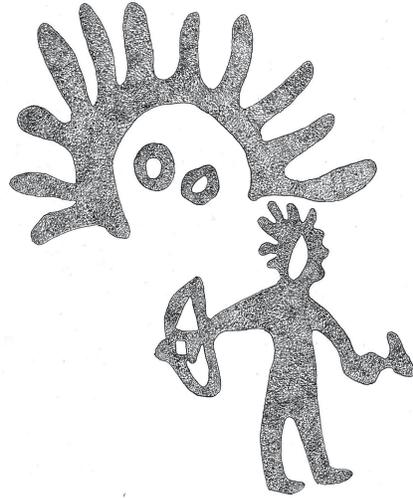
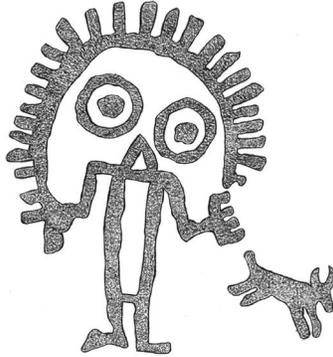


# John Beeson's Ghost

Thomas Doty



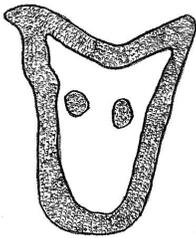
# John Beeson's Ghost



**A Doty & Coyote Story**

Thomas Doty

**Ashland, Oregon • 2020**



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## ***Introduction***

In the 1850s, while much of Oregon's newly arrived white population was calling for the extermination of Native Americans, there were some who recognized native people as deeply spiritual. John Beeson was such a man.

In 1853, John Beeson arrived in the Rogue Valley by wagon train with his wife, Ann, and son, Welborn. Appalled by the treatment of native people, Beeson began writing articles and speaking in public about native rights. As a result, he was driven out of the Rogue Valley by death threats, leaving behind his family.

The May night he left was rainy. Welborn rode with him as far as Fort Lane. Leaving his father at the fort, Welborn rode back through the rainy night to the family farm near Talent. He and his mother were now responsible for running the farm. He wrote in his diary that it seemed strange that none of his father's friends knew he was gone. The diary entry ended with these words: "And it's still raining."

Next morning, soldiers accompanied Beeson downriver. They rode through what was left of the abandoned village of Ti'lomikh. On that day, far downriver, would be the Battle of Big Bend which would end the war. In 1856, five Trails of Tears left the Rogue Valley, forcing native people to leave the sacred lands they had been their home for thousands of years.

Essentially, the same people who forced Beeson to leave his new home also forced the native people to leave their ancient homeland.

The soldiers left Beeson at the ferry and returned to the fort. Beeson crossed the Rogue River and rode his pony north to Portland to board the Steamship Columbia. Waiting on the docks, he watched as hundreds of Indians from the Rogue Valley disembarked from the ship. From there they were marched to the reservations. At that moment on the Portland docks, two Trails of Tears crossed paths ... Beeson's and the native peoples'.

Beeson sailed to San Francisco, and then around the horn to New York, where he continued to advocate for the rights of Indians.

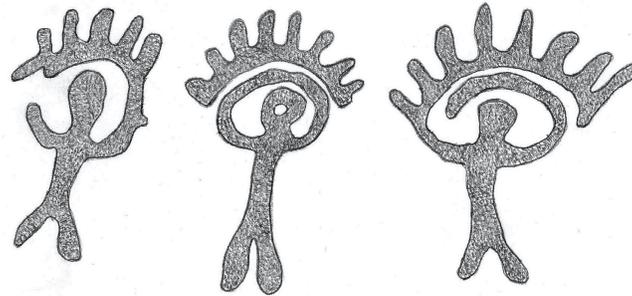
In 1857, Beeson published a book, *A Plea for the Indians*. This is a treasure of Oregon literature. In this work, Beeson used a style and depth of language that would not be heard again until the Civil Rights Movement a hundred years later.

