

LEGENDS OF THE KIOWA

by

Russell Bates

. . . it is my deep involvement and inculcation in my tribal culture that brought me into contact with "legends" and "mythic" beliefs of my people. Nowhere that European man has gone has he paid much attention to the local peoples' cultural information on their own (soon NOT to be such) lands. Who else would know it better? But, no, the land is explored and 'conquered,' and the people are explored and 'conquered,' and the new landlords move in, little realizing that they have done nothing at all to explore or to conquer themselves.

As a Fortean, you may know of the experience of the US Navy Seabees in the Hawaiian Islands during WWII. In trying to deepen other harbors to supplant Pearl Harbor until it could be repaired, one location yielded a right proper mystery. One very large coral outcropping could not be budged, no matter the number of cranes, or tugs, or bulldozers, or explosives. With a pressing deadline to meet, the Seabees were just about to abandon the cove as unworkable. But native workers told them to ask the local shaman to advise on the matter.

Clutching at the straw, the officers in charge did just that. And the old shaman went out to the rock, and then came back to say that the rock could not be moved because the shark god didn't wish that it be moved. There was a lot of harrumphing, but one canny ensign did ask if the shark god ever changed its mind. The old man nodded, said that it was more than possible, but it would take one full day of prayer. Did the soldier-men wish the shark god's mind changed? Sure.

The old man sat alone on the rock for a full day, praying and singing, with only a small fire for company. The Seabees watched from shore, amused but admitting that it couldn't hurt. By noon the next day, the old man waved for his canoe. Ashore, the old man said the shark god had given permission for the rock to be moved. He refused payment, asking only to be fed. In the cove, one crane was moved into place while

others were being floated from shore. Attaching one line, the operator put preliminary tension on the line to await the other cranes. Under just that small energy, the rock slid from its perch and pancaked down into deeper water, out of what would become the ship channel. At least one group of white men came to believe in the shark god that day.

In 'North America' (Turtle Island, to you immigrants), it is much the same story. Cultural beliefs are quick to be named legends and myths and other words for poppycock. (Excuse the aside, but isn't 'poppycock' derived from impotence brought on by hard drugs?) Useless knowledge, superstition, heathen lore flying in the face of (European) logic. The Omah, the Sasquatch, the Khot-sa-pohl, the Tonk-kyanh-hee, and the Ogo-pogo met with laughter and derision from a people who brought their own cultural baggage full of dragons and gnomes and leprechauns and Devil Tygres and Sea Serpents. Ahem!

Well, the 'myths' and 'legends' survived because the people to whom they belonged also survived, despite war, epidemic, acculturation, relocation, and despair. In fact, many cultures thrived on reservations because the promised medicines and food and clothing and education were either lacking, in short supply, or boring. Medicine practices continued because medical care simply wasn't forthcoming. And so it is that much of such knowledge and history and belief comes

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(Editor's note: Russell Bates graciously accepted an invitation to write informally about some of the legends of his people. This article is taken from a personal letter, and we are indebted to him for his permission to print it.)

down to me, an ostensibly educated, civilized, Americanized descendent of Ice Age Man. Pardon my heathen soul, but it's rather difficult to entertain any belief in a god who forgives any inhumanity committed if only you will ask while feeling a bit guilty. Remember that the men of the *Enola Gay* prayed for forgiveness? How refreshing!

Onward. Among the Plains Indians, the Kiowas were something of an enigma. Their language was unrelated to any other, though computer reconstructions and correlations now hint that it is remotely similar to Mayan. They believed in The Thunderbird, a huge flying messenger from the stars (so now you see why I picked Kukulcan for my STAR TREK episode). They worshipped small idols, kept sacred bundles that contained medicine objects and written histories, used an almost hieroglyphic symbolic language to record events and lives on buffalo robes, and they were taller, more aloof, and more warlike than any other tribe. Given such presence, it is not without reason that such people were highly regarded (and feared) by other Plains tribes, and later by the soldiers and settlers.

