

Minor Mensch

Volume 2, Chapter 15

Pacific Pow-Wow

© Courtney Jensen | www.CourtneyJensen.com

Friday, September 1, 2006 at 9:40 p.m.

I'm sitting in Baun, typing this on the POC computer. Win and I have been wandering around the "Pacific Pow-Wow" since 7:00. We'll be heading back out in just a minute to participate in the nighttime pow-wow. But first, notes on the daytime pow-wow:

By noon, the giant lawn between Baun Fitness Center and Hand Hall was covered with booths. It looked like a roofless mini-mall filled with nothing but kiosks. Except, instead of apathetic teenagers selling hats, cell-phones, or perfume, each booth was being operated by an adult man who was one-fifth Native American. And he was selling shirts. Shirts with air brushed pictures of lightning and feathered chieftains (and sometimes a wolf or wolves). Half of them had a Chief Joseph quotation in a "poetic" font.

Attempting to sound poetic himself, I heard one man operating a booth criticize the UOP student body by calling them "a people who know no love but possession."

By his tone, I could tell he didn't mean it to be offensive, but it still felt like an invitation to debate. So I argued that selling airbrushed wolf shirts (or any other such merchandise) is hardly an effective way to set oneself apart.

The man (who I then realized was wearing a child-sized Chief Joseph shirt) responded by criticizing me for using Native American images as sports team mascots.

This was too ridiculous for me to respond. Especially since he was barely more native than I am. A pattern that was suspiciously common among the vendors. But the dance floor¹ seemed to house more purebloods than the booths did. These were mostly women. And Win and I watched them (not *just* the women) perform their round dances and grass dances and fancy dances and gourd dances (and whatever else they called the exact same dance over and over).

¹ Dance floor = small patch of exposed lawn.

None of the performers were wearing any of the merchandise being sold from the booths. And every one of them was dancing to really, really terrible drumming.²

My favorite part about the evening (so far) has nothing to do with the drumming (or the dancing or the would-be carnies trying to sell me their garbage).

It has to do with a generator. A big one.

As the sun was beginning to set, that generator was turned on to power a bunch of floodlights, prolonging the appearance of daytime over the lawn (while giving it a sports arena look).

I'm sure, if I were standing halfway down Miracle Mile, this generator would have still been audible. At that distance, the decibel level would have probably been comparable to a nearby vacuum cleaner. At ten feet away though, it sounded like a steam-hauled freight train carrying twenty-thousand tons of coal as fast as it can.

I tried to shout that analogy directly into Win's ear but I couldn't produce volume enough to be heard. It's okay though because I lost interest in it as soon as I saw this:

Parked right beside the generator – right beside it – was a man in a wheel chair. He was middle-aged, Native American, and appeared to be quadriplegic (tiny, atrophied arms, legs like wobbly scaffolding buckling in on each other).

Obviously he was unable to move himself.

As far as I can tell, somebody left him sitting there (practically tipped up against the machine) in order to lighten his or her load for some last-minute booth-shopping.

What a burden it would have been to have had to buy cheap jewelry with a quadriplegic in tow.

Although the whole scene was remarkably sad, it was also a little bit funny.

² Tribal drummers should take lessons from real drummers (e.g., John Bonham, Jimmy Chamberlin, Neil Peart, Dave Grohl, Steve Gadd, Buddy Rich, Ginger Baker, Stewart Copeland, Keith Moon, etc.). If no one from that roster is "spiritual" enough, go for the Susie Ibarra variety. If there isn't enough soul, go for a Tony Allen. But take lessons from *someone*. Drumming, just like everything else in the world, has made a lot of advancements since we retired our search for the Northwest Passage. If you can't keep up, don't expect an entertained audience.

The word “pow-wow” comes from an old Algonquian word “powwaw” (I learned this evening), which means *spiritual leader*. So the modern pow-wow is a spiritual event, during which Native Americans gather, leading each other (and us non-natives) through a series of tribal customs, aimed at helping us remember (and honor) their culture.

I have to say there’s no way that paralyzed man was sitting there in his wheelchair, reminiscing about the old days of tribal life. A simpler time on the prairie, when giant, authentic Amerindian generators deafeningly supplied the whole power grid.

This person was clearly abandoned and waiting for someone to return. I didn’t go help him because I’m just now realizing it would have been an appropriate thing to do.

I’m heading back out in a minute though, so if he’s there, I’ll move him.

But first (before they power down the lights and it’s too hard to see), Win and I are going to pitch a tent.

Apparently the event lasts all weekend. And the people with the booths aren’t going to pack everything up every night. They’re just sleeping in tents beside their booths. And taking their “valuables” into the tents with them.

This feels like the perfect opportunity to become a Native American. An opportunity to embrace my *own* life on the prairie with authentic generators.

