

MY GREAT GRANDFATHER'S STORY

The dictionary tells us that the coyote or coyot, whichever you prefer, is a wolflike, carnivorous animal, common in western North America and ranging eastward to Pa. and N.Y. It is also known as the prarie wolf. It is also a slang word used for a "contemptable sneak". But, the dictionary fails to explain the origin of the slang usage. And I for one can understand why it has escaped them. I think that perhaps they would rather not deal with it. And so, it has fallen to me to enlighten you.

When I was very young, my great grandfather, then a very proud chief of our tribe, loved to tell us this story:

"Many moons ago, our people met with difficult times. The winter had been very severe and we had lost half of our tribe from cold, sickness, and starvation. But worse still, it was now feared that the rest of the tribe had very little time to live, for though they had survived the winter, a new and even more frightening danger threatened. Strange men on large four-legged creatures had come to this land and our people instinctively knew that these men would eventually try to steal from them and enslave them. But, this tribe would rather die than allow that to happen.

"There was, in this tribe, a young boy who was, you might say "different". The medicine men dispised him because of his ability to foresee the future and forewarn the tribe of danger. He had told them of the severe winter to come and had told them that strange men on four-legged creatures would try to enslave them. But the medicine men ridiculed the boy and the tribe went along with them and ostracized this gifted young man. He felt as though he were invisible.

"And so this little boy would sit at the edge of the camp at night all by himself and stare at the heavens, and visit with his only friends, the stars and the moon. And he would stare for hours and imagine that the stars were alive and that he

could talk to them and that they would talk back. And then, one night, when the moon was full, he cried and told the stars of the impending danger to his tribe. The moon frowned and then became very angry and the face of the moon became dark. At the same time the stars became brighter and brighter and they began howling (coyote sounds). At first the boy was very scared, but still he remained at the edge of the camp and stared at the stars. As he stared, some of the stars began to get larger and larger until they surrounded him and the eerie howls were all around him. And suddenly, he realized that the stars were in pairs. He blinked his eyes and discovered that he was looking into the eyes of wolflike creatures. By now the boy was too amazed to even be frightened and one of the prairie wolves spoke to him. 'For hundreds of years we were hidden in the skies amidst the multitude of stars, having been placed there to look over and guard the native people of this land. We were told that one day a little indian boy would reach out to us for help and that we should answer his cries. So take heart! We are here and we will help you'. And then they sneaked off across the prairie toward the camp site of the men who rode atop the large four-legged creatures.

"The little boy was so excited that he woke up the entire tribe to tell them the news. But the tribe was very upset with him for waking them up and his mother dragged him into their tepee by his ear and threw him on the floor, cursing the heavens for having given her an idiot son.

"Suddenly, in the distance, a noise such as never been heard before on this earth filled the night. The little boy immediately recognized it as the howling of the prairie wolves. This was accompanied by the yelling and screaming of the strange men, now completely panicked. And finally, they could hear that the frightened men were riding off on their four-legged creatures.

"Soon after, the prairie wolves appeared at my people's camp and hanging from their teeth were bundles and bundles of food they had taken from the strange men. They dropped the food at our feet, turned, and went into the hills. Not only was the tribe now safe from the strangers, but also they now were in no danger of starving. And of course, the little boy became a hero and later a great chief. And in the years to come, when one would go to sleep at night and hear the howling high in the hills, a smile would come to his face, for one knew that he was protected.

"And finally," my great grandfather would caution, "be wary of those who speak of the prairie wolf as a 'contemptible sneak'. I don't have to tell you why."

And that is my great grandfather's story. And so, when you go camping, what do the coyote's howls do to you as you go off to sleep at night? Of course, I already know the answer. Not all of you smile.