

Lenape Stories

Why the Raccoon Has Marks on His Face

This is about the little raccoons and what they said caused them to have little marks on their eyes. They said that the other creatures told him to go and borrow some firewood from the camps around. So this coon then went to the camps to get some firewood sticks that were already aflame and blackened by the fire and burned on part of the stick. And they said his little coon fell down with these in his hand and his face fell across these charred sticks. And that's why now he has little marks to show his shame trying to steal something from the campers. That is the thing to tell the younger generation to not to steal anything because that mark will be upon you.

Told by Nora Thompson Dean

KWĒLĒPISUWE . . . A HUMOROUS TALE

I heard this story a long time ago when I was a young woman. At one time there was a man named Kwēlēpisuwe. It is said that he liked women. When he learned where some women lived he would go there immediately. At first it seemed like he just wanted to visit, but he must have wanted to flirt.

He would suddenly stand up and reach into his pocket [and] take out some finger-rings. He stood there. In his hand he held the rings. He said, "I will burn them, I will burn them!"

Then the women would all get up. They began to beg him and they hugged him and they rubbed him. They said, "Don't! Don't! Give them to us, give them to us."

The man would just have a smile on his face. He put the rings back in his pocket, he left. He went looking for some other women so that he could flirt [again].

It is said that the man would say, "I am really good looking! All the women like me! Oh, the women bother me, even when I am trying to sleep."

Finally that man was hated because he admired himself. Everyone hated him, even women, men, children, and even dogs.

This comes from a correction of long ago, "A person should not brag about himself," the elders said. Then I asked my father, "Was that really true that he was handsome?" My father said, "That wasn't so, the man was homely. He just said that."

Told by Nora Thompson Dean

What the Rabbit Said

This is a story about Rabbit who used to make a lot of stories long ago. When animals had a council long ago, they would have a council and talk about something. Every kind of animal was there including deer and buffalo.

The Rabbit would be asked, "What's the matter with you? Your shoulder blades really stick way out when you sit down?"

He said, "That's right, I had two wives long ago. I used to sleep between them. That's why when I used to sleep they really crowded me, that's why my shoulders are like that.

And they asked him again, "How come those ears of yours are so long?"

He said, "Well, I was a chief's messenger, long ago. I would be made a chief's messenger all the time. "I delivered some messages to all these different kinds of animals," he said. That is what the one called Rabbit said. He said, "That's really true. That's how come my ears are long, so that I will hear anything well. I don't want to miss hearing anything because I want to deliver the message to them, to animals of every kind, when the chief hires me, when he makes me his messenger.

That's the reason why I would want to hear things well." That's why his ears are long, because he always wanted to hear things well.

When the animals would assemble in council, they would talk about when they hide from people. The buffalo said, it's hard for us, because we're big. We have to flee to where there's thick brush, and we are able to hide. And that deer said the same.

And then the rabbit jumped up. He said, "Well, for me, though, it's easy to hide from anybody. On the hillside, in the grass, all I have to do is make a hole, and that's where I back in. That's how I hide from anybody. Sometimes someone comes close by, and he doesn't see me," said that rabbit.

Told by Martha Ellis to Ives Goddard in 1966. Martha was a member of the Western Delaware Tribe

Story of a Lenape Boy and a Mother Bear

There's an old story that my parents used to tell me about how a boy got lost in the deep forest one time, way back there. He was a little kid, and finally he met this mother bear. I guess he went kind of irrational, sort of lost his mind, and he thought this bear was his mother. The way she looked to him she had this apron on like the old Delaware women used to wear. She had some little cubs with her that he thought were children and she took him in the den with her and she just licked him and he nursed her like she was his mother, and he ate honey. He said he talked with her.

There were some hunters came into the woods and killed her and they said he just grieved over her because he really thought that was his mother. They said he really grieved when these hunters killed her, and he grieved a long time for her. They say that's the only mother he ever knew.

I don't know if this is Delaware mythology or whether this is supposed to really have happened, but anyway that is a story that was told to me.

