

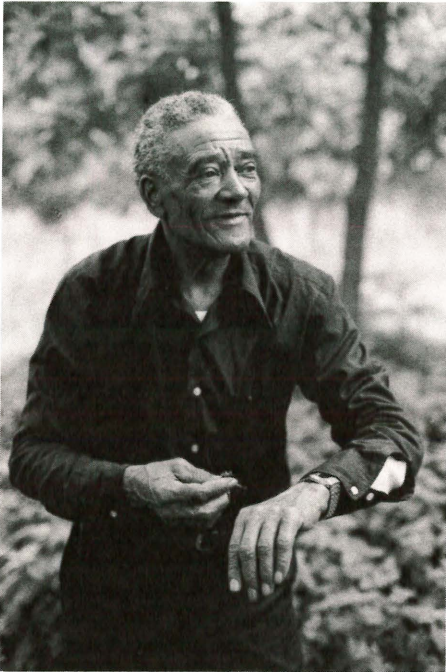
American Indian Stereotypes

Rayna Green

This year at the Festival, Americans will see some venerable and wonderful North American institutions — a medicine show and a Caribbean-style Carnival. Some traditional aspects of these performances, however, will not be seen on the Mall because we have asked the performers not to show them. Rather than exercise a silent censorship, we decided to bring the discussion to you, the public, and explore a rare part of our national heritage that we do not wish to put on the Mall. We are speaking of ethnic stereotypes — here mainly of American Indians — that are often presented through acts and costumes in the entertainments we feature this year. Although certainly traditional and popular, and just as certainly often innocent and well intentioned, some aspects of the stereotypes disturb many people and, for this reason, we prefer not to present them. Our friends from the carnival and medicine show have agreed with this.

Medicine shows and carnivals did not invent Indian stereotypes. Stories, songs, jests, jokes, sayings and artifacts like weathervanes, cigar-store figures, dolls and paintings have been in wide circulation since the first Native American and immigrant American met. In cartoons, maps and travel book illustrations, the Indian Queen figure — a large, full-bosomed, naked, barbarous woman with her hand on a spear and her foot on the head of an alligator — was the symbol of the New World's promise and peril. Later, the Indian Princess figure — slimmer than her "Mother," draped in a classic gown,

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1, 2 In many areas, health specialists are also family and friends. John Lee is an herbalist, and his sister, Maude Bryant, is a midwife. They live outside Pittsboro, North Carolina, and they service other members of their family as well as friends and neighbors. Photo by Jack Santino for the Smithsonian.

Photo by Glenn Hinson for the Smithsonian.

the human being is a whole, integral being, and, consequently, that respect, trust, and faith must be mutually earned if curing and healing are to occur.

Suggested Reading

Hand, Wayland, ed. *American Folk Medicine*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

Sontag, Susan. *Illness As Metaphor*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

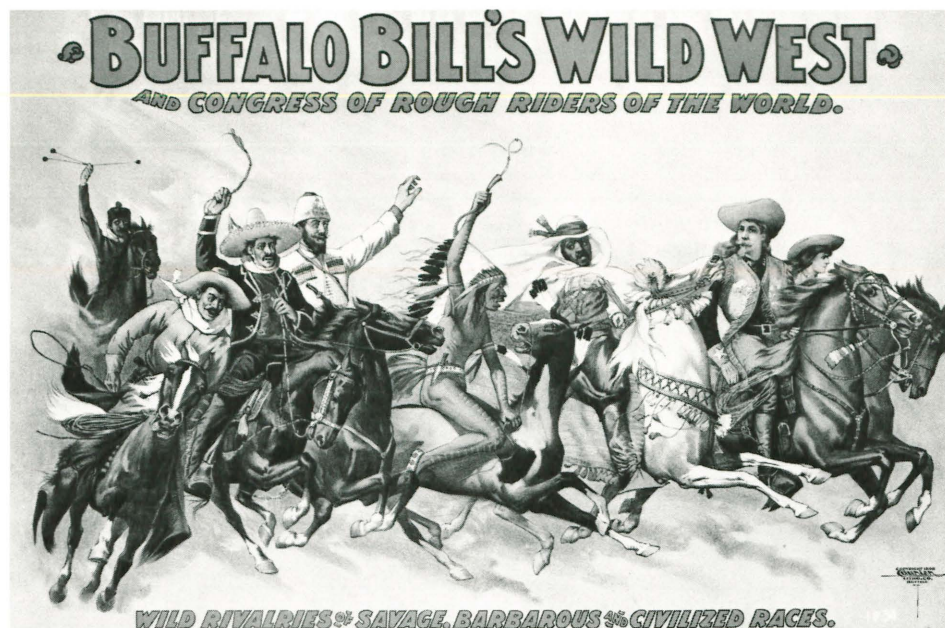
Yoder, Don. "Folk Medicine," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard Dorson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, 191-215.

