



Western Edition Episode 2
 "The West on Fire: Smokey Bear"
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(CHIRPING SOUNDS)

BILL DEVERELL: Hello, I'm Bill Deverell and this is *Western Edition*, season 1: "The West on Fire."

SMOKEY AD: "A forest is sure a lot of things!" "Yes, but let a little fire get started, catch on, destroy, and your forest is nothing!" (OMINOUS MUSIC) "Nothing for anybody." "You have so many reasons to protect your forests. Remember, only you can prevent forest fires."

(MUSIC – PILE)

DEVERELL: Yup, that's Smokey Bear. A large friendly bare-chested bear in denim jeans and a forest ranger hat, asking you - imploring you - to prevent forest fires. Smokey Bear is the longest-running public service campaign in U.S. history. He's universally beloved. Well, almost.

JOSHUA WHEELER: Smokey Bear signs and Smokey Bear paraphernalia are some of the most stolen and bullet riddled signs that you'll find in America.

DEVERELL: In this episode, we get to know Smokey Bear. Where did he come from? How did he and his message spread like...well, wildfire? How did he become a beloved children's character, a working-class hero, a guardian of nature, a countercultural icon, and a symbol of government overreach, all in one? And...what's it like to dress up in a Smokey Bear costume?

LIBBY GROOM: It was generally pretty hot. You could only go out for 15 or 20 minutes and then you have to take breaks in between.

DEVERELL: But let's start with Smokey's origins.

SOUND OF WWII NEWSCAST: We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin: the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, by air, President Roosevelt has just announced.

DEVERELL: It took Pearl Harbor and the aerial threat from Japan to convince foresters and civic officials that the U.S. needed to take forest fire prevention seriously, particularly in the American West. Then, the following spring, Japanese submarines surfaced near the coast of Santa Barbara, California. They fired shells that exploded on an oil field, very close to the Los Padres National Forest. As this was going on, experienced firefighters and other able-bodied men were being deployed for the war effort. That left the home front largely unprotected from Japanese attempts to start wildfires along the Pacific Coast.

LINCOLN BRAMWELL: It really grew out of California.

DEVERELL: Lincoln Bramwell is the chief historian of the United States Forest Service.

BRAMWELL: During World War II, a couple events were taking place. Wood was actually still a vital wartime resource. Everything that was shipped in those days was shipped in wooden crates. And the Japanese were launching these paper balloons and trying to float them across the Pacific to hopefully land in the forested West coast of the U.S. and hopefully start fires. Basically more of a terror campaign.

SOUND OF WWII NEWSCAST: For the past several months, long-range free balloons released in Japan carried explosives to the North American continent.

DEVERELL: Japan launched more than 9,000 bomb-carrying balloons over the western U.S. between 1944 and 1945. They were made from rice paper, and carried detonators on jet stream winds. One high-altitude balloon bomb killed six members of an Oregon church group in 1945. Overall, though, the campaign was a failure.

SOUND OF WWII NEWSCAST: It is believed the main purpose of the bombs was to start brush and forest fires. But attacks were so scattered and aimless that they constituted no military threat.

BRAMWELL: With that background, the federal government had formed the wartime Advertising Council. And they started thinking about fire and coming up with some kind of slogan or war time campaign around preventing forest fires.

DEVERELL: They created posters and slogans with messages like "Forest Fires Aid the Enemy," and "Our Carelessness, Their Secret Weapon." But the ad campaign needed a cute, furry face to make people care.

CLIP FROM *BAMBI*: “Come on, Bambi, get up. Try again.” “Come on, get up.” “Come on, get up.” “Get up!” “Get up, Bambi!”

REBECCA MILLER: And *Bambi*, the Disney film, had come out during World War II and through a contract with Disney, the U.S. Forest Service adopted Bambi and all of his animal friends to become faces of the U.S. Forest Service.

DEVERELL: Rebecca Miller is a postdoctoral researcher studying wildfire resistance and resilience policies in California with the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West.

MILLER: The contract only lasted one year. And during that year, the U.S. Forest Service took advantage of Bambi's character. There were bookmarks for example, that were passed out to children, encouraging them to keep fires out of the forests to protect Bambi and his friends. But after that year contract was up, the U.S. Forest Service decided that it really liked the use of an animal mascot. And thus Smokey Bear was born in the mid 1940s. And he's since become one of the most emblematic figures in American culture. Just about everyone can recognize Smokey Bear, just like they can recognize Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny.

