

The winter had been long and cold. There was very little food left. The river was still thickly covered with ice, except where it ran quickly through the canyon.

On each side of the canyon stood a town. In one of them lived Dawk, the chief's son. Like all people he was very hungry."

Dawk travels to the world of the Salmon People to save the starving people in his village. He learns the rules or laws of respect. Then he returns to his village and shares his new found knowledge with his people. Thanks to Dawk, all the people learn what they have to do for the salmon to return year after year.

About the Illustrator

Ben Gerow, born in Vanderhoof in 1950, is a member of Nakazdli First Nations. He grew up sawmilling, logging and tug boating. After a short visit to Ksan in 1983, he started to pursue his artistic interests.

Ben has illustrated books for the Nakazdli Band and the school district in Fort St. John. He is totally honoured to be contributing to the First Nations Education.

Ben presently lives in Terrace.



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The Salmon

First Nations Resource Centre



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illustrated by **Ben Gerow**

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- Robin Thistle Walker for giving permission to reprint his story originally appearing in *Harvesting the Ksan*. Terrace, BC: School District No.88 (Terrace/Thornhill), 1977
- Ben Gerow for his illustrations

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First Nations Education Centre
School District 82 (Coast Mountains)
3430 Sparks Street
Terrace, BC V8G 2V3 Canada
Telephone: (250) 638-6394

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Editor and Project Manager Barbara Tøye-Welsh
Illustrator Drake Morven
Production Payce Enterprises Inc.
Box 764, Garibaldi Highlands, B.C. V0N 1T0

Introduction

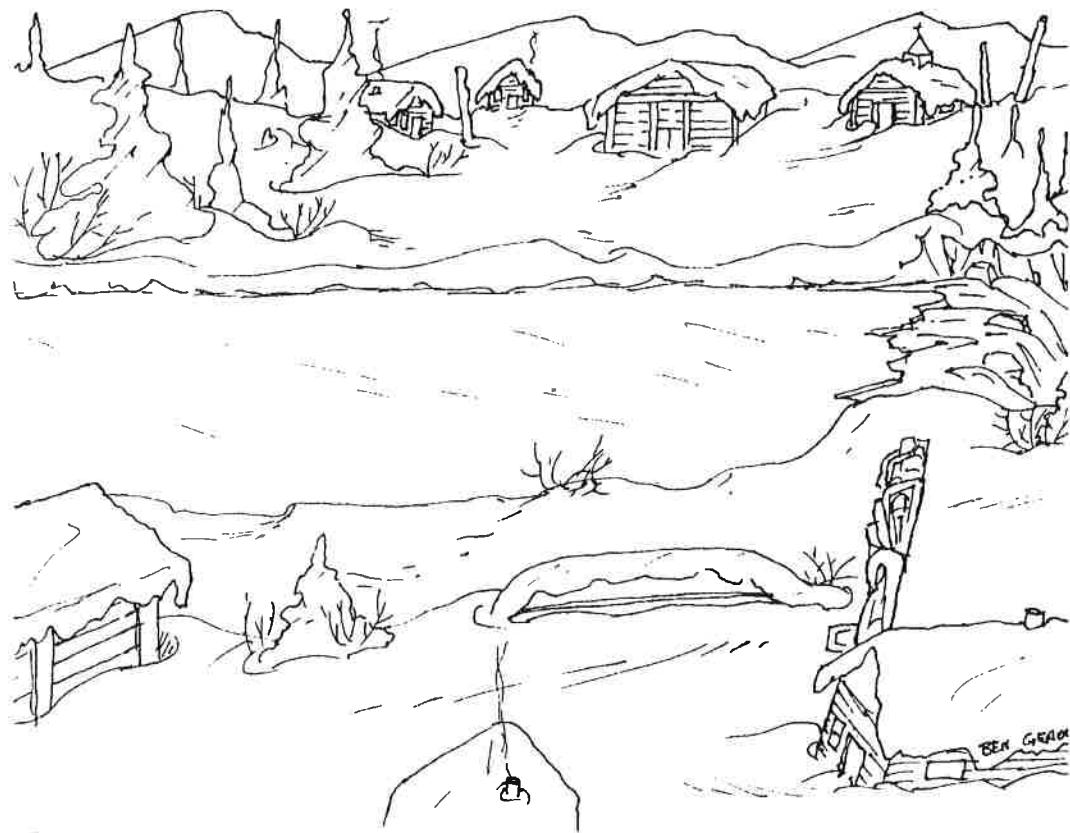
Different versions of *The Salmon* have been told for centuries by the many First Nations of the North Coast. Oolichan, berries and salmon were the most important food in the life of the people. In early summer, people moved to their fish camps. The Kitwancool moved towards the upper Nass River. The Kitwanga moved to Terrace and up the Kitwancool River. The Kitselas moved up and down the river. The coastal Tsimshian moved down the river below Kitselas. The people of Kispiox, the Gitanmax and the Hagwilget moved up the Kispiox River.

The people believe that the salmon spend the winter in great cedar houses under the sea. Every year the salmon people exchange their outer human clothes for those of fish and migrate upstream to offer themselves as food to the humans or die after spawning. In both events, the salmon's bones are returned to the water and float back to sea, where they are transformed into living salmon people.

In the story, the people are starving because of their treatment of the salmon. Dawk travels to the world of the salmon people and learns the rules or laws of respect. He learns the salmon should only be kept for one year. Dawk also realizes every part of the dried fish must be eaten. He is reminded salmon must be carefully folded. Very importantly, he learns — bones, if not returned to the water should be burned. After Dawk shares the laws with the people, they understand that if man treats the salmon with respect, the salmon come every year and provide food.

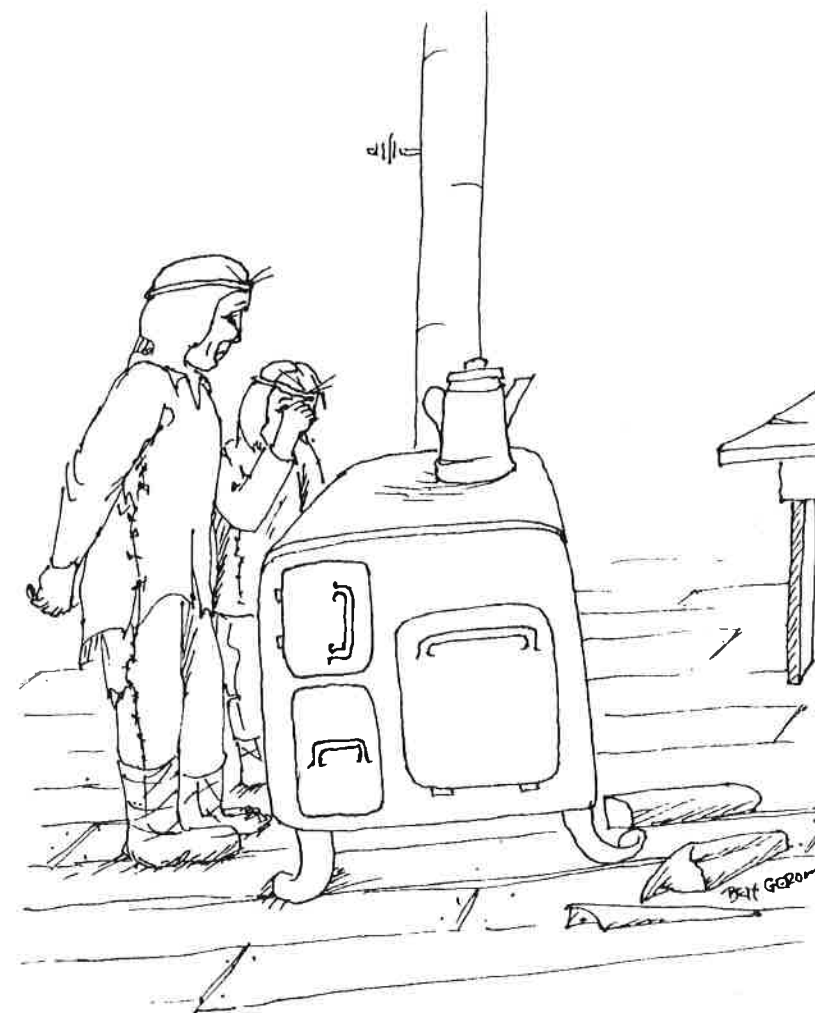
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Special thanks to Ben Gerow for the many hours he devoted to completing the illustrations.



