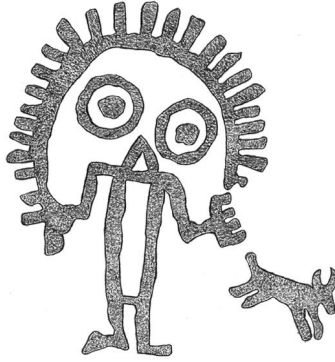


We Who Watch the River

Thomas Doty



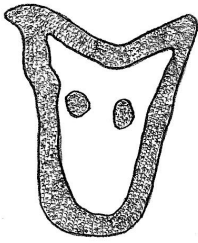
We Who Watch the River



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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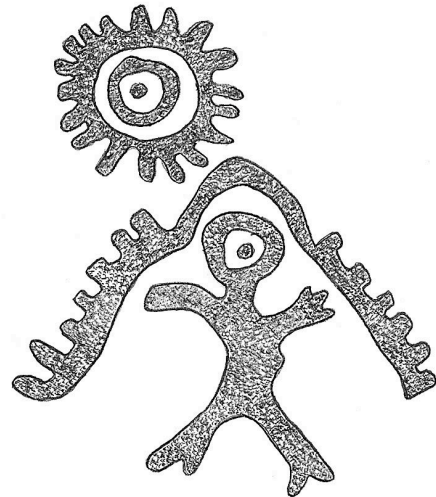
Cover photo and drawings by Thomas Doty
Back cover photo by Melani Marx

In the Museum

The Columbia River Maritime Museum is a wave-shaped building along the river in Astoria, Oregon.

As Coyote and I walk through the doors of the museum, Coyote disappears, his long nose drawing him into his curious nature. I shrug — this is nothing new — and I walk by myself and have a look around.

As a storyteller, I feel responsible for the stories I tell. In the native tradition of Culture Watching, I keep an eye on those stories as I journey through the places the stories come from. Quite a few stories live along rivers, and I am drawn to them. Many of the stories find voices in this museum.



Ancient Culture Watchers are celebrated in dances and myths, and their images carved into rock and wood and bone. The petroglyph She Who Watches is the most famous of all Watchers. For centuries her huge eyes have kept watch on the comings and goings of the people as they journey along Wimahl — Big River.

Watching the world is not limited to Old Time cultures. There are modern viewing platforms along the Columbia, the Astoria Column provides a crow's-nest panorama of the entire region, and in the museum, spotting scopes invite visitors to view the river close-up. There are river watching benches in front of windows, and the exhibits are stories that provide deep gazes into maritime history and lore. The Columbia River is a culture in constant motion and change. I watch, and the river's story becomes my own.

I look around for Coyote. I spot him thirty feet up a rope ladder used by bar and river pilots.

“Get down from there!”

“Hey, Mister bug-eyed Storyteller, have a look from up here. The view is great!”

I try to ignore Coyote’s antics. I close my eyes and see myself standing on a sand spit that stretches into the mouth of the Columbia River. I look deeper and see a new story. I try a few words and folks gather to listen. I open my eyes and words flow like the river....

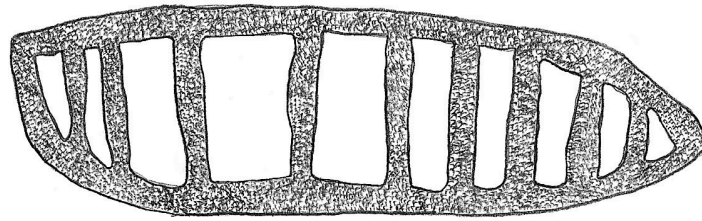
Telling a River Story

I have been watching the Columbia for quite a spell. This story begins where Big River ends, here at the mouth.

On the evening before the storm, the glimmer of a January sunset sails the western sky. It brushstrokes purple and orange pathways across the Pacific and sends light up the Columbia toward next morning’s sunrise. Aged fingers of leftover light reach east for new life before darkness drifts in.