(MUSIC – RADIO KEEPS ME ON THE GROUND (SLIGHT RETURN))

DEVERELL: Smokey Bear was created in 1944, by an illustrator named Albert Staehle. He drew a cartoonish-looking bear pouring water on a campfire. The bear was named after a former firefighting legend: New York assistant fire chief “Smokey Joe” Martin.

JERRY INGERSOLL: So, like most folks who worked for the Forest Service, especially in the field at one time or another, I've been honored to portray Smokey Bear.

DEVERELL: This is forester Jerry Ingersoll. He's in Corvallis, Oregon. Jerry's worked for the Forest Service for over 30 years, and directs a civilian conservation corps program called the Forest Service Job Corps. He's worked as a forester and a firefighter.

INGERSOLL: And, Smokey, as you know, is the leading mascot for the Forest Service. Really his primary message is around fire prevention. And yet he's also a representative of the agency especially to young people. And so I've portrayed Smokey at preschools, at a minor league baseball game, in parades. I've also done all of those things in uniform, sometimes accompanying Smokey as his companion and wrangler, if you will. Smokey always has uniformed a Forest Service employee with him. Smokey does not speak in public even though some of you will remember, depending on your age, Smokey used to speak on TV. Yeah. Smokey never speaks in person. And Smokey has some, let's say, vision impairments. Because of the shape of his face, Smokey can see pretty well straight ahead but really has a tough time seeing what's directly on his feet and he has large feet. And so when Smokey is interacting with preschoolers, there's a variety of risks involved. Some of the preschoolers are terribly frightened of Smokey and run away just because they're that way. Some of them come and give Smokey hugs, which are located down below his knees. And it's very difficult for Smokey to actually see who's hugging him and not step on them. And so for all those reasons, and you

know, sometimes in a public space, Smokey will interact with teenagers who sometimes aren't as respectful as small children.

DEVERELL: By all accounts, the Smokey costumes were uncomfortable to wear.

JERRY GLOVER: You didn't like them summer months. I'll tell ya.

DEVERELL: Jerry Glover is a retired firefighter and fire captain. And he wore the suit a lot.

GLOVER: I played Smokey Bear, put the suit on and 'howdy folks,' scared the heck out of some kids because they weren't used to a big old bear-looking thing coming up and not knowing that there was a human inside it.

DEVERELL: Jerry now helps run the Cal Fire Museum in San Bernardino, California, where they have two Smokey costumes in their collection, as well as a Smokey animatronic figure. Libby Groom helps Jerry run the museum, and she studies California fire history, and is herself a retired firefighter.

GROOM: Jerry is very proud of our friend Smokey. Everybody gets shown Smokey. I was terrified. The thing just because it's an old artifact, it creeped me out. It needs a little restoration. I think his jaw is, it's either misaligned or not right. So, I mean, it looked to me like something out of "Creepshow."

DEVERELL: Up in Oregon, Jerry Ingersoll says he was proud to play the part of Smokey Bear, both in the suit and as the wrangler.

INGERSOLL: There's a sense in there that Smokey is about integrity and service and care for the land and conservation. The song "Smokey the Bear" sort of has some of those things in it. And that's an image that I think we believe in and that goes to the core of our identity as an agency.

(MUSIC – "SMOKEY THE BEAR")

"Smokey the Bear, Smokey the Bear.
Prowlin' and a growlin' and a sniffin' 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."

DEVERELL: That's country music legend Eddy Arnold, singing "Smokey the Bear Song" in 1952. And yes, the songwriters added the word "the" to Smokey Bear's name to help with the rhythm of the song. But his official name is just "Smokey Bear." Don't worry, we've gotten it wrong lots of times too. Now, not everyone is singing the same tune when it comes to appreciating Smokey Bear.

INGERSOLL: Smokey is a symbol of the Forest Service. And so people who don't like the Forest Service will sometimes, you know, hang Smokey in effigy or whatever, use Smokey in an image

in a way that reflects poorly on the Forest Service. They do the same thing with forest ranger outfits. Smokey is a symbol of us and people who dislike us will use that.

DEVERELL: Jerry Ingersoll is based in Oregon, and the further east you go in that state, the more you run into folks who don't like federal land management practices and the Bureau of Land Management's ranching restrictions. The Forest Service, and by extension Smokey himself, sometimes take the heat of that antagonism.

INGERSOLL: Oregon overall was a blue state because of its urban areas. The land use areas of the state and the rural populations tend to be interested in making a living, having jobs come off of their surrounding public lands. And so they tend to be anti-fire on the landscape. And again, I'm speaking in broad generalizations. They're interested in managing the land so that it's not susceptible to fire and so that private timber lands and public timber resources aren't affected by fire - where the more urban populations and more environmentalists tend to want fire to play more of a natural role, as long as it doesn't burn down their particular individual house.

