

Arizona: The Wild Frontier by Jody Franklin

Circa Burning Man – Arizona – 2002

"You have to meet Gary Taylor, he's a wild man!" Calamity June, Cowgirl of the Apocalypse, told me during a visit. Just two weeks earlier, she spent the weekend with Rockstar Gary and two dozen others at Scalping Man, Arizona's first regional Burn event. I had the pleasure of encountering Gary two months later on the playa, at the annual Regional Reps gathering at First Camp last year. Rockstar, indeed! Sporting a Hawaiian shirt and a straw hat, Gary, a colorful Gulf War veteran, stood out amongst a pack of Burners, which says something about this man's character. I walked over and introduced myself, because I just had to meet one of the guys behind the legendary Scalping Man. "Calamity June told me all about Scalping Man, but I want to hear it from you!"

On the high desert of Arizona, under rocky clefts and hillsides swept with juniper and sage, near canyons concealing rattlesnakes and scorpions, a new wild west tradition was born. When scouting for appropriate land on which to hold a Burning Man-inspired campout, Gary and Grover Davis from the Solo Collective, explored territory adjacent to a Zuni Indian Reservation, which was sufficiently isolated from civilization. The property was an ultralight landing strip owned by a Burner. Satisfied with their discovery, Gary and Grover stopped for a beer at the Witch Well Tavern on Zuni land. "Have you heard of Burning Man?" they asked the young Zuni woman tending bar, who was inquiring as to their business in the area. A Doberman, a shotgun and a stockpile of ammo boxes accompanied her. "No, but we have our own festival called Scalping Man. You guys should come, we'd love to have you," she said with a wry laugh.

"Scalping Man was held during the last part of May (2002) during a drought," Gary explained. This kept the numbers down to only the most hardcore dusty desert rats. The landscape offered a variety of daytime distractions. With an assortment of guns, participants blasted the hell out of clay pigeons under the blazing sun. "Seven of us piled into a trailer towed by Grover on an ATV," Calamity June reported. "We bumped for several miles down the desolate sand roads. Eventually this jolly little hayride arrived at a wall of petroglyphs." At dusk, they gathered around the fire barrel and howled at the moon as it rose into the night sky. They shared a communal meal together, a feast before the celebration. Calamity June wrote, "there, a spontaneous band formed with drummers, a harmonica, and a jaw harp. A couple of boom boxes and car stereos provided music. We listened to classic rock and I spun fire to Led Zeppelin. We danced with glow sticks and sparklers. Gary breathed fire." Reminiscent of the earlier, more anarchic and sparsely populated days of Burning Man in the Black Rock Desert, propane canisters exploded in the burn barrel as people danced around. Pam Schuler, a performing arts teacher at an Arizona college and an accomplished performance artist in her own right, initiated a semi-improvised play that night. "I created a small performance piece and drafted actors. I used chakra masks that I had created to tie together a tale of the circle of life and the life of this first regional gathering. It was a very neat experience to be able to share it with the group."

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"In retrospect, it was the birth of a new part of our regional culture," Gary said. "Without that first small gathering in the high desert, the next regional burn would not have been as great of a success." The Arizona regional group has come a long way in the past couple of years. Gary participated in Burning Man for the first time in 2000 and entered the highly individual kind of life-altering reality-tunnel that typifies the personal encounter with Burning Man. "I was becoming fully immersed in the culture and felt that I had found my new home. All I knew was that whatever it was I was experiencing, I wanted others to experience it as well." Returning to Phoenix, he soon found himself appointed the Regional Contact. His initial job was to corral all the dispersed, disparate, unconnected people in the area via an email list. "I set up a discussion list server in February 2001 with three people. For the next couple of months there was a slow migration to the list as word spread."

Bartholomew Wolftwain actively attempted to connect with other Burners during this time and attended some of the small intimate happenings. "Early on, the main local interactions were at Grover's, getting together to bend rebar, drink beer, and plan for the Burn," he laughed. "He had two parties he ran each year: the 100 Days Before party and the Rebar Bender." Pam was another who spearheaded activities amongst local Burners. "From a few organized gatherings like 100 Days, a core group of about 15 Phoenix Burners began getting together for weekly trips that included cooling down in the Salt River on Friday afternoons, and meeting downtown for the monthly art walk. Whatever we did together, Burner attire and Leave No Trace principles carried through. Along the way, we often met more interested people and invited them to join in the on-line discussions and gatherings."

Gary elucidated upon how their group really started to roll. "The turning point was when we begged Danger Ranger to detour to the Phoenix area on his Silver Seed tour of America. He rolled into Mesa and we set up the first official AZBurners weekend gathering on May 19th 2001 at Grover's home. Gifts were made to pass along downstream and the Arizona Republic newspaper showed up and did an article in the Sunday arts section. People started migrating to the list at a steady pace. As they say, the rest is history. After Burning Man 2001, the region exploded!" Pam told me that "over the past year, the AZBurners community has grown very quickly. The group has been active in supporting Tucson and Phoenix art events, including the Day of the Dead parade. I think that the openness of our group and our activities have attracted people." And a diverse lot at that!

"One of the things I really like about our community is that it seems to have a wide spectrum on just about any scale you'd care to use," Bartholomew opined. "College-age to geezers, software geeks to welders and carpenters. Just about every type of music is played and cherished. I like that. One of the things that hit me at my first Burn was that I had finally found my tribe, people who built stuff just because it would be fun to do it,

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and don't worry about the reaction. That seems to describe most of the Arizona crowd." Gary believes that "the steady growth has allowed us to create a very warm and close group of people. We have learned many things along the way, and teach new people the Burner World and how we interact in it."

With a much larger and dedicated crew of Burners participating, the AZBurners group planned and pulled off the grand sequel to Scalping Man this past May: Burning Toast. Out on the desert plain overgrown with scrub, the village of Toast Town, a ramshackle assortment of theme camps, domes, a coffee bar, tents, pyramids and four-wheel drive vehicles, sprung up. "Toast was a huge success, with participants from as far away as the UK, Houston, and New York," glowed Gary. Their regional event had grown almost tenfold in the span of just one year. The level of artistic involvement was much higher and decidedly more large-scale. "Gordy Green constructed a twenty foot tall Toasted Man, which was burned on Saturday night. On Sunday we burned Mr. and Mrs. Toast, created and built by ALKYMIST, one of our regional artists. A thirty-foot tall bamboo Eiffel Tower was burned shortly afterwards. Fire spinners from around the west performed during the burning of the tower. A participant on stilts dressed as Pan circled the burning tower, dancing and jumping while other fire performers joined in spontaneous, interactive participation."

Four large-scale temporary burning art objects at one regional event? I shook my head. When the Cowgirl of the Apocalypse first told me of Scalping Man, I vowed I'd make it down to Arizona to take part in whatever nuttiness they had planned for this year (which, sadly, I missed.) Meeting Gary only further solidified my belief that they were up to something special out there in the desert. From very modest beginnings three years ago, the AZBurners group has evolved into a strong local cultural force in its own right. With its own unique Wild West flavor and a panoply of nonconformists, mavericks and creative people, there is a fire spreading across the Arizona desert- one that threatens to Burn for years to come.

For more information on the Arizona regional group, write to Gary Taylor at Arizona Regional .