'Tahoma gives us water, gives white water to the land'

Mount Rainier in Indian Legendry

by Ella E. Clark

"MOUNT RAINIER and Mount St. Helens were female mountains," says an 82-year-old Chehalis Indian. "Mount Adams was a male mountain. One time the women mountains quarreled over the man mountain. They threw hot rocks and fire at each other." The fight continued, according to Cowlitz Indian tradition, until Mount Rainier was struck so hard that her head was broken off.

Mount St. Helens was the man, in another Cowlitz legend. Mount Rainier ("Takhoma") and Mount Adams ("Pahto") were his wives. They had many children. The wives quarreled and fought until Takhoma finally got the best of Pahto. She stepped on all of Pahto's children and killed them. "She was the stronger. The children were in the way when they were fighting and so they kept stepping on them. The two women and their husband turned into mountains."

Mount Rainier and Mount St. Helens, according to an Indian tradition told to O. D. Wheeler, were once separated by an inland sea. One time they had a fierce fight, each peak determined to rule over the region. They hurled hot rocks at each other, shot forth flames from their summits, rained ashes upon the water between them. They shook the earth, darkened the sky with their smoke and burned the forests with their fire. At last the birds interfered. They took Rainier far inland. Then the enemy peaks became quiet and all the world was peaceful again.

Long ago when the mountains were people, say the Lummi Indians of northern Puget Sound, Komo Kulshan was a handsome man. "Komo Kulshan" or "Kulshan," meaning "Great White Watcher," was their name for Mount Baker. One of his two wives was named "Duh-hwahk," meaning "Clear Sky." Jealous of the second wife, she left Kulshan, took with her all her roots and seeds and traveled south for a few days' journey.

Not far from the south end of Puget Sound, she made a permanent camp and there planted all her roots and seeds. By the time she stopped traveling, she had stretched herself so many times, to look back upon her husband and children, that she had become very tall. We know her now as Mount Rainier, the top of which can be seen from near Mount Baker when the sky is clear. Flowers from the garden Clear Sky planted cover the lower slopes of Mount Rainier with bright colors every summer.

The Duwamish, Skokomish, Nisqually, and Puyallup, who once lived along the shores of southern Puget Sound, tell legends about Rainier as a wife of one of the Hohadhun, who lived on the peninsula west of the Sound. Either because the wives quarreled or because "Takkobad" grew too big for the space given her, she decided to move across the water. She crossed by canoe, taking her little boy

MOUNT BAKER was called "Komo Kulshan" ("Great White Watcher") by Indians in northern Cascades area.
—Photo by Ella E. Clark

When she is not performing her duties as associate professor of English at the State College of Washington, Pullman, Ella E. Clark is writing about the Northwest, its places and its people. Her book, "Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest," published by the University of California Press in 1953, includes 40 pages of stories about peaks in the area and 28 about mountain lakes in Washington and Oregon. In fact, the book is a result of the author's hearing a Klickitat myth about Hood, Adams and St. Helens while serving as a lookout for the U. S. Forest Service in the Cascade Mountains during World War II.

—Photo by Ella E. Clark

FLOWERS from garden planted by "Clear Sky" cover Paradise Valley on Mount Rainier.

with her. When the Changer came to transform the world, she was changed into the mountain now called Rainier and her son into Little Tahoma, the highest peak on the eastern flank. The Hohadhun were transformed into the Olympic Mountains, still crowded close together on the Olympic Peninsula.

Takkobad and Duh-hwahk are only two of several Indian names for Mount Rainier. From other tribes come strongly guttural and aspirate words that have been spelled "Tahoma," "Takhoma," "Takhobah," "Dahkobeed," "Tacoman," "Tacobud," "Tkomma." The accented syllable "ko" or "ho" means water. "Tahoma gives us water, gives white water to the land," some elderly Indians living near Tacoma explained to Elwood Evans in 1882. Others have explained that their name for the peak means "breast of the milk-white waters"; still others, "great white mountain."

The syllable "ko," meaning "water," refers to the little lake on top of the mountain, an educated Puyallup wrote to the Indian agent in Tacoma in the 1880's. "In that lake is a great abundance of valuable shells from which the Indians made their nose and earrings and other valuable jewelry." Probably that is the lake in the familiar story of the miser who climbed Rainier for shell money and was punished for failing to leave any of it with the spirits up there.

