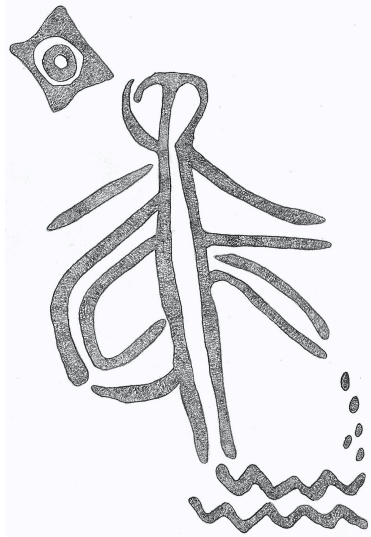
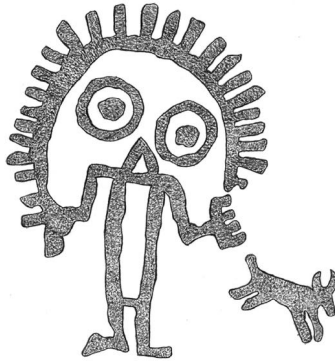


The Storyteller of Buckhorn Springs

Thomas Doty



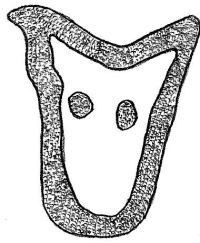
The Storyteller of Buckhorn Springs



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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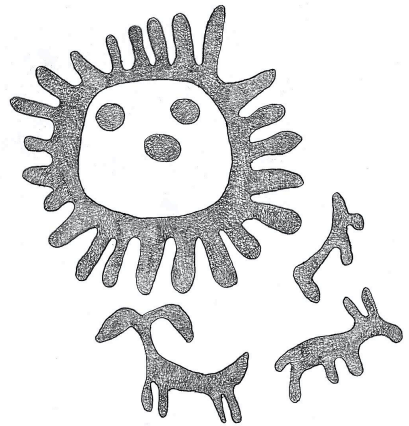
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Cover photo and drawings by Thomas Doty
Back cover photo by Melani Marx

Buckhorn Springs is a crossroads of healing where the Siskiyou and Cascade Mountains of southern Oregon come together. In the Chinook Jargon, a native trading language, Buckhorn Springs is called Hiyu Skookum, which means “an abundance of something good and powerful.”

Long before Europeans settled in the area, native people from several tribes visited Buckhorn. From the north came the Takelmas, the people of the Rogue River. From their homes along the rivers and creeks of northern California, the Shastas journeyed from the south across the Siskiyou. And from the desert basins to the east, the Klamaths and Modocs crossed the Cascades to Buckhorn Springs.

For these, and for other native people from more distant lands, the journey was long and through some of the most rugged terrain in the West. But it was worth it. Once there, the springs was considered not only sacred ground, but neutral ground. Discord and tribal disagreements were left behind and did not enter the wooded canyon along Emigrant Creek. For centuries, native people savored the healing qualities of the mineral water and carbon dioxide vapor baths.



Mother Landscape has many children, and one of her daughters is Gwisgwashan. She is a Takelma elder and the Keeper of Stories. When she visits Buckhorn Springs, she stays in the Creekside Cabin. She opens the windows and invites Mother Landscape’s words to enter. Night after night, she listens. She seldom sleeps. She is a watcher with wide–open eyes. She is one who hears words in the night. In her world, stories and dreams share the same language.

