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HIGHLIGHTS:

- Mr. Pooyak was born in 1919 on the Sweet Grass Reserve. He has worked as a trapper, farmer and carpenter. He is an excellent singer and storyteller. (For complete biography see IH-080, p.2).
- Story of boys who became rattlesnakes.
- Story of the woman who was half fish.
- Murder and suicide by Thunder Blanket.

This story I am going to tell was told to me two times; by my uncle Mi-mi-quas, and also it was told to me once by an old man named Night Traveller. Night Traveller, a great storyteller, is long dead and is buried on Little Pine Reserve.

I also heard See-see-quays, whose father was in the party, tell this story. See-see-quays died a very old man in March 1974. He is buried on Sweet Grass Reserve.

I believe I can tell this story quite accurately. Some of the people in the story I knew personally. Coming Day, one of the party, was blind for many years before he died a very old man in November 1935. He too is buried on Sweet Grass.

Musinas and Mah-te-kuhp died around 1910. They were both residents of Sweet Grass.

Falling Through The Ice is said to have died on Samson's Reserve in Hobbema, Alberta, in the summer of 1897.

In 1974, Musinas's daughter is living on Moosomin Reserve. She is 92 years old.

Mah-te-kuhp's great-grandson is living on Sweet Grass.

What later became of Tookesee is not known.

THE SEVEN CREE BOYS WHO WERE TURNED INTO RATTLESNAKES

The story I will tell you now is about some Cree boys who went on a raiding trip. It seems there was a Cree camp at Stepping Lake. (It was called Stepping Lake at the time; now it is called Tramping Lake.) This could not have happened too long ago, as you will conclude when you hear the story.

A young man in camp wished to go on a raid, and told his friend, who at once agreed to go with him. After much talking, each agreed to find three friends who would go with them. Blood Indian country was the one selected to raid. And on a certain night they met on a hill some distance from the camp.

When all had gathered on the hill, there were eight Cree boys ready and willing to go raiding without wasting any time. The boys headed straight for where the sun is in the middle of the day. After much walking, I do not know how many nights, they climbed a high hill one morning, and looking south, they could see the river. They called it Elk River. (Now the white man has another name for it.)

Not being in enemy country, the boys slept for a while on the hill. After walking all night they were a tired bunch. They did not, however, sleep very long; they were hungry and thirsty. The sun was not too high when they got up and made their way to the river. After walking on the bank of the river for a ways, they found a buffalo trail leading to the water, and following it, they were happy and surprised to find some meat beside the water. It was the hindquarters of a buffalo. The meat looked fresh and it was very fat, and the boys were very hungry. "Some of you cut up the meat," said the leader as he turned the meat over. "And some of you gather firewood and start a fire. We will cook all of it. What we can't eat now we will take with us to eat later." "Perhaps," said one of the boys, "it is not safe to eat. Maybe some Moonias from the Long Knives country have poisoned the meat, intending it for wolves. I do not think we should eat it."

But the boys paid no heed; they were hungry and the

roasting meat smelled good. In a short time the seven boys were joking and laughing as they ate their fill of meat. "Come eat with us," they told the boy who would not eat; "We have a long road ahead of us and you will be hungry." "I don't think I'll eat," said the lad. "I'm not hungry." Later, after they had eaten, the seven boys lay down on the warm sand beside the river and rested. Nobody spoke and all was very quiet. The one who did not eat suspected all was not right and moved further away from the seven boys.

"I am having stomach pains," said one of them as he rubbed his stomach. Soon several more were complaining of stomach pains. They found the pain would go away when they lay flat on their stomachs. Very soon all seven were lying in that position. The boy who did not eat looked at them; he knew something was very wrong. He was looking at the one who first complained of pains, when he noticed the face of his friend beginning to change into the face of a rattlesnake. He watched as the rest of the body turned into a rattlesnake. The snake turned and disappeared into the waters of the river. As he looked on he saw his friends turn, one by one, into rattlesnakes and all disappeared into the water. All his handsome young friends were gone, and he was alone on the river bank. The boy scrambled up the river bank and went straight toward Stepping Lake.

After much walking and running and camping several times, he reached their camp. He went to his father's lodge. "Where are the others? What happened?" asked his father. "If the people will gather at the chief's lodge they can listen while I tell the chief a very strange story," he told his father. His father spoke to the camp crier, who in turn informed the people accordingly. The boy walked over to the lodge of the chief. Soon it was full of people, mostly relatives of the boys who had not returned. Much wailing was heard in the camp after the boy told his story. It was as if the people knew the boys would never be seen again.

