

Coyote and the Strawberries

George Wasson, Coquille folklorist and storyteller, observes that "this story's been told to me by most of my relatives from the Coos Bay area. I've heard my dad tell it. George B. Wasson. Aunt Daisy told it, his sister. Aunt Mary's the one who told it most often. And of course my brother Will also told the story to me. It's kind of a combination of those." For an account of the Wasson family's rich ongoing involvement in Indian and Anglo Oregon folklore, see J. Barre Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore*, pp. 158-171.—Personal communication to editors by George Wasson, 1992, all rights reserved.



Left to right: Susan Wasson Wolgamott, Bette Wasson Hockema, John Wasson, Wilfred C. Wasson, George B. Wasson, Jr. (ca. 1975)

Coyote was going down South Slough off Coos Bay, and he was going along when a hail storm came up. Big hailstones came down and started hitting him, pelting his body, and he was jumping around, saying, "Oh, that hurts! Oh! Oh!" And he had to get out of the hail storm, so over on the side of the trail there he found this big tree. I think it was a cedar tree. It had been burned, maybe even hit by lightning, which would make it a taboo tree to mess with, but anyway this big cedar tree that had a hole down in the bottom of it, a cavity had been burned to the bottom and partly hollow down there. So he rushed over, and he got down inside there, and he huddled up to get out of the hail storm. But it didn't quite protect him, so he used his magical powers, his *tamanawis*, and he commanded the tree to grow shut around him. So he said, "Tree, grow shut. Grow shut around me." And the tree did that. But he left a little hole he could see through, little hole he could look through, and he was looking through that hole and he could see outside, and he felt really proud of himself, saying how smart he was, how good he was. He had commanded that tree to grow shut.

Well, the hail storm passed by, and Coyote was sitting in there, and he decided, "Well, I guess it's time to get out of here now," so he used his power again, his *tamanawis*, and he said, "Grow open." Nothing happened. Then Coyote says again, "GROW OPEN." Still nothing happened. He thought, "Well, I'm not doing something right here," so he commanded the tree, "Grow open." And nothing happened, and on the fourth time, he still said, "Grow open." Nothing happened at all, and there was Coyote stuck inside of the tree. He must have been too proud of himself because his power wouldn't work, the

tree wouldn't grow open. So he was looking out that little hole, and pretty soon he saw one of the Woodpecker Girls flying by, and he looked through the hole, and he called out through the hole, "Oh Miss Woodpecker!" She looked around, and she said, "Where's that coming from?" And he says, "Come over here, over here to this hole." And she flies over the tree, and she looks in there. And he says, "Yes, in here. Peck this hole bigger so I can get out." Well, she starts working away. She starts pecking on the hole, and she pecks on it and pecks on it, and it gets bigger and bigger. As the hole gets bigger, Coyote can see a little more of her, and he looks out and says, "She's pretty nice looking." He reaches out there, and he thinks, "I'm just going to stroke her tail feathers." And he reaches out and just starts to touch her on the tail feathers, and he grabs her, and she jumps back and says, "What are you doing?" He says, "Oh, oh, I didn't mean to do anything." He'd grabbed her by the tail feathers, grabbed her by the tail. "Oh, oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do anything. I won't do that." And she starts work and says, "Okay. I'll work some more." She had started to fly away, and he said, "Oh, I won't do that again." And so she starts working away, pecking away, and the hole gets bigger, and she's inside pecking away, getting it bigger, working away. And he looks up. By that time he can see the front of her, and he says, "She has nice beautiful round breasts." He said, "Oh, she's got her head up in the air, she won't even notice me. I'll just reach up and just kind of, I'll just kind of stroke and just touch them a little bit." And he gets so excited, he grabs her, and she jumps back and flies away, says, "No more. I'm not going to help you."

Well you might know, there's a little woodpecker down the coast that has two marks on it: white marks across its tail and across its breast also. That's probably where they came from, Old Coyote messing with her when she was trying to peck the hole bigger.

So anyway, she flew away and left Coyote inside the tree, the hollow tree, and he's trying to figure out what he's going to do to get out. Then he has a bright idea: "Aha." So he reaches up behind his braid, behind his ear, in his braid, and he pulls out his clamshell knife, and he takes his clamshell knife, and he starts cutting himself up in little pieces. Reaches down to his foot, and he cuts out a piece and he pokes that out through the hole. Then he cuts off another piece and he pokes that out through the hole, and he just goes like mad. He starts cuttin' himself a little piece, poke, cut off a piece, poke it through the hole, cut off another piece, poke it through the hole. Working up his legs, all the way up his body, he cuts himself all up in little pieces, pokes 'em out through the hole, and then he's going to put himself together when he gets outside. But while he's doing this, he's cutting out his intestines, his guts, and he throws 'em out through the hole, but while he's doing this, here comes

Blue Jay flying along. Blue Jay flies along and looks down and says, "What's all that?" Looking around, down the bottom of that tree, all that interesting stuff, coming out of that hole over there, falling on the ground. Nobody's around any place. Blue Jay swoops down and grabs a string of intestines and flies away. Well, Coyote gets all finished, gets all poked out through the hole, gets outside, puts himself all back together [*sound of narrator patting hands together*]*—*back here, back there, everything back into place. He doesn't notice that Blue Jay has flown away with part of his intestines. And he just thinks he's just fine, so he's all put back together, and he goes on his way.