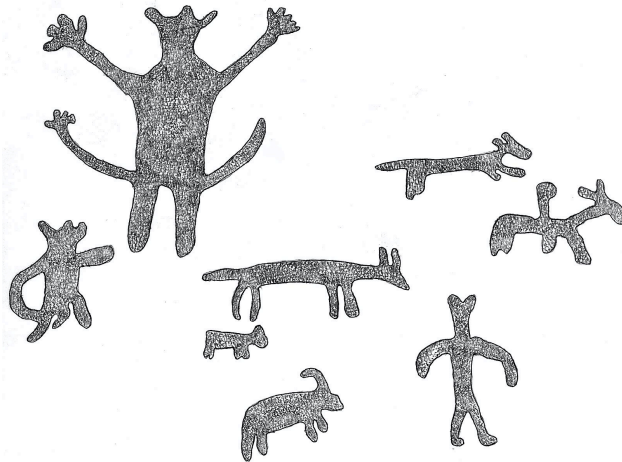
Mother Landscape speaks voices that are heard by those who have chosen to listen. For centuries, it has been the art of native storytellers to place themselves within earshot of those voices. Storytellers journey to places Mother Landscape is known to visit and to sacred places she calls home. In quiet moments in the depths of night, the tellers hear whispered words. They learn the words until they grow into memories that seem their own. Eventually, they share them as stories.

Gwisgwashan first heard those voices when she was young, and they have been her companions for all of her long life. On those nights when the landscape is speckled with

shadows, when myths and dreams are vibrant, Gwisgwashan walks through the woods at Buckhorn Springs. A breeze murmurs through the oaks. She whispers words from the Old Time. Like bubbles in the creek, they rise and float for an instant, and are gone.

In Oregon, there are places where the voices of Mother Landscape have been heard and her stories painted and carved on cliffs. A few of these pictures show the storyteller as she abandons her role as narrator to join her story as a dramatic participant. In firelight, in the depths of a winter evening, characters come alive and speak directly to each other and to those in the audience. This is the most ancient spark of performance.

The storyteller's words sizzle with depth. Layers of truth emerge as her story swells beyond sound to include a visual canvas of gestures and movements. Like the story itself, shadows cast on walls by firelight loom larger than the event. What is real transcends itself into what is possible. Not only is the storyteller transformed, so are her listeners.



In the pictures they are often portrayed as myth characters. Perhaps those who were most deeply touched by the stories were the artists who were inspired to create the pictures. If one looks long enough at the images, it isn't hard to imagine that there is a time in each story when listeners become so engaged in the narrative that they leap up and join in a telling that soon becomes a dance drama.

When we visit the cliffs and view these pictures we are reminded to remember.

In this spirit, on the longest night of the year, Gwisgwashan invites a few storyteller friends to gather in the lodge at Buckhorn Springs. I am there, and my mythic friend Coyote. So is Fox Girl and an old man who calls himself, The Hunter. Together we form a troupe of tellers.

Gwisgwashan has been at Buckhorn for five days. Before the others arrive, she spends some of her time in the Creekside Cabin listening to the sounds of the place. At other times, she wanders through the woods, along the creek, across the meadow, listening to the words of Mother Landscape and making them her own.

On this solstice night, as shadows settle along the creek and climb the ridges, I walk the grounds. Old buildings become silhouettes. They cover vivid stories that bubble and simmer within their walls. Darkness enters each building and hides the heaps of history ... the big-dialed machines and wooden tubs in the physical therapy clinic and the turn-of-the-century aura of the cabins along Emigrant Creek.

In the terra-cotta building built next to the old Indian site, the bathhouse looms like an enchanted entrance into a nether world of healing. I pause on the threshold, and enter. I walk down steps that lead into the vapor baths and sit on a bench. I close the wooden door over me. There is a hole in the center for my head. The door rests just above my shoulders, leaving my head in the realm of breathable air. In the pocket beneath the door, carbon dioxide rises out of the earth and surrounds my body, sending each impure spirit choking toward its last breath. Feeling refreshed and focused, I walk back up the hillside toward the lodge.

With darkness, a winter silence encloses Buckhorn Springs as if its history pauses for this long night to acknowledge something older. Like the sluggish flow of a half-frozen creek, stories slow down. In those hours before the thawing rays of the rising sun, there is an opportunity for storytellers to journey into the heart of each story, experience what is there and share it in a new way.

As everyone gathers at the fireplace inside the lodge, Gwisgwashan strolls among them, whispering to each as a director might speak to each actor moments before a play begins. Coyote switches off the lights. Everyone finds a comfortable nook in the shifting shadows of the room. The fire crackles and snaps. Gwisgwashan steps into the firelight. Her shadow covers the wall.