The Yakima Indians, east of the mountain, interpreted "Tahoma" as "rumbling like thunder near the skies" or "the great mountain which gives thunder and lightning, having great unseen powers." Elderly Yakima still relate a story about Mount Rainier as one of the five wives of the Sun. They used to tell a myth about Thunderbird ("Enumklah") and the five mountain peaks that were his wives.

Enumklah became angry with the smallest one of his wives. In the quarrel and battle which followed, all the wives took part. The head of Pahto (Mount Adams) was badly beaten, as you can see today. Tahoma also was battered and bruised. "Ah-kee-kun" (Mount Hood and "Low-we-lat-Klah" (Mount St. Helens) were not injured; their heads still stand high and proud. The wife who started the trouble is Mount Simcoe, still the smallest peak. Enumklah punished her by taking the best of her pine nuts, camas bulbs and huckleberries and giving them to his other wives.

In a Klickitat tale recorded by George Gibbs in the 1850's, Rainier, Hood and St. Helens were brothers. Hood became angry at St. Helens for some reason, made war against him and cut off his head. The head flew over the mountains, fell on the east side and became Mount Adams. Though beheaded, St. Helens was not killed. Later, he made war against Rainier and cut his head off. The head flew off and lit in the Wenatchee country at the head of the river (perhaps Glacier Peak?). St. Helens then stamped on Rainier's neck, as Hood had stamped on his. St. Helens cut off Hood's head also and threw it down to the Klamath country where it still stands (perhaps Mount Shasta?). Later, the three brothers agreed to be mountains only. 'They all smoke

but their heads do not."

These tales surely refute an idea held by some white people who live in sight of Mount Rainier—the idea that the Indians used to worship the peak. This misconception is probably due more to the picturesque title of John Williams' book, *The Mountain That Was God,* than to any statement concerning worship found between its covers. Ninety-year-old Indians recall no such tradition, and myths from several tribes suggest no concept of a mountain deity.

Like other peaks of the Cascade Range, Rainier was the Ararat at the time of the Great Flood. As on Mount Adams and on peaks in the Olympics, a cave on Rainier was the home of Thunderbird. Among the Puyallup and Nisqually, Thunderbird was greatly to be desired as a guardian spirit because it made a person brave and gave him power to obtain wealth; therefore, young men from those tribes often went to the mountain on their guardian spirit quests. But that fact does not indicate reverence or worship.

In a myth written by Henry Sicade, last chief of the Nisqually, the mountain was a female monster that sucked into its maw all the people who came near, until the Changer, in the form of Fox, challenged and defeated it in a sucking contest. The monster died and streams of blood from burst blood vessels ran down its sides. The Changer decreed, "Hereafter, Tacobud shall be harmless. The streams of blood I will change to rivers of water. The waters shall have plenty of fish for the good of all people."

There is some evidence that Indians feared Mount Rainier, especially the area above the snow line. They tried not to anger the spirits of the mountain, lest storms and avalanches be hurled upon them.

Sluiskin, the Indian guide for whom Sluiskin Falls in Mount Rainier National Park were named, would never take people above the snow line. "There is a lake of fire on top of the mountain," he told Hazard Stevens and P. B. Van Trump in 1870. "In the lake lives a powerful spirit. If you should reach the top, the evil spirit will seize you and kill you and throw you into the fiery lake. Many years ago, my grandfather, the greatest chief of all the Yakima, climbed nearly to the summit. There he caught a glimpse of the fiery lake and of the evil spirit coming to destroy him, and he fled down the mountain. Where he failed, no other Indian dared to try. Don't go! Don't go!"

Late into the night Sluiskin kept up a dismal chant of warning. Two days later when his companions returned, the first white people ever to reach the summit, the Indian stared at them as if they were ghosts.

The only suggestion of divinity in many myths about Mount Rainier is contained in a little story related in 1900 by a nephew of old Chief Seattle. When the Changer-Creator saw that his work was done, he climbed up and sat on the highest peak in the region. After looking out upon what he had created and transformed, he said to the mountain, 'You shall be Takobid, because upon you I have rested and you are so near the Divine."

For an Indian legend about the Jackson Hole country, see page 58.—Ed.

—Photo by Ella E. Clark

MOUNT ADAMS, shown here from Bird Creek Meadows, was one wife of Mount St. Helens in Cowlitz legend.