

Tales of the Straits

Stories are a good way to learn about other people and their lives. Today, we can learn about the past from stories in books. We write our history down to pass it along to the next generations. Some cultures keep their history by telling stories, rather than writing them down. To remember them over time they tell stories about their traditions and live to their children and through many generations. This is called an oral tradition. At the Straits of Mackinac, the American Indians and the French Canadians have an oral tradition from a long time ago. We listen to these stories to learn about their cultures.

Some stories from the American Indian tribes of the area tell of the creation of Mackinac Island, a sacred place for these people. They talk about Gitchi Manitou, or Great Spirit, and also less friendly beings such as the Red Geebis and the Mitchi Manitou. There are many stories about Mackinac from the French Canadians also. Every summer, French traders and voyageurs rendezvoused, or met, at Michilimackinac. Here they told stories in the homes of the French families who wintered at Michilimackinac. These French tales, most of which originated in what was French Canada or New France, now Canada, were told in the local setting.

Here are two such stories:

Arch Rock

Adapted from the **Lore of the Great Turtle** by Dirk Gringuis.

This strange rock formation was looked upon with awe by the Indians as a bridge to another world after death where departed souls could find their last resting place in the island caves. There are many stories, or legends, to how Arch Rock was formed. This one tells about a mortal woman and her love for a sky spirit.

Along the beaches on the shores of Lake Huron lived a band of Ojibwa. Their lodges, or homes, were round topped and made of saplings and elm bark. The homes lay peacefully beneath forest boughs.

In the finest lodge, with its door blanket made of moose hide, lived

the chief of the band and his beautiful daughter called She-who-walks-like-the-mist.

When She-who-walks-like-the-mist carried water from the lake in her clay vessel or worked the bright designs of dyed moose hair and porcupine quills into soft moccasins,



the young braves watched with admiring eyes.

But Mist Woman paid little attention. Her work days were long without a mother to help her. She never complained. Her father was proud of this. Some day, he knew, she would marry a fine brave from another clan and have many children.

At first, when the young men began coming to their lodge bringing gifts, Mist Woman smiled and offered them wild rice she had gathered in the canoe.

Then, one day, all was changed. Suddenly the young men would find Mist Woman sitting with downcast eyes instead of welcoming smiles. As her father saw her growing more and more sad, paddling her canoe alone at night, he became angry.

“Why, my daughter, do you who once smiled on the strong young men who brought you gifts, now treat them with a cold heart? Are you under an evil spell?”, he asked.

Mist Woman only shook her head.

“A daughter cannot always live in the house of her father. You must choose a husband soon or you will become old and wrinkled like Mez-he-say, the turkey,” he said.

Slowly the girl lifted her head. She saw anger in her father’s eyes. At last she spoke.

“It is true, my father, that I am under a spell. But not the spell placed by an evil spirit,” she spoke.

“What then?” her father asked fiercely.

“Let me speak that you may know my heart,” she said. “Often when I go to gather the wild rice it is late. The star of the path of the dead is in the sky when I return.

“Two moons ago, as I paddled to the eastern shore of our village, a handsome brave appeared to me. His clothing was one of the whitest deerskin I have ever seen and covered with designs my fingers could have never made.

“But even more wonderful was his robe of shining light. I tried to paddle quickly homeward, as a daughter should, but my hands were helpless and my canoe drifted into the lake.

“It was then that he spoke to me. ‘Oh, lovely one,’ he said. ‘Long have I watched you in the village wishing that you might be mine for all time. In my home, high above you, I am the son of a chief, Evening Star, and therefore, a Sky Person. And so, I felt I could not speak to you



of my love.’

“Then, as I watched the young men coming to your ledge bearing gifts, my heart felt heavy and I became one without hope. It was then that my father came to my couch of bird feathers and I told him of your beauty. He understood and gave me leave to descend to earth that I might ask you to join me in my sky home.”

“And what did you answer, my daughter?” her father asked.

“I said I would marry no one, but him,” she answered.

“Daughter! No! It is forbidden! You should marry no one at all then!” he shouted.

Holding her by the arms, he took her out of the lodge toward the lake shore. He placed her in the bow of his canoe. With mighty strokes he drove the canoe straight to the Island of the Turtle Spirits.

There, he took her to the top of the great rock, which towered above the beach. “Now,” said he, “you shall not see your love again. Here you shall stay until you decide to be a faithful daughter once more.” And he left.

Mist Woman made no answer. She did not cry out when the sun grew hot or the rain fell. Only her tears flowed down the rock to show her longing for the man.

Little by little, the tears began to melt the stone until at last an arch appeared beneath her and she was left on a high bridge of rock. That night, through the arch, appeared the rays of an evening star and down these rays walked the one she loved.

Gathering her into his arms, he carried her up the stars into the land of the Sky People. But the arch rock was formed and stayed to remind people of this story.



Sky Hunt

Adapted from the **Were-Wolves and Will-O-The-Wisps** by Dirk Gringuis.

