

*Salmon Always Goes Up River*  
*An American Indian Epic*

Retold by Rodney Frey

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Salmon is a great warrior.  
    He's going up the Columbia River;  
        Salmon always goes up river.

Salmon comes to a camp,  
    an old man's camp;  
        It's Spider's camp.

Out there in the river is a platform;  
    it's built to catch the salmon;  
        it's not so good.

Salmon goes over,  
    piles up rocks,  
        here and here.

He goes up the bank of the river,  
    to Spider's camp.

Spider is making a dip-net;  
    it's not so good.

"What are you doing?" Salmon says.  
"Oh,  
    I'm just making a dip-net.  
        I thought I might try my luck at catching a salmon or two;  
            they might take pity on me," Spider says.

"Well,  
    let me see the net," Salmon says.

He takes it,  
    works on it,  
        here and here.

Salmon goes down to the river,  
    to the platform.

He puts the net in the river,  
    and just like that,  
        lands a salmon.

He goes back up the bank of the river,  
    to Spider's camp.

"Well,  
    there are a lot of salmon in that river.  
        Everything is ready.  
            I dipped out one salmon;  
                left it there for you," Salmon says.  
"Soon the human peoples will come to this place.  
    When the people come,  
        this is the way they'll fish the salmon," Salmon says.  
"There's a big camp of people up river;  
    the Dove people," Spider says.  
"The chief has a good looking daughter.  
    The one who can split the five pieces of elk horn,  
        each as long as a spear point,  
            he can marry his daughter," Spider says.  
Salmon goes up the river,  
    to the camp of the Dove people.  
        Salmon always goes up river.  
Along the way he picks up a piece of flint,  
    sharp flint;  
        puts it under his fingernail.  
He takes a small pouch of salmon oil;  
    puts it in his mouth,  
        just behind his cheek.  
Salmon goes up river;  
    Salmon always goes up river.  
It's a big camp.  
There are many young men there;  
    each tried to splinter the pieces of horn.  
"I'll split the horns,  
    Rrrr." Grizzly Bear says.  
        But he can't.  
All who tried,  
    hold their head's down.  
"It's up to you;  
    No one else can break them," the people say.  
"Well,  
    if the chief asks me,  
        I'll try," Salmon says.  
Salmon goes into the chief's lodge.  
    The chief is there.  
        His daughter is there.

Salmon's and Dove's eyes meet.  
    They care for each other very much.  
        She loves his handsome red face.  
"Try to split the pieces of horn," the chief says.  
"Thank you for that invitation," Salmon says.  
The pieces of horn are laying there,  
    on a mat.  
"Do you want me to split this horn here,  
    here?" Salmon says.  
Salmon points his finger to the horn;  
    moves his fingernail from one end to the other.  
Salmon holds the horn to his mouth;  
    kisses the horn.  
Salmon twists the horn;  
    splits it into several pieces.  
"Ah," the chief says.  
Salmon takes another horn.  
"Do you want me to split it here,  
    here?"  
Salmon moves his fingernail along the horn;  
    puts it to his mouth.  
Salmon twists the horn;  
    splits it in two.  
"Ah," the chief says.  
Salmon takes the third elk horn.  
"Do you want me to split it here,  
    here?"  
He moves his finger;  
    puts the horn to his mouth.  
The horn splits into several pieces.  
"Ah," the chief says.  
Salmon takes the fourth horn.  
"Do you want me to split it here,  
    here?"  
He moves his fingernail along the horn;  
    takes it to his mouth.  
The horn splits in two.  
"Ah," the chief says.  
Salmon takes the fifth horn,  
    the largest of all.  
"Do you want me to split it here,  
    here?" Salmon says.

