

Origins of Smoki and Snake Dance

GAIL GARDNER SPEAKS: In 1921, the Prescott Frontier Days Association found themselves out of funds. Well, what to do? To keep the celebration, which was started in 1888, the good citizens decided to have a one-day show and call it Way Out West, and charge a buck admission. It was purely local talent, which of course would come for free.

For that first show they'd taken a Ford automobile and put eccentric wheels on the front and they put a saddle on the hood and with the eccentric wheels a guy rode a buckin' Ford around. And then a prominent judge in Prescott did a tight-wire act. The wire was just layin' on the ground, but he had a balance pole and did some quite good acting to show that he was walkin' a tight wire. So in the old Yavapai Club we talked about, well now, what kind of a stunt could we put on? We

came up with the idea of a burlesque on the Moki Snake Dance. All of the old maps showed the Hopi reservation as Moki, and it was universally called just that in 1921.

So we were talking about having a snake dance as a part of the Way Out West Show. Well, in preparing for that, we tried to get artificial snakes. We ordered a snake or two. They were not realistic. They had these various street carnival shows and one of the

shows they had was "Esau the Snake Eater." Well, some of us went to see Esau. And here was a guy with a black wig on, and they had this cage full of snakes. There wasn't a rattlesnake in the bunch. They were all bull snakes. But they'd taken one snake and killed it and skinned it back, and Esau once in a while would fake to take a bite out of that skinned snake there. That was Esau the Snake Eater.



Gail Gardner Leading the Smoki Snake Dance

Well the carnival had gone broke, and

we were talking about having a snake dance as a part of the Way Out West Show, so this guy says, "Well, why don't you use live snakes?" "Oh, gosh," we said, "We couldn't do that!" "Oh, yes you can," he said. "I'll

bring a cage full of ‘em up to the Yavapai Club and show you how to handle ‘em.” So he brought a whole box of snakes up to the Yavapai Club and he gave us one, and he said, “Now I’ll tell you how to handle these.” Says, “Don’t ever squeeze one, just let ‘em — hold ‘em lightly, let ‘em crawl through your hands.” So that seemed reasonable. So we bought — the Smokis — or the Smokeys, they were then — bought that whole cage of bull snakes. So when it came time to put on our Snake Dance, why we had real live snakes.

It took a lot of persuasion plus a few demonstrations before the Smoki group decided to dance with live snakes. Fortunately we had the assistance of two ladies, one a very fine artist who had lived among the Hopis, the late Kate Cory, and Mrs. Tomber, who had a great deal to do with the production of that first dance, and also a man who had made a remarkable study of the Indian ceremonials, particularly the Hopi, one of our past chiefs, the late Lyle Abbot.

The date was set for Thursday, May 26, 1921. And one short item on the program read, “One Thirty PM: Smoki Snake Dance.” That was all there was on the program. Incidentally, since we were portraying the Mokis, we pronounced Smoki with a short I – Smokey. And it was not until the third dance that we changed our name to Smok-eye with the long I. Well, that’s where the name came from.

That first Way Out West Show was something of a brawl. The prohibition moonshine flowed freely, both among the actors and the audience. It was a fun day of which the Snake Dance was only a small part.

We danced right out in the hot sun. No scenery, no nothin’. All the proceeds of the show went, of course, to the Frontier Days Association.

The year 1922 showed much the same situation so there was another Way Out West and the Smoki put on another Snake Dance. Better trained and better performed. And the Smokis added an educational feature in which the mounted Indians and warriors afoot waylaid an emigrant train. Of course, wagons and teams were easy to come by in those days. The Indians swarmed down on this emigrant train, and Mrs. Fay Southworth, Dr. Southworth’s wife, was driving—was on the seat of the wagon, and one of the savages started to climb up on the wagon and she took a fryin’ pan and conked him on the head with it! And with the noise—you coulda heard it clear up in the grandstand. It was quite effective, you know.

And then, John Reno our property man was getting pretty good and we’d made these big copper shields for the Indians to carry. Well, John Reno was carrying one of these copper shields and he got too close to that old wagon team and one of those old work horses let out with a heavy kick! Well old John woulda had a big horseshoe track on his belly if he hadn’t been carryin’ that shield!

At the close of our second year, the Smoki were formally organized and a Chief elected. But the Frontier Days Association again received all the proceeds. However, even after the first dance the Smoki had lost all idea of burlesque. The hot sunshine, the rhythm of the drums, the exotic costumes over the brown body paint, gave us all a kinship with, and a deep appreciation of, real

Indian ceremonials, and established the basic purpose of Smoki.

Our third dance was all Smoki. We had added a Kachina Dance and a Flute Dance and our now well-established Snake Dance. Also, the mud-heads made their appearance.

Our version of the Snake Dance was purposely different from the Hopis, principally by the fact that we used bull snakes instead of rattlesnakes.

Also, it was so difficult to teach our dancers the Hopi chant that establishes the tempo of their dances that we had to use a drum

to start and maintain the rhythm. [The Hopis] dance entirely to the rhythm of the chants. This third year and thereafter, the Smoki people kept the receipts of the ceremonials.

