

ANISHINAABE – THE GREAT FLOOD¹⁰

For many years the first people lived together in harmony with all of the Creation. This harmonious way of life on Earth did not last forever. Men and women did not continue to give each other the respect needed to keep the Sacred Hoop of marriage strong. Families began quarrelling with each other. Finally villages began arguing back and forth. People began to fight over hunting grounds. Brother turned against brother and began killing each other.

It saddened the Creator, Gichi Manidoo, to see the Earth's people turn to evil ways. It seemed that the entire Creation functioned in harmony except for the people who were the last to be placed there. For a long time Gichi Manidoo waited hoping that the evil ways would cease and that brotherhood, sisterhood, and respect for all things would again come to rule over the people.

When it seemed that there was no hope left, Gichi Manidoo decided to purify the Earth. He would do this with water. The water came like a *mush-ko-be-wun* (flood) upon the Earth. The flood came so fast that it caught the entire Creation off guard. Most all living things were drowned immediately, but some of the animals were able to keep swimming, trying to find a small bit of land on which to rest. Some of the birds were caught in the air and had to keep flying in order to stay alive.

The purification of the Earth with water appeared to be complete. All the evil that had built up in the hearts of the first people had been washed away.

But how could life on Mother Earth begin anew?

There are many Anishinaabe teachings that refer to a man named "Way-na-boo-zhoo". Some people have actually referred to Anishinaabe or Original Man as Waynaboozhoo. Most of the elders agree that Waynaboozhoo was not really a man but was a spirit who had many adventures during the early years of the Earth. Some people say that Waynaboozhoo provided the link through which human form was gradually given to the spiritual beings of the Earth. Everyone agrees that Waynaboozhoo had many human-like characteristics. He made mistakes at times just like we do. But he also learned from his mistakes so that he could accomplish things and become better at living in harmony with the Earth. These things that Waynaboozhoo learned were later to become very useful to Anishinaabe people. He has been looked upon as kind of a hero by the Anishinaabe people. These "Waynaboozhoo Stories" have been told for many years to children to help them grow in a balanced way.

The teaching about how a new Earth was created after the Great Flood is one of the classic Waynaboozhoo Stories. It tells of how Waynaboozhoo managed to save himself by resting on a *chi-mi-tig* (huge log) that was floating on the vast expanse of water that covered Mother Earth. As he floated along on this log, some of the animals that were able to keep swimming came to rest on the log. They would rest for a while and then let another swimming animal take their place. It was the same way with the winged creatures. They would take turns resting on the log and flying. It was through this kind of sacrifice and concern for one another that

¹⁰ Pg 29-34 of *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* by Edward Benton-Banai, published by Red School House, 1988.



Waynaboozhoo and a large group of birds and four-leggeds were able to save themselves on the giant log.

They floated for a long time but could gain no sight of land. Finally, Waynaboozhoo spoke to the animals.

"I am going to do something," he said. "I am going to swim to the bottom of this water and grab a handful of Earth. With this small bit of Earth, I believe we can create a new land for us to live on with the help of the Four Winds and Gichi Manidoo".

So Waynaboozhoo dived into the water. He was gone for a long time. Some of the animals began to cry for they thought that Waynaboozhoo must have drowned trying to reach the bottom.

At last, the animals caught sight of some bubbles of air, and finally, Waynaboozhoo came to the top of the water. Some of the animals helped him onto the log. Waynaboozhoo was so out of breath that he could not speak at first. When he regained his strength, he spoke to the animals.

"The water is too deep...I never reached the bottom....I cannot swim fast enough or hold my breath long enough to make it to the bottom."

All the animals on the log were silent for a long time. Maang (the loon) who was swimming alongside the log was the first to speak.

"I can dive under the water for a long ways, for that is how I catch my food. I will try to dive to the bottom and get some of the Earth in my beak."

The loon dived out of sight and was gone a long time. The animals felt sure he had drowned, but the loon floated to the top of the water. He was very weak and out of breath.

"I couldn't make it," he gasped. "There appears to be no bottom to this water."

Next, Zhing-gi-biss (the helldiver) came forth.

"I will try to swim to the bottom," he said. "I am known for diving to great depths."

The Poet and the Song

*Born on a star path
worn by Eagles and wind
I live in the heart of the sun.
My mother's heart
is the river of time.
The dark forest wall
is where my father sleeps,
where he gave me passage
to this small bend in the river.
The forest stands before me
an ancient doorway
I can silently slip through
to dwell among the colours
the shadows
and the spirits living there.
I can sing out
with a raven's tongue
and fly above the night
to touch the fire
of starlight
and dance on the moon
until the end of time
but the river
marks my beginning
and my end
and here
I shall tell my story.*

Michael Robinson
Poet/Artist





The helldiver was gone for a very long time. When the animals and Waynaboozhoo were about to give up hope, they saw the helldiver's body come floating to the top. He was unconscious and Waynaboozhoo had to pull him onto the log and help him regain his breath. When the helldiver came to, he spoke to all the animals on the log.

