BLOODSTOPPERS & BEARWALKERS

FOLK TRADITIONS OF
THE UPPER PENINSULA

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new encounter. They all live in the woods as if the cities of white men never existed, in tumbledown shacks flimsily furnished, with junky autos lying alongside. This squalor does not represent the poverty or tragedy of the city slums, however, for the Indian is not in the struggle for material wealth, and he has temperamental resources that make life satisfying enough. The swollen family unit provides a common strength, and each dwelling houses a pyramiding group, from barefooted kids to surly youths – often ex-GI's – and varicolored females, up through hangers-on and in-laws to the patriarch. Some of the red folk are degenerate and semi-idiotic, like some whites in the adjacent towns, but the community leaders, who are usually also the storytellers, possess a regal serenity and poise. There may be a lineal basis for this air, for the Sogwins claim descent from Pontiac, and Chief Welsh says he is a grandson of Sitting Bull. These outstanding personalities, unlike the rest, feel the stigma of idleness; the Chief stokes a furnace in the Ford mill, Alec Philemon leaves his family all week to cut cordwood for a jobber, and the Sogwins act as guides for sportsmen who visit the Snows to hunt and fish.

Education and literacy, when they exist, do not curb tribal traditions, but rather sustain them, for worldly wisdom helps rationalize the tribal viewpoint. John Sogwin compared dream-learning to book-learning; both produce power knowledge. In describing the popularity of an Indian hero in a fairy tale, Chief Welsh commented, "I read in the paper where a girl took a bunch of flowers to Sinatra on the stage at Chicago, and then fainted. It was the same order." The marvels of science go to prove the second sight of the medicine men. "They used to tell that there would be a bird that would fly through the air, and a wagon that would run by itself without horses pulling it, a man driving it." In the flood story, the basswood bark strung on trees to catch Winabijou is likened to telephone wires.

Exposure to Carlisle or Haskell or the public high school has not changed the Indians from talkers to readers. They possess

still the gift for storytelling and story-listening, with the tenacious memories and effective use of words on which oral art depends. Family and social groups today listen as raptly as past generations to the master speakers. This is oral tradition at its purest, and the narrator usually knows exactly where he has heard his tales. "It used to be the custom for the younger people to go to an old lady or man, and give him tobacco, and listen to stories," said aged Mrs. Philemon, adding, "Now the only time we have meetings is when we have a little beer or wine." Her son Alec, who spellbinds his family with legends, learned them that way. "You give those old men some tobacco, and they'll tell you stories all night. And I never forgot them." Parents and grandparents did their quota of entertaining. "I heard those stories in Sioux from my Dad when I was ten years old," remembers Chief Welsh. "He would tell them until I fell asleep, and when my head started to drop he'd say 'Herbert, wake up.' Some stories lasted three or four nights."

The Indians have a keen and gentle sense of humor. They laugh delightedly at the mishaps of Winabijou. Chippewa and Sioux kid each other much as do Yale and Harvard men, and both kidded me for malpractices of whites. "You come tell us you killed your God, and then you blame us for it." They can turn their jests on the arrogant white man.

"Bishop Whipple would come to my reservation and bring suitcases of presents to the Indians, and distribute them around. On one visit Chief Ish-quay-gwon said to him, 'There is a sick woman a long way off. Do you want to see her?' 'Yes, but will the presents be safe in the tepee?' 'Oh sure, there's not a white man around for forty miles!' "

John Lufkins insists that actually happened on his reservation, although the story can be found in jokebooks. But it doesn't matter; he relished the turn of the joke, and enjoyed this next one too.

Some dude hunters from Lower Michigan stopped off at a

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