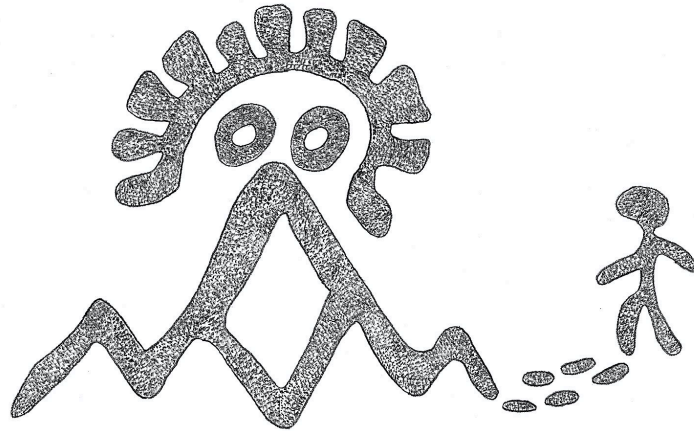
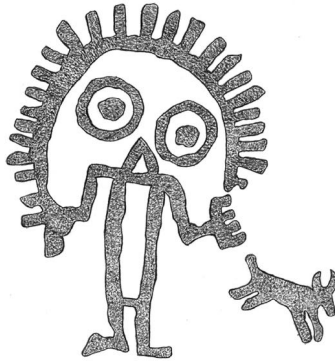


Five Nights at Medicine Rock

Thomas Doty



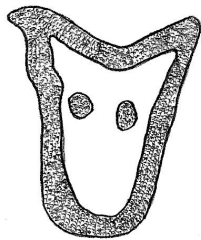
Five Nights at Medicine Rock



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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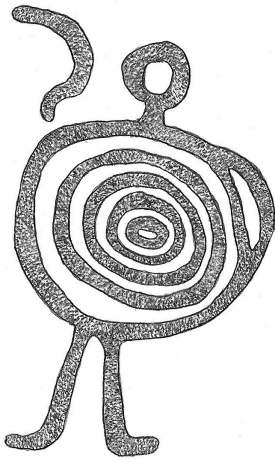
First Digital Edition – April, 2020

www.DotyCoyote.com

This story was commissioned by
Talent Historical Society and Museum
(Talent, OR)

With additional funding by
Meyer Memorial Trust
(Portland, OR)

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



Sometimes the stories of my home feel foreign. I was born and raised in southern Oregon where generations of my family lived before me. I travel widely, but the stories of my people always bring me home. I hear those stories as I walk the landscape, searching for a mythic encounter that is always around the next bend. There are deep layers of stories I have yet to experience, stories I thought I knew well. Until I find them, my heart beats a restless rhythm, and parts of the stories seem just out of reach. In some of those stories, I feel like a visitor.

The latest journey in my search begins in a museum in the small town of Talent. I'm with Coyote in the research library looking at maps.

"Look," I say. "Here's the Rogue River." I trace a route on the map with my finger. "The old Indian trail goes along here, and on this ridge, that's Medicine Rock. I've never been there."

Coyote's eyes twinkle and he chuckles. "You know where the rock is, don't you?"

Coyote leaps out of his chair and trots toward the door. "Need a guide?" he says with a smirk.

Before I can answer, he's out of the museum and heading for my rig. He leaps through the open window and lands in his doggy bed. He howls, "Giddy-up, Doty's rig! Giddy-up!"

Half an hour later we are driving along a gravel road uphill from the river. Twilight surrounds us as we approach a locked gate blocking the road. There is just enough light to read the sign: "Rogue River Rock Quarry. No Trespassing. This Property Under Video Surveillance."

Medicine Rock is in a rock quarry? This biting irony is better than anything this storyteller could ever dream up.

"Yes," says Coyote as if he could hear my thoughts. "We're headed into the rock-smashing place. Here's where we start walking." He lowers his voice to a whisper. "Just around that curve is the caretaker's cottage. He has a couple of guard dogs who like to snooze on the porch. We'd better tiptoe."

"Let me guess. We should let sleeping dogs lie?"

"Right you are. And I'm awake and I'm telling the truth."

"Not another wild dog chase?"

"Nope. These dogs are disturbingly domestic."