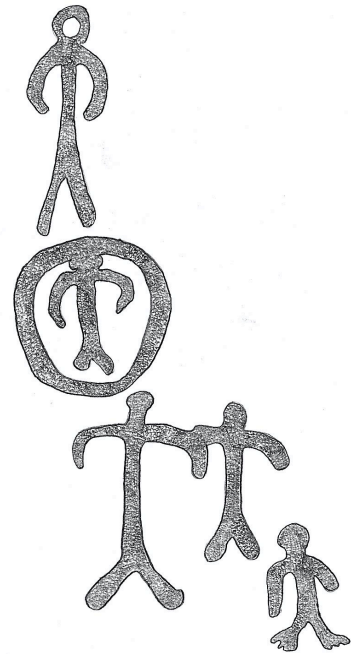
Gwisgwashan: Our story of Buckhorn Springs is as old as the hills, as old as the world — nearly as old as I am — and it still gets told. Like firelight, it draws us together in this December darkness, this longest of storytelling nights. Parts of this story are as ancient as dreaming, perhaps older than words. But because the story is alive and still shared, it remains as youthful as when it was first made. This is our gathering. This is our gift of words.

Fox Girl stands and pulls a blanket around her shoulders. Bent as an old woman, she walks into the firelight. She shuffles with each step. She stops and slowly drops to the floor, huddled under the blanket. With words that sound as if they come out of the landscape herself, Fox Girl begins to speak from under the blanket, slowly stretching and rising with each word.

Fox Girl: Mother Landscape wakes up for the first time and nothing is here but the bones of the land that Hapkemnas the Children Maker created. The Rock People are here, and a scattering of Tree People, but no one else. Mother Landscape has been sleeping, covered with leaves. With her first breath, there is a breeze. She stretches and the landscape swells into forests and hills and mountains. She speaks the first words in this place, and the spring begins bubbling into a creek. Her words drift on the breeze. They mix and form the words of our oldest stories. The land is here, and water is on the way.

Coyote leaps out of the shadows, leans against the hearth and speaks in his best storyteller voice.

Coyote: In the long ago time, all beings were people. Duck swam in the water. Otter caught fish. Crow sang, Haaaaa! Bear pounded on Ground. Deer kept quiet. Now a great flood covered the world. Duck and Otter stayed with the water. Crow sang in the sky. Bear and Deer learned to tread water, real quick!



Coyote snickers at his own joke and disappears into the shadows. Gwisgwashan stands in front of the fire.

Gwisgwashan: As water drains back into the beds of rivers and creeks, and as the great canoe full of critters lands on the slopes of Roberts Mountain, the best water of that Old Time flood finds its way to places where people gather to share stories, to visit friends, and to seek health in the healing powers of ancient water. Such a place is Buckhorn Springs.

Coyote and I walk into the firelight. I carry a medicine staff, and Coyote is dressed in his usual rags ... tattered ribbon shirt, faded jeans, an old felt hat with his ears poking through like feathers. He looks a little pale and he whimpers as he bumbles along.

Coyote: Ohhhhh, I don't feel so well.

Me: What's wrong?

Coyote: I hear new folks are coming with wholly unnatural critters ... cows and sheep and ranch dogs. Can you believe it? Domestic dogs! Those ranchers won't like the table manners of we coyotes, and they've got rifles for shooting at us, and big knives for hacking off our ears. The scoundrels! They get five bucks from the Government for a pair of coyote ears. What cheapskates! Half of my left paw is worth ten times that! Ohhhhh, the world is changing. I have nightmares of my earless carcass stretched out and drying on a barbed wire fence! And it makes me tremble to think what might become of my handsome tail!

