

Dancing to a Different Tune

Ninety-nine years ago, a group of burlesque performers mimicked a Hopi dance in Prescott. The audience loved it and clamored for more. So, for almost 70 years, the “Smoki People” obliged. Now, 30 years after the last Smoki performance, the Smoki Museum, which celebrates American Indian art and culture, is distancing itself from its origins with a new name.

BY KATHY MONTGOMERY

In May 1921, the Yavapai County attorney placed a newspaper ad offering 50 cents apiece for live bullsnakes. The question on most people’s minds was: Why? And the Prescott newspaper promised to get to the bottom of it.

A trail of clues dribbled out with the regularity of a drumbeat. The Owl Drug and Candy Store displayed the snakes in its window. Curious customers learned the snakes had something to do with *Way Out West*, a playful revue planned to benefit Prescott’s rodeo.

Subsequent articles said the show would feature “a peaceful Indian tribe” invited to perform its famous Bullsnake Dance. Organizers promised to halt the “death-defying” spectacle if more than 13 people fainted.

The publicity ploy worked. Spectators packed the stands at the rodeo grounds, and the show’s finale, the Smoki Bullsnake Dance, was a hit.

In keeping with the comedic nature of the show, the dancers had burlesqued a Hopi dance, although many believed it was authentic. The newspaper assured its readers that none of the participants “was other than a perfectly well-known and respected citizen of Prescott or its environs.”

Audiences clamored for more. And for almost 70 years, Prescott’s Smoki People obliged.

Identified by tattooed dots on their left hands, the selectively anonymous members included some of Prescott’s leading citizens: state senators, legislators, county and city officials, and, most famously,



U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater. Smoki became such an institution that members said that to be Prescott was to be Smoki and to be Smoki was to be Prescott.

Yet despite the group's stated objective of preserving Native culture, the popular dances proved increasingly controversial, and many in Native communities — particularly the Hopi Tribe — found them offensive. Now, 30 years after the last Smoki performance, Prescott's Smoki Museum, which celebrates American Indian art and culture, is distancing itself from its origins with a name change to accompany a planned expansion.

The name "Smoki" is a play on *Moqui*, a term the Spanish used to describe the Hopi people. As its emblem, the group chose a variation on the Hopi Sun Shield, and poet Sharlot Hall wrote a Smoki origin myth based on that of the Northern Arizona tribe. The name was originally pronounced "smoky," but in 1922, Prescott's newspaper explained that "Smoki" should be pronounced "smoke-eye," emphasizing for the first time the group's unique identity. The same year, encouraged by the success of their *Way Out West* performance, Smoki members repeated their dance.

Smoki's 26 charter members incorporated in 1923. That was when they "got serious," as one member put it. With the support of University of Arizona archaeologist Byron Cummings, Smoki's mission shifted from supporting the rodeo to preserving Native American customs, artifacts and lore.

"Shuck the clothes off a white man, paint his body brown, give him a live snake in one hand [and] a rattle in the other ... and he reverts to the primitive," charter member Gail Gardner, a noted cowboy poet, famously said. "He realizes that many Indian ceremonies are strangely moving and beautiful, and that the encroachment of our so-called white civilization may mark the end of them."

It wasn't a stretch for Smoki members to believe they were preserving a vanishing culture. Beginning in the late 19th century, the federal government's Indian policy was assimilation. Native children were sent to boarding schools and discouraged from practicing their language and customs.

In 1882, the government declared the Plains Indians' Scalp Dance, War Dance and Sun Dance "Indian offences." And by 1915, Hopi dances had come under fire.

Beginning the year of the first Smoki dance, Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner Charles H. Burke published rules that placed restrictions on dances, particularly those that failed to meet Anglo codes of morality or caused participants to neglect their crops, livestock or homes. Some Hopi dances were accused of all of these.

In its heyday, Smoki membership was highly prized and granted by invitation only. Full membership took years and required a secret, elaborate and difficult initiation. With the exception of President Calvin Coolidge, an honorary member, admission was initially restricted to white men who lived in Prescott and had significant business interests there.

Amid great controversy, Smoki allowed "squaws" to form an auxiliary in the 1930s, with membership subject to the approval of the Smoki tribal council. But, unofficially, women played key roles early on. Marie Tumber came up with the idea for the first



ABOVE: President Calvin Coolidge (left) is made an honorary Smoki member by Yavapai Chamber of Commerce Secretary Grace Sparkes (center) and Phoenix Chamber of Commerce Secretary H.B. Watkins in 1924. *Library of Congress*

OPPOSITE PAGE: A Smoki dancer performs in Prescott in the mid-1920s. *Arizona Highways Archives*

Smoki Snake Dance, presenting it to a fraternal organization called the Yavapai Club. Having lived on Hopi land, Tumber choreographed the dance and taught it to the men.

Yavapai Chamber of Commerce Secretary Grace Sparkes threw her marketing genius behind promoting the dances. And in 1935, she helped secure Depression-era public works funding to construct the Smoki Museum to house the group's artifacts and research library, as well as relics from archaeological digs underway around the county.

Over the years, Smoki's stagecraft grew increasingly sophisticated, with members spending most of the year preparing for the annual ceremonials. After each performance, a newly elected chief appointed a ceremonial director to plan the next year's program.

