Description of the research project:
During an online chat with students in the University of North Texas School of Library and Information Sciences, Dr. Barre Toelken described the Coyote of Native American tales this way, “Coyote is a kind of character we seldom find in our culture. He is believed to be sacred (he often creates plants, places, the stars, teaches animals how to behave etc.) and at the same time he is extremely secular (he is underfed, oversexed, selfish, arrogant, pushy, competitive), in short all the things native people are supposed to be.” The Coyote character takes many forms in the stories within each tribe, but the character changed even more dramatically as the stories traveled over time to different regions and new generations. He is a fascinating character with a special aura about him that brings to mind Greek gods with their human frailties. This project will explore the character of Coyote and the cultural meaning attached to Coyote in examples of these stories. The morphology of the Coyote stories will be analyzed as well.

Purpose of the research project:
This is a research paper using a selection of Native American Coyote Tales from Mexico and the United States. The stories have been chose to provide a representation of the different stories told in different times and places. The purpose of this paper is to provide background knowledge for librarians or teachers preparing units of study on Native Americans.

Location of items used in this project:
Materials were gathered from the Castañeda Elementary School Library, the McAllen Public Library, and the library at the University of Texas Pan American.


**Bibliographic Citations:**


**Story Synopsis:**

In this story clever Coyote makes a ladder to the moon. From there he shoots his arrows at the stars until he arranges them in the shapes of the animals. Upon his return to earth, the animals are overwhelmed by his feat and praise him highly. Coyote promises that he will always be a friend to them and their children.


**Story Synopsis:**

Coyote is referred to in this story as “Wise Old Coyote” or “Grandfather Coyote.” It takes place in a long ago time when the people did not have fire for heat or cooking. They had heard about fire being kept by the yellow jackets who would not share. Coyote gathered all of the animals together and told them that they could steal the fire if they all cooperated. Coyote traveled until he reached the yellow jackets. He was able to snatch the fire by trickery. He then passed it on to the eagle, who passed it on to the mountain lion and so on. Finally, the turtle swallowed the burning ember and kept it under water until he could spit it onto the root of the willow tree. Coyote then showed them how to get the fire back by rubbing willow sticks together.


**Story Synopsis:**

In this myth Coyote has created all of the animals and now wishes to create a Lord of the Animals. Each animal tries to help him by molding a model out of clay and each model looks remarkably like the animal itself. While they are sleeping, Coyote takes their models and incorporates their best qualities to create a unique new being to be Lord of the Animals, a human, as clever as he is.


**Story Synopsis:**

The Pomas are suffering from the effects of a drought. Their beautiful lake has dried up and there is nothing left but the roots of the grass. Just when it appears that things can’t get worse, they are hit by a devastating swarm of grasshoppers. Coyote is moved by their plight and appeals to the Great Spirit for help. To his astonishment, the Great Spirit instructs him to start eating grasshoppers. As Coyote struggles to follow the Great Spirit’s instructions, he is led to water and is thus able to restore the lake and save the Pomas.
**Story Synopsis:**  
Coyote is blue in this tale and he has been looking for and getting into one misadventure after another as he tries to emulate different animals. When Coyote decides to fly, the crows humor him until he becomes too annoying. His fall down to the desert and reality results in his coat changing to the color of dust, but does nothing to change his nose for trouble.

**Story Synopsis:**  
Coyote finds himself in a predicament when, despite warnings from the hummingbird, he takes a blanket that does not belong to him. A huge rock rumbles through the canyon chasing him and knocking down everything in its path. Coyote cannot save himself until he returns the blanket and appeases the spirit of the great desert.

**Story Synopsis:**  
Coyote attempts to eat a little ewe lamb, a borreguita. Each time the Coyote tries, the borreguita tricks him. She sends him into the lake after a giant “cheese,” that is really a full moon. She leaves him “holding up” the mountain, and she butts his mouth so hard that all of his teeth ache. The tale ends with an uneasy truce.

**Story Synopsis:**  
The Great Spirit Chief was passing out names to all of the Animal People prior to the arrival of a new kind of people. Coyote was unhappy with his name, Sin-ka-lip, or imitator. However, the great Spirit Chief arranged things so that Coyote was unable to change his name. The Spirit Chief consoles him by giving him an important mission in life. He is to be chief of the tribes and protect them from those who will destroy them.