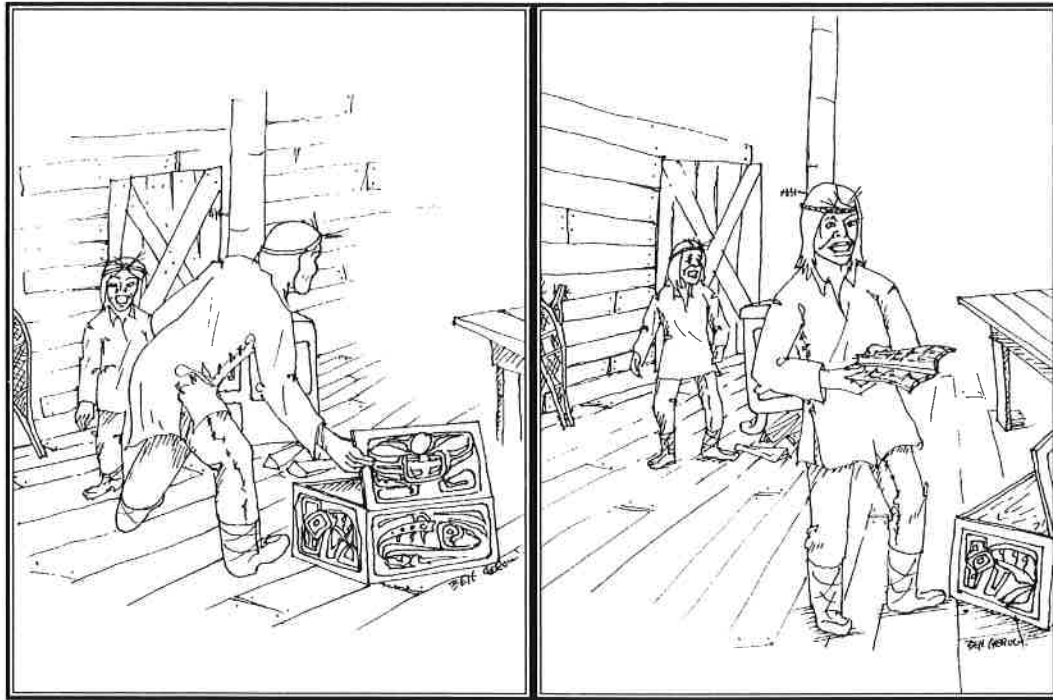
The winter had been long and cold. There was very little food left. The river was still thickly covered with ice, except where it ran quickly through the canyon.

On each side of the canyon stood a town. In one of them lived Dawk, the chief's son. Like all the people he was very hungry.

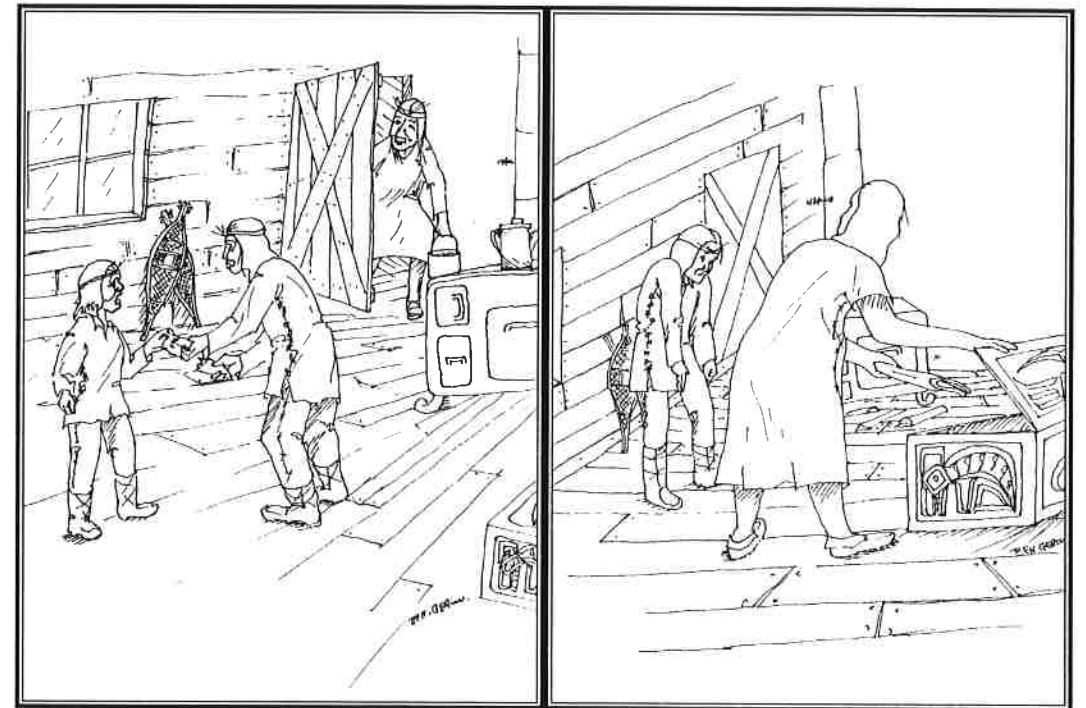


One day he stood by the fire with his little slave boy. He was cold and hungry, but he knew that he was not more hungry than anybody else. All food was shared equally.

The slave boy started crying. "Oh, I'm so hungry," he moaned.



Dawk looked around the room. There was nobody there. He went to a box. He opened it and unfolded the fish which was inside. He took a piece from the tail and shut the box quickly.



He was about to pass the piece of fish to the boy, when his mother came into the house.

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” she said. She took the fish from him and put it back in the box. “You are the chief’s son and here you are taking more than your share.”

Dawk said nothing. His mother went to the box to return the fish. Dawk was so ashamed that he crept from the house.



He went up the river a little way to where the water rushed with no ice on it. He did not know how long he had been looking at the water. He was cold because he had not waited to take his warm fur cloak with him. Suddenly he heard strange sounds, sounds of a canoe being poled up the river by many men. Still Dawk did not look up.

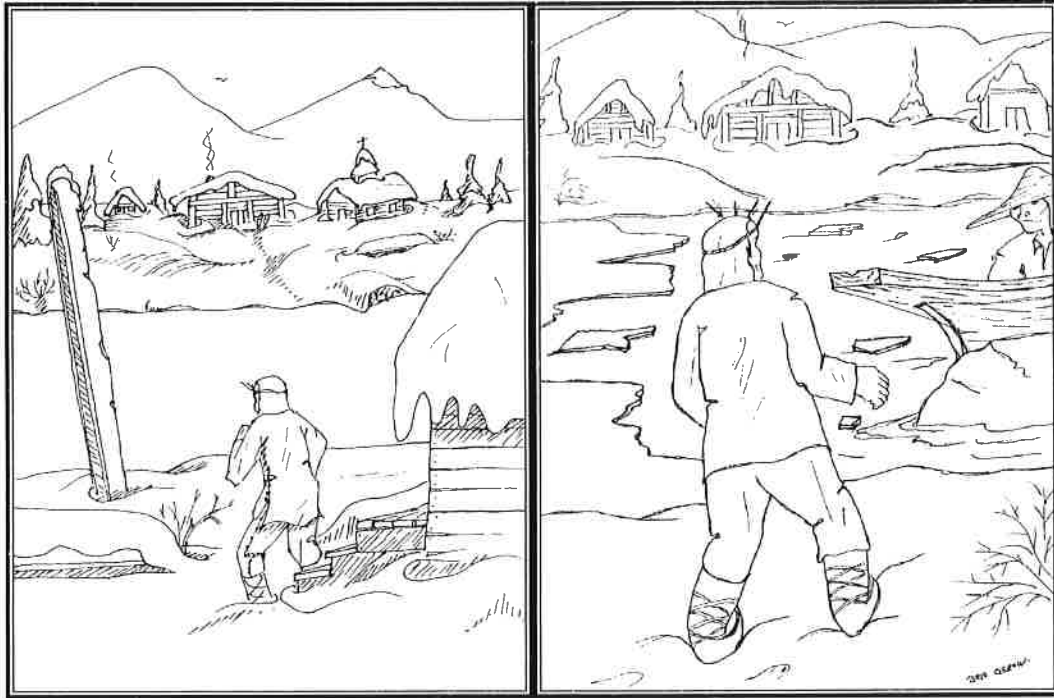


Back at the house the slave boy was very upset.

