

Coyote and Wishpoosh

from the Chinook tribe

retold by S.E. Schlosser

Now Wishpoosh the monster beaver lived in the beautiful Lake Cle-el-lum which was full of fish. Every day, the animal people would come to the lake, wanting to catch some fish, but Wishpoosh the giant beaver drove them away with many threats and great splashing. If they refused to leave, Wishpoosh would kill the animal people by dragging them deep into the lake so that they drowned.

Coyote was very upset at Wishpoosh for the way he treated the animal people. Coyote decided that he would kill the monster beaver and so he went to Lake Cle-el-lum with his spear tied to his wrist and started to fish. As soon as Wishpoosh saw this upstart person invading his territory, the giant beaver attacked. Coyote threw the spear and it pierced the beaver. Immediately, Wishpoosh dove to the bottom of the lake, dragging Coyote with him.

Well, Coyote and Wishpoosh wrestled and tugged and fought each other at the bottom of the lake until the sides gave way and all the water rushed out, pouring out over the mountains and through the canyons until it collected in Kittitas Valley and formed another, larger lake. Coyote and Wishpoosh burst forth into the new lake, shouting and wrestling and fighting each other with renewed vigor until the second lake gave way and the water rushed out, joining in with the waters of several rivers to form a massive lake at Toppenish.

Wishpoosh the monster beaver would not give up the fight. He bit and clawed at Coyote and tried to drown him in the massive lake. Coyote fought back fiercely, and at last the massive lake gave way, the water roared down into the meeting place of the Columbia, the Yakima, and the Snake, where it dammed up into a lake so huge none has ever seen its like before or since.

Coyote and Wishpoosh dragged at each other, pulling and tugging and ripping and biting until the dam gave way and a huge wave of water swept down the Columbia River towards the sea. Coyote and Wishpoosh were tumbled over and over again as they were swept down river in the mighty wave of water. Coyote grabbed bushes and rocks and trees, trying to pull himself out of the massive wave. By these efforts was the Columbia Gorge was formed. But Coyote could not pull himself out of the great wave and so he tumbled after Wishpoosh, all the way to the bitter waters at the mouth of the river.

Wishpoosh was furious. He was determined to beat this upstart Coyote who had driven him from his beautiful lake. The giant beaver swept all the salmon before him and ate them in one gulp to increase his strength. Then he swam out to sea with Coyote in pursuit. The monster beaver threw his great arms around a whale and swallowed it whole.

Coyote was frightened by this demonstration of the monster beaver's strength. But he was the most cunning of all the animals, and he came up with a plan. Turning himself into a tree branch, Coyote drifted among the fish until Wishpoosh swallowed him. Returning to his natural form, Coyote took a knife and cut the sinews inside the giant beaver. Wishpoosh gave a great cry and then perished.

Coyote was tired after his long fight with the monster beaver. He called to his friend Muskrat, who helped drag the body of Wishpoosh to shore. Coyote and Muskrat cut up the giant beaver and threw the pieces up over the land, thus creating the tribes of men. The Nez Perce were created from the head of the giant beaver, to make them great in council. The Cayuses were created from the massive arms of Wishpoosh, in order that they might be strong and powerful with the war club and the bow. From the beaver's ribs, Coyote made the Yakimas and from the belly the Chinooks. To make the Klickitats, Coyote used the beaver's legs, so that they would become famous for their skill in running. With the leftover skin and blood, he made the Snake River Indians who thrived on war and blood.

Thus were the tribes created, and Coyote returned up the mighty Columbia River to rest from his efforts. But in his weariness, Coyote did not notice that the coastal tribes had been created without mouths. The god Ecahni happened along just then and fixed the problem by assembling all of the coastal tribes and cutting mouths for them. Some he made too large and some he made crooked, just as a joke. This is why the mouths of the coastal tribes are not quite perfect.