

## Indian Humor: from campfires to the Internet

Following each annual convention of the National Congress of American Indians in the 1970s, we would have a meeting with management of the host hotels to assess the event and get their advice for planning future conventions. One of their observations, invariably, was that the Indian conventioners seemed to joke and laugh more than any others they had hosted; they seemed surprised at that.

We would explain that, contrary to the “stoic” Indian stereotype, humor has always been an important part of Indian life.

In my tribe, the Oglala Lakota, as in other Sioux tribes, one of the important roles in the camp was that of Heyoka - the “contrary;” and among his various roles was that of making fun and laughter. And trickster stories, like the spider Iktomi, have delighted many generations around Sioux campfires. Humor was important to preserving civility and order in the community, especially in the confinement of the long winter camps.

All tribes have clowns and tricksters as part of their lore. Sometimes, through humor, a clown’s role might be to ridicule, when such was warranted. Felix Cohen, the great legal scholar, tells about this: “A chief who forgets that he is a public servant and tries to order others around has always been an object of ridicule,” he wrote, “...and Indian laughter has rippled down the centuries and upset many thrones.”

Another genre of Indian humor is the “49” song. In humorous lyrics and almost always in English, these intertribal songs tell of unrequited love, heart ache, poverty, and reservation life, all in round-dance cadence. From WWII to the present, “49” songs – sometimes along with a six pack or two, have put a happy ending to many pow-wow nights and convention after-hours.

Lakota elders are often practitioners of a special kind of humor - teasing. And oftentimes, white visitors to the reservation are the butt of the old men’s jokes. Back home at Wanblee in the 1940s, a group of old men used to sit on a bench in front of the general store, which also served as the town post office, waiting for mail and talking about old times and about tribal politics. Wanblee village is near the most rugged and beautiful area of the South Dakota Badlands, an area rich in fossils, and this attracted archaeologists and paleontologists to the area. One day a jeep load of student archaeologists drove up and one of them showed a skull of some prehistoric critter he had found. The elders studied the fossil carefully. “I found one just like this several years ago,” said one of the old men, “but it had an arrowhead stuck right above the eye.” He pointed to the spot.

The young scholars became excited about the prospect of finding evidence of human existence on the continent thousands of years earlier than had been thought. What did you do with the skull, they wanted to know. “Oh...I threw it down a canyon.” He said, “We used to find lots of old stuff like that.” After he told them the approximate place he threw the relic, the explorers tore off in a cloud of dust, back to the badlands.

The old man sat silent for a long while looking far away. The others sat quietly, looking down and smiling. Finally one of them looked up at him and grinned: "You old bullshitter, you didn't find no skull like that." They all burst out laughing.

These days the Internet is becoming an arena for Indian humor (although many of the same jokes circulating now were making the rounds for decades). These new Internet storefronts are buddy-list groups who share Indian news and jokes via e-mail, much of the time forwarding stuff that had come from other groups. I am included in a number of them, but my favorite is a small group, which includes Louie LaRose (Winnebago's answer to Rodney Dangerfield) and Nebraska humorist Roger Welsch (the white man's answer to Louie LaRose). Louie manages the tribe's bison herd, and sometimes goes by the name "Buffalouie." Roger is a self-described wannabee who used to star in the "Postcards from Nebraska" segment on Charles Kuralt's Sunday Morning on CBS-TV. There are a few others who join in our group, but they usually lay low, out of range of collateral damage.

As has been his shtick for many years, much of Louie's jokes are tribal-targeted, and we Sioux are usually ground zero. For example, in recent chatter about the war in Iraq, Louie suggested that what is needed over there are Sioux code talkers. But he wouldn't have them speaking Lakota; says Louie, "Their English would confuse everybody." He also tells that the Sioux celebrate Ocho de Mayo - "Cinco de Mayo, Sioux time," he says.

But Roger Welsch is most often the target of the joking -- a spear-catcher role he endures with a sense of masochistic penitence. And the humor is the take-no-prisoners kind. One time Roger added several new names on the buddy list and they responded quick and witty, scorching him with one-liners. Louie and I were silent. Finally, a couple days later came e-mail from Louie in which he protested the new members and maintained that we Indians have sole rights -- treaty rights, no less -- to insult Roger; and he resented having to share it with white guys. Roger shrank the list back into compliance with Louie's apocryphal treaty.

But most of the time Louie appreciates Roger: "He's a credit to his race," says Louie.

The Internet buddy groups are fun. On the other hand, the on-line Native American chat rooms usually aren't. Repartee that has to be instantly typed loses much; and Indian repartee requires much in way of facial expression and body language (As Louie says, "Sioux can't communicate if they can't use their hands or point with their lips."). Besides, the chat room groups seem to be made up largely of wannabees and born-again Indians, and most of the jokes there, like most of the screen names, are of the inane, fluffy sort.

Back to Louie LaRose. In real life he is as wise as he is funny, and one of his deep observations is that Indian humor over the years has served to cover much pain and sorrow, and it helps us to endure. With such an abundance of Indian humor, and with humorists like Louie, we shall endure long into the future.

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