Salmon moves his fingernail along the horn;  
    takes it to his mouth.  
Salmon twists the horn,  
    and twists the horn.  
        It splits into several pieces.  
"Ah,  
    ah," the chief says.  
The chief of the Dove people is true to his word.  
Salmon and Dove marry.  
    They care for each other very much.  
        She loves his handsome red face.  
"The people will be very angry that we married.  
    Hold tight to my belt;  
        you'll be safe.  
            The arrows won't hurt you.  
                They're after me," Salmon says.  
The people are standing around watching.  
The men with their heads down,  
    are there.  
        They get angry when they see Salmon with Dove.  
Salmon rushes across the camp.  
    He's halfway to the river before anyone moves.  
The women tease the men with their heads down.  
"There goes Salmon getting away with Dove;  
    none of you are doing anything," the women say.  
All the men grab their bows and arrows;  
    run after Salmon.  
They shoot at him,  
    but the arrows glance off Salmon's slick back.  
There's all this noise,  
    shouting and commotion.  
Porcupine is sleeping in his lodge,  
    away from the camp.  
He hears all this noise,  
    and pushes open the flap of the lodge door.  
He sees what's going on,  
    puts on his moccasins,  
        his quills and so on.  
Porcupine starts down the hill;  
    but he's pretty slow.  
        He goes back into his lodge,  
            back to sleep.

There's all this noise,  
    shouting and commotion.  
Rattlesnake looks out.  
    He's an old man.  
He sees Salmon with Dove.  
Rattlesnake takes out one of his poison fangs,  
    and puts it on an arrow shaft.  
He shoots the arrow;  
    it hits Salmon in the back of the head.  
        The arrow-point stays in Salmon's head.  
Salmon tumbles and falls over,  
    falls into the river.  
        The river carries Salmon down river.  
Dove cries.  
The five Wolf brothers are there;  
    they are great hunters.  
They see what's happening;  
    see Salmon go down river.  
They take Dove to their own camp,  
    way up in the mountains,  
        and make her do all the work.  
            They're very cruel to her.  
All day and night,  
    the wives of the five brothers watch over Dove.  
She's very unhappy;  
    she feels bad.  
The river carries Salmon a long way,  
    down river,  
        a long way.  
Salmon is washed up on a sandbar.  
    His flesh is gone;  
        only the skull and the backbone are there.  
The sun bleaches those bones white.  
Mouse,  
    the Sly One,  
        comes along.  
            He's looking for something to eat.  
She finds the bones of Salmon.  
Salmon had been chief to Mouse.  
    Mouse feels bad.  
She goes back to her camp;  
    gets some salmon oil.

Mouse rubs the skull and the backbone with the oil,  
a first day passes.

Mouse rubs the bones with the salmon oil,  
a second day.

The bones are rubbed,  
a third,  
and a fourth day.

Mouse rubs the skull,  
the backbone with the salmon oil,  
on the fifth day.

And the flesh comes back to those bones.  
Salmon has life.

"Oh,  
I've been sleeping a long time," Salmon says.

"You haven't been sleeping,  
you've been dead!" Mouse says.

"Oh!" Salmon says.

Salmon is strong,  
returns back to the river.

Salmon goes up the river;  
Salmon always goes up river.

His wife is nowhere to be seen.

"The Wolf brothers have taken her,  
and they are cruel.

If you want Dove,  
you must go for her," Old Man Spider says.

Salmon goes up the river;  
Salmon always goes up river.

He comes to the camp of Whitefish.  
Whitefish is making a three-pronged fish spear.

"What are you doing?" Salmon says.

Whitefish keeps whistling.

"What are you doing?" Salmon says.

Whitefish keeps whistling.

"What are you doing?" Salmon says.

Whitefish turns,  
grabs Salmon,  
and pushes the spear into his arm.

"This is what I'm going to do with it;  
I'm going to use it on Slick-Eyes," Whitefish says.

"That's hurting me," Salmon says.

Salmon pulls the spear from his arm;  
looks it over.

"That's a pretty good spear." Salmon says.

Salmon grabs Whitefish;  
pushes him down.

Salmon jabs the spear into the back of the neck of Whitefish.

"Soon the human peoples will come to this place.

When the people come,  
they'll use the three-pronged spear;

this is the way they'll fish for the whitefish," Salmon says.

Salmon goes up the river;

Salmon always goes up river.

He comes to the camp of Rattlesnake.

Rattlesnake is in his mat-covered lodge,

Salmon hears a song.

"I shot Salmon.

I shot Salmon.

Salmon was chief.

He's chief no more."

Salmon goes into the lodge,

and Rattlesnake sees him from the corner of his eye.

The song changes.

"I'm sad that Salmon is dead.

I'm sad that Salmon is dead.