"What's the matter," asked the chief, who had just come in.

"He did it for me," said the boy. "He would never have eaten it himself. Now he's run away."

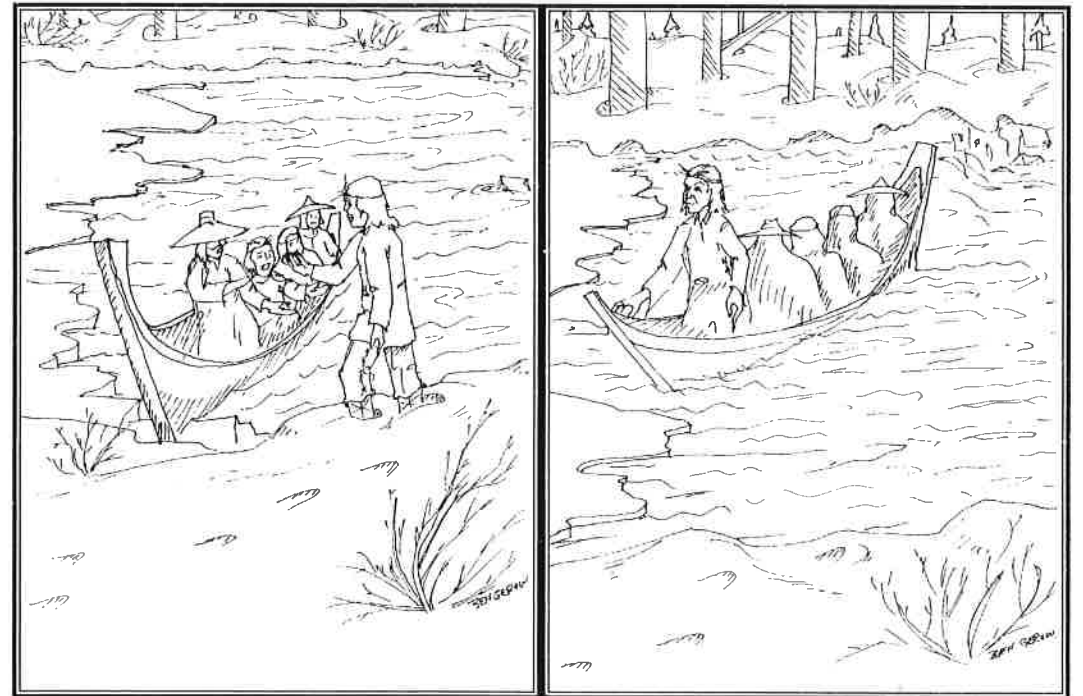
"Let's go and look for him at once," said the chief.



Dawk was still staring into the fast water.

“There he is,” said a voice. “That’s the one.”

Dawk heard a bump. He looked up. He saw that a large canoe had hit the rock at the edge of the pool. It was a strange canoe. It shone pale and silvery in the fading light. Four men sat very still in the canoe. Only their silver cloaks moved in the wind.

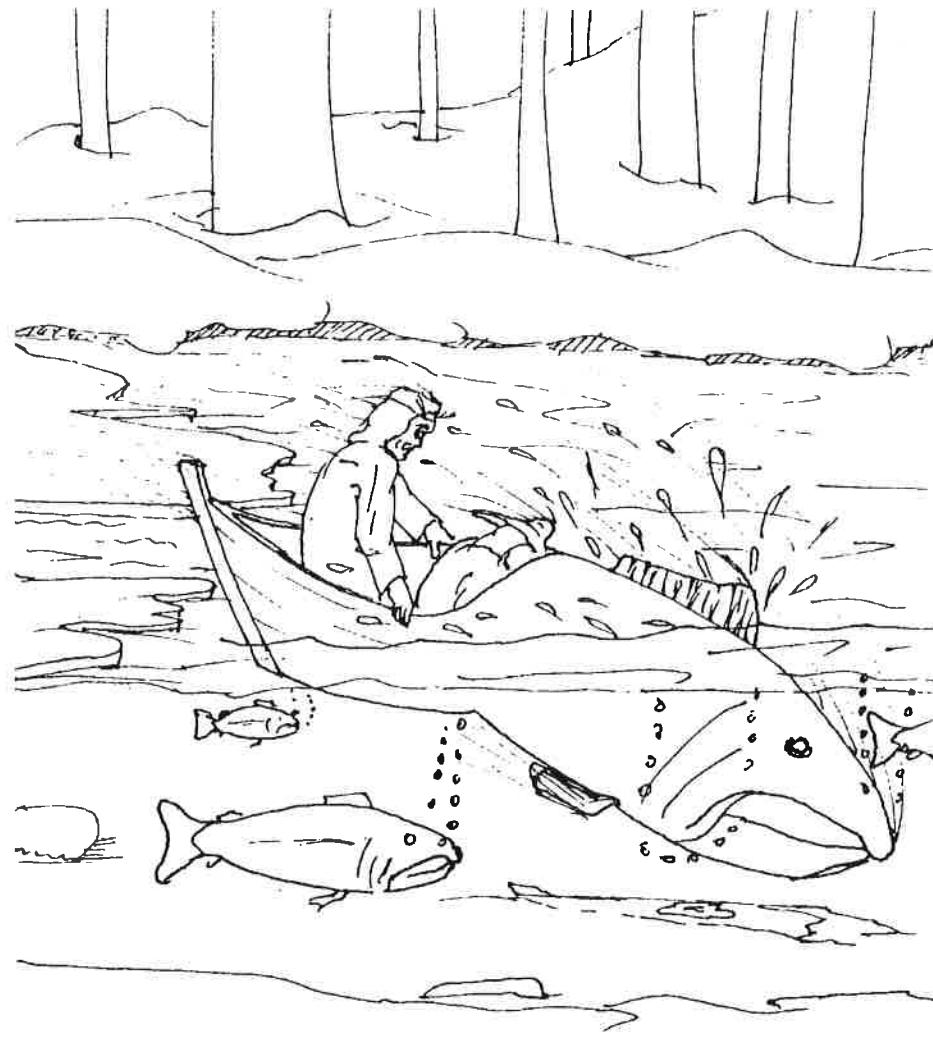


One of the men stood up. “Come,” he said. “Come down into the boat.”

Dawk still sat.

“Come down,” said the man again.

This time Dawk climbed down the bank and climbed into the boat. He looked back towards the village and saw many lights moving among the trees.



