



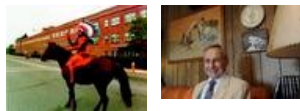
Going 'Native' draws cheers and jeers

Photos



Fred Muzi in a Needham Fourth of July parade from years ago. Muzi has missed only four parades since 1957.

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By **Debra Filcman, Staff Writer**
GateHouse News Service

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Dover-Sherborn — Fred Muzi's second-floor office, above Muzi Ford, is covered in a mix of browns and oranges, with a boot-shaped clock on the wall, between Native American artifacts and mementos. In a corner, there are photos of Ronald Reagan, George Washington, and a depiction of Jesus Christ.

Behind his couch — also orange with arms like tree stumps — there's a collection of books on Native American culture. From his window, Muzi, 77, can see the rows of cars in his lot off Highland Avenue — a business his immigrant father built — and the flow of traffic on Route 128. The history of various tribes intrigues him, always has, but he can't pinpoint the reason. He just shrugs.

"I've just always found them fascinating," he said, riffling through a photo album dedicated to his appearances in Needham Fourth of July parades gone by.

Each year, for the past 51, Muzi, a resident of Dover, receives a phone call, or usually, a letter, from the Exchange Club, inviting him to participate in the parade. It began in the spring of 1957, just after he returned to his hometown from the army to run his father's car dealership. The police and fire chiefs of the day — members of the Exchange Club — asked him to take part, and launched a tradition Needamites have largely embraced through the decades, though not always.

That summer, he first rode his horse bareback, dressed as a cowboy. But soon, and for the many years that followed, he parlayed his passion for Native American culture into the parade. His body and face painted red, accented with white streaks of shoe polish, he'd don an authentic Native American headdress and a homemade loincloth.

From atop his horse, Muzi greeted the people of Needham.

"How," he'd say, as he waved to locals lining the parade route on Highland Avenue.

He's missed only four parades: twice, while he recuperated from surgery; once as he recovered from a cracked rib after getting kicked by a horse; and once after he "must have had a heavy date" because he didn't get up in time.

And in all these years, only three times did residents complain about his getup, calling it politically incorrect or offensive, Muzi said, holding a folder full of newspaper articles, editorials and letters to the editor

about his portrayal. One year, readers continued to write into the Times through Labor Day, he said.

"Parade marked with inaccurate stereotype," he read one headline aloud.

"Well, I'm *accurate*," Muzi said, raising his eyebrows. "If the people of Needham didn't want it, I wouldn't do it.

Moe Handel, a longtime member of the Exchange Club, said his portrayal is entirely in keeping with the tradition of the parade, bringing to light the history of the United States.

"If we remove pieces of the parade every time someone finds it offensive, pretty soon all we'll be left with are the antique cars," Handel said. "Until somebody objects to the fact we're burning fuel."

Over the years, a spattering of residents upset by his costume contact Muzi directly, but by and large, he only reads about in the newspaper.

"I'm happy to talk to people about it, and hopefully change their minds, but most of them don't contact me," Muzi said.

Once, Muzi even sent a critic some literature educating him to the authenticity of his portrayal, which he said, an army buddy who is a Pueblo Indian, verified.

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But for the first time in several years, residents again wrote in to the Needham Times to complain — or support — Muzi. With a few folks calling his portrayal “offensive,” or “stereotypical,” others responded calling their neighbors too “politically correct.”

It all began, however, as a means of warding off sleeplessness nights upon Muzi’s return from the army.

“I told my doctor, ‘I’ve got all these wonderful ideas, but I’m never going to live to implement them.’” Muzi told his doctor back in 1956.

The doctor told Muzi to take up a hobby, and horses quickly became his passion.

Five decades later, living in Dover — where he keeps his six horses and stables — he still dons the Indian garb for the Needham parade, riding bareback and shirtless.


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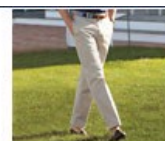
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