

Out-Indianing a Wannabee

There were few in Indian Country more outstanding than the late Ruben Snake of the Nebraska Winnebagos – a man to whom the word “sage” could truly be applied. And like most such people of the tribes, Ruben had a wonderful sense of humor. I don’t know if he had written much besides his autobiographical work, “Ruben Snake: Your Humble Serpent,” edited by Jay C. Fikes; but one of the treasures he did leave us was the small brochure, “Being Indian Is...,” in which he listed indignities and ironies we Indians endure as our lot.

Some day, when someone comes up with such a list especially for us mixed-bloods, at the top of the list has got to be this: “Being mixed-blood is getting out-Indianed by a Wannabee.”

“Wannabee” is a term used to describe a non-Indian who, for various reasons, takes on the identity or practice of Indianness. For some, it is pursuit of an idealized picture of Native American cultures. To others, so-called new agers, it is the search for some cosmic mysticism. For most, I suppose, it is just a search for an identity in a convoluted world.

Most Wannabees are dead serious in their quest and they work diligently at it. They research virtual forests of family trees in hopes of finding that one great-to-the-nth-degree grandmother who was an Indian princess.

I must digress here to ask the question: Why does a Wannabee never search for or claim a prince in his or her Indian lineage? Why always a princess? To remedy that, a Chippewa friend of mine several years ago had thought of taking on the name Prince Male Poon – an obvious take off on Princess Pale Moon, the darling of the Washington Redskin bunch; but too much could be read into the Poon part, and he wisely decided against it.

Wannabees study the history, culture and traditions of their newly discovered or adopted tribal heritage, and much more beyond. They generally know more about Indians than the Indians they invariably attach themselves to, and they are always eager to flaunt their knowledge, often to the chagrin of the mixed-bloods in the group. Mixed-bloods, especially those reared on reservations, tend to take their heritage for granted, and don’t bother learning much beyond osmosis about their tribal cultures.

And Wannabees tend to adulate full bloods and the more traditional types, and always show them great deference. Whereas full bloods and traditionals are generally secure in their identity, mixed-bloods very often aren’t, and this makes them fair game for Wannabees, who get a sense of empowerment by out-Indianing them.

But, as in all things, there is sometimes justice for the mixed-blood.

Back in the 1950s, just out of high school, I hired on as a counselor at a Boy Scout camp in the Pennsylvania Pokonos. Being a Sioux lad, I was expected to know everything about Indians, including lore, archery, dancing and crafts. But I figured I could fake it – after all, who would know? As for dancing, I did have some regalia I borrowed before I left the reservation, but I had expected to just saunter around camp in the getup (“Chiefting it out,” as we used to say back

home), and not have to show my total ineptness at dancing. However, having quickly disappointed my employers in the crafts workshops, and having proved to be a menace on the archery range, I figured I best give dancing a try, or risk being sent packing.

Wednesday evening was show time, and the camp gathered around a blazing campfire to see the first one, which was to be a pow-wow. And, although I was billed as the star of the show, there were a couple boy scouts and another counselor who would also take part in the dancing. The counselor was a Polish fellow, an Eagle Scout, body-builder and health nut who taught canoeing and all sorts of woodsy lore. He had a complete Indian outfit that would be the envy of any pow-wow – well, in Oklahoma, anyway. He had made it from goods he got from Grey Owl's in New York, and his craftsmanship was meticulous. And the guy could dance – all kinds of dances: fancy dance, war dance, and some he had created himself. And he worked hard to out-Indian me. For instance, while I snored away every second I could get in after reveille, he would go out early into nature and in ceremony bring up the sun.

But come show time, I was determined not to be out-Indianed, and I had it all planned. As the show was set to begin, I raised my arms like a chieftain in one of those kitsch 1920s paintings, and in my best Tonto voice, I told the audience that back home on the reservation, it was not the fancy steps or the ballet grace of a dancer that counted, but the spirit put into the dance. I would show them how it is done by a *real* Indian. Then I proceeded to dance up a storm, stomping dust high into the night sky, whooping, and swinging my warclub wildly. At Pine Ridge or Crow Fair, I might have been tolerated for a little while by the arena bosses, thinking perhaps I was playing a Heyoka or a clown. More likely, though, I would have been removed – forcibly and forthwith. But there at Camp Goose Pond, the kids reasoned that since I was the only real Indian among the performers in the clearing, I must be doing it right. The Wannabee was politely appreciated, but I was the star of the show.

I out-Indianed him.

I sometimes think back on that evening and feel a pang of guilt, having given the young lads at the camp the wrong impression of the war dance in its beauty, grace and meaning; and having ruined the budding career of a Wannabee warrior. But then I think again and grin, “Hot dog, it felt good!”

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