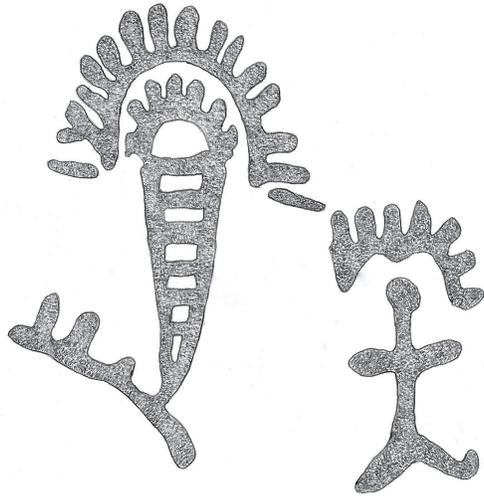
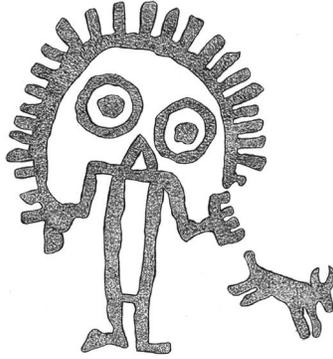


Trek to Table Mountain

Thomas Doty



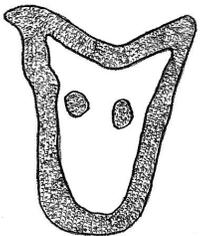
Trek to Table Mountain



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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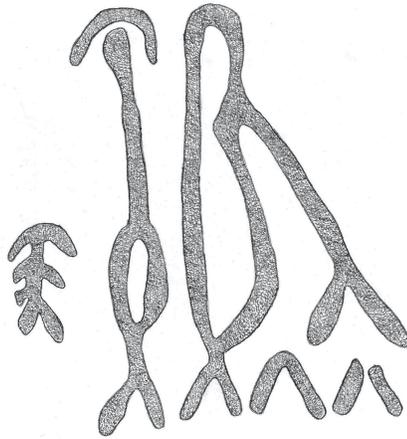
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The Legend

For several years a legend has sauntered around the rugged country of the Greensprings in southern Oregon. Like all good legends, it grows as it sloshes through creeks and rivers, traipses into canyons and wanders deep into the shadows of old-growth forests. Eventually the legend clammers up a steep ridge to the towering height of a mountain peak. If the legend survives the climb, it finds a mythic place in the landscape and in the hearts of people who call the Greensprings their home.



This legend tells of an old man who spends his winters in the abandoned fire lookout on the summit of Table Mountain. Like an ancient character in a many-layered story, he is many images woven into one: the wise man on the mountain peak, the hermit in the forest chapel, a monk in his cell studying texts, an elder with a vivid memory of the Old Time stories and how things used to be, the old man who abandoned the weight of the world to search in the wilderness for the song of his heart.

The story says that before he came to Table Mountain, the man traveled nearly every day of his life. As an anthropologist and linguist, he was obsessed with saving native cultures — myths, languages, folklore, history, songs — and he scribbled nearly every word ever spoken to him. He filled notebook after notebook with observations, insights and shreds of folklore and language. He stashed hundreds of boxes of notes in “safe” places to be retrieved at a later time, when something might be done with the raw data. He put what little money he earned into second-hand clothes, fuel for his rig and into notebooks and pencils.

As years went by, his obsession to collect cultures never slowed. He rarely enjoyed his travels or noticed much of the world as it breezed by him. There was too much to be done. Ancient civilizations were being lost, and quickly. Those moments between native informants were shadowed with the worries and troubled dreams of a riveted urgency. As years went by, he forgot where the notebooks had been stashed.

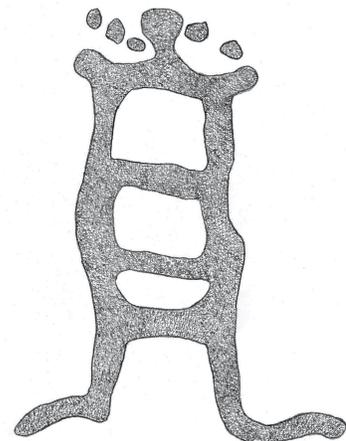
Each time he traveled to a new interview, he was certain that a dozen informants were dying at that very moment — perhaps the last speakers of their native languages — and he would never be able to record their stories. They would be lost to the world forever. Once he had a friend run over his legs with a car to keep him out of the army so he could continue working. Another time he gave a dying informant morphine to keep him alive a little longer, long enough to scribble another story and a few more words from a dying language.

