

# Two Chemehuevi Teaching Myths

CAROBETH LAIRD

**I**N a sense, all myths are teaching myths. Among peoples who have never developed a system of writing, beliefs about origins and cosmology, customs, social attitudes, and many other kinds of information are transmitted by the spoken word in tales both dramatic and humorous that are told and retold from generation to generation. However, certain stories are obviously designed to pass on specific knowledge. This is true of large segments of the myths to be considered in this paper.

One of these is entitled "Southern Fox Went to Visit Flicker and His Brother."<sup>1</sup> It runs as follows:

Southern Fox (*Tantivaiyipatsi*)<sup>2</sup> was living in a certain place on Whipple Mountain (*Wiyatu*<sup>1a</sup>). He thought to himself, "I am going north to visit my cousin." Then he went north.

Having gone down off the mountain, he shot an arrow and ran under it, running faster than the arrow flew. When it fell to earth, he dodged it. Then he plucked it out of the ground, and water issued forth from the place where the arrow had stood. Southern Fox named this water *Hawayawi*.<sup>3</sup> Then he went on his way.

When he had traveled far, he shot another arrow, outran it, and dodged it when it fell. Again, when he plucked the arrow out of the ground, water came out. Southern Fox named this spring *Hahaiiv*<sup>1a</sup>.<sup>4</sup>

Again he went a long way to the north, shot another arrow, outraced it, dodged it, and pulled it out of the ground. Water sprang forth, and he called it *Paasa*, Field.<sup>5</sup>

Yet a fourth time, he traveled far, shot an arrow, ran beneath it, and dodged it when it fell. This time much water flowed from the ground and he named it *Parimpa*, Water Mouth.<sup>6</sup>

Southern Fox left that place. While going along, he saw a bear. He sat down in ambush. When the bear came close, he shot and killed him. Then the person who owned the bear as a pet came into sight, descending<sup>7</sup> toward Southern Fox. Southern Fox hid himself.

Flicker (*Kwanaw*<sup>2wantsi</sup>) came where he was. "Come out!" he said, "why are you sitting there hidden?"

Southern Fox came out. "I killed that one without knowing that he belonged to you," he said. He raised up the bear and made him again to be a living creature. Then he and Flicker went north together, in the way from which Flicker had come.

Blue Jay (*?anga*) was staying at Flicker's house.

Flicker said, "Tomorrow, early in the morning, I am going over to kill the deer that I always see in his sheltering place."

The next morning, while Blue Jay was still asleep, Flicker hid his arrows by shooting them into a hollow in the hills. He hid Blue Jay's bow by sticking it into the windbreak, and he concealed his carrying net in the top of the brush house. Blue Jay's knife he buried at the foot of a post and his moccasins under the ashes. Then Flicker started off on his hunt.

After a while Blue Jay woke up. He was looking for his moccasins. When he couldn't find them, he asked the pet bear, "Where did he hide my moccasins?"<sup>8</sup>

The bear looked at the fireplace. Blue Jay dug in the ashes and recovered his moccasins. Then he looked for his carrying net. Not finding it, he asked their pet, "My carrying net, where did he hide it?" The bear stared up at the ceiling and there, hidden in the brush, was Blue Jay's carrying net. "How about my knife, where is it hidden?" he asked. The bear looked toward the foot of a certain post. Feeling around there, Blue Jay laid hold on his knife. "How about my bow, where is it hidden?" The pet bear looked at the windbreak. Then Blue Jay retrieved his bow. "What of my arrows, where are they hidden?"

The pet bear gazed out towards the hollow in the hills. Blue Jay was going about for some time pursuing his arrows, because they had become birds. Finally he caught them all, and they were arrows again.

Then Blue Jay told Southern Fox: "I am going to follow my brother's tracks. You will stay here with him, my pet. You will sit watching him closely. If anything is done to us, that one, my pet, will stand up, he will stretch himself, then he will jump onto you. Four times he will jump upon you, then he will run! You will follow him, he is the one who will take you to us!" Even as he spoke, Blue Jay started off on his brother's trail.<sup>9</sup>

Blue Jay overtook his brother.

"What have you come for?" Flicker asked. "You are one who does not go about quietly."