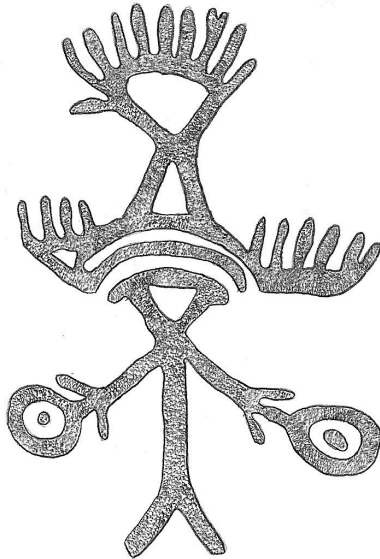
Me: Ahhhhh, this is a sickness of the spirit. We can take care of that.

Gwisgwashan and Fox Girl carry in a large blanket and cover Coyote. They dance a circle dance, miming the rising gas bubbles. They swirl around Coyote, and with gestures that are both gentle and strong, the sickness is deprived of its breath and driven away.

I help Gwisgwashan and Fox Girl pull the blanket off a nearly-passed-out Coyote. We carry him to the edge of the firelight. Making sounds that imitate the rushing ripples of the creek, we

toss him into the cold water. Coyote leaps to his feet and makes a dash for the fire. He sits shivering and tingling, close to the flames. Gwisgwashan and Fox Girl and I dance a healing dance around him, singing....

“Wa–ya–we–ne lo–wa–na? Who creeps there about the shadows?”

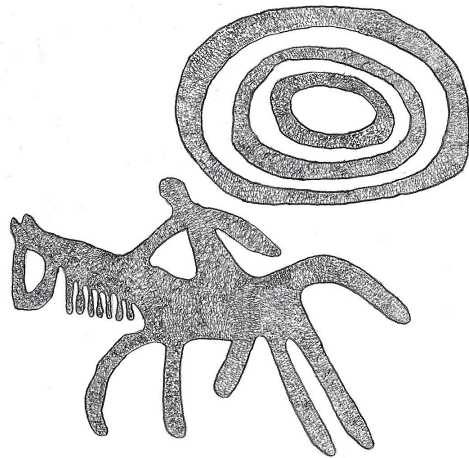


Gwisgwashan: For centuries, our people journey to Buckhorn Springs. They drink the good water. They hollow out places along the creek where gases escape through cracks in the rocks. They line them with fir boughs. They crawl in and lie down. They cover themselves and allow the medicine gases to surround them. They spend time with the medicine people in the Old Time sweat houses. They sing. They dance. They pray. And they go home whole. Conflict does not enter into this sacred place of healing. Since that moment when Mother Landscape woke up, we native people journey up and down the rivers, over the mountains, to visit the springs. A few centuries later, in the mid 1800s, a hunter wanders up this canyon and finds several springs along the creek.

All five members of our storytelling troupe stand in the shadows, back from the fire. As we sing a chorus of the medicine song, an old man steps into the firelight. He tosses a log onto the fire and it blazes. The Hunter sits on the edge of the hearth. His deep eyes sparkle as he begins his story.

The Hunter: I first came to this valley for furs, later for gold and finally, as an old man, I hunted solitude. There weren't many white folks around here then, but enough to start a stir. Even here, miles from farms and towns springing up along Bear Creek and the Rogue River, I heard rumblings of the Rogue Indian War. Now it seems strange to me how history has made truths from the self-serving testimonies of certain self-appointed witnesses. Imagine this: an Indian War not started by Indians, and the only Rogues in the valley were grabby-minded, exterminator

types who wanted the “stinkin’ Injuns” dead and gone from their homeland. They had loud voices and long arms, and certain versions of history made them big-shot heroes. Few noticed the restless silence of the landscape. I kept my distance from that mess. I spent years wandering up and down every secluded ridge, along every creek, across every alpine meadow and into the quiet depths of ancient forests. On one of those early treks, I stumbled across the springs. I found dead birds and butterflies, dead squirrels and snakes, heaps of dead animals all around the springs. At first I thought the water must be poisoned. That’s what I told those few folks I came across. Word spread among miners and settlers, and they stayed away from what they called “Poison Springs.” Fine by me. Perhaps it was a blessing that we didn’t know yet what the Indians had always known about the hidden wisdom of the vapors.