Members pored over federal Bureau of American Ethnology texts to research dances and costumes. Max Factor, the Hollywood cosmetics line, created and tested their body paint. Set designers experimented with special effects: a tree felled by "lightning" with the help of a battery and primer cord, a rainbow created with a pair of fire hoses and a projector, a "maiden" who disappeared into a pond as though she had drowned.

Not everything went smoothly, and most of those incidents made for entertaining stories. There was the "Fire God," which unintentionally caught fire, and the maiden who emerged from

a pond prematurely when carbon dioxide from dry ice made it hard to breathe in the pit where she waited. More seriously, though, a 23-year-old fell from a pole in 1981, leaving him permanently disabled.

Meanwhile, Smoki grew in power and prestige. At its peak, the group claimed as many as 700 members from every level of Prescott society, including several mayors and City Council members. Performances sold out, and restaurants and hotels filled to capacity with tourists who came to watch the dances.

"Somebody in the organization represented the power company or the telephone company or construction," the late Bruce Fee, a former Smoki chief, said in the documentary *Borrowed Dances*. "Highway patrol, policemen, they were all Smoki. So we could do anything we wanted to."

Smoki promotional materials claimed the dances were "given in a manner which [left] no offense whatsoever from the standpoint of the Indian." But Hopi tribal members objected early and often. In 1922, after a visit to Hopi land, University of Arizona President C.H. Marvin told a reporter that Hopis were deeply concerned about the Smoki Snake Dance. "They believed it a sacrilegious ceremonial," he said. "The chiefs ... wanted to know whether or not there was some way of stopping it."

More criticism came in 1924, when a *Los Angeles Times* editorial called the performances "a thoroughly offensive, objectionable and indefensible exhibition of bad taste." And by the late 1920s, governmental scrutiny of Indian dances had eased. In 1930, the Hopi Tribe, which never stopped performing the Snake Dance, won the right to continue it without interference, calling Smoki's stated goal of preservation into question.

But the Smoki organization took on a momentum of its own. Smoki activities involved whole families; some had members who spanned two or three generations. And participation gave members a sense of identity and purpose that felt deeply personal.

"It was a family, more or less," recalls Wally Warren, a former Smoki chief who joined the group in 1966. "If you had problems, there was always someone to help you out." And while Smoki performed dances from many tribes, the Snake Dance, which concluded every ceremonial, had become the group's signature.

The practice of electing a new chief every year provided cover. When Smoki performed the Kachina Home Dance in 1980, Chief Elino Jacobson reportedly apologized to the Hopi Tribe, saying, "We have acted out of ignorance, rather than disrespect," despite a letter of protest sent three years earlier. Three years after that, the Smoki People performed a Mudhead Kachina Dance.

The dispute came to a head in the late 1980s with the creation of the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office. "[Smoki] told us,

'We don't have any ill intent, and our mission to do these Hopi dances was to help the tribe preserve them,'" recalls Leigh Kuwanwisiwma, the office's director emeritus. "We told them those ceremonies are still alive and well, and I don't believe we need anyone to, quote, 'preserve' them for us."

With the support of other tribes, Hopis organized a protest in Prescott during the 1990 Smoki ceremonial. Within days of the event, the Smoki chief requested a meeting with Kuwanwisiwma to say that while the group respected the Hopis, Smoki planned to hold its ceremonial again the following year. "So I told them, 'We're going to be back again,'" Kuwanwisiwma says. "And we're going to continue to publicize our opposition, and we're going to hit all of your advertising support."

But there never was another Smoki dance. To this day, the Hopis claim credit, but Smoki members insist the protest played no part. Like many, Warren, who participated in the 1990 Snake Dance, attributes the end to declining membership and aging dancers. "We wasn't putting on a proficient show," he says. "And we wasn't getting the people to put on the show. ... The last show, the average age of the dancers was 55. If you had to dance in three dances, you had a hell of a time going from one dance to the other."

Smoki reorganized its museum as a nonprofit, and the group formally disbanded in 2001, transferring its assets to the museum. "It was like a family separating," Warren recalls. "A lot of people had their feelings hurt."

Warren threw himself into museum work. "I didn't want to see it dissolve," he explains. "I just wanted to see it held together." He's 90 now, and among Smoki alumni, only he continues to volunteer at the museum. "We had three kinds of people," he explains. "We had people who joined Smoki for the social benefits, we had the ones who wanted to dance, and we had museum people. The museum people just died off."

Over the years, the museum leadership began to distance itself from the Smoki legacy. Its board began consulting Native American advisers and added trustees with Native heritage. Recently, it voted to change the museum's name, although it

hadn't settled on a new one when this story went to press.

"About the last thing we are about as a museum right now is the Smoki People," Executive Director Cindy Gresser says. "As Native tribes regained their own culture, there was no more need for places like Smoki to preserve it. It's not their job. It wasn't their job. They just didn't know it."

Kuwanwisiwma says the Hopi Tribe supports the museum's direction. "We see eye to eye with Cindy," he says. And Warren feels optimistic about the museum's future and endorses the expansion, but he shrugs off the name change. "It's still the Smoki Museum, as far as I'm concerned," he says. "They can put whatever handle they want on it. It'll always be the Smoki Museum." **AH**