BEN GEROW

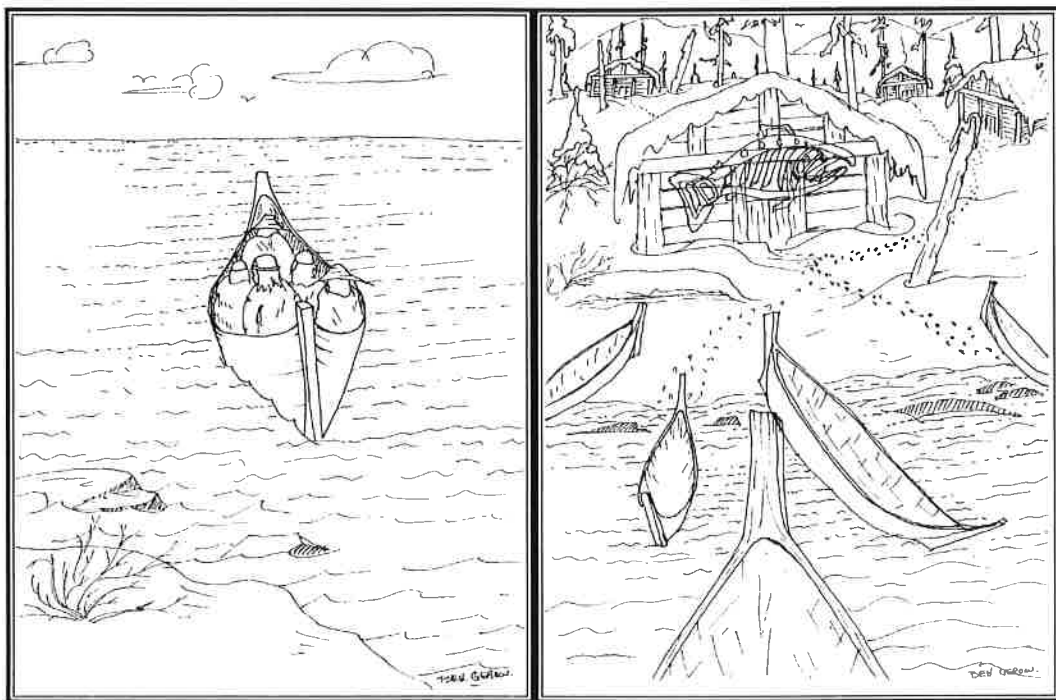
He heard someone call his name. He sat down. He saw that there were no paddles in the canoe. The canoe glided out into the river by itself. As the boat moved, the sides grew upwards, until they joined above his head. It dipped down and dived under the ice, like a great salmon.



At last the canoe came to the surface. The sides came down. It was light now and there was no ice on the river. Dawk saw a village on the river bank. The houses had beautiful salmon crests on them. Many people came from the houses.

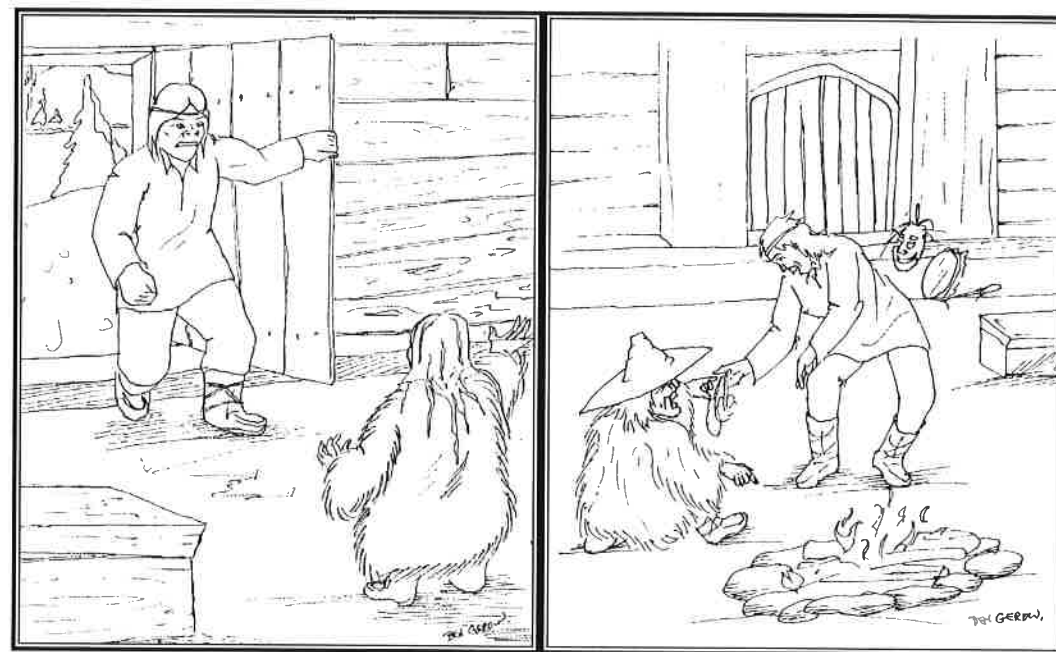
As the canoe passed they waved and called, "Have you found the one you were looking for?"

"Yes, we have," replied one of the men.



They passed other villages on their way to the sea. The houses were painted with the crests of different salmon. At each village the same question was asked and the man gave the same reply.

The canoe passed into the sea and crossed it quickly. At last they came to an island. There were many other canoes like it on the beach. The men took Dawk up to a large house. There was a spring salmon painted on the front.



As he went in, Dawk was met by a tiny woman dressed in grey fur.

"I am Uwantseets, the mouse woman," she said.

"Do you know where you are?"

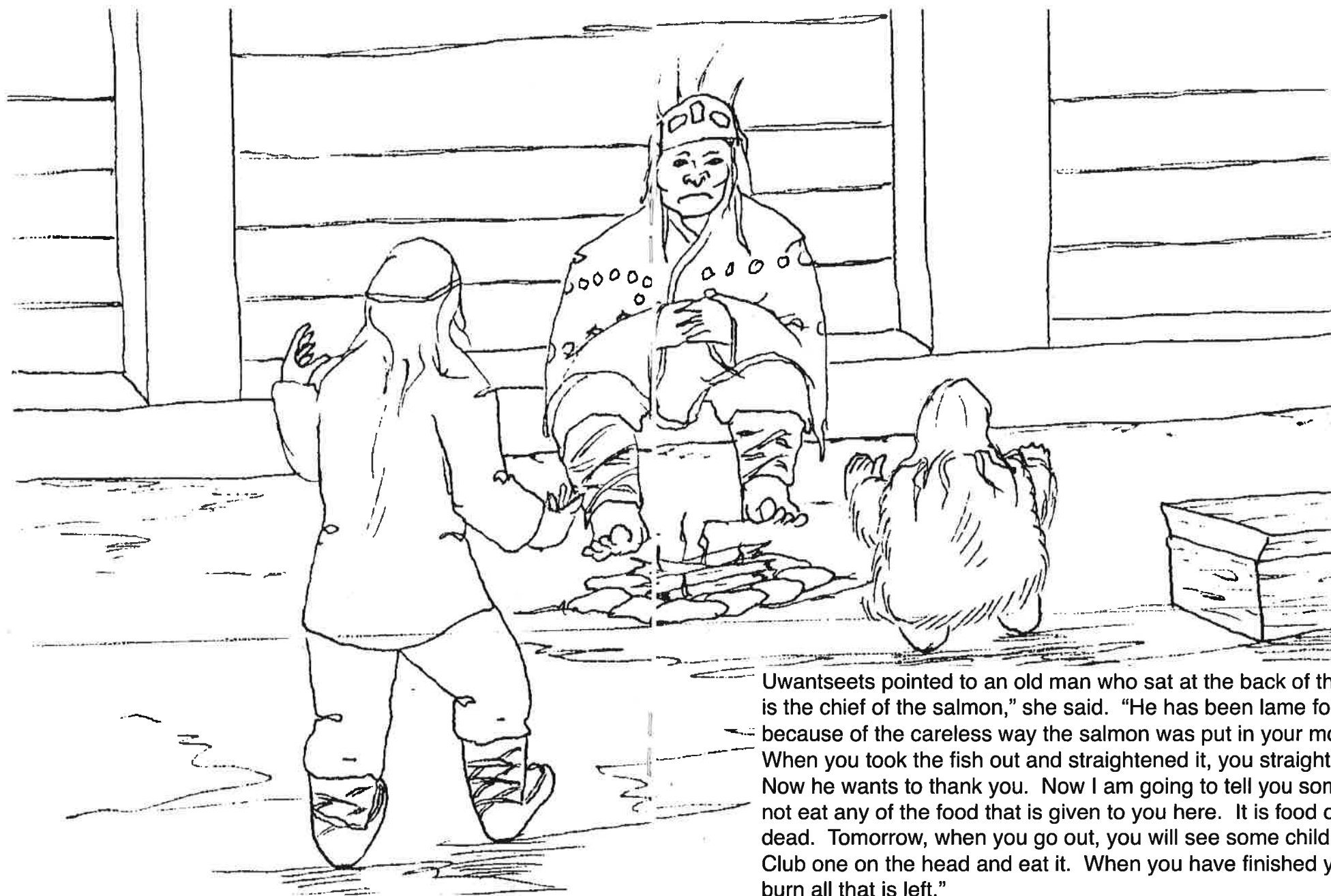
"No," said Dawk.