Coyote leaps into the firelight, and adds what he terms an “insightful pawnote of cultural and historic significance.”

Coyote: Poison? Hah! We native critters refer to our medicine helpers as “Poisons” and “Pains.” What they call “Poison Springs” is a healing place. These new folks are slow on the uptake, aren’t they?

Coyote leaps back into the shadows. Gwisgwashan steps into the firelight.

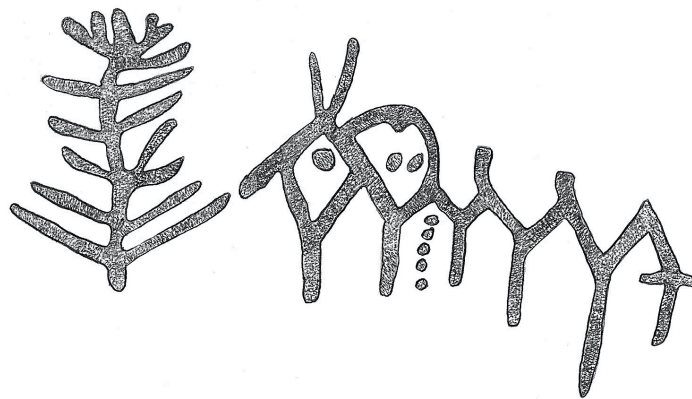
Gwisgwashan: Through the bloody push and shove of the Indian War, Buckhorn Springs remains a place of peace. Back in the old days, the Indian trails follow the bends of rivers and

creeks. One trail meanders along Emigrant Creek and connects the many springs that makes Ashland famous as a spa town: Buckhorn Springs, Wagner Springs, Lithia Springs, the Helman Baths, Jackson Hot Springs.... The old wagon and stage roads follow some of our old trails, but then come railroads and highways. They ignore the curves of Mother Landscape and cut through this country like knife blades, and the valley shudders with the hoots and blasts of cars and trains. Secluded springs of healing are left behind in this quickening pace of what many truly believe is progress. However, new voices are heard, and in their varied attempts to make something of the springs, history remembers their names while the Old Ones, the many children of Mother Landscape, watch from the depths of the woods.

Coyote and The Hunter join Gwisgwashan in the firelight, singing....

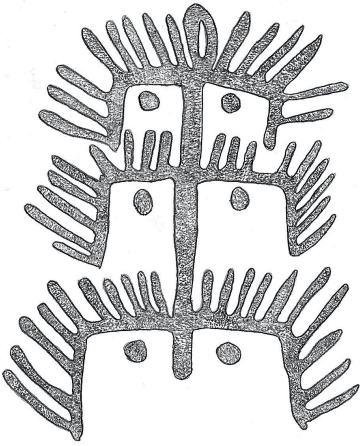
“Wa–ya–we–ne lo–wa–na? Who creeps there about the shadows?”

Coyote: A procession of owners files through the woods as Buckhorn passes from the paw of one owner to the next.



The Hunter: Down the creek, The Hunter sells his claim at Wagner Soda Springs to Samuel Whitmore, an Ashland school teacher, who sells it to Dr. Caldwell, who builds a house for himself and for travelers, and a small sanitarium.

Coyote: That’s a good idea after everyone has been shooting at each other and hacking their neighbors to bits! Perhaps the sanitarium might have been larger to accommodate a fatter slice of the valley’s more war–hungry population?



The Hunter: In 1864, Caldwell builds a cabin by the springs at Buckhorn, and in the 1880s he sells his Buckhorn parcel to a fellow named Blackwood who sells it to Judge James Clarke Tolman who names the springs after himself — Tolman Springs. The Judge digs into his pocketbook, and by 1900 the springs is a health resort with a rustic hotel, cottages and facilities for visitors to drink the mineral water, and indulge in mud baths and vapor baths.

Gwisgwashan: The Old Ones watch from the shadows, so many their eyes shine like stars on a moonless night. The creek flows and bubbles toward the valley. A breeze whispers words through the woods.