Indigenously,

Courtney

Saturday, September 2 at 10:45 a.m.

Last night was definitely worth it. Right after Win and I finished setting up our tent, we were caught:

“You guys aren’t Indians!”

“Sure we are!”

That approach didn't work. So we tried again, this time with charm instead of lies. And it worked much better.³ We secured a plot on their reservation.

(See the pictures. These are Win and me with the university's event host; the one who recognized our status as intruders. She was totally lovely once we explained that our stay was an attempt to embrace Native American culture more fully.)

Though, as it turns out, we didn't end up embracing it all that much. We wanted to. And we tried. Hard. It was just difficult when the "native" nightlife was so crass.

None of it offended *me* (or Win), but we can be pretty sure that every female passerby called the police.

As soon as it started happening, I ran back to the POC and grabbed a roll of paper towels and two pens (in case one ran out of ink). If I didn't write it all down in the moment, I was sure I'd forget it by morning.

And I wrote down as much as I could.

I wasn't able to get *all* of it, but what I did manage to get are exact quotations. These quotations:

(A girl of maybe fourteen – fifteen at the most – walks by. She's probably the daughter of someone who attended the pow-wow.)

From the tent right next to ours we hear: "Want me to walk you home? Damn girl! Shit! Wassup!"

The girl freezes, looks over with an incredibly empty face (the face of someone deeply startled), then turns and begins to walk away faster than she had been walking previously.

Feeling rejected, our tent neighbor yells: "Shit, I don't need you! I got laid last night and the night before that and before that and that and that and that and that!"

³ It makes me wonder if charm had been the strategy all along – charming the natives out of their land, rather than trampling them with horses or giving them diseases – if Andrew Jackson (and his congress) would have never needed to pass the Indian Removal Act. One long Trail of Tears avoided.

Then he threw an empty beer bottle (not can; bottle) at the girl. It shattered on the ridge of the sidewalk next to her ankles. She started running.

(The next girl/victim to walk by was about nineteen, maybe twenty.)

From the tent next to ours: “Hey girl! I got a big, long, dark stick for you, girl!”

His friend chimes in: “Butt sex, yeah!”

She, too, started speed-walking in the other direction, a gesture that quietly, but firmly, rejected his offer to sodomize her.

This called for an even better response on his part: “Shit, I don’t even *want* you! Fucking a white girl is like sticking your dick in a bucket of *water!*”

I’ve been thinking about this comment for a while now and I still don’t know what it means. Is it the total volume? Like a white girl’s vagina is more gaping? It’s a vaginal wall circumference issue? Or does he think all white females have pre-coital episiotomies? Or is it the fluidity? All white females also have urinary incontinence during and just prior to sex. Is that it?

Anyway, our tent neighbors (and another slightly less audible group a few tents down) continued to harass every passing female until females stopped passing (midnight or so). My roll of paper towels logged a lot more harassment during those hours, but you get the idea.

I think the more interesting observation here is this:

When you’re completely familiar with something and someone else isn’t, and you have a conversation with that person about it, that person’s lack of knowledge is instantly and totally obvious.

Let’s use golf as an example. I know nothing about golf. If I tried to pretend otherwise in a conversation with Tiger Woods, it would take about one sentence for him to realize I have no idea what I’m talking about. Maybe two sentences if he was distracted.

Even if he’d only played golf a few times (the “weekend warrior” type who did something else for a living), it’d still be patently apparent after the first paragraph.

The reason I bring this up is because that's exactly what was going on here. I'm not saying I'm a pro at sex, or even semipro. But having had the *experience* of sex (weekend warrior type), I can be pretty sure I'm not among like company.

Even if these men weren't a bunch of virgins though – even if they were in the major league circuit – that still wouldn't permit such shameful and lecherous behavior.

(Okay, being as I'm back at the POC computer, and thus interruptible by fellow UOP students who have questions about outdoor equipment rentals, one of those students – Mike – just interrupted me. My response to every one of his sentences was “huh...” Apparently he didn't get the memo that “huh...” indicates no interest whatsoever in what is being said.)

“Hi, I'm Mike. I'm a junior here and I'm trying to stake out my own adventures.”

“Huh...”

“I have a digital video camera and I want to go on trips.”

“Huh...”

“I have a sixty gig hard drive and I plan to fill it *every* week.”

“Huh...”

“I want to ride a kayak and film while I'm actually riding. That'll go on my hard drive.”

“Huh...”

“Like I said, I'm a junior here, so I have plenty of time left to hike and do trips.”

“Huh...”

The conversation went on for probably ten more sentences before I finally said “look, Mike, can you come back when an actual POC employee is working? I'm just using the computer to write a syllabus.”

He left.

Now back to my evening with the womanizers.

Once all of the womanizing was done (not due to a lack of zeal, but a lack of victims), Win and I went over to their tent.