After things quieted down and the people had had time to think things over, the relatives of the missing boys made a move to the banks of the Elk River, taking with them the most powerful medicine men the camp had to offer. At the Elk River, the remains of the campfire were found. The bones from the meat the boys had left were not there. The medicine men went to work, all to no avail; the boys were never found.

As far as we know there are still rattlesnakes in the Elk River.

Littlepoplar: Maybe they raised families. There are a lot of rattlesnakes in that particular spot of the Elk River.

Pooyak: Whatever happened, this could not have happened too long ago. There were Moonias and Metis people around already at the time. I told the story the way it was told to me. This is as far as I heard the story.

THE FOUR CREE BOYS WHO SAW A HALF-FISH WOMAN

This story, like many others, was told to me by my uncle, Mi-mi-qwas.

This time the Cree camp was located away west of the lake called Manitou Lake. Four boys were involved on this raiding trip. The boys rode horses and they went west of the lake. Their plan was to raid a Blackfoot camp and steal horses. Late in the evening on the first day out, the boys came upon a creek. The grass was good and the water was plentiful. Here they spent the night.

Early next morning the four boys were again on their way. They were still in Cree country but they took no chances. When they came to a high hill one boy would crawl up the hill and

look around to make sure no enemy was around. Two more nights they camped on the prairie.

One day while riding, they came upon a deserted Blackfoot campsite. By the tracks they could see the camp had moved southwest. These tracks they followed all day, till it became sunset. After spending another night on the prairie, they kept on going southwest, following the trail left by the Blackfoot. Late in the day they came to the foothills, and the trail led straight for the mountains. Here the Cree stopped and discussed their situation. All concurred in the decision that it would be too risky to follow the trail any further, and so the boys turned back and started for home.

Their food supply was low, and it was decided that a buffalo calf would be killed on the way home to supplement their meager food supply. All day they travelled without seeing buffalo. It was late and the sun had long since sunk in the west when the boys made camp beside a small slough.

Next morning there was no breakfast for the boys; their food had run out. They continued riding north. It was late forenoon when a small herd of buffalo was sighted. A yearling calf was killed, and very soon the boys were enjoying a meal of meat roasted over an open fire. The meal was over, and feeling much better, the boys resumed their journey northeast.

The day was hot and the boys began looking for a slough or creek. Coming over a hill, they could see a large lake some distance away, and they started riding in that direction. "Our horses will have a good drink, and ourselves too," said one of them. "Also we will have a swim," said another.

As they approached the lake they saw sitting on a rock jutting out of the water, someone who looked like a girl. As they came closer they saw it was a girl. She had her back to them, but when the horses splashed in the water she turned her

head, and favoured the boys with a smile. She was very beautiful. After the horses had drunk their fill of water, the boys rode back to the bank and continued to watch the girl. "There must be a camp nearby," someone said. "One of you go ask her." But no one would go. (Boys at the time were very shy when it came to girls.) After much arguing back and forth, one of them rode into the water toward the girl. As he came near, the girl again turned her head and again smiled at the boy. Then she lay down on the rock and rolled over into the water. The boys noticed that the bottom half of the girl was a fish. They became very frightened and made for home with all possible haste.

The sun had set when they reached their camp. The camp was located north of Manitou Lake, close to Battle River. When they told their story of seeing a girl who was half-fish, the people had no choice but to believe them as there were four of them, and they were still frightened.

That's the way my uncle told me this story.

THE DEATH OF THUNDER BLANKET AND HIS WIFE

This other story I am going to tell you happened in 1927, when I was eight years old.

It was in September and my dad and another man named Standing Horn (his Cree name was My-is-kih-nee-koo) were cutting grain. They worked together. At the time, horses were scarce on the reserve, and it was not uncommon for two farmers to pool their horses and work together.

The chokecherries were in full bloom, and the day was very hot. It was one of those beautiful September days we sometimes get on the prairie.

Mother worked in the house, while I played outside, shooting birds with a slingshot I had made. Then my slingshot broke and I sat down in the shade to fix it. Sitting there, I noticed someone walking very rapidly towards our house; it was a woman. I watched and as she came closer I knew it was my grandmother, Silly Bones. She was my father's adopted mother. She was very kind to me, and I went to meet her. I remember she was all out of wind and breathing very hard. "My grandson, where is your father?" she said. "He is away cutting grain," I told her. "Is your mother at home?" she asked. "Yes," I replied. She then walked very fast to the house. I walked and half-ran behind her. At the house she sat down and wiped her brow. She was sweating and was very excited and said nothing for a short time. Then she said to my mother, "Daughter-in-law, I have bad news. Thunder Blanket has just shot his wife." "Where did this happen?" asked my mother. "Just below Coming Day's house," replied Grandma. "I'll get my shawl and we will go," said my mother. "Maybe we can be of some help."