The Hunter: In 1912, Tolman’s heirs sell the property and it dozes as a private residence until Lillian Gearing buys it in 1919. She and her future husband, C. W. McGrew, rename the springs Buckhorn Mineral Springs. They expand the hotel, add a hand pump to tap the mineral water and roof over the old Indian site, creating a bathing area. Fifteen years later, they sell out to the Buckhorn Mineral Springs Corporation. A footbridge is built to connect the new bath facilities to the physical therapy clinic. A Pelton Wheel on nearby Baldy Creek produces the first electricity at the springs. In the 1930s, Amelia Toft shows up, marries Yarrington, the resident masseur, and after letting the taxes lapse as Buckhorn’s manager, she purchases the springs at a sheriff’s auction. Being the sole bidder, she gets Buckhorn dirt cheap. The Yarringtons sponsor dances every Saturday night. The lodge is jammed. Banjo and mandolin music echoes up and down the creek. Young folks eyeball each other, and their thoughts have more to do with the yearnings and curiosities of youth than with the healing possibilities of mineral water.

Gwisgwashan: The Old Ones move to the edge of the shadows and tap their toes. This gathering of folks to socialize and celebrate seems familiar in a primal way. The creek flows and bubbles toward the valley.

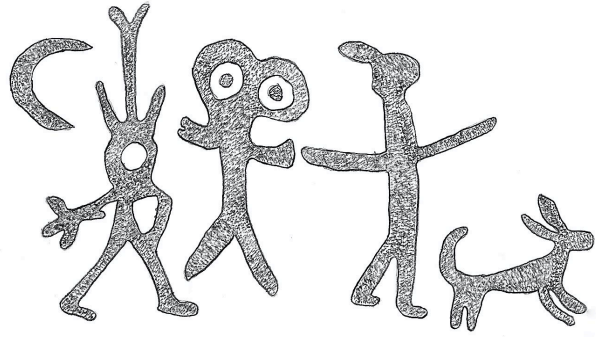
The Hunter: In 1942, Dr. Herman Wexler purchases the springs, and he and his nurse, Hollys Richardson, move into the lodge. The dances are canceled. The music stops. They are not in the spirit of Wexler's vision of the place. He opens his sanitarium, and his clinic bulges with the bells and whistles of impressive electronic equipment, all needed, according to Wexler, to diagnose the various discomforts of his clients. Wexler uses the mineral water and vapor baths to treat everything from gall bladder and kidney ailments to arthritis and rheumatism to alcoholism. His colleagues speak of his practice somewhat "tongue in cheek." While the machines look impressive, medical science rips past Wexler's theories of "vitalization" and his dream to turn Buckhorn into a vibrant and profitable health spa never comes true. He keeps a clinic in town to make ends meet, and Hollys, his nurse, fends for herself at Buckhorn. She is rarely paid, and she becomes somewhat grumpy, often treating guests with a gruffness that belies the spirit of a sanitarium. Upon Wexler's death in 1962, Buckhorn Springs closes to the public. Lucy Harrell purchases the property in 1966, and it becomes a private residence for her and her family for the next two decades.

Coyote: After a long morning of treating folks of various ailments, Dr. Wexler is in the habit of closing up shop at noon, walking down the street from his Ashland clinic to the Elks Club where he spends most afternoons tipping brews in the lounge. One November day, he drinks until his heart fails, and he tumbles off his bar stool, dead. Perhaps he might have hung out at the springs a bit more and guzzled mineral water? Hmmmmm....

Coyote and The Hunter walk out of the firelight and sit in the shadows of the lodge.

Gwisgwashan: The Old Ones watch from the depths of the forest. Starlight drifts through the trees. For several years, it is quiet at Buckhorn. There are few visitors. Dust layers the machines in the clinic. The wooden bridge to the bathhouse rots and sags. Blackberries and saplings take root and grow over the old Indian site. Buckhorn Springs slumbers for a spell. Eventually, something ancient wakes up. Just before dawn, on a spring morning in the 1980s, the Old Ones peer out from the woods. They listen. They hear the familiar footsteps of native people walking to the springs.

