HOW THE PRAIRIE BECAME AN OCEAN

The history of earthquakes, floods and tsunamis is recorded in the oral traditions of indigenous people. This story told among the Yurok people of Northern California describes subsidence due to earthquakes and subsequent tsunamis and flooding. After hearing this story, paleoseismologists found a wealth of geologic evidence of subsidence in the Humboldt Bay area. Researchers also found evidence of a tsunami connected with this event in Japan.

Adapted from the version told by Ann of Espeu, a Yurok Indian, recorded by A.L. Kroeber in Yurok Myths.

Near Oketo, at Sumig*, lived Thunder. He wondered about the well-being of the human beings that lived in the Yurok’s world, “Where shall we make water to be? How will they live if we leave prairie there?” He asked Earthquake, “What do you think? I want water to be there so that people may live. Otherwise they will have nothing to subsist on.” Earthquake said, “That is true. Far off I always see water and there are salmon at Opis.” So they went with Pipir, the water panther, to get water at Opis. They brought two abalone shells and filled them with water. They decided that it would be best to go to Pulekuk, the north end of the world, and then go to Perwerhkuk, at the south end of the world. Thunder decided, “I shall stay at Sumig. For I shall do this: I shall bend the trees over, since in the gulches there grow big trees.

Earthquake and Pipir arrived at Pulekuk with the abalone shells to fetch water. First Earthquake thought, and then he ran about and made the ground sink as a means of letting the water out. Then they arrived at Opis, which is at the end of the water. They saw seals and salmon in the water and all kinds to be eaten, and they decided that this was where they would take water in the abalone shells.

With shells full of water and sea animals, Earthquake and Pipir decided to go to back to Perwerhkuk. Along the way, Earthquake sank the ground as Pipir held the abalone shells. They traveled all the way from the north end of the Yurok world to the south end.

Earthquake and Pipir returned to Sumig and were pleased to see that Thunder had knocked down trees. Then they discussed what they should do next. They went to the coast in front of Sumig, and Pipir poured the water out of one shell; it only went halfway to Pulekuk. So Thunder said, “Pour some more!” Then they went all the way to Espeu and poured out all the water from the other shell. It ran downstream toward Pulekuk, but it was not enough since the brush still stuck out. Thunder asked Pipir to urinate and increase the water, which he did, and the brush disappeared.

Earthquake continued sinking the land and went south with Pipir. They stopped occasionally to look at their work as water filled in the new low-lying areas. They stopped and saw Thunder at Sumig. Thunder exclaimed, “Look at the water running down! It is as I wanted it to be.” Earthquake said, “That is what human beings will thrive on. This stretch that was prairie – there will be ocean there.” Then they continued north again and did the same. The Earth would quake and quake. The water was flowing all over, swarming with seals, salmon, whales and all kinds of fish. They looked upon this and said, “Now this is enough, enough for human beings to subsist on. Everything needed is in the water.”

That is how the ocean comes to be as it is: they are the ones who made it, Earthquake, Pipir, and Thunder. For it was Thunder who said, “Let us try to make it so that they may live.”

*Sumig was at the site of Patrick’s Point, California
*Espeu was near Orick, California

Sources