“How’s it goin’?” or some such effort to start up a conversation.

The goal was to get to know them a little bit. Just enough to identify something that deserved sympathy. Because I knew I would be sitting right here at the POC computer in the morning. And I knew I would be writing all about them. And I didn’t want to spend the entire journal entry dehumanizing them. Not because I thought it would be in bad taste. I just thought there might actually be a story there. Something real. Something touching. And my writing would profit from learning that story.

So I tried.

And at first I thought it would be relatively easy. “How’s it goin’?” brought all four of them out of their tent.

“Hey wassup?” as they climbed out on the lawn to meet Win and me.

“Oh, not much. Heard you guys next door, figured we’d see what you’re up to. Are you guys involved in the pow-wow? Do you have a booth or something?”

I don’t remember their exact response (I thought it would look weird if I were scribbling frantically on a roll of paper towels as they were talking), so I’m not going to make an attempt to quote them here. But the general summary is this:

That bad drumming I was talking about earlier? The talentless bongo drumming circles? That was them. Or at least they were contributors. There may have been more.

Somehow they used the topic of bongo drumming as a transition (and an invitation) to a phase of joke-telling.

During this phase, I realized none of them knows how to pronounce the word “Indians.” All four of them pronounced it “engines”, which confused me the first several dozen times they said it... during their “jokes.”

(I wrapped “jokes” in quotation marks because they weren’t actually jokes. They were just stories. Womanizing stories about an “Engine” named “Panama Joe.”)

“Okay, my turn to tell a joke” one of them begins. And then he goes on for five minutes about Panama Joe’s sex life.

Even if the stories weren’t all about belittling women, they were terrible. There was no punch line, no plot twist. They just went on and on until they didn’t anymore. And then one of the other guys would say “okay my turn to tell a joke!”

And then a whole new (though practically identical) story about Joe’s sexual conquests would begin.

I eventually had to interrupt them. They were way too stupid; I couldn’t take it anymore. “So!” I said really loudly while one of them was in the middle of a sentence. “What tribes are you guys from!?”

This actually elicited an interesting response.

Two of them were Tulliokas, one was a Chumash Shioka, and the other a Bee River Wintu.

That wasn’t the interesting part.

And I’m sure my spelling is wrong on all three of those. Though not because I’m having a hard time remembering what they said. At this point, I was actually writing everything down as they were saying it. (Halfway through the Panama Joe stuff, I pulled out the roll of paper towels; if they were attentive enough to notice, they were too drunk to care.) They just weren’t saying it very clearly.⁴ And when I asked “can you spell that?”, they didn’t. So I decided it doesn’t matter if I spell it wrong. If they don’t care, neither do I.

Much more interesting was what the tribe-talk led to.

Apparently, calling any one of them a Cherokee is the biggest insult one can issue. Real racism there. And Aztec, Tachi, and Mexican are almost as offensive.

I was immediately interested.

⁴ I can’t say that I expected them to. These were, after all, men who had just finished talking about Panama Joe, the Engine.

“Does every tribe feel this way? What about *actual* Cherokees? Are there rivalries between tribes? Do you guys have Cherokee friends? If so, do they get offended when you call them Bee River Wintus? Like is it just getting the tribes wrong or is *Cherokee* especially derogatory? And does that mean you guys hate the Jeep? And do people call you a Cherokee or Mexican because they don’t know any better or is said with the purpose of offending? And what’s a Tachi?”

Panama Joe’s disciples weren’t as interested in the subject as I was.

Instead, they decided it was time to tell stories. At least this would be better than Panama Joe jokes, I thought.

Turns out that thought was incorrect.

The only difference between the jokes and the stories was that the stories were told in first person. That and they were much, much shorter. And I was supposed to believe that they were true.

Because I was writing on the paper towels when these stories began, I was able to record them word-for-word.

Here’s the first one:

“I have this friend and I fuckin’ busts in on him – found him sucking on his own pipe. Dude was sucking his own pipe. His OWN pipe! He was like THIS!” (I wasn’t looking at him while he was telling the story as I was too busy writing, but I didn’t find it too hard to imagine the gesture.)

Second story:

“I finds this dead guy in the fuckin’, the fuckin’, the fuckin’, fuckin’ wind tunnel. He was all raped with his asshole was all blown out and had sporks all fuckin’ stabbed into it. Blood blown out fuckin’ blown out asshole in a fuckin’, fuckin’ wind tunnel.”

As soon as I had finished writing that story, but before the third story began, Win and I turned our backs (after having said nothing), entered our tent, and zipped it up behind us. This felt like the clearest way to communicate “we’ve heard enough.”

We fell asleep to the sound of some muffled bedtime sex stories penetrating the fabric of two tents. I had stopped writing for the night. And I don’t remember any of them.