Told by Nora Thompson Dean

Give Us a Little Piece of Your Land

Our elder brothers' tribe (the Europeans) wanted to fool us when they were new here. They said, "We will really treat you good for as long as the river flows and the sun always moves, and as long as the grass always comes up in the Spring then I will take care of you. That will be for how long I will be a friend to you all," he said. He wanted to fool us and it seems he is still fooling us.

Then he said, "Here, I will give you this red flag." He said, "As long as you keep it you will give us a little piece of your land as much as a cow we will kill. Then we will kill him and skin him. Then they did not take the hide off but cut it into very small pieces. Then they [the Delawares] looked good at it. It was a big piece of land our Lenape ancestors of long ago gave to them. Then they said, "Oh my!" They said. They thought that the land was only to be as big as the hide they put on the ground but it was a big piece. Then they said, "You didn't say, 'I want to cut it'."

He said when he had already finished, "You finish signing on this paper."

It was said at that time we will treat you good. You will be given everything. That is really true, he gave us everything. Then they gave those late chiefs an axe and a hoe so they could use them. Then they (the chiefs) just hung them on their necks.

[This might sound like a strange thing to do but in those days the ax heads and hoe heads were much smaller and the early Lenape probably thought they looked like some type of pendant, especially since they were not hafted so they did not come with a handle attached].

Then the white man told them, "No, that is not the way to use them when you wear them on your neck. I will give you something different to wear on your neck, that's it. Then he handed them back, and he accepted them. Then he put them on handles, whatever it is so that can take ahold of this. Then the white man said, "This is how it is done when you plant or when you hoe. Now this axe for you cut trees or for cutting wood or to make or to make a log house. That is what it is used for.

Then he said, "All right." Then they always made use of them. That is what I told my daughter and my grandchildren, "They are still fooling us."

Told by Bessie Snake in 1978

When Squirrels Were Huge

It is said that long ago the squirrel was huge, and he walked all over the place, in the valleys, in the woods, and the big forests. He looked for creatures that he could eat. He would eat just anything, animals, even snakes.

Suddenly one evening he saw a two-legged creature running along. So he ran after that two-legged creature, and finally he caught that person, and when he snatched him up he began to tear him to pieces. Finally he ate that person all up except for the person's hand which the giant squirrel was carrying in his hand.

While he was still busy chewing, all at once this person, an enormous person, was standing nearby. That person had a very white light shining and shimmering all around him, and when he said anything he roared like thunder and the earth shook and the trees fell down. He was the Creator.

The Creator said to the squirrel, "Now, truly you have done a very terrible deed. You have killed my child. Now, from this time on it is you who will be little and your children and your great grandchildren

will be eaten, and the shameful thing you did will always be seen (by a mark) under your forearm.” Oh, the squirrel was scared, and he trembled with fear. He wanted to hide the man’s hand, and he placed it under his upper arm. This story must be true because for a long time I have cut up and cooked many squirrels, and I have seen the hand under the squirrel’s upper arm. We always cut that piece out before cooking the squirrel.

Nora Thompson Dean, 1975

Three Boys on a Vision Quest

There were once three Lenape boys who were sent on a vision quest. A Manitu came to them and asked what they would like to be when they grew up.

One boy said that he would like to be a hunter. Another said he would like to be a warrior. The last one said he wanted all the women to like him.

When they grew up, that came to pass. The one boy was a fine hunter. The other was a good warrior. But the third one, who wanted all the women to like him, was killed by a bunch of women at a gathering who ganged him and tore him to pieces because each one wanted him. He should only have asked for one woman to like him.

There are two morals to this story: One is to not be greedy when you ask for something, and the other is to not ask to be more than you can be.

Warren ‘Judge’ Longbone, as told to him by his Grandmother, Minnie Fouts

The Man Who Visited the Thunder-Beings

Once a man wanted to go and visit with the thunder beings. He told the men all over the village, “I wish you would all help me, I want to cut some wood. I want to heat this boulder.” Everyone came there, and there were many of them who cut wood, and finally they had a lot of wood. Then they began to heat the big rock. When it got very hot, they pushed it into the big river. Then when the steam arose the man jumped into it. He went up to where the thunder beings live.

