

The Legend of Queneesh

There are many wonderful legends that belong to the Comox people. We are the people who have given our name to this part of Vancouver Island where we have lived for thousands of years.

One of these stories is the Legend of Queneesh, the Comox word for the huge white glacier which looks down majestically over the Comox Valley.

Let's travel back in time to when giant evergreen trees grew right down to the shore of the Puntledge River. Our people lived along the shoreline in big houses made from cedar planks with totems presiding over the doorways. Canoes lined the river bank, wiers were set to catch salmon and there were smokehouses for preserving salmon and clams.

The Comox people numbered in the thousands and spoke their own language. In this world, when people went to sleep at night the only sounds they could hear were the sounds of nature. And other than the moon and the stars the only light came from fires in the big houses.

On just such a night an old man, Qwoi qwa lak, had a dream. In this dream a voice came to him and told him that he must go to his Chief and warn him of a coming disaster. When Qwoi qwa lak woke up, he remembered what had happened to him during the night. The power of the voice that spoke to him, the clear direct advice as to what must be done made him realize that he must act.

Qwoi qwa lak went to the lodge of the Chief of the Comox people, Gye gya janook, and requested an audience. The old man told the Chief about his strange and compelling dream. The voice in his dream told him that he must repeat to his chief what the dream said.

The voice warned that soon rain will begin to fall and it will not stop for a long, long, time. Day after day, and night after night it will rain. This constant rain will result in tremendous flooding such as the people have never seen before. The voice warned that in order for the Comox people to save themselves they must work hard to prepare for this time. If they are willing to do as the voice advises the people will remain safe in their own land.

Gye gya janook, Chief of the Comox, thought about what the old man had told him. This was a grave prediction with serious consequences if it was ignored. Finally, because Indians have such respect for the advice of their elders, the Chief decided that he must act on this revelation.

Gye gya janook called all the people together and told them about Qwoi qwa lak's dream. He told them that their present plans must be put aside. He assigned one group of people to build more canoes, others to harvest much cedar bark, and still others to pound and prepare it for weaving. Qwoi qwa lak was to oversee the weaving of a huge cedar bark rope which must be miles in length.

Other people got busy preparing food that could keep for long periods of time. Fish must be smoked, clams and cockles had to be dried, seaweed preserved, deer hunted and the meat cured and readied.

Everyone had a job to do and everyone began to carry out the tasks that they were given.

Capes and hats made from woven cedar bark that are able to shed the rain were a must. Young boys, taught carefully by the older men, made bailers - many will be needed! Even the children had to give up their games to help.

People had to also decide which objects would have priority in the space available and what must be left behind. Ceremonial dress and rattles are treasures that must be kept safe.

Finally, because the people had been diligent, because they listened, because they worked hard, because they had been cooperative and because from the youngest to the oldest each one had done his or her best, the Comox were finally prepared. And lo, just in time for the rain had begun to fall.

A group of the strongest and wisest young men were sent to make the trek to the top of the glacier that rose above the valley. They were to use their judgement as to the ideal location for the cedar rope to be attached. Choosing the right place was crucial, as the very future of their families and loved ones depended on the correct choice.

It rained, and it rained, and it rained, day after day and night after night. Before long the river began to flood and the people had to get into their canoes and attach the canoes to the great cedar rope. Soon the water rose up over the totem poles and the people had to watch as many of their wonderful possessions (such as bent cedar boxes) floated by. There was just not enough room in the canoes for all these things.

The trees in the valley and then even on the mountainside became covered as the water rose higher and higher. But the rain continued to pour down and the people became more and more afraid. The canoes required constant bailing and the children were very afraid and unhappy as they could no longer run on the green grass or play on the beaches. The world became one of water and sky, a very dismal sky. Daylight and darkness came each in their turn but the rain continues relentlessly.

Each person asked the other what will happen when the flood waters rise to where our young men have tied the rope. A great fear spread among the canoes. Eventually the day came when the glacier was almost covered over and only the topmost parts can be seen.

The Chief, his Medicine Man, Ha ha geelth and every person in each canoe prayed to the Great Spirit. As they prayed, fearfully waiting and holding their breath, something they had never dreamed possible occurred.

The glacier, their glacier, that they had seen and watched from a distance for years seemed to suddenly take on a life of its own. It began to float, then it broke through the surface of the flood waters in the same way a giant grey whale breaches. The water running off the glacier and foaming around the canoes caused a huge commotion.

At first the people are in awe of this strange happening and then slowly, as they begin to understand what has happened, the Comox people began to cry out and cheer, "The glacier is a huge white whale!" Then they began to chant, "Queneesh, Queneesh", as before their eyes the glacier had indeed become a huge white whale.

Soon to add to the joy of the people the rain stopped. After weeks of constant rain this seems an added miracle. The people cheered again and for the first time they slept well and comfortable in their canoes. No one had to bail!

In the morning the sun shone brightly. The air was fresh and sweet. Steam rose from clothing and belongings as things began to dry. Great excitement ran from one canoe to another; people were laughing, talking and calling back and forth. The time of sitting silently and fearfully wondering were over.

Plans began for a giant celebration when they were all safely back on the site of their own village. They knew there would be much work to do but they also knew they would be safe in their own land, Comox. The air was filled with the sounds of laughter, chattering and words of praise and thankfulness.

The rain had stopped at the perfect time. Queneesh had floated almost free of the mountain, but not quite. Now as the water began to recede, Queneesh began to settle back into his former position where people see and admire him to this very day, overlooking the whole Comox Valley as if he were a king on a throne.

So honoured is Queneesh that he is symbolized in paint on the front of the one remaining big houses of the Comox. Those who are truly Comox are still heard to whisper to him, "Kwa la whee gai, Queneesh. Thank you, thank you."