

Nez Perce Storytelling

People love stories. We like to read them, hear them, and tell them. Exchanging stories with our friends and family members is universal, people everywhere in the world share experiences in this way. Can you think of any storytelling practices that you share with your friends and family? Every culture has its own traditions when it comes to storytelling. The Nez Perce people are no different.

Who are the Nez Perce? They are the Native Americans who lived in the Wallowa Valley before the settlers did. They lived here for thousands of years and it is through storytelling that knowledge of this place has been passed from generation to generation.

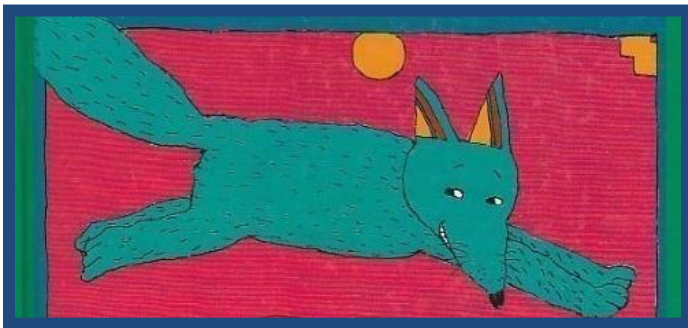
For the Nez Perce, storytelling is much more than just entertainment.

Storytelling is school. It is how Nez Perce children learn the customs, values, and history of their people. Through stories told by elders, children learn how to behave, how to speak **Nimiipuutimt (the Nez Perce language)**, and how they come to understand the landscapes, plants, and animals where they live.



Through stories, people of all ages learn about themselves and what it means to be **Nimiipuu (Nez Perce)**. Some of the common themes in Nez Perce stories are **bravery, justice, and generosity**. This is because these are values that the Nez Perce hold, and the young people learn how to embody these values through the stories they learn from their elders.

It used to be that **the only times for storytelling were in the winter or when travelling** because in the summer the people were busy gathering food and preparing for the winter. Although these storytelling customs are not always followed today, there are certain stories, called **Coyote Legends**, that should not be told outside of the winter months. This is because, like hunting, fishing, and gathering, **the Coyote stories are tied to the seasons.**



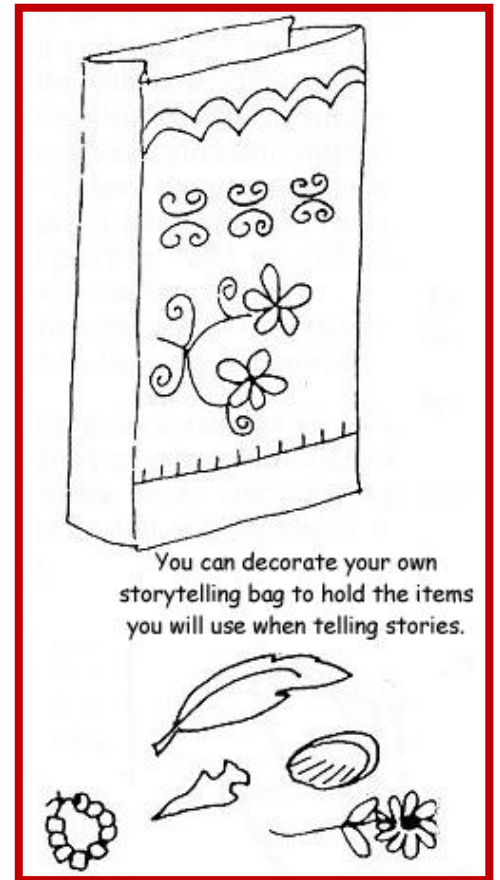
Many Nez Perce stories are about Coyote and other animals. The Nez Perce people sometimes refer to themselves as “children of the coyote” **because it was Coyote that created the Nez Perce people**. Right here, in **the Wallowa Valley, is where their creation story begins.**

Language is not the only way that the Nez Perce tell stories. They also tell stories through art. **Grass weaving, beadwork, painting, sculpting, music, and dance;** these are just a few of the art forms that Nez Perce people use to tell stories about themselves and their people. If you come to the Tamkaliks Celebration Powwow in Wallowa you will see dancers dressed in regalia. **Regalia is ceremonial clothing that tribal people wear for special occasions. It tells the story of that person—of their personality, their history, their family, and their culture.**



Now it is your turn to be the teacher and tell the story:

1. Think of a story you would like to tell. What kinds of lessons would you like to teach through your story? Are there certain values or behaviors that you think your friends or family members should learn? Think of how you might teach these things with your imagination. For example, if you believe that it is important to never steal, you might tell a story about what happens when a naughty woodpecker steals food from a squirrel's winter stash of nuts.
2. Create a story telling bag. Use the paper sack and coloring crayons provided to make a story telling bag that you will fill with props to help you tell your story. Decorate the outside of the bag with drawings of things that inspire you and make you feel creative.
3. Fill the bag with props. Collect a few things to put inside your storytelling bag that will help you tell your story. For example: if you are telling the story about the thieving woodpecker, you might put some nuts and berries in your bag to demonstrate what it steals from the squirrel. Maybe you have a small stuffed animal squirrel and bird you can put in your bag to act out the roles of the characters in your story. Or perhaps you could use a couple of rocks that look like little animals. Use your imagination!
4. Tell the story. Gather your family around you and tell them the story. Have fun with it! And when you are done, ask them what they learned from your story. Did they learn the lesson you wanted them to?



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Nez Perce Wallowa Homeland

The Nez Perce Wallowa Homeland project—also known as the Wallowa Band Nez Perce Trail Interpretive Center (WBNPTIC)— is a grassroots endeavor to develop a place in the Wallowa Valley where the Nez Perce people can once again celebrate their traditions and customs in their ancestral homeland. The Homeland Project's aim is to connect a new generation of Nez Perce people, local community members, and visitors from around the world with stories of the past and a vision for the future.

Our Visitor Center is open!

Monday through Friday 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.