The early dances were held in the afternoon, at the fairgrounds. We soon had a set built to establish a more Indian atmosphere. The first set was built by a local carpenter, mainly out of muslin and lath painted to look like adobe. We soon found out that nobody but this one carpenter knew how to erect the primitive set and how to take it down. We had to hire him every year 'cause nobody else could do it.

Well, eventually we built a more substantial set out of fiberboard, properly numbered and lettered so that the tribesmen could set it up

and take it down. Our dressing rooms were the stock corrals, with shelves added to the interior on which to place the costumes in proper order. Then later, large canvas tarps were spread over the corrals to keep out the sun and the unlikely event of rain. Unlikely because the dances were held in June.



President Coolidge Waves His Smoki Stetson

In 1925, we invited President Calvin Coolidge to attend our show. Made him [our only] honorary member. Sent him an Indian tanned buckskin inscribed with all of our names. We also sent him one of those high crowned, red, yellow-banded Stetson hats the Smoki were wearing that year. He favored us with a picture of himself wearing the hat,

and some irreverent Smoki remarked that he looked like snowbird under a sifter, which he probably did.

That same year, early in 1926, the Smoki took a small group of dancers to Bisbee to appear before the State Convention of the American Legion. The Legionnaires were impressed and voted to send the Smoki to represent Arizona in their National Convention at the Sesqui-centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. It should be noted, of course, that practically all of the Smoki at that period were veterans of World War I. It might be added that any veteran had learned to march, and they were therefore far easier to train to dance to the drumbeat. Some guy who hadn't been in the

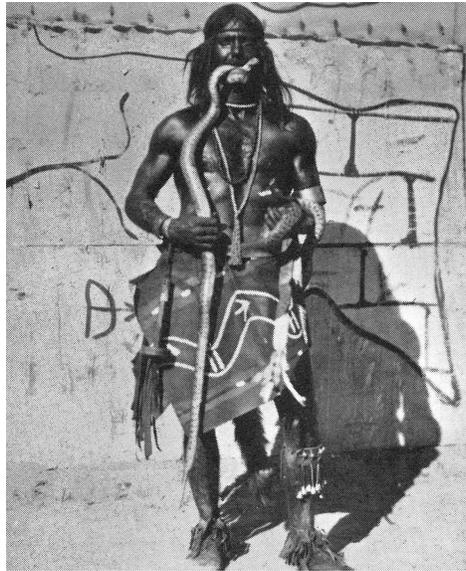
service, why he turned out to be something of a stumble bum and had to be worked on and worked on. But all the old soldiers picked that up right now.

That Philadelphia trip of October, 1926, was a safari and a saga without equal in the annals of any organization. You packed 36 Smoki braves into one Pullman car in Prescott, rolled them down to Phoenix and started them over the Southern Pacific to New Orleans. Naturally there had to be lots of doubling up, even to a couple of smaller guys in an upper berth. From New Orleans north, over the Southern railroad to St Louis, where there was a layover of a few hours. Some of the boys had some high adventures in St Louis.

And we were all wearing those high crowned, red, Smoki hats

Then we went on to Philadelphia where our Pullman car was [parked] in the railroad yards, to serve as a dormitory for anyone wishing to stay there. But most of us went to hotels. That huge stadium holds over a hundred thousand, and it didn't appear that many saw our Snake Dance. But we heard later that our audience was more than twenty thousand. We had brought along all the [fat] bull snakes we could catch. But they weren't enough, so our director rented a batch of waspy little black snakes from a zoo. These little varmints nearly ate us alive! Not a bit like our own home-raised gentle bull snakes.

Some guys seemed like would get bitten by those bull snakes. I never did get bitten by one. But Cecil James was one of our dancers, and gosh if he'd get near a bull snake it'd bite him. I don't know why, but something about him that a bull snake'd bite him. Of course, the bite of a bull snake is no more serious than a hen peckin' ya'. It'll draw blood, but that's about all.



Gail in Costume With Snakes

Our 1927 show did pretty well and in 1928 we had a trip to Phoenix with a parade and an afternoon and an evening show. We learned then and there that transporting costumes, scenery and busy Prescott men out of town was not in the cards for Smoki if we wanted to remain

solvent.

In 1929 and '30, we brought our financial heads above water, and so a wise Chief and Council decided that we'd put our money into something that enthusiastic New Dealers couldn't spend. So in 1931 we began the Pueblo. Hauled rock, dug foundations, laid up walls, all through hard work and cooperation. Trucks were donated. We had 35 trucks one Sunday! Members worked Saturdays and Sundays. By 1935 the Pueblo was fairly complete but even now, we still find work to do on it. The museum, of course, was a government project of the depression. But a member of the Smoki was largely responsible for the design and

execution, and the Smoki people are its custodians. The fine display of prehistoric artifacts of this area is well worth the time of any visitor from any area.

