

Living Legend

The World's Greatest Knife Thrower?

photos courtesy Prince Che Che White Cloud



Prince Che Che and Donna White Cloud in 1963. Note the way Che Che fans the knives card-style at left.

Prince Che Che White Cloud has thrilled audiences for almost half a century

■ By Bobby Branton

It's rare for a man to follow in his father's footsteps of carrying on the family business, let alone sustaining a family business that was started by his great-grandfather. Such is nonetheless the case with the man known as Prince Che Che White Cloud, the World's Greatest Professional Knife Thrower.

Che Che was born Kenneth Lawrence Pierce. He spent his childhood in Shongo, New York, on the Seneca Indian Reservation located near present-day Salamanca, New York. "I'm of mixed Seneca and Onondaga blood of the Hodenosaunee of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy," he noted.

The Pierces aren't an ordinary family, nor do they operate an ordinary business. They are instead a family rich in heritage and tradition with a bloodline that can be traced back at least 10 generations of Native Americans.

Where the few remaining knife throwers must hold other jobs to pay the bills, Prince Che Che has carried on the family business of throwing battle axes,



Also known as Chief White Cloud, Lawrence Pierce (right) had to masquerade as a non-Native American early in his career to get work throwing knives. Here he is performing with wife Lillian at a Coney Island Wild West Show circa 1915.

knives, tomahawks, spears and boomerangs, as well as performing feats of fast shooting, rope spinning and trick riding that were started by his great-grandfather, Willet Pierce, three generations ago.

Willet Pierce performed with the old rodeos. Unfortunately, he found it hard to get work because of the color of his skin. Che Che's father, Lawrence Pierce, better known as Chief White Cloud, performed at Millers 101 Ranch and the world famous Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Chief White Cloud also found it difficult to find work as a Native American and had to use the stage names of Powder Monkey and Mexican Pete to earn a living throwing knives.

When at home, the White Clouds would rebuild or repair their throwing equipment, practice their routines and attend to business that had been neglected during their long stays on the road. "We also hunted for game to provide food for the family," Prince Che Che noted.

The White Cloud women were the backbone of the family. They spent their time making wardrobes, hand crafting the beadwork that adorned the colorful costumes worn in the knife throwing act.



A young Prince Che Che mugs for the camera with his human knife throwing "target."

In addition to lending their support to their men, the women played doctor, lawyer, cook and also served as human targets for the knife throwing, sharp shooting, blowgun and archery acts.

The Young Prince

At age 5, Che Che was involved in an accident that tore the biceps from his throwing arm. "The muscles were reattached by a German physician who was a friend of the family," the Prince recalled.

Chief White Cloud started Che Che's physical therapy by first having him squeeze putty until he gained enough strength to squeeze a rubber ball with his hand. Then, with a series of range-of-motion exercises, he would have Che Che swing his arm in a circular motion back and forth until he had regained full use of it.

The series of exercises became Che Che's introduction into knife throwing at age 7. His father had him throw at a string tacked on a board to simulate the outline of a target. "I had to throw the knives wide of the target until my confidence began to build," the Prince recalled. "As I got more confident, I would throw each knife closer to the string until I knew exactly where each knife would stick." Only then was he ready to perform with a live target before an audience. "This type of training can take years to master," he added.

Unlike more traditional knife throwers, Che Che throws his blades in a criss-cross pattern. The knives that he flings at his lovely assistant appear to pin her to the board. In his book, *Knife Throwing in the Professional Style*, the late Harry McEvoy notes that Che Che's foot-long

knives are fanned like cards in a deck from his left hand to his right for the half-spin blade throw in such a dazzling blur of motion that the eyes can hardly follow the sequence from the first to the ninth knife.

The blades that the Prince throws are a matched set of nine made by his father shortly after the First World War. Che Che is undoubtedly the fastest knife thrower in the world, hurling his blades at less than one-second intervals in one of the most spectacular displays of knife throwing this author has had the pleasure of seeing.

Che Che says that the future of professional blade throwers doesn't look good. He knows that he's the last of a dying breed. He says that his art will go the way of the dinosaur and that the future of the sport and hobby depends on such organizations as the American Knife Throwers Alliance.

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“By putting on safe exhibitions and knife throwing contests, we can further educate the general public that knife throwing is indeed a sport and hobby,” he observed. “We are not mercenaries or assassins that the folks in Hollywood would have you believe.”

There are no heirs to the White Cloud legacy. Che Che's two sons, Kenneth Jr. and Roy Allen, have chosen other professions even though they both have proved that they could easily slip into their father's moccasins. According to Che Che, show promoters and television producers want their knife throwers to work for wages not befitting an entertainer and showman of his caliber, so his sons have no choice but to choose livelihoods that pay better.

Who knows? Since most things seem to come full circle and with the current renewed interest in knife throwing, maybe future generations will have a professional blade thrower thrill them with spectacular demonstrations of speed and accuracy that all knife throwing enthusiasts have come to love.

*The author is president of the American Knife Throwers Alliance, conducts knife throwing seminars and also makes throwing knives. His address: 4976 Seewee, Dept. BL, Awendaw, SC 29429 (803) 928-3624. **BLADE***