**Story Synopsis:**  
This Hopi tale begins with Coyote eating a family of baby birds. He goes on his way from village to village all the while running an extortion scheme. He convinces the people that they will be flooded if they do not give him all of their
possessions. Meanwhile the mother of the birds is on his trail. Coyote is acting more and more strangely. When the mother of the birds catches up with him and persuades the villagers to kill him, the baby birds are released. Their fluttering about inside of him had apparently driven him mad.


**Story Synopsis:**
“Uncle Rabbit” repeatedly tricks the coyote in this tale. First he leaves Coyote holding up the mountain, and then he convinces Coyote to drink all the water in the lake to get the cheese, which is in reality a full moon, reflected on the water. There is no reason given as to why the rabbit is tricking Coyote. The story ends with Rabbit walking off and Coyote abandoning the effort in a great deal of physical distress.

**Character Analysis:**
Coyote’s character is complex. As will be shown later, certain tribes portray some aspects of his character more than others. Coyote is a creator, a friend of the animals, a hero, a trickster, a predator, and more often than not, an imitator of everything he admires. Even at his worst, Coyote is given a bigger than life persona.

In the Lord of the Animals, Coyote is the creator of all the animals and finally man himself. In *Coyote Places the Stars*, Coyote has the power to move the stars around to create the constellations. He is a friend to the animals in this story as he is in *The Fire Race* in which he helps the people to obtain fire. Coyote needs the help of the Great Spirit to become a hero to the Pomo people in *Coyote and the Grasshoppers*. *The Spirit Chief Names the Animal People* demonstrates Coyote’s desire to imitate the other animals as he yearns for any name other than his own, which is of course Sin-K-Lip’ or the Imitator. He is however, given magic powers by the Spirit Chief and serves as helper to the Spirit Chief.

Gerald McDermott’s *Coyote* shows Coyote at his worst as an imitator. One calamity after another befalls him as he tries to imitate the other animals. Coyote’s tricky ways again land him in big trouble in *Coyote Steals the Blanket*. Ignoring Hummingbird’s advice, Coyote in his own greedy arrogant way takes a blanket and soon finds himself chased through the canyons by a boulder sent by the spirit of the great desert. His greediness again results in his demise in *Coyote and the Bird Woman*. The mother of the baby birds he has eaten follows Coyote as he tricks one village after another into giving him their belongings. Finally she rallies the villagers to kill the ornery Coyote and free her little birds. *Borreguita and the Coyote* and *The Rabbit and the Coyote* show Coyote as a slow-witted predator tricked by the smaller animals time and time again. Trickster, creator, friend, hero, imitator, greedy predator; Coyote is all of these
things. He shows human nature at its best and its worst and occasionally touched by the divine.

Cultural Analysis:
Coyote stories have special meanings to the tribes that tell them. Even the way in which the stories are told has become a part of their culture. In the Karuk story, *Fire Race*, the Coyote helps to bring fire to people. Since then, the people have sat around the evening fire on cold winter nights and told his stories. They call these stories Pikva. *Fire Race* also emphasizes the importance of each creature; even the willow tree plays an important role. According to Jonathan London, stories about the other creatures referred to in these stories are told in the other seasons. Barre Toelken’s experience is that Coyote stories are best told in the setting of the story. For example, a story about hunting is told on a hunt. The content of Coyote stories can be quite graphic. For that reason some tribes do not include the youngest children when telling these stories while other tribes tell an abbreviated version when children are present.

The Zuni people associated the Coyote with the color blue, representing the west. After he is brought down by his own foolish behavior in Gerald McDermott’s *Coyote*, his color changes to a dusty gray with a black tipped tale. According to the Hopi elders, the black tip of Coyote’s tail represents the pitch darkness we will fall into when we reach the end of the world.

The introduction to Mourning Dove’s *Coyote Stories* points out that among the Columbia River tribes the only way you know that a story is over is when Coyote dies. The next story then begins with Fox restoring Coyote’s life. This phenomenon is explained in Morning Dove’s *The Spirit Chief Names the Animal People*. The Spirit Chief makes Coyote a minor deity in order to protect the New People from evildoers. To aide Coyote the Spirit Chief gives him the power to transform himself into other creatures. He also gives Fox the power or medicine (shoo'-mesh) to restore Coyote’s life. The special power given to Coyote is not spoken of as shoo'-mesh. Similarly, the Hopi medicine men never take Coyote as their spiritual father. In his collection of Hopi Coyote Stories, Ekkehart Malotki points out that they believe that Coyote’s medicine is harmful because he never takes the time to get it right. In fact, they even associate witchcraft with the Coyote. Malotki also points out that when the coyote comes to a village and howls, it is believed some disaster will occur within four days. In his story *Coyote and the Bird Woman*, Coyote goes from village to village howling. The meaning is that there will be a flood within four days.