During the Civil War he met with President Lincoln, convincing him to take on the plight of native people following the war. Unfortunately, Lincoln was assassinated before that could happen.

Eventually, Beeson returned to the Rogue Valley and lived out his life. He is buried next to his wife and son on a wooded hill near Talent, not far from his homestead.

For me, John Beeson's death is not the end of his story. Here is what I remember about the night I visited Stearns Cemetery, where I met the ghost of John Beeson.

The dead are not silent. Some ghosts speak wisdom we ought to pay attention to. They pace the centuries, unsettled, searching for an audience willing to listen to their tales. Their stories are true on the deepest levels of truth, and for that reason, they survive. They are the teachings, the wisdoms, the humanity of what is known. They are the sounds of our memories and our dreams.



As a storyteller, I have learned to listen. I have discovered that each word, each breath of silence, each subtle gesture, every gaze into the soul of every story, is sacred. I have learned to open my heart and my senses to what may be possible. In this spirit, I journey into wild places where stories draw breath. Drawn by some scrap of scribbling, a conversation with a friend, some strange and wonderful sound, a mound or knoll in the landscape, I pause in the place. I settle in. I listen carefully.

On an October evening, as a full moon spreads pale light over the Rogue Valley, I climb the slope at Stearns Cemetery, toward the hilltop grave of John Beeson.

I sit in the moon-struck shadows of three trees that circle the graves of the Beeson family ... a madrone, an oak, a pine. In these trees, a restless breeze rattles leaves with a haunting whisper. The long-shadowed twilight invites a quality of unquiet that sends spirits scampering into the night. I hear words of stories swirl over each gravestone. I hear the unsettled voices of my own thoughts. Beyond the shadows, Coyote yips and barks on a wild run down the valley.

Here in this cemetery, in the company of ghosts, I wait for something unusual to happen.

No one remembers when Mother Landscape first appears. Perhaps it is just before the Rock People, the oldest ones we hear stories of. Whichever way we look, whatever words we choose to tell the myths, no matter how our memory-soaked minds try to make sense of where we come

from, nothing seems tidy, as if creation is a mirror of our own lives made shiny by how we desire the world to be.

There are always a few things spread around to make the world out of ... some curve of hillside, a scattering of trees, the cloud-reflecting river, a deep sky and stars beyond, and a menagerie of Animal People wandering up and down the rivers ... Coyote's Mythtime buddies.... Arrival. Hapkemnas the Children Maker shows up and things start happening. The Dragonfly brothers journey up the Rogue River from the coast, fixing up the world and making it ready for the people. Centuries flow by.



Arrival. The Takelmas settle along the river. Mother Landscape invites them in. They make a family. Centuries and centuries flow by. Arrival. Miners and pioneers. Mother Landscape groans a bit, but smiles and makes room. She adopts thousands into her family. A day blips by. Arrival. Loggers. Fruit growers. Mall builders. Mother Landscape tries to make the best world for all of her children. Her family is huge. She stretches her arms as far as she can around everyone. There seems to be room, but just barely.

Near the beginning of this sweep of narrative, Coyote shows up with his talented troupe of myth actors ... Grizzly Bear Woman and Black Bear Woman, Medicine Fawn and Jackrabbit and Beaver, Panther and his brother Wildcat, the White Duck sisters, Mudcat Woman, Rock Old Woman, Acorn Woman, the Dragonfly brothers, and many, many others.

They build a house along the river, and light a fire in the center of the house. They invite Mother Landscape and her children inside. Everyone dances to celebrate new friends. And later, in the dark of night, they gather close to the warmth of the flames.

From inside the memories of their experiences, from sparks of dreams layered with their most vivid imaginings, the stories begin, here in the house, spreading into the wide world.

“Wili yowo, there is a house along the river...”

Mother Landscape adopts the stories, giving them a sense of place. With people and stories in her family, the place begins to make sense.

They call the river Gelam, and the word stretches to include the name of the people to come, Takelma, the people of the river.

