

9

The Story of Whitefish Woman



As Told by David Joe

David Joe is a Healy Lake elder, son of the late Alice and Alex Joe and grandson of the late Chief Joe of Salchaket (Saa Cheeg), who grew up with this and other traditional stories, including other adventures of Yaabaa Teeshaay. Ellen had told me the story of Whitefish woman several years before our interviews, but by the time of the interviews she had forgotten the story.

One night he went to bed. First, he uh . . . I'll try it in English, that way I can do it. The first thing he tried was birch. No, spruce bark and he threw it in the water and uh. . . First, he killed a chicken, and you know that breast bone? You know how the front end looks like a "V"? He was looking at that and that's how he decided to build his canoe.

Anyway, he was looking at it and he started thinking about it and he was a powerful medicine man too. So he could make them do anything, *Ta telch'eegh*.¹ Anyway, he tried different barks, like I said, a spruce tree. He threw it in the water and right away it sank. The same thing with cottonwood and such and he tried birch bark and he threw it in there and it just kind of floated nicely. And so he figured that's what he was going to make his canoe out of. And so, anyway, so he peeled off birch and made his frame just the way that chicken breast bone looked on both sides and he made his ribs and everything, but he didn't know how to sew. He didn't know how to put it together. He didn't know how to sew.

¹ Another name for *Yaabaa Teeshaay*.

So, anyway, he went to bed and he was thinking, “Maybe I could make somebody sew that canoe up for me.” Anyway, he went to sleep and when he woke up the next morning, there was this canoe there. And there was this little chicken and she was just really, really working hard there, and when she sewed, she was like this—just here and there, really a bum job. So anyway, he was really happy. He got his canoe. And he put his thing in the water and right away, the canoe sank, so he had to go back out in the woods and peel off some more of that birch bark and he did the same thing the second night.

So the next morning he got up, and there was Fish Girl² sitting there. She was sitting there and she was sew-

² In the case of Whitefish Woman, her superior skills and her beauty, as seen by First Man, were the things that attracted him and caused him to value her highly. From this we may discern the importance of whitefish to the people of Healy Lake from the earliest times. That he wanted to keep her on land and almost created a disaster indicates the fine line that exists between a rightful relationship and one that is in some way abusive (not just interpersonally, but between humanity and nature as well). So, we can see that these stories are ancient teaching stories that are imparted to explain relationship and rightful living. The fact that they have been maintained for centuries is also an indication of their importance in the Native culture.

ing that birch bark just like uh, so fine that it looked like a machine did it. And she was really nice looking, too, Mom was telling me. Anyway, that Fish Girl got done and *Ta telch’eeg* decided he wanted to keep her and she was telling him, “No, you can’t because I live in the water. And if you touch me, I can’t get back underneath the water.” And yet, anyway, he touched her and she had a heck of a time getting back into the water and finally she did get back underneath the water and it was almost a disaster.

Anyway, there was this beautiful nice job and he put it in the water and it still leaked. So he took it back out and decided, “What shall I do?” [Indiscernible] come and she looked around and she walked up to a spruce tree. There was pitch, *dzeex*. And he looked at it and he went down and you know there was uh, the light part, you know, before it becomes really hard. It’s light color, before it becomes hard. And so anyway, he looked at it and [indiscernible] sticks. And so anyway, he looked at it and he put a bunch of it in a birch bark basket, and he melted it down somehow, with rocks, probably. And uh, he started putting it over the cracks to make it stop leaking. And after he did it so long, he put it in water and it floated. That’s how the canoe was made.