If this sunset had been a late-night story told in the light of a dying fire, the storyteller might rush the pace toward some moment of completion before the light failed and his audience settled into sleep. The same story told around next evening’s fire would be a different story. Storytellers know this, and so do those who watch the subtle shifts of river moods, shapes of mountains and canyons sculpted and sculpted again, the evolving memories of a place and its people as history and culture is retold with the ebb and flow of centuries.

In this moment between sunset and twilight, between a calm day and a looming storm, I stand on the riverbank and gaze at the landscape. Roads and highways overlay old Indian trails, bridges over canoe and ferry crossings, towns over villages, tree farms over ancient forests.... Even the shape of Mount St. Helens has changed through a series of eruptions still vivid in the memories of those who were there. For those with longer memories, the course of the river seems different, and its old name, Wimahl, is an echo from the ancient days when people first began telling stories of their arrival at the mouth of the river.



Long ago there was a time that lives in the oldest memories of the people, so long ago that there was no peninsula or bay here at Wimahl's mouth, and no people. But things changed.

One day a large canoe arrived from a cold land far away. It carried a hundred men with their wives and young children, and tried to enter the Columbia. But a strong wind blew and blew and forced them back to the sea. They tried again, but the powerful wind turned them back. Finally, they paddled to the shore at the south end of what is now Long Beach Peninsula. They tied the stern of their canoe to the rocks and anchored the bow pointing north, and they hid their belongings in a nearby cave.

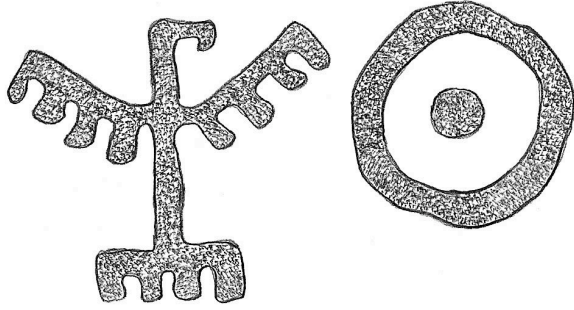
They walked along the river to what is now called old Chinook. They were away for many months and when they returned, their canoe was gone. The big canoe was nowhere to be seen. In its place was a small sand spit with a clam bed, a view of the sea to the west, and young pines growing over the top. Bushes red with cranberries fringed the eastern edge, and beyond that, a small lake had formed.

The people built a house on the sand where their canoe had been. Seasons circled through many years. Children grew, generations flowed by, and those first arrivals became many people. As their community grew, the sand spit grew into a peninsula, and the lake stretched into a large bay. These first people of the Old Time were the Tanewatiks, the long-ago ancestors of the Chinook.

Night after winter night, in the cedar lodges, the people sat around fires and shared their stories. Visitors came from other villages and brought new stories with them.

The people told the story of a spring day when South Wind journeyed north to the river where he met a giant wild woman called Quootshoy. South Wind was hungry and asked her for food. She gave him a fish net.

South Wind went to work and caught a small whale. He took his flint knife and started to cut off a piece of meat. Quootshoy stopped him and told him to use a shell knife and to cut it lengthwise down the back. South Wind paid no attention and did it his own way, across and with his flint knife.



He cut off a large piece, and in the blink of an eye, the fish became Hahness, a huge bird. When she flapped her wings thunder crashed up and down Big River. She was so large that she blocked the sun and made daytime into night.

Hahness flew north. South Wind and Quootshoy followed behind but they couldn't keep up, and they lost her.

Years went by, and one day when Quootshoy was picking berries on the slopes of Saddle Mountain, she discovered the nest of Hahness. It was full of eggs. Quootshoy ate the eggs and tossed the shells down the slopes of the mountain. They scattered over the land and each bit of eggshell became a person.

When Hahness flew back to her nest and found the eggs gone, she went and found South Wind. Together they searched the land for Quootshoy. Each spring Hahness and South Wind go north to look for her but they haven't found her yet. She's still out there. And they're still looking.

From the top of the ladder, a familiar voice breaks in on my story. Mister Dog-on-a-Rope offers one of his "Pawnotes of Original Thoughts."

"Hey, Mister Storyteller, isn't it about time I got into this story?"

"Patience, my doggy friend, your old ancestor once traveled up this river. Some people claim he fixed up the world and made it better. Others say he simply stirred up trouble."

