

Why The Columbia River Sparkles

Five stars once came down from the sky and slept beside the river near The Dalles. The next morning, four of them rose into the air and took four sisters back to the sky with them. When the sisters got to the place where the stars lived, they saw that the sky world is just like this one, with grass and flowers. The oldest of the five stars did not go back with the others, because he was still tired from the long journey. He remained lying there on the ground by the river, but he changed himself into a white flint rock, very large and thick and round and bright. It shone so brilliantly that it could be seen from a long distance. It became a good luck rock for the Wishram people who lived near it. The star rock brought many salmon up the river, enough for the Wishram to dry for their own use and also to trade with the people who came to the narrows and to the big falls of the river. The place where the rock lay was a great gathering place for many tribes. Everyone knew the star. The Wishram became known as the Star people.

Across the river on the south side lived the Wasco people. They did not have a star, but they did have a big cup. Wasco means "those that have the cup." Near their main village was a rock in the shape of a big cup. Into it bubbled a spring of pure, cold water. The Wasco people prized the cup very highly.

The Wasco, who were always quarreling and fighting with their neighbors, became jealous of the good luck the bright star was bringing the Wishram. One night when the Wishram people were away, some of the Wasco people crossed the river and stole the star. They wrapped it in an elk skin and threw it into the river. When the Wishram returned from picking berries, they could not find the star. Months later, when the water of the river was low, some people of the Wishram village saw it shining on the bottom. They got it and put it back on the shore. Always thereafter, someone guarded the star. But three summers later, when the Wishram were again in the Mount Adams country picking berries, Wasco men found the guard asleep one day and stole the star once more. This time they broke it into pieces and threw it into the river. When the Wishram came back to their winter village, the star rock was gone. Angrily they crossed the river and made war on the Wasco. Some of the young men pounded the big cup until they almost destroyed it. It had been very large and deep. It is now very small. After the star was stolen and broken, the Wishram lost the name Star people and became very common people. But the broken star rock is still in the river. That is why the water sparkles in the sunshine.

-Wasco legend recorded by Ella E. Clark
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