



# The Origin of Fire

*One of the most important acquisitions for native people is fire, and this theme is one of the most popular in North American Indian folklore. Some myths, as in the next selection, have animals as the main characters, while others deal with man's need for fire. This interchange in folklore is common in the European as well as our native Indian legends.*

Long ago the Nimipu had no fire. They could see fire in the sky sometimes, but it belonged to the Great Power. He kept it in great black bags in the sky. When the bags bumped into each other there was a crashing, tearing sound, and through the hole that was made, fire sparkled.

People longed to get it. They ate fish and meat raw as the animals do. They ate roots and berries raw as the bears do. The women grieved when they saw their little ones shivering and blue with cold. The medicine men beat on their drums in their efforts to bring fire down from the sky, but no fire came.

At last a boy just beyond the age for the sacred vigil said that he would get the fire. People laughed at him. The medicine men angrily complained, "Do you think that you can do what we are not able to do?"

But the boy went on and made his plans. The first time that he saw the black fire bags drifting in the sky, he got ready. First he bathed, brushing himself with fir branches until he was entirely clean and fragrant with the smell of fir. He looked very handsome.

With the inside bark of cedar he wrapped an arrowhead and placed it beside his best and largest bow. On the ground he placed a beautiful white shell that he often wore around his neck. Then he asked his guardian spirit to help him reach the cloud with his arrow.

All the people stood watching. The medicine men said among themselves, "Let us have him killed, lest he make the Great Power angry."

But the people said, "Let him alone! Perhaps he can bring the fire down. If he does not, then we can kill him."

The boy waited until he saw that the largest bag was over his head, growling and rumbling. Then he raised

his bow and shot the arrow upward. Suddenly, all the people heard a tremendous crash, and they saw a flash of fire in the sky. Then the burning arrow, like a falling star, came hurtling down among them. It struck the boy's white shell and there made a small flame.

Shouting with joy, the people rushed forward. They lighted sticks and dry bark and hurried to their tipis to start fires with them. Children and old people ran around, laughing and singing.

When the excitement had died down, people asked about the boy. But he was nowhere to be seen. On the ground lay his shell, burned so that it showed the fire colours. Near it lay the boy's bow. People tried to shoot with it, but not even the strongest man and best with bow and arrow could bend it.

The boy was never seen again. But his abalone shell is still beautiful, still touched with the colours of flame. And the fire he brought from the black bags is still in the centre of each tipi, the blessing of every home.

1. Where did the fire come from?
2. What happened to the boy?
3. What happened to the shell?

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