"What makes you so sure that this timelessly brilliant and eternally handsome fellow wasn't me?"

"Well, I'm not. That's never been clear to me. I know that sometimes there's more than one Coyote on the river at the same time. And both traits of accidental hero and self-taught troublemaker fit the present pooch."

Coyote smirks to himself in a way that shows he's sensing that everyone — including myself — is watching him and admiring his coy coyote demeanor, this clever mythic decoy of himself. He swings out on the ladder.

"So what do you think?" asks Coyote.

"About what?"

"Did I fix up the world or tear it down?"

“A little of both, I suspect.”

“I’ve always been good at multi-tasking.”

“That’s for sure. How many simultaneous ways can you find to twist a story to make yourself look snazzy in the spotlight? Makes you seem almost human, doesn’t it?”

“Never mind. Just get on with my story.”

“Right. At least this first part of your upriver journey makes you look pretty good, perhaps a little too good....”

Coyote was out wandering around and he arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River. This was the home of Atatahlia. This creature was forever destroying people. She strapped them onto a cradle board and sent them drifting on the river and into the fog. After calling out, “Go forever!” the cradle board returned carrying nothing but bones. On its journey it had gone to a place of such intense heat that all flesh burned away. A long line of people sat on the shore, waiting their turn to be sent floating into the fog. In their hearts they wanted to run away, but powerful Atatahlia held them there by her will.

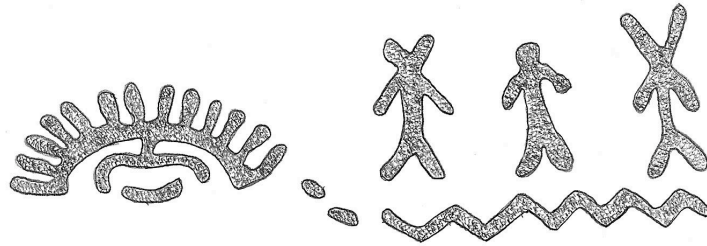
Coyote hid himself among them and watched Atatahlia. After a time he announced, “I can make that journey, and I can come back, too.”

Atatahlia tied him to a cradle board and sent him drifting into the fog. “Go forever!” Atatahlia called after him. As Coyote disappeared, the people called out, “Come back again!”

The people watched and soon they saw Coyote’s cradle board drift into view. When it floated ashore, Coyote leaped up, and the people were happy to see he had survived. Coyote grabbed Atatahlia and tied her onto a cradle board. As he pushed her into the water, he howled, “Go forever!” The people joined in, “Go forever! Go forever!” When the board returned, it contained only the blackened bones of Atatahlia. She who had killed so many had been destroyed.

The people were happy and urged Coyote to take a wife from their people. But Coyote said, “No, I do not want a wife. I must travel upriver.”

This begins Coyote’s long journey up Wimahl.



With darkness, car lights blink on as they cross the Columbia on the bridge between Oregon and Washington. A steady pulse of white headlights and red taillights create a visual lifeline joining the two sides of the river. This bridge is the current view of an ancient connection. It has its origins in many canoes carrying people across this same expanse of Big River, their torches making a line of light across the water.

All night the storm blows, carrying rain clouds from the sea to the river's mouth. If this had been another time, this wind might have brought the first European ships, early explorers and traders, and later, the dark diseases. Epidemic after epidemic traveled the old river trails, bringing unimaginable suffering to each village and pushing the descendants of the original people to the brink of extinction.

With the first blast of rain, clouds settle along the river. The stars disappear, then the shoreline. The sky is an echo of the river, full of water and with a steady current.

Next morning, in the first faint light the storm allows, I start up the river from the mouth, following the mythic path of Coyote's adventures. His stories are everywhere. I pass the place where Coyote freed the salmon, where he became a medicine man, and where he turned two women into birds. He fought monsters, and had a smelly encounter with Skunk. He was the most human of myth actors, performing both shameful and heroic deeds. That tricky dog stumbled along without any particular purpose, making up the world as he went. In the winter, the people told stories of Coyote's exploits. By revisiting their origins in the myths, they remade their world with every telling.

