would kill the monster if they would let him come back and live with them. He said that he wanted to come back to earth, and that he would kill all monsters and make the earth a safe place for the people to live on, and would not do any more harm himself if they would let him come back. The people decided to let Lightning come, because there was no one else powerful enough to kill the great monster.

The Origin of Animals

The people and animals all lived together and were the same in the beginning of the world. After a time they became too numerous and there was not food enough for all. A council was held and the chiefs determined that some should become animals and live apart from the people and be hunted by them for food. Some of the people, who lived where the big fire had burned off the grass, were rolled about in the black ashes until they became black. Again they were rolled and then they took on the form of bears. Long pieces of white stone were put upon their feet for claws and in their mouth for teeth. They were given ten lives. When killed the first time, the second life was to arise from the blood that was spilled upon the ground, and so the third life was to arise from the blood that was spilled when the bear was killed for the second time, and so on through the other lives up to the tenth. During the first life the bear was not to be fierce, but as often as he was killed and passed to another life he was to become fiercer and fiercer, until, when he came to the tenth life, he would fight, and even eat, human beings.

Some other people who lived where the long grass grew were rolled upon the earth, and when they arose they had the form of buffalo, and the grass had stuck to them and hung all like a beard under their necks. They, too, were given ten lives and then put upon the prairie to live, where man could hunt them. The deer were then made in the same way, and after them all the other animals were made.

The Lazy Boys Who Became the Pleiades

Long, long ago, in the beginning of this world, there lived an old woman with seven children, who were all boys. The boys were full of life and fun and they would go away from the others and play all the day long, and would not work, nor take time to eat but twice a day-morning and evening. When they came home in the evening their mother would scold them, and one evening when they came home late for their supper their mother would not let them have anything to eat. The boys were very angry and went back to their play and determined on the morrow to go away where they would never trouble her any more. The next morning early they went down to their playground before breakfast and began to go round and round the house, praying to the spirits to help them. At last their mother noticed and heard what they were saying, and as she watched them she noticed that their feet were off the earth, and then she knew that something was wrong, and she ran out trying to get her children, but it was too late. With every round they rose higher

and higher in the air, and were soon above the roof of the house. They circled higher and higher until they went up to the sky, where we can see them now as the Seven Stars. These seven boys who were taken to the sky were very indolent, and when the work time came they would always slip off and play. That is the reason that during the winter months the Seven Stars can be seen; but at the beginning of the spring months, at the work time, the Seven Stars are gone.