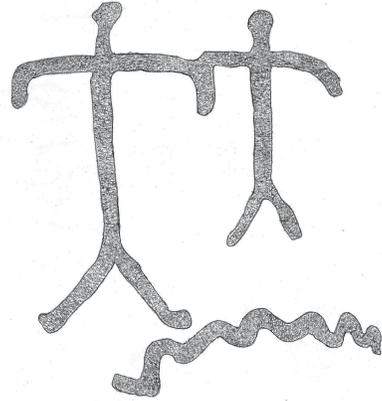
As generations of people arrive and depart, for as long as any storyteller can remember, the stories from the family of Mother Landscape get told and retold.

Night after night, Coyote makes himself a star of legend and myth. He destroys ghosts that have been taking living people with them to the Land of the Dead. He dies and comes back to life. He gets stuck to Pitch. He gets unstuck. He takes himself apart to escape the tree that closed him in. He gets put back together. He runs upriver looking for women, downriver looking for more women, and as it goes, he ends up with fewer than he would like. Frog Woman is his greatest disappointment. Night after night this spindly-legged canine buffoon romps through the stories in pursuit of his various appetites, always a hero in his own eyes, always with just enough humanity to inspire us to search our souls.

But Coyote is not the only critter in the stories. Skunk becomes a disillusioned lover. Grizzly Bear Woman loses her children. Jackrabbit goes crazy, chops down trees and starts the first war. The deer steal Panther’s pancreas, but with the help of his brother Wildcat, he gets it back. Later on, to the disappointment of Coyote, Panther marries the White Duck Women.

There are more stories. Mudcat Woman weaves a basket out of sunrays. Rock Old Woman mixes medicine and keeps the culture healthy. Acorn Woman brings good food to the people. After their trek up the river, the Dragonfly brothers become the Table Rocks.

Night after night, huddled close to the fire, the people journey through the landscape of myth. And each morning, as the sun rises over the river and the stories pause for a day, the people emerge from the house and see Mother Landscape in a new light. They feel as if they have traveled far and come home again, not quite the same as when they left.



A bit later in the narrative of the world, on the 28th of September, in 1853, John Beeson arrives in the Rogue Valley with his wife and son after a long journey by wagon, from Illinois to Oregon. He sees Mother Landscape, and he says....

“It is impossible to describe the joyful sensations of our company on entering this valley. It was a picture varied with shadow and sunshine, lofty mountains and little hills, meadows, groves, and silvery streams, altogether more beautiful than a painter could portray, or even imagine.”

After his relief at having come to the end of his journey, Beeson looks closely and notices the brow of Mother Landscape furrowed with worry. “We were soon apprised of the existence of war with the Indians, and the death of several men. I earnestly sought to learn the cause, and found no lack of informants.”

Though the story of Mother Landscape and her family becomes horrible beyond belief, a new voice joins Coyote’s troupe of tellers. Beeson becomes the newest storyteller to seek the truth and share the story of this place he now calls home. On a September day in 1853, Mother Landscape notices one of her children, and she invites Beeson to come inside and share the fire. In Stearns Cemetery, I sit near Beeson’s grave. Twilight and moonlight mix and catch a few words on his gravestone: “Beeson ... a Pioneer.” It is too dark to make out the other words.

Through the trees, I look out over the Rogue Valley. My memory fills in what I cannot see ... a hillside of oaks, the river, a sky full of stars.... I see lights blink on down the valley. I imagine them to be the sparks of that first fire reflected in the eyes of the storytellers. A breeze dances across this hilltop like a breath drawn in before a word is spoken. I listen carefully. Mother Landscape has arrived.

When the last light of twilight lingers, there is an opening, an opportunity to journey into the depths. This is the traditional time of myth telling. From twilight to the first flicker of morning sunlight, the spirit world reveals herself.

Telling after telling, we listeners sit by the fire, surrounded by depths of darkness. We open our hearts and listen carefully to each word spoken, to each silence between each word. A good story has layers of truth. It is the art of the teller to give life to each layer, and it is the art of the listener to open the door and allow the truths of each story to enter. Sometimes a story feels deeply unsettling, and we yearn for a new day. But often, a story that lives in darkness is the story we most need to hear, over and over, until the truth becomes clear, and we find a way out.