With each break in the storm, clouds pull apart and create windows onto the riverscape. With the town downriver and out of sight, these views are glimpses into a time outside of time and beyond my memory of recent history. What I see through holes in the clouds is not so different than what the Old Time Culture Watchers saw on that first misty morning of Mythtime as they watched Coyote begin to change their world forever.

Coyote continued traveling upriver until he came to Beacon Rock. He looked onto the water and saw a man in a canoe. Coyote watched the man dive into the river and come up with a sturgeon in each hand. He placed the sturgeons in his canoe and pointed a long finger at them as he counted them.

“When he dives,” Coyote thought, “I shall steal one of his sturgeons. I’ll see what he does about that!”

As the man dove, Coyote dog-paddled to his canoe, reached in and grabbed a sturgeon. He hid himself and the fish behind bushes on the shore.

The man came up and dropped his catch into his canoe. He pointed and counted them, and counted them again, and once more to be sure. One sturgeon was missing!

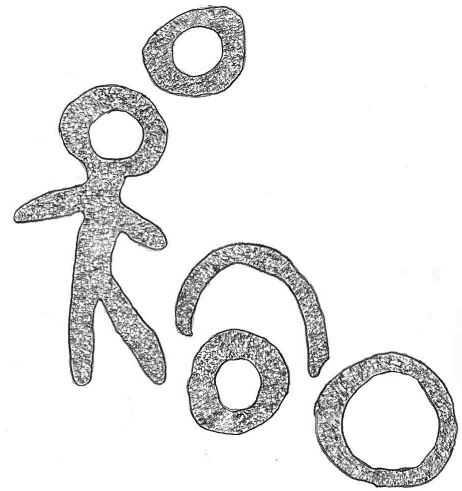
The man pointed his long finger, first up high, then a little lower, again lower still, finally to the ground along the shore. When that finger stopped moving it was pointing right where Coyote was hiding!

The man held his finger there. Coyote moved to his left and the finger followed him. He moved to his right, and there was the finger, aimed right at him. He leaped into the air. He flattened himself on the ground. No matter where Coyote went, that finger pointed at him.

The man paddled to shore and walked up to Coyote. Coyote squirmed. He thought the man looked strange. He didn’t have a mouth. He had eyes and ears and a nose he spoke through. When he spoke, the words made a sound in Coyote’s nose: “Den Den Den Den.” That man was scolding him. He told him through his nose, “You are no good. You are no good....”

Coyote’s heart felt small and he thought, “Perhaps now this man desires his sturgeon. Maybe he is going to kill me.” But the man went back to his canoe.

Coyote made a fire, gathered rocks and heated them. When they were hot, he cut up the sturgeon, laid the pieces on the hot rocks and steamed them. Smelling the fish, the man with no mouth came back and found Coyote eating. Coyote thought, “What’s he going to do without a mouth?” The man grabbed the steamed sturgeon, sniffed it and threw it onto the sand. “This is not good,” Coyote thought.



Coyote picked up the sturgeon, brushed it clean, and once again the man grabbed the fish, sniffed it and tossed it aside.

Coyote walked up to the man and looked at him closely. “I’m not sure how to do this, but I should try and make this fellow a mouth.” He turned his back to the man and took a flint and chipped it into a sharp knife. He turned to face the man and looked closely at him again. The man dodged from side to side, but Coyote worked fast. He put the flint over where he thought his mouth ought to be and sliced it open. The man's blood flowed out and he took two breaths, “Haaaaa! Haaaaa!”

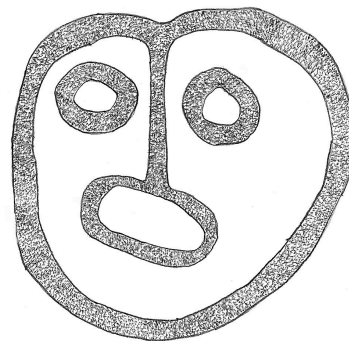
Coyote grabbed his nose. “Phew! Your breath stinks! Now go wash in the river and rinse your mouth.” That’s what Coyote told the man.

When the man returned, he spoke through his mouth to Coyote. “You do not seem to have steamed a large sturgeon.”