Coyote is a talker and I have found it wise to allow him some slack in his linguistic leash when it comes to what he thinks is clever banter. Setting him up keeps him happy. But this is enough and I walk on. As we creep past the cottage, the dogs stay stretched out on their sides, happy in their dreams. A full moon rises above the ridge and the road ahead lights up. A couple of turns and we walk into the main part of the quarry. There is white rock everywhere. Moonlight is brilliant. Our shadows stretch across the landscape.

As I turn to say something to Coyote, I see him heading back down the road.

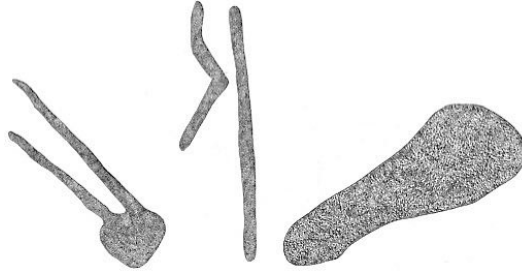
“Where are you going?”

“You need to do this by yourself. Here, take this. You’ll need it!” He tosses a small stone my way and disappears into the shadows.

As I walk into the heart of the quarry, Coyote’s stone feels comfortable in my hand, well-worn, a perfect fit. I stand and look around. The only rocks still intact — and the only trees — are high on the ridges. Between here and there are deep gouges in the earth where machines have removed the soil and found the rock layers underneath and then hammered them into gravel. There is white dust everywhere, on trucks and bulldozers, and on the metal tool shack. A cloud of dust hangs around the electric light above the door. My eyes scan the tops of the ridges until I spot a rock partially hidden by trees. The rock is tall and flat on top and stands by itself in the moonlight. That’s got to be it, I’m thinking, and I start up the ridge.

It takes a while to get there. Loose gravel from the quarry work makes for chancy climbing and I slide back a bit with each step. Handholds are few. But moonlight reveals the easiest way up, and eventually I find myself standing at the base of the rock.

The main rock leans toward another rock creating a cave-like crevice between the two. I push my way through the scrub oak, side-stepping the poison oak, and walk inside. Even in the shadows I see the painted symbols, bright red on white rock. There is a series of images leading me into the cave, almost luring me to the back where there is a small hole that leads out. Some of the symbols are familiar. The long fingers that mean to look way up. Another symbol confirming that this is a good place hidden below. The squeezed lines indicating a narrow place. Footprints that show the path up and the return along a second path. A circle. A sacred journey to become complete. A moccasin print points the way. The exit in the back draws me forward.



I walk past the symbols, squeeze through the hole and scramble up the ledge to the top of the rock. Here the world opens up. Despite the brilliance of the moon, stars are everywhere, wheeling and circling through the deep sky. I see ridge after ridge in the distance, and the valley below where the river winds toward the coast. I sit on a natural stone seat that faces east. Within reach is a pile of stones. I pull mine out of my pocket and add it to the pile. I glance back at the stars. This is the last thing I remember before I doze off and slip into the most dramatic dreams I have ever had ... five nights of dreams as vivid as stories....

Here is my dream of the First People....

My old friend Rockman Jim appears in this dream. He's an old soul, a wanderer, and I haven't seen him in years. It's just like him to show up at this particular time, and in a special place. He knows all about rocks. We meet on top of a cliff.

"I've been looking for the creator's cave for a long time," says Rockman Jim. "There's a symbol here that tells me this is the right place."

He points to a weather-worn carving in the sandstone: a circle inside a circle meaning a hollow place, a cave below. Before I can even get excited, Rockman Jim is halfway down the slope.

There is a fire near the entrance of the cave. As I walk in, I no longer feel inside my body. I am a shadow on the wall, a spirit outside of time, my movements controlled by flickering flames. Rockman Jim sits by the fire.

"Watch the rock wall for the Old Ones," he says. "They still come here to visit."

The fire flares and crackles as Rockman Jim tells me about the Rock People.

"They were the first people anywhere. Even before Hapkemnas the Children Maker made the world, the Rock People made this cave. When Hapkemnas was done with his work, he came here to live. The entrance looks down on his world. He watches the seasons spin through the year as

the medicine people make their rounds. Each spring, Acorn Woman comes down from her craggy home on Mount McLoughlin to help the oak trees grow food for the people. Rock Old Woman walks from village to village keeping the people healthy, returning often to her home below the summit of Sexton Mountain. There are other mountain spirits, all spreading good medicine through the world. Each winter, Gwisgwashan, the Keeper of Stories, stops by and shares not only the old myths but also the new ones that have been made since her last visit.”