"I will go about without saying anything," Blue Jay said. "Right here a deer is standing!" He was mistaking a bush for a deer because, never having hunted before, he had never seen a deer.

"It is a bush standing there," his brother told him. "We shall ambush the deer. You go that way around the mountain, come down opposite him and shoot him."

"Yes, I am going to ambush him." With this, Blue Jay started out to ambush the deer.

Immediately, right after Blue Jay left, Flicker ambushed the deer and shot him. The deer was wounded. He ran down into a wash and died.

Blue Jay, believing that *he* was ambushing the deer, shot into the cave which was the deer's sheltering place without even seeing anything in it. Then he went over and looked into the cave. Since the deer was not there, he started to follow its tracks. Just going along without looking where he was going, he stumbled over the dead deer. Blue Jay lay there, feeling around the deer's body with his hands.

"Butcher him quickly!" said his older brother.

Then Blue Jay got up. He touched the deer's hoof and asked, "What is this to him?"<sup>10</sup>

"That is his foot."<sup>11</sup>

"How about this, what is it to him?"

"That is his thigh."

"And this, what part is it?"

"That is his tail."

"How about this, what is it to him?"

"That is his torso."

"How about this?"

"That is his hair."

"These, what are they to him?"

"Those are his front legs."

"How about these, what are they to him?"

"Those are his horns."

"And this, what is it to him?"

"That is his nose."

Whereupon the deer, having stood up, ran off. The brothers followed him. When they had come a long ways down into the valley, they killed him. Then Flicker began to butcher him. He told his younger brother to prepare a roasting pit so that he could roast the head.

Flicker's enemy saw the smoke. They ambushed Flicker and Blue Jay. Crow (*?Atapatsi*), having previously been captured, was with the war party. "I will do it to him," Crow volunteered, "I will ambush him and shoot him."

At that moment, back in Flicker's house, the bear stood up, facing away from Southern Fox. He stretched himself. Then he jumped at Southern Fox. Four times he jumped at him and missed. Then he ran, with Southern Fox hard behind him.

Meanwhile Crow was ambushing his own mother's younger brother. Then he shot him, taking care to shoot through the club-shaped topknot in which he wore his hair.

Then, being really on Flicker's side, he called out, "They are out to get you, Uncle!"

Thus, Crow, Flicker, and Blue Jay made three. Crow and Blue Jay exchanged shots with their enemies, while Flicker kept on butchering the deer. Then the bear and Southern Fox arrived. Without pausing, Southern Fox exchanged shots with the enemy. Then Flicker also began to discharge his arrows. The bear was grabbing and killing the enemies, hugging them to death. He grabbed Wasp (*Niningkuy?yah*) and broke him almost in two. Then Wasp, having his two parts barely joined together, said, "Even this way I shall live." Whereupon Wasp killed Southern Fox and Flicker.

Afterwards Blue Jay and Crow raised them up and brought them back to life.<sup>12</sup>

That is all; thus ends the ancient telling, the telling about Southern Fox.

Another tale which definitely belongs in the category of a teaching myth, even though at the end it appears to take off into the realm of fantasy, is called "*Pivisatsi Killed Person Carrier*."<sup>13</sup>

At that same place<sup>14</sup> an old woman was living, taking care of her grandson. Coyote made his home with them. Each day the old woman would go seed gathering, while Coyote merely went out to walk around.

When he was left alone, the boy sat twisting Coyote's red milkweed fiber into string.

*Because Coyote had red milkweed fiber*

*I am twisting string,*

*Because Coyote had red milkweed fiber*

*I am twisting string.*<sup>15</sup>

So chanting continuously, the boy sat twisting the fiber into string. When he had finished, he set a small snare at the edge of the place where his grandmother was accustomed to sleep.

In the evening, the old woman arrived and cooked food. Then when they had finished eating, when it got dark, they lay down. In the morning the boy got up and looked at the snare which he had set. Because a body louse had got caught in it, he asked, "My grandmother,<sup>16</sup> what is this?"

His grandmother got up and looked at it. "This is a body louse (*poowavi*)," she said, "this is the way he will be killed." Whereupon she burst him between her thumbnails.

"You will not go walking around very far," the grandmother then said to her grandson. "This is dangerous land, it contains enemies." Then she went off as before, and so did Coyote.