"First give me the wool ornaments from your ears."

Dawk took them off and handed them to Uwantseets. She threw them into the fire. She watched them as they burned. Suddenly she raked the charred wool from the flames and ate it.

"Now," she said. "The spring salmon have brought you to their village."

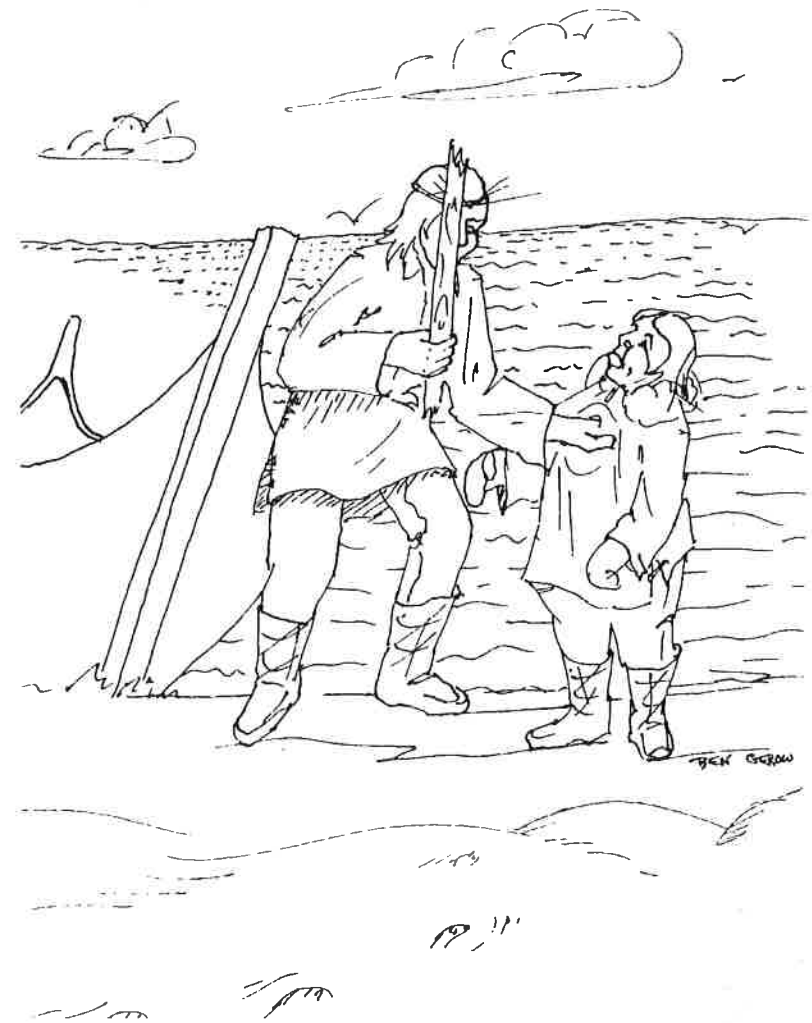
"Why?" asked Dawk.



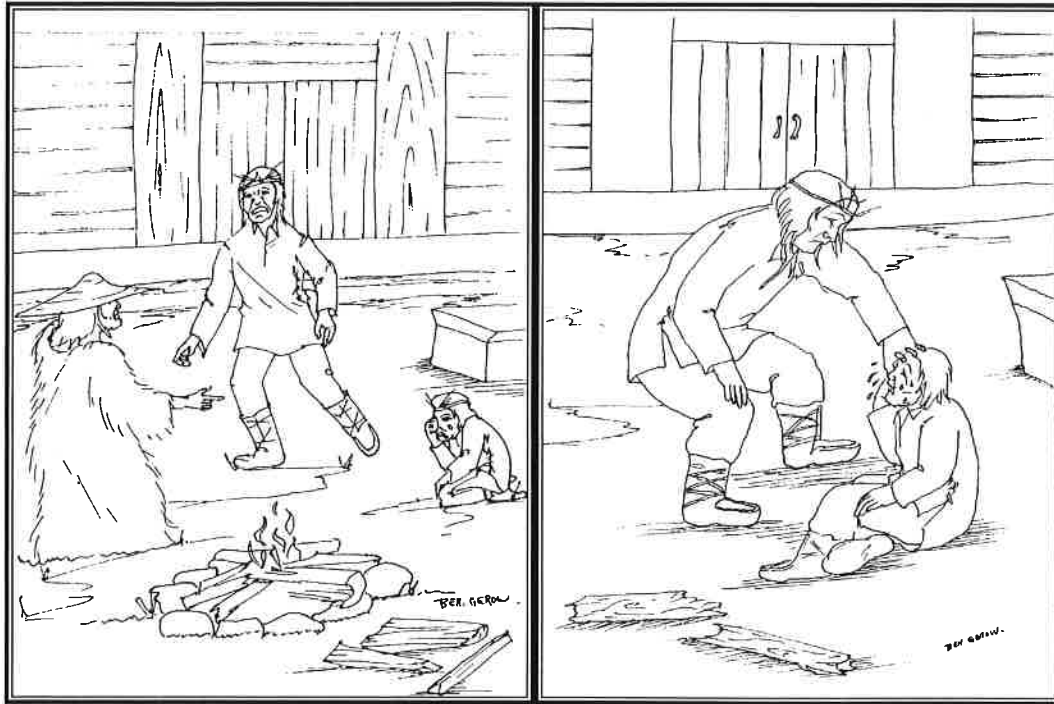
Uwantseets pointed to an old man who sat at the back of the house. "He is the chief of the salmon," she said. "He has been lame for a long time, because of the careless way the salmon was put in your mother's box. When you took the fish out and straightened it, you straightened his leg. Now he wants to thank you. Now I am going to tell you something. Do not eat any of the food that is given to you here. It is food only for the dead. Tomorrow, when you go out, you will see some children playing. Club one on the head and eat it. When you have finished your meal, burn all that is left."



Dawk ate nothing in the salmon's house. Next morning he was very hungry. He went down to the beach. There he saw the children playing on the sand. He could not bring himself to kill one and so he went away hungry.

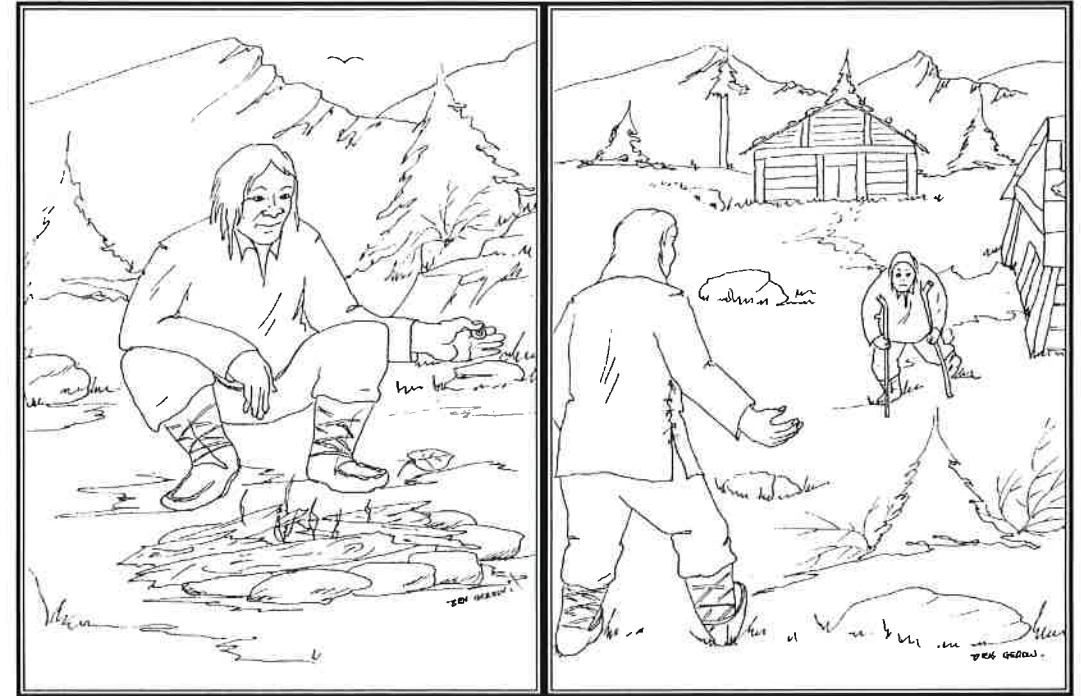


He became more and more hungry. At last he was so hungry that he grabbed a little boy and hit him on the head with a club. The boy fell to the ground, now a small silver salmon. Dawk grabbed the fish and went to the edge of the forest. He lit a fire and cooked the salmon. As soon as he had finished, he gathered all the little bones and pieces and threw them on the fire.



