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At 100, This Santa Fe Tradition Is Still Burning Bright

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On Friday of Labor Day Weekend, the community of Santa Fe celebrates the Burning of Zozobra.

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Santa Fe has its own version of a burning man festival and it's turning 100 in 2024.

Known as **The Burning of Zozobra**, this annual event involves the igniting of a giant mythical villain towering over the city's Fort Marcy Park. It happens on the Friday before Labor Day. This year, its date falls on August 30.

Zozobra's origin story is linked to an artist named William Howard "Will" Shuster Jr., who came up with this menacing-looking character.

The Philadelphia-born Shuster studied art after high school but was then drafted and sent overseas amid World War I. He would develop respiratory problems, resulting from exposure to the warfare use of mustard gas. After returning home, Shuster's cousin, who was also a physician, gave him two medical options.



The Burning of Zozobra in Santa Fe features a schedule of performances before the igniting of ...
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“[He] says that you can stay in bed for the next six months here in Philadelphia and die, or you can move out West and die of rattlesnakes and whiskey,” explained Event Deputy Ray Sandoval, “and Shuster liked to always tell people that he chose the rattlesnakes and whiskey, so he moved out here.”

Shuster, a painter and sculptor, was among its founding members of Los Cincos Pintores, a 1920s-era group of artists and writers in New Mexico.

On Christmas Eve in 1923, Shuster and his fellow Los Cincos Pintores went to dine at the then new Santa Fe hotel, La Fonda. According to Sandoval, Shuster noted that his friends were all in bad moods and weren’t talking to each other. With a sketch pad on him, Shuster had his friends write down what was bothering them and placed their papers in the middle of their table.

“He grabs the candle that’s on the table and he lights them on fire and declares that their worries are gone,” explained Sandoval. “The bartender walks back in and sees the fire on the table, and he throws all of them out. And they all just start laughing at the absurdity of what had just happened.”



Zozobra is depicted as a gloomy character coming to take over Santa Fe. However, the giant ...

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The burning of the penned grievances sparked an idea in Shuster. The following April, his inspiration would be fueled further when the artist witnessed a Good Friday celebration while on a visit to Mexico. At this festivity, a six-foot effigy of Judas was paraded through town. It was mocked by locals and then also set on fire.

Shuster would draw upon these happenings to start what is referred to as the first Burning of Zozobra. In 1924, at a private party held at his home, Shuster built a six-foot-marionette that he ignited in his backyard. People other than his guests saw what was happening and led to this occurrence becoming a public event in September 1926.

Originally, Zozobra was referred to as the “Old Man Gloom,” but his initial name didn’t really fit. To find a more suitable moniker for this monstrosity, Shuster went to his friend, E. Dana Johnson, who was then the editor of *Santa Fe New Mexican* newspaper. The two came across the word, Zozobra, in a Spanish-English dictionary.

Shuster, who passed away in 1969, continued to personally oversee the construction of Zozobra until 1964. That year, he gave his detailed model plus an archive of related drawings and scripts to the Kiwanis Club of Santa Fe, which still organizes this event.



Crowds continue to come to watch the Burning of Zozobra annually. BRYCE RISLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

Overtime, Zozobra has undergone a physical transformation, growing from six feet to now 50. He originally had legs but he now sports a ghost-shaped tail. Between the 1930s and 1940s, Zozobra was slimed down and sculpted with gloomier facial features like goblin ears.

According to Sandoval, the current Zozobra starts with a wooden frame base that was made by Shuster in the late 1930s. It gets tucked over with a chicken wire skin, then stuffed with shredded paper (hence, the written grievances) and then covered with a cotton cloth. Zozobra's head dates back to 1926 but has been modified to maintain its longevity.

However, the celebration starts earlier. ZozoFest happens the weekend before the Burning of Zozobra and provides some time to see the beloved troublemaker before his big day. Santa Feans can submit their written grievances to Zozobra through what are known as gloom boxes placed around Santa Fe. A box is also stationed at the Friday burning at Fort Marcy Park.

Admission to the Burning of Zozobra is by ticket sales. The proceeds not only cover the costs of putting on Zozobra but also send a portion toward the Kiwanis Club's foundation grants aiding local nonprofits.

According to Sandoval, it's a fun irony that for a "gloomy guy, he does a lot of good."

Tickets and merchandise for the 2024 Burning of Zozobra can be purchased [here](#). For more information and a event schedule, visit this [link](#).