



Kansas 1972 Podcast

MINI-EPIISODE: Only You: The Kansas Roots of Smokey Bear

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Tracy Quillin:

This series was made possible by the Friends of Humanities Kansas.

Kara Heitz:

Welcome to Kansas 1972. A lot happened during that pivotal year, including the founding of Humanities Kansas. In celebration of our 50th anniversary, we'll be telling stories from that era of Kansas history. So tune in, chill out, and get the lowdown on Kansas 1972.

Kara Heitz:

And welcome to a special mini episode of Kansas 1972. We couldn't quite fit this story into one of the main episodes, but we felt like it was too important not to tell. So, enjoy this extra story.

EPIISODE INTRODUCTION

Smokey the Bear, 1952

[Singing] "Smokey the Bear
Smokey the Bear
prowling and growling and sniffing the air
he can find a fire
before it starts to flame
that's why they call him Smokey, that was how he got his name."

Jeremy Gill:

So what do you think of Smokey Bear? If you think of the Forest Service, probably the last place you're going to think of is Kansas. But there is a pretty significant Kansas connection.

Kara Heitz:

In 1972, illustrator Rudy Wendelin retired from his position at the Forest Service, where he had been an employee for forty years. While you might not know Wendelin's name, you certainly have heard of his most famous creation - Smokey Bear. (Side note - in doing this story, I learned that, contrary to song you just heard, his name is not Smokey THE Bear, but rather just Smokey Bear. And if you get it wrong, some rather vehement Smokey Bear aficionados might not be too happy with you.)

But however you say the character's name, you are probably wondering what does Smokey Bear have to do with Kansas?

To help tell the story of Smoky Bear and Rudy Wendelin, I spoke with historian Jeremy Gill who is the Kansas Room Coordinator at Hays Public Library.

Jeremy Gill:

Rudy Wendelin was born in Rollins County in Herndon, Kansas, and way Northwest Kansas in 1910, about as far away from a forest or trees that you could possibly think of on a pretty treeless prairie. The guy who becomes so known as the artist of Smokey Bear is born in Dylan then goes to school in Herndon.

He then attends KU's architecture school because he was interested in art, but at the time period he attended, you were into art, you sometimes went to architecture school. So he attended KU.

He leaves there and he goes to an art school in Wisconsin, and he graduates that probably the worst possible time you could graduate as an art student. And it's during the Great Depression. So he's just like a lot of young guys his age – he found himself out of work, can't find a decent job really in any industry, let alone doing any kind of artistry. He gets a job with the Civilian Conservation Corps, which President Roosevelt had put into place to put, you know, young guys to work in the national parks, state parks.

CCC A Nation-Wide System of Parks – 1939

In 1933, the chief concern of the American government was to break the back of a bad depression. Among the conditions to be remedied were two President Roosevelt recognized at once: employment for hundreds of thousands of young men and war veterans was imperative; havoc wrought by soil erosion had long since shown the necessity of the immediate restoration, conservation, and further development of the country's natural resources. As one solution for both problems, the organization and work of the Civilian Conservation Corps was undertaken...

Kara Heitz:

The Civilian Conservation Corps (often referred to as the CCC -1930s politicians loved acronyms!) was one of many New Deal programs aimed at providing jobs for the unemployed during the Great Depression. The CCC helped create recreation spaces throughout the country. But they were also involved in conservation efforts. The 1970s may be when the modern environmental movement gained steam, but even in the 1930s, there were concerns over the preservation of natural resources in America.

Of course, agencies like the CCC needed more than just manual laborers. Rudy Wendelin was hired as an illustrator by the Interior Department to help develop promotional materials for the CCC. And during Wendelin's first job for the US government, he created a memorable piece of propaganda.

Here's Jeremy Gill.

Jeremy Gill:

He draws the very masculine photo of like what our CCC worker looks like. It's like a guy with his shirt off and he's super muscular and he has like, it's like a pick axe or a shovel. ... ready to take on save the country. Basically, you know, can work for Roosevelt was kind of the mantra.

