The Gift of the River

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story was taken from "Louisiana Indian Tales," a recent book written by Elizabeth Moore and Alice Covillon and illustrated by Marilyn Rougelot. This excerpt was reprinted with permission from Pelican Publishing.

Tchefuncte Indians, 500 B.C.-A.D. 400
St. Tammany Parish, Covington

Natal was the first to greet the new day in the season of autumn. Large persimmons hung like lanterns from the trees as he walked the trail to the river. He stopped at the bluff overlooking the amber water. Natal froze as he saw three deer, their images ghost-like in the morning mist. They scampered away when he tried to come closer.

The river provided many gifts for Natal's family. They fished in it and caught bass, catfish and beautiful sunfish that had bright bellies like the setting sun. Calcaso, his father, hunted the beavers' pelts to make clothes in the winter and keep their dwelling place warm.

Natal's trip down to the river was fun. He tossed his mother's water bags on the sandy river bank and slid down the slippery clay bluff. Going back with heavy waterskins, though, was a hard job. But he had to hurry to his mother Katlaha, so that she could begin preparing a morning meal. Natal was eager for the day to start, for today Calcaso had promised to take him along for the hunt.

His mother and younger sister, Tala, were just coming out of their palmetto hut when he returned. Katlaha took the water to mix with parched acorn meal and the family ate the porridge with wooden spoons.

When they had finished, Natal gathered everything needed for the hunt with his father. Now that he was getting bigger, he was becoming skilled with the blowgun. He had learned to make it from a long piece of hollow river cane. The darts were sharpened pieces of wood with thistledown tied to them to make them fly. Natal would put a dart in his blowgun, aim at a squirrel, give a mighty blow and hope to have roasted squirrel for his next meal.

It would soon be time for him to hunt with an atlatl and spear like his father. He had already learned to make spear-points by carefully chipping away flakes of rock with his new blowgun. The darts were sharpened pieces of wood with thistledown tied to them to make them fly. Natal would put a dart in his blowgun, aim at a squirrel, give a mighty blow and hope to have roasted squirrel for his next meal.

"Why is everyone so busy?" Tala asked.

"Oh, Tala," her mother answered, "we didn't tell you. There is a wedding at the village near the Wide Lake. It is a time of celebration, but there is much to do. The men must hunt food for our journey, and we will bring these baskets for gifts."

"Teach me to make a basket so that I may give a gift, too," Tala said.

"You are still too young, my child, but why don't you make something pretty out of river clay and bring it as your special gift?" Katlaha asked.

"That will be fun. I will make it now." Tala knelt down on the sand and scooped the white clay from the shallow river. She returned to her mother's side and began playing with the clay. She rolled it in her palms until it was a nice, round ball. Then, she stuck her thumb down into the center of the ball and made a tiny bowl. Tala took another piece of clay and rolled it with her fingers until it was a long, skinny snake. She made another snake and coiled it around and around to look like some of the snakes she had seen sleeping in the hollow logs. "Look, Mother," Tala squealed, "at the pretty things I made."

Katlaha held the tiny clay pieces and beamed. "They will be perfect wedding gifts. Now, come, we have finished our baskets and must return to our village. The men will be coming home soon, and we must have the fires ready to smoke and dry the meat."

Tala carefully placed her clay objects on a piece of flat pine bark and followed her mother. She watched as the women cut fresh green twigs from the trees and asked, "What are the branches for, Mother?"

"The fresh wood we will add to the fire pit to make smoke to cure the meat," Katlaha explained. "Could you help us gather some twigs?"

Tala picked some small branches and added them to her piece of pine bark. She was proud to be able to help.

When the women arrived at the campsite, they began readying the fire. In a large pit, dug deep into the group, the women added dried wood to the blackened, charred remains of previous fires. The men returned after a successful hunt. The wild turkeys and rabbits were

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UPCOMING STORIES:

Nov. 1 — Why the Sea is Salt
(A Norwegian Tale)

Nov. 8 — The Cardinal's Red Feathers (A Cherokee Tale)

Nov. 15 — The Boy Who Learned Good Sense (A Tale Told Round The World)

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River: Gift

Prepared by the women and roasted over an open fire. While the women cooked, the men bowed reverently over the slain deer, thanking it for the food it provided. Then, they skinned the animal and cut strips of meat.