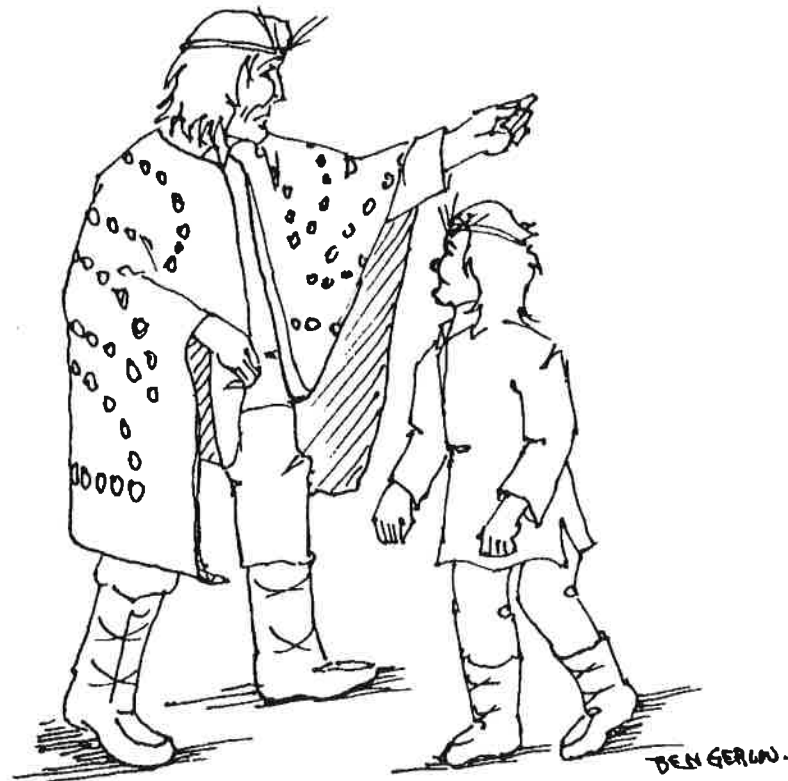
He went happily back to the chief's house. As he went in he heard a child screaming. It was a little boy, who was covering one eye with his hand. Dawk went closer and saw that it was the little boy he had hit with the club.

"You forgot to burn one eye of the fish you ate,," said Uwantseets.



Dawk ran back to the fireside. He looked around for a while, until he found the eye under a dead leaf. He threw it into the fire. When he got back to the house, the little boy was playing happily on the floor.

Dawk stayed among the salmon people for a long time. He never ate the food which was offered to him in the chief's house. Each day he killed one of the beautiful children. Each day, after he had eaten, he gathered all the tiniest fish bones and threw them into the fire. Now he knew why there were so many lame people in the salmon village. Someone, somewhere, had not been careful to burn the last little bone.



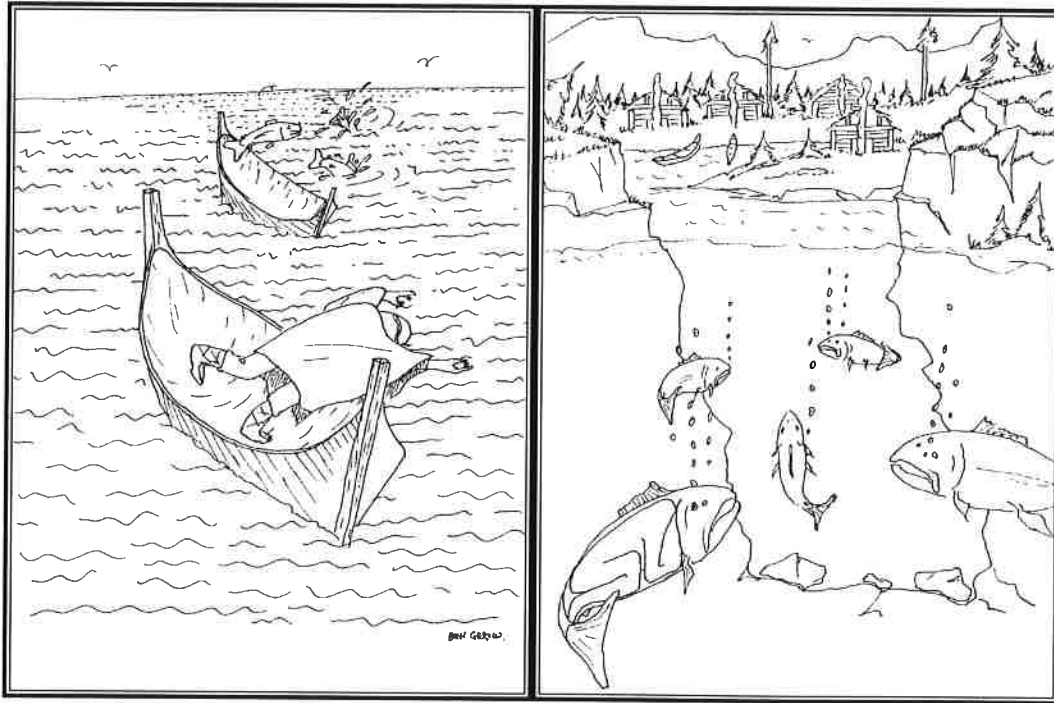
One morning the chief of the salmon said to his nephew, "Go and see if the cottonwoods are budding on the Ksan."

The chief's nephew went. When he came back he told his uncle that the trees were still bare. The chief sent him out again.

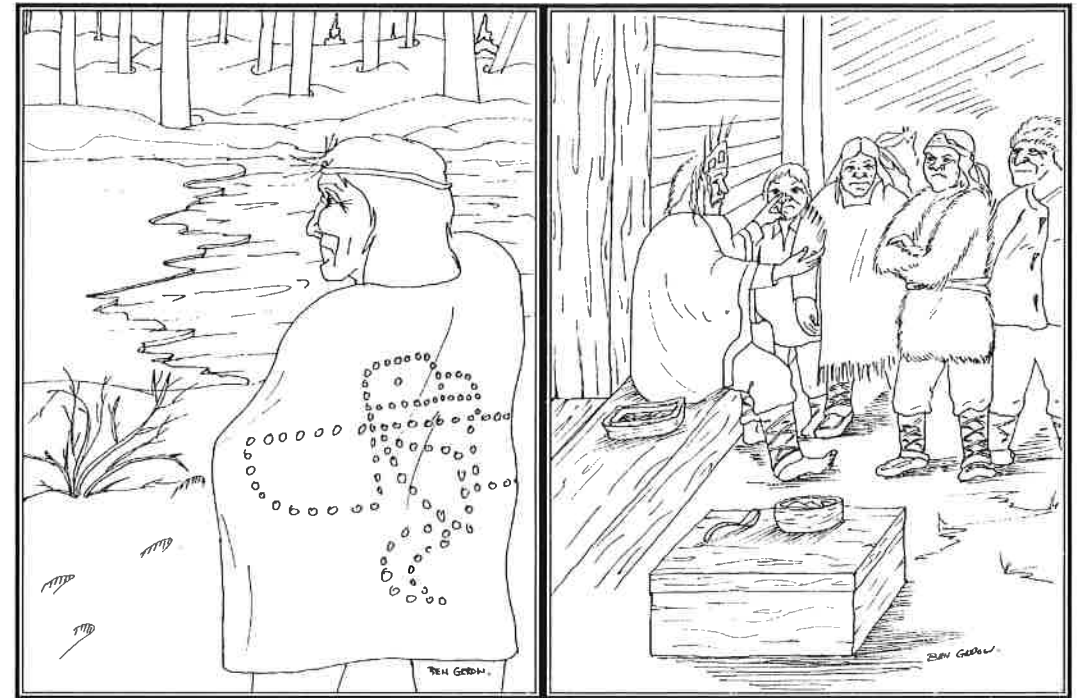


When he came back he said, "The cottonwoods are green beside the Ksan."