The three of us then left the house. When we arrived at the scene of the shooting, Thunder Blanket was lying on the ground. Blood was running out of his nose and mouth. He was still breathing. His wife was lying some distance away. Her head and face were covered with blood. We then went into Coming

Day's house. He was the father of Thunder Blanket's wife: also he was a blind man. While Mother and Grandmother stayed in the house with old Coming Day, I stood around outside. Fine Day and Calf Child arrived and soon after, two riders came galloping from the east. The horses they were riding stopped and reared up at the sight of the bodies. They did not like the smell of blood. They were my brother Saloman and a boy named Henry Standing Horn. They sat on their horses, staring at the bodies on the ground. Then Mother came out of the house and called them over. She told them to go fast to the farming instructor's place and report the shooting to him.

Soon after they left, people began to arrive. The first to arrive, as I remember, was Lonesinger and his brother Day Child, followed by Chief Sam Swimmer. Soon there were many people there.

Some time later, the farming instructor, (a white man named Matt Layton) arrived in a light wagon, called a democrat. He had with him a doctor and a policeman. By now Thunder Blanket was dead. His wife was alive and the doctor ordered her removed to a hospital. After the doctor treated her wounds she was put into Layton's wagon and they left.

I remember seeing my father and Standing Horn in the crowd. Other people in the crowd were Ugly Bear, Alcheynum and his wife, Chee-chee-qways and his wife, and many more whose names I forget. Soon after the doctor left with his patient, people began to go away. My father and mother and I also went home.

We had not been home long when Lonesinger and his wife drove up. "What will we do with the body of our cousin?" he said to my dad. "We cannot leave it there overnight." "We will have a lunch and then we will go over there," replied Dad. Mother had made tea and after we had eaten, we all went back to the scene of the shooting. It was decided to take the body across a creek to an empty cabin, where it was left overnight.

Next day, news reached us of the death of Thunder Blanket's wife. Then Lonesinger arrived with some lumber, and he and my dad went to work building a coffin. While they were working, my two uncles, Atcheynum and Chee-chee-qways arrived with their wives. They talked for a while and when the box was ready, we all left for the cabin where the body was. The women quickly washed the blood away and did what they could to prepare the body for burial, after which it was placed in the box and nailed shut. While we were still in the cabin, the funeral procession for the other body passed by. We were about ready and we followed.

At the cemetery a short time later, two graves were dug and the bodies buried. Soon after, it got dusk and we returned home. That night our dogs barked and howled all night long. They kept us awake. They seemed to know that some tragic thing had happened. I used to hear in later years it was the same all over the reserve. Dogs barked all night long. Also, I heard some time after, some boys who had been working south of Rockhaven were coming home to Sweet Grass on the night of the funeral. In the bunch were Paul Chicken, Peter Wolfe, Norman Frank, and several others. The night was dark, and they sang Thunder Blanket's songs as they drove. These boys became lost, and at daylight found they were seven or eight miles from where they were supposed to be. Thunder Blanket did not like anyone singing his songs so soon after his death.

One week after Thunder Blanket was buried, my father could not find one of his work horses. He walked and walked all forenoon without finding his horse. After dinner, he started off in another direction. Walking along some bushes, he heard a horse whinny in the bushes. Upon investigating, Dad found it was Thunder Blanket's horse. The horse was gaunt; it had not drunk water or eaten in a whole week. Dad brought the horse home, took off the saddle, the halter and bridle and turned it loose to graze. Dad put the saddle and other things beside the house, and again that night our dogs howled and barked all night long. Dad took the things to Thunder Blanket's house the next day.

Some time later, Dad left our house. He said he was going to a sale. Thunder Blanket's things were being sold. Thunder Blanket was well-to-do. He was a farmer of sorts, and had things like horse harnesses, wagon, discs, seed drill, and many other things.

Littlepoplar: Was the sale held a month or so after his death?

Pooyak: There was a little snow on the ground when the sale was held; I think it was in November. It was also said that on the day of the shooting, Thunder Blanket went first to a white man living close to the reserve, and asked for shells for his high-powered rifle, a 30-30. The white man, named McCaskill did not have shells for a 30-30. Thunder Blanket then went to another man, whom the Indians call the Trader. There also he could get no shells. Then he went to a third man, named Percy Naves, who also had no shells of the make Thunder Blanket wanted. Had he got shells for his 30-30, he may have shot more than his wife. He may have shot some police, or someone else.

That's the story the way I saw it, and the way I heard some of it.

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