Walking on down, and he goes on down South Slough and comes upon where Coos Head is now, and he gets up on there, and here are strawberries all over. And Coyote says, "Oooh. Oh, look at that, nice strawberries." Well, you can tell that this is an unusual year because here's a hail storm when the strawberries are ripe out on the bluff out there, so unusual things are happening. And here's Coyote, "Oh, I love strawberries!" And he reaches down and starts picking strawberries. And he picks a strawberry and he eats it, and he picks another one and he eats it and says, "Oh, these are so good." He just keeps eating strawberries, picking and eating, picking and eating. Well, you know right away he's doing something wrong here because you're not supposed to pick strawberries and eat them yourself. You're supposed to take them back home to share with other people. So here's Coyote doing the wrong thing again. Picking and eating, picking and eating. But he just can't get full. He just can't—he tries eating faster. So he picks faster and eats faster, picks faster, pick and pick, and he just goes as fast as he can. He can't get full at all, when eventually he looks around behind him, and he sees a whole string of strawberries lying on the ground, and they come right up to his rectum, because that's when he discovers that Blue Jay flew away with the lower end of his intestines and flew away with his rectum. And he's just got a straight line right through, and the strawberries just go right in one end and out the other. And Coyote's looking, and he says, "I've got to stop that." So he got an idea. He said, "I'm going to have to plug it up." (Aunt Mary always said his "bunghole," plug up his "bunghole.") And so Coyote figured what's he going to do. So he looks around there and says, "This'll do." And he walks over, and here's this old rotten log, and he kicks on one of the knots sticking out of this old rotten log, knots sticking up, everything's rotted away. These knots are out there, and he kicks one off, and he grabs that, and he says, "Oh, I'll take that." And he takes it, and he shoves it up in his bunghole and jumps—"Ouch!" And he throws it down, "Oh, that hurts! That's rough, that hurts." And he says, "That won't do. I want something that's more smooth." And he looks over, and here's a rock down there. He says, "Well, I'll try that." So he picks up this rock, and he

takes it, and he starts to shove it up, and, "Oh, that's cold." And it's too big and it falls right back out. "No, that won't do it. I've got to have some way to plug it up so I can keep strawberries inside of me." So he's thinking about it, and he looks down the trail there, and here's a wild carrot, a wild carrot growing down there. And he says, "Ah, that's just the right thing." You know it's just about so long, and it's tapered, and it's nice, soft and pliable, and that's just what he wants so he reaches down and picks it and very carefully turns it and pulls it up out of the ground. Yes, that's just right. He breaks off the stem and throws it away. But he's thinking, "You know, I ought to have something to make sure it stays in better." And right over on the side a little ways there's this great big fir tree that's been hit by lightning, and it's dripping pitch, pitch falling down there. So he takes this carrot—Well, you know something's wrong here also, 'cause he shouldn't mess around with a tree that's been hit by lightning. But here's this tree hit by lightning, and Coyote goes over and takes this carrot and rolls it around and around in the pitch, gets it all pitched up, and then he takes it and very carefully slides it up into his bunghole and pushes it up and takes some more pitch and packs it in place. Oh, he gets it all nice and glued up there and pats it real tight, and it's all sealed up. And he's really happy with himself.

So then he goes back to eating strawberries, and he's eating with both hands just as fast as he can go, eating and eating, more and more and more—eating strawberries until he gets so full he can hardly walk. His belly's just puffed way out, and by this time he's worked himself way down to the edge of the bluff. And he looks over there, and he can see a fire out there. He'd worked way out toward Bastendorf Beach. And he gets off out there, and he looks way out there, and he goes closer and closer, and he gets up on the edge of the dunes, and he looks out, and there are people out there with this fire on the beach. And he's thinking, "Oh, someone's cooking something." Well, you know, Coyote's such a glutton he's always ready to eat something more. And he calls out, "Halloooo." And the people look up. And it's the Seagull Boys out there, and they say, "Oh, hello, mother's brother." And he says, "What are you doing?" And they say, "We're playing 'Jump over the Fire.'" He says, "Oh, well I'm very good at that." "Well, come over and show us." So Coyote goes over there, and he goes along and he runs over by the fire. He's disappointed it's not food, but he comes down there, going to show off, and he runs up—here his belly's so big he can hardly walk—runs up there and he takes a little jump over the fire. And they say, "Oh, well, that was very good, but you really ought to jump over here where the flames are. That's where the contest is. Jump over the fire." "Oh, well, I can do that too." So Coyote circles back around, and he goes over, and he takes another run at it. He takes a run,

and he jumps over, and he just barely gets over the fire, and he drags his tail right through the flames, and his tail suddenly explodes into fire. And he looks back there, and oh his tail is burning, and flames shooting up. And he starts batting at the flames, batting at his tail, and he's running in circles, and it gets too hot, and suddenly the pitch melts, and POP!—out goes the carrot. And Coyote's running in circles. Strawberries start spewing out. He's running in circles, batting at his tail, strawberries spewing out, and they're flying all over the Seagull Boys, just spewing out, covering everybody, strawberries everywhere. And the Seagull Boys are mad. They grab rocks and they start throwing rocks and sticks at Coyote.