"Tomorrow we shall leave," said the chief.



When the canoes reached the mouth of the Ksan, they stopped. The people put on their silver cloaks and dived into the sea as shining fish. Dawk stood up too and put on his cloak. He dived into the water. Quickly he joined his friends, the salmon, as they raced towards the river. As they went up the river, some of the fish went up the smaller streams. He stayed with the salmon which went up the main river. Soon they reached the bottom of the canyon.



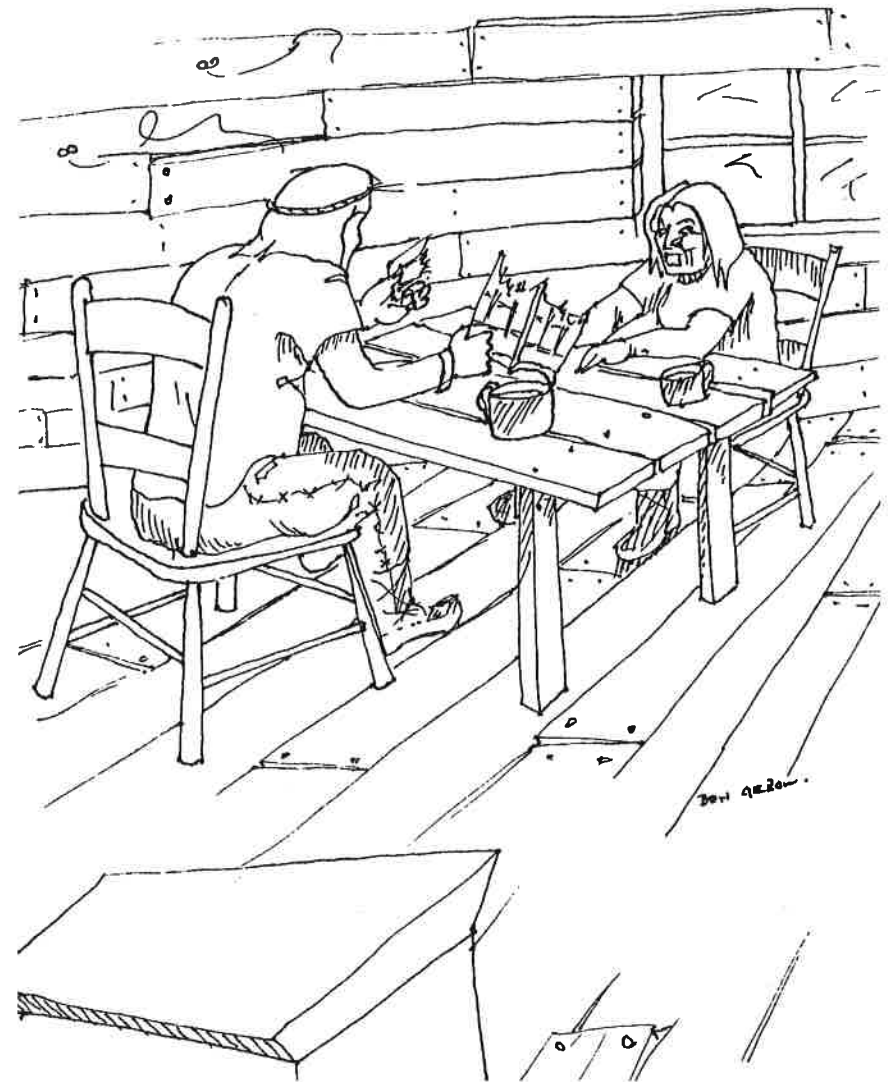
Back at Dawk's village, the chief was very sad. When he could not find his son, he called all the halayts. Not one of them could tell him what had happened to Dawk. At last the chief sent for Neswayetk, a halayt who lived by himself among the woods.



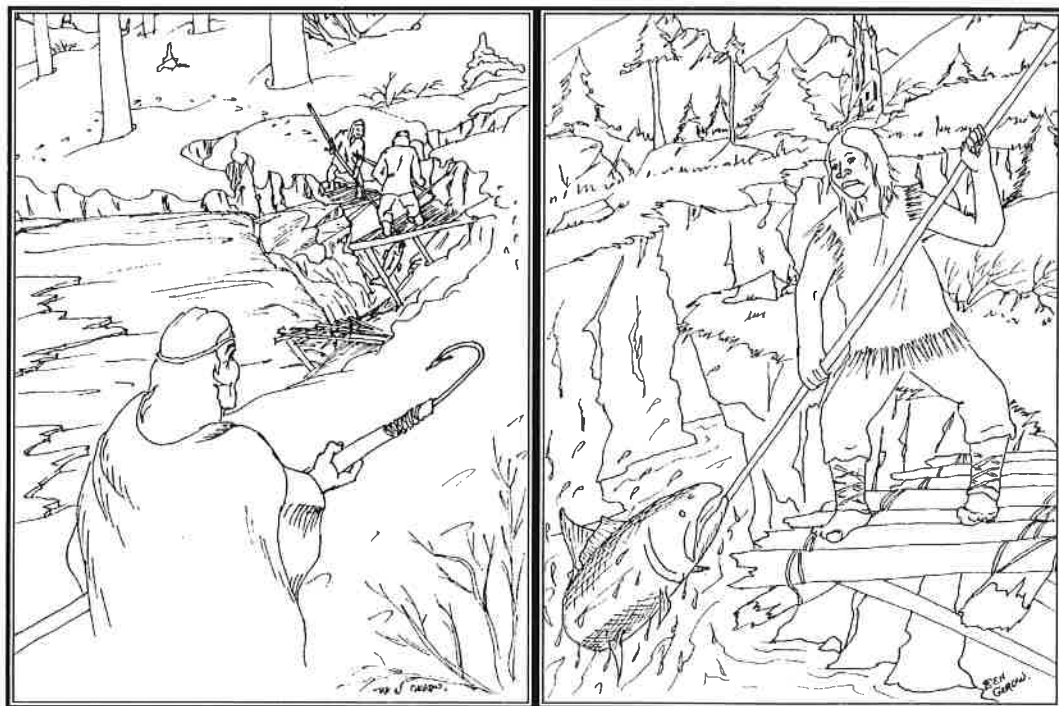
He came into the chief's house. In one hand he carried a rattle and in the other the white feathers from an eagle's tail. He danced near the fire. He sang three songs of power. When he had finished, he stood in front of the chief.

"Your son is not dead," he said.

The chief looked a little happier. The halayt went back to the fire. He began to sing and dance again. At the end of the third song of power, he came to the chief.

