

Spilyay Breaks The Dam

At one time no salmon could swim up the Columbia River because the Swallow Sisters had built a dam. This legend tells how Spilyáy outwitted those sisters and liberated the salmon for everyone to use. If the younger sister had followed her better judgment, Spilyáy would not have succeeded.

Spilyáy was traveling down the Columbia River near Spearfish (Wishxam) and he was told by some creatures that there was great concern because the salmon were blocked off from traveling up the Columbia River. It was rumored that there were five Swallow Sisters damming them up and trapping them to keep them from escaping and going up the river. The sisters had this trap built right there between Wishram and Celilo Falls. (Wishram is across the river from Celilo.)

Spilyáy pondered and schemed on how he would release the fish and get them to the upper part of the Columbia River, because the people were starving. Finally he thought of a way. He would play on the sympathy of the five sisters.

He caused a lot of rain and it flooded the river and then he rigged up what looked like a battered old house, with torn up tules crushed up like they were smashed, and tent poles all bent up and broken. Then he made it float down the river, as if this home was torn down by the wind. He made himself into a little tiny baby, wished himself into a baby board, and floated down with the tules and tent poles, crying, "Waaa, waa, waa!"

The five sisters saw the baby and they said, "Oh, somebody's home must have been washed out and this baby is the only survivor! Poor thing." They picked him up out of the river, "He's a cute little baby." But the youngest sister was suspicious of this baby. She said, "I don't want to hold that baby; there's something peculiar about it!" But the others were still sympathetic and they scolded their younger sister for being so cruel.

They took him into their home and they gave him an eel tail to suck like a nipple. Then they tied a piece of dry salmon on his cradle, hanging it down in front of him. He would reach up and grab it, pull on it, and put it in his mouth. The sisters exclaimed, "Oh, he is a smart baby! He can feed himself just like a grown-up!" But the youngest sister was still suspicious.

They were active women, always going around digging roots and preserving food for their home. That's why they were hoarding all the fish for themselves, because they believed in eating well. One day they had to leave the baby at home and go to Warm Springs to dig nunás (onion). They left him with dried salmon tied on his cradle and hoped he would be all right until they came back.

As soon as they left he turned himself back into Spilyáy again. He already had five shields put away near the dam, and he had five sharp tools to work

with on the dam. He took one sharp stone and began to chip away at the dam with it. When the sisters came home, he changed himself into a baby again and jumped into the cradle, where he was innocently sucking on his dried salmon and cooing away. The sister exclaimed over what an intelligent baby he was, how he took care of himself, smiling and cooing. They thought he was so cute.

On the second day it was the same, and then the third day and fourth. Then on the fifth day he was nearly finished with his work and he began to work too eagerly. One of the sisters was digging up at Warm Springs and she broke her digging iron, exclaiming, "Something is wrong at the house! It's the baby. He must be something else, not a baby!" They ran over the hill into the Columbia River and caught Spilyáy chipping away at their dam. They took their diggers and began to strike him on his back over and over, but he threw a shield on top of his back and kept chipping away. When one sharp instrument became dull he would throw it away and grab another until he was on his fourth chipper, and his fourth shield. When his fifth chipper put a hole in the dam and his fifth shield was on his back, he ran away as the salmon came bursting out of the trap, swimming up the Columbia River.

The five sisters sat down on the beach and cried when they saw all the salmon swimming away. From that day Coyote decreed the swallow sisters would no longer have the power to trap the fish and keep it from the other people.

Spilyáy continued up the river and soon he became so hungry he could not stand it. Spilyáy went up the river scavenging for food. Soon he became so hungry his insides felt hollow. He was thinking to himself, "I wonder if the salmon will feed me?" Then he called out loudly, "Oh my liberated salmon, jump out here and feed me!"

The Chinook Salmon jumped out of the river and landed on his feet, flapping its tail against the rocky ledge. Spilyáy grabbed it, but the salmon slipped through his fingers and slid back into the river, because it was too slimy to hold. This happened five times until Spilyáy gave up. Then he sighted an object that looked like a piece of fat from an animal floating in the river. He thought, "Hmm. This piece of fat must have floated off an animal." He would dive into the water, feel around in the water for the piece of fat, but he couldn't find anything. He'd come up out of the water with nothing in his hand. When he dove under the water, his tail would stick straight up out of the water, wiggling. He kept diving in the water until he was all tired out. Do you know what that thing was in the water? It was the reflection of the moon overhead. He was so hungry that all he could think of was food, and when he saw this reflection it immediately related to food and he thought of the first thing that came into his mind, grease. This is what Spilyáy liked best to eat.