and faith that a cure is possible and forthcoming.

On the popular level, the medicine show "doctor" relied on folk humor, the verbal artistry of his "pitches," and entertainment to sell his products. Today, myriad over-the-counter popular medicine rely on slick and expensive media campaigns to convince us of their curative powers. The performance factor has been institutionalized in clinical medical practice as "bedside manner." The term itself is testimony to the need of the medical specialist to use the community's beliefs and symbols to create a receptive frame of mind and an attitude conducive to healing in the patient. The healers, curers, and herbalists who practice folk medicine teach us that

tiara on her head, torch in her hand and surrounded by Revolutionary heroes like George Washington — came to be the symbol of freedom from the Old World. Her real but myth-laden counterparts, Squanto, Pocahontas and Sacajawea, came to represent the epitome of the Good Indian, that is, Indians who aided white men in conquering their own country and countrymen. The Indian “sidekicks” of television and Western movies, the Lone Ranger’s Tonto and Red Ryder’s Little Beaver, are, in a way, Pocahontas’ brothers. As wars and conflicts over land worsened between Native people and white settlers, however, the Bad Indian figure came to be just as prevalent as the Good Indian. Geronimo and Sitting Bull were the real-life counterparts of Indians in stories and songs who massacred innocent settlers, dashed out the brains of children, and made captured women into drudges for cruel warrior masters. Princess and Squaw, Warrior and Brave, Noble and Ignoble Savage, all became stereotype characters in American folk and popular repertoires. Many real aspects of Indian traditional cultures have enriched American cuisine, language, landscape and art, but some Americans think only in stereotypes.

Indian images have been projected in popular entertainments since the 1700s. On the American stage the Dying Cherokee warrior and the Indian princess who leaped for love were applauded, and their Savage cohorts were condemned. In American commerce, the Indian became a major advertising device. One of the most important Indian “gifts” (modern Native people would call it our last revenge, perhaps) was tobacco, and cigar-store Indians decorated American sidewalks until fire laws



“Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” ca. 1890. *Wild West Show Poster.* Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Division of Prints and Photographs.

demanding their removal about 1925-50. Indians were standard figures in print advertising as well.

Indian medicines were commercially introduced in the 18th century, and soon over 80 brands of “Indian” medicine were on the market. The white “Indian” doctor was a familiar sight to most people, as were the brightly colored ads, booklets, and calendars issued by the “doctors” to tout their products. Popular acceptance of the medicines came from a belief that Indians were healers, superior knowers of Nature’s ways. Early settlers hastened to obtain Indian remedies when they could, befriending Indian curers and developing their own versions of Indian medicine. Many best sellers like the “Indian Doctor’s Dispensary” (1813), “The Indian Guide to Health” (1836) and the “North American Indian Doctor” guided popular American health practices for years.

Medicine shows were one of the major popular entertainments of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Shows varied from large tent operations to single wagon productions, though it is probably the image of the single wagon with an “Indian” doctor pitchman that most people remember. The purpose of the Indian presence in medicine shows was, however, principally entertainment, in addi-

tion to serving as an amusing endorsement of the product’s value. The image conveyed was generally other than that of the Indian healer: The Kickapoo Co. had hundreds of real Indians dancing, weaving baskets, playing the drum, doing feats to demonstrate health and strength and, naturally, making herbal preparations. But most of the “Indians” in medicine shows were Mexicans, blacks, and white men made up in red-face and costume. All wore colorful costumes, most of which eventually became a standardized combination of various tribal regalia from Plains Indian groups.