Kara Heitz:

We'll put a copy of this image on the Humanities Kansas website, along with other resources for this episode. It's a very iconic 1930s image of a male manual laborer that you see in lots of art, especially government art, from this era. Evoking vigor and strength at a time during the Great Depression when many people felt hopeless and even weak.

Wendelin continued to produce work for the CCC until the US entered WWII. Because many New Deal programs were being phased out, he was offered a job with the Navy.

Jeremy Gill:

And during the war, the United States was highly concerned about some foreign attacks on the United States because of Pearl Harbor. And one of them was a possibility that wildfires would be started in California and Washington, Oregon, So the Forest Service and the federal government kind of got people really suspicious of their neighbors and trying to look out for people that might be wanting to start one of these fires.

Kara Heitz:

Part of stoking these suspicions required getting wildfire prevention on the minds of American citizens. And this is actually the origin of Smokey Bear. The first image of Smokey Bear created by the Forest Service is a kind of ominous figure trying convince people to spy on their neighbors, just in case they are Nazi spies intent on setting forest fires in US national parks. This is certainly a far cry from the cuddly character we know today.

So Rudy Wendelin is not the original creator of Smokey Bear. But when WWII is over and he leaves the Navy, he's offered a job as an illustrator at the Forest Service. Wendelin therefore inherits this WWII propaganda version of Smokey Bear. However, the campaign needs a post-war makeover.

Jeremy Gill:

Wendelin's job was to make a softer toned ad campaign to prevent forest fires because even though the war ended, this was still a major security risk, an economic risk, especially for those who lived in those areas. So Wendelin goes, and he starts creating a much more family friendly, bear like character that becomes beloved, reproduced throughout many decades is still in use today ...

Kara Heitz:

Post-war American culture is very car-centric, because of trends like suburbanization, commuting, and a more prosperous and growing middle class who can afford cars. But another part of this car culture was the road trip, facilitated by the creation of the National Highway

system. More and more Americans at mid-century are traveling around the country by car, and often are vacationing in national parks.

Jeremy Gill:

Camping becomes a lot more in vogue, so it's like, be careful. Don't throw your cigarettes out the window. Don't leave your campfire unattended. Like, there's some major ramifications if you do these things. And Wendelin was tasked with kind of creating an image that permeated both adults and children.

Smokey and the Little Boy 1960

"But there were other people who didn't seem to appreciate the forest
they left camp fires burning

and they failed to crush out cigarettes

"That's a good job," said

Smokey the Bear. But it takes more than one junior forest ranger when so many
people are careless

Be sure you're never responsible for this terrible destruction.

So remember only you can prevent forest fires

Kara Heitz:

And it worked. Tremendously well. Appealing to both children and their parents, Smokey Bear develops into an iconic and effective figure in teaching people about treading carefully in forests and other natural spaces.

In this interview with the National Forest Service, Rudy Wendelin reflects on his creation.

Rudy Wendelin, "Greatest Good"

"I felt a real strong responsibility, I really did (laugh) I just felt like Smokey was a real character down the hole somewhere ... I had to be careful, responsible. And as we got so much response from children and teachers all over the country that just increased that sense of responsibility."

Kara Heitz:

But by the time Rudy Wendelin retires from the Forest Service in 1972, ideas about conservation and natural resources are shifting in the country.

Wendelin was really part of a generation of environmentalism that originated in the early 20th century and was focused on ideas of conservation of natural areas mostly for human enjoyment and the efficient use of natural resources.

But a whole host of new environmental issues are entering the public dialogue in the 1960s and early 1970s, including concerns about air and water pollution, toxic waste, species loss, overpopulation and sustainability. This modern environmental movement offered a much more wholistic view of environmental problems and humanity's place in the global ecosystem.

And Smokey Bear gets caught up in these changes.

Jeremy Gill:

The Forest Service saw that Smokey Bear was being used for unintended purposes. It was basically being an all-encompassing environmental ad campaign. They were using Smokey Bear for litter campaigns or pollution campaigns that I really wasn't what that was meant for, nor that they wanted that to be my fault as it diluted the original message of forest fires.