DEVERELL: Right. Which puts the Forest Service right in the middle.

INGERSOLL: Absolutely. And I mean, being in the middle is the nature of public service. If you are not in the middle, I think then you're not necessarily representing all your constituents. Or to put it another way, if this was easy, anybody could do it. It is our job to serve and to represent all of the public. And guess what, all the public doesn't always agree with each other on anything.

(MUSIC- CARBON DATED LOVE)

DEVERELL: So there was a cartoon bear. And then there was a real-life Smokey Bear.

WHEELER: The original live mascot of Smokey Bear that lived at the Smithsonian Zoo for a long time in Washington, DC was from Southern New Mexico was rescued from a fire called the Capitan Gap fire in the early 1950s.

DEVERELL: Joshua Wheeler is a writer. He grew up in Southern New Mexico, just outside Lincoln National Forest, where that little bear cub was found. The three-month-old black bear cub was found clinging to a burned-out tree. He was brought to Santa Fe and treated. Pictures of the little cub and his bandaged paws ran in newspapers across the country. The Forest Service brought him to the National Zoo, and he lived there for 26 years.

BRAMWELL: It's hard to overstate how big and how recognizable Smokey was. For instance, in 1965, Congress passes an exemption and gives Smokey Bear his own zip code number.

DEVERELL: Back to Lincoln Bramwell, chief historian of the U.S Forest Service.

BRAMWELL: Children wrote him voluminously. I think after Santa Claus, he was getting the second amount of mail. Cause in the fifties, the Forest Service started a junior forest ranger program where, you know, you could go perform some activities and fill out a card and you

could mail it to the Forest Service to get your badge. And often kids were writing Smokey Bear along with us and I think for years, a public relations person probably sent something back.

(MUSIC – HIGHWAY DOWN)

DEVERELL: One little girl wrote a letter to Smokey in the early 1950s. Here's part of what she said: "I am helping you prevent forest fires by watching my daddy when we are out riding in my car. If my daddy throws a cigarette out the window, I fine him 10 cents. But if we are near a woods, I fine him 25 cents. My daddy is using his ashtray quite a bit now." That real-life Smokey was buried back where he was found, in the Lincoln National Forest. At the site of his grave, there's a Smokey Bear museum.

WHEELER: And that's just about an hour from where I grew up. And I visited that museum a number of times as a kid. That's where we went on field trips. We'd go on these sort of Southern New Mexico mythology field trips where we'd go see areas where like Billy the Kid broke out of jail in Lincoln, New Mexico. And then we'd see the Smokey Bear Museum in Capitan. And there's just these things that loom large in your youth and Smokey Bear was one of them. There was definitely a point of pride in Southern New Mexico that the museum was there. While at the same time, it was a point of controversy because there was all sorts of conflict between private landowners and the U.S. Forest Service. Smokey Bear, and I know this through my research, Smokey Bear signs and Smokey Bear paraphernalia are some of the most stolen and bullet riddled signs that you'll find in America. Part of it's because of their prevalence, they're everywhere. And they often happen to be places where people have guns or people are not being supervised and can easily take something. But there also is definitely a sense that Smokey Bear is an authoritarian figure. In Southern New Mexico that had a lot to do with land use and land rights in particular, especially as it relates to water. There's a scarcity of water in Southern New Mexico. And so the government coming in and controlling large swaths of land would make it difficult for people to have water for their agricultural purposes. But in other areas, in Northern New Mexico, I know it was more about the actual use of fire. Fire was a way in which people in Northern New Mexico for instance, were able to, you know, create grazing areas for their sheep and their use of that fire was being, in some ways, criminalized by the Forest Service.

DEVERELL: It's almost as if the, the sensibility was Smokey was one of us, but he'd been co-opted and, in a sense, captured by the presumably heavy handed, federal presence.

WHEELER: Sure. I mean, you have that in Smokey's image in and of itself. Smokey's wearing blue jeans, which are the clothing of the people. They're the clothing of the working man, right? These, these blue jeans with a belt. And in fact, that image of a working man with blue jeans and a belt and no shirt on comes from the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. There's some famous posters that some people suggest are inspiration for Smokey Bear. And it's a working man in blue jeans, no shirt, holding a shovel, right? That's the same image that we have of Smokey Bear from the very beginning. So there's this very working man of the people aspect below, you know, below the waist, maybe even the mid-section with no shirt on, but then you've got that hat which has come to become a sign of authoritarianism. You know, the

Smokey hat has been emblematic of police and authorities in the United States, since even before Smokey Bear, though Smokey had a lot to do with popularizing it. So there is this really interesting dichotomy which exists even in just your initial impression of Smokey that you have this authoritarian top and then this working man bottom.