The boy sat twisting string and singing, as he had done on the previous day. This time when he had finished his snare, he set it at the head of his grandmother's sleeping place.

Then in the evening, the old woman came back, and Coyote also returned. The old woman cooked for him. When they had finished eating and it got to be night, they lay down. When morning came, the boy again looked at his snare. He found something in it.

"Grandmother, what is this?" he asked.

The old woman got up and took what the boy had caught. "This is a head louse (*atsivi*), this is the way he will always be killed." So saying, she crushed him between her teeth.

Then she again warned the boy. "My grandson, you will not walk far off, this land contains enemies."

The old woman went off again to gather seeds, and Coyote also went off to walk about. Left alone, the boy sat twisting Coyote's red milkweed fiber into

string, singing as before. When he had finished, he set his snare at the edge of the windbreak.

Then in the evening, the old woman came back and Coyote also. Just as always, the old woman cooked food. When they had finished eating and night fell, they lay down.

In the morning, the boy looked at his snare.

"Grandmother, what is this?" he asked.

"This is called a mouse (*puwintsatsi*)," she said, "this is the way it will always be killed." With this, she broke off the mouse's heart.<sup>17</sup>

Then again the old woman went out to gather seed, and Coyote went to walk about. This is what he did every day. The boy sat down again to twist string, sitting and singing as he was wont to do:

*Because Coyote had red milkweed fiber*

*I am twisting string,*

*Because Coyote had red milkweed fiber*

*I am twisting string.*

This time when he had made a snare he set it a little further away, at the edge of the house.

Just as always, in the evening the old woman came and cooked food, then they ate, and when night came, they lay down.

In the morning, the boy went to look at his snare. He came back dragging it, with a woodrat caught in it.

"Grandmother, what is this?" he asked.

The old woman got up and looked. Taking the animal, she said, "This is a woodrat (*kaatsi*), this is the way it will always be killed." So saying, she broke off its heart. Then she roasted it. When it was done, she ate it, giving the intestines to Coyote.

Then the old woman went out seed gathering again, Coyote also left, and the boy sat twisting red milkweed fiber into twine. Just as he always did, *Pivisatsi* sat singing and working:

*Because Coyote had red milkweed fiber*

*I would twist it into string.*

This time he made the twine bigger and stronger than ever before. When he had finished, he set his snare in a jackrabbit trail.<sup>18</sup> Then he returned to the house.

In the evening, the old woman arrived and did just what she always did. When the three had finished eating, when it got to be night, they went to bed.

In the morning, the boy went out to look at the snare he had set. Having pulled it up, he returned dragging the snare with the animal it had caught still in it.

"Grandmother, what is it?" he asked.

"*Haik<sup>ya</sup>!*" Coyote exclaimed, "This is said to be a jackrabbit (*kami*), hand it here!"<sup>19</sup>

Taking the jackrabbit from the boy, Coyote tied it under a greasewood bush. Having done so, he took his arrows. "This is the way he will always be killed, by circling round and round him!" As he spoke, Coyote was going in circles around and around the jackrabbit. When the jackrabbit squatted down, Coyote shot him. "Thus all jackrabbits will have it done to them!" said Coyote.

Then he roasted the jackrabbit. Coyote and the old woman ate it.

The old woman went out seed gathering again, and the boy sat singing and twisting a larger cord than before. When he had finished, he went out to set his snare. This time he set it in a mountain sheep trail. Having done this, the boy returned.

In the evening, the old woman came back, and they ate and went to bed as usual. When morning came, the boy went to look at his snare. Even though he was afraid of what he had caught, he came dragging it back to the house.

"Coyote, what is it?" the boy asked.

"This is what they call a mountain sheep (*naga*)," Coyote said. Taking his arrows and saying, "This is the way he shall customarily be killed!" he ambushed him. Then Coyote killed the mountain sheep and butchered him.

After she had eaten some of the meat, the old woman went out seed gathering again. Then the boy went out to set his snare,<sup>20</sup> this time in a deer trail. Having done so, he returned home.

At night they lay down, and in the morning the boy went out to look at the snare he had set. Even though he was afraid of what he had snared, he came dragging it back to the house.

"Coyote, what is this?" he asked.