Smokey Bear, Emptiness, 1973

“Not much around, is there? But once all this emptiness was rich with life. Over here was a beautiful, lush forest. Back there was a great rolling meadow. Yes this forest was once filled with love and life. But not anymore. Not since man came ... “ [fade out clip after this]

Kara Heitz:

Even with these shifts, the character of Smokey Bear has persisted beyond the tenure of Rudy Wendelin at the US Forest Service, and is currently the longest running public service announcement campaign in American history. According to a 2018 study by the Ad Council, 80% of individuals who engage in outdoor recreation in the US recognize Smokey Bear's image. And for his 75th anniversary in 2019, the National Zoo in Washington, DC, hosted a Smokey Bear exhibit, complete with a 6-foot-tall state of the cartoon version of Smokey. He is certainly still an important part of our popular culture.

So what about Rudy Wendelin, the illustrator from Rawlins County, Kansas, who popularized this icon? While Smokey Bear was his day job, Wendelin was a talented artist who drew, painted, and also designed several commemorative stamps. Wendelin lived most of his adult life in the Washington, DC, area because of his work, but he maintained a connection with his home state.

I spoke with Lynda Hurst, one of the curators at the Rawlins County Historical Society Museum in Atwood, Kansas, about Rudy Wendelin.

Lynda Hurst:

This was the area he grew up in. He was very fond of this area. It was home to him.

He loved this area, and he was very generous, he would come back periodically and he would always paint, bring paintings, you know, donate paintings to different organizations for fundraisers.

Kara Heitz:

Lynda Hurst also told me about items by Wendelin they have in their collection.

Lynda Hurst:

We are so excited about the things that we have of Rudy Wendelin's. We have a collection of his calendars with the Smokey Bear picture on them...each one of those were directly mailed to the Rawlins County Historical Museum.

Kara Heitz:

After his official retirement in 1972, Wendelin does not stop working. In 1974, the Rawlins County Historical Society commissioned him to paint a historical mural of the County. The mural was done in acrylic paint and measures 28 feet long by 9 feet tall. It took Wendelin two years to complete and was unveiled just in time for bicentennial celebrations in 1976.

Lynda Hurst:

The mural is fabulous. He started with three large images. One is the Plains Indians. The second one is the first family that homesteaded it in Rawlins County, and the third large image is his modern-day family. And in through all the rest of it, it's a rich history of Rawlins County. He depicted a lot of different scenes and a lot of different activities that took place here. One that I think is particularly interesting is he has a picture of a bulldozer dredging out the Lake Atwood under the direction of the surveyor. Perhaps the surveyor was young Rudolph Wendelin himself for Wendelin and his brother measured the area, and the young artist drew still illustrations of the terrain that went to the lake proposal to Washington, D.C., in the early 1930s and was instrumental in getting the CCC project approved.

Kara Heitz:

I love how this mural kind of brings Wendelin's career full circle. So the mural is of course, about the history of where he grew up, but it also connects to the start of his illustration career with the Civilian Conservation Corp during the Great Depression. And just his presence as the "famous native son" creating the mural reminds you of his most iconic creation.

Little Smokey 1953

Well, that's the story of Smokey Bear, your friend and mine. But Smokey needs our help, so let's all be careful of fires in the forest always and remember, only we, you and I, can prevent forest fires. So long for now, partners!

Kara Heitz:

Thanks for listening to this special mini episode of *Kansas 1972*. You can listen to full episodes as well as find out more about the sources we used for this and other episodes, on our website at humanitieskansas.org.

Catch you on the flip side!

Tracy Quillin:

Humanities Kansas is an independent nonprofit leading a movement of ideas to strengthen Kansas communities and our democracy. Since 1972, HK's pioneering programs, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark conversations and generate

insights. Together with statewide partners and supporters, HK inspires all Kansans to draw on history, literature, and culture to enrich their lives and to serve the communities and state we all proudly call home. Join the movement of ideas at humanitieskansas.org.