



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Rudolph Wendelin (1910-2000)

Born in Herndon, Kan., Rudolph “Rudy” Andreas Michael Wendelin might not be a name you recognize, but his work is one you surely will. Wendelin grew up in Ludell, Kan., and attended the University of Kansas School of Architecture. He later attended art schools in Milwaukee and Washington, D.C.

After finishing school, Wendelin went to work for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) as a draftsman and illustrator in Milwaukee, Wisc., and transferred to Washington, D.C. in 1937. During World War II, Wendelin served in the Navy, but returned to his position with the Forest Service immediately following his active duties.

Upon return to the USFS, Wendelin helped launch the Smokey Bear project in an effort to spread the word about forest fire prevention. The initial 1944 cartoon was drawn by Albert Staehle, but it would be Rudy Wendelin who helped the bear evolve and achieve success over the next 40 years.

Initially, Smokey Bear was drawn as a cub and then became a full-grown animal with long snout, fangs and fearsome claws. Wendelin gave Smokey a more broad appeal by humanizing the bear’s features, giving him human hands, a ranger’s hat and belted blue jeans. Smokey Bear nearly always carried a shovel, and his slogan was “Remember, only YOU can prevent forest fires.”

In 1952, Smokey Bear became so popular the U.S. Congress passed The Smokey Bear Act to give the Secretary of Agriculture control of the icon and create an initiative to use all royalties for continued education on the prevention of forest fires. Smokey Bear appeared on and in all types of media, on postage stamps, and was used in various teaching materials. He even appeared in a movie. Eventually, his popularity reached the point where he was awarded his own Zip code, 20252.

Wendelin oversaw Smokey's activities until he retired from the Forest Service in 1973. He designed and sculpted government awards and was a landscape painter. Wendelin also designed five commemorative U.S. postage stamps and co-designed a sixth. While in retirement, Wendelin drew calendars and sketched illustrations for a book featuring Smokey Bear.

For his dedication to his career, Wendelin was presented with the Medal of Honor by the Daughters of the American Revolution for his work in popularizing Smokey Bear. He also received awards from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Wendelin passed away at age 90 from injuries