And he runs and heads for the ocean as hard as he can go, runs and jumps out into the ocean, going to put his tail out. And he jumps out there, and what happens, but he jumps right out into the waves, and out in the waves is a big whale. And he jumps—right as the whale is coming up, he jumps right into the whale's mouth, and the whale swallows him. He goes clear down inside the whale's stomach. And everything's all quiet down in there. Coyote's down inside the whale's stomach. The tail is not burning any more; it's gone out. Coyote's feeling his way around: "How'd this happen? Where am I?" And he's wandering around in there, and BUMP, suddenly he hits his head on something. He reaches up, and there's the whale's heart, and Coyote bumps right into it. And he says, "Aha." And he has an idea, so he takes his clamshell knife again, and he says, "I'll get out of here." So he takes his clamshell knife and reaches up and cuts off the whale's heart. And the whale dies. There's Coyote, inside the whale, out in the ocean. The whale dies, and it floats up to the surface, and there's Coyote, standing up inside the whale, with his arms out, holding on. He can tell they're out in the big swells because the whale's going back and forth, real slow-like with the great big swells out there. Back and forth, back and forth. And pretty soon it gets a little rougher. They're going a little faster, and he can tell they're coming into the breakers on shore, and it gets faster and rolls some more, and the breakers are tossing him around, and he gets tossed around. Pretty soon there's a bump, and rolls over, and then everything's still. Aha, he knows then that they've washed up on the beach because the whale came ashore and washed up on the beach, and so Coyote is going to get out of there.

Once again he takes his clamshell knife, and he starts cutting between the ribs, through about that much blubber, about a foot thick or more of blubber. Coyote starts cutting, and he starts cutting, and cutting between the whale's ribs, trying to get a place to get out of there.

Well, the whale washed ashore right at Sunset Bay, and that's a very famous place where whales come ashore because there's another old story about a

woman who went out in the ocean and married the sea otters, and she had them send a whale ashore every year. So whales are very important to the people, because they had been watching it. Now they didn't know Coyote was inside it. The whale comes ashore and washes in at Sunset Bay, and all the people are watching. They've all come down. All the people come down. This great gift from the ocean. And they're coming down to Sunset Bay, and the whale is on shore. And they're all waiting for the ceremonious occasion to cut up the whale and share it with everybody. And just as they all arrive, here comes Coyote. He cuts his way, finally cuts through between the ribs, last strike just as the people arrive, and here comes Coyote, squeezing out between the ribs, and he's just covered with oil and whale blubber, just covered like Crisco all over him, just really tight. His hair is all matted down, and he's real skinny, sliding out, and his tail's all burned off. Coyote's just squeezing his way out between the ribs, and everybody's mad. Well, the Seagull Boys are there too, and they haven't forgotten the strawberries yet at all. All the people are mad because Coyote's contaminated the whole thing, this great gift from the ocean for all the people. Coyote's contaminated it. Everybody starts throwing rocks. Seagull Boys throwing rocks. Everybody throwing rocks at Coyote. He can't see anything because of all this blubber in his eyes, and it's all blurry. But he can hear. Down south he knows where Big Creek is; he can hear it running in down there, and he takes off running as hard as he can down the beach. And all the people throwing rocks at him, and he runs and runs and goes way down the beach. And he goes way up to Big Creek, and he starts running up Big Creek, and he hears the Salmon Girls going up Big Creek, and they're out there paddling, paddling in the water. And he gets ahead of the people real fast, and he runs up and he says, "Oh Salmon Girls, oh come over here." All the people are still trying to catch up with him. He says, "Oh, you're so pretty. Come here, let me scratch your sides." And he reaches down and he's scratching their sides for them. He says, "Oh, you're so lovely. I could scratch better if you get up here in my lap." And so they let him. They get up in his lap, and Coyote's taking both hands and scratching both sides. Well, he's probably got other things on his mind, too, but he hears the people coming too soon. They're right on his tail. And he's scratching both sides so casually, rubbing their sides and he gets right up to their heads, and he grabs their eyes, pulls their eyes out of their heads. He takes his own eyes out, which are all blurry and greasy, and he sticks them in the salmon's head. Because at that time salmon had bright shiny eyes, and Coyote had greasy eyes, and now he traded with them, salmon now always have greasy eyes, and Coyote's got the bright shiny ones. And that's the end of that part of the story.