

Way Out Yonder on the Indian Nations

By Kenn Hartmann

You've seen TV westerns, the cowboy matinee shoot-em-ups; Hollywood cavalry charge with bugles blaring, guns blazing chasing the American Indian myth into obscurity. Now let me tell you about being the lone white man on the Great Plains surrounded by thousands of Indians - somewhere around Sisseton, South Dakota. The drum starts low, like distant thunder but builds pulsing with beat of a buffalo stampede, the indigenous voices spread deep into the dark starlit night. There's a great massing of tribes & I'm in the middle of the powwow grounds staring into eternity as usual, drifting aimlessly in my thoughts when a heavy hand descends upon my shoulder. I spin around but this big Indian doesn't let go; he hasn't twisted my shirt or grabbed tight, just these giant hands resting on my collarbone. "Let's go," he says, "follow me." He turns & walks through a throng of Native peoples who part like the Red Sea. I gather my thoughts, this isn't just some big Indian, this is Mitchell Looks Young, the badass bouncer from the Twin Cities, who worked the thug joints at the edge of downtown Minneapolis, the quasi-trendy joints just a little too criminal for the corporate element. I heard one time he cleaned out a whole bar of ruffians - his fists were like sledgehammers felling stone pillars. Here he is muscular & trim in a police uniform & I follow like a marionette monkey, mumbling half hoping he hears me, 'hey man, what'd I do? I ain't no bad man. I didn't know you had to pay to get in.' I follow to the livestock corrals away from the powwow, away from the front gate. I'm paranoid of becoming a stone pillar. He stops at a ramshackle animal chute where cattle are led to slaughter. He asks, "You wanna get high?" Uh no, none for me thanks, I don't mess with that stuff. "That's bullshit," he says while pulling an Esmeralda joint from his uniform pocket, holding its long white shaft before my eyes. "Confiscation weed, the best!" Well, I guess I can try it, there's a first time for everything, I mean, I won't get hooked will I? He fires it up, drags deep. I follow his lead. He says, "when the city council hired me to be the Police Chief, they placed a pound of weed on my desk & I responded like you. They said they wouldn't be hiring me without knowing my personal idiosyncrasies, so to speak." While he talks I bogart the joint. Apparently the city council was willing to forgive his transgressions if he would forgive theirs. "You've got a vice & we've got ours - agreed?" Apparently he did, but I know he didn't bring me to the cow pens to brag about his career path.


"So what the hell are you doing at the Butte with those gangsters, the Blasphemous Dreamers?" I'm with the crew from Ahbleza; they hired us to do a gig - we set up the sound stage for Floyd Westerman. It's just a place to stay. "I know who you are, we're out on the prairie, we see your every move & you won't see a nickel from those thugs, in fact word is they plan to steal all your shit." Yeah, they tried to pay us off in booze & promises of future gigs. They're all drunk; nobody in Ahbleza is drinking, except for me of course, beer's part of my cultural heritage. Jamie Mahto, leader of the band is a force to be reckoned with when he's sober. Of course Jamie hates when I call him that, "my name's Jamison dude." As the powwow winds down I float to the periphery. During the powwow, one drum plays at a time. Afterwards, there are many drums,



many camps, many fires - the infamous "49" where traditional songs turn into jazz rap spontaneous riffs. The coolest one is the gathering of the rock-stars of the professional powwow circuit - the fancy dancers, handsome young men & gorgeous women. They're dressed sharp in ribbon shirts, vests, cowboy hats & feathers. I can see the horizon in every direction, a dizzying effect like I can fall off the world & tumble into space. I wander from campfire to campfire & near dawn, far from powwow grounds I'm back with the Blasphemous Dreamers, who stumble around motorcycles & shit-box cars, arguing, searching scattered bottles strewn about the roadside, spying down the necks, holding bottles toward a glimmer of light on the horizon, hoping to find 'a spider web of tokay' in the corner of an empty chalice. I leave them & their grand promises & head down the dusty road toward sunrise.

For years after, whenever I cruise through South Dakota, I'll stop at any reservation to see what's cooking. In fact when my brother Chuck & I went to Sturgis, we stopped at the Native owned gas station on the Lower Brule Rez & asked the young girl, 'hey, where can we get some fry bread?' She just pointed & said, "over by the water tower." She didn't give directions like street signs or distances - just point at an object on the horizon & head toward it. Chuck & I got some fry bread & coffee. We took a break from the road & sat around talking to locals. This is what Mitchell Looks Young meant when he said, "don't be sneaking in next time, just be up front & folks will take care of you."

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