More years went by. He grew old. His clothes wore thin. Even on the hottest days he wore a threadbare jacket to hide his shirt that was split up the back. His rig labored and chugged with each trip. He tried to keep up the pace of his youth, but he was tired. The old man slowed down.

One fall morning, as he sat exhausted, he looked away from his field notes and noticed a mountain peak brushed white with a light dusting of new snow. It was beautiful. The longer he gazed at the mountain the less tired he felt. He put his field notes on the ground. His felt light, unburdened. At that moment he replaced his obsession with a new horizon. He let go of everyone else's stories and began to think about his own.

He stored his field notes in his memory, left behind his rig, and slowly made his way to the summit of the mountain. He climbed the rickety steps to the top of the old fire lookout and looked out upon the world. He tossed away his mental debris and began to contemplate what was left of his life, his own place in the great story of the world.

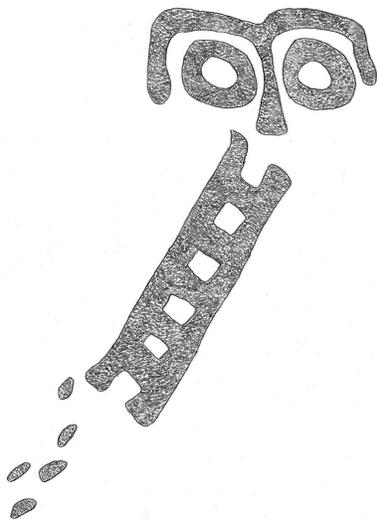
As winter neared, the old man gathered firewood, got the stove working, carried in food and water, fuel for a lantern, and repaired the old cot and heaped it with blankets. As snowdrifts closed the roads and trails, he gazed upon the landscape where he had spent his life and everything looked foreign.



All winter, during the storytelling season of long nights, his mind traveled through every story he had ever heard. As though stories were as real as the landscape, he put himself into each narrative and began to experience each story as if he were there. As he traveled through stories he traveled through seasons and watched the landscape evolve as each story changed.

In the spring, he walked down the mountain and discovered the relationship between stories and walking: the rhythm and pace of the story, the measured feet of the poetry of the language, each step shuffling through story and landscape, the silence between the words and between each breath of the warm breeze. He spoke new versions of the stories as he walked. The earth warmed, trees leafed out, spring sunlight pushed away the shadows of winter. With each word of each story, with his own presence as the storyteller, the old man recreated his world as spring remakes winter with the warm-hearted telling of its arrival.

The old man walked through shifting storyscapes of spring and summer and into the fall. He never felt alone. His companions were stories and the places where they continue to thrive. Before the first snow, he returned to Table Mountain for another winter of contemplation and story making.



He remembered that he had first come to the mountain with the Takelma elder Gwisgwashan. It was a November day, ages ago. He was on one of his many ethnographic field trips. But this time he returned not as a collector of stories, but as a story himself.

He became a legend. Perhaps someday he'll become a myth. He soon forgot those fixated field trips of his former life. He forgot his troubled dreams and worries. He even forgot his name. What he remembers are the stories, which are the summit of his life. As he looks out from the lookout, he opens his eyes wide and the landscape feels like home.

The story says that he has few visitors. He is gone on his walks for most of the year, and when snow closes the mountain roads, he is cut off from the rest of the world. He is alone in his snowy lookout, spinning and re-spinning tales in the shadows of the long nights and in the warm glow of lantern light and firelight. Every so often, someone comes to visit and finds the old man in his lookout. The old man tells one of his stories, and the visitor takes the story home, where it

is told again and again. A few folks have come across the old man on his walks and, likewise, they are each given a story to take home. The stories are not lost after all.

This legend is about many things, and so it is destined for a long life. It has been written as it has been told, season after season. The facts shift from version to version but the truths of the legend never falter and remain unchanged as the legend continues to grow.

The Journey

In November, just before the first snowstorm of the season buries the road to Table Mountain, Coyote and I journey into the Greensprings in search of the legend of the old man. It takes some coaxing to get Coyote excited about leaving his lair on a chilly day, and Coyote makes a speech about it.

“Do I have this right? You’re suggesting we go looking for a dog-eared old guy living in some shabby lookout about to fall over. Must I remind you that this old geezer is a legend and probably doesn’t even exist?”