White and almost transparent in the moonlight, with eyes that glow like light from dying stars, my longtime sauntering buddy Coyote steps out of the shadows.

“Thought you could sneak out of the house and make this journey on your own?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Ha! I’m always around. And I love a haunted graveyard with juicy stories.”

“How do you know this place is haunted?”

“I know why you’re here.”

“Think so?”

“I know so. I’m as close to your heart as you are. And snooping and lurking are two things I do well.”

“That’s scary. You do more?”

“Scary? You wander among gravestones on a full moon night and you think me showing up is scary? Yikes! I’ll show you something scary....”

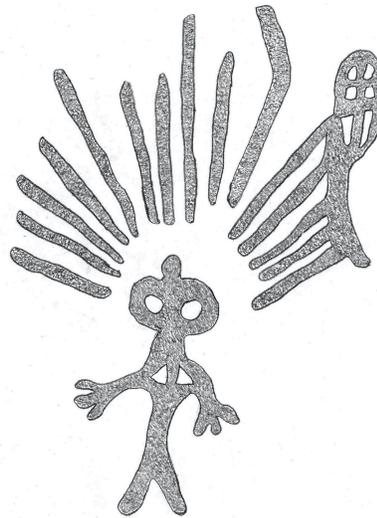
A cold wind rushes up the valley. Trees sway. Moonlight dances across the gravestones. I look back to Coyote. He has put on a mask. I recognize the face of John Beeson. Coyote steps into a splash of moonlight next to Beeson’s grave and speaks with words drawn from Beeson himself.

“The following quotations may be taken as a specimen of the spirit in which Indians were generally treated. They are from an Oregon paper of November 10th, 1855: The Indians are ignorant, abject, and debased by nature, whose minds are as incapable of instruction as their bodies are of labor. They have nothing in common with Humanity but the form; and God has sent us to destroy them.”

Coyote pauses, removes his mask, and speaks in his own words.

“This view is familiar among us critters ... buffalo, bears, coyotes.... Well, there’s more, and it’s scary.”

Coyote puts on his Beeson mask.



“At first they find more excitement in shooting bears and buffaloes, than they did in the States in killing rabbits and deer. They grow ambitious, and begin to think it would be a great achievement to kill an Indian. The desire becomes strong to slay one of those whom their own savageness has converted to an enemy.

“On coming to a lake, an Indian man, with two women, was discovered catching fish. The Indian, with only a bow and arrow, nobly stood his ground until he fell, riddled through and through by bullets of his assailants. The terrified females were caught and made to witness the cutting and slashing of the gory body of their murdered husband, by those who thus added brutal insult to their previous crime.

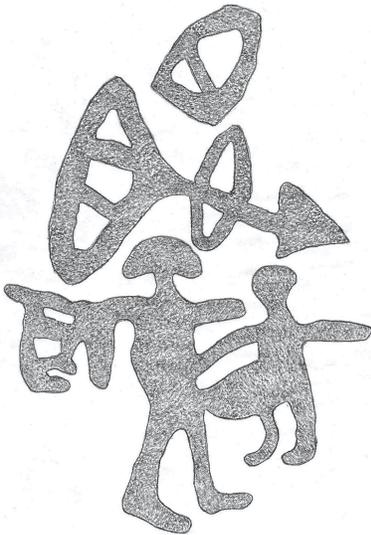
“On another occasion, a White Man being found dead, was supposed to have been killed by Indians. A company was made up forthwith, an Indian Ranch was surrounded, and all the

inmates were put to death — about forty souls — including men, women, and children. The domineering spirit grew by what it fed on ... excited to madness.