This French Canadian story has Michilimackinac as part of the setting. It tells the story of a man and a woman who fall in love.

There once lived along the shore of Lake Michigan a hunter, Michel. Above all things he liked the chase of a hunt. His friends could never get him to join in any other sports. It was said he was born with a gun in his hand.

One day, during the hunt, while chasing a deer, Michel discovered a new cabin deep in the forest. At the door of the cabin stood a beautiful young girl.

He learned the girl's name was Marianne. She had come into the spring woods to help her father collect maple sap to make syrup.

The two fell in love. He was in love with her gentle beauty and she was in love with his strength and honesty. It was decided that they would wed in the church named Ste. Anne at Michilimackinac in September.

One day, while strolling along the beach discussing plans for the wedding, Marianne admitted she suffered from *serrement de couer*, or squeezing and pressing of her heart. She feared their happiness might not

last. But Michel only laughed at such an idea. He was strong enough for both, he said.

He left her and returned shortly with several hunters, guns in hand, followed by the dog, "Tache" or Spots.



While they were untying the boat, Michel pointed out to Marianne a flock of ducks flying toward the flat lands. This, he said, would be his farewell hunt. He would stay with Marianne now and not go away to hunt.

Marianne hid her face in her hands, her slender body shaking with sobs.

"Michel," she begged. "Do not leave me, for I fear you shall never return!"

Michel looked into her sad face, torn between his love for her and his companionship of his friends. At last, hearing the calls of his friends he kissed her tenderly.

“Fear not, *ma petite*,” he said gently. “I shall return tomorrow at dawn, dead or alive,” he added in jest.

Soon the hunters were paddling off. The dog barked his farewell and Michel waved his red sash.

At dawn, Marianne awoke and hurried to the sandy beach. It was a perfect day. The lake was bluer than ever before and the dark forests had splashes of red maple and yellow birch leaves.

Today was her wedding day. Why did Michel not show? Hour after hour she waited, praying to Ste. Anne, the patron saint of mariners, to guide her Michel home. Night came and there was still no sign of the hunters.

Day after day, Marianne watched and waited, scanning the great lake and sky. Snow fell and melted again. Still no sign of her husband to be. Somehow, she seemed as hopeful as if held up by faith alone.

And then one evening she

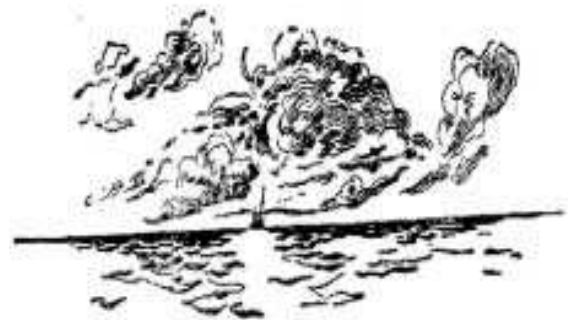
looked up and saw Michel’s boat in the clouds. In a voice strong but far away, he called to her. “I will come for you in a year and a day.” This was followed by the barking of his dog.

A year and a day passed. Now Marianne grew thinner with sickness and being away from Michel. She had dressed in her bridal gown and went to the beach. It was much like the day Michel left, with ducks flying toward the marsh.

Suddenly, the dying girl pointed at the sky. “See!” she cried out, “there is Michel in his boat with his dog. Listen to the barking! Here they come and they are calling to me. Michel, Michel, I am coming...”

And with that her spirit leaped upward to join her to Michel. Her friends stared in wonder to where she had gone and saw a boat drifting in the billowing clouds. They heard the echoing of a barking dog grow soft and fade into silence.


This vision had been reported in different forms over many years by the habitants of French Canada.



Lesson 8

Using “Tales of the Straits”

 **Read the “Tales of the Straits”.**

 **Discuss the following questions with students during or after reading.**

1. What is the difference between an oral tradition and stories we read today?

Oral traditions are stories that are told from one generation or person to another, instead of writing them down. Stories we read today are written down; they may or may not be passed from one generation to another.

2. Many stories are written down today. What are some oral traditions from life today?

Answers vary. Family stories passed from generation to generation are still common. Ask if their parents or relatives ever tell stories about when they grew up. This is an oral tradition. People also learn by example from different generations, not necessarily from a family member, like at a job or apprenticeship.

 **Use Activities 21 to further support the ideas in the “Tales of the Straits”.**

 **Ask students about differing reports of the same event.**

Even different tribes have different stories about how Arch Rock was created, like it says in the introduction. But there is a very different report from scientists about how Arch Rock was formed. They say it was formed by water eroding the softer middle rock to form an arch. Explore and analyze these different viewpoints of the same story. Why do the American Indians tell a story about its creation? How are these stories the same? How are they different?

GLCEs that may be reached in Lesson 8:

3-H3.0.1 Identify questions historians ask in examining the past in Michigan.

3-H3.0.4 Draw upon traditional stories of American Indians who lived in Michigan in order to make generalizations about their beliefs.

Vocabulary Words: Michilimackinac