Undaunted, I lure Coyote into the immortal fame of the Mythtime spotlight. I promise glitzy stories with Coyote cast as exalted hero. I promise adventures, treasures, top-billing, plenty of blood and guts for him to pompously wallow in, and a good meal when we come home — no stale dog biscuits for this pooch! For an hour, I inflate Coyote’s self-created stardom nearly to bursting and finally convince him to make the journey.

We climb into my rig and drive into the mountains. We follow the curves of an ancient route. For centuries, this was the way of the old Indian trail. Later on, fur trappers, explorers and miners traveled it. During the western migrations, a series of roads covered the old trail. As folks changed their methods of travel from horses to wagons to cars, the road zoomed through a succession of names from the Applegate Trail to the Greensprings Highway.

We pass Emigrant Lake with its Indian War cemetery, and Buckhorn Springs, that age-old place of healing and peace. We climb to the first pass, turn off the highway and wind and bump along a gravel road to the summit of Table Mountain.

Coyote points his nose at a communication tower. “Hey! Look at those microwave tom-toms. They’ve got red lightning bolts painted across their skins. Don’t they look like Indian drums? I knew this was an Old Time power place.”

Coyote does a pseudo-Indian dance, circling and circling, “Heyoooooh, this is big chief wampum Coyote Chases-His-Tale going to tell you a story from the Ancient Place of Cell Phone Towers. Woo, woo, woo!....”

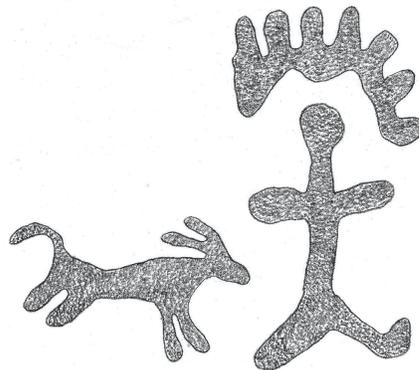
“Knock it off,” I say. “Is nothing sacred to you?”

“Nope, that’s my role. I’m an upside-down, inside-out, front-to-back and back-to-front Coyote clown. I remind you what matters, remember? And speaking of which, have a look at that fire lookout. Looks like it’s about to blow over. Looooook oooooout!”

As I turn to have a look, Coyote picks up a rock and is about to hurl it at one of the microwave drums to see how loud it booms. He stops when he hears a door creak open at the top of the lookout. An ancient face peers down at us.

“Welcome. Come on up and warm yourselves with a story.”

Coyote and I climb the shaky stairs, stepping carefully over holes where planks are missing. We climb through wisps of mist and clouds. As we reach the wobbly walkway at the top, I feel lifted into a youthful notion of wide-eyed exploration.



The view from the rickety lookout on the summit of Table Mountain is as familiar to me as memories of my childhood ... Mount McLoughlin, Pilot Rock, Mount Shasta, the curving shorelines of mountain lakes, the eastern openness of the Klamath Basin.... This landscape has changed little since I sat spellbound by stories from generations of my family who grew up and lived their lives within this world of rugged mountains and valleys as kind as summer.

With the rig and modern towers behind me, I imagine entering the narrative of some secret stretch of wild and primal hinterland where myths shake their sense of time and stretch their wisdoms across the ages.

Standing on top of his world, I feel drawn toward the old man's offer of a story.

The Old Man Shares a Story

A cold wind slams the lookout and jolts me back into the present. Coyote and I step inside. The wind swirls clouds across the summit where they consume the lookout for a moment before blowing down the ridge and out of sight. This happens again and again as if each arrival of clouds is a story coming to visit and pausing to be shared before heading off to find a new audience. The old man shuts the door. He gestures to us to sit on the cot.

The old man sits on the woodpile. He says nothing about himself. His presence in this setting of stove, lantern and cot is just as the legend tells. After a long gaze into the flickering flame of the lantern, he begins....

Just down the ridge is Cottonwood Glades, one of the battlegrounds of the first war. It's a peaceful place now, a far cry from the bloody shrieks that echoed across this land those many centuries ago. The path of that war snaked through this entire region, from one knife-in-belly battle site to the next, from the sacred banks of the river, along the creeks, high into the hills, eventually slithering back to the river. And for what? Misunderstanding, misinformation and an outrage upon the land. The story may be old, but the truths of it live with us now.

