

INJUN SUMMER

John T. McCutcheon
Chicago Tribune
September 30, 1907



Yep, sonny this is sure enough Injun summer. Don't know what that is, I reckon, do you? Well, that's when all the homesick Injuns come back to play; You know, a long time ago, long afore yer granddaddy was born even, there used to be heaps of Injuns around here—thousands—millions, I reckon, far as that's concerned. Reg'lar sure 'nough Injuns—none o' yer cigar store Injuns, not much. They wuz all around here—right here where you're standin'.

Don't be skeered—hain't none around here now, leastways no live ones. They been gone this many a year.

They all went away and died, so they ain't no more left.

But every year, 'long about now, they all come back, leastways their sperrits do. They're here now. You can see 'em off across the fields. Look real hard. See that kind o' hazy misty look out yonder? Well, them's Injuns—Injun sperrits marchin' along an' dancin' in the sunlight. That's what makes that kind o' haze that's everywhere—it's jest the sperrits of the Injuns all come back. They're all around us now.

See off yonder; see them tepees? They kind o' look like corn shocks from here, but them's Injun tents, sure as you're a foot high. See 'em now? Sure, I knowed you could. Smell that smoky sort o' smell in the air? That's the campfires a-burnin' and their pipes a-goin'.

Lots o' people say it's just leaves burnin', but it ain't. It's the campfires, an' th' Injuns are hoppin' 'round 'em t'beat the old Harry.

You jest come out here tonight when the moon is hangin' over the hill off yonder an' the harvest fields is all swimmin' in the moonlight, an' you can see the Injuns and the tepees jest as plain as kin be. You can, eh? I knowed you would after a little while.

Jever notice how the leaves turn red 'bout this time o' year? That's jest another sign o' redskins. That's when an old Injun sperrit gits tired dancin' an' goes up an' squats on a leaf t'rest. Why I kin hear 'em rustlin' an' whisper in' an' creepin' 'round among the leaves all the time; an' ever' once'n a while a leaf gives way under some fat old Injun ghost and comes floatin' down to the ground. See—here's one now. See how red it is? That's the war paint rubbed off'n an Injun ghost, sure's you're born.

Purty soon all the Injuns'll go marchin' away agin, back to the happy huntin' ground, but next year you'll see 'em troopin' back—th' sky jest hazy with 'em and their campfires smolderin away jest like they are now.

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John T. McCutcheon

Tribune editorial cartoonist John T. McCutcheon drew "Injun Summer," inspired by his boyhood on the cornfields of Indiana. The cartoon was accompanied by a lengthy discourse with the plainspoken charm of Mark Twain.

Tribune editorial cartoonist John T. McCutcheon in the early 1900s, at about the time he drew "Injun Summer," a popular drawing inspired by his boyhood on the cornfields of Indiana. (Tribune archive photo)



Deadlines roll around every day in the newspaper business, whether a writer or an artist is fired by an idea or not. One day in the early fall of 1907, cartoonist John T. McCutcheon found himself groping for inspiration for a drawing to fill his accustomed spot on the front page of the Tribune. He thought back to his boyhood in the 1870s on the lonely cornfields of Indiana. "There was, in fact, little on my young horizon in the middle '70s beyond corn and Indian traditions," he recalled later. "It required only a small effort of the imagination to see spears and tossing feathers in the tasseled stalks, tepees through the smoky haze. . . ."

That "small effort of imagination" became McCutcheon's classic drawing "Injun Summer," which was first published on this date. It was accompanied by a lengthy discourse with the plain-spoken charm of Mark Twain. McCutcheon's astute folk poetry captured the sere, prickly, enigmatic mood of nature's most puzzling season. The cartoon proved so popular that it made an annual appearance in the Tribune beginning in 1912, and over the years ran in many other newspapers. McCutcheon's long career at the Tribune stretched from 1903, when he moved from the old Chicago Record, until 1946, when he retired. Over the years, his gentle brand of insight, satire and nostalgia resulted not only in "Injun Summer," but also his poignant expression of grief on the death of Pope Leo XIII, showing the world with a mourning ribbon tied around it, and "Mail Call," which depicts a lone soldier without mail in a crowd of happy recipients. A cartoon is worth at least a thousand words: One reader wrote 11,384 letters to men in service because of it. McCutcheon won a Pulitzer Prize in 1932, the first Tribune staff member to receive journalism's coveted award. His death in 1949 earned a front-page obituary.

In tapping his youth to create a drawing with a sense of a shared, almost mythic past, McCutcheon provided an early and powerful illustration of cartoonists' crucial role in shaping the character of American newspapers and their ability to touch readers in personal, everyday ways. Through the years, Chicago's newspapers have been unusually rich in cartooning talent. At the Tribune, Carey Orr (whose career stretched from World War I to the Cold War), Richard Locher and Jeff MacNelly joined McCutcheon in the Pulitzer ring. Other Chicago newspaper artists to whom Pulitzers were awarded include Vaughn Shoemaker and John Fischetti of the Daily News; Jacob Burck of the Times; and Jack Higgins of the Sun-Times. The drawings of Bill Mauldin, a two-time winner for work done before his arrival in Chicago, enlivened the editorial pages of the Sun-Times from 1962 to 1991.

The "Injun Summer" era ended on Oct. 25, 1992, when it appeared for the last time. The drawings may be timeless, but the text had outlived its day. Complaints had been voiced for several years about its offensiveness to Native Americans. Wisps of smoke have continued to rise from those smoldering leaves, however. Every fall, some readers complain that they miss it.



Sid Smith, Tribune staff reporter