The pit was ready with glowing charcoal. "Tala, bring your green wood now and throw it into the fire," Katlaha called.

Tala tossed the bundle of sticks and then cried out in horror, "My gifts, my gifts! My clay snakes and bowl are in the fire. Get them out before they burn!"

"Oh, Tala, we cannot get them out. The fire is too hot," her mother sighed.

Tala sobbed as Natal approached. "I will bring you to the river, Tala. You can make some more."

When the two walked away, Katlaha placed the raw deer meat on a rack of fresh twigs and lowered it into the burning pit.

Wet Spanish moss covered the opening and a smell filled the air.

The family packed the next morning and started on their long walk. When they arrived at the Wide Lake, they were happy to see their relatives and friends.

All day the Indians talked, and traded goods, and prepared for the feast that night. Natal and Tala met up with their friends and soon had several games going.

While the women were preparing the deer and bear for the meal that evening, the children took the deer bladders, washed them and blew them up like balloons and batted them around. The older boys found some small, round water-smoothed hearts of pine that they knocked along the sand with sticks.

That night there was a great feast with roasted meat, steamed oysters and dried shrimp. After everyone had eaten his fill, some of the musicians of the tribe got out their drums.

The young adults danced, and the older people watched, and clapped, and sang.

The wedding was the next day, and after much merriment, Calcaso's family headed back to the river. When they arrived, Tala asked her mother, "Do you think the fire is cold now? May I get my snakes and bowl?"

Her mother said, "Tala, the fire was so hot and lasted so long that your clay burned to ashes. Do not be disappointed."

"Well, I will still check the pit." With a long stick, Tala stirred the cold ashes. Her stick hit a hard object. She was amazed to see one of her skinny snakes in the remains of the fire.

"Natal, Natal, come see!" she cried.

Natal ran to his sister.

"Natal, come get my snake out of the cold ashes. It did not burn up."

Natal reached down into the pit and pulled up the long, skinny snake which now was black as his sooty fingers. He turned it around in the palm of his hand and wondered what magic had caused it to become so hard and strong.

He took the stick and found the tiny clay bowl and coiled snake too.

Tala was filled with surprise, and she ran to show her mother.

"What is this that you give me?" Katlaha asked, holding the small objects. Then she understood that these were clay gifts that had fallen into the fire and become hard. When she tapped them together, there was a clicking sound. It was a mystery.

"Let's go to the river and wash off the black soot," Tala said, pulling at her mother's arm.

At the river, Katlaha scrubbed and scrubbed, but the black color remained. Surprisingly, the clay did not soften. The tiny bowl held water and did not leak.

Katlaha turned the hard clay pieces over in her hands, wondering if this was some gift from their god.

Katlaha was so fascinated with this discovery that she and Tala made many clay bowls of different sizes, built a new fire, and placed the bowls into the hot fire pit. Again, they covered the fire with wet moss.

The fire burned all day and night and into the next day. When the ashes were cold, Katlaha removed the moss. Tala jumped up and down and clapped her hands when she saw that again the clay had turned into hard, blackened bowls.

When Katlaha and Tala had made and baked many bowls, they sent a messenger to gather the neighboring Indians to the banks of their amber river. The tribal members were told only that Calcaso's family wanted to show them a special gift of the river.

When everyone arrived, they were amazed to see the clay bowls holding water and being used for cooking vessels. Katlaha and Tala shared all they knew about how the bowls were made. The women of the tribe watched and learned. And from that time, Calcaso's family was held in great honor.

From generation to generation, as the moon of fire changed to the moon of frost, Indian families gathered in their homes on cool, autumn evenings. The father would light his pipe and tell his sleepy children the well-loved story of the river god's gift to their tribe.