"That is called a deer!" So saying, Coyote tied up the deer. Taking his arrows, he circled around and around it. When it crouched down, he shot it. "That is the way it will be done to the deer!" Coyote said.

Then the old woman cooked some of the venison. Having finished eating, she went seed gathering.

On the mountain where he saw that something had made a track, there the boy set his snare.

At night, having finished eating, they lay down.

Then when morning came, the boy went to look at his snare. A big person carrier was sitting in it. The

boy untied his snaring device, thinking to carry home his catch. But Person Carrier grabbed him and carried him away to his island in the sea.

On this island Person Carrier had many wives. "Spread it out to cool!" he called as he was approaching, meaning that they were to spread out his food to cool.

In the morning, he said, "You will beat that boy,<sup>21</sup> then you will roast him for me."

Having prepared a roasting place, the women were about to beat the boy. He said, "My grandmother will grumble if you kill me." Then they did not do it to him.

In the evening, Person Carrier came and lit on the dead tree standing in the water off his island. That is where he always sat when first arriving. "Spread it out to cool!" he called to his wives.

Thereupon, the women lay down side by side with their legs spraddled out. There were many gnats (*?angivimi*, singular *?angivi*) there and they kept saying over and over, "Vagina tastes earthy, vagina tastes earthy."<sup>22</sup> Person Carrier came and said the same thing.

"Did you not roast the boy?" he asked.

"He said his grandmother would get angry," his wives told him.

Person Carrier laughed at that. "Tomorrow you will surely roast him," he said, "even though he keeps saying it."

When it got to be morning, Person Carrier went off again. Then his wives were pounding the boy, even though he kept saying, "My grandmother will get angry." Being unable to kill him, they roasted him while he was still alive. Then they went to bathe.

While they were bathing, the boy popped up among them. "How is this?" they said. "What we have roasted has arrived amongst us!"

Then in the evening, Person Carrier came and lit on his dead tree standing in the water.

"Spread it out to cool!" he called to the women.

Then again the women lay down side by side with their legs spraddled out, and the gnats said, "Vagina tastes earthy! Vagina tastes earthy!"

Person Carrier came and he also said, "Vagina tastes earthy." He said to his wives, "You should have roasted the boy as I told you."

"We did roast him," the women said, "we don't know how he escaped. He said his grandmother would get angry."

The Person Carrier was laughing with his mouth wide open.<sup>23</sup> "Without fail you must roast him tomorrow," he said.

When morning came he went off again. Having beaten the boy, but not having been able to kill him, the women again roasted him alive.

Then they went to bathe. As they were bathing, the boy popped up in their midst again; there he was, bathing with them! The women returned home.

The boy took wax from his ear and made it into a ball, then he snapped it with his thumb and forefinger at the dead stump standing in the water and cut it off. Thus he was testing his power.

In the evening, Person Carrier came along saying, "Spread it out to cool!" This he called as he came, because the tree on which he was accustomed to perch was not there anymore.

He came and said, "Vagina tastes earthy." "Vagina tastes earthy, vagina tastes earthy, vagina tastes earthy!" said the gnats, mocking him.

"Why did you not roast the boy?" Person Carrier asked.

"He said his grandmother would get angry," the women told him. Person Carrier laughed at them with his mouth open.

The boy was sitting waiting, having made some of his earwax into a ball. Then, as Person Carrier was laughing, he finger-snapped the ball at him, hit him directly over the heart and killed him. Then he pulled out Person Carrier's feathers, stuck them together, and set out flying across the water. Over the ocean he returned, he arrived at his own home.

He told his grandmother about the creature that had carried him off.

"He is Person Carrier, that is what he has for a name!" said Coyote.

That is all; thus it ends, the ancient telling.

One obvious similarity between the myths here narrated is that both contain lists of words, besides conveying other important or useful information.

The myth which deals with Southern Fox's visit to Flicker and Blue Jay names, or gives opportunity for naming, the body parts of a deer. My informant, George Laird, stated that all the parts were "supposed" to be named, although in practice the narrator

never did this. However many parts were mentioned, a certain order was obligatory. The story teller must begin with the hind legs (*sic*; actually in this version the hoofs) and end with the nose. The Chemehuevis, like many other people, enjoyed repetition. If time permitted and the narrator felt in the mood, he could go on and on with Blue Jay's questions and Flicker's answers. Also, it is natural to assume that such a story would spark discussion. To hunters and youthful hunters-to-be there can have been few things more interesting than the conformation of a game animal.

