

The history of the Love Flute

These traditional Native American flutes are known by several names, the most common being love flutes, or courting flutes. As the name suggests, they were flutes played in courting rituals - by a young man serenading his intended bride. Generally they were played for no other reason, although some men are known to have played them for their wives as a sign of love.

Courtship was not the private affair that western culture takes for granted. Most courting was very formal, and took place in full view of the rest of the tribe. When a young man courted a woman he was dressed and painted in his finest. He carried a special blanket, woven by the female members of his family - a sister or other close female relation, which he would invite the woman to share.

There, standing together under the watchful eyes of the tribe, they whispered together - the only form of "privacy" afforded them. A popular girl might have a row of young men waiting for her, each carrying his own courting blanket to wrap her close to him.

How the love flute came to be a part of these courting rituals is the subject of many sacred stories. The one that follows is based on a Dakota myth as told in the wonderful little book, "Love Flute", by Paul Goble.(Aladdin Paperbacks, 1997).

The Story of the Love Flute

A long time ago, there lived a young man who was very shy. He was brave in battle, and led the buffalo hunt with courage, yet when it came to speaking his love to the girl he wanted to marry, he was too shy to speak. He would stand helplessly, his eyes cast to the ground, while other young men stood with their courting

blankets outside the tipi of the girl's father.

The young man thought about the girl day and night. In his dreams she was still there before his eyes, yet even in his dreams he lacked the courage to tell her of his love.

He watched her from a distance when she fetched water from the river, and his heart was heavy when he saw the other young men who talked to her so easily, whistled to her to gain her attention, and in a hundred ways vied for her love. The young man was sure that the girl did not notice him

One day, his heart aching, he left the camp and wandered alone. In despair he drew his bow and without a thought he let fly an arrow into the air.

To his amazement the arrow stayed aloft. It seemed to him that the arrow pointed ahead. He followed the direction of the arrow and found that it moved ahead at a steady pace which he could follow. He followed the arrow all day, and when evening came the arrow fell to earth beside a stream.

He slept beside the stream, and in the morning shot another arrow into the sky. Again the arrow stayed aloft, and led him on. That evening it, too, sank to earth beside a stream. This continued for a total of four days.

On the fourth day the young man slept at the edge of a forest. In that half-dream state between waking and sleep, two Elk Men appeared to him, and told him that they had come to help him. "We have come to give you this flute", one said, and when he blew into the flute he carried, the sound was so beautiful that even the forest stood breathlessly listening.

The Elk Man told him, "This flute is made from the wood of the cedar, because cedars grow where the winds blow. Woodpecker made these finger holes in the flute with his beak."

The other Elk Man told him "All the birds and animals helped to make this flute, and their voices sing within it. When you play

this flute for the girl you love, all our voices sing with you. Your music will speak the words of love that your voice alone cannot."

Then the Elk Men were gone, but there, lying on sage leaves, was the flute. The young man set off towards his home, his heart light. He played the flute as he walked, and the cranes joined in his song. For four days he walked, playing his music, and listening to the sounds of the animals and birds. He imitated the sounds of the animals on his flute, and from those sounds he made melodies

As evening drew near on the fourth day, he reached the hill above his camp. There he paused to play his flute, and the sounds of the beautiful music he made carried into the camp and thrilled the heart of every woman there.

But one woman, the girl he loved, knew that the music spoke straight to her heart. The girl left her tipi and joined the young man on the hill. She listened to the words of love that his music spoke more eloquently than his voice could express. "I love you. I love you."