

A Legend of White Bear Lake

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Every spring for perhaps a century, or as long as there has been a nation of red men, an island in the middle of White Bear Lake had been visited by a band of Indians for the purpose of making maple sugar. Tradition says that many springs ago, while upon this island, a young warrior loved and wooed the daughter of his chief, and it is said also the maiden loved the warrior.

He had, again and again, been refused her hand by her parents, the old chief alleging he was not brave enough and his old consort calling him a woman!

The sun had again set upon the "sugar bush", and the bright moon rode high in the blue heavens, when the young warrior took down his flute and went out alone, once more to sing the of his love. The mild breeze gently moved the two gay feathers in his head dress, and as he mounted on the trunk of a leaning tree, the damp snow fell from his feet heavily. As he raised the flute to his lips the blanket slipped away from his well-formed shoulders and lay partly on the snow beneath. He began his weird, wild love song, but soon felt that he was cold; and as he reached back for his blanket some unseen hand gently laid it on his shoulders. It was the hand of his love--his guardian angel. She took her place beside him and for the present they were happy—for the Indian has a heart to love, and in his pride he is noble as is his own freedom, which makes him the child of the forest. As the legend runs, a large white bear, thinking that perhaps snows and dismal weather extended everywhere, took up his journey southward. He at length approached the northern shore of the lake, which now bears his name, walked down the bank and made his way noiselessly through the deep heavy snow toward the island. It was the same spring ensuing that the lovers sat. They had left their first retreat and were now seated among the branches of a large elm, which hung far out over the lake.

For fear of being detected they had talked almost in a whisper, and now, that they might get back to camp in good time and thereby avoid suspicion, they were just rising to return when the maiden uttered a shriek, which was heard at the camp, and bounding toward the brave she caught his blanket but missed the direction of her foot and fell, bearing the blanket with her into the great arms of the ferocious monster. Instantly every man woman and child of the band were upon the bank, but all unarmed. Cries and wailings went up from every mouth. What was to be done? In the meantime this white and savage beast held the maiden in his huge grasp and fondled his precious prey as if he were used to scenes like this. One deafening yell from the lover warrior is heard above the cry of a hundred of his tribe. And dashing away to the wigwam, he grasped his faithful knife, and returns almost at a single bound to the scene of fear and fright, rushes out along the leaning tree to the spot where is treasure fell, and spring with the fury of a mad panther pounced upon his prey. The animal turned and with one stroke of his huge paw he brought the lovers heart to heart; but the next moment the warrior with one plunge of the blade of his knife, opened the crimson sluices of death and the dying bear relaxed his grasp.

That night there was no more sleep for the band or the lovers, and as the young and the old danced about the carcass off the dead monster the gallant warrior was presented with another plume, and ere another moon had set he had a living treasure added to his heart. Their children for many years played upon the dead skin of the WHITE BEAR--from which the lake derives its name--and the maiden and the brave remembered long the fearful scene and rescuer that made them one, for Kis-se-me-pa and Kar-go-ka would never forget their fearful encounter with the huge monster that came so near to sending them to the happy hunting ground.

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It was at the close of a warm summer day, in the Land of the Dakotas. As the blazing sun slowly sank to the western horizon, the squaws set about the preparation of the evening meal, around the camp fire. Suddenly the barking of dogs heralded the return of the hunting party. The shouts of the children added to the din and soon all was confusion in the camp. It was a great homecoming, for the hunt had been successful and the party was laden with buffalo and antelope. Chief Eagle Eye, riding at the head of his band, dismounted before the door of his wigwam, where he saw his lovely daughter, Naugawese, industriously grinding rice. She barely glanced at him, though the light in her dark wistful eyes betrayed the adoring love she felt for her father.

Now about this time Chingachouk, a Chippewa scout, was stealthily approaching the Camp of the Dakotas. Chingachouk was the son of a Chippewa Chieftain. He was a noble warrior, tall, strong fleet of feet and the best archer of his band. He was trained in the cunning of woodcraft. While yet a youth he had successfully withstood all the tests for fortitude devised by his people. Long periods of fasting he had patiently endured as was the custom of his tribe. Every temptation of thirst and of hunger he had resisted. The test of fire and the test of water-all had fallen before his strong clean body, the courage of his soul. Many times his wisdom and his courage had made him the deliverer of his people. His knowledge of the woods and country had saved them from famine while his experience, as a scout, had made it possible for him to warn them against invading enemy.

The maiden Naugawese was at the spring in the glen drawing water for the evening meal; a twig snapped in the bush close by. Startled, she jumped, poised like a frightened fawn. But she saw nothing, so reassured, she started along the shady trail which led back to the camp. Suddenly there appeared in the path before her the lithe form of a young brave. It was Chingachouk, the Chippewa scout. Silently he gazed at her, fascinated by her beauty. Finally, gathering courage, she advanced to pass him, when he seized her in his arms, stifling her cries with his hand. He would bear her away with him. But some feeling, he knew not what, made him release her. Like a deer, she sped toward the camp, but before she reached her father's wigwam, she slowed to a walk, her fright turned to wonder. "Who was the handsome warrior and whence came he?" That night and for many thereafter, Naugawese dreamed of him. She saw him in the smoke of a fire and he beckoned to her.