"I am sorry my brother and sisters. I, too, could not reach the bottom although I swam for a long ways straight down."

Many of the animals offered themselves to do the task that was so important to the future of all life on Earth. Zhon-gwayzh (the mink) tried but could not make it to the bottom. Ni-gig (the otter) tried and failed. Even Mi-shii-kenh (the turtle) tried but was unsuccessful.

All seemed hopeless. It appeared that the water was so deep that no living thing could reach its bottom. Then a soft, muffled voice was heard.

"I'll try," it said softly.

At first, no one could see who it was that spoke. The little Wa-zhushk (muskrat) stepped forth.

"I'll try," he said again.

Some of the animals laughed and poked each other. The helldiver jeered, "If I couldn't make it, how can he expect to do any better?"

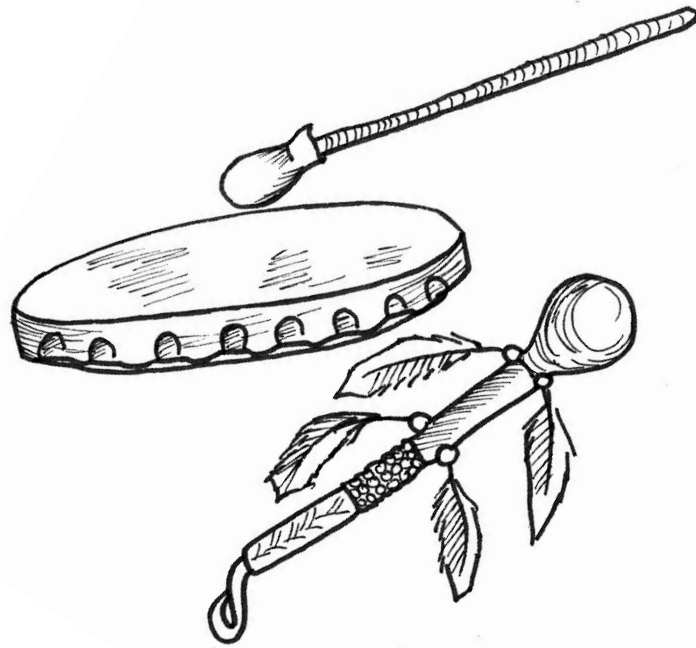
Waynaboozhoo spoke, "Hold it everyone! It is not our place to judge the merits of another; that task belongs to the Creator. If little muskrat wants to try, I feel we should let him."

The muskrat dived down and disappeared from view. He was gone for such a long time that Waynaboozhoo and all the animals on the log were certain that muskrat had given up his life in trying to reach the bottom.

The muskrat was able to make it to the bottom of the water. He was already very weak from lack of air. He grabbed some Earth in his paw and with every last bit of strength he could muster, muskrat pushed away from the bottom.

One of the animals on the log caught sight of muskrat as he floated to the water's surface. They pulled his body onto the log. Waynaboozhoo examined the muskrat.

"Brothers and sisters," Waynaboozhoo said. "Our little brother tried to go without air for too long. He is



dead." A song of mourning and praise was heard over all the water as Wa-zhushk's spirit passed to the next world.

Waynaboozhoo spoke again, "Look! Muskrat has something in his paw. It is closed tight around something." Waynaboozhoo carefully pried open muskrat's tiny paw. All the animals gathered around trying to see. Muskrat's paw opened and there, in a little ball, was a piece of Earth. All the animals cheered! Muskrat had sacrificed his life so that life could begin anew on the Earth.

Waynaboozhoo took the piece of Earth from the muskrat's paw. At that moment, Mi-shii-kenh (the turtle) swam forward and said, "Use my back to bear the weight of this piece of Earth. With the help of the Creator, we can make a new Earth."

Waynaboozhoo put the piece of Earth on the turtle's back. All of a sudden the noo-di-noon (winds) began to blow. The wind blew from each of the Four Directions. The tiny piece of Earth on the turtle's back began to grow. Larger and larger it became, until it formed a mi-ni-si (island) in the water. Still the Earth grew but still the turtle bore its weight on his back.

Waynaboozhoo began to sing a song. All the animals began to dance in a circle on the growing island. As he sang, they danced in an ever-widening circle. Finally, the winds ceased to blow and the waters became still. A huge island sat in the middle of the great water.

Today, traditional Anishinaabe people sing special songs and dance in a circle in memory of this event. Anishinaabe people also give special honour to our brother, the turtle. He bore the weight of the new Earth on his back and made life possible for the Earth's second people.

To this day, the ancestors of our brother, the muskrat, have been given a good life. No matter that marshes have been drained and their homes destroyed in the name of progress, the muskrats continue to multiply and grow. The Creator has made it so that muskrats will always be with us because of the sacrifice that our little brother made for all of us many years ago when the Earth was covered with water. The muskrats do their part today in remembering the Great Flood; they build their homes in the shape of the little ball of Earth and the island that was formed from it.