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The Man Who Plucked the Gorbey

Charles Sibley

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Story: "The Man Who Plucked the Gorbey"
Story Teller: Charles Sibley
Town: Somewhere north of Moosehead Lake
NA 1.55 Tape 55
Collector: Sandy Ives
Date: November 30, 1958

Of all the stories told in lumbercamps, few have captured the attention of Maine's folklorists like the story of **"The Man Who Plucked the Gorbey."** The gorbey, one of many names for the Canada Jay (also known as a moosebird, meat bird, gray jay, or Whiskey Jack), is a native of the northern coniferous forests of North America. It is found across all of Canada, but only the northernmost parts of the United States, including northern Maine. The gorbey is a little larger than a robin and has thick, gray furry feathers over most of its body save for a white throat and forehead and a black cap. It is mostly notable for its insatiable and indiscriminating appetite (in other words, it will eat anything) and its high degree of comfort around humans. There are many stories from the woods about gorbies, all dealing with the bird's bottomless stomach. A song called "Tom Cray" humorously warned men to look out for gorbies because they would carry off woodsmen as a meal; another story claims a cook watched as one gorbey picked up three stale doughnuts that were tossed outside.

In addition to these humorous tales, the gorbey had a deeper significance to many woodsmen. They were often considered the souls of dead woodsmen, and it was even more common to find that no woodsmen would harm a gorbey. As one former logger said, "Anything that you do to a gorbey happens to you." And this brings us to the tale heard here in which a man (often named as Archie Stackhouse, but also under various other names) grabbed a gorbey that landed near him, plucked out all of its feathers, and tossed it into the cold, February night. The next morning the man woke to find that all of his hair had fallen out overnight, clearly a punishment for his cruel treatment of the gorbey.

The origin of this tale is not entirely clear. It has no direct analog in Europe, but many similar stories were told on both sides of the Atlantic. Sandy Ives suggested Scotland as a likely source of the gorbey story, pointing in particular to the Scottish and Irish word "gorb" which meant "glutton" and "an-unfledged bird" as well as the heavy immigration of Scottish and Irish into New England and the Maritimes. This may explain the bird's nickname, but an even more likely scenario was presented by folklorist Bacil F. Kirtley. Kirtley pointed to an ancient Algonkian magical rite of weather control whereby a few feathers were plucked from a gorbey to bring cold weather. It should also be noted that the Algonkian deity *Wisakedjak* was a Canada Jay and the term "Whiskey Jack" is likely an Anglicized version of the Native American name. The two ideas are not mutually exclusive, and it is possible that a Scottish word was applied to a Native American ritual, resulting in a popular woods tale in this region.

One final note to help clarify the story: "Wangan" was a term used by woodsmen for the camp store. It was also used as shorthand for the items sold in the store and the boats that were used in some areas to transport goods to camps. Therefore a "wangan man" was likely the store keeper (and in this case he also took other jobs to keep busy). The transcription below only covers the main story, but the audio file contains additional details.

Transcript:

Ives: "You were telling me the other day about Archie Stackhouse."

Sibley: "Yeah."

Ives: "Now where did you know him?"

Sibley: "Well, he used to be wangan man up in the woods there, and he'd watch camp and tote-teams; he used to stay up there the year round. Well, this is the story they told. Now I don't know whether it's true or not. The only thing I know about it-he didn't have a spear of hair on his head no more than you in the palm of your hand. Not a bit. And they said he took a-one of these gorbies, these meat-birds, you know what them are. Well, he took one of them and he picked him, all but his wings. In February. Picked him all off, feathers all off him, all but just his wings, and he said, "Go, you son of a bitch, and get you a new coat." And they said the next morning when he woke up, his hair laid right on the pillow, every God-damned bit. Now, if they's any truth in that, I don't know, but I do know he didn't have any hair."

Sources: Ives, Edward D. "The Man Who Plucked the Gorbey: A Maine Woods Legend," *The Journal of American Folklore* 74, no. 91 (1961), 1-8; Kirtley, Bacil F. "On the Origin of the Maine-Maritimes Legend of the Plucked Gorbey," *The Journal of American Folklore* 87, no. 346 (1974), 364-65; & Botkin, B. A. *A Treasury of New England Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of Yankee Folk*. New York: Crown Publishers, 326-30 contains a reprint of Gerald Averill's version, "Esau and the Gorbey," as published in *Ridge Runner: The Story of a Maine Woodsman*.