Less than a moon later, Eagle Eye called a council of his people. The Braves and the warriors responded to the beat of the tom tom. Soon many were gathered around the Council Fire. In the extreme outer circle hovered the women and children. Then their Chieftain, Eagle Eye, so magnificent in war paint and feathers, disclosed to them his plan for an immediate attack upon their enemy, the Chippewa. With should and ceremonious dance the braves and warriors enthusiastically agreed to the proposal of their chief for an advance upon their foes before dawn. But one poor Dakotah maiden felt only grief and despair.

In the meantime Chingachouk, the Chippewa scout, was seated at the foot of a great oak in the forest. The solitude of the place quieted the tumult in his breast, while the swaying branches whispered to him of peace-peace. Peace, fight no more, teach your people peace. The crunching of leaves betrayed the coming of hurrying feet. Swiftly approaching was Naugawese, who came this time without hesitation or fear. Gaspingly she told him of the proposed attack upon the Chippewa, before dawn. Then Chingachouk and Naugawese went away together to the camp of his people. Later that night, they returned and with them was a band of Chippewa braves. As they approached the sentry of the Dakotahs, Chingachouk advanced alone and gave the sign of friendship. After a parley, the entire band was admitted to the Council of Eagle Eye, who gravely listened while Chingachouk eloquently pleaded for a truce between the two nations. Peace between the Chippewa and the Sioux. Then came prolonged silence after which with much deliberation, they solemnly discussed the proposal. At length Eagle Eye said that only on one condition would he smoke the Pipe of

Peace with his enemy and consent to the marriage of his daughter with a Chippewa brave. “Chingachouk must first prove himself worthy of the maiden by some deed.”

It was late in the next moon, late in the afternoon of a beautiful August day that a light birch bark canoe drew up to the shore of a thickly wooded island. A stalwart young Indian brave stepped from the boat as it touched the sand. It was Chingachouk. He had come to keep a tryst with the lovely Naugawese. Swiftly he bounded along the path. One more turn and he would see her. He made the bend but the sight struck horror to his heart-for a huge white bear was poised ready to seize his Naugawese. Chingachouk grasped his hunting knife, immediately attacking the beast, whose claws had already torn the shawl from his loved one’s shoulders. Naugawese, stunned only for a moment, fled in terror to the village of her people and almost the entire band returned with her to the scene of that terrible conflict between man and beast. At last, through the gathering dusk, Chingachouk, torn and bleeding, was seen to sink his knife in the breast of the bear, then both fell and lay motionless on the crimson sod. Little clouds of mist arose through the dusky air. They seemed to take the forms of Chingachouk and the bear, which slowly floated upward and were lost from sight. The silence was broken by Eagle Eye, who said, “Chingachouk, you’ve won the test, Naugawese is yours.” But only the whispering breeze was heard, as the spirit of the young brave and the great white bear sped on their way to the Happy Hunting Ground. And always thereafter this lovely but tragic spot was known as Manitou, or Spirit Island. It lies in the lake called White Bear.

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Occasionally the old men of the nations [Dakota & Ojibway], who had outlived the fire and fervor of the hatred that existed in their youth, would counsel peace. Though a boundary line was drawn between the battle grounds of the two nations, however, no regard was paid to it by either; until at length the Bad Spirit, discouraged at the death of so many braves, decided to make a fresh line between the hunting grounds of the two people. Mounting a monstrous charger, he rode through the wilds of Wisconsin and Minnesota, crossing the St. Croix at a single leap, and clearing everything before him by the fire emitted from the nostrils of his flaming steed.

His route was marked by a line that was plainly visible, extending so as to divide the lake and leave a share of it for each nation. When he returned to his own dominions the Evil One left a he beast to guard the division of the lake. The line was respected for many years, and upon a renewal of the strife, the Chippewas were victorious, and the Dacotahs believed that the beast, Mah-to-me-di, was the cause of the success of their enemies.

At last one of the stalwart Dacotah chiefs resolved to solve the mystery and put an end to the spell which the Evil One had worked over the tribe. The warrior met the monster with arrows, who retreated the while, but on reaching the bank of the lake was brought to bay, and a terrible conflict began. The hunter was covered with blood from his wounds and the beast’s white coat turned to crimson by the gore from the great gash opened in his body from the warrior’s knife. So they fought all day, until at last, but just as the sun was setting, the chief summoned all his strength for a final effort, and inflicted a blow that reached a vital spot, and sank to the ground insensible of the victory that he had won.

The lake soon came to be know as Mahtomedi, from Mahto, white bear, and medi – water. The dead brave was buried so they say, on the siland in the middle of the lake, which henceforth became a sacred place in the eyes of the Dacotahs. Ever after, during fierce storms, when a flash of lighting lighted up the island, the Indian and his ghostly enemy could be seen in mortal combat and the island is still known as Spirit [Manitou] Island.