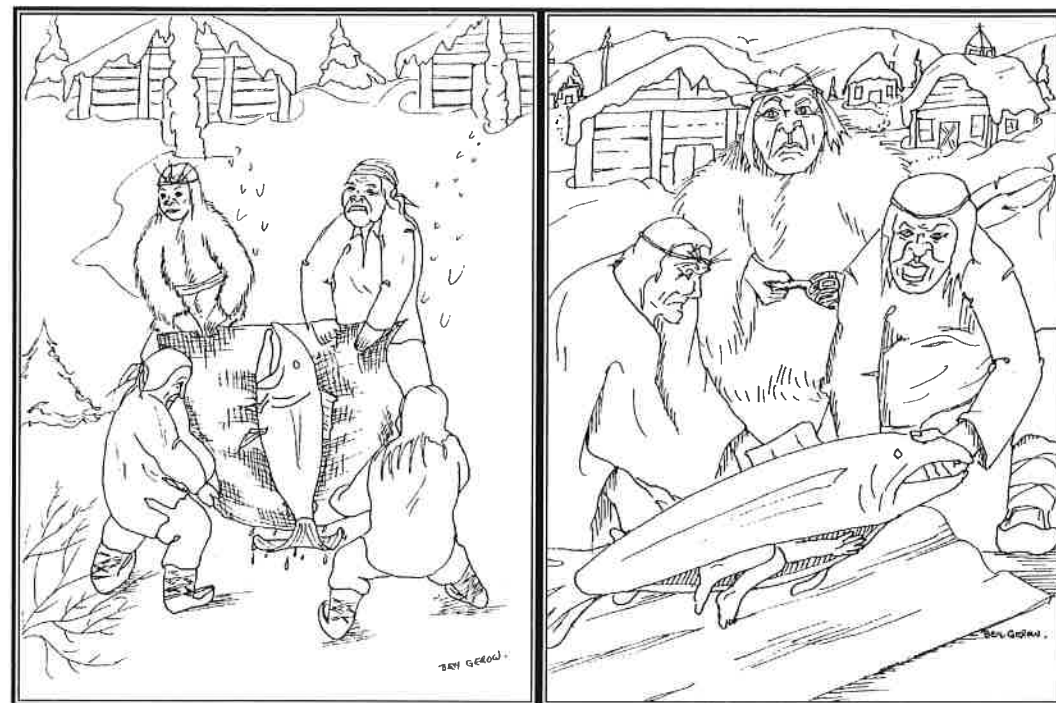


"Your son is with the salmon people," he said. "The chief's fish form is in your wife's box. Eat that fish at once, or you will not see your son again." When the fish had been eaten, the halayt said, "Let everybody get ready for the salmon run."



The young men mended the fishing platforms while the chief and the halayt prepared their gaffing poles. All was ready when the first fish reached the mouth of the canyon. The chief had soon speared many salmon, but the halayt waited.

Suddenly the halayt thrust his gaff towards a fish. He pulled it up onto the platform. He had caught the biggest fish he had ever seen. He knew that the chief's son was in that salmon. He clubbed it, but gently. He laid the salmon on a cedar mat.

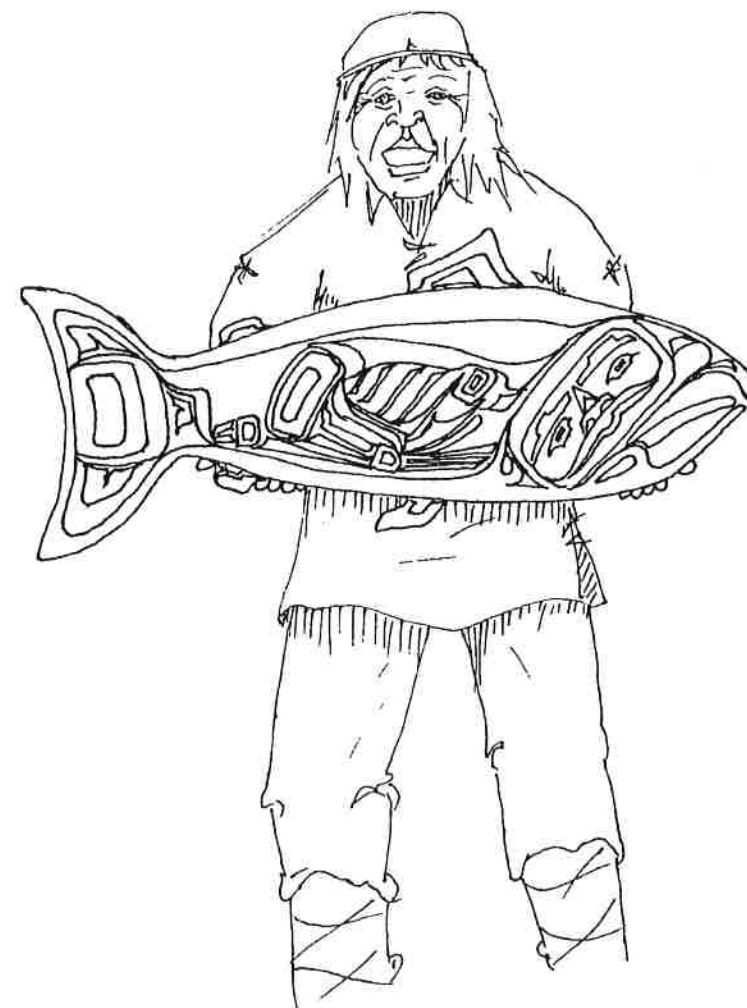


"Let four halayts come down from the village," called Neswayetk.

Each halayt took a corner of the mat. They carried it up to the chief's house. Only the old people were allowed to stay. They laid the salmon on a plank in the middle of the house. The halayts began to sing and dance around the salmon four times. When the singing was over, two wise women stepped forward. Each had a knife in her hand. They slit the salmon's stomach. Inside was a tiny baby.



One of the women took the baby into her arms. Neswayetk sang loudly. The baby began to grow quickly. The baby became a boy. The boy became a young man — Dawk himself, just as he had been when he left the house.



Dawk stood in the middle of the house and told his story. “. . . And so we must remember,” he said, when his story was finished, “that no fish must be kept as long as two years in our boxes. Salmon must be folded very carefully and when we have eaten, the last tiny bone must be burnt.”

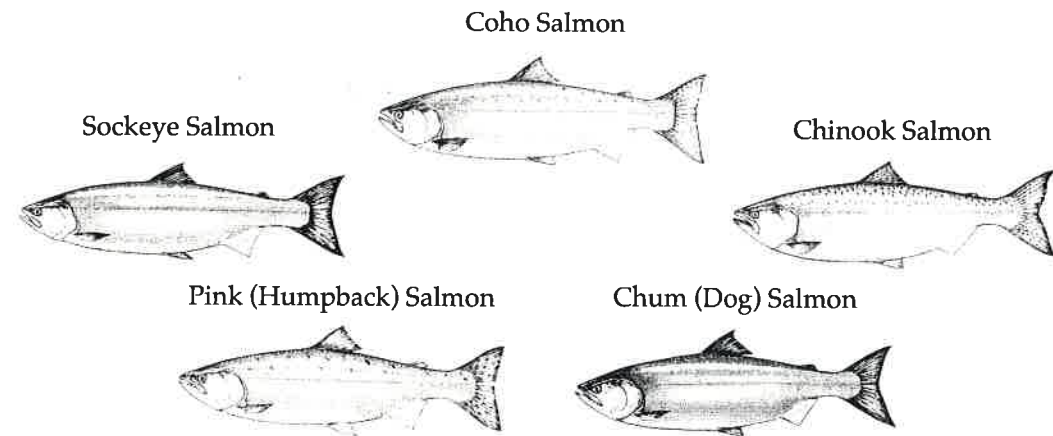
About Salmon

Most salmon come from five species that live in the coastal waters of the North Pacific Ocean. During the late spring, summer or autumn, the salmon leave the ocean for fresh water. They travel upstream, sometimes as far as 3,200 kilometres to spawn (lay eggs). Some scientists believe that salmon remember the odour of their home river or stream and follow this scent.

Salmon migrations vary from region to region depending on the climate and how far the salmon have to swim to their home rivers. The spring salmon (king salmon) migrate in early May.

The sockeye come the beginning of June. The pink (humpback) and chum (dog) salmon come around the first part of July. The coho come in the middle of July.

Every species of salmon is not in every river. Sometimes, the salmon count is very low and the salmon will disappear from the river for a year or two. Other years, there will be an abundance of salmon. There are many factors — pollution, over fishing, logging, mud slides, natural disasters — that effect the salmon count.



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