“An Indian girl in the act of fetching water for her employers, was shot, and her body thrown into the creek. An Indian boy, scarce in his teens, who was in the habit of visiting the shanty of some miners, with whom he was a great favorite, and always welcome, was taken and hung upon the limb of a tree. Two women and a man took refuge upon Table Rock. It was reported that they had killed themselves by jumping down its steep and craggy sides. They fell because they were shot and could not avoid it. Their mangled, but yet living forms, as they lay on the loose rocks below, were so revolting a sight, that many began to declaim against such proceedings.

“Few listened, and this state of things continued until people got into a perfect frenzy, and they found sufficient authority to condemn to death all Indians in the Valley.”

Coyote removes his mask. Still drawing his words from Beeson, he speaks slowly as if he has seen a lot in his long lifetime.



“Let us listen to a voice from fallen victims, from bereaved families, and blackened ruins, and be warned! All these things are significant.”

There is another rush of wind. As fallen leaves swirl into a whirlwind, Coyote slips into the shadows, and is gone.

I walk slowly toward Beeson’s grave and sit in the moonlight where Coyote had stood. I reach into my story bag and pull out Beeson’s book. In the bright moonlight, I can easily read the words. I turn page after page, searching for some way out of Coyote’s dark story.

Words left behind visit me over and over again. Some of the words are remembered and told as stories. Others are written down in books or dairies or letters. Sometimes the words are carved on gravestones.

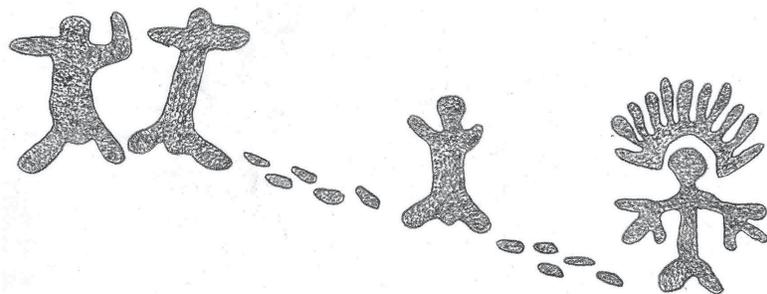
I find these words: “Sacred to the memory of Isham Keith, born September 13, A.D. 1834. He fell in the battle fought with Rogue River Indians on Evans Creek August 17, 1853. This tomb is erected over his silent and vaulted chamber by his mother, who feels his death as the rose

feels the blighted frost. Fearless he stood upon that bloody field, bravely, until his mournful doom was sealed. He faced the savage foe. The earthly hopes all wither at thy tomb. The fatal shot left naught for me, but gloom my son! that laid thee low.”

These words from one who has suffered settle into my soul. I feel a mother’s grief at the death of her 18 year old son. These singular words rise from a feeling that is universally tragic. There is truth here. These words might have been spoken by a Takelma mother. Something close probably was. Perhaps her story was lost. Or perhaps I need to listen more carefully.

Sitting next to Beeson’s grave, I turn the pages of his book. I no longer want out of Coyote’s story. I want to go deeper in. At a time when the Rogue Valley was on the brink of insanity, John Beeson offered a path away from the madness. I turn the pages and find this....

“The Indian gets the elements of his faith fresh from the hand–writing of his Maker. It is presented to him in the ever–open book of Nature. It is renewed with every returning spring; and comes forth clear and bright in the light of every morning sun.”



The moon travels over the ridge. Just before sunrise, it is darker and colder. I can no longer read the words on the page, and I close Beeson’s book.

I sit and wait for something to happen ... and it does....

Beeson’s ghost settles onto a stump. Shadows of madrones and oaks and pines branch overhead. The living room lights of homes are flickering flames down the valley. The air is still and the night is dark.

His voice begins like an early sunrise, faint light at first, then bright as a sunny day and full of the smell of trees.

“Some of them won’t believe you,” he says. “There are some who didn’t believe me about the Indians in this valley because they didn’t understand them. And there are some who won’t believe you when you tell them we had this little talk. But that’s no reason not to tell the story.

“They didn’t believe me when I told them Indians were hunted like deer, about the lynchings in Jacksonville, that Indian women begging for food were shot on sight. They didn’t believe such atrocities could occur in this lovely Rogue Valley.

