

Kutchin Legends from Old Crow, Yukon Territory¹

Edited by Charles J. Keim

WILLOW MAN

Willow Man was one of the strongest Indians who ever lived, and he belonged to the Vun-tut-Kwtchin (Rat Indians) tribe. He was a chief of the Vun-tut-Kwtchin. For his strength and daring, he was envied by his own people. They turned against him. He had a brother younger than himself, and a sister who was married to one of the men.

Where he stayed most of the time is just about 20 miles above the village of Old Crow.

One day in springtime Willow Man and his brother were out hunting, and his brother got the moose. While he was skinning and cutting up the moose, Willow Man went ahead. Just then the Indians rounded up on the younger brother and killed him. And then they went on after the Willow Man. When they came upon him he was too busy skinning and cutting up a moose which he had just killed ahead of them.

Willow Man looked around and asked, "Where's my brother?"

An Indian answered, "Oh, we just passed him not far back. He was still busy cutting up the moose he killed."

Willow Man knew there was something wrong. He knew that it wouldn't take that long for his brother to cut up a moose. Willow Man made a fire and hung up the moose head by the fire to cook while the Indians were drying their footwear which was all wet. The moose head was just half cooked when Willow Man pulled it down and took it apart. He put the moose jaw bone aside for himself for a club.

A young boy happened to be sitting next to Willow Man who noticed that the boy was nervous. So Willow Man asked questions about it. Then he gave a jerk with his elbow on the boy's chest and instantly sprang up and clubbed every single man to death.

¹ Mrs. Effie Linklater of Old Crow was engaged by Dean Keim to collect these stories. The project was materially assisted by Father Jean Marie Mouchet, O.M.I., Roman Catholic priest at Old Crow. Editing has been kept to a minimum.

From there he moved up to the head of the Porcupine River to where it is called Fishing Branch. There he made a hideout where he had two of his nephews with him. The other Indians did not know where he went, and they hunted for him.

One day a hunter was chasing a mountain sheep, and he came over a ridge of a high mountain and there he stopped, seeing where Willow Man's hideout was. That quick, he hid himself under brush.

Willow Man had noticed the sheep. He killed it. While cutting it up he noticed that it had been chased by humans, so he ran up to the ridge to look around, but he noticed nothing. The hunter had fled homeward and brought the news of Willow Man's hideout.

One day Willow Man was out hunting while his two nephews were at home. The enemy came to his hideout and killed the two young men. On the way home Willow Man looked down over his hideout and noticed that he was surrounded. From every direction arrows were flying. Towards the end he fell. Lying close to the cliff, he started tearing beads and ivory made into beads off his clothes. This is what the silly Indians were after most—Willow Man's outfit, clothes of beads and ivory.

From where he lay he spoke to them and told them, "Don't ever say you killed me. Say you have made me friendless."

They thought Willow Man was dead, and two young Indians sneaked up to him and made a grab for the beads and ivory. Willow Man jumped up and grabbed the two young men and held them under each of his arms and jumped over the high cliff with them. Halfway down these two men were gone to nothing, but the great Willow Man was all in one piece when he landed at the bottom. There he died. The whole side of the rocky cliff was smeared with his blood, and it shows yet today. The powdered rock is red and the Natives use it for dye. There also is an ancient cave where Willow Man had his hideout.

Willow Man was a great chief. He had strength and a strong body, and the Vun-tut-Kwtchin always won the war through Willow Man. And after they had killed their own chief they always lost the war, until very few of them are left.

This is an old Indian story before the white man came. The Indians never knew about the Bible story about Samson, but the story is like that one.

STORY OF AN INDIAN WHO WAS CALLED
"GRASS PANTS" (TLO-THUL)

Grass Pants was a poor man who was about the first Indian to meet a white man. He was called "Grass Pants" because that's just what he wore in summer time.

One day Grass Pants was out hunting alone. He had just made a fire on the shore of the river when just around the bend came a row boat. To him it was like a dragon. He was so frightened he couldn't move. He had no chance to run for his life so he just waited. When the boat landed by him he saw that it held some humans dressed in strange clothes, and they were so pale looking.

As the white men came to him, they tried to talk to him by making signs he couldn't understand. So they took hold of him and started to undress him and to bathe him. Poor Grass Pants thought that the white men were going to drown him, but he all at once noticed that he was covered with white foam which was soap. After that they dressed him like they were dressed. When he came to the shoes he couldn't walk, they felt so stiff on his feet. The white men broke up his bow and arrows and handed him a gun. To him it was some kind of strange, heavy iron. They showed him how to load it and how to pull the trigger.

"Bang."