Spilyáy dove around like this for quite some time until he was so tired and

hungry he was nearly starving to death. Then he decided to ask his wise sisters who were his counselors. He asked them, "What is the matter? I can't find any food. It's the same with those creatures that I have helped to create, they don't respond to my bidding." His sisters told him, "Oh, if we tell you, you'll only say, 'I knew that all along,' that's what you will tell us. We thought you were the wise one, you are Spilyáy, and here you are diving around blindly grabbing at what you think is a piece of fat. It is only the reflection of the Moon on the water. You are also asking the salmon to come out of the water. Don't you know that if you catch a salmon on top of hard stone, you will not be able to hold him. If you want to catch the salmon, you must go to a sandy beach, then ask him to jump out. He will jump out onto the sandy beach and you can catch him." Spilyáy was flabbergasted that he was fooled by the Moon. He was so hungry, his stomach was growling like a wolf. Then he walked down the river looking for a sandy beach. Then he called the salmon, "Come out my creation! Now is the time for you to throw yourself out of the water." Immediately the salmon came flapping out of the water. It was a great big Chinook Salmon that threw himself out on the sandy beach, and rolled around covered with sand, until Spilyáy clubbed it to death. He walked up to a hillside and he found some flint and made himself a flint knife. Then he cut up the salmon. Afterward he built a fire and then he roasted the salmon on a stick by the fire, and he waited for it to cook.

In the meantime, along the trail came some other creatures. They smelled the salmon. They sneaked up and saw Spilyáy roasting it. They wished him asleep, "Sleep, sleep, sleep Spilyáy." Soon Spilyáy was sound asleep. Later he woke up, "Uh! I'm all covered with grease." He looked at himself. He was all covered with grease on his coat and on his arms, and down his legs. He looked around. "I couldn't have eaten this salmon. My stomach is still growling." He couldn't remember when he ate his salmon. Then he asked his wise sisters about what happened. Again they were reluctant to tell him. When they told him what happened, "Oh, that is exactly what I thought," said Spilyáy. Although they were disgusted with Spilyáy, they told him who ate his salmon. "It was the Wolf brothers."

Spilyáy continued on his journey because he was very, very hungry. Suddenly he smelled something. The wolves were roasting eggs in huge pits. They were gathering wood and cooking. He overheard them laughing, "I wonder if Spilyáy is awake yet! Ha, ha, ha. I wonder what he will do when he finds out we ate all his salmon!" Coyote was angry; he swore revenge on these people. Then he wished them to sleep. He exerted all his powers, "Sleep, sleep, slowly go to sleep, SLEEP!" He kept repeating over and over again as he looked down on them from the high cliff, while they busily roasted their eggs, and stiins stiins (water chestnuts) mixed together. Finally one of the creatures walked over to a stump, lay back, and was sound asleep. Then another one walked

over by the fire and lay down and went sound asleep. Soon they were all sound asleep lying around by the fire while their mounds of eggs and chestnuts steamed away, cooking and smelling delicious.

After these creatures were asleep, Spilyáy gathered some more wood and began to cook the eggs for himself. When they were cooked, he uncovered the leaves and dirt from the top, exposing the steaming food. Oh how his mouth watered as he feasted his eyes on this delicious looking food. He took a stick, rolled the eggs out of the pit, and he grabbed the water chestnuts and ate and ate, until he was filled up. He saved all of the shells and the stems and skins from the water chestnuts and then he put all of this back into the pit and covered it all up with the cooking leaves and dirt. He put out the fires, and walked away smiling happily. He paid back those creatures for stealing his salmon.

The creatures woke up from their deep sleep, hungry and refreshed. They began to uncover the pits of eggs thinking, "Oh my, we are going to have a delicious meal of eggs and water chestnuts." They were so surprised when they uncovered the eggs; they looked white and funny. They said, "The eggs must have had baby chicks inside of them when we baked them." (Spilyáy mixed some of his leavings with these shells.) "The babies in the eggs must have already had some feathers on them!" Actually these were the sticks and things that Spilyáy picked up while he was scavenging around when he couldn't find anything to eat.

The creatures were still wondering what happened, when the youngest creature came back from tracking the culprit. He told the others, "You have played tricks on a famous person. Now he paid you back. You are now eating his leavings." The creatures were ill, and they were remorseful because they had eaten Spilyáy's leavings.

In the meantime, Spilyáy was doing all sorts of things in his travels along the river. He would encounter a situation and then he would make predictions for those things. He created all kinds of landmarks along the river and in the mountains. Wherever he went something happened. He made rivers and streams for the fish to swim up, so that the people would have something to eat. He would tell the salmon, "Don't go up this stream because it's bad for you." Sometimes people would not treat him right and he would not allow the salmon or fish to go up that river. That's why you don't find salmon in some rivers.