DEVERELL: There's another interesting dichotomy, and that's in the Forest Service's messaging around Smokey Bear. The slogan that Smokey started with, "only you can prevent forest fires," was changed to "only you can prevent wildfires." Rebecca Miller says that change is part of a larger cultural shift in our understanding of Western wildfire.

MILLER: A lot of that comes out from the recognition that there's wildfire that can take place on both forests and non-forest lands. And it's also a recognition that there's good fire, that we can use fire to actually reduce fuel loads and to start addressing that giant overgrown vegetation that we're facing using something called prescribed burns or purposefully set fires designed to reduce those fuel loads. And so by changing Smokey's slogan to "only you can prevent wildfires," it's recognizing the value of these prescribed burns while also recognizing the potential threats that could take place from both forest fires, as well as fires on other wildlands.

DEVERELL: Wheeler says that dichotomy can be felt at the Smokey Bear Museum in Capitan, New Mexico.

WHEELER: One half of it is dedicated to the legend and life of Smokey Bear, which of course is all about fire prevention. But then the other half of the museum is, is focused on educating people about the importance of fire and the ecosystem. So, The museum has been, I think, updated in the last 10 or so years to reflect changing ideas about fire. But when you go into the museum, it presents this kind of almost schizophrenic idea where on the one hand Smokey Bear's telling you, 'suppress those fires,' right? It's up to you to, to keep, you know, our, our habitat from burning down. And then on the other side, it's saying here's all the ways in which fire is, is really useful and important for the ecosystem and, and the good things that it does.

DEVERELL: The museum also pays homage to the orphaned bear cub that was named Smokey Bear and lived at the National Zoo. That bear cub, Wheeler says, had kind of a bad reputation.

WHEELER: Apparently it was a very angry bear despite the fact that it represented this bear that was interested in protecting humans and sort of being this, this mythical protector. The bear was, called by his handlers, a son of a bitch. They really did not get along with the bear. They also tried to get Smokey, the original Smokey, to procreate, and it turned out the Smokey was impotent and that's fascinating considering the masculine representation of American identity that Smokey represents. And then there was this whole fascinating rumor about a plot to hijack Smokey's body when it was being moved from the National Zoo to New Mexico where it was buried so that they could cut off his paws and, and sell them on the black market.

DEVERELL: In fact, it's said that the rangers buried Smokey's body in the dead of night to ward off vandals.

(MUSIC)

DEVERELL: But even as there are Smokey haters out there, Josh Wheeler says that most people really like Smokey.

WHEELER: I think that Smokey has been the most successful campaign of the Advertising Council for a reason. Part of it has to do with our culture and the way it's been positioned in our culture. But there's also this really interesting human allure that we're drawn to of the bear-human hybrid that goes back a very long time. You know, even kind of all the way back to the Chauvet cave and, and, and some of the drawings that are there. And certainly in the Middle Ages, there were, you know, these bestiaries of human bear hybrids and how they represented our attempts to both be part of nature, but also set ourselves apart from it. So I think there's something deep that's happening there. Personally, I also know that in my life as a teenager, Smokey Bear eventually came to represent a certain kind of counter-culture, right? Smokey Bear was co-opted by the communities that liked to smoke pot, right? Get high Smokey Bear became a kind of shorthand for a totally different kind of culture than the authoritarian one as the Forest Service was, was using it for, and that continues to this day. Most of the imagery of Smokey Bear that I see is in some way related to counterculture and in particular marijuana and psychedelic. And the counterculture acceptance of it is not necessarily new. That was happening all the way back in the fifties and sixties. You know, you had groups like the Grateful Dead doing PSA's that involved Smokey Bear. And indeed, one of the most recognizable images of the Grateful Dead are these dancing bears, which are somewhat reminiscent of Smokey, if not a bit more psychedelic looking.

CLIP FROM GRATEFUL DEAD PSA: "Hi I'm Mickey Hart of the Grateful Dead and we've traveled all over the world, from Amsterdam to the Great Pyramids of Egypt. But I can't think of anywhere more full of beauty, life, and music than our own national forests..."

WHEELER: And then there was a famous poem called "Smokey Bear Sutra." I think it was actually called "Smokey the Bear Sutra," which Gary Snyder wrote it in the sixties, in this part of a Sierra Club event. And it became this kind of counter-cultural force, almost like a beat poet mantra that was used in different environmental realms.