Poor Grass Pants shook with fright. Then they threw away his flint and gave him matches and showed him how to use them, too. After that, they let him go. When he came back to where his people were, he was afraid to show himself. So out of sight he let out an Indian call. The whole camp was silent.

Then he told his people what he had seen and what had happened to him while he was out hunting. After he told his story he came out of hiding and was surrounded by his people looking at him with unbelieving eyes.

Grass Pants was a poor man, but there to his people he was a rich man.

STORY OF A CROW

Long ago there lived a crow who was always full of mischief, and forever was playing tricks on other birds or animals. One day he came upon a flock of ducks now named *Helldivers*. These divers had nice, long hair and they looked very smart. The crow wished that he had nice, long hair, too.

Since he could not have this hair, he thought that he might be able to trick the divers so that they would lose theirs. He decided to tell the divers some false news.

The divers were all surrounded by campfires. The crow came along and told the divers about the death of their great, loving uncle. Then all of the divers started to mourn, even burning their long hair and not caring for their looks. The crow, seeing that every diver had burnt his hair short, told them that he was not sure if the news about their uncle was true.

Then the divers cried out that the silly, old crow had tricked them, and so they grabbed him and started to throw him into the fire. He cried out that the only way they would be able to satisfy themselves would be to throw him into the flames face upwards. So that's just what they did. As they let him go, he flew up into the air with his laughing "Caw, Caw, Caw."

STORY OF A SWAN AND A TEAL

There was supposed to be a big wrestling match between every kind of duck. One day the big contest was opened and a swan and another duck started to wrestle. The swan won. Every duck tried his luck, but all lost, and the great swan was still a champion.

Then a small duck named Teal came forward and said, "Let me give a try." The swan and all the other ducks started to laugh because Teal was so small. One duck said, "Why not let him try? It's all fun."

So out to the middle of the ring little Teal went. The little Teal grabbed the swan around the waist, and the next second the big swan was doing his best to keep himself off the ground. With a fast pull Teal had the big swan down, and up came the swan. He wanted to try again. Down went the swan. There was another try. The third time the swan went down he walked away feeling shame, and little Teal was the champion of all the ducks. (He is about the fanciest duck).

STORY OF A CROW AND A BIG FISH

It was getting late in the fall and Mr. Crow was getting worried about the cold winter ahead, and, of course, he had to use his old tricks to get his winter meal.

In a lake there was a big fish the size of a whale, and so the crow told the big fish that the lake was much too small for him and that there was a big sized lake just a few yards away that would give him all kinds of room to move around in.

There was a small pond where the crow would throw a stick in and say, "See how close it is?" And every time the crow would throw a stick in the pond the big fish would hear a splash.

So the big fish pushed himself upon the ground, and pushed again and slid on the ground and then couldn't move any more, so he died. That's how the old crow tricked the big fish and had his meat for all winter.

THE LUCKY BOY

An old Indian father wanted his son to have a wife. The father felt that the son should get a girl who could do many things such as sewing, tanning hides, and other necessary work.

One day the Indians began to move to another camp. The father put himself and his son ahead of the rest of the people. When the people were approaching the camping place the father stood at the side of the trail with his son. Together they watched each young girl as she passed by. Many were wishing that the boy would choose them, but he let each one pass by. Many of the pretty girls were dressed in their best skin clothes. When the son would prepare to state his choice, the father would say, "Wait, son."

At last, at the end of the line of teams, there came a girl dressed in old, worn out rabbit skin clothes and pulling a big load. The father said, "Son, this is the one."

The young man was very down hearted for many pretty girls had passed and he could have chosen any one of them.

At the camp the girl moved in with her young husband. There she unloaded what she had been hauling, and she started to unpack her bags. Then she changed into fine and fancy skin clothes with different colors of porcupine quills. She also took out a well made set of skin clothes for her husband, a caribou skin robe, fancy arrow sheath and many other things that a hunter needs. She also unpacked a new, white skin tent, fancy with different colors of dye and fringe, and also many white skins of nice dried meat.

People often had wondered what was in the load she had hauled from camp to camp, but no one had really given the matter much thought because she was a poor girl.

The young man soon became rich, and was happy to have the prettiest girl in the tribe, and they both lived a long, happy life.

THE BOY IN THE MOON

One cold winter the people were hungry and even starving. There was no meat and fish. Men with strong medicine tried to make the caribou come their way, but nothing worked.

All the time one small boy asked and asked, wanting to work with his medicine, but no one paid any attention to him. They thought that he was just a baby. Finally, however, the men decided to let the boy do as he wanted, just to see if anything would happen.

