

Legend of Manitou Springs

Category: Manitou Springs History

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Written by George F. Ruxton

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Many hundreds of winters ago, when the cottonwoods on the Big River were no higher than an arrow, and the red men, who hunted the buffalo on the plains all spoke the same language, and the pipe of peace breathed its social cloud of Kinnik-Kinnick whenever two parties of hunters met on the boundless plains--where, with hunting grounds and game of every kind in the greatest abundance, no nation dug up the hatchet with another because one of its hunters followed the game into their bounds, but, on the contrary, loaded for him his back with choice and fattest meat, and ever proffered the soothing pipe before the stranger, with well filled belly, left the village--it happened that two hunters of different nations met one day on a small rivulet where both had repaired to quench their thirst. A little stream of water, rising from a spring on a rock within a few feet of the bank, trickled over it, and fell splashing into the river. To this the hunters repaired; and while one sought the spring itself, where the water, cold and clear, reflected on its surface the image of the surrounding scenery, the other, tired by his exertions in the chase, threw himself at once to the ground, and plunged his face into the running stream.

The latter had been unsuccessful in the chase, and perhaps his bad fortune and the sight of the fat deer which the other hunter threw from his back before he drank at the crystal spring, caused a feeling of jealousy and ill humor to take possession of his mind. The other on the contrary, before he satisfied his thirst, raised in the hollow of his hand a portion of the water, and lifting it toward the sun, reversed his hand and allowed it to fall upon the ground--a libation to the Great Spirit who had vouchsafed him a successful hunt and the blessing of the refreshing water with which he was about to quench his thirst.

Seeing this, and being reminded that he had neglected the usual offering, only increased the feeling of envy and annoyance which the unsuccessful hunter permitted to get the mastery of his heart; and the Evil Spirit at that moment entering his body, his temper fairly flew away and he sought some pretense by which to provoke a quarrel with the stranger Indian at the spring.

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"Why does a stranger, " he asked, rising from the stream at the same time, "drink at the spring head, when one to whom the fountain belongs contents himself with the water that runs from it?"

"The Great Spirit places the cool water at the spring," answered the other hunter, "that his children may drink it pure and undefiled. The running water is for the beasts which scour the plains. Au-sa-qua is a chief of the Shoshones; he drinks at the headwater."

"The Shoshone is but a tribe of the Comanche," returned the other: "Waco-mish leads the grand nation. Why does a Shoshone dare to drink above him?"

"He has said it. The Shoshone drinks at the spring-head; other nations of the stream which runs into the fields. Au-sa-qua is the chief of his nation. The Comanches are brothers. Let them both drink of the same water."

"The Shoshone pays tribute to the Comanche. Waco-mish leads that nation to war. Waco-mish is chief of the Shoshone as he is of his own people."

"Waco-mish lies; his tongue is forked like the rattlesnake's; his heart is black as the Misho-tunga (bad spirit). When the Manitou made his children, whether Shoshone or Comanche, Arapahoe, Shian or Paine, he gave them buffalo to eat and the pure water of the fountain to quench their thirst. He said not to one, drink here, and to another drink there; but gave the crystal spring to all that all might drink."

"Waco-mish almost burst with rage as the other spoke; but his coward heart alone prevented him from provoking an encounter with the calm Shoshone. *He* made thirsty by the words he had spoken,--for the red man is ever sparing of his tongue,--again stooped down to the spring to quench his thirst, when the subtle warrior of the Comanche suddenly threw himself upon the kneeling hunter and, forcing his head into the bubbling water, held him down with all his strength until his victim no longer struggled, his stiffened limbs relaxed, and he fell forward over the spring, drowned and dead.

Over the body stood the murderer, and no sooner was the deed of blood consummated than

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bitter remorse took possession of his mind where before had reigned the fiercest passion and vindictive hate. With hands clasped to his forehead he stood transfixed with horror, intently gazing on his victim whose head still remained immersed in the fountain. Mechanically he dragged the body a few paces from the water, which, as soon as the head of the dead Indian was withdrawn, the Comanche saw suddenly and strangely disturbed. Bubbles sprang up from the bottom, and rising to the surface escaped in hissing gas. A thin vapory cloud arose and gradually dissolving, displayed to the eyes of the trembling murderer the figure of an aged Indian whose long, snowy hair and venerable beard, blown aside by a gentle air from his breast, discovered the well-known totem of the great Wau-kau-aga, the father of the Comanche and Shoshone nation whom the tradition of the tribe, handed down by skilful hieroglyphics, almost deified for the good actions and deeds of bravery this famous warrior had performed when on earth.

Stretching out a war club toward the affrighted murderer, the figure thus addressed him:

"Accursed of my tribe ! this day thou has severed the link between the mightiest nations of the world, while the blood of the brave Shoshone cries to the Manitou for vengeance. May the water of thy tribe be rank and bitter in their throats."

Thus saying, and swinging his ponderous war club (made from the elk's horn) round his head, he dashed out the brains of the Comanche, who fell headlong into the spring, which from that day to the present moment remains rank and nauseous, so that not even when half dead with thirst, can one drink of the foul water of that spring.

The good Wau-kau-aga, however, to perpetuate the memory of the Shoshone warrior, who was renowned in his tribe for valor and nobleness of heart, struck with the same avenging club a hard, flat rock which overhung the rivulet, just out of sight of this scene of blood; and forthwith, the rock opened into a round, clear basin which instantly filled with bubbling, sparkling water, than which no thirsty hunter ever drank a sweeter or a cooler draught.

Thus the two springs remain, an everlasting memento of the foul murder of the brave Shoshone and the stern justice of the good Wau-kau-aga; and from that day two mighty tribes of the Shoshone and Comanche have remained severed and apart; although a long and bloody war followed the treacherous murder of the Shoshone chief, and many a scalp torn from the head of the Comanche paid the penalty of his death.

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The American and Canadian trappers assert that the numerous springs which, under the head of beer, soda, steamboat, springs, etc., abound in the Rocky Mountains, are the spots where his Satanic majesty comes up from his kitchen to breathe the sweet, fresh air, which must doubtless be refreshing to his worship after a few hours spent in superintending the culinary process going on below.

The Snakes, who, in common with all Indians, possess hereditary legends to account for all natural phenomena, or any extraordinary occurrences which are beyond their ken or comprehension, have of course, their legendary version of the causes which created in the midst of their hunting grounds these two springs of sweet and bitter water; which are also intimately connected with the cause of separation between the tribes of "Comanche" and the "Snake." Thus runs the legend:

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