

MOUSE STEALS FIRE

As told by the Central Sierra Miwok of Tuolumne County.

A long time ago, in the very beginning of things, the people in the hills were freezing, for they had no fire with which to keep warm. They gathered in their assembly house to talk over what they could do. There were Black Goose, White Goose, Lizard, Coyote, Mouse, and many others. It was Lizard, sitting on the rock outside of the assembly house, who discovered fire emerging from an assembly house in the valley below.

Later, Mouse, the Flute-player, slipped away unnoticed to go and steal some of the fire from the valley people. He took with him four of his flutes. When he arrived at the assembly house in the valley he found Bear, Rattlesnake, Mountain Lion, and Eagle guarding all the entrances. But Mouse managed, nevertheless, to get into the house. He climbed on top of the house, and while Eagle slept he cut two of his wing feathers, which were covering the smoke hole, and slipped in.

Once in, he began to play his flute for the people. The music soon lulled them to sleep, and, when they were all snoring, Mouse safely filled his four flutes with fire and escaped.

When the people awoke they searched all over the hills for the one who had stolen fire from them.

Eagle sent Wind, Rain, and Hail in pursuit, for they were considered the swiftest travelers among the valley people. Finally Hail came up to Mouse, but Mouse had concealed his flutes under a

buckeye tree just before Hail overtook him, and so denied having the fire. Hail believed him and departed.

Because Mouse placed his flutes of fire under the buckeye tree, there remains to this day fire in the buckeye tree, and people today obtain their fire with a drill of buckeye wood.

After Hail's departure, Mouse resumed his journey with his four flutes of fire. He met Coyote, who had become impatient fearing some dreadful fate had befallen Flute-player, and had gone out to find him.

Arrived home, Mouse sat on top of the assembly house, playing his flutes and dropping coals through the smokehole.

Coyote interrupted him, however, before he was finished, and so it is that the people who sat in the middle of the house received fire. Those people now cook their food and talk correctly. The people who sat around the edge of the room did not get any fire and today when they talk their teeth chatter with the cold. That is the way the languages began. If Coyote had not interrupted and Mouse had been able to finish playing all his flutes of fire, everyone would have received a share of fire and all would have spoken one language.

Indians today talk many different languages for the reason that all did not receive an equal share of fire.

From: Gifford, Edward Winslow and Block, Gwendoline Harris, compilers, *California Indian Nights: Stories of the creation of the world, etc.*, Lincoln, Neb., University of Nebraska Press, 1930.