We are the people of the river called Gelam, the Rogue River. She was the lifeblood of our world long before she flowed red with the story of this war. I know this. I was in our village when the myth was made. I have walked this story path many times and I have listened to the language of the trees.

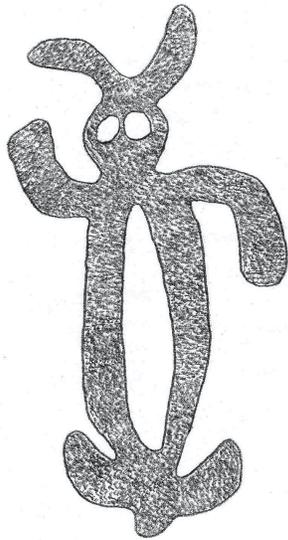
In the time we call the Old Time, when animals and people were not so different, the time of myths, of dreams, when the landscape stretched beyond sight, when trees were so plentiful it seemed they would last forever, at such a time as this, we tell a story about Jackrabbit, Coyote, ourselves, and our relations, the trees.

Wili yowo. There was a house along the river, and Jackrabbit lived by himself in that house, away from the village.

It was fall. Morning fog pressed low on forests of pines and firs and cedars, and oaks and maples blazed yellow and red through the fog as their leaves fell and fell and fell.

We were gone from the village, scattered through fog to the meadows to dig camas roots for the coming winter. As trees dropped their leaves, the forests lost color. Even evergreens seemed pale in the gray fog. While we were digging camas, Jackrabbit was alone in his house, away from the village.

Jackrabbit woke with a start and crossed his ears. He looked through the fog toward the village and said to himself, “Where has everyone gone now that camas is ripe?” He jumped out of his house. “So they’ve gone digging, eh? I’ll show them I can be as useful as they are. I can get ready for winter, too. I’ll cut firewood.”



He grabbed his ax and laid out his ears, hop–hopping into the forest as fast as he could.

“I’ll cut enough wood for everyone, enough for a hundred winters!”

Jackrabbit didn’t settle for gathering dead, fallen wood. He cut down live trees. He cut pine trees, which give the people planks and beams for their houses. He cut oak trees, the sons and daughters of Acorn Woman who provides food. He even cut the medicine trees whose bark and sap and leaves keep the people healthy. He cut every tree in sight. He worked in a frenzy, cutting trees still brilliant in their fall colors.

He hacked and he hacked, and each time he stopped to catch his breath, he crossed his ears, and with a fevered look in his eyes, he said to himself, “I’m so good at this. If it was anyone else, the trees would fall on top of him. But not me. I’m a useful Jackrabbit. A talented Jackrabbit. The people’s provider! I’m the ... But what am I saying? I should be cutting. These trees are as ripe as camas.”

He cut trees all day. He hacked and he hacked, and the trees fell and fell and fell. And the fog pressed lower.

Day settled into shadows as we returned to the village, our baskets brimmed with camas roots. Coyote, his nose tuned to thoughts of a full belly, was padding through fog along the river when he heard Jackrabbit hacking down trees. “HmMMMM. Interesting.”

Coyote stopped. He put an ear to the ground and heard Jackrabbit talking to himself: “I’m the best hacker there is. When I cut them all down, I’ll dump them in the river and float them to the village. I’ll show the people I’m as good as they are! But what am I saying? Time to be cutting!”

Coyote turned his nose to the village, carrying his version of the news to the people.

When he got there he told us, “There’s a fuzzy bunny upriver killing your relations. He hacks them in two and dumps their bodies in the river. I heard him say so himself.”

Word got around and we gathered in the dance house. Thinking that Jackrabbit was killing our human relations, we tied our hair into topknots. We dusted our foreheads with white paint. We prepared for the first war there ever was. We grabbed our spears. One by one through the night and the fog, we followed Coyote upriver, into the woods.

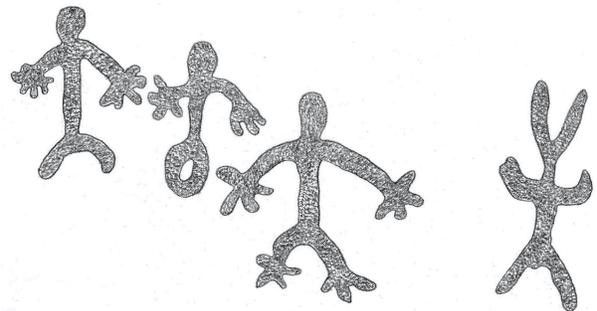
One man found Jackrabbit, and Coyote told him, “That’s the one I told you about.”