Strictly speaking, the Khot-sa-pohl is the same critter as the Omah, the Sasquatch, Mupetz, and other tribal names given it by various tribes who knew of it. Yes, it was used as a kind of Boogeyman to scare errant children, but it also meant quite a lot to adults as well. To the Kiowas, it was a huge, hairy, pointed-headed, smelly, fierce (supposedly flesh-eating), man-like creature that it was better to avoid. It did not live only in the mountains but on the plains and in swamps and in forests and just about anywhere it wanted to live. Oddly, though the stories grant it human-like attitudes and even speech, it was not seen as human but rather as a marauding kind of animal. They could speak in whatever language a tribe spoke, but would come in contact with humans only by accident, or if they were hungry.

One humorous tale tells of the clever fool Sayn-day (the Picaro trickster of the Kiowas) who was captured while hunting. Two Khot-sa-pohl grabbed him and argued over who would get what part of Sayn-day. But Sayn-day knew the creatures feared only one thing: a tiny bird whose only sound was a barely-audible "Tsst."



As they carried him by one leg toward the hills, arguing as they went, Sayn-day cried and begged to be let go and said he was tough and bony. Then he covered his mouth and said, "Tsst."

The creatures stopped and looked around, very nervous. Sayn-day kept crying and pleading, and then would cover his mouth and say "Tsst." Because they were sure they heard it that time, they put Sayn-day down and started walking away. Still Sayn-day kept crying and begging, stopping only to call out "Tsst." The creatures got further away and actually started running; Sayn-day sat up and watched them, still crying but now having to call out louder, "Tsst!" Finally, as the Khot-sa-pohls were running over a nearby mountain, Sayn-day was on his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "TSAIIT! TSAIIT!"

It is interesting to note that Canadian Indians tell a much similar lore, with one group saying the Omah fears the bird and the other saying that the Sasquatch protects the very same tiny little bird.

With the exception of Southeast U.S. tribes, who describe the creature as being about the size of a chimpanzee, almost all tribes who tell of the creature describe him as very huge. In recent years, sightings continue of beings who match the native descriptions, with none captured or killed to provide proof. If I, as a modern Kiowa, needed proof, it was provided on or about July 4, 1978, in wooded hills just southeast of my own home town.

My brother and I and a cousin had taken my nephew Adam out on a country road to shoot off his fireworks. It was dusk but clear and calm with a fairly bright second-quarter moon almost overhead. My cousin suddenly noticed a tall, dark figure near the woods some two hundred feet away from the road. We at first thought it was a farm worker or even a derelict; but the fence that edged the field also ran away from the road and bordered the woods. The posts just in front of us were maybe five feet tall. At the point they ran next to the figure, the same height would have meant that it was at least twice as tall as the posts. Then we realized it could not possibly have been a human or anything we would otherwise recognize.