The boy ordered that a fence be built. After this was done, the boy told the men to set all their caribou snares in the fence. Although there were no tracks of any kind to be seen, five hundred or more snares were set in a single day.

Then the boy split the men into two groups, one group to go one way and the other group another way. They were to go quite a distance then circle towards each other and come to where the fence had been built. This was done and out of nowhere a herd of caribou was driven into the fence. A caribou was caught in every snare.

After killing the herd, the boy asked his father to carry him around to see all of the caribou. The boy asked the hunters to find the fattest caribou and to give the fat from it to him. However, the boy's uncle who found the special caribou would not give the fat away. The boy begged

and begged. Other men offered their caribou fat, but the boy wanted only the fat from the special caribou. He cried when he did not get it.

All the hunters went home. Finally the boy had his father pull him and a load of one caribou home, too. There they cooked some meat. The child put aside one shoulder and the tripe half full of blood. He then went to bed.

The next morning the father called his son, but he did not answer. He had disappeared during the night. His marten skin pants which he always wore were hanging by the smoke hole at the top of the tent, but nowhere was the boy to be found.

That same morning the hunters went to haul meat. When they came to the caribou fence, no meat was left. It all had vanished. There was not even a sign of blood.

Everyone cried because of the loss of the child and the meat. They knew this had happened because the boy had not gotten the piece of fat from the fattest caribou.

One night not long after this all happened, the boy appeared to his surprised parents. He told them to keep that one caribou shoulder, cut off the meat to the bone for eating, but not to break the bone or tear the tripe. His parents did as they had been instructed. Every morning the bone would have lots of meat on it. Every day the parents cut off the meat and ate it. They did that for a long time.

Then the boy told his parents that he would vanish into the moon and live there until the end of the world. He said that at the eclipse of the moon, if the moon were on its back, there would be a good winter with lots of caribou. But if the moon should be face down, that would be a sign that there would be a cold winter and starvation. He told his parents that in time of plenty all the people should sing, dance and feast. He said that he would be watching from the moon. Today if people look at the shadow on the moon they will see the boy with his bag of blood in one hand and a dog at his side.

A BRUSHMAN

Brushmen live in caves and never let anyone see them. Their caves are so well hidden that a person would not know if he were to walk over one.

One day a brushman spied on some Indians. He hid close to their camp. A young girl gathering spruce branches for the tent wandered a little too far from camp. The brushman snatched the girl and took her back to his cave. He made a braided skin line and tied the girl so that she could not escape.

A few days later the girl asked the brushman to let her alone for a while. With the line tied to her, the brushman let her move behind a stump. He kept the other end of the line near him. Somehow the girl managed to untie herself. She dressed the stump with her skin clothes and large bonnet, tied the skin line to the stump and stealthily ran away to her home.

When the brushman called the girl she did not move. When he pulled the line he could not budge her. Singing love songs and dancing, he went toward the girl. What a surprise he had when he leaped and hugged a stump.

THE LUCKY GIRL

Long ago young men wishing to marry would choose their brides in this manner.

The young men would leave camp to go hunting. The rest of the people would follow the hunters at a distance. Half way to the next camp the young men would hang their outer fur pants on trees, and, wearing their inner trousers, continue on their way.

The young girls, following, would choose a pair of nice looking pants, not knowing whose pants they were getting.

Once a young orphan girl was following the hunters with her grandmother. Because the grandmother was old and walked so slowly, the girl was the last one to reach the trees where the pants were hanging.

Only one pair of fur pants was left hanging, an old, well worn and patched pair. The girl did not want to take such poor pants, but the grandmother, knowing that they belonged to a good boy and a hard worker, told her to take the pants. The girl did as her grandmother said.

The people made camp. Soon the young hunters came and started searching for their pants. also the girls who had taken them.

Long after dark the last young man came to the camp to search for his old, nearly worn out pants and his new wife. In the last old tent he found the old lady with her granddaughter and his fur pants.

The young man brought in a large pack sack of caribou meat. He alone of all the hunters had killed caribou that day. Then the busy young man got wood and built up the fire to keep his new wife and the old lady warm.

The young girl and the grandmother, who were warm for the first time in a long while, were so happy to have found a good hunter. The young girl knew that she had a wonderful husband.

THE STRANGER

Long, long ago there lived a stranger who had changed many wild animals, some smaller and less wicked than the others. He had two wives. One's name was "Dawn." He loved her very much. The other wife's name was "Twilight," whom he disliked. He would not eat any of her cooking.

