

THE FIRST FIRE

Recorded in Myths of the Cherokee & Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee by James Mooney

In the beginning there was no fire, and the world was cold, until the Thunders (Ani'-Hyun'tikwalas'ski), who lived up in Galunlati, sent their lightning and put fire into the bottom of a hollow sycamore tree which grew on an island. The animals knew it was there, because they could see the smoke coming out at the top, but they could not get to it on account of the water, so they held a council to decide what to do. This was a long time ago.

Every animal that could fly or swim was anxious to go after the fire. The Raven offered, and because he was so large and strong they thought he could surely do the work, so he was sent first. He flew high and far across the water and alighted on the sycamore tree, but while he was wondering what to do next, the heat had scorched all his feathers black, and he was frightened and came back without the fire. The little Screech-owl (Wa' huhu') volunteered to go, and reached the place safely, but while he was looking down into the hollow tree a blast of hot air came up and nearly burned out his eyes. He managed to fly home as best he could, but it was a long time before he could see well, and his eyes are red to this day. Then the Hooting-Owl (U'guku) and the Horned Owl (Tskili) went, but by the time they got to the hollow tree the fire was burning so fiercely that the smoke nearly blinded them, and the ashes carried up by the wind made white rings about their eyes. They had to come borne again without the fire, but with all their rubbing they were never able to get rid of the white rings.

Now no more of the birds would venture, and so the little Uksu'hi snake, the black racer, said he would go through the water and bring back some fire. He swam across to the island and crawled through the grass to the tree, and went in by a small hole at the bottom. The heat and smoke were too much for him, too, and after dodging about blindly over the hot ashes until he was almost on fire himself he managed by good luck to get out again at the same hole, but his body had been scorched black, and he has ever since had the habit of darting and doubling on his track as if trying to escape from close quarters. He came back, and the great blacksnake Gule'gi, "The Climber," offered to go for fire. He swam over to the island and climbed up the tree on the outside, as the blacksnake always does, but when he put his head down into the hole the smoke choked him so that he fell into the burning stump, and before he could climb out again he was as black as the Uksu'hi.

Now they held another council, for still there was no fire, and the world was cold, but birds, snakes, and four-footed animals, all had some excuse for not going, because they were all afraid to venture near the burning sycamore, until at last Kanane'ski Amaiyehi (the Water Spider) said she would go. This is not the water spider that looks like a mosquito, but the other one, with black downy hair and red stripes on her body. She can run on top of the water or dive to the bottom, so there would be no trouble to get over to the island, but the question was, "How could she bring back the fire?" "I'll manage that," said the Water Spider; so she spun a thread from her body and wove it into a tusti bowl, which she fastened on her back. Then she crossed over to the island and through the grass to where the fire was still burning. She put one little coal of fire into her bowl, and came back with it, and ever since we have had fire, and the Water Spider still keeps her tusti bowl.

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GETTING FIRE

As told by Kathi Smith Littlejohn

A long time ago,
they didn't have fire
on our side of the world,
and everything was real dark and cold.
They knew
that there was fire on the other side of the world,
and all the animals wanted some fire.
So one by one
they said that they were gonna go get the fire.
First,
the buzzard went.
And he flew way around
on the other side of the world,
and he saw some of the fire,
and he tried to get some.
And he got a real coal,
a real hot coal,
and he thought,
"Great, I got some.
And I'm gonna fly back
and take it back on the other side of the world."
And he put it right on top of his head
and flew off.
And what happened?
It burned off all the feathers on the top of his head.
Oh, it was so hot
he went and stuck his head in the lake.
And no fire.
Everybody tried.
Finally,
the little black snake went all the way around on the other side of
the world,
(but the snake wasn't even black then).
He stole from the fire.
He didn't have a good place to carry it,
so he put on the back of his neck,
and it burnt him black all the way down.
And he's still black.
So he got into the lake to put the fire out.
So he didn't get the fire either.
Now they didn't know what to do.
Finally,
Grandmother Spider said,
"I may be small,
but I'm gonna go get the fire."
"You!"

all the other animals laughed.
“You can’t even make it,
you’re so small
you can’t carry that fire.”
She said,
“I might be small, but I’ll go get the fire.
You watch me.”
She went all the way on the other side of the world,
but this time she was thinking,
“Now, those other animals tried to steal it,
and it was too hot,
so I need to put it in something.
HmMMM. What can I put it in?”
She went down to the river,
she made a little pot of clay,
and she put it on her back
When she went and got some of the coals,
hot coals,
she put it right in the pot.
She made it all the way back
and gave everybody some fire.
But then she also gave the Cherokee people
the idea of making pottery.

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