The use of Coyote stories to instruct and explain, and the careful manner in which the stories are told are a part of the culture of the people to whom these stories belong.
Morphology:
The name coyote comes from the Nahuatl word, coyotl. Nahuatl is the language of the ancient Aztecs. Among the Stone Age hunters, coyote was admired for his cleverness. Later, however, the Native Americans who became shepherds and planters saw his cleverness as conniving and his endurance as a nuisance. These tribes portray him as a wily trickster at best who often falls victim to his own acts of selfishness.
The Native American tribes who lived off of the land took a more positive view of Coyote despite his obvious character flaws. *The Lord of the Animals* is a myth from the Miwok tribe of California. The Miwoks were hunters and fishermen and said to eat every species of creature. In this creation story in which Coyote creates a human, Coyote is crafty but wise as well. Other tribes along the west coast also portray Coyote positively. *In Fire Race*, a Karuk story from northwest California, Coyote helps the animal people to get fire. The Pomo tribe of California recounts how the Coyote saved them and became a friend to the Pomos in the story *Coyote and the Grasshoppers*. Coyote again displays his creative powers in the Wasco legend, *Coyote Places the Stars*. Coyote is so pleased when the animals tell him he is the most clever and crafty, that he tells them "I will always be your friend and the friend of your children’s children.” One can almost imagine this story being told underneath the night sky in the mountains of Colorado with the constellations shimmering overhead. Mourning Dove Humishuma describes the Coyote of the Salishan tribes of the Columbia River area who lived primarily off of seafood. Her version of *The Spirit Chief Names the Animal People* portrays Coyote as very flawed semi-deity. Coyote is not given a name he desires, but is called Sin-ka-lip' which means Imitator. However, he is placated with an important mission. The Great Spirit sums up the attitude of this tribe towards the Coyote with the words, “For doing that, for all the good things you do, you will be honored and praised by the people that are here now and that come afterward. But, for the foolish and mean things you do, you will be laughed at and despised. That you cannot help. It is your way.”

The attitude that developed among the tribes who turned to planting and herding is in direct contrast to that of the fishers and hunters. Ekkehart Malotki, author of *The Gullible Coyote* says, "The overall esteem that the Hopi have for coyote the ‘range creature’ is low. The predominant view holds that the animal is a rather ordinary critter with no positive attributes whatsoever." His version of *Coyote and the Bird Woman* portrays an animal whose greed and gluttony result in his own downfall. Gerald McDermott’s *Coyote* also tells of a coyote with a “nose for trouble.” The crows in this story tolerate his attempts to imitate them until his rudeness becomes unbearable. The *Borreguita and the Coyote* takes Coyote back to the land of his origins in western Mexico. Now however the shepherds’ low opinion of him is in evidence. Time and time again the sheep outfox the Coyote in this tale. *The Rabbit and the Coyote* can be interpreted as a post-conquest story. The story is very much the same as *Borreguita and the Coyote*; however, the rabbit stories in this region portray the rabbit as the mayor, a puppet of the Spanish overlords. The coyote is cast as a bandit who is tricked by
mayor rabbit. Although this portrayal of Coyote does depict a part of his personality, the greedy predator, it is quite a fall from Coyote the creator.

Summary:
The research for this paper really began when I was searching for stories to tell the students who come to my library. I was looking for stories that are related to their Hispanic culture. Initially, I was looking at Mexican folklore. As I began working with these stories I was intrigued with the Coyote stories. The more I looked into them, the more interesting and varied I found them. That’s when I decided to focus on the Coyote stories for this project.
One of the most difficult parts of writing this paper was the analysis. The effects of the time and location of the tribes influenced so much of the story that it was difficult to separate the cultural analysis from any other type of analysis. Just as the Native Americans adapted their food, shelter, and culture to the region in which they dwelled, their stories also reflect their lifestyles. Now I think that those are factors I will be watching for in any story I read or tell.

Citation of Additional Sources:

Toelken, Barre. Interview by Elizabeth Figa. 2 April 2002. WebCT online chat with the School of Library and Information Systems 5440 class. University of North Texas, Denton, Tx.