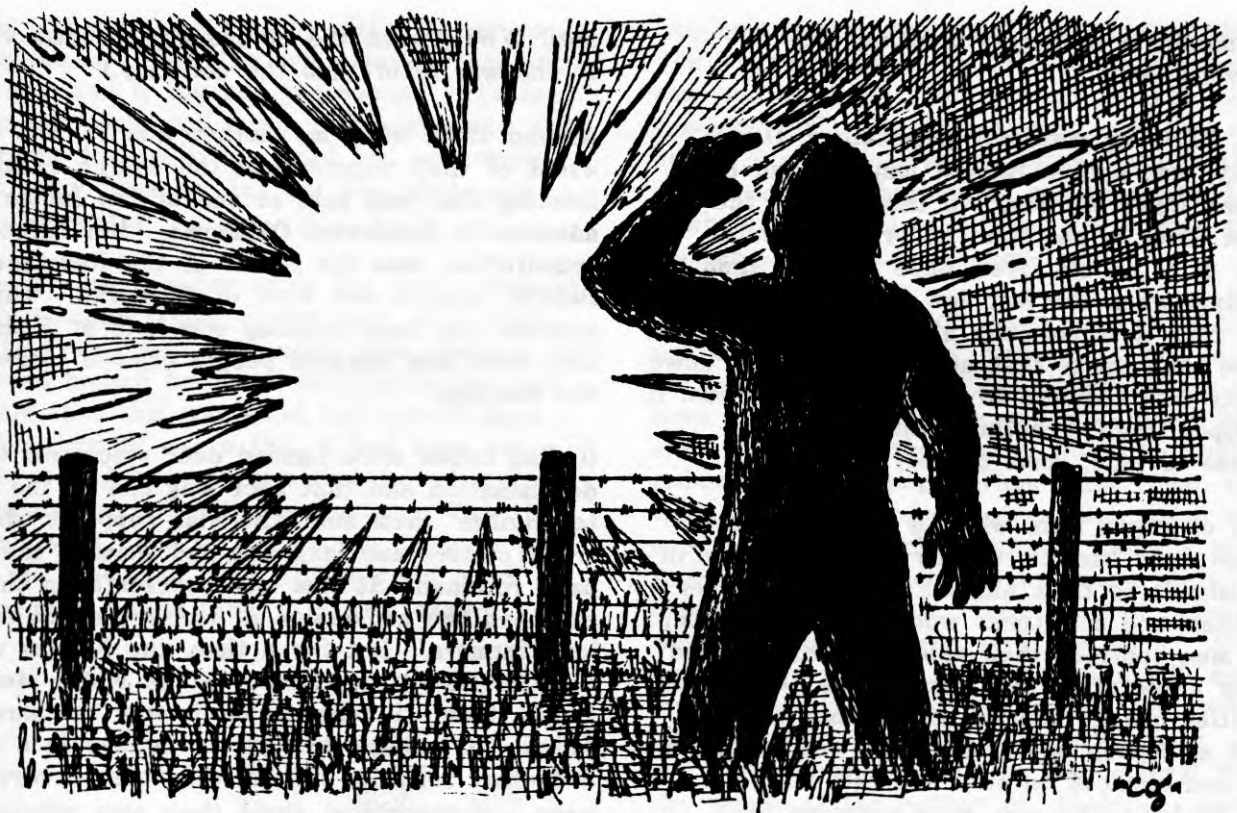
My brother shouted at it but it didn't move. Okay, he said, and he got out several large

packs of pop bottle rockets. The rest of us weren't sure what we were seeing. My brother angled one whole pack (about 24) on the bottom strand of barbed wire, wrapped a paper towel around the sticks, and set fire to the towel. In seconds, most of the rockets were launching themselves in an arc right at that patch of woods. Before they hit, they began to explode. The flashes showed us a tall, human-looking thing that seemingly was covered with very dark hair. The explosions must have startled it, for it stepped back a few paces, then stopped to regard us again. My brother set up two more packs of rockets in the same way and this time there was a veritable fusillade of explosions and flashes of light just against the edge of the woods. Whatever it was apparently had had enough, for it turned away and began walking off into the darkening woods, not fast at all, just at the walking pace of a man. It did keep glancing at us over its shoulder, however, until we lost sight of it in the woods. At that, we all loaded up in the car and drove to the west side of town where there is a park and shot the rest of the fireworks.

When we told our folks about it, they merely nodded and said it was probably a Khot-sa-pohl, checking out what the noise was. My aunt did say that it wasn't going to hurt us and we certainly had no reason to shoot rockets at it. My brother simply said that he didn't care for it watching us and that's why he did it. In any case, we have gone almost every year since to shoot fireworks at the same spot and have not seen anything similar. But it was light enough to be very sure that we did see something that fit the description, and it would be a rare human indeed who would stand to have rockets shot at him and either not shout at us or run away.

