

# THE LEGEND OF REELFOOT LAKE

At the beginning of the 19th century this region was called Indian Country, and rightly so, for in the rich bottom lands dwelt a tribe of the Chickasaws, which camped at the base of the bluffs that rose 300 feet above the Mississippi, providing the lookout points so needed in a wilderness.

Legend says that at the time of our story a mighty chief ruled wisely, yet his heart was heavy, for his only son had been born with a deformed foot. As the boy grew up he developed normally, but his walk was different from all the other Indians. He walked and ran with a rolling motion, so his people called him Kalopin, meaning Reelfoot.

When the old chief died, Reelfoot became chief. He, too, was sad and lonely, for as yet none of the Indian maidens had stirred in him the thoughts of love. His father had often recorded to him tales of the mighty tribes dwelling to the south, and of the wondrous beauty of their maidens. So, restless in spirit, when the robins arrived from the north seeking a mating ground, he likewise gathered a few of his chosen tribesmen and wandered south in quest of a princess.

Many days they journeyed. Finally their canoes, floating down the river, entered a domain having different tribal customs, and there were signs that told them that they were approaching the abode of a mighty chieftain.

Reelfoot sent runners forward to notify the great Choctaw Chief, Copiah, that a friendly party approached. Soon the chief's councilor came forward to welcome the strangers to the council fire.

When the village was reached Reelfoot went forward to offer the requisite homage to Copiah, and then, continues the legend, he beheld his dream princess, more beautiful than he had ever dared imagine, sitting closely by the side of the chief, her father.

The old chief was stately and dignified, as all Indians are on such occasions, and after they had smoked the great peace pipe and eaten of the freshly killed game, he inquired of young Reelfoot the reason for his visit.

Reelfoot replied that he was on a pilgrimage to find a princess to rule his tribe with him, and that now he saw his heart's desire for the first time.

At this the old chief was filled with wrath, for he knew the beauty and entrancing charm of his only daughter, and what chief would want his daughter to marry one deformed, even though he be powerful.

So old Copiah told Reelfoot that his daughter was only to be given in wedlock to a Choctaw Chieftain, and under no circumstances could she join a tribe which was so unfortunate as to have a clubfooted chieftain.

This made Reelfoot sick at heart, but he was more firmly resolved than ever to have this one Indian maiden. So he offered her father pearls and skins and other treasures that would arouse envy even in the greatest chieftain's heart. Then the old chief sent for the tribe's medicine man, who called publicly on the Great Spirit of all Indians.

The Great Spirit spoke to Reelfoot, saying that an Indian must not steal his wife from any neighboring tribe, for such was tribal law, and if he disobeyed and carried off the princess that he, the Great Spirit, would cause the earth to rock and the waters to swallow up his village and bury his people in a watery grave.

Reelfoot was frightened at this threat of dire punishment, and stifling his longings deep in his heart, sorrowfully turned his canoe toward the North Star and home.

Summer had come when the home country was reached, but to Reelfoot it lacked one thing -- Laughing Eyes, forbidden to him by the Great Spirit. Through the long summer days the Indians fished and hunted, and Reelfoot as chief was doing his part in storing up food for the coming winter.

His activities did not keep Reelfoot from thinking of his love and wondering if the Great Spirit would really do as he said.

For the first time Reelfoot did not want to believe the Great Spirit; so, as the days grew short and the maize was gathered, he planned with his warriors to go south and capture the forbidden maiden. When the first snows came they started, and, swooping down on the Choctaws, he captured the princess and fled back to the north.

Laughing Eyes was greatly frightened, for she had heard what the Great Spirit had said to Reelfoot. She feared for herself and implored that he send her back to her father; but Reelfoot was in love and, now that he possessed his longed-for bride, was willing to defy everything.

One starry night he brought his princess bride home, and there was great rejoicing among his people, for now their tribal family was complete. The festival fires burned; the pots boiled and the venison browned on the spit. In the midst of the festival and the marriage rites the earth began to roll in rhythm with the kettledrums and tom-toms.

The Indians tried to flee to the hills, but the rocking earth made them reel and stagger. Chief Reelfoot and his bride reeled also and the Great Spirit stamped his foot in anger. The Father of Waters heard and, backing on his course, rushed over Reelfoot's country.

Where the Great Spirit stamped the earth the Mississippi formed a beautiful lake, in the bottom of which lay Reelfoot, his bride, and his people.

Such is the Indian legend of Reelfoot Lake...