

WHEN SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES

BY: Jonathan Nicholas

Night stalks like a tiger, unseen yet unforgiving. Darkness pads through the forest, creeping ever closer until the last lingering shadows are devoured.

Silence settles on the cedars.

A single high-pitched whistle.

A solitary beat from the elkhide drum.

From deep inside the firepit, hiding place of history, some flame of memory begins to flicker. And the great planked walls of the potlatch house soften and grey and glow. The firelight forces open the doors of perception, and, without pause or invitation, the past soars in through the smoke.

Suddenly he appears, this immense figure- at least 350 pounds - garbed in his enormous button blanket, his massive head serving as plinth for a huge cedar headress. His hands are the size of canoes, and into them he sweeps us, carrying us off on the tide of his imagination.

Chief Lelooska has committed himself to a singular pursuit - to making the unseen world palpable, to escorting us to a time and place where everything in nature has life and power.

The tools of his trade are the masks of the cedar and salmon people, the Indians who lived along the 1,000-mile, rainsoaked stretch of coastline that ribboned north from the mouth of the Columbia River.

The curator of the big-time Back East museum was feeling pretty proud of himself. Here, at last, was the old Indian chief, touring his prized collection.

Surely, he thought, the visitor would gaze in awe at the magnificent masks, each ensconced in its own temperature-controlled case, preserved for all eternity.

But in the chief's eyes, where the curator expected to see admiration, all he saw were tears. "A mask," says Lelooska, "means nothing to us when it is empty. It has no song, no story, no smoke."

The Indians of the Northwest Coast had no written traditions, the entire history and mythology and folklore of the tribes was preserved by the masked dancers, who handed their secrets down through the generations.

And no Indian wore a mask, used a song or dance, without earning the right-by marriage, by heredity, even by war.

So powerful was this tradition that in the 1920's the Canadian government, seeking to solidify its hold on Northwest tribes, outlawed potlatches, and the showing of masks and dances. Masks by the truckload were hauled off to museums. Masked dancing remained illegal until the 1950's. Illegal, but alive.

Masks retained their power because they never were seen outside the ritual, never glimpsed other than through alder smoke and firelight's shadow, where drum and chant and passion gave them life as Raven and Wolf and Bear.

To the child reared on teen-age mutant Ninja turtles, Angry Bear might seem like pretty tame stuff. But Lelooska finds in the business of impressing fourth-graders, a little woodsmoke goes a long way.

Lelooska, born Don Smith, is a Cherokee, who came West to become the leading

expert on the folkcraft of the Northwest Coast Indians. In recognition of his skill and passion, he was adopted by James Sewid, hereditary chief of the Kwakiutl people, and given the title of "Chief of Chiefs".

His carvings of masks and headresses, house posts and totem poles, are highly coveted by collectors. But he dedicates one third of his time to telling stories, especially to children.

Each year as many as 15,000 youngsters come to the Lelooska family compound at Ariel, Wash., there to sit around the fire and step into the past.

Lelooska, aided by his cast of family dancers, lures his audience back to a place "where the world of the imagination is just an arm's reach away."

The performance may be ragged around the edges, some of the dancers seeming to have one foot in the future rather than on the beat. Lelooska knows. And smiles. "Even when the dancer is wearing Nikes," he says, "the masks still come to life."

Bringing them to life, he says, is the challenge. The reward is building bridges to the young before they get their prejudices, before they come to think of Indians as lazy and stupid and drunk, or worse, as dead and gone.

One day, likely not too distant, these dances will be on display in Disneyland-with simulated firelight and spray-on cedar scent. But for now, in the woods of Southwest Washington, it still is possible to peek at the real thing, thus peering clear through into the past. Especially when the smoke fills your eyes.

TAKEN IN ENTIRETY FROM THE OREGONIAN.

REBURIAL CEREMONY HELD

The deceased ancestors of the three Indian tribes who have been on public display over the last 50 years have finally been put to rest in a tribal reburial ceremony conducted by the Pawnee Tribe of Oklahoma.

The reburial ceremony for the 146 ancestors of the Pawnee, Arikara and Wichita Tribes was held on Saturday April 14, 1990.

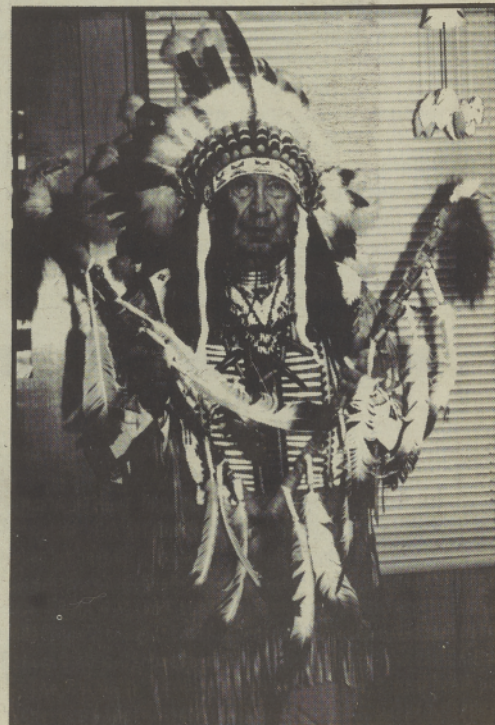
Because of the sensitive nature of the ceremony, the event was closed to the general public. However, over 50 invited guests from Kansas who are representatives of the public (including the Governor, Attorney General, Lawmakers and County Commissioners) were invited to attend the ceremony.

The tribal reburial ceremony marks the end of a three-year struggle to close the so-called "Salina Burial Pit" that offered tourists for \$3.50 fee a view of the bodies contained in the burial ground that was opened to the public in 1935. The bodies are estimated to be around 600 years old. Strong tribal opposition and public outcry led to the pit's eventual closing in 1989.

The reburial effort, spearheaded by the Native American Rights Fund as legal counsel to the three Tribes, ended in the signing of the "Treaty of Smokey Hill" which provided for the reburial of the bodies and compensation for the owners of the land. The Kansas Legislature passed necessary enabling legislation for the Treaty last Spring. The Legislature also enacted a state bill that bans unregulated public displays of human remains and protects unmarked

graves from unnecessary disturbances.

Walter Echo-Hawk, the Tribes' attorney, expressed the three Tribes' appreciation by stating, "I hope that the rest of the country will be as sensitive as the people of Kansas in helping Indian people to rebury their dead relatives that are presently warehoused in museums, federal agencies and universities."



DEPOE BAY CHAMBER HONORS CHIEF DEPOE

Chief William Depoe, well known as a "good will" ambassador of the Siletz Tribe, was awarded an honorary membership in the Depoe Bay Chamber of Commerce at their monthly luncheon this March.



*In recognition & appreciation of
Outstanding Community Service*

Chief William Depoe

is hereby named an

Honorary Member

of the

Depoe Bay Chamber of Commerce

This 12th day of March, 1990.