Oh, the man was well received by the thunder beings. One told the man, “I am glad because you came here where we live. Soon we will eat.” Finally when it got to be evening, the thunder beings began to gather some bones. The bones were dry, and white, and old. They used them when they made soup. He said that the soup looked good.

The one old being told the man, “You people might hear us sometimes.” Soon after the old being said that he heard them, but when those young thunder beings make a noise it is loud and they are heard when it is going to rain. The old thunder beings made a low rumbling noise. After the man had visited the thunder beings for several days, he told them, “Now I will be going home.”

Then when a little cloud floated by near where he was standing he jumped onto it. The man went home and he notified everyone and they held a council. He said, “Here is what the thunder beings told us.” Everyone was surprised when the man told the story.

Nora Thompson Dean

The Good Looking Woman

Once there was a good looking woman. The men all liked her looks, but she would not have any of them. Even several animals said of her, "I sure would like to go with this woman."

Now there were three animals: a beaver, a skunk, and an owl. They said, "Now we will try to get this woman." They told the owl, "You go first and see whether you can get this woman." Then the owl went to see the woman, but she told him, "I won't go with you because you are ugly. Your eyes are too big. I won't go with you!" So the owl went back and said, "I couldn't get that woman."

Next the skunk went to see the woman, and she told him, "I won't go with you either because you are too ugly, and you stink." So he went back and said, "I couldn't get that woman either."

So then the beaver said, "I will go see that woman." When he got there he began to talk to the woman, but he also failed to get the woman. She told him, "I won't have you because you are an ugly thing. Your teeth are wide and your tail is big and broad. That tail of yours looks like a stirring paddle."

Then the beaver went back and he said, "Well, I also could do nothing with that woman. Now I wonder what we could do to get that woman?" Then they talked about what they could do to be able to get that woman. The beaver said, "Way over there in the creek, where she gets water, there is a log that runs into the water. Now I'll go and gnaw that log nearly in two. Then when that woman goes to fetch water, her weight will break the log, and the woman will fall into the water. Then she will send for us so we can help her get out."

Then when that woman fell in the water she said, "Now I wish the beaver was here. Maybe he could help me out of get out of the water."

Then she began to sing, "Pe Pe Kwan Sa, Pe Pe Kwan So. Ni ha noliha tamakwesa (I like the beaver)." Then he said, "No one would like my looks because I am ugly. My teeth are too wide, and my tail looks like a stirring paddle."

Then the woman sang, "Pe Pe Kwan Sa. Niha nolina shekakwisa (I like the skunk). Pe Pe Kwan Sa." The skunk said, "No one would like my looks because I am so ugly and because I stink."

Then again she began to sing, "Pe Pe Kwan Sa. Niha noliha kukhusa (I like the owl)." Then the owl said, "No one would like my looks because I am ugly. I've got big eyes."

So the woman floated on down the creek, nobody would help her, and she finally drowned.

Told by Chief Charlie Elkhair to Truman Michelson in 1912, as in Mythology of the Lenape by John Bierhorst

The Hunter and the Owl

Once a Delaware man and his wife went on a long hunt quite a way from the village. They had been out several days without having any luck when one night as they were sitting around their camp fire an owl hooted from a tree near by and after hooting laughed. This was considered a good omen, but to make sure of this the hunter took a chunk of fire and retired a little way from the camp under the tree where the owl was perched, and laid the chunk of fire on the ground, and sitting by it began to sprinkle tobacco on the live coal and talk to the owl. He said: "Mo-hoo-mus (or Grandfather), I have heard you whoop and laugh. I know by this that you see good luck coming to me after these few days of discouragement. I know that you are very fond of the fat of the deer and that you can exercise influence over the game if you will. I want you to bring much game in my way, not only deer, but fur-bearing animals, so that I may return home with a bountiful supply of furs as well as much dried meat, and I will promise you that from the largest deer that I kill, I will give you the fat and heart, of which you are very fond. I will hang them in a tree so that you can get them." The owl laughed again and the hunter knew that he would get much game after that.