Rockman Jim tosses a log on the fire and my shadow leaps deeper into the cave. I am not alone. There are other shadows, dozens of them, dancing on the cave wall.

“Here is a story. In the beginning, nothing. All was black. IT IS made a loud explosive sound and pointed at one spot. IT IS made white light and burst out of the darkness. A spirit circle of light, IT IS. From the center, a yellow flame giving out molten red earth.”

My shadow whispers, “Who is IT IS?”

“IT IS was here when the Rock People arrived. There was always something around to make the world out of, you know. Maybe it’s the ancestor of the earth herself. I know it’s confusing. The old people used to say that Indians just grew, never came from anywhere.”

Rockman Jim tosses water on the fire and smoke smarts my eyes. When I open them, I’m the only one left in the cave. It’s dark. I am back inside my body and I can’t see my shadow. I hear Rockman Jim singing somewhere outside.

“Rock People, Rock People, I cry. Dance my morning when I die.”

I walk out of the cave and down into the valley, toward the Takelma village of Ti’lomikh.

Here is my dream of the Human People....

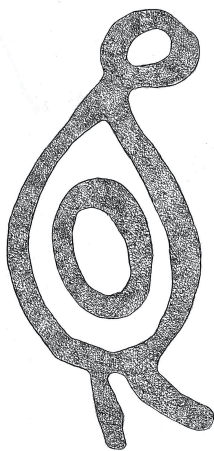
The community house is large. It holds over a hundred people and sits near the edge of the river. From inside, even above the voice of the storyteller, I hear the wild rushing of the falls.

The storyteller is an old woman wearing worn leather clothing and a basket cap. She has the traditional woman’s tattoo of three marks on her chin and she leans on a staff carved with Animal People from her stories.

“We all know the story of Rock Boy,” says the storyteller. “We have heard it around this fire many times on the long winter nights. We know about Rock Boy’s birth, how he disappeared and Coyote found him. And we know all of the stories that come after. But few people know what happened to Rock Boy after this village was settled. I will tell you the rest of his story. He is still out there, wandering around.”

The storyteller eases into a long story that I have trouble following, one I’ve never heard before with words and phrases from some ancient version of the language. But clearly the native listeners know what’s going on. They are tuned in to every word, every gesture, especially a young woman sitting in the back near the door. Her eyes are as wide as the river.

Here’s what I do remember. The old woman’s story is filled with ancient customs. If a rattlesnake bites your shadow, it is a sign that you will be sick. You must kill any black–striped snake that crosses your path. If you don’t, one of your relatives will die. Beware of Bluejay imitating Eagle’s screech. This is a sign of bad luck. Maybe someone will be killed with an arrow. And watch out for ghosts, the oldest spirits, especially on foggy nights. They are everywhere! They travel to and from the Land of the Dead along a strip of white cloud in the west. Sometimes they are seen as little lights at night along the old trails or heard as strange whistling noises in the trees: Tsusum, tsusum, tsusum.... “Sometimes Rock Boy sounds just like that,” says the storyteller.



She pauses. I hear that same sound from outside. At first I think it’s the falls. But the young woman near the back hears it as well, and she stands up and opens the door. I follow her outside. The woman walks downriver past the cemetery. From down the trail, somewhere ahead of her, I hear the sound: Tsusum, tsusum, tsusum....

Behind me, I hear the falls crashing over rocks as well as the storyteller’s voice as she continues her story.

The woman sings as she walks.

“Rock People, Rock People, I cry. Let the ghost be a dragonfly.”

Here is my dream of the Medicine People....

This night is entirely its own. I walk behind the woman. Though there is no trail, she seems to know where she is going, up the ridge to the entrance of Medicine Rock. She walks inside.

She places her hands on the smooth rock face. Her fingers trace the cracks as though they are exploring a map of the world or painting symbols with invisible paint. She walks through the crevice and finds her way to the top of the rock. She sings for the spirits of the old medicine people to come visit her.