The deer's anatomy is not the only matter with which this myth deals in an informative way. Tracing the route of Southern Fox, who by his magic caused the waters to spring forth, three important watering places are mentioned in their proper order. And the segment dealing with the hiding and subsequent retrieval of Blue Jay's possessions lists those things which it was necessary for a hunter to own.

Blue Jay is an outstanding character. He is represented as too noisy and clumsy ever to have been taken on a hunting expedition, and therefore ignorant even of the appearance of a deer. The questions arising from this ignorance furnish the peg upon which to hang the list of body parts. However, his speech characteristic (*-vinin<sup>y</sup>inin<sup>y</sup>ini* and variations thereof) and his ability to go about after the battle raising up the slain mark him as a shaman of sorts. He is therefore a type of holy fool, comical yet touched by awesome power.

The knowledge requisite to name every part of an animal's body may have esoteric significance. "In the beginning was the Word." In this myth at any rate, the implication is that the deer was restored to life by the audible naming of all its parts.

Blue Jay's mistaking of a bush for a deer probably satirizes the errors of novice hunters, likely to shoot at anything in their excitement.

In the Person Carrier myth, Coyote appears in his primary role of pattern setter. He does not go out to hunt, merely to walk about. The boy, *Pivisatsi*, like Blue Jay, is represented in this present world by a bird. In the myth, he illustrates man's gradual progress from a state of primal ignorance and fear to a position of dominance. As he snares each animal, he asks its name. Coyote names all those larger than a woodrat and illustrates the methods by which they are to be hunted and killed. But when the boy passes from the natural to the supernatural, when he snares and is carried off by the dreadful Person Carrier, he is on his own. He must prove his own power, vanquish the enemy, and return to his home, as the shaman returns after his solitary ordeal of initiation; only then does Coyote give the creature a name. The long, fantastical episode with Person Carrier also suggests the progress from childhood into adolescence and sexual initiation.

The boy, the protagonist of this tale, has two qualities in common with Blue Jay: ignorance, shown by questions which bring forth valuable information, and magical powers. Blue Jay performed the shaman's feat of raising the dead; the boy, *Pivisatsi* is unkillable.

There is a certain ambivalence in the concept of the boy's adversary. He is at first mentioned as "a person carrier, a big one," as though he were merely one of a species; when he carries off *Pivisatsi* he becomes Person Carrier, a mythological personage, definitely one of "the kind that talks." The concept of a bird-like being who could carry off people may have been suggested by legends about the golden eagle or the California condor.

In the first myth here considered, there are no women; in the second an old woman has great importance. She performs a woman's primary tasks of gathering, grinding and cooking food, and she names and kills the woodrat and all smaller animals. (She is also

said to have cooked part of the venison; but years later, in another context, George Laird stated emphatically that everything to do with game animals, with the sole exception of packing home the kill, was in the masculine sphere. The man, he said, butchered the game, cooked the meat, dressed the hide, and, using his awl, sewed the clothing and other items into which it was made.) The grandmother in this myth might be considered an aspect of Ocean Woman.<sup>24</sup> The boy attributes great power to her, threatening the wives of Person Carrier with her wrath in case they harm him in any way. The story implies that the home of grandmother, grandson, and Coyote was not far from the sea, and Person Carrier is represented as living on an island in the sea—although the detail of a dead tree projecting out of the water might be more appropriate to a fresh water lake.

In the text here given, no animal is mentioned between the jackrabbit and the mountain sheep; but the narrator was free to name and describe the method of killing as many animals as he desired.

These two myths well illustrate how all information, from the most esoteric to the purely practical, was orally conveyed. Such teaching was never dull, and it was not easily forgotten.

Poway, California

## NOTES

1. In Chemehuevi, *Tantivaiyipatsi Kwanawaw?wanaaviwiv kani?iwaipi*. George Laird (my informant and late husband) said he thought that *kwanaw?wantsi* was the word for flicker, and in lieu of a more positive identification, this is the way I have translated it.

2. Voiceless vowels in Chemehuevi words in this article are rendered in roman type. Sequences of two identical vowels represent long vowels. Ng stands for the sound in *sing*. All other symbols have their standard phonetic value.