Popular as the medicine shows were, however, no other single form of American popular entertainment contributed as much to common stereotypes of the Indian as the Wild West Show. The Wild West Show projected the figure of the Plains warrior as the essential American Indian and, along with its cousin, the Western movie, it became the real-life West in the minds of many. At least ten major road shows played from 1884 to 1938, when the Western movie and circus effectively took over the Wild West Show’s function of public spectacle. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and Congress of Rough Riders was the first show and prototype, and it played to over six million people in 1893 alone.

Carnivals, circuses, and medicine shows were not the only American institutions that featured stereotyped Indians or



Wildroot magazine advertisement, n.d. Photo by Rayna Green from the Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution.

parade as “Indians.” With outrageously elaborate outfits of feathers, sequins, and spangles, the “chiefs” lead their “tribes” in Afro-Caribbean-influenced dance steps down the avenues of New Orleans.

Playing Indian, whether on the screen, in a child’s game, in a Scout Merit Badge competition, medicine show sales pitch, Mardi Gras, hobbyist dance contest, or half-time entertainment, seems to be a compelling activity for the American people. They don’t easily give it up. Folklore sometimes includes material that, however unintentionally, is harmful to the positive public self-image of others. The decision to omit these aspects is a kind of censorship, but one that reaffirms the best of tradition. That the performers from the medicine show and Carnival have agreed to appear without some of their customary costumes and acts speaks well of the richness of their traditions and the fairness and openness of their minds.

Suggested Readings

Berkhofer, Robert. The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present. New York: Knopf, 1978.

Coen, Rena Neumann. “The Indian as Noble Savage in 19th-Century American Art.” Unpublished PhD. dissertation,



1 “Red Cloud Chewing Tobacco,” ca. 1875. Tobacco ad. Photo courtesy of the Division of Prints and Photographs, the Library of Congress.

2 Kickapoo Medicine Company Ad Card, n.d. Photo by Rayna Green from the Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution.

others playing Indians. Ordinary Americans join the Boy Scouts and other fraternal organizations like the Improved Order of Red Men; they dance in hobbyist groups and subscribe to magazines that advertise the best places to acquire beads, feathers, and costume elements for “authenticity.”

In the 1920s groups of black Mardi Gras-goers in New Orleans began to march in the Carnival

Folklore and the Vietnamese Community in the United States

Maxine Miska

University of Minnesota, 1969.

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For refugees, community is an immediate concern. Vietnamese, the newest wave of refugees to American shores, have been plucked from their families and communities so suddenly that their children sometimes thought they were just taking a vacation in the Philippines or Guam.

Approximately 130,000 Vietnamese arrived in the U. S. in late 1975 and were sent to four holding camps—Camp Pendleton, Calif., Fort Chaffee, Ark., Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., and Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa. Most left the camps through the help of American sponsors in the form of various religious or secular groups who accepted financial responsibility for them.¹ After four years, they are now settled in major urban areas. The adults have learned English and have been retrained for new professions; their unemployment rate is below the national average. Cultural change also has been rapid; in some families the grandparents speak little English and the grandchildren speak little Vietnamese. Nonetheless, the traditional pattern persists of the three generations of an extended family living and working together. In Vietnamese terms, a family consists of the passing on responsibility and gratitude from generation to generation.

For the boat people fleeing Vietnam, the passage to America is longer and less certain. Families leave in small boats, not knowing whether they will find a country to accept them, or perish at sea. Many have seen the family mem-

bers they hoped to bring to safety lost in the escape. Arriving with fragments of their families and communities, the Vietnamese in Washington, D. C., have vigorously woven a network of community activities through neighborhood grocery stores, restaurants, the Buddhist church, Catholic organizations, a bistro, Vietnamese language schools, senior citizens' groups, and newspapers.

The history of Vietnam has often combined political domination by foreign empires with Vietnamese mastery of the colonizer's culture. China occupied Vietnam in 111 B.C., and during the 1000 years of Chinese rule that followed, the Vietnamese adopted the Chinese writing system, the Buddhist religion, and an administrative and governmental system based on Confucian philosophy. In A.D. 939, Vietnam gained its independence from China, and for the next



Music is among the rich traditions Vietnamese bring with them to this country. Photos by Nicholas Bocher for the Smithsonian

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