
Native American Legends and Stories of Geologic History in Oregon

Reading One: Crater Lake

Scientists think Crater Lake was formed almost 8,000 years ago when a violent eruption caused the volcano Mount Mazama to collapse. Rain and snow later filled the hole to create the deepest lake in the United States. The ancestors of the Klamath Tribes were living in Oregon when Mount Mazama erupted. The following story is adapted from one that Chief Lalek, an 80-year-old Klamath Indian, told William M. Colvig, his 19-year-old visitor in 1865.

One time when Chief of the Below World was on top of Mount Mazama, he saw and fell in love with Loha, a Klamath woman who was cherished by all who knew her. Chief of the Below World told Loha of his love and asked her to return with him to his lodge inside Mazama. There, he said, she would live forever. But the tribal wise men warned Loha that even though they also loved her, she could never, nor should she ever, want to live forever. Following their instruction, she refused Chief of the Below World by hiding from him.

When Chief of the Below World learned that the people had unanimously refused his proposal, he became furious and in a voice like thunder swore that he would destroy all the Klamath with the Curse of Fire.

The mighty form of Chief of the Above World then descended from the sky and the two spirit chiefs began a furious battle on the mountaintop. The mountain shook and crumbled. Red-hot rocks as large as the hills hurtled through the skies. Burning ash fell like rain. Chief of the Below World spewed fire from the mouth of the mountain. Fleeing in terror, the people found refuge in the waters of Klamath Lake.

Then the oldest of the tribal wise men raised his voice so all could hear. Only a living sacrifice will turn away Chief of the Below World's revenge. But who among us will offer himself as a sacrifice? "No young person will want to make the sacrifice" answered the second oldest wise man. "You and I have but a few more years to live. We should be the ones to throw our torches and ourselves into Chief of the Below World's fire pit."

After a period of silence, the two old men lit their pine torches and started toward Mount Mazama. From the waters of Klamath Lake the people watched in astonishment as their torches, brilliant against the night sky, moved to the crest of the volcano. There the old men paused, and then, with their torches high above their heads, jumped into the fiery pit. The generosity of the old men energized Chief of the Above World. Once more the mountains shook and the earth seemed to tremble on its foundation. When Chief of the Below World was finally driven back into his home, Mount Mazama collapsed upon him and after many years rain filled the great crater.

Source:

McWilliams, R. G. (n.d.). *The geology of North America as illustrated by Native American stories*. [Online] Retrieved January 22, 2020, from <https://www.units.miamioh.edu/cryolab/publications/documents/McWilliams%20Geology%20NA%20Illus%20NA%20Stories.pdf>

Native American Legends and Stories of Geologic History in Oregon *(Continued)*

Reading Two: Bridge of the Gods

Scientists think that about 1,000 years ago a giant landslide from the north side of the Columbia River blocked the Columbia Gorge and stopped the river from flowing. This created a dam that backed up water all the way into Idaho. Over time, the water eroded the dam and created a natural stone bridge. Eventually this bridge fell, creating the Cascade Rapids. Native American oral histories also speak of the creation and destruction of this natural bridge. One version of the story is given in Katherine Berry Judson's book, Myths and Legends of the Pacific Northwest, especially of Washington and Oregon.

Long ago, when the world was new, Tyhee [Chief] Sahale with his two sons, came down Great River. They came near where The Dalles now are. The land was very beautiful and each son wanted it. Therefore they quarreled. Then Sahale took his bow and shot two arrows. One he shot to the north; the other he shot to the west. Then Sahale said to his sons, "Go. Find the arrows. Where they lie, you shall have the land."

One son went north over the plain to the country of the Klickitats. He was the first grandfather of the Klickitats. The other son followed the arrow to the Willamette Valley. He was the first grandfather of the Multnomahs.

Then Sahale raised great mountains between the country of the Klickitats and the country of the Multnomahs. This he did that the tribes might not quarrel. White men call them the Cascade Mountains. But Great River was deep and broad. The river was a sign of peace between the tribes. Therefore Sahale made a great stone bridge over the river, that the tribes might be friends. This was called the Bridge of the Tomanowos [Bridge of the Gods].

The tribes grew, but they did evil things. They displeased Tyhee Sahale. Therefore the sun ceased to shine, and cold and snow appeared. The people were unhappy for they had no fire. Only Loo-wit had fire. Therefore the people sought to steal the fire of Loo-wit. The Loo-wit fled and because the runners were stiff with cold, they could not catch her.