Salmon was chief.

He was a good chief."

Salmon says nothing.

He picks up a piece of burning wood from the fire;

touches it to the dry mat-lodge;

jumps outside.

The flames leap up.

Rattlesnake is trapped;

can't get out.

Rattlesnake is ashes.

From one of Rattlesnake's eyes crawls a small snake;

it's a rattlesnake.

"Soon the human peoples will come to this place.

When the people come,  
the rattlesnake will crawl on its belly,

and always warn people before it strikes," Salmon says.

Salmon goes up the river;

Salmon always goes up river.

He sees a nice little stick in the path;

steps on it.

"You broke my leg," it says.

It's Meadowlark.

"Oh,

I'm sorry;

it was right in my way." Salmon says.

Salmon mends Meadowlark's leg;

she goes with him to the camp of the Wolf brothers.

Salmon goes up the river;

Salmon always goes up river.

He finds Dove in the camp of the Wolf brothers.

They're out hunting.

"What do the Wolf brothers do when they return from the hunt?" Salmon says.

"They first go down to the river to wash," Dove says.

Salmon goes down to the river,

into the waters.

Meadowlark goes out.

"Come,

the woman you stole,

she's hungry," Meadowlark says.

The first Wolf brother,

the oldest,

comes back.

"I smell Salmon," he says.

"How could that be?

He's dead," Dove says.

"I'm not so sure?" he says.

The first brother goes down to the river to wash.

When he's in the waters,

Salmon is there;

takes out his knife.

The Wolf brother floats down river.

The second Wolf brother,

the next oldest,

comes back.

"I smell Salmon," he says.

"How could that be?

He's dead," Dove says.

"I'm not so sure?" he says.

He goes down to wash.

Salmon is there.

The second Wolf brother floats down river.

The third Wolf brother comes back.

"I smell Salmon," he says.



"How could that be?

He's dead," Dove says.

"I'm not so sure?" he says.

He goes to wash.

Salmon is there.

The Wolf brother floats down river.

The fourth Wolf brother comes back.

"I smell Salmon," he says.

"How could that be?

He's dead," Dove says.

"I'm not so sure?" he says.

He goes to wash.

Salmon is there.

The fourth Wolf brother floats down river.

The fifth brother,

the youngest brother,

comes back from the hunt.

"I smell Salmon," he says.

"How could that be?

He's dead," says the wife of Salmon.

"I'm not so sure?" he says.

He goes down to the river to wash after the hunt.

Salmon is there.

"Soon the human peoples will come to this place.

When the people come,

they'll find you gone from this country;

you'll be in the timber country;

you'll be the first timber wolf," Salmon says.

Salmon takes Dove to the river.

They care for each other very much.

She loves his handsome red face.

"We'll part for now.

But each spring when I hear you cry,

I'll come up the river.

We'll be together then," Salmon says.

"Soon the human peoples will come to this place.

And when the people come,

they'll hear you crying in the spring.

'The salmon must be coming!' they'll say."

So listen carefully for the cry of the dove,

and the salmon will soon be here.

Salmon always goes up river.

And by the way,  
    even today,  
        all salmon have arrow-point markings,  
                just like the one Rattlesnake shot into Salmon's head.  
You know,  
    Salmon always go up river!

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### **Story Background**

The story of Salmon is one of the many great stories told by the Indian peoples of the Inland Northwest and Columbia River region. Salmon, himself, is one of a large host of the powerful Myth People. Other Myth People include Coyote and Fox, Rattlesnake and Grizzly Bear, Sweat Lodge and Chief Child of the Root, Swallowing Monster and the Sea Monster. The Myth People have always inhabited the land, from the beginning of time. In their adventures and sometimes misadventures, the Myth People first brought forth all the landforms we now see--the rivers and mountains, the forests and grasslands. They created the animal and bird peoples, and the fish and plant peoples. These powerful beings did all this for one primary aim--to prepare the world for the coming of the human peoples. And it is the Myth People who eventually created all the human peoples. While they traveled the world at the beginning of time, the Myth People are still here today, in the rivers and mountains, and in the sky. It may even be Wolf or Elk or Salmon who comes to a young man, as a guardian spirit, during a vision quest.