3. No etymology; presently called West Wells.

4. No etymology; now known as Klinefelder Springs.

5. Paiute Hill.

6. Pahrump, Nevada. In translating this account of the way in which these four "waters" were formed, George Laird spoke as if Southern Fox had loosed several arrows at a time; but in his comment he explained that he shot but one arrow each time, reduplication of the Chemehuevi verb signifying that the action was repeated several times.

7. Coming down from the north or down from higher ground; here direction is indicated.

8. Blue Jay follows each phrase with *-vinin<sup>y</sup>inin<sup>y</sup>ini*, these syllables repeated a varying number of times and ending with *-n<sup>y</sup>i* or *-ni*. This is characteristic of the speech or song of certain shamans.

9. George Laird explained that the reason Flicker never took Blue Jay hunting with him was that Blue Jay always made too much noise—the blue jay of today is a notoriously noisy bird. However, on this occasion Flicker had made the mistake of leaving the pet bear behind, and it indicated to Blue Jay the places where his equipment was hidden.

10. That is, What part of his body is this?

11. Or, these are his feet. Inanimate plurals are not indicated in Chemehuevi, although multiple plurals, such as many hills in a chain, may be shown by reduplication.

12. George Laird commented that the bear was killed a long way off, therefore Blue Jay and Crow did not find him to bring him to life. Had he been revived, he would have been a pet to this day. Even so, if you should meet a bear in the mountains, if you address him as *nīwaani*, my friend, he will remember his ancient status and will not harm you.

13. In Chemehuevi, *Pivisatsi Ninino<sup>o</sup>ovi Pakapi*. *Pivisatsi*, the boy in this story, is a small unidentified bird resembling the bird (also unidentified) called *tanatsokotsi* and about the same size as *tanatsokotsi*. George Laird gave the Mohave name of *pivisatsi* as *?atsiipa*. *Ninino<sup>o</sup>ovi* is a mythological bird resembling an eagle, but much larger. The word derives from the root of

*nīwi*, person, plus *no<sup>o</sup>-*, to carry on the back. The reduplicated form led George Laird at first to translate the name as "People Carrier," but since only one person was carried at a time, he said "Person Carrier" was better.

14. The conventional beginning for many Chemehuevi myths; comparable to the English "Once upon a time" except that the reference is to place.

15. *Sinawavitsi wi<sup>o</sup>itsig<sup>y</sup>aaku tunani<sup>o</sup>iyi*, *Sinawavita wi<sup>o</sup>itsig<sup>y</sup>aaku tunani<sup>o</sup>iyi*. *Sinawavitsi* (for *Sinawavitsi<sup>y</sup>a*) is a diminutive form with the case ending *-a* elided and replaced in the next phrase with the less frequently used *-ta*.

16. *Hutsin<sup>y</sup>i*, my paternal grandmother.

17. That is, she pressed its chest with her thumb and forefinger, located the heart, and by pressing and pulling down at the same time broke off the "stem" or main artery.

18. *Kamirivovi*, jackrabbit trail. George Laird explained that any small narrow trail (of an animal) is *tivovi* (cp. *tivipi*, earth), but a large trail or road is *poh*. As shown later by the text, *tivovi* is used even for the trail of a large animal; e.g., *nagarivovi*, mountain sheep trail, and *tihiyarivovi*, deer trail.

19. In characteristic Coyote-talk, Coyote begins his speech with *haik<sup>y</sup>a* and ends each phrase with *-aik<sup>y</sup>a*; or, in times of great excitement, he may say *-aik-aik-aik<sup>y</sup>a!*

20. After he had caught the mountain sheep, the boy did not need to twist string again, since he had a cord strong enough to catch anything.

21. George Laird explained that beating the boy to death would tenderize him.

22. *Wigimp tivik<sup>y</sup>amayi*, *tivik<sup>y</sup>amay wigimpi*. The gnats not only varied the word order in this phrase, they used every kind of voice, from the highest to the lowest in pitch.

23. He was "giving them the horse laugh," George Laird said.

24. For the myth of Ocean Woman, see Laird's "Chemehuevi Religious Beliefs and Practices," *The Journal of California Anthropology* 1974, 1:19-25.