Then Loo-wit told Sahale of the need of the Indians. Loo-wit said the Indians were cold. So Sahale gave fire to the people. Thus Sahale built a fire on the bridge of the gods, and there the people secured fire. Sahale also promised to Loo-wit eternal youth and beauty. Thus Loo-wit became a beautiful maiden.

Then began the chiefs to love Loo-wit. Many chiefs loved her because she was so beautiful. Then came two more chiefs, Klickitat from the north and Wiyeast from the west. To neither would Loo-wit give an answer. Therefore the chiefs fought, and their people also fought. Thus did they anger Sahale. Therefore, because blood was shed and because Great River was no longer a sign of peace, Sahale broke down the [bridge]. Great rocks fell into the river. They are there even to this day. When the water is quiet, buried forests can be seen even to this day. Thus Sahale destroyed the bridge of the gods. Thus the tribes were separated by Great River.

Native American Legends and Stories of Geologic History in Oregon *(Continued)*

Then Sahale made of Loo-wit, Klickitat, and Wiyeast snow peaks. Always they were to be cold and covered with ice and snow. White men call them Mount St. Helens, Mount Adams, and Mount Hood.

Sources:

Port of Cascade Locks. (n.d.) *Bridge of the Gods*. [Online] Retrieved January 27, 2020 from <https://portofcascadelocks.org/bridge-of-the-gods/>

Judson, K.B. (1910). *Myths and legends of the Pacific Northwest, especially of Washington and Oregon*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.

Native American Legends and Stories of Geologic History in Oregon *(Continued)*

Reading Three: Earthquakes and Tsunamis

Scientists have begun using Native American oral histories of earthquakes and floods as evidence to figure out when earthquakes and tsunamis hit the Pacific Northwest and the damage they caused. The following story comes from the Coos people of the Oregon Coast, as adapted by Patricia Whereat Phillips in the summer 2007 issue of Oregon Historical Quarterly. It tells the story of a massive flood that may have been a tsunami caused by an earthquake (note the line where it says “the earth sank into the water”).

When the flood tide came there was no ebb tide.
All was full of water.
It was wholly filled.

The world was full of people.
There were too many people.
They looked, when that water reached its fullness.

Some people had large canoes.
And some had small canoes.
All kinds of people crowded in when they settled down on the earth.

Some people were ready with braided ropes they'd stored away.
So they quickly went into the canoes.
all people became scared.

The earth sank into the water.
Wherever a small bit of land stuck out,
that's where they went.

A small bit of land was sticking out
Here the people assembled.

All the animals came there in twos.
All small birds came there in twos.
All kinds of things came there in that manner.

They were mixed together there with the people.
It's as though they did not know one another,
when they were mixed together with the people.

Native American Legends and Stories of Geologic History in Oregon *(Continued)*

Wherever the top of a fir tree was sticking out, there they fastened the canoes.
And some people were without braided ropes.
Some people drifted far away.

Many people had braided ropes.
They no longer knew one another.

The small piece of land kept on floating.
The small bit of land's name was Qalatl (Kentuck).
It was sticking out.

There the people were assembling.
There all manner of things were assembling.
There were many kinds of animals there among the people.
All kinds of birds were mixed together there in pairs.

They did not know anyone.
Fear was in their hearts.

Nothing was sticking out.
They scattered far away, the people drifted far and wide.
The water carried them far away.

When night came, the people's canoes were fastened.
They were watching their canoes.
They were watching the canoes when they were made fast.

Some of the ropes were short.
Suddenly some were loosed, and they drifted away.

Water carried them away.
Thus in that manner half the people drifted away.
They no longer knew one another.

When it became evening, the water ran down.
Everywhere one person had a canoe that was fastened.
They did not know how to take care of the canoes when the water went down.

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Whenever a canoe caught on a tree limb, they freed that canoe.

Some people didn't watch the canoes.

They did not watch them, they tipped over.

When ever a canoe got hung up, when it became caught on a tree limb,
their canoes tipped over, when evening came.

Thus they worked.

They could not sleep, when they watched their canoes.

When the earth again became dry, the people dropped onto the earth with their canoes.
So again they returned there.

Everywhere they settled down individually.

One man with one woman.

Thus they settled.

The animals, they again returned to shore, when the earth dried.

Likewise the small birds.

Everywhere the small birds went in pairs.

They did not know the place where they dropped down,
and the people began to go farther away.

They did not know where they dropped down.

Thus the people were scattered.

In this manner is the story being told.

Source:

Phillips, P.W. (Summer 2007). Tsunamis and floods in Coos Bay mythology. *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 108(2).