There are many stories of Salmon and the salmon people. For example, there is the story of Coyote and the Swallow Sisters. The two Sisters had captured all the salmon people in a pond near Celilo Falls on the Columbia River. With his powers, Coyote frees the salmon to go up stream and turns the Sisters in swallows, who now signal the return of the salmon each year. There is also the story of Coyote and the Woman. Coyote sought a particularly beautiful woman as his wife, but the people refused to allow the marriage. In anger and with his great powers, Coyote made the great falls near Spokane, Washington and Post Falls, Idaho. As a result, the salmon, prevented from going up stream, could no longer be fished by the peoples of that area.

Before 1855, when the first of a series of federal treaties was signed with the Indian peoples of the Columbia River region, there were over fourteen million chinook, coho and sockeye salmon and steelhead who swam up the Columbia each year. It has been estimated that for many of the tribes of the region the salmon contributed up to 40% of the entire aboriginal diet. The Indian peoples have always given the greatest respect to the Salmon, honoring him and the fish he brought. Each year with the coming of the salmon up the river, and at sites such as Celilo Falls, Priest Rapids and Kettle Falls, the Indian peoples would hold the First Salmon Ceremony. During the five-day ceremony, homage would be paid to the salmon, and the salmon, in great quantities, would be gathered from especially constructed weir-traps.

Today it is estimated that less than 2.5 million salmon return annually to spawn in the Columbia River and its various tributaries. The number of native sockeye salmon is even fewer, with less than a dozen making their way back over the 950 miles of rapids and the eight hydroelectric dams along the Columbia and Snake Rivers to Redfish Lake in central Idaho. In former times thousands of sockeye salmon would return to Redfish Lake to spawn each year, hence its name. In 1994 only a single sockeye was sighted.

This particular story of Salmon was told by the Sanpoil and Okanogan peoples who today live on the Colville Reservation in Washington, and by the Coeur d'Alene and Nez Perce peoples of Idaho.<sup>1</sup> While each tribe told the story slightly different, each with its own emphasis, we have sought to maintain the integrity of the narrative to reflect the spirit of the tradition and the land from which it came. Our goal throughout is to convey as authentically as possible in a written format the style and voice of the Indian storyteller. Yet to recapture here the elegance and beauty with which the Indian elders have spoke the Salmon story into being is almost impossible.

To gain a sense of the "oral nuance" and storytelling dynamic we have formatted the story in a "poetic" style. By representing each verse on the written page as a separate line, the rhythm and pacing of the storytelling can be more clearly conveyed. It is a literature meant to be told aloud, heard in the company of others. We would encourage the reader to become a speaker or listener, as you or another read--tell--the story aloud. Vary the length of your pauses between

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<sup>1</sup>You can read previously published accounts of this story in Ray 1933:142, Mourning Dove 1990: 93, Riechard 1947: 119 and Phinney 1934: 222.

each verse--short pauses as indicated by commas and semicolons, and longer pauses by periods.

You will notice that certain verses as well as sequences of actions are repeated throughout the text. It will take Salmon a particular number of attempts to successfully complete an endeavor. Throughout the Inland Northwest the prominent numbers which govern these patterns are typically three and five. The patterns of repetition not only highlight the key actions of the story, but help draw the listener into the rhythm of that story.

You will also notice that the use of the language is rather terse. Descriptions of the landscape and the characters that roam that land--Salmon, Dove, Spider--are only minimally conveyed. In fact, the motivations of those characters are seldom explained. Left to the active imagination of the story listener is the opportunity to complete the images of the landscape and the actions of the characters. It is for this reason that the visual images we have provided only hint to the descriptions of Salmon or Dove. As Archie Phinney, a Nez Perce who did a comprehensive study of his people's oral literature, once stated, there is "no clear picture" of the physical images of the Myth People "offered or needed."<sup>2</sup>

In the experience of telling and hearing the story, in the patterns of repetition, and in the minimal use of the language and visual imagery the listener is transformed into a participant within the story. And the voice of Salmon and of the elders who have told his story becomes a little more immediate and personal. For additional insights into the "oral nuance" as well as cultural context of this literature you can consult the anthology, *Stories That Make the World*.

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<sup>2</sup>Phinney 1934: ix

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