Dawn had a young baby, and it was a ptarmigan. Later on, Twilight had a baby and it was a water beetle. This made the husband very angry and he left both his wives. Twilight, knowing that it was her fault, went after her husband. As she went along she came to where two wolves were facing each other on each side of the trail. She was afraid to pass them so she turned back. After returning home she told her friend Dawn, "Why do you not go after him? You have the loving one." She did not tell Dawn about the two wolves.

So the second wife went after her husband. When she came to the two wolves, she threw her mitts between them. They did not move so she knew they were dead wolves. She passed them and went on and on. She noticed that all the lakes she came to were large. The next lake she came to was very large so she circled the edge of it until she came to her husband who was by a fire and looking across the lake where he knew he would be followed. While he did this, Dawn sneaked up on him. As soon as he saw her, the stranger began to run. But as he did so Dawn threw the baby ptarmigan in front of him and told him, "Have you ever thought of this baby?"

As she said this he fell to his knee and wept over the young ptarmigan. Then they all went on their way together. Soon they came upon many tracks.

The stranger knew that the tracks did not belong to a human. So he made a stage for his wife and the baby and left them on it, and went on himself to find what kind of people they were. Soon he came to where their camp was. There were lots of them. As soon as they noticed him they all yelled, "A stranger," and started chasing him. He ran around in every direction. One old man kept saying as he ran, "My son will be the friend; my son will be the friend."

The stranger wondered about that remark and noticed that the old man's son was not around. So he ran close to the old man to be caught. The old man took the stranger to his home. The old man told the stranger that his friend soon would come to the home and cook for him whatever he brought home.

Just before dark a young man came in with a big pack. He started to cook, and the stranger noticed that the meat was not from a caribou but from a large snake. He also noticed that the people were husky dogs and not human. The young man put a large birch bowl of cooked meat in front of the stranger. Instead of eating the meat, the stranger would drop the food under his chin into his parka. All this time the old man was sitting by the door. He noticed that the stranger was putting the meat under his clothes. So the old man told everyone. While the stranger was busy making friends with the young man, all the males went the way the stranger had come. They found Dawn and the ptarmigan and killed her and left the baby alive.

When at last the stranger came back to his wife all he found alive was the ptarmigan. The stranger was broken hearted, but there was the baby ptarmigan to think about. The stranger made up his mind to try to get even in every way. He took the ptarmigan with him and went after the others.

His young friend waited for him and warned him about the two wolves that kill people. They were wolves that could not be gotten rid of even after they were killed and cut up into pieces. The pieces would come back to life. The stranger thought about all this and then he knew that a certain part of the wolf could be destroyed so the animal could not come back to life.

So as the stranger accompanied the others he came upon two wolves. Before the wolves had a chance to kill, the stranger speared them. To make sure that they were dead he cut them into pieces. He saw that the tail always came back to life if any part of it was left on the pieces of the body. So he cut all the tail off the pieces of the body and destroyed the ugly monsters.

When the stranger was leaving the camp the next day the young man told him about a snake that would kill people if approached from the direction of the tail. The stranger decided to test the snake so he approached it from the tail and it swallowed him. He managed to get free and kill the snake.

Next the young man warned the stranger about a lynx and told him not to go under any half fallen tree. The stranger did not heed the young man's warning. He went under a tree and a large lynx killed him and ate him.

The young man was very sad about the loss of the stranger who was his friend. Finally he asked his father to work with medicine. The old man tried to change his son's mind by bringing him gifts, but the son would keep asking his father to work with medicine.

Finally the old man brought snares made out of sinew. He told his son to take him back to where the lynx had eaten up the stranger. There the old man told his son to build a snowhouse. Then the old man wanted lots of dry wood and then a big fire. When all the wood was in flames the old man took the stranger's snowshoe and stepped into the fire while he sang a medicine song. He sang until he was nothing but bones.

When the bones all went to nothing, there was a silence. The old man's son stood waiting. After a while he heard two people talking in the snowhouse. Then out came the stranger. He was carrying his snowshoe under his arm. After him came the old man who a short time before had been burnt to the bones.

THE STRANGER AND THE RABBIT

The stranger's friend warned him that he would meet two monster rabbits that kill people, and not to pass between two rabbits that sit on each side of a trail.

These monsters killed people with their tails which were as sharp as spears. So before the stranger started off he put two flat stones under his clothes, one on each side of his body.

Soon he came upon two rabbits. One was sitting on one side of the trail, the other on the other side. They were facing away from each

other. As the stranger passed between them, the two rabbits came together. Each jabbed his tail into a stone and screamed with pain. Then their tails curled up.

That's why the rabbits' tails are short and curled up. And from that time until today the rabbits have been small and harmless.

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