In the matter of the Tonh-kyanh-hee, the Kiowas describe them as being manlike, very black, having large eyes, being all covered with scales, and about two to three feet tall. They are the People Who Live Under The Water And Mud. For the most part, such creatures are said to inhabit rivers and lakes and most inland bodies of water.

One story that tells of them has the Kiowas traveling to their winter camp in what is now Texas. They had horses, so the tale comes from a time after White Men have come. They camped for the night on the shore of a natural lake, and if you will imagine that their number was around 900, the camp was quite large. In fair weather,



the tipis were not set up and mostly ground areas were prepared for sleeping and cooking and such. What horses they had were taken to water to bathe themselves in the lake, with only a few men set to guard them. In early evening, a group of boys came down to swim and to play in the lake. The guards took that opportunity to go to the camp to eat.

Not long after, the boys heard one of the horses suddenly scream out in the water. As they watched, the horse leaped and spun and struck its hooves into the water, over and again, finally running toward shore, with other horses following. As it ran out of the water, the boys saw that something small and black was being dragged from one of the horse's rear legs. The thing fell off on the sand and the horse continued running toward the camp. They began daring one another to find out what it was until they all went down in a bunch to look at the object. It scared them because it looked human but it was smaller than they were; it was black and its skin was hard and scaly; it lay face down, apparently dead, and none of them were brave enough to turn it over. Instead, they ran for the camp and told the adults what they had seen. When people finally believed them, a

crowd went down to the lake shore and got a real surprise. Two more such creatures were there, standing over the body of the dead one.

Only one of the chieftains had courage enough to leave the crowd and approach the creatures. He stood near them, talking and also making signs to them, which they also seemed to do in return. Then the two picked up the dead one and walked out into the lake, until they disappeared under the water. When the man returned, everyone wanted to know what he had found out. He said, they told me that they live under the water and the mud and that that is their world, just as we live on the land. They rarely come out on land and instead catch what game there is that happens to be near or in the water. When the chieftain asked if they ever caught humans, the creatures said no, and that humans are very hot to their touch. Thus it is that they leave humans strictly alone and therefore there is no reason for us to ever meet, except on rare instances like this one.

Nonetheless, no one was allowed to go down to the lake again that night and in the morning, the Kiowas moved, on making note to avoid such lakes in the future.

Three incidents seemingly involving the Tonh-kyahn-hee:

Around 1927, my maternal grandfather, David Paddlety, was both a Baptist minister and an Oklahoma Game Warden. In this county, the Washita River is and was the principal water supply. It is an old river, once mightier than the Mississippi when the last Ice Age was melting away. Now it is normally a fairly shallow stream no more than thirty feet across as it winds down to empty into the Red River. In several areas, it winds upon itself, creating small islands and isthmuses of land, some densely wooded.

A gang of young men, who for all intents and purposes were bandits, usually camped on one of these islands as their hideout. My grandfather knew them and sometimes would visit their camp. These men confined their raiding to Kansas and thus my grandfather and most of the other local authorities had no quarrel with them. On a summer afternoon, my grandfather was making his patrol and chanced to stop and talk with the bandit leader. The men were watering their horses and several were swimming and playing in the water. Their horses milled around and one had moved downstream away from the others. As my grandfather spoke with the leader, suddenly that one horse leaped into the air and screamed. Then it fell on its side and could not get up again, thrashing and screaming in the shallow water. The men watched, puzzled about what could have happened to the horse. Some of them tried to reach it, but it seemed to be dragged fairly fast into deeper water. Then it disappeared under the water and the ripples from its thrashing stopped.

