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TRUE TALES OF THE UPPER SKAGIT

AS RETOLD FROM MEMORY BY DICK BULLER

THE STORY OF MOX TATLEM¹

This tale of Mox Tatlem, who lived 125 years ago and his son, George, who lived at a later date was interpreted to me by an Indian medicine man named Hiyu Tillicum. Any slight inaccuracies should be laid to my inability to understand Hiyu's English instead of any desire on my part to exaggerate.

It was about one hundred and twenty-five years ago when Mox Tatlem first saw the light of day. The first few months of Mox's life were not very eventful. About the first thing he could remember was his mother preparing salmon to smoke. She would split the salmon down the back, removing the head, backbone and tail and then small cedar splints were used to keep the fish spread apart until dried. When little Mox would look up in the roof of their rancheree he could see tons and tons of salmon being smoked, laying by food for a rainy day when there would be no salmon in the river.

The continuous struggle for a living kept Mox's father busy all the time fishing and hunting. No time for long trips to keep himself abreast of the time. The length of the Skagit Valley was his world. It must be confessed that Mox's father was just an ignorant savage with no chance of education or enlightenment such as civilized people have. He had no roads, doing all his traveling

by canoe; therefore he did not have the civilizing influence of a gas tax.

If the river was too high to canoe on he could always wait a week or so as he was not engaged in the pursuit of wealth. His business affairs gave no worry. In this day of super civilization worry over financial affairs gives us more food for thought and cultivation of the intellect than anything else. Mox's father had no choice but to remain the savage he was.

It is small wonder that Mox, growing up under these social conditions, should remain savage like his ancestors. The next few years of Mox's life were uneventful, he learned to hunt, fish and run a canoe to keep his life from becoming monotonous. He became especially proficient in setting snares for catching small game. This hobby for catching wildlife was the means of saving his life.

When Mox was ten years old there came a winter of great snow December, January and into February. Then came warm rains and floods. A great slide filled Diablo Canyon full, damming the river. When this broke a great flood raced down the river – ice, logs, and debris—a solid wall of death forty feet high. As all the Indian villages were on the lowlands bordering on the river but few

¹ This story was divided into three issues. Each issue is separated by a date heading.

escaped.

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It so happened that Mox had got up early and went to look at his snares. When the huge wall of water and debris swept by, carrying death to all his relatives, you can imagine the feelings of a ten year old boy looking out over this scene of desolation. Recovering a few pieces of dried salmon from the ruins of the village, he made his way to the Sauk River where he had some relatives and with them grew to early manhood.

Completing his education in the primitive art of making a living and feeling at last like a college graduate with a Dr. degree and that the world was at his feet, he married a beautiful young maiden of a near-by village and looked around for a suitable place to set up housekeeping. Like all people who ever left it, he pined for the Skagit, but vowing that he would never settle where his family could be washed away he selected a high bench overlooking the Skagit about a mile up river from the present town of Rockport. A high mountain was right back of his house affording additional means of escape in event of another flood. Below the bench a wide flat extended out to the river, furnishing lots of easily cleared land on which to raise potatoes. Of course, fish and potatoes had to be carried up the hill but why worry about that as it was a woman's work anyway and if she wasn't doing that she would only be gossiping with the neighbors.

Mox's life ran along uneventfully. Plenty of fish and potatoes but an economic change was taking place. To Mox's knowledge the river for centuries had furnished a never ending supply of salmon and other fish but—here was the rub—the fish had to be caught by the men. The women only cleaned and prepared them for smoking. This kept him busy with no time for recreation and social contacts.

Up to this time we will have to admit

Mox was just an ignorant savage, however, with the advent of the potato there was a subtle change in his condition. Squaws planted, cultivated and harvested the potatoes, leaving Mox more leisure time in which to meditate and cultivate his mind. Having eliminated the worry of making a living he could travel and have conversation with strangers from strange land. It must be admitted that Mox was enjoying a fuller life. Only once was Mox worried and that was during a very cold winter when all his potatoes froze and he had no fish dried. It looked blue for awhile but some of the older Indians that still liked their fish and had plenty smoked, helped him out.

With all this leisure on his hands Mox had started to climb the ladder of social leadership. His old squaw dying at this time and although an old man himself, he took unto himself a young squaw that had spent a few months at a mission school. When their only son was born they named it George. Now Mox being old and full of years, faded out of the picture and passed on to the happy hunting grounds and mingled with the spirits of his fathers, leaving son George to carry on the traditions of the family.

Having inherited his father's estate George still lived in the old home. Setting in front of his house one day he saw a mighty cedar tree fall into the river with a big crash. This was the beginning of the end so far as George's farm was concerned, as before the water went down an acre of land had washed away.

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The next high water took a larger toll of George's land, necessitating the clearing of a new potato patch, but as the squaws did all the clearing George did not have to worry about the labor problem and there was lots of land to clear. Setting in front of his house one day he saw many white men with saws and

axes and about a hundred horses and mules coming up the river bottom, making a pack trail as they came, winding in and out where the going was easiest. Coming to George's potato patch they went through the middle of it. George not liking this very well went down to see who they were and what it was about. He found they were Great Northern surveyors running a preliminary survey to select a pass to cross the Cascades with the mail line. Being short of men they had George join the crew as a swamper, as an axe was the only white man's tool George could use.

George was now on the 1st rung of the ladder that was to lead him to all the benefits of the white man's civilization and the benefits of being hungry and out of work. There is nothing like fasting and leisure to develop the mind of mankind.

Within a year the great panic of the nineties had descended like a pall over the land and while the white man starved, George merely went back to his salmon and potatoes. But this change back to poverty was not welcomed by George and as he sat in front of his house enjoying the leisure thus forced upon him, he contemplated all the blessings the white man had endowed him with—shoes, overalls, a cotton shirt—even a hat. Associations with his white brothers had trained his mind to follow the peculiar ways of white man's thinking. In fact, George was almost civilized. Working for the white man whenever the opportunity offered he learned to make roads, do any kind of work in a logging camp, help surveyors. In fact he was an all-around outdoor workman. In all these years George saw the river slowly taking his farm, little here, a little there. Every year they moved the wagon road a few feet at a time until at last his land on the river bottom was all gone and the county had to move the wagon road on top of the bench on which George's house stood. A number of years later a railroad was built alongside the wagon road, the two roads running side by side

around a high bluff whose base was washed by the waters of the river.

When George died and went to join old Mox Tatlem in the happy hunting grounds there had been no change in the river channel for some time.