Fox Girl and I walk into the firelight, carrying a blanket. Carefully and with ceremony, we place the blanket on the floor in front of the fire. Gwisgwashan joins us as we circle the blanket in a slow dance. Coyote and The Hunter stand up and watch from the shadows. Everyone sings....



“Wa–ya–we–ne lo–wa–na? Who creeps there about the shadows?”

Coyote walks across the room and opens the windows in the lodge. Fresh air rushes in. The Hunter tosses a log on the fire and flames leap and dance. Everyone sits on the floor in a circle around the blanket. Firelight fills the room and makes the blanket blaze. Each of us reaches forward and grabs the edge of the blanket. Together, we raise it up and let it fall back down. Again. And again. Five times the blanket ripples as it rises and falls as if gas bubbles rising through cracks in the earth lift it up, give it life and bring it home again.

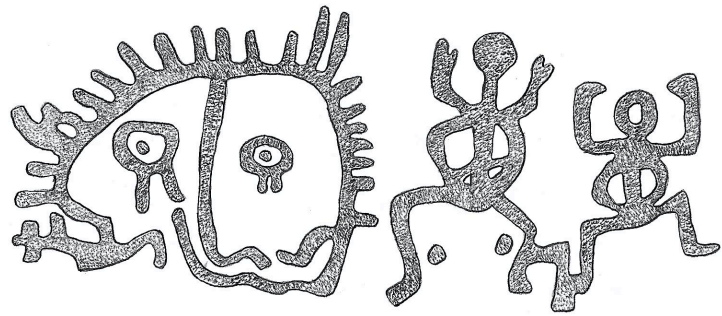
Fox Girl: Just before sunrise on a spring morning, several friends get together at Buckhorn. We gather at the old Indian site, say an ancient prayer of healing, and we dance.

Me: We bring out shovels and clear the old site. We sing sacred songs as we work. We move beyond the mood of animal furs and gold, beyond the Indian War and barbed wire and roguish bounties on coyotes, past highways and railroads and big–dailed machines, past the pace of progress, and we find the bones of the earth once again.

Gwisgwashan: Once again we see the rocks that line the pit and we know the Rock People have returned. As the sun rises and sends sunrays through the woods, oaks and pines glow in the morning light and we know the Tree People have returned. As we listen to the flow and bubbling of the creek, we hear words and we know that Mother Landscape is awake once again. The Old Ones come out of the shadows and join us. By mid–morning, there are many visitors at Buckhorn Springs. The people have returned to their place of healing. This is our gathering. This is our gift of words. Now it is time to take this story into the wide world.

Before midnight on that longest of nights, everyone says goodbye and heads home, except for Gwisgwashan, who stays a while longer at Buckhorn. She walks through the woods, whispering to herself. In the spirit of being the Keeper of Stories — the storyteller of Buckhorn Springs — she slowly adds everyone else’s words to the story of this place, and bit by bit, they become her own words. She imagines the images of this night’s story painted and carved on cliffs in the ancient symbols of her ancestors, the Old Ones.

Near dawn, Gwisgwashan sits by an open window in the Creekside Cabin. She speaks the words of this new version of the story into the depths of the winter night. Mother Landscape listens, and takes them in.



“One of the best of Oregon’s storytellers!”

“A cultural treasure.” — “A master of his art.”



Thomas Doty is a native storyteller. Since 1981, he has traveled the countryside performing traditional and original stories. He learned his art and native cultural traditions from elders, including listening to Grandma Maude, the family storyteller. Doty was born in southern Oregon where he still lives. He is descended from Irish and English settlers who settled in the Rogue Valley in the 1800s, and has family connections to Takelma and Shasta ancestors of the region.

He is the co-founder and co-director of Reading the Rocks, and the author of several books, including *Doty Meets Coyote*, a collection of 40 traditional and original native stories published in 2016 by Blackstone Publishing. His stories have been broadcast on Public Radio, and he is the recipient of a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the national American Indian Program.

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