

Coyote and Fox

I am a firm believer in the power of understanding origins, be that of family, history, or place. I chose the 1860's in Missoula for just that reason, because this was the true year of birth of our beloved city. It began with the settling of Hell's Gate, near what is currently Frenchtown, to the eventual migration to the current site of Missoula. Shortly before the move, however, Hell Gate felt growing pains and restlessness, resulting in a significant death rate for such a small settlement, surprisingly primarily from criminal executions. Hells Gate began to live up to its name, and I am sure was one reason for the big move only a few years later.

One of these incidents particularly caught my eye: what seemed to be a tiny blip in the history books was a story of poignancy. In 1864, the son of the chief of the Pend d'Oreilles tribe, attacked and killed a Frenchman in the Corican defile after some dispute over rights of land. The son then gathered a small band of fighters and threatened an uprising by which the Hells Gate residents grew alarmed. They sent for help from nearby towns, which in turn frightened the rebel's tribe, who had had no hand in the dispute. They then demanded the chief do the hardest thing possible to ward off trouble: hand over his own son to be executed. Albeit reluctantly, the chief did so, and the son was brought in, tied, disgraced, and executed on the gallows pole in town.

In a Salish legend, Hah-ah' eel-me'whem, the great Spirit Chief calls the Animal People together, for they must be renamed in the event of a new people coming to live on the earth. By having new and permanent names they could be remembered by their descendants forever. Spirit Chief tells the Animal People to come at the dawn of day to choose their names on a first come first serve basis. Sin-ka-lip', or Coyote, is eager to receive his new name, but as circumstances unfold he is late to the naming the following morning, and is still stuck with the name Sin-ka-lip'. While at first Coyote is disheartened, the Spirit Chief assures him that he has the proper name, and gives him an important task. Coyote is to be chief among the people, and will be defender, and have the great power to change into any form he needs. Also, to Coyote's twin brother Why-ay'-looh, or Fox, is given the power to restore life to Coyote if he is killed. Even if the bones are scattered and there is no life left, Fox can bring Coyote back and keep the people alive.

The promise of the great Spirit Chief is of course a promise to the Salish People: no matter what misfortune may happen to them, their memory will live on through their ancestors and stories. The warning of this tale can be indicative of most changes in life: when one thing passes away, the new does not come without pain. Whether right or wrong, or how things come about, it is important to pay homage and heed where we come from, and what has been. It is only through remembrance, gratitude, and humility can we keep what has been alive while still looking ahead to the future, and heed the mistakes and legacy of our ancestors.