

KASKA THE MAGIC LAKE INDIAN

The world around us awakened with birds singing and squirrels chattering. Still weary from yesterday, we remained in our sleeping bags while frost melted and wildlife sounds from the shallow valley to our south flooded into the open end of the tent. Fat groundhogs sat upright outside their burrows and whistled shrilly at the slightest provocation, or for no reason that was apparent to us, except maybe from the hormonal exhilaration of life on a new spring morning.

Breakfast was the first order of the day, and the abundance of squirrels made the choice easy. They were tough and tasted slightly like pine tar, but we were hungry and our teeth were strong. The area was breathtaking, our camp was dry and snug, food was plentiful, and we needed a rest after yesterday's ordeal, so we decided to stay put for the day.

The urge to explore soon overtook our need for rest and before high noon, we were following the river bank upstream. There were no longer ice bridges to entice us, and even if there had been, a serious lesson had been learned. Two miles upstream we heard the roar of rapids and the river turned white with froth. We emerged from the spruce forest to the shore of an immense lake whose farther shoreline lay below the horizon. Water gushed from beneath its frozen surface, creating the river we followed from camp. It was the largest expanse of lake ice either of us had ever imagined or witnessed, and we gazed

with awe upon this natural phenomenon. Despite the experience of yesterday, we tentatively tested the strength of the ice by walking out a few feet from the edge of the bank, but with much uncertainty.

As we walked about, kicking the ice and examining the shoreline for footprints and other signs of wildlife in general, I picked up a speck of movement far out on the horizon of the lake. We watched it with wild speculation as it loomed ever larger and gradually took the form of an unbelievable object. It was a truck, a big truck with a six-foot-high stake body, full-to-overflowing with what turned out to be a small tribe of Indians. An immense sled, fashioned from long, slender saplings, was in tow and piled high with belongings. A pack of wolf-like dogs loped easily alongside. As the tribe ignored our presence, we watched in amazement as they left the lake on a hidden trail leading in the general direction of our camp.

By the time we backtracked to our camp, the magical, lake-produced Indians were setting up camp in the head of our valley, some quarter mile uphill from our hidden location by the river. Our intrusive hidden camp, as we discovered later, was hidden only in our perspective. They ignored our obvious curiosity while we watched.

They secured their dogs by short chains to separate locations under protecting trees. The tribe seemed equally balanced in sex and age, and all were performing assigned tasks that must have been performed many times in the past. It was a picture of organized confusion. A fire already produced coals under a suspended iron pot as large as the one Mother used for her weekly laundry. One half-grown youth, with a sack over his shoulder, left the campsite. He strode down slope into the tundra-like vegetation of the valley, stopped periodically, dropped to his knees, and removed something from his sack. When his sack was empty, he returned to help with settling in.

Our curiosity was piqued, and two hours later, we approached the new camp. Several women, without a glance toward Charles and me, were skinning fat groundhogs that the youth had trapped, and

dropping the meat into the pot.

A particularly handsome dog with a malamute face watched me intently and invitingly, and I responded, intending to offer a petting hand. Suddenly, "Hey there!" was shouted loudly in my direction by a tall, thin Indian. "Don't touch Blue Eyes. He'll eat you up. Can't stand white men. They smell like shit." His speech was strongly accented with nasal inflections, but completely understandable. It was obvious he was leader of the tribe, but not the eldest.

Chastised, I mumbled an apology and backed off. The man seemed friendly and just concerned about my safety. I addressed him. "Sir, we're camping on the way to Alaska. Hope we don't bother you none."

"Nope," he replied with a half grin. "So long as you eat them dog-food squirrels, we got no complaints." Evidently, he had examined our camp before we returned. The question in my eyes prompted him to follow with, "Nothing but dogs eat 'em. Now those critters," he continued with a nod toward a young woman suggestively stirring meat in the pot, "is what brung us back across the ice. We ate 'um all up near winter camp. Stick around and you can have a plate."

We exchanged names. "I am Kaska," he proudly announced. "Leader of my tribe." It was obvious he wanted to talk after a winter of isolation. We had no cigarettes to share, though they asked, and we talked far into the night after sharing the most delicious meal since leaving my mother's table.

When I asked, "Chief Kaska, how was trapping this winter?" his answer was a suspicious glance and deafness to the question, obviously protecting his tribe's secrets for trapping success.

After supper, with all members listening while sitting in a circle around the cook fire, he talked about the construction of the Alcan Highway, the highlight of his life. One story in particular must have been repeated many times, reaching the status of a legend. In an eloquent voice and pantomime, he told of huge men with unbelievable strength, who could work twenty-four hours a day in summer or winter.

Heat and insects did not bother them, and they ate a strange mixture of white seeds called rice and beans. Both were boiled together with potatoes and with meat called pork.

The strangest thing about these men, Kaska told the group, was their black hair, kinked and coiled like a bird's nest and skin as black as coal. Their love poles were enormous. Using them in a woman made her useless for normal men, he warned. The native women giggled and nodded during this telling and graphic presentation, egging on the story with a grinding of their hips and crying out in fake pain.

Kaska elaborated his tale by wrapping in a blanket, shaking as if from cold, and continued. These road-building men had no sense of cold and in the subzero temperatures of midwinter would sometimes freeze into statues of black ice, still grasping an axe or shovel with giant hands.

I listened with respect to Kaska's stories and nodded my head in agreement. These budding legends might not survive the test of time as civilization encroached upon his world, but it was an excellent example of how folk stories originate and become a part of isolated, indigenous cultures, sometimes surviving thousands of years.