

COLUMBIA GORGE INTERPRETIVE CENTER MUSEUM

EXPLORATIONS

NATIVE AMERICAN LEGENDS

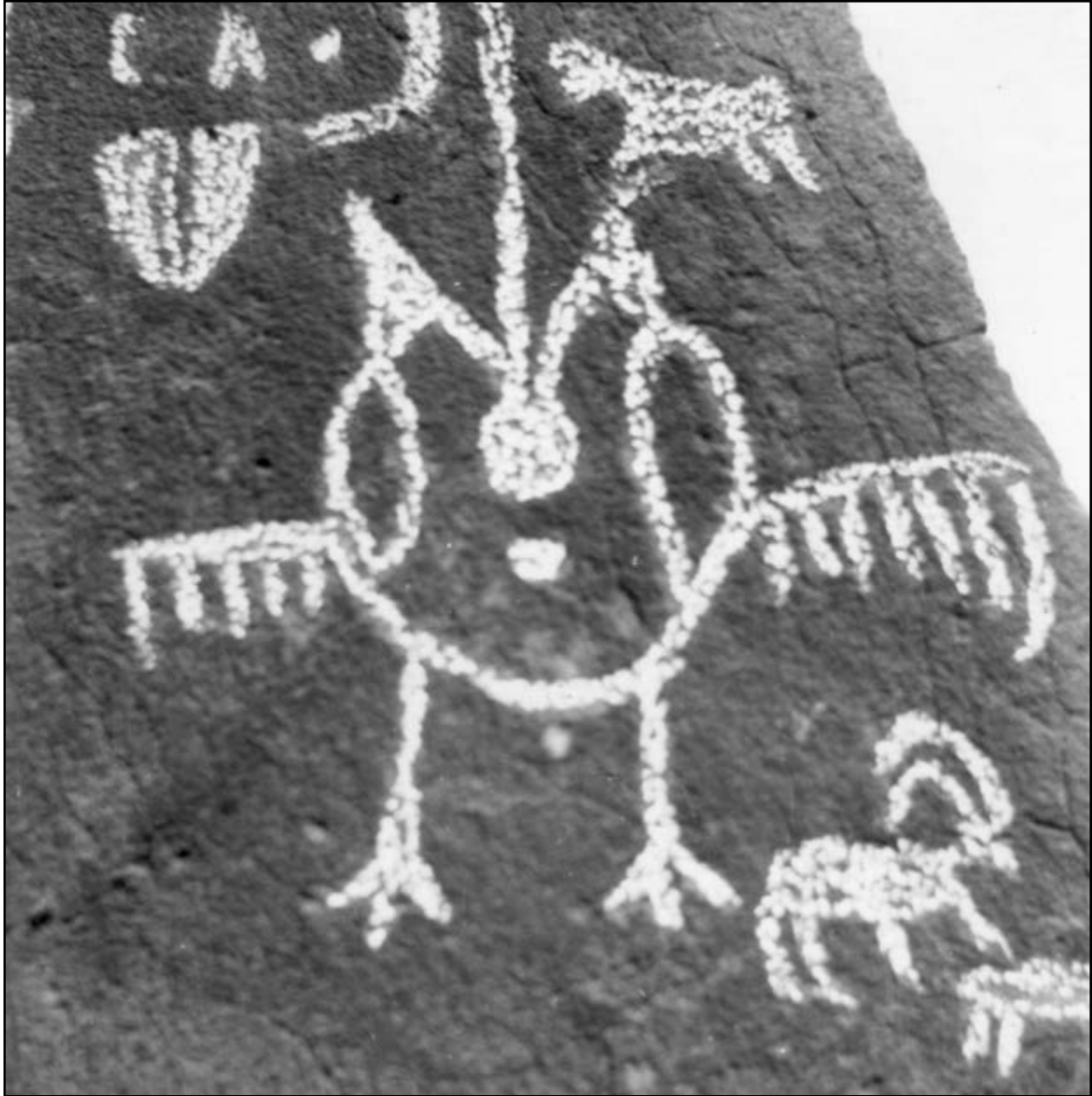
by Marilynn Weaver



Storyteller Marilynn Weaver poses in her Indian dress and holding coyote she uses as she delights her audiences.

(About the author: Marilynn Weaver, a member of the Cherokee Nation, has been a long time active

member of the historical society, has served on the Board of Directors and is a retired library assistant. The ability to



Spedis Owl petroglyph near Spearfish Lake.

tell Indian legends in an entertaining and compelling way has made her very popular particularly with school groups. The following are a facsimile of the legends which she tells the most often. She puts a personal twist on them each time she performs using hand puppets and other props. However, she keeps the endings as original as possible so as not to alter the moral or

lesson.)

