

Tell Me a Story

Pecos Bill and the Cyclone (A Tale From the American Southwest)

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A long time ago, down in Texas, there was plenty of room and even more sky. Only a few pioneers lived out there. One of those folks was Pecos Bill, the youngest of 13 children.

Bill was always different. When he was born he refused to drink his mother's milk, so she had to feed him the milk of a mountain lion. Little Bill played with wild bear cubs. He was real friendly with all the animals.

One day when Bill was just a baby, his father packed up the whole family, and they set off to move to the Pecos River. Well, what happened was that their wagon was crossing a dry streambed when suddenly it hit a big rock. Little Bill flew right out of that wagon. He landed so hard that he lost all his breath, so he couldn't cry out. No one in the family saw him fall; they just traveled on.

For a while little Bill sat there in the dry streambed, looking around. Then, in the distance, he spied a pack of coyotes.

The coyotes looked at Bill, and he looked at them. These coyotes had never seen a human baby before and didn't know quite what to think. The pack moved closer until one of the females trotted right up to Bill and offered

him a piece of deer meat. Bill didn't want to hurt her feelings, so he began to chew. And that made the coyotes feel kindly toward Bill. That day they welcomed him into their pack.

For many years Bill lived with the coyotes. He ran with them, and at night he curled up beside them in their dens. When the full moon rose in that big sky, Bill and the coyotes howled through the night.

By the time Pecos Bill was 10 years old, he could outrun and out-howl any coyote. He never saw any other human beings. Pecos Bill believed he was a coyote.

He might have believed that forever, but one day a cowboy happened by. The cowboy stopped his horse and stared down at the strange-looking boy, clothed in fur. He leaned over and asked, "What's your name, son?"

Bill didn't understand human language, so he didn't say a word. The cowboy tossed Bill a plug of tobacco. Bill chewed it and just stared up at him.

Pretty soon the cowboy decided Bill needed him, so he stayed. He taught Bill to talk like a human, and he tried to prove to Bill that he really wasn't a coyote.

At first Bill didn't believe him. "I can howl," he said.

"All Texans can howl," the cowboy said, "but boy, you don't have a bushy tail. You got to have a bushy tail to be a real coyote."

Finally Bill saw that the cowboy was right, and he knew he had to leave. So he said goodbye to his coyote family. Then he straddled a mountain lion and rode with the cowboy to join the other cowboys at the ranch.

As they rode across the desert prairie, Bill caught a rattlesnake. Whoosh, in a second he turned that rattlesnake into a rope. He threw that rattlesnake rope right out there and caught a few Gila monsters with it. "This here is a

lasso," he said to the cowboy. And that was just the first of Bill's many inventions.

The minute he arrived at the cowboys' ranch, he slid off his mountain lion and walked up to the biggest cowboy there. He showed him his rattlesnake rope. The big cowboy looked down at little Bill and said, "I was boss before, but now I think you are."

And that's how Pecos Bill took over. He taught the cowboys almost everything they know today. He invented spurs for them to wear on their boots, and he taught them how to round up cattle, and he taught them how to drive those cattle clear across the range.

One night, feeling a little lonely for the old days, he strode out to the corral. He was thinking about his friends, the coyotes. When the moon came up, Bill started to sing the way the coyotes had taught him, except this time he made up some human words to go along so that the cowboys would understand.

And after that the cowboys always sang songs. They sang about the lonesome prairie, about the Texas sky, about the wind whistling through the tall, dry grass, and about other cowboy things.

Pecos Bill wanted a horse. For a long time he watched the son of White Mustang, the Ghost King of the Prairie. This young mustang had a wild spirit and could run faster than any horse Bill had ever seen. Fact is, he was the only horse Bill couldn't outrun. Bill wanted that horse bad, so finally he rigged up a huge slingshot and climbed right in. Then he shot himself high over the cactus. He landed, splat, in front of the horse.

Now that mustang was so surprised, he stopped. But he had been running so fast that his hooves stuck in the mud. Bill leaped onto the mustang's back and yanked on his golden mane and pulled him free. And off they flew.

Bill rode that horse a whole week long, in and out of the canyons. Finally he promised he would never place a bit in the mustang's mouth and also that no other human being would ever sit in the mustang's saddle. From that

day on Bill and that mustang were partners.

Bill named his horse Widow-Maker. Together they traveled the prairies, starting new ranches and helping out on long cattle drives. Sometimes they holed up with a band of coyotes and sang late into the night.

Then came the year of the terrible drought. The land shriveled up. The coyotes even stopped howling, their throats were so dry. "Hey, Bill," the cowboys said, "You have to help us bring some rain down here."

Bill looked up at that big hot sun. He saw whorls of dust spinning up from the hard yellow earth. And then one day he saw a tall, whirling tower flying over in Oklahoma. Bill climbed up on Widow-Maker's back and chased that cyclone. A bolt of lightning struck the ground and quivered just long enough for Bill to grab hold. Then it whipped him right into the sky. When Bill was high as the top of the cyclone, he jumped onto its spinning shoulders.

Everyone from miles around was looking up and watching by then. They watched Bill wrap his legs around the cyclone's belly and squeeze so hard the cyclone started to pant. Then Bill swung his lasso around the cyclone's neck and pulled so hard the cyclone began to choke, spitting out all the rain that was mixed up inside of it.

Down below, the coyotes and the jackrabbits and the lizards and the snakes lifted their heads and caught the sweet falling rain. The cowboys whooped with delight and held out their pans to catch the drops. Everyone cried out praises for Pecos Bill and Widow-Maker. And forever afterward, Pecos Bill was famous all over the Southwest.

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