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Why the Possum's Tail is Bare



A Cherokee Oral Narrative
Re-told by Barbara Shining Woman Warren

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About the Storyteller



My name is Barbara Warren. I am Cherokee, and I live in Northern California. My home is in the beautiful foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

For many years I was a Kindergarten teacher. Although I am now retired, I serve as a Trustee on the local elementary school board, and as an Elder at our local American Indian Education Program. As a member of the Cherokees of Northern Central Valley, I keep close ties with my Cherokee community.

I love to sing! I sing with Otsigeya, "We Women", Cherokee Hand Drum Singers. Many of our songs are in the Cherokee language. Also, I love to tell Cherokee stories...especially to children!

The animals shouted louder than ever, and Possum was delighted. He danced around again and sang, "See how fine the fur is!"

Everybody was laughing so long and so loud that Possum stopped to see what was the matter. He looked around at the circle of animals and they were all laughing at him. Then he looked down at his beautiful tail. There wasn't a hair left on it; it was completely bare!

Possum was so upset and embarrassed that he fell over on the ground in a dead faint...with a slight grin upon his face, as possums do to this very day when taken by surprise.

(adapted from "History, Myths and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee" by James Mooney)

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Then Possum sat down and waited for his turn to dance. When his turn came, he loosened the red string from his tail and stepped into the middle of the dance circle. The drummers began to drum and Possum began to sing.

As he danced around the Circle, he sang, "See my beautiful tail."

Everybody shouted and he danced around the Circle again and sang, "See what a fine color it has."

The animals shouted again and he danced around another time, singing, "See how it sweeps the ground."

Bright and early the next morning, Cricket went to the Possum's place. He said he had come to get Possum ready for the dance. So Possum stretched himself out on the floor and shut his eyes while Cricket dressed his tail.

Cricket combed out the tail and began to wrap a red string all around it to keep the fur smooth until that night. But as he wound the string around Possum's tail, Cricket was clipping off the hair close to the roots and Possum never knew it.

When it was time for the dance that night, Possum went to the townhouse where the dance was to be held. Just as Rabbit had promised, the very best seat was saved for Possum.

Possum once had a very long bushy tail. He was so proud of it that he combed it out every morning and he always sang about it at the dances.

Rabbit used to have a long bushy tail too, but he lost his in the frozen lake. Rabbit was jealous of Possum's tail, so he decided to play a trick on Possum.



Rabbit used to have a long bushy tail too.

A great council meeting and dance was to be held; all the animals were invited to attend. It was Rabbit's job to spread the news. Passing Possum's place, he stopped to ask Possum if he intended to come to the dance.

Possum said, "Oh, I'll go if I have a special seat. Because I have such a handsome tail I ought to sit where everybody can see me."



I ought to sit where everybody can see me.

Rabbit said he would definitely see to it and he would also send someone to comb and dress Possum's tail for the dance. This pleased Possum very much and he said he would be there.

Rabbit went straight way to the Cricket who was an expert hair-cutter; he is known by the Cherokee as the "barber". Rabbit told Cricket to go the very next morning and attend to Possum's tail for the dance. Rabbit told Cricket exactly how he wanted Possum's tail fixed, and then Rabbit went on about his mischief.



The "barber"