

"...to out-Zuni the Zunis"
FRANK H. CUSHING 1857 - 1900

(Smithsonian photo)

Frank Cushing, an eccentric, flamboyant, enigmatic, intuitive, chronic complainer with an uncontrollable spirit was at age eighteen an anthropologist extraordinary and tolerated as the "boy genius" of the Smithsonian. He wrote: "When I was a boy less than 10, my father's man, while plowing one day, picked up and threw to me across the furrows a little blue flint arrowpoint, saying 'the Indians made that...'. I took it up fearfully, wondering... It was small, cold, shining and sharp, perfect in shape. Nothing had ever aroused my interest so much." And so in this simple manner he found his niche in which he became totally immersed for the rest of his life. This early beginning started on his father's farm which was located just south east of Barre Center on Old Route 98 near Cushing Road. His father, Dr. Thomas Cushing, a physician by education was a freethinker and gave up medicine to study philosophy which greatly influenced his child-rearing techniques and no doubt explains Frank's attitude toward life. Another son, Dr. Enos Cushing with his share of creative talents and eccentricities was for many years a practicing dentist in Albion.

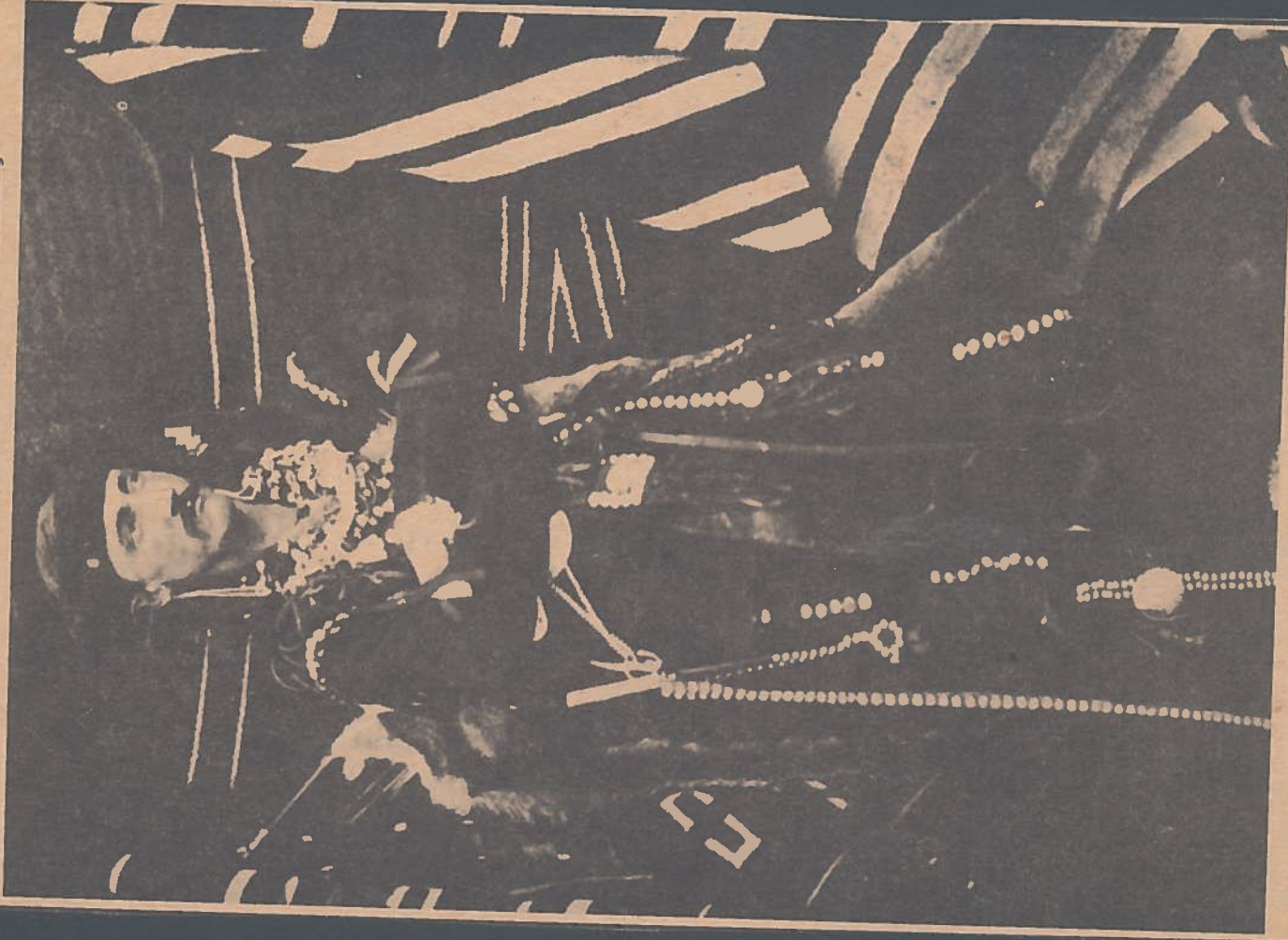
Frank soon began exploring and searching for Indian artifacts. He pretended he was an Indian and he developed an uncanny talent for finding ancient sites. At the age of seventeen he sent to the Smithsonian a paper telling about his finds in Orleans County. To his amazement it was published in the Smithsonian annual report of 1874. He then continued correspondence with the Smithsonian hoping for a position in the Bureau of American Ethnology, but no job offer came. Frank went off to Cornell where he spent most of his time reading only what he wanted to in the library. In November 1875 the offer for a job at the Smithsonian Castle came through and at age eighteen he then had an office in one of the towers as Curator of Ethnology. The next four years he spent carrying out tedious tasks but in 1879 his real dream came true with an assignment to travel to New Mexico. His job was to select a typical tribe of Pueblo Indians and collect all the information he could. For his study he chose the Zuni, a tribe which had evolved a complex community, rich in mythology and ceremonial life which had never before been studied. He stayed four and a half years. At first he camped outside the pueblo in a tent and observed their habits and religious ceremonies constantly taking notes. Uninvited, he moved into the house of the governor of the tribe so as to make his work easier and befriend a powerful ally. The chief's only remark to this maneuver was 'tuh!' meaning damn. Cushing mastered their language and acquainted himself with Zuni arts and industries. He was adopted into the ancient Macaw Clan, initiated into tribal fraternities and inducted into religious ceremonies. He ate their food, wore their native apparel and had his ears pierced in a special ceremony. Finally he was given the ultimatum of either marrying a Zuni girl or take some of the Indians east to see the white man's world. Cushing choose the tour. While east with six Indian headmen-priests he married the daughter of a Washington banker. Upon his return to New Mexico he was accompanied by his wife Emily, she bringing her sister and a cook along. His involvement became at this point, even greater as he participated in a Zuni raiding party. For you see, he considered himself a Zuni. He came to understand them better than any outsider had before and was intelligent to see and point out that they were quite different in whole from other tribes.

On April 10, 1900 while planning another expedition west, over dinner he choked on a fish bone and died before help could be summoned.

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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