

So the Legends Go
Or
Some Things I Saw, Thought and Stole

By Dave Olson, 1988

Grandpa was asleep in the back. I was driving. Driving into the burning, morning Arizona sun. I thought it was Arizona anyway. It's not like I was lost or anything, just didn't know where I was. Or where I was going. Mostly because I wasn't going anywhere. Nowhere particular to go whatsoever. Which, incidently, is often the best place to go.

Last I remember was somewhere around Marble Canyon. Maybe. I think. It was nighttime then and daytime now, but an altogether different daytime than yesterday. We were around Bryce Canyon then. So that means we're somewhere else. That settled, motor on.

CAMEROON!?!?! No, Cameron. Cameron, Arizona. Navajo Nation rather. Whatever. Can't ever figure it out. Must be an alright place though. Suddenly savage, no Denny's or J.B.'s. Not many of those on these half-paved, roughneck, tertiary roads through nowhere and beyond. Maybe that's why I like them so much.

I drove through town. One road, a half-paved one. But the town ended after two miles of tar-paper mobile homes, satellite dishes, broken bigwheels and shiny, dented pick-ups. I turned around, there was too much to see to just drive past. I pulled into a gas station but didn't stop, instead went into a dusty parking lot bordered by the gas station, "The Phoenix" (a bar advertising family fun) and Navajo Joe's Indian Trading Post. A big store boasting not only authentic, real-life, honest to goodness, Indian handcrafted arts and crafts at the best prices in the Geronimo Valley but also the best breakfast anywhere in their *dee-lux* (sic) restaurant. My kind of place. Maybe. I wasn't exactly sure, yet.

It wasn't open though. Not until seven. My concept of time had stopped at 9:09 a couple of days earlier in the land of twenty-four hour diners and a lack of desire to keep winding my wrist-worn antique.

I asked. Another obvious outsider-not tourist, outsider. He mumbled something about inefficiency and opening stores late and moving with the modern world. He continued reading the myriad of handbills splattered across the poles, walls and windows. He seemed a little upset that his grand Hemingway-esque adventure had been so rudely interrupted. He and his new safari clothes were anxious to continue their search for something.

I sat for a while and watched. Just watched. More people started to appear, only a few but I moved the car anyway. I didn't want people peering in through grimy windows at Grandpa slumbering, tangled amongst backpacks, sleeping bags, backseats and empty cigarette packs. Sleeping, wrinkling, and wheezing. No use startling anyone, especially my dozing co-pilot and compadre. I listened for him to breathe, a habit I'd acquired lately. Just to make sure.

In the gas station, two Native Americans dudes sat in uniform. Jeans, flannel shirts, boots. I almost fit in.

"Hey guys, you know what time it is?" I waited for them to say "no".

"Six-fifty."

"Twenty past seven." One right after another.

Not even going to try to figure that one out. They didn't catch it or acknowledge it, so I didn't. Maybe I wasn't supposed to.

Needed another question. "So, how much is your gas?" I had bravely assumed that the sign saying _____.9 a gallon wasn't correct.

One looked at a different wall, towards the ceiling. Stared for a moment.

"One dollar, fifty-two and nine-tenths cents," he said slowly, eyes closed.

"Thanks, appreciate your help." Back out the door. Back into the dust, sand and sun.

Back to Joe's and my seat on the porch. I couldn't leave yet.

An Indian kept on walking back and forth, slowly, almost gingerly but thoroughly lazy, picking up litter. Back and forth. Back and forth, then to the garbage. And

back and forth. I couldn't see any more scraps but he continued, filling his hands with the dusty pieces of nothing. Looking ahead, there would be none. But there was. Back and forth he went.

Not wanting to interrupt his rituals, I read the handbills. The news.

Maybe I ought to stay and go to the potluck supper and dance with the all-native "Sons of the Desert" band from Flagstaff. It was at the community center in some damn place next weekend. Next weekend if today was about the day I figured.

Or maybe if I was tricky, I could qualify for the Native Job Training and Placement Program. Go to school in a trailer and learn to be a roofer. That or a witch doctor.

Wrestling was coming soon. A special no disqualification, Indian (sic) strap match between Mr. Wrestling and the mighty Lumberjack. And an Easter egg hunt for the kids. I peeled the tape off the window, trying to be quiet, after looking around to make sure Mr. Wrestling (or Mr. Handbill for that matter) weren't going to reprimand

me for thieving their poster. That's the last thing I needed.

My brother and I used to laugh about Indians who would get all stinky, liquored up and go to wrestling. They would sit in the cheap seats, make lots of noise and think it's real. Well hell, it was real. So the legends go. My other brother would really dig it too. He's way into wrestling.

So I went into the museum. I saw their ancient, proud culture pressed, dried and displayed. The signs talked about all the clever and curious things they used to do, but avoided the topics of how it all seemed to drift away. When that day was or about pick-up trucks and firewater. It about got me all confused and embarrassed just thinking about it, all those stories about cowboys, prospectors, preachers, marshals, governors, trains. Blood. My moralizing lasted for about six minutes.

I figured I would've made a good Indian way, way back. Making pottery, smoking peace pipes, praying to rain gods. Little Wiener Pig would be my name. Yeah. Some Indians are still like that. It's a nice notion for a PBS special. Most aren't. Some are real dumb - I think that applies to any tribe, community, or club right down to the Elks.

Two came hauling around a corner at about mach 12 in Department of Transportation truck loaded down with gear. They gyrated donuts across dusty, gravel parking lot. Spinning and whirling. Laughing and drinking. Then they were gone leaving silence and dust. No one dead, no one injured, no one even noticed. Or moved anyway.

The dust cleared a little bit, although it never does completely, and the garbage man peeled away the glass doors and unlocked the iron prison bars into the trading post and dining emporium. He walked in and sat down on stool and just sat there. Waiting for something to happen.

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1988, written in Orem, UT