She picks up a stone and looks at it closely. She sings a song to Rock Boy. She turns it over and sees a different shape and sings to Acorn Woman. More turnings ... Rock Old Woman, Mudcat Woman, Medicine Fawn, all of the Old Time healers.

Between verses she strains to hear the sounds of the village: the falls, distant voices, someone drumming. She falls asleep and inside her dream she hears herself singing. Days and nights go by as if time is defined by Dreamtime or Mythtime.

She leaves the stone on top as she makes her way down the slope. She walks around the outside of the rock to the entrance of the crevice. Five days later, she returns and paints the symbols of her ceremony on the inside walls. She completes the circle and starts a tradition. She is the first of many generations of medicine people to sit on top of the rock and dream about healing.

Here is my dream of the Quarry People....

This dream is a nightmare, loud, sharp, abrasive. I'm surprised I sleep through it!

Huge machines roar up the ridge. Mother Landscape shivers. Animal People escape into the woods. The machines go to work, clearing the forest, digging into the earth, scraping away the soil down to the rock. Creeks turn muddy with debris. Dirty water finds its way down the ridge to the river, pooling into brown clouds at the mouths of creeks. Dust makes the air thick and gritty. The sun is a blur.



As I watch the first rocks crushed into gravel and hauled away in trucks, I'm struck that this is another Trail of Tears. It's the same story happening again. The Rock People are being removed from their homeland, transported to new homes to live different lives. Some of their relations stay behind, hiding on the ridges, hiding in forests beyond the fringe of the quarry. They watch in silence as their age-old world is transformed. They hide out for decades.

The shift whistle blows. The machines shut down and everyone heads home, except for one fellow sitting in a dusty chair in front of the shack. I walk his way, and as I get closer I recognize Rockman Jim.

“Nice to see you,” he says. “In case you’re wondering what I’m doing here, let’s just say that jumping from one dream to another is something we medicine folks do well.”

“But here? You? What’s up?”

“I’m the quarry manager. See? My own pickup, cell phone, a tin shack with a coffee pot — the works.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope. I’m needed here. New owners, you know, and they like the rock. Some scientist-types told them it’s a sacred site so the place has a new name, Medicine Rock Quarry. Like it?”

Before I can say something about cosmic irony, another whistle blows and I’m back on top of the rock.

Here is my dream of the Museum People....

I wake up inside another dream. I hear voices. People are working on the rock.

“Yikes! What’s happening?” I’m thinking and say it out loud.

“The rock is moving,” says Coyote.

“What are you doing here?”

“You look confused. I thought you might need an interpreter.”

A power saw starts up and whines as it cuts through the rock, trimming the edges. The entire rock vibrates.

“Okay, Coyote, you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“You’re back in town. You’re on a different rock, well, sort of. This one is a replica and is being sculpted out of concrete. I hired these rock artist guys. Good idea, huh? Hold on, they’re going to carry it inside.”

I look around. It’s a sunny afternoon and I’m definitely in town. I duck as the rock is carried through the doorway of the museum and fitted into its new home near the entrance. I slide off the top and watch the workers from a distance. At the end of a long day, they pack their gear and head out. I stretch out on the floor and doze for a while.

It is nighttime when I open my eyes inside the museum. Moonlight shines through the window. I walk around the rock. I carefully paint the symbols as I remember them. Not knowing what else to do, I take out my grandfather's tobacco pouch, sprinkle tobacco over the rock and recite a Takelma medicine poem. I turn to leave and see Coyote standing in the shadows, watching me.

"Nice looking fake rock," he says. "The Rock People might even like it."

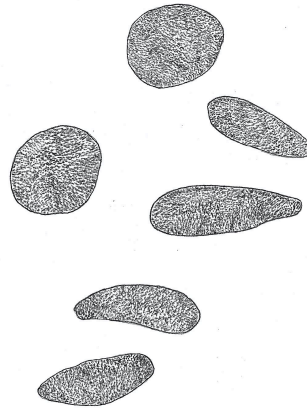
"Was this your plan all along?"

"I don't make plans," says Coyote. "I just show up."

Coyote trots outside. I stand in front of the rock. I close my eyes and listen. I hear the footsteps of people walking an ancient trail, I hear the rushing of the river down the ridge, I hear singing drifting through the night. I can barely make out the words.

"Rock People, Rock People, I cry. My journey passes me by."

I turn and take a few steps toward home.



“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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