About the time the Pueblo was under construction, the women of Smoki demanded an organization of their own as part of Smoki. And their organization was formed literally over the dead bodies of two members. One of them was this chronicler who is speaking to you now. It was a burning issue at the time, but now we freely admit that some of our most dedicated and effective members are of the gentle sex.

The earlier ceremonies were held in the afternoon in June, which meant we had to practice all through the month of May. In the evenings, when the businessmen could attend, many evenings in Prescott were pretty often cold, and so for that and other good reasons the ceremonies were advanced to the month of August. While still operating in June, we did a night show, which involved a formidable problem of lighting. We used to make our own body paint, which showed up pretty well in daylight, but in that first night show our dancers looked more like the natives of the Congo than members of the Smoki nation.

As Smoki's financial status improved, we were able to build a small Pueblo at the fairgrounds, which got us away from the canvas covers, the corral dressing rooms, and gave us a convenient storage space for the now smaller number of necessary panels needed to top off the Pueblo. We had a big rain during the show along about 1953, and then we really appreciated the new building. No more tarps above us full of rainwater.

You old timers have had that rainwater trickling down your necks, I know.

There've been some awful funny things. That time Bert Savage was in the pit waitin' to go out and the Smokis were hunting, and the skunk came out of the hole. They'd doctored up a tomcat so he looked like a skunk. Put cotton on his tail and cotton down his back, and then this old skunk was supposed to come out and confront the hunters. A few pigeons had been let out, and then a rabbit'd been let out, and the Indians shot at him, and then came this skunk, which is supposed to floor the Indians. Well that tomcat went round and round a time or two and went right down in the pit on top of Bert Savage, where he was waitin' to come out for one of those magic stunts. And he pitched that cat out, the old cat made another turn and went clear across the parade ground and clear across the fairgrounds into the Miller Valley where he'd come from!

Henry Brickmeyer'd gone over and got that tomcat. We wanted a black cat we could make a skunk out of, and we asked this man, says, "Can we borrow that black cat?" "Borrow him, hell! You can have 'im if you can catch 'im." So Henry got a box and he went up and the old cat was on the back porch asleep and he just claps the box down over him, you know, and slipped the board under the box and we had our tomcat. Well that god-damn cat just growled at us all the way back to the Pueblo, you know.

We had one man there, I don't remember his name, but he just took the cat by the front legs and arched his wrist under the cat's chin like that. Hell, I wouldn't a touched that damn tomcat; he'd eat you up. But this guy sure

knew how to handle a cat. He just had both front legs and had his wrist under the cat's chin, and then he doctored him up. He just dipped his tail in the shellac and got cotton all over it, and put some shellac on his back, put dabs of cotton along there and that was our skunk!

In the early dances, some of the members felt they needed a spot of Dutch Courage to be able to handle these ferocious bull snakes. And the tribe even furnished rations, a four-ounce bottle of the local moonshine. That liquor tasted like the bottom of a birdcage, and smelled like a Forest Service outhouse. But it was plenty potent I could say, about 120 proof! Boy, that would knock your head askew! This soon presented a problem which was handled by the inauguration of the Temperance Lecture. The lecture urged, and insisted on, complete sobriety on the day of the dance so that no jugged-up individual could destroy the fine precision of the ceremony.

We had one kind of a hassle [with the Hopis] one time. We were puttin' on a Bean Dance but it was at the wrong time of year. And some of the Hopis came down and protested putting on that Bean Dance at the wrong time of year. Russ Insley made all our property. Well, Russ took 'em out to the Pueblo and they were looking at some of the property that Russ had made, and some of the things he'd made were so much better than they had, so Russ said, "Well now, I'll give you these." So that placated the Indians and they went back with these to run the Bean Dance with and they were satisfied, but poor old Russ had to work the rest of that night re-makin' these things!

There is only one Honorary Chief: Barry Goldwater. Barry was initiated into Smoki in 1941 and has danced both in the Antelope and the Snake Lines. He has given us priceless volumes on ethnology and early research on Indian culture, long out of print, from the Smithsonian Institution and other government bureaus. When he was nominated for U. S. President in 1964, the Smoki people made him an Honorary Chief in proper ceremony, on the Courthouse Plaza.

In the production of our ceremonials, there can be found in our membership any kind of talent needed for that production. Electricians for our lighting, communications, woodsmen to harvest the trees for our set. Tractor operators. Plumbers and carpenters. Radio announcers, pick and shovel men, and cooks. And last but not least, property men and women. Skilled artists who research and design our costumes, and make 'em. There are valued members of the tribe who have never danced a step but without whom we could not function.

Smoki is unlike any other organization. No regular meetings, no dues. Asking only dedicated service and cooperation and rewarding with pride and knowledge of accomplishment. From the beginning in 1921, out in the hot sun, no set, no nothin', to the realistic atmosphere of an Indian village, in the evening firelight of 1972, and a superb and finished ceremonial performance, we've come a long, long way.

The final performance of the Smoki Snake Dance was in August 1990.