The men were shocked; when they swam to the spot, there was no trace of the horse to be found. My grandfather then told the bandit leader about the water men, the Tonh-kyahn-hee. Most of them scoffed at such an idea but there was no denying that something unexplainable had happened to one of their horses and that they had seen it with their own eyes. My grandfather just shook his head and went on about his rounds. On his way home that evening, he found the hideout abandoned. In years to come, he never ran across them again, though the papers still said that a gang raided farms and small towns in Kansas until about 1932. (Understand that Kansas, Oklahoma, and much of Texas remained undeveloped and had few paved roads

until WWII, when the oil industry became vital to the war effort and the economy.)

Around 1930, when my mother was 15, the big event of their summer was the church camp meeting that was held at one of the Indian missions in Southwest Oklahoma. Her father, my grandfather, was the pastor of the Redstone Baptist Mission just west of Anadarko. That summer, the camp meeting was held at Redstone and some four hundred people camped there for the meeting.

(Indian tribes were handed over piecemeal to this denomination and that sect was one of the means to 'civilize' them and otherwise supplant what tribal culture and language and worship they may have retained. It was less successful in the long run than the conversion of hunter-gathers into land farmers. But for a time, the Kiowas were heartier Christians than even the White Men who taught them. I believe that is why the movement failed: it became difficult to believe in a god and other religious tenets when the purveyors were so hypocritical about their own religion.)

The young people quickly would get bored with the singing and preaching and would gather in groups that would sneak away to the nearby Washita River to swim or wade or just play in the sun in a kind of innocence that people either would not believe or would find remarkable by today's standards.

My mother, her sisters, and her brothers were in such a group one afternoon and they all walked down to the river. The girls were not as bold as the boys; they merely sat on the bank and dangled their legs in the water while the boys stripped mostly down and swam and played in the river itself. They merely watched the boys, laughing at their escapades. At the end of the row, maybe three girls down from my mother, one girl felt something clutch at her leg. She thought it was fish or maybe one of the boys swimming under water, so she pulled her legs up and looked down. And out of the water came a small black hand: scaly, with long claws, like a child's hand that had been burned. She shook the girl next to her and pointed. Then the other girl called the rest and they all looked at the hand in the water; my mother remembers not being so much scared by what they all saw as curious and ready to find out that one of the boys was trying to scare them. The hand reached around,

feeling and clutching for the girl's leg, or so they assumed. Then the arm came further out of the water and it touched the second girl's leg before she could pull away. She screamed and that broke the spell; the hand just as quickly jerked away from her leg and the whole arm went underwater.

The boys came running when the girls screamed and they began diving at the spot when they were told what had been seen. One came up with a twisted branch he found sticking in the mud and said that this was what had scared them. But the girls all swore that it had been no branch; it had been an arm that moved and a hand that clutched with its fingers. With that, they all went back to the church camp to tell what had happened. My mother's old blind grandmother chided them in Kiowa, saying,



"Ain-haw (serves you right!), you bad children! The Tonh-kyanh-hee are in that river and you saw one of them! That's what you get for sneaking off!" Needless to say, very few of them had that much interest in going down to that spot again and the singing and preaching took on a whole new level of interest for them. But my mother recalls that day very well.

The final incident took place some eight years ago and it involved my brother. I was in California writing for TV or I very likely would have been with him. He and six friends had spent the day at the nearby Ft. Cobb Lake, swimming and fishing. When night came, they were on their way home over back roads usually used as farm-to-market routes. Halfway to Anadarko, my brother and my cousin were the only ones still awake. They had the radio on and were just talking about girls and such. Just before they reached the crest of a hill, my brother suddenly killed the engine and switched off the lights, trying to scare my cousin. "Oh, no! Something happened to the battery! We'll hit the bridge at the bottom of the hill!" And he laughed as the car came over the hill and began heading down to the bridge.

