

# Bridge of the Gods



Looking back we sometimes mourn missed opportunities, but giving such prominence to what we missed robs us of the memories we should cherish. My maternal grandfather, Bernal Hug, was a farmer, local historian, writer, and county commissioner, but as I reminisce I see him as a storyteller. Magpie syndrome plagued me a bit as a child, being distracted by shiny objects. It was hard for a little boy to sit still long enough for an old man to enter his story mode, but when I did listen treasures were unwrapped in before my eyes.

The details of the trip are hazy, but in my recollection, I was a little boy traveling along the Columbia River, which forms the border of Oregon and Washington, with my grandparents. When we came to the small town of Cascade Locks Granddad pointed to an old suspension bridge with a sign that read, “The Bridge of the Gods,” and asked if I knew its story. He said, “Your schoolteachers might have a slightly different explanation, but

## Jesse Hulse

they weren't there. The people who were there, the eyewitnesses, told the story to their children, who told it to their children, who told it to theirs. So the story came in an unbroken line to a friend of mine who heard it from his father and told it to me. Since you are my grandson, I am going to tell you how it really happened." Granddad's face took on a meditative look, as though he were watching the scenes unfold before his eyes, and the story began.

Long before the white men came to this country when the first men were still new to the land, people lived on each side of the big river, and it was only with great difficulty that they crossed over to visit their friends and loved ones living on the other side. Trips across the river became less and less frequent, and they were becoming two different peoples rather than one. They cried out to the Great Spirit, and he heard their complaints. He caused a huge piece of the mountain on the north side to fall into the river, forming a dam over which the people could easily walk. The people called this the Great Crossover and used it for many years. Behind the Great Crossover, the water backed up creating a huge inland sea covering the lowlands for 200 miles, nearly to the present state of Idaho.

Through years of natural erosion the dam was weakened and one day the immense weight of the water burst the dam sending a 50-foot wall of water through what is now Portland and continuing to the Pacific Ocean. The people cried out again to the

## Jesse Hulse

Great Spirit, this time in terror, and again he heard them. The water subsided and they looked with awe to see that the top of the Crossover remained as a beautiful arched bridge across the river. The water flowed under the arch but the people could still cross. In their gratitude, the people named the arc of stone, “The Bridge of the Gods.”

The bridge was not only beautiful but also significant. The Great Spirit foresaw its importance and appointed a guardian, a very old and wise woman, the keeper of the fire; her name was Loo-Witt.

At about the same time, the Great Spirit brought his three sons, the magnificent snow mountains, to the land. The furthest to the north was Multnomah, the warrior, a little to the south stood Klickitat, the totem maker, and beyond the river stood Wyeast, the singer of songs. The three brothers stood as guardians of the land and its people, and there was peace until the beautiful Squaw Mountain moved into a valley between Klickitat and Wyeast.

With the arrival of Squaw Mountain, the two brothers began to compete for her affection. In time she fell in love with Wyeast and his beautiful songs, but having two mighty brothers compete for her heart gave a selfish thrill and she enjoyed flirting with Klickitat to make Wyeast jealous. In time the rivalry between

## Jesse Hulse

Klickitat and Wyeast progressed. Their good-natured banter became taunts; their taunts became insults and their insults became challenges. They grumbled and growled. They stomped their feet, shaking the earth. They spat ashes and fire into the air and belched clouds of smoke that hid the sun. Finally, they began to hurl rocks and they shot liquid fire at each other, burning forests and sending people into hiding. Through all of this, the brave Loo-Witt remained on the bridge, guarding it with her life. She dodged stones and fire, holding her ground and trying to reason with the warring brothers, but finally, she was knocked into the river leaving the bridge unguarded. This was the last barrier holding the brothers apart and they both raced toward the bridge. To keep the brothers apart and stop the violence, the Great Spirit caused the bridge to fall into the river creating treacherous rapids we still see today, a reminder of the monumental struggle.

Klickitat, who was bigger and stronger, won the fight, but there was little joy in his heart as he looked upon the destruction his passion had caused to the land and its people. Wyeast admitted defeat, giving up all claim to beautiful Squaw Mountain who dutifully took her place beside Klickitat, where she stands to this day. But, she no longer stands tall and beautiful. In her shame she dresses in drab colors and is bent low, standing beside her husband, but never looking up into his face. Klickitat, although

## Jesse Hulse

still great and mighty, stands with his head bowed in shame for the destruction he wrought upon the land he was to preserve.

Wyeast stands erect and beautiful with his perfect cone shape and his snowy white head. He still sings his songs, but they are sad songs for he stands alone as a warning to those who would allow their emotions to run away with their reason.

What of Loo-Witt? She was hurt in the battle but did not die. The Great Spirit saw her bravery and her devotion. Pulling her from the river, he held her to himself until her wounds were healed. As a reward for her bravery, the Great Spirit granted her one wish. She asked to be young and beautiful again. The Great Spirit agreed to make her body young and beautiful but told her that her heart and her memory would remain unchanged. Beautiful, but too old in spirit to seek companionship among the young, she removed herself and stood alone. She is there today, standing in beauty, but some say she is still restless.

Granddad explained that this was no mere fantasy. The mountains were there to be seen. Multnomah, the warrior, is the great and majestic Mount Rainier in Northern Washington. His brother Klickitat is Mount Adams who to this day stands with his head bent in sorrow. Across the Columbia river Wyeast, whom we call Mount Hood stands tall and straight, but somehow sad and lonely.

## Jesse Hulse

When Granddad told the story he thought it had ended, but the best stories live on. Granddad had suggested that Loo-Witt was restless. Twenty years later, she could be quiet no longer. On March 27, 1980, I watched from my home as she spewed smoke and steam thousands of feet into the air and covered the Northwest in ash. She is the beautiful but violent Mount St. Helens.