The next morning he arose early, just before day, and started out with his bow and arrow, leaving his wife to take care of the camp. He had not gone far before he killed a very large buck. In his haste to take the deer back to camp so that he could go out and kill another before it got too late, he forgot his promise to the owl and did not take out the fat and heart and hang it in the tree as he said he would do, but flung the deer across his shoulder and started for camp. The deer was very heavy and he could not carry it all the way to camp without stopping to rest. He had only gone a few steps when he heard the owl hoot. This time it did not laugh as it had the night before.

The owl flew low down, right in front of the man, and said to him: "Is this the way you keep your promise to me? For this falsehood I will curse you. When you lay down this deer, you will fall dead." The hunter was quick to reply: "Grandfather, it is true I did not hang the fat up for you where I killed the deer, but I did not intend to keep it from you as you accuse me. I too have power and I say to you that when you alight, you too will fall dead. We will see who is the stronger and who first will die." The owl made a circle or two and began to get very tired, for owls can only fly a short distance. When it came back again, it said: "My good hunter, I will recall my curse and help you all I can, if you will recall yours, and we will be friends after this." The hunter was glad enough to agree, as he was getting very tired too. So the hunter lay the deer down and took out the fat and the heart and hung them up. When he picked up the deer again it was much lighter and he carried it to his camp with perfect ease. His wife was very glad to see him bringing in game. She soon dressed the deer and cut up strips of the best meat and hung them up to dry, and the hunter went out again and soon returned with other game.

In a few days they had all the furs and dried meat they could both carry to their home, and the hunter learned a lesson on this trip that he never afterwards forgot, that whenever a promise is made it should always be fulfilled.

As related by Richard C. Adams in 1905 and now in Legends of the Delaware Indians, edited by Deborah Nichols

Why the Wolves and Dogs Fear Each Other

A long time ago when this world was new these wolves and dogs were friends, but now at this time everything is different. At that time when it got to be wintertime the wolf said, "I am cold, and hungry! Who is there who would go where the humans are to get a stick with fire on one end so we could make a fire?" The little mongrel dog said, "Oh, my friend, I will go get some fire!" The wolf said, "All right, so be it!"

The little dog went to get the fire saying, "We will soon have a good blazing fire! We will be warm!" So he left and he went near to where the Delawares lived. When he got near, a girl said suddenly, "Oh, there is someone who is very cute! I want to go see him. This is surely the little dog." The girl began to pet the little dog. She told him, "Come here, come here! You are cold! Soon I will feed you, I will give you meat and bread."

Oh, the little dog was happy, and he went into the bark house, and he forgot to bring the fire. Finally the wolf gave up, saying, "That 'old' dog is a big liar! I will knock him in the head if I ever see him!" That is the reason these wolves and dogs are afraid of each other to this day.

Nora Thompson Dean

The Fox and the Rabbit Story

One time a fox lived near a creek. He would always work, and every spring he would make garden, different things; beans, lettuce and corn. Every morning he would go hoe. One morning he saw that everything had been bitten off. He thought, "Someone must like to steal," and then he went home.

He sharpened some little sticks, he went and drove them into the garden [with the sharpened ends sticking up.] The next morning he went to the garden. There was blood everywhere, and rabbit hairs scattered here and there. The fox said, "See there, now I know who that thief is."

Then he went to visit the rabbit. He knocked on the door. He heard the rabbit when he said, "Come in! Come in!" The rabbit was lying down. The fox went and sat down. He told the rabbit "Are you sick?"

The rabbit said, "Oh no, I am just resting." The fox said, "OK, well, let's smoke." The rabbit said, "OK, that's it." Then he picked up his pipe, he pulled it out.

The rabbit had difficulty getting up. When the fox saw the rabbit he must have had a bloody behind. He immediately said, "See there! You are the one who is stealing from my garden." The rabbit said, "Not me, not me!"

Finally the fox quickly got mad, they almost fought. He said, "You are the biggest liar! You are shameful!" The fox was so angry and so he went home. It has long been known that the rabbit likes to lie.

Told by Nora Thompson Dean