“Well,” said Coyote. “You would have killed me. You wanted that sturgeon for yourself. You got after me pretty good with that sneaky finger of yours.”

Coyote and the man steamed a sturgeon and ate it together.

Word of the man’s new mouth got around and the people of his village told the story through their noses. None of them had mouths. They said, “There’s a man who had a mouth made for him. We should do the same.”



Coyote got busy and carved mouths for everyone. They were nice big mouths, so well made the people of that village became famous for their big talk and their storytelling skills.

The people were grateful. They told Coyote, “We will give you a woman for a wife.”

“No!” said Coyote. “I shouldn’t care for a woman. I’ll not take one.”

Coyote traipses off into his next adventure.

I travel upriver. The storm grabs my story and carries it with me to the old village of Wishram. Through a break in the clouds I see the low rimrock along the edge of the river. Two large eyes stare out at me, and I remember the story....

There was an old woman who lived in a house where Wishram was later built. Long before Coyote traveled upriver and changed things, she was the leader of all who lived along this stretch of river. Coyote arrived at this place and spoke with the people who lived there.

“Are you living well or ill?” he asked.

They sent Coyote to the old woman in charge who lived in the rocks with a view of the village and the river. She saw everything that happened there.

Coyote climbed the rocks to her home, and asked her, “How do you treat these people? Do they have a good life? Or are you one of those evil women?”

“I teach them how to live well,” the old woman said, “and how to build good houses.”

“This is good,” said Coyote, “but the world is going to change. Women will no longer be chiefs.”

Coyote changed the old woman into a rock. Her face formed on the face of that rock, smiling, and her huge eyes focused on the river and the people.

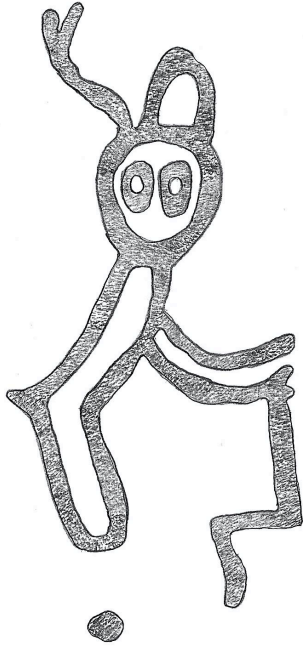
He told her, “You shall stay here and keep an eye on the people who live here, and those who pass by on the river.”

The old woman who became a rock is called Tsagiglalal, She Who Watches. Even today she keeps a constant gaze upon Wimahl. She sees everything. When people look to the rocks, they know her large eyes are watching them.

The storm travels upriver and skims over a smooth stretch of water that was once the greatest falls on the Columbia. Celilo. Wyam. Echo of Falling Water. Sound of Water Upon the Rocks.

The Old Man of The Dalles once lived here. He was one of the ancient Watchers. Carved into rock in the spray of the falls, he watched the fishermen with his big eyes and reminded them to be generous and share their catch with those who had less food.

I close my eyes and look through the eye of the storm for the story of that March day in 1957 when the rising backwater of The Dalles Dam drowned the falls. Hundreds of native people lined the cliffs on both sides of the river and watched in disbelief as the floodgates were closed and their sacred falls began to disappear.



Sometime earlier, a man climbed out onto the rocks and chipped the Old Man of The Dalles from the cliff. Old Man traveled to the local Chamber of Commerce, out of view of the river. For two decades he slumbered there with a sad stare of half-open eyes. Then one day, like the falls, the Old Man of The Dalles disappeared and was never seen again.

I gaze back into the scene of the people watching from the cliffs. With the last Echo of Falling Water, they turned their backs on the river and crossed their arms. Elders sang the death song of the falls. Singing turned to wailing and drifted across the deep hush where the falls once were. Later that night, they walked away. The watching of the falls had ended. The Sound of Water Upon the Rocks had been silenced. That night began a long darkness of native grief that has yet to end.

I listen carefully and believe I hear the faint falling of the falls just under the water. Maybe one day it will rise back to the surface. Perhaps Coyote has more changes to make along the Columbia.

As I journey upriver, the storm clears and a new day dawns, far to the east.