In the morning, we woke up, took down our tent, and returned it to the POC, being careful to avoid stepping in the broken glass. There must have been half a dozen shattered beer bottles.

(However many girls rejected sexual advances while an empty bottle was available, that's the exact number of broken bottles on the pavement surrounding the POC).

Win is asleep on the couch right now and I'm sitting at the computer typing this.

I just finished transferring my paper towel scribbles to the word processor and I have to say: none of these guys would make a respectable mascot.⁵

Imagine: Panama Joe, the Saltine Warrior / Sexual Predator.

If this pow-wow had taken place on a Syracuse campus lawn prior to their adoption of Big Chief Bill Orange (i.e., the Saltine Warrior), it wouldn't have been a Native American student organization that protested. It would have been a bunch of hyper-conservative Christians.

And I would have agreed with them, but for very different reasons; mine incorporating discrimination, which is, I think, an ethical necessity.

In *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, Christopher Hitchens wrote about the difference between racism and discrimination; noting how they are not synonyms, but antonyms. Discrimination is the opposite of racism. It would be racist to think that all Native Americans are the same. Every Bee River Wintu might as well be a Cherokee. If one of them talks about a blown out ass in a wind tunnel, then they all spork blown out assholes. That would be racism.

Discrimination is the ability to dismiss this particular group of bongo drumming savages as sex-offending psychopaths without dismissing the rest of their tribe.

And that's what I've done (or so I would like to think).

I definitely don't oppose the use of a Saltine Warrior (or any other Native American image) on the grounds of "I'm offended."

⁵ See Atlanta Braves, Cleveland Indians, Kansas City Chiefs, Washington Redskins, etc. The vendor who accused me of using these images is ridiculous.

I just don't understand why anyone would want to appoint some figure from a militarily defeated population to fill the mascot role. Why not just call yourself the Banana Slugs⁶ or the Syrupmakers?⁷ The Native Americans seem just as threatening.⁸

I guess what I want to see is the Syracuse Neoconservatives take the field, with a likeness of Dick Cheney dancing on the roofs of the dugouts. This may be the most lethal population we know of. And it seems absurd to pretend otherwise.

Just as absurd as pretending "Chief Joseph was poetic." That kind of make believe requires some *serious* racism (and a hell of a lot of guilt).

It's not just Native Americans propagating this nonsense. It's European Americans.⁹ And largely Oregonians. Chief Joseph was the leader of a Nez Perce band in Oregon until the government forced them into Idaho. And I don't blame him for fighting (pre-surrender); I wouldn't want to go to Idaho either. I can respect him for that. And I could be moved to honor that at a pow-wow. But it's ridiculous to pretend that, during his surrender, he revealed to the world that he was a poet.¹⁰ He just had bad grammar. He had a hard time doing things like conjugating verbs.¹¹

I can admire his effort to learn English, but if we're being honest, we have to admit that every quasi-literate six year old is exactly as poetic as Chief Joseph was. And it's racism (of a kind) to pretend otherwise when the sole criterion is: one of them is a Native American.

⁶ University of California, Santa Cruz.

⁷ Cairo High School in Georgia.

⁸ Now you could point to an image of Native Americans on horseback – flying alongside a raging stampede of bison – no hands on the horse, arrow aimed at the Bison's heart, readying to bring the creature down at thirty-five miles per hour so he can feed his tribe. Okay. But there's no way a single Native American ever once did that. There's just no point. No point in making a task incredibly difficult for the sake of making it incredibly difficult. The only reason people paint images like this is because it would be boring to paint a couple adults with spears and hatchets sneaking up on a bison while it's sleeping... and delivering the critical blow before it wakes up. Nobody wants to equate Native American hunting practices to a couple teenagers cow-tipping in central Idaho. But that, I would argue, is much closer to the truth. If Native Americans could single-handlessly navigate a horse at top speed while penetrating the heart of their prey, the Europeans would have been totally outmatched.

⁹ See Jeb Rosebrook and Theodore Strauss's movie "I Will Fight No More Forever."

¹⁰ Though, I would argue (without even leaving the Roberts), that neither was Robert Burns, Robert Browning, Robert Louis Stevenson, and scarcely Robert Frost. If I have to make a complete list of non-poets (e.g., John Dryden, Lord Byron, etc.), it wouldn't fit in a footnote.

¹¹ And the "I will fight no more forever" stuff was probably ghostwritten by Charles Erskine Scott Wood.

Although, now that I think about it, if this pow-wow had taught me something true or useful (like an Algonquian language) rather than some Chief Joseph quotations and mascot nonsense, I don't know that I would have gotten as much out of it.

I would have learned something about Native American culture, but nothing of the human condition (and one of those is much more interesting than the other).

Either way, when tonight's pow-wow begins, I think I'll just head over to Miracle Mile instead. I'll listen to the generator from there. And I'll play the role of the consumer I was accused of being.