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CRATERS OF THE MOON NM

# INDIAN LEGENDS FROM THE NORTHERN ROCKIES

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*by Ella E. Clark*

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BY ELLA E. CLARK

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FRONTISPIECE: Blackfoot Medicine Pipe  
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to his lodge alone, opened his medicine  
ceremonies. Then he returned to  
Bring all those who are ill to my tipi  
y. I will take them on a journey of

the trail along the Snake River toward  
uns, the medicine man called a halt.  
his sacred tipi and stayed in it for  
out, he advised those who were sick  
rise to a place which the spirit had

the stars were disappearing, all who  
They were helped by their friends  
medicine man to a place in the hills  
camp the night before. Here Man-  
stop; he ordered the sick people to

al robe and carrying in his hand his  
ple to a creek.

ill soon flow from a rock that is up  
oon reach the place where your sick  
waters reach you, drink from them  
flow long. I will soon stop them."  
the hillside above the place where  
something from his sacred bundle  
like secret, mystic words. Instantly  
a great quantities. Soon it reached  
k people waited. They drank from  
the medicine man tapped the rock  
to flow.

he could cause the healing waters  
nothing from his sacred bundle,  
ystic words. Again a great quan-  
into the creek. The Indians drank  
medicine man caused it to stop.

### *The Craters of the Moon*

All day the ceremony continued at intervals. When the stars came  
out, Man-from-the-Sky stopped the ceremony and the healing waters  
for the night. All the people returned to their camp, as the medicine  
man directed.

By the next morning most of them had been cured of their illness.  
Those who were still sick were again taken to the spot in the creek  
where they had been the previous day. Again the waters flowed and  
ceased to flow in obedience to the tapping and the words of the  
medicine man.

When the people awoke the next morning, every sickness was gone.  
All had been healed by the healing waters. On the third day the  
Indians returned to their homes entirely cured.

"Do not visit the healing waters alone," the medicine man warned  
them. "Never go there without me. Those are sacred waters. Only I  
control them. Anyone who goes there alone is sure to die."

Forever after, the Indians held the place in reverence and in awe.  
No one is known to have visited it again. And Tenupah Dome-up  
became known as one who could control the forces of nature. He  
was henceforth the greatest medicine man of the Shoshoni people.

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### *The Craters of the Moon*

THE CRATERS OF THE MOON National Monument in southern Idaho  
is part of a vast lava field. Its name comes from the fact that "its  
caves and natural bridges, cones and terraces and weird piles of stone  
resemble the surface of the moon as seen through a telescope." The  
Idaho Shoshonis have handed down this myth about the origin of  
the weird formation.

**L**ONG, LONG AGO, a huge serpent, miles and miles in length, lay where  
the channel of the Snake River is now. Though the serpent was  
never known to harm anyone, people were terrified by it.

One spring, after it had lain asleep all winter, it left its bed and  
went to a large mountain in what is now the Craters of the Moon.  
There it coiled its immense body around the mountain and sunned  
itself.

After several days, thunder and lightning passed over the mountain and aroused the wrath of the serpent. A second time flashes of lightning played on the mountain, and this time the lightning struck nearby. Angered, the serpent began to tighten its coils around the mountain. Soon the pressure caused the rocks to begin to crumble.

Still the serpent tightened its coils. The pressure became so great that the stones began to melt. Fire came from the cracks. Soon liquid rock flowed down the sides of the mountain.

The huge serpent, slow in its movements, could not get away from the fire. So it was killed by the heat, and its body was roasted in the hot rock. At last the fire burned itself out; the rocks cooled off; the liquid rock became solid again.

Today if one visits the spot, he will see ashes and charred bones where the mountain used to be. If he will look closely at the solidified rock, he will see the ribs and bones of the huge serpent, charred and lifeless.



### *The Lava Beds of the Snake River*

FOR A LONG DISTANCE, the upper Snake River flows through the Lava Beds of southeastern Idaho. They are a weird assortment of small caves, buttes, fissures, and solidified rock flows. Not far away is the Craters of the Moon National Monument. Because many arrowheads and other Indian relics have been found in the Lava Beds, it is supposed that an ancient village was buried by the eruption.

The Idaho Shoshonis and Bannocks have the following tradition about the origin of the Lava Beds.

