

# Oral Storytelling as Recounted by the American Indian Medicine Doctor Paul Peter Buffalo: A Probe

Thomas J. Farrell

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## **Oral Storytelling as Recounted by the American Indian Medicine Doctor Paul Peter**

### **Buffalo: A Probe**

Thomas J. Farrell

University of Minnesota Duluth

Email: [tfarrell@d.umn.edu](mailto:tfarrell@d.umn.edu)

Timothy G. Roufs (born in 1943; Ph.D. in anthropology, University of Minnesota, 1971) in anthropology at the University of Minnesota Duluth edited and annotated the three-volume set of the transcribed tape-recordings made by the American Indian Medicine Doctor Paul Peter Buffalo (c.1900-1977) over the last twelve years of his life. Paul Buffalo was a member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe in northern Minnesota. Paul Buffalo and his fellow Ojibwe American Indians were hunter-gatherer-foragers.

The overall title of the three volumes is *Gabe-Bines: "Forever Flying Bird: Teachings of Paul Peter Buffalo* (Minneapolis: Wise Ink, 2019; according to WorldCat, more than 40 libraries have these three volumes, which are available through inter-library loan). Gabe-bines is the anglicized form of Paul Buffalo's name in his native language; his name means forever flying bird. English is his second language. The volumes feature a lot of terms in his native language as well as their English equivalents.

Overall, the three volumes contain 50 chapters. Each volume comes equipped with an "Index" at the end of the volume. As editor, Roufs has inserted superscript numerals to references he

gives at the end of each chapter. The bibliographic references in the endnotes are to items in the “Bibliography” in volume 3 (pp. 737-760). Roufs also selected the photographs and maps that are scattered throughout the three volumes.

Volume 1 is subtitled *Year-Round in the Early Years*; it contains chapters 1-18.

Volume 2 is subtitled *“Wenabozho” and the Way We Think About the World*; it contains chapters 19-34. The figure of Wenabozho served as the model for the character that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow named as Hiawatha in his 1855 epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*; what Wadsworth refers to as *Gitche Gumee* (line 1) is Lake Superior, which the Ojibwe refer to as *Gitchi-gami* (in Roufs’ rendering).

Volume 3 is subtitled *Living Amongst the Whites . . . the Best We Can*; it contains chapters 35-50.

Now, it was hard for me to imagine Paul Buffalo’s early years because the early years in a remote part of Minnesota were removed from what I have learned over the years about the same years in white urban areas of the United States – for example, in the early years of the American-born Nobel-Prize winning poet and literary critic Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) in growing up in St. Louis, Missouri. See Robert Crawford’s 2015 book *Young Eliot: From St. Louis to “The Waste Land” [1922]* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

For all practical purposes, Paul Buffalo grew up in what the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) refers to as a residual form of a primary oral culture in northern Minnesota. By contrast, T. S. Eliot grew up in the well-established print culture in urban America.

Ong's pioneering study of print culture is his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason [in the Age of Reason]* (Harvard University Press) – which prompted the Canadian Renaissance specialist and media ecology theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980; Ph.D. in English, Cambridge University, 1943) to write his pioneering 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press).

Now, I will here concentrate my attention on Paul Buffalo's passing remarks about television in chapters 19, 20, and 21 of volume 2. In Chapter 19: "*Wenabozho* and the Creation of the Current World" (pp. 1-26), Roufs reports that Christopher Vecsey "lists forty-six 'Major Versions of Ojibwe Creation Myth' from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (p. 25, note 6). In any event, Paul Buffalo says, "I've always heard that *Wenabozho* was shrewd and he was tricky" (p. 4). He was a trickster figure.

"We would call one another in the tribe '*Wenabozho*.' We'd say, 'There's the guy that's foolish. He's just like *Wenabozho*. He fits anywhere and he's daring.' It was just like TV now-a-days; you can believe it or not" (p. 4). In the "Index" in volume 2 (pp. 541-554), Roufs does not list an entry on television, as he does in the "Index" in volume 3 (p. 771), where he lists six specific pages references. I wish that Roufs had created an index entry for listing each time that Paul Buffalo uses the expression now-a-days.

"There are great stories about *Wenabozho*. You never know what *Wenabozho* was made of. He was made for right and wrong. He was made for right *and* wrong, so that's why he could do

bad and he could do good” (p. 4; italics in the text as edited by Roufs).

In chapter 20: “Tales of *Wenabozho*” (pp. 27-54), Paul Buffalo says, “We camped as a group along the rivers and lakes. I often thought a lot about those times when in those camps I heard the elders talk and tell stories. The old stories of the Indians, which they had told and used for lectures, was part of camp-fireside talk. To the younger generation, the older class spoke these words. In the olden days we had campfires, and talks. We didn’t have TV. We didn’t have radios.” (p. 27).

Subsequently, after recounting one story, Paul Buffalo says, “That’s one story. We didn’t have any TV. We had to have stories like that from the old people. It was nice to hear stories. Everybody laughs when they hear that. Oooh geez that story’s a laugh! Old raccoon always got quite a few laughs” (p. 35).

“I used to kind of believe those stories, the way they talked about them. I’ve seen things like that. If you’re in the woods and hike around, searching for provisions for yourself, you know how *Wenabozho* and the animals worked” (p. 35).

Subsequently, after recounting another story, Paul Buffalo says, “Ya, the story you imagine is just like TV. The way old people tell them to you, you could see the picture of it – *if* you sit and listen” (p. 45; italics in the text as edited by Roufs).

Subsequently, after recounting yet another story, Paul Buffalos says, “That is an old story. And I like that story in life. I just enjoy it. How hard it was for the old people when they were young compared with their children now-a-days. Just think. That’s the only means of entertainment

that we had. There was no radio; there was no television. When they were telling stories you could just see the picture” (p. 50).

In Chapter 21: “The *Wiindigoo* Cannibal and Other Life Trials and Adventures of *Gwashun*, the Boy Who Did Not Obey His Father and Mother: Our Favorite Story” (pp. 55-87), Paul Buffalo says, “Indians are not going to tell a story just for fun. The Indian told stories to show what would happen if you would go out into the world. We tell them in order to see the way – just an *example* of the way – we should live. Our stories are to get the children to think of, to *beware* of, where the danger spots are in life. The story of *Wiindigoo* and *Gwashun* tells us the way we should listen to our folks and to the rulers of this earth. If they’re wrong or right, we’ll see that flash in the story. We see a flash which blazes the path of life for us.

“I enjoy hearing stories. In the evening when we had a storm or when it was cold outside, we used to listen to stories. We didn’t have any television, any radio, or anything of that kind, so to settle our evening before retirement we’d ask a story from the grandma in the house or in the *wiigwaam* or tipi or log cabin we had to live in. We used to love to sit around the fire and listen to them tell stories. When the old-timers were telling a story, you could picture what was happening in your mind, just like you were watching a TV show. You could picture every word in your mind. The stories. Were always interesting too” (pp. 55-56; italics in the text as edited by Roufs).

In conclusion, it strikes me as unlikely that young T. S. Eliot grew up listening to old-timers in his family circle in St. Louis tell stories. As Paul Buffalo repeatedly says he did grow up listening to old Indian tell stories that captivated him and stimulated his imagination. Lucky him.