But the man replied, “That one? You’ve got to be kidding. He’s too small. He would make a plaything for my child.” The man scooped Jackrabbit into a basket and fell in at the back of the line.

Jackrabbit coiled his legs, made a great leap out of the basket, and hop–hopped back into the woods. But nobody noticed. We were all looking ahead, walking in a long line upriver, looking for the one who was killing our relations.

Another man found Jackrabbit, and Coyote said, “That’s the one who’s been killing people. That’s the one!”

But the man said, “No, no. You must have it wrong. That one looks like a toy for my child.” He stuffed Jackrabbit into a basket and joined the first man at the back of the line. Again, without anyone noticing, Jackrabbit leaped out and disappeared into the woods.



How many times did we find Jackrabbit, and how many times was Coyote not believed? Through the night, along the river, through the fog, many of us found Jackrabbit. But each time he escaped.

It was only when we got together back at the village that we realized we had been catching the same rabbit. “What did yours look like?” “Furry, with long ears.” “That’s the one I caught. But he got away.” “So did mine.” “Mine, too.”

At this point I suggested that Coyote might be telling the truth. “If that little rabbit could escape so many times, I suppose he could kill our relations.” Everyone agreed to go after Jackrabbit again in the morning. We went to bed with thoughts that led to uncomfortable dreams.

Next morning, we gathered and again prepared for war. Coyote joined us, and we started upriver toward the last place we had seen Jackrabbit.

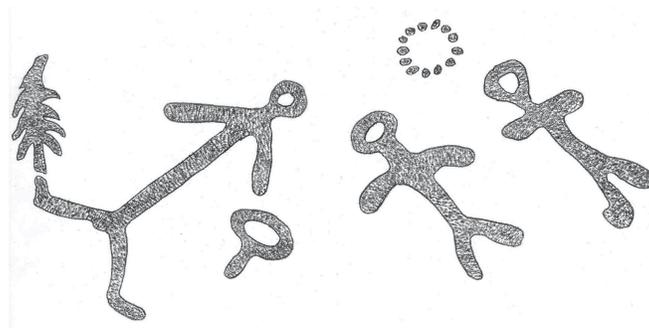
It wasn’t hard to find him. In the daylight we could see the trees cut down, and we followed the path of Jackrabbit’s cutting.

Some trees had fallen over others. Some lay half in the river. Nothing was left alive. No trees. No bushes. No plants. Jackrabbit had hacked everything to the ground.

We froze.

Eyes widened. Brows lowered. Anger fired our eyes.

Jackrabbit stuck his ears into the air like war feathers and looked to where we stood, dead still. “Ahhhhh, more trees? Just when anyone else would have thought the job was done, Jackrabbit sees more trees.” He grabbed his ax, rushed us and cut several through. They fell among the stumps and cut-through trunks of the sons and daughters of Acorn Woman, the pines, the firs, the cedars and all the other trees. They fell and fell and fell.



With a swiftness that surprised himself, Coyote grabbed the ax and cut Jackrabbit to the ground. He hacked him to pieces and tossed him into the river.

Somewhere a lark started singing. The morning breeze picked up the song and carried it downriver toward the village. Then there was silence, as filling as night.

We few survivors walked back to the village. We spent the winter mourning the dead and telling and retelling the story of Jackrabbit. Snow buried the stumps and logs until they were vivid only in the memories of the people.

The days were crisp and clear in the spring. Coyote had taken up hunting rabbits. Camas bloomed in the meadows. Wildflowers blazed yellow and red along the riverbanks, and between stumps and rotting logs new saplings took root.

It took many years for new trees to smooth the scars of Jackrabbit's work. Every winter we gathered around a fire in the dance house and told the story. "As long as the story lives, the trees will live," says the storyteller. "If the story dies, that will be the end of us and the end of our relations, the trees."

Storm, and the Journey Home

As the old man finishes his story, clouds swirl and dance across the top of the mountain. The first snow falls heavily and blows sideways, and the lookout sways and shakes and creaks in the wind.

"You'd better be going," says the old man. "This storm is the one that starts the winter season. Stay much longer and you won't make it down. You'll end up inside your own story and there won't be much of it left to tell when I find you next spring." The old man chuckles in a half-serious way.