Just when he had my cousin begging for him to hit the brakes, my brother turned the key and switched on the lights. But before he could laugh, my brother and my cousin both saw three black figures in the middle of the bridge: very small, like children in Hallowe'en costumes. He hit the brakes and skidded onto the bridge just as the three small black figures scattered and dived over the side of the bridge. They got out, thinking that they had caused some kids to get hurt. But when they called and shined a flashlight over the edge, they got no response. Then they noticed wet footprints on the wood slats of the bridge: flat, duck-like prints, as though the children had had webbed feet. That did it for them; they got back into the car and scared the other boys when they told what they had just seen. A couple of them wanted to go back to the bridge and look around but my brother said if they did, they were going to have to walk.

In the time that he goes or we go to the lake, my brother uses another route, especially at night.

In the matter of other water creatures, I have only heard that the Caddo people once camped

near small lakes that spring literally out of sandstone cliffs some ten miles north of here. This would have been some two hundred or more years ago. They would never let their women go for water without being accompanied by an armed man because something lived in those lakes that would snare and drag a human deep underwater into caverns carved by the springs. What little I know of them is that they are about the size of a horse, have several arms or tentacles and very tiny eyes. Oddly, they are reddish-brown, look leathery, and make no sound

at all, much like some kind of snail or slug that has no shell.

The only recent seemingly related matter is the fact that a small swimming resort was built on one of those lakes, calling itself Salyer's Lake. It had paddleboats and canoes and cabins and it also had the highest drowning rate of any such resort in all of Oklahoma. Several of the bodies were never recovered due to a maze of underwater sandstone caverns around the edges of the lake. Interestingly, all who drowned were whites because during the time it was open, the resort was (of course) whites only. It finally had to close in the '60s as it was deemed a public hazard by state authorities and also because people just stopped going to a place where they were almost guaranteed to drown.

Near the end of its run, it at last integrated its attendance to try to survive. A few blacks dared to swim there and sure enough, two were drowned. But none of the Indians in this region would have gone there even if they were being paid. Most knew or were told of the things that live in the underwater caves that the Caddoes knew and feared.

Today, the ruins of the closed Salyer's Lake and Camp still stand on the highway between Binger and Cogar just a few miles north of Anadarko. No one seems to either want to revive it or to re-develop it. Maybe somebody finally told them why the Indians avoid the place at all costs.

Oklahoma at last began to receive man-made lakes in the late 1950s and through the '60s. Unexplainably high drowning rates exist at Tenkiller Lake, Lake Thunderbird, and Lake Oolagah. I know this as well: you could not get me to either fish or to go swimming in those lakes if you offered me gold.

I fish in the Washita River alone in the daytime but the only way I'll fish there at night is in a party of four or more, with Coleman lamps and with .22 pistols handy.

Many of my friends hunt for deer and other game in this region but you could not pay me to go out in the woods here, day or night, even armed like a berserker Navy Seal.

My reasons are quite simple: I know what is there, in the woods, in the water, and elsewhere. And knowing is quite enough for me.

Well, I'll ring off for now. Sometime when you and I both have the time, I'll tell you about Peck's Country here in Caddo Country, and about a giant bird the size of a Piper Cub seen in the '60s and '70s, and about the dog with a human face, and the sixty-foot plume of flame that once plagued the country roads back in the 1930s: When approached, it shrank and shrank until it was no more than a spark and then vanished as you came upon the site from which it sprang with the air cool and the ground cold where it had stood, but as you got further away it sprang up again until it was again sixty or more feet high, lighting the hills of its valley with flickering blue light. And then there are the small red and/or purple lights that dance through farm fields at night, or follow cars and trucks; or the burned-out cars that travel some of our back roads; or the things that howl like herds of monkeys in trees at night west of Anadarko...

Our Merrie Clipsters



Our sincere thanks to all those who have sent newspaper clippings and related materials for the Journal and for INFO's files:

W. R. Bailey, Bob Blackie, Jack Brotzman, Wayne Cermak, H. E. Crawford, Desaray Donovan, George W. Early, Victor Manos, Ray Nelke (COUD-I), Olive Oltcher, John Sappington, Mike Shoemaker, James Weatherington, Christine Weiner.