Tsagaglala, legendary chief of the Wishram, tells about her conversation with Coyote, the Trickster. "A long time ago, when the Earth was young and the people and animals could still talk together, Coyote was trotting along the Great River and noticed there was no fish in the water. He knew People would be coming and

would need fish to eat. He saw where two women kept many fish in a lake, and Coyote said to himself, 'I shall make these fish to escape into the river.' With trunks of five young oak trees, he dug a channel and caused the water from the lake to roar into the river and fling all the fish into the Great River. The two women were angry with Coyote for stealing their fish. Coyote scolded the women. "What were you going to do with all those fish? Keep them for yourselves? I am going to turn you into Swallows and you will fly over the river when the Salmon return, and the People will run to the river to see them." Coyote said to Tsagagalal, "The People will know that it was I, Coyote, who brought them Salmon and thank ME!"

Coyote is in many northwest stories. He is a n'er-do-well, full of greed, pride, and self-importance. If he did do good, it was because it made him feel good.

All Native American stories have a moral or a life lesson, each teaching the importance of honor, respect, family and love. The stories are from a time when people and animals could still talk together and tell the why and how the world came to be the way it is. Each tribe has its own stories and heroes. The Tlingits believe Raven created the world, the stars, trees and water. The Wascos and Wishrams have Coyote. However, other animals have their stories of the why and the how.

Birds are a common theme in Columbia rock art. The Spedis Owl is found throughout the Gorge, first being seen in Skamania. Some tribes believed people turned into owls when they died. Others believed hearing an owl could portend death. Then there is this story from Chief Lalooska which tells



Tsagaglatal rock formation near Horsethief Lake, WA.

what happens to children when they do not obey their parents.

Long time ago, there was a village near a forest where a strange creature lived. It never bothered the people and the parents told the children not to bother it. However, one day the children went deep into the forest and found the hut of the creature and began throwing rocks and sticks at it. They saw nothing but heard scratching. One eve as the people were gathered around the fire pit to hear stories, a strange figure appeared in the shadows at the entrance of the long house, and in a deep voice warned the parents that the children must leave it alone or something terrible would happen to them. But the children continued to bother the hut. Four times the creature came with dire warnings.

One day the children threw sticks and stones until dark when suddenly the hide door flew open and

out came a creature in a feathered robe, hands like claws, bird like feet and a sharp hooked nose between huge yellow eyes! It said, "I am the Owl Witch, chief of all the Owl People and my power is great. Now your parents will learn that children must obey." As all the Owls gathered around and hooted, the Owl Witch waved a staff and changed the children into little furry mice who ran squeaking into the forest. And then . . . there was silence.

Now the village is quiet and joyless and empty. Each night the Owls return and their calls echo in the darkness.

In another bird story, Buzzard is elected by the council to be their representative to the Creator who had been asked to make clothing for them. As the representative, Buzzard was given first choice of all the feather suits, but the Creator warned him to choose carefully, because he could not put a suit back on if he took it off. Buzzard tried on suit after suit. None was good enough for a representative! He sent down to Earth suits for the other bird who were pleased with the beautiful feathers. Chickadee put on a black and white suit; Hummingbird just fit in the shimmering green and red suit; Robin picked up the grey suit with a bright red vest, and Goldfinch loved the yellow and black one. They all wear them even today.

Finally, Buzzard tried on a dull brown suit that was too short and left his legs bare. There was no dance cap and his head and neck were bare. It was really rather ugly. Buzzard looked around and saw that this was the very LAST suit. Then he realized that he had been so vain in wanting the best for

himself and he blushed red with embarrassment. When he left the Sky World and came back to Earth, he did not join the other birds who were celebrating with feasting, singing and dancing, sending thanks to the Creator for their beautiful suits and thanks to Buzzard for sending them down to them. And Buzzard? He was still so embarrassed at his vanity that his neck and head are still red even to this day!

The Indians did not tell jokes as we know them, but have laughing stories; stories that have lessons and morals like all Indian stories, but are more laughable than most. Very seldom is a story told just to make a listener laugh, but here is an example.

Bear was such a braggart! He bragged how BIG he was! He bragged how STRONG he was! He bragged how FAST he was! To stop his bragging, Turtle came up with a scheme. Bear was challenged to a race around the frozen pond by the little water Turtle. Turtle had his relatives poke their heads through holes in the ice to make bears believe Turtles has won the race. Bear was so humiliated at losing a race to a turtle he slept all winter in his den so he wouldn't remember.

Bears sleep all winter even today to they don't have to remember losing a race with a turtle. Although Turtle and his family are slow of foot, they are not slow of wit!

Humor, bravery, greed, selfishness; the how and why; all are told in stories over and over until everyone knew them and their lessons to be passed on as oral history. The tradition of story-telling continues even today.