As Coyote and I start down the stairs, I look through holes in the clouds and see that even down the valley the snow is starting to pile up. Green tree-covered slopes are quickly turning white.

The old man calls after us. "Come back next fall. I'll have another story. Maybe two, maybe three. One at a time, that's how we tell them."

On our twilight drive down the mountain, we pass Cottonwood Glades. My mind ignores the snow. I see the place in the summer of my youth, those days of endless stories in a changeless landscape. My thoughts grow into a picture. Words mix Mythtime with my own memories and make the beginnings of an old story from a new point of view. I whisper to myself....

"In the long shadows of evening at Cottonwood Glades, this alpine meadow of creeks and pools is brushed green with skunk cabbage, yellow with buttercups, white with trilliums.

Somewhere near here, the first war was fought. Sometime in Mythtime these creeks flowed red. Cottonwoods became smoldering stumps. A lot of people died. Now the creeks brim with the boomings of frogs. Woodpeckers rattle the trees. Deer browse slowly from glade to glade. In the long shadows, that first war is barely a memory.”

A doggy voice interrupts my musing. “Say, didn’t we meet that old guy out on the Illinois River? And didn’t he have some big–mouthed domestic dog with him?”

“Elder. That was the dog’s name.”

There is silence as I imagine the picture. “Yes, I think it is the same fellow. We must have met him on one of his story walks.”

“Where’s the dog?” asks Coyote.

“I don’t know. He was pretty old.”

“I’m glad I’m immortal.”

“In the stories, perhaps.”

“Modern humans have such simple–minded views.”

“Don’t be so sure, Professor Dog. We human storytellers invented you, didn’t we? Talk about complex. Did you like the old man’s story?”

“It wasn’t quite up to your promise of glamorous possibilities, but I’ve looked worse.”

“There are always revisions, you know. You’re a piece of work that never ends.”

Coyote contemplates. “Perhaps. Well, I suppose....”

A wild blast of wind buffets my rig. Coyote dives into the back seat and disappears under a blanket. By nature, Coyote is a fair weather traveler. Slick roads make him jittery.

I laugh. “Protecting your immortality?” No answer. The purr of the rig is broken only by occasional wallops of wind followed by the nervous chattering of canine teeth.

Coyote and I drive homeward through a mountain mishmash of forests and clear cuts. Snow deepens the woods and softens the harshness of cut–over land. Like a good story, each shift of seasons has a long and deep memory. As snow transfigures the ground, nothing underneath is forgotten.

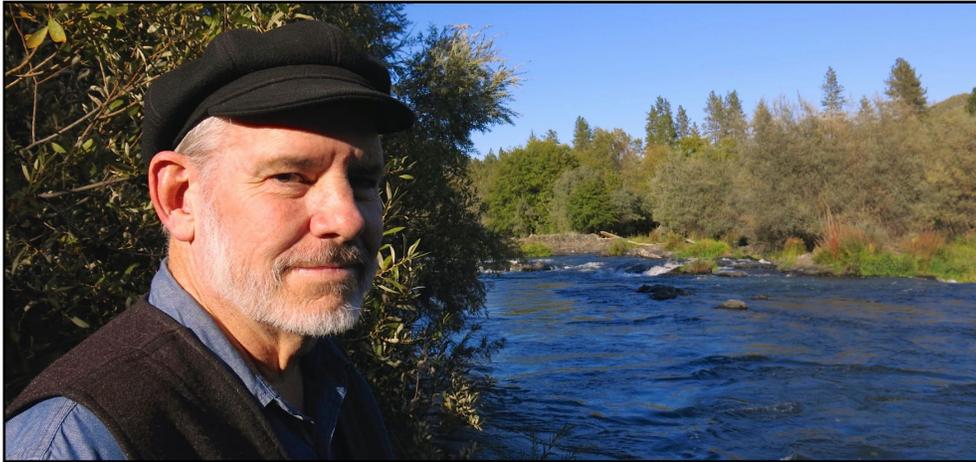


The Legend Lives

On Table Mountain, the storm settles in. Wind blows snow into drifts that cover the summit. Inside the lookout, the old man's thoughts turn to words and he speaks to the night. "This storm howls like a scared Coyote. Snow falls and falls, and our houses vanish under snowdrifts. Inside, one by one, we share our stories...." The old man's words hang in the warm glow of lantern-light and firelight, and never quite fade into silence.

“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.

www.DotyCoyote.com