LONG AGO the valley of the Snake River here was covered with forests, and many streams flowed into the big river. In the forest roamed many game animals of all kinds. In the clear streams were many fish. So the Indians were well fed and happy.

But strange people, in great numbers, came into the valley to hunt and to fish. Soon they crowded out the Shoshonis and forced them to give up forest after forest and stream after stream. These strangers

lived in caves and bow and arrows,

When they had Shoshonis and of a large group on t There they talked of the strangers and

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"I will go into th and eloquent speec more wisdom. The strangers from our

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At last he entered a large number of a large cougar had har an Indian's. The me spirits, that the anim was their chief.

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With a loud voice and to listen to the vis medicine man. "and t The man told them

and lightning passed over the mountain serpent. A second time flashes of lightning, and this time the lightning struck the serpent, and it began to tighten its coils around the rocks, and the rocks began to crumble. The pressure became so great that the rocks began to crack. Soon liquid lava came from the cracks. The mountain began to move.

The lava movements, could not get away from the serpent, and its body was roasted in the lava itself; the rocks cooled off; the lava solidified.

Today you will see ashes and charred bones of the serpent. He will look closely at the solidified bones of the huge serpent, charred and black.

### *The Snake River*

The Snake River flows through the Lava Beds. There are a weird assortment of small rock flows. Not far away is the monument. Because many arrowheads have been found in the Lava Beds, it was believed that the Indians were buried by the eruption. The rocks have the following tradition.

The Snake River here was covered with forest. The forest was forced into the big river. In the forest there were many kinds of animals. In the clear streams were many fish. All were fed and happy.

Strangers came into the valley to hunt the Shoshonis and forced them to leave the stream after stream. These strangers

### *The Lava Beds of the Snake River*

lived in caves and in huts made of stones. They were skillful with bow and arrows, and they were cruel warriors.

When they had killed a good many people, the head chiefs of the Shoshonis and of the Bannocks called a council. They gathered in a large group on the top of a high mountain overlooking the river. There they talked and talked about what they should do to get rid of the strangers and to possess again their lands along the Snake River.

In the council was a great medicine man, the only one of them who could receive messages from the Great Mystery. After chanting and praying a long time for wisdom, he made a speech to the assembly. He advised the warriors to be patient and not stir up further trouble.

"I will go into the deep forest," he told them at the end of a long and eloquent speech. "There I will pray for more knowledge and more wisdom. Then I will be able to tell you how to drive the strangers from our country."

His listeners gave their approval, and the medicine man departed alone. As he walked through the deep forest, he occasionally saw a bright star and traveled toward it. Sometimes he was frightened by the cry of a cougar and by the mournful sounds of other animals. But he kept on traveling, always praying to the spirits to protect him for the safety of his people.

At last he entered an opening where there was light. In it he saw a large number of wolves, foxes, bobcats, and cougars. One very large cougar had hands instead of front feet, and he had a head like an Indian's. The medicine man realized that he was in the land of spirits, that the animals were spirits, and that the manlike cougar was their chief.

Trembling, the medicine man approached the large cougar. To his surprise, the animal greeted him kindly, speaking in the Shoshoni language. "I have been told that you were coming," he said. "You may tell all of us why you have come."

With a loud voice, the cougar called the animals to come near and to listen to the visitor. "They are all good spirits," he said to the medicine man, "and they are ready to hear what you have to say."

The man told them about the coming of the brutal strangers into

the country of the Shoshonis and Bannocks and about the suffering of the people. "They have seized our lands and they are killing our people. We do not know who they are or where they came from. But I beg you to send them back to their own country."

"The strangers are great warriors," replied the spirits, "and they do not fear us. If they are sent away, they will not heed the warnings of the spirits but will surely return to your land."

Their words made the medicine man very sad, but the chief spoke encouraging words.

"The spirits will get rid of your enemies if all your people will make a solemn promise, for all time to come. These animals that you see—cougars, foxes, wolves, bobcats—are spirits. Your people must promise never to kill any of them. If any one of you should ever kill or eat of the flesh of any of them, he will be considered a rebel against the spirits. Then the spirits will appear in the form of animals and will devour every Shoshoni and Bannock in the land. Go home now and return as soon as possible with all your people. Then we will hold another council, a great council."

