Smithsonian MAGAZINE

August 22, 2024
UVM: 4,657,949
Ad Value: $31,052.99

TRAVEL | AUGUST 13, 2024

For 100 Years, Santa Feans Have Burned New Mexico's Boogeyman in a 'Sacred Rite of Purification, Laughter and Rebirth'

The original "burning man" was the brainchild of a local artist and involves volunteers constructing a 50-foot-tall villain

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Each year, thousands of people gather at Santa Fe's Fort Marcy Park on the Friday of Labor Day weekend to face their proverbial archnemesis, a 50-foot-tall effigy known as New Mexico's "Boogeyman" or "Old Man Gloom." As the villain makes one final attempt to heap sorrow on the city, plunging it into total darkness, revelers take their cue to commence their fiery revenge.

"Burn him! Burn him!" they chant to the embodiment of their anguish, writhing and howling as they cheer his flaming demise.

It's the annual Burning of Zozobra (pronounced "zuh-ZOH-bruh"), a cultural tradition held sacred to Santa Feans since its inception in 1924. A name meaning "anxiety" in Spanish, Zozobra is staged annually by the Kiwanis Club of Santa Fe to mark the end of summer and kick off Fiesta de Santa Fe, a nine-day celebration of the city's Spanish heritage. This year's event on Friday, August 30, marks the 100th burning.

Volunteers help assemble last year's 50-foot-tall Zozobra. Sam Wasson/Getty Images

A decades-long tradition for many New Mexicans, it epitomizes Santa Fe's uniqueness. "To take a group of volunteers and spend basically an entire year planning, building and constructing this big 50-foot monster only to destroy it, that's pretty City Different," says Ray Sandoval, Zozobra event committee chair, referring to the city's tagline.

Zozobra is also considered a sacred rite of renewal, says Judith Moir, event deputy. "It's a time at which you can let go of everything that bothered you, everything that disappointed yourself or disappointed somebody else around you, and start fresh," she says.

The spark for Zozobra came on Christmas Eve 1923, when local artist William Howard "Will" Shuster Jr., gathered Santa Fe's first artist collective, known as Los Cinco Pintores ("the five painters"), for dinner at the newly opened La Fonda hotel to celebrate selling one of his paintings. But the friends seemed glum, so Shuster demanded they write their troubles on paper, which they then burned in a small tabletop bonfire to clear the negativity. (The restaurant staff kicked them out for it.)

Shortly thereafter, the Zozobra website says, Shuster was inspired by a Yaqui Indian tradition during Easter Holy Week in which an effigy of Judas was led around villages by donkey and eventually set afire. He married the ideas in a four-foot effigy (according to Shuster's diary), which he named "Old Man Groucher" and burned in a private backyard celebration in 1924.

In a handwritten note to a friend, Shuster describes that first burning: "Tonight, we have not just witnessed a spectacle; we have participated in a sacred rite of purification, laughter and rebirth."

The myth developed the following year, Sandoval says, when Shuster and E. Dana Johnson, then editor of the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, changed the effigy's name to "Zozobra," a fitting word they found in a Spanish-English dictionary. The first public burning took place behind Santa Fe City Hall on September 3, 1926, with a six-foot figure constructed of wood, chicken wire and muslin hanging from a metal stake.

Initially resembling a bald, shirtless man with bulging eyes, gaping lips and giant ears, arms draped at his side, Zozobra quickly evolved in style and size. Shuster added tuxedo-like clothing around 1930, fashioning a dapper dinner guest covered in white cloth wearing cuffs, buttons, and a bow tie and waist sash, his head topped with shredded-paper hair typically spray-painted a new color each year. Over the decades, the ghost-like marionette has grown, from 20 feet to 38 feet to today's 50-foot, 6-inch version.

Crowds grew so large in those initial burnings, Shuster relocated Zozobra in the 1930s to a baseball field at the newly built Fort Marcy Park, just a half mile from historic Santa Fe Plaza. While the diamond is currently named Magers Field, the City Council will commemorate this year's centennial by renaming it Zozobra Field at Fort Marcy Park.

The festival now draws an average of 60,000 festivalgoers, equivalent to about 70 percent of Santa Fe's entire population. Many of them are locals like Eric Griego, whose families have passed down the myth of Zozobra for generations. The 53-year-old hasn't missed a single festival in 48 years.

"It is special to New Mexicans because it is an event that is unique to our culturally rich state," says Griego, owner of FS2 Supply Company, the only retailer licensed to create and sell Zozobra merchandise, including T-shirts designed each year by a different local artist. "It is community-centered and focused on banishing the 'gloom' from our lives, and gives us a fresh start for the year to come."

