

April 18, 1941

U-20

Captain Bertrus Kemmerer
Division Ordnance Office
Camp Barkeley, Texas

Dear Captain Kemmerer:

I have your letter of April 15, and am very glad to comply with your request for information regarding the Indian ideas of the Thunderbird.

Different Indian tribes had slightly different notions concerning this mythical creature and, of course, each language had a different name. However, most of them agree in saying that the Thunderbird was like an eagle or a bird of prey of enormous size, which caused the lightening by opening and closing its eyes. The thunder was caused by flapping its wings, and snapping its beak. The great downpour of rain, which generally accompanies thunder on the plains, was believed to be produced by the bird spilling part of the lake of fresh water carried on the bird's back. The thunder storm was believed to be caused by a fight between the Thunderbird and a huge rattlesnake or water-monster, which the Sioux called Unktehi.

Sometimes the Thunderbird is shown with arrows in his claws like the American eagle. The Indians say that the Thunderbird's stone arrowheads are the large black stones found here and there on the plains, probably meteorites. In the Dakotas, the large round boulders are believed to be eggs of the Thunderbird.

When a man is struck by lightning, Indians think he was shot by one of the Thunderbird's arrows. The old-time Indians believed that the eagle on United States coins represented the Thunderbird. The Rapihoe's word for the Thunderbird is "Ba-a" (pronounced bah-ah), imitation of the sound of thunder.

Old Indians, who say they have seen Thunderbirds perched on hill tops or in the clouds, have described them to me as being of a dark blue color, marked with zig-zag lines like lightning, running from the breast or heart down the tail and along the wings to the wing tips. I have heard the thunder was called Many Drums.