“They didn’t even believe me when I told them that love is the universal cure for the social wrongs that curse the world. Their disbelief followed me right to this grave.

“But the ones who did the killings knew. They threatened to kill me, my wife, my son. They would have blamed it on the Indians, and some folks would have believed them.”

Beeson’s ghost pauses. Sunlight grows in the east. I can read all the words on his gravestone: “John Beeson. Died 1889. A Pioneer and man of Peace.”

When I glance back to the stump where his shape had been, there are only shadows. I call after him, “Was it you who said about the Indians that this nation was born in genocide and murder?!”

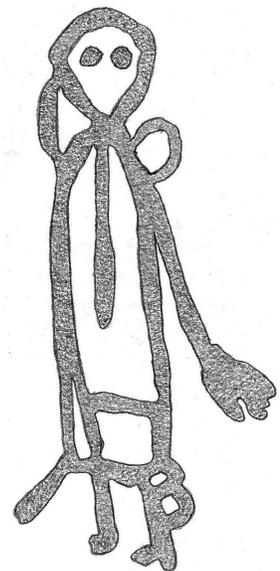
“No ... no....” he says. “That was Martin Luther King, Jr. a hundred years later. We dream the same dreams. We tell the same stories. Some folks didn’t believe him either.

“Now it’s your turn to tell the story. And get some help, you’ll need it. And remember about love....”

The air smells like trees. The rising sun carries the ghosts of his words down the valley where they settle over the lights of homes where people are starting to wake up.

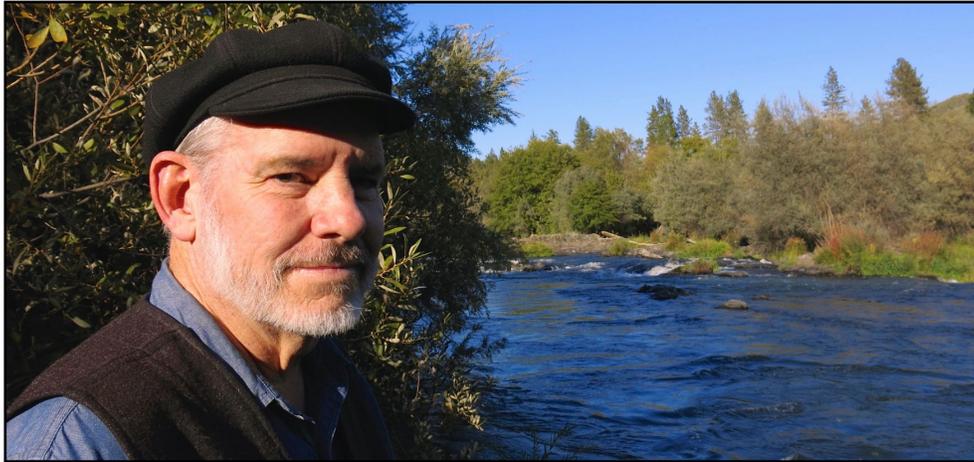
Many years ago, and here on this sunny morning in October, the words of John Beeson continue to offer a path away from the madness.

The dead are not silent. Some ghosts speak wisdom we ought to pay attention to. I am haunted by the stories of ghosts.



**“One of the best of Oregon’s storytellers!”**

**“A cultural treasure.” — “A master of his art.”**



Thomas Doty is a native storyteller. Since 1981, he has traveled the countryside performing traditional and original stories. He learned his art and native cultural traditions from elders, including listening to Grandma Maude, the family storyteller. Doty was born in southern Oregon where he still lives. He is descended from Irish and English settlers who settled in the Rogue Valley in the 1800s, and has family connections to Takelma and Shasta ancestors of the region.

He is the co-founder and co-director of Reading the Rocks, and the author of several books, including *Doty Meets Coyote*, a collection of 40 traditional and original native stories published in 2016 by Blackstone Publishing. His stories have been broadcast on Public Radio, and he is the recipient of a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the national American Indian Program.

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