CLIP FROM GARY SNYDER POEM "SMOKEY THE BEAR SUTRA":

And if anyone is threatened by advertising, air pollution, television,
or the police, they should chant SMOKEY THE BEAR'S WAR SPELL:

DROWN THEIR BUTTS

CRUSH THEIR BUTTS

DROWN THEIR BUTTS

CRUSH THEIR BUTTS

And SMOKEY THE BEAR will surely appear to put the enemy out
with his vajra-shovel.

WHEELER: Part of that I think is, is an attempt to glom on to maybe the idea that we need to be stewards of nature, which at one time was a very countercultural idea in America,

unfortunately. And then, as it progressed, I think it did become this attempt to own propaganda for the people, as opposed to having it forced on them by the government. And so kind of remaking Smokey into this stoner bear who's always got a spliff in his mouth is common. There's even one or two fairly popular rappers on the internet now who go by the moniker 'Smokey the Bear.' And that's a direct reference to marijuana culture.

DEVERELL: Some people have tried to cash in on the Smokey craze. It became such a problem that in 1974, the federal government made it a crime to make money off Smokey's character or name. The punishment? Up to six months in prison and/or a fine. The law was rescinded in 2020, as part of a big spending bill. Still, the Forest Service takes its trademark of Smokey very seriously. Now, Smokey might be the most popular anthropomorphic animal in public service messages. But he's hardly alone.

CLIP FROM WOODSY THE OWL PSA: "Thanks kids. If you help me stop vandalism, we'll keep America looking good. Give a hoot, don't pollute. Whoo whoo!"

DEVERELL: Like Woodsy the Owl, who campaigned against pollution and vandalism. Or McGruff the Crime Dog, who police used to make kids aware of crime.

CLIP FROM MCGRUFF THE CRIME DOG PSA: "Ah, that's Jenny. But that's not Jenny's dad. If she gets into that car, that may be the last time you'll see Jenny. I'm McGruff the Crime Dog...help take a bite out of crime. [Crunch]"

DEVERELL: Smokey's not even the only animal who is against starting fires. There's also Sparky the Fire Dog, the dalmatian created by the National Fire Protection Association.

CLIP OF SPARKY THE FIRE DOG PSA: "If you want to help Sparky, remember, a clean home seldom burns! So never give a fire a place to start..."

DEVERELL: In a great example of 1960s psychedelic kids' programming, Cal Fire hired Hanna Barbara to create Sniff and Snuff.

CLIP OF SNIFF AND SNUFF PSA: "It's a fact, Snuff! 90 percent of all forest fires are caused by human carelessness." "Isn't there something we can do, Sniff?"

DEVERELL: They never quite caught on. In 2019, Cal Fire unveiled their new fire safety mascot created with Disney animators. It's a mountain lion named Captain Cal, and he carries a big axe. Libby Groom from the Cal Fire Museum says no cartoon or creature can replace Smokey in the public's heart.

GROOM: I still don't think anybody ever will be able to touch the connection that Smokey has. When they announced Captain Cal it, the talk around the fire station was, you know, it's no match. Nothing will ever equal Smokey, you know, no one will ever replace Smokey. He is a beloved member of our family who will always exist.

DEVERELL: More than seventy-five years later, Smokey Bear's message has evolved with the times, and wildfires have increased in scope and intensity. But Smokey's core message has remained the same: It's up to each of us to be vigilant and be careful with fire in the forest.

(MUSIC – "SMOKEY THE BEAR" SUNG BY GENE AUTRY)

"With a ranger's hat and shovel and a pair of dungarees,
You will find him in the forest always sniffin' at the breeze.
People stop and pay attention when he tells them to 'beware,'
Cause everybody knows that he's the fire-preventin' bear."

DEVERELL: Thanks to Libby Groom, Jerry Glover, Lincoln Bramwell, Rebecca Miller, Jerry Ingersoll, and Joshua Wheeler for joining me to talk about Smokey Bear. I'm Bill Deverell. Next time on *Western Edition*:

PETER WESTWICK: The heat of the fire kind of sears the top layer of the soil to make it almost like wax, where the water and then the mud and the dirt actually run off easier and faster.

Western Edition is produced by Avishay Artsy, Katie Dunham, Elizabeth Logan, and Jessica Kim. Our music was written and recorded by I See Hawks in L.A. *Western Edition* is a production of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. Please rate, review and subscribe to the show, and share it with a friend. Thank you, and be well.

(MUSIC)