Again the medicine man entered the dark forest and followed the star as he had done before. Before the dawning of another day, he reached the council still gathered on the mountain. There he told about his meeting with the spirits, and about the promise their chief had asked of him. "Go now," ordered the medicine man, "and bring here as soon as possible all your people—all the warriors, the old men, the women, and the children. Together we will go to see the spirits and their chief."

Some of the warriors laughed at their medicine man, saying that no Indian could see the chief of the spirits and talk with him. But the man gave them proof: when he touched a stone, it took fire, melted, and ran like water.

Believing him, the members of the council started forth to bring all the people together. Several suns later, all the people of the Shoshoni and Bannock country had gathered on the mountain. Their journey to the land of the spirits was made during the night. When

they reached the open animals sitting around

Again the warrior arations to put him to Great Mystery, to he people and spoke to go to war any more, the spirits. It will be cessors for all time. I your prayers to be re

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they reached the opening in the forest, they could see nothing but  
animals sitting around on their haunches.

Again the warriors doubted the medicine man and began prep-  
arations to put him to death. He begged the chief of the spirits, the  
Great Mystery, to help him. The Great Chief appeared before the  
people and spoke to them in words of wisdom and caution. "Do not  
go to war any more," he said, "without first obtaining the advice of  
the spirits. It will be given to the great medicine man and his suc-  
cessors for all time. In return for your promise to obey this caution,  
your prayers to be restored to your country will be answered."

When all the members of the great council had given their promise  
to the Great Chief of the spirits, the medicine man was lifted high  
into the air. So high was he taken that his companions lost sight  
of him in the darkness. The spirits carried him above the treetops to  
a tall and rocky mountain. There they ordered him to touch the top-  
most point with his finger. When he did, the peak instantly ignited  
and burned fiercely.

Then the spirits carried him back to the opening in the forest  
and told him to depart immediately with his people. "Go back to  
the mountain on which you hold your councils."

As they journeyed, they saw a bright light gleaming through  
occasional openings in the forest, and they reached their mountain  
quickly. From it they saw another mountain burning and melted  
rock running down its sides like red water. The fire grew bigger  
and bigger. Nearby hills and cliffs melted and flowed into the valley.

All the trees were rapidly consumed by the fire. In a short time  
the valley was a lake of fire as far as the eye could see. All the strangers  
who had invaded the land of the Indians were destroyed.

After many moons the hot rocks cooled, but it was many snows  
before trees began to appear again on the foothills. More snows  
came and went before there was plenty of game and fish once more.

The valley burned by the fire was left bare. When other members  
of the strange race came and saw what had happened to those who had  
been there before them, they hurried back to the land they had come  
from. They feared the lava beds.

The Shoshonis and Bannocks have always kept their promise to the Spirit Chief. Remembering the lava beds, they remembered his order not to kill or eat of the flesh of wolves, cougars, and kindred animals.



*The Mysteries in Bull Lake*

BULL LAKE, on the Wind River Reservation, has a Shoshoni name that means "Buffalo Bellowing Lake" or the "Lake That Roars." It is situated in a deep canyon; when the wind rushes through this gorge, it sounds like a buffalo bellowing. Although some Indians were afraid to pass the lake, the medicine men used to spend a night there, hoping for a vision in which they would be given more supernatural power. Here are three of several traditions about the lake.

**M**ANY YEARS AGO in the area around Bull Lake there lived a great herd of buffalo, the leader of which was an enormous white bull. Indians have always held the white buffalo in reverence; any man who killed one was thought to be superhuman, almost a god.

The Shoshonis hunted this herd again and again, hoping to kill the great white leader. Always the buffalo escaped. At last, in fear and desperation, the herd tried to get away from their pursuers by crossing the lake on the ice. But the ice was not strong enough. The animals broke through and went down to their death with a great plunging and roaring. Above all the others could be heard the cry of the big white leader as he went down into the icy water.

To this day, a roar often comes up from the depth of the lake. It comes from the spirit of the old white bull, roaring on and on forever in protest against the fate that befell him and his herd. And so it is called "the Lake That Roars."

 ONE DAY when my grandmother was a little girl, wrote a child at the Wind River School, she and her father and mother and some friends were traveling near Bull Lake. Hearing a baby crying, they looked and saw a water baby out on the lake, combing its hair. Every

time it brought the  
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