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THE COYOTE IN SOUTHWESTERN FOLKLORE

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Perhaps one of the first mentions of the coyote (*Canis latrans*) by Anglos in early-day journalism was from Mark Twain's notes during his travels through the plains frontier in the early- to mid-19th century. Touring the frontier region before its inevitable subjugation to ranching and farming, Twain wrote of the coyote and its larger more infamous cousin, the wolf (*C. lupus*), in words which left no doubt to the reader the popular sentiments for such predators of the day. Although derogatory in some respects, Twain did concede respect for *Canis latrans* and made mention of the tricks the coyote would play on domestic dogs as the wagons lumbered across the pristine landscape.

Although the wolf has since passed into the twilight of extinction (at least in the Plains), the coyote made a successful transition into the 20th century, proving to settlers for the first time, its extraordinary character and tenacity. Such characteristics have made the coyote well deserving of its role as "top dog" in folklore of the southwest.

Centuries before the appearance of Anglo settlers on the ranges of the southwest, the coyote had already isolated himself as a prominent figure in the lore of Native Americans. Long fascinated with

the cunning nature of *C. latrans*, many Native tribes believed that the coyote appeared on earth before man. Although not denying the fact that the coyote exhibited a lack of morals in its bid to survive, many tribes acknowledged great respect for the coyote and considered *C. latrans* somewhat sacred in his mythological role.

Almost as colorful as the tales of the Native Americans are the many stories involving the coyote in Anglo folklore. From *C. latrans*' ability to hypnotize chickens into falling from their roost into his waiting jaws to the creature's baleful stare actually causing fruit from palm trees to fall to the ground, the coyote has fully established itself as an icon to students of southwest folklore. Largely misunderstood for over a century, but thumbing its nose in the face of all ridicule, *C. latrans* stands above it all as perhaps the most popular villain in our history.

In the words of J. Frank Dobie, "extraordinary folklore develops around only extraordinary characters, though not all extraordinary characters inspire it". No doubt the coyote has been an inspiration for exaggerated tales about its ability to connive, dupe, and chase its way into the heart of the Southwest.