Griego and his two teenage sons are among the hundreds of volunteers, nearly 700 in 2023, says Sandoval, who help pull off the annual event. He manages the "arm crew," a group of volunteers charged with building Zozobra's upper appendages, working when free time allows from spring through summer. Another crew is responsible for Zozobra's legs, body, head and hands, plus other volunteer positions aiding in pyrotechnics and security efforts.

Shuster oversaw the building process until 1964, when he designated the Kiwanis Club of Santa Fe to carry on his tradition. Today, volunteers toil in an empty retail space at the Santa Fe Place Mall, building Zozobra in pieces and following Shuster's original specifications (scaled up from his 20-foot wood-frame design, says Sandoval).

"The size and shape of Zozobra has changed throughout the decades, but the structure stays true to the original design," Sandoval says.

Zozobra takes shape in rolls of chicken wire wrapped over the wooden frames, the holes stuffed with handfuls of shredded paper collected year-round. He's then covered in some 70 yards of cloth. Several vehicles are required to transport the 3,000-plus-pound effigy, in pieces, to Fort Marcy Park.

Importantly, Zozobra is stuffed with actual "glooms," everything from handwritten notes to mementos, like a wedding dress, a hospital gown and a divorce decree. Locals can deliver these castaways ahead of the festival to "gloom boxes" located throughout Santa Fe; nearly 200,000 were collected last year, according to the 2023 media kit.

Outside of Santa Fe, participants can submit online glooms (for a small donation) to be printed and placed inside Zozobra on festival day. Profits from glooms and ticket sales benefit local children and family charities.

Community members can even stuff their own glooms into Zozobra's chicken-wire frame the weekend preceding the burning. On festival day, last-minute glooms are collected in boxes situated amid food vendors and live performers. The gates open at 4 p.m., but many onlookers appear that morning to see the guest of honor (or "dishonor") as workers from PNM, the state's largest electricity provider, hoist Zozobra atop the steel pole (measuring 51 feet and 6 inches tall, a foot taller than the effigy) with heavy equipment.

Which raises the question: How is Zozobra *supposed* to look?

It's complicated, Sandoval says.

"You've got to thread that needle, because Zozobra has to look like Zozobra, but nobody wants to see a Zozobra that they've seen before," he says. "But if it doesn't look like him, it's over. You're going to get a lot of flak for it."

Decades of photos show similarities in Zozobra's eyes, lips, ears and hair with variations in style, from the subtle—removing his bow tie or adding a hat—to the superlative. For instance, the 1943 Zozobra became "Hirohitmus," whose face combined qualities of the three primary World War II Axis leaders Emperor Hirohito, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler (including the latter's mustache, of course).

From 2014 to 2023, the Zozobra Decades Project styled the effigy to reflect the history through the decades he's existed, from a 1920s handlebar mustache to the iconic red leather jacket from Michael Jackson's 1980s "Thriller" video. The 2020 Zozobra featured "Covid-19" hair made of red triangles, orange ping-pong balls and silvery shreds meant to resemble the structure of the virus itself, his wrists adorned with murder hornet cuff links (another 2020 worry).

Although Zozobra's appearance varies by year, adherence to the original artist's vision does not. Shuster famously wrote in diaries about the myth of Zozobra, a storyline depicted for more than 90 years in a live performance preceding the burning. Every year, Sandoval says, Kiwanis planners follow the same blueprint or "ritual checklist."

The basic story begins when townspeople invent a ploy to defeat him: inviting Zozobra as a special dinner guest. But Zozobra is angry to learn he's been fooled, thrusting the city into darkness (beginning around 9 p.m., weather-dependent) and stealing the city's youth as depicted in children called "gloomies" dancing on the stage before him.

"He's going to use Santa Fe's youth against [citizens] in order to take over and ruin the city," Sandoval says.

The citizens respond with torches, and a weakened Zozobra releases the gloomies from their spell. (Kids audition each year for the role.) Zozobra groans and waves his hands in anger as the kids return to their parents, his ire too powerful to be defeated. But the festivalgoers use all their hope and kindness to summon the Fire Spirit, a role bestowed on only two other dancers since the ballet dancer Jacques Cartier's first performance in 1939, Sandoval says. (Cartier danced the role for 37 years.)

Wearing an iconic red costume and fire headdress, the Fire Spirit dances with torches that grow more powerful as the audience cheers. The current dancer, Helene Luna, plans to retire in 2026. Following July auditions, her soon-to-be-announced replacement will perform in 2027.

Fireworks light up the sky, and two waterfalls of fire surround Zozobra. As a crown of fire erupts at his head, signaling Zozobra's flaming downfall, the celebration ends in victory and renewal.

"It's our New Year," Sandoval says. "We start all over again."