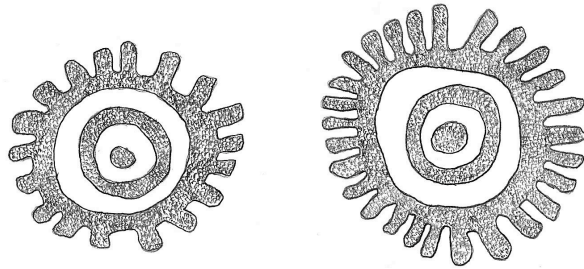
Coyote was traveling toward the Sun. He arrived and said to the Sun, “It is good that I shall be your assistant and follow you around. I shall work for nothing. You are Chief Woman and you are lucky to have me here to help. Someday I’ll have your job.”

The Sun smiled and said, “Yes, perhaps.” Next morning she rose into the sky.

Wherever she went, Coyote trailed her like a puppy. He looked down and saw everything. He got an eyeful of what the people were doing but he wisely kept his thoughts to himself.

Next morning, he traveled again with the Sun. And again, he saw things. He saw the way some people were acting. He saw men and women running off together, he saw what got stolen, who got lied to, who got killed — all the bad things.

Coyote tossed his small dose of wise restraint to the wind and cried out, “I see what you people are doing!” He was no longer a passive Culture Watcher. He was lean, mean Coyote with beady eyes and a big mouth! Time after time, he yelled, “I seeeee yooooou!”



Now the Sun no longer wanted Coyote around. She said, “I have taken you with me long enough. You are too mean. It is not good that you always snitch on people. There will be trouble if people cannot have their secrets.”

Now Coyote walked a little more east and made camp in the land beyond the Chinook. He had arrived at the end of this stage of his journey. He would have more to do later.

Back in the Museum

I finish my story and chat with visitors. As folks leave the storytelling and walk deeper into the museum, I look around. I spot Coyote still hanging from the rope ladder.

“Get down from there!”

Coyote leaps down and makes tracks toward the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Upriver! I’m Coyote the River Pilot, big time chief of a big boat! I’m the star of a new story!”

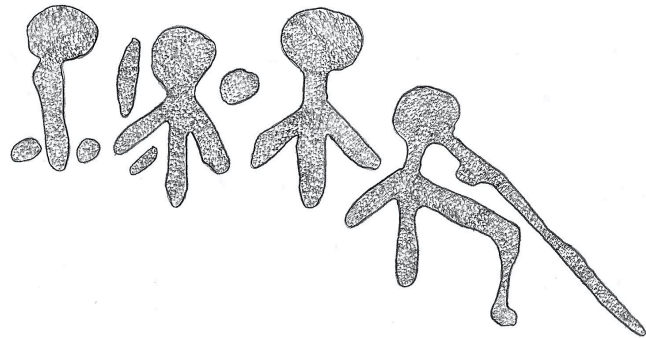
“Hold on, Mister Mark–Twain–with–a–Bristly–Tail. Not so fast!”

“Gotta get going. I’ve got stuff to do upriver! And you can bet I won’t refuse any offers of female companionship along the way! Not this time. Watch for my story, and I’ll wave as I sail by!”

Coyote lays out his tail and disappears out the door. He sidesteps a Coast Guard boat and streaks onto the dock. He stops short of the water, surveys the bay and hightails it toward the biggest ship he can see.

During a lull in the storm, the setting sun sends shafts of light through holes in the clouds and they sparkle on the river. Museum visitors stroll from exhibit to exhibit, reading stories, pausing as they pass the windows to look out at the river and the end of the day.

A young boy squints as he looks through the spotting scope. He turns and calls, “Hey, Mom, look at this!” and puts his eye back to the scope.



I close my eyes for a moment and imagine the beginning of a new story. From the deck of a boat chugging upriver through the nighttime riverscape, I see the shadowy shapes of the Tanewatiks, the ancient ones. They line the cliffs on both sides of the Columbia. They’ve come back to watch Wimahl.

I open my eyes and gaze at the river.

“Coyote the River Pilot has another journey to make,” I chuckle to myself. “The antics of that one are never done.”

“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.

www.DotyCoyote.com