

The Bear Claw Story

By Don Gilkerson

Once, more moons's ago than there are stars in the clear night sky, there lived a peaceful Indian village. The village was nestled at the foot of the great mountain range to our west. Food was plentiful, for the hunting was good, which also meant that there were plenty of hides to make teepees and warm clothing for winter.

In this village lived an adventurous boy, about your age, named Running Bear that loved to hunt and fish, and was very good at both. On one crisp Spring morning he set off to go fishing at a small lake higher up the mountain. Running Bear was just sitting down to start fishing when he heard some bushes rustle not far from him. A good hunter knows the sounds of the forest, and this, even to young Running Bear, sounded dangerous. Running Bear didn't waste any time, he started climbing the nearest tree. Suddenly a big bear came crashing through the brush, followed shortly by yet another only slightly smaller bear. The two bears were fighting so fiercely that they did not see the steep ridge. They fought right over the edge and all the way down the mountain, to never be seen again.

Running Bear decided it was safe to come down out of the tree, just as he got down he heard another rustling in the brush. This was not as dangerous sounding. Running Bear looked carefully into the brush. Far down, hiding nervously in the brush was a bear cub.

How does this explain the bear fight? That's right, the mother bear was protecting her cub. Running Bear thought about the cubs chances of survival all alone. The boy and the bear were immediately attracted to each other, mostly because of the berries that Running Bear was giving

the cub. With the help of the berries, he had picked earlier, this friendship was the start of something bigger than either of them had or would ever dream of..

Running Bear thought about what he should do with his new friend, and what name should he give him. The two of them played games like hide and seek, wrestling, and even made a game of fishing. After enough fish had been caught to feed the cub, and for Running Bear to take home to help his family, they set off for the village.

As Running Bear and the cub were nearing the village, Running Bear feared for the cub, for he did not know how the tribe would react to a bear cub in the village. (What would your parents say if you brought home a bear cub)? He rushed right to his teepee to talk his mom.

Mom warned of grave dangers but said he should talk to his father, who had just gotten back from hunting with others for buffalo. Their early arrival meant a successful hunt nearby. The whole village was glad, and all had grand stories to tell.

Running Bear thought this would be a good time to tell his father about the cub. Father warned of the dangers and that bears are a powerful thing of nature. After watching Running Bear and the cub play and react to each other, he told Running Bear that he should go to the medicine man for guidance and counseling.

The thought of confronting the medicine man, the most powerful and wise man in the whole tribe or even world, was very scary. Running Bear was determined to ask the medicine man if he could keep the cub as a friend. As Running Bear and his father and the bear cub approached the medicine man, the medicine man could see what was coming and knew that the boy had been warned of the dangers. The medicine man instead told of the future and how man is not meant to tame such a powerful thing of nature. As the medicine man looked the

boy in the eyes he said, but to have a friend in nature with that kind power could be a greater thing than even I can imagine. The bear cub will one day return to nature. Be the best friend you can be.

With that information Running Bear and the cub spent the rest of the year doing the things they enjoyed most, playing games, hunting, fishing, and picking berries. What do bear cubs do? They grow very fast. It wasn't long and the cub was bigger than Running Bear. Winter was coming and Running Bear knew of a nearby cave that the cub could go hibernate in. Running Bear took extra roots and berries and water to the cave for his friend to eat and drink at times when he woke in the winter. What do bear cubs do when they hibernate? They grow very fast.

In the late winter, when bears start to wake up, Little Bear went to the cave to see his friend. Instead of seeing a cub not much bigger than him, he found that his friend had grown to a full sized bear. Running Bear was a little nervous when he saw him. What would you do? I don't know about you, but I would probably have to go change my underwear. That big bear woke up and saw Running Bear, and immediately started playing a game that they both enjoyed.

When Running Bear and friend went back to the village with enough fish to feed most of the village, the rest of the Indians were not as scared of the bear, for they knew that he is indeed a friend.

When Indian boys prove their manhood, by their hunting and fishing skills, it is said that they are no longer the same person. What they do is give them a new name. Can you guess what Running Bear's new name is? It's Little Bear, and they called the bear Big Bear.

Big Bear and Little Bear made quite a team. Their hunting and fishing skills were unequalled, and their friendship grew. One day, Little Bear went out to go fishing, but could not find Big Bear. Little Bear

remembered the words of the wise medicine man, and thought that Big Bear had finally gone back to nature. Seasons pass, still no sign of Big Bear. Years pass and Little Bear has grown to be a great brave in the tribe.

Bears are territorial. Do you know what that means? Yes, they live by themselves in areas that they mark off. How do they mark their area? They stand and reach up as high as they can on a tree and put deep scratches into the tree. That way when a new bear comes into a territory they can see how big the bear is in that territory. New bears generally being young and without a lot of experience, might challenge a bigger bears territory, but quite often give up when the bigger bear proves his power.

One day Little Bear was out hunting. He was being very careful for he knew by the tracks and the tree scrapings, that he was in the territory of a big bear. Just then the bear appeared over a rise. Little Bear climbed the nearest big tree. Now big bears don't like to climb unless, they are mad or hungry enough. On this day the bear decided to climb up after Little Bear. Little Bear went as high and far out on a branch as he could. The bear was determined and kept getting closer. The branch was not strong enough to hold them both and the bear started shaking the branch, trying to make Little Bear fall from the tree. Little Bear knew he could not hang on much longer and prayed the branch didn't break. All of a sudden he heard a great roar below him. There stood another big bear. The bear in the tree thought this was too much for this other bear to be his territory, and he quickly climbed down to protect it.

This was the worst fight that Little Bear had ever seen. The two big bears had big scratches and hair was flying everywhere. Finally one of the bears had enough, and went running away over the hill.

Little Bear couldn't tell which bear had won, but stayed quiet hoping that the bear would not remember him up in the tree. The bear went over to the tree that marked the territory and reached up and scratched it even higher than it had been marked before. That is when Little Bear knew that the new bear had won. The great bear wondered off probably to go mark the rest of his territory. Little Bear decided it was safe to come down.

On the way back to his village, Little Bear had good success hunting. When he entered his camp the village was glad to see him, and were in awe of the story he had to tell. The medicine man reminded them of the power of nature involved and that Little Bear was lucky to be a surviving witness.

Little Bear and some other warriors went on a scouting trip to search for neighboring tribes and to prepare for the Gathering. Does anyone know what a Gathering is? That's right, it's when all the tribes get together and have, what we call a big PowWow.

The direction that Little Bear took went right through the territory of the great bear. Now Little Bear is a fast runner, but no one can out run a bear. When that great bear popped up on the trail in front of Little Bear, all Little Bear could do was prepare for a fight.

Little Bear looked the great bear in the eye. Suddenly,,, the bear turned and did something that Little Bear recognized as the beginning of a game that he hadn't played since he was a boy.

Who do you think the bear was? Little Bear was so surprised and happy that he went running after the great bear. Yes, Big Bear knew who Little Bear was, and for the rest of the day they renewed their friendship.

Little Bear had a to complete the task that he was sent to do, so he had to leave Big Bear and go in search of another tribe. On the four-day trip

there and back Big Bear was never far from Little Bear. Little Bear knew that Big Bear was watching and following him. It became a new game, a form of hide and seek. When Little Bear got back to the village he told of his renewed friendship. The tribe was happy for Little Bear and wanted to see Big Bear. The medicine man said that Big Bear was now more of nature, and would probably never come into the village again. Little Bear agreed, for he had seen how Big Bear had become one with the world around him. Almost like a spirit, disappearing right in front of you.

There are many stories of the friendship between Big Bear and Little Bear with all of their travels. Their story was known throughout the land, for it is one that is sought after and told at all of the gatherings. Their story of friendship is one that helped all the people and lands prosper and grow. Their story was so powerful that it even reached the great spirit of all things. God saw and approved and wanted to make a symbol of their story. He made a plan.

By now Big Bear and Little Bear were very old. They were exploring a new territory and came upon a set of twin buttes that reached clear up through the clouds. At the base of one was a cave that Big Bear decided to explore. He followed the cave all the way to the other end, which opened up on top of the mountain. All at once there was a deep rumbling in the earth. It caused the cave to collapse. Big Bear searched all around the top for a way to get down, but there was no way down.

Little Bear aware of what had happened, searched for a way to help his friend. Finding only another cave in the other mountain, he decided to enter the cave to see if it would lead him to the top. The cave did finally end at the top of the mountain. Little Bear could see Big Bear on the other mountain and had a plan to get him down when the mountain started to shake. The cave had completely closed. Little Bear searched all around and tried different areas to climb down. The cliffs were too steep and long to get down. So, here you have Little Bear on top of one

mountain and Big Bear on the other and neither can get down, or help the other. What do you think they did?

Well Little Bear prayed. It must have been a very good prayer, for God looked down and was pleased. Remember, God wanted to make a symbol of the friendship between Little Bear and Big Bear. God reached down, grabbed them, and with their spirit wrote their names across the sky. To this day their names are still there. Do you know what it is?

That's right! Ursa Major means Big Bear, and Ursa Minor means Little Bear. That's the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper. The two dippers are always facing each other with the big dipper ever pointing at the North Star. What greater symbol of friendship between man and the power of nature could God have created? Two symbols that help all of mankind to find their way around the world... Tremendous...

The North Star District has many connections with Indian tribes. One of these, is with a medicine man that knows the ways of bears, and that when they scratch trees, sometimes the rough bark will pull a claw out. *(Story teller show your strand of bear claws, you don't have to say anything.)* The medicine man goes carefully to the marked trees and digs the claw out of the tree. He then gives them to the great North Star District, so that brave young men that go beyond the call of what is required can also have a symbol of friendship. *(Now is when you have the Den Leader call the boys that have earned the bear claw.)*

(In preparation of the bear claw. I recommend scraping all excess plastic off the claw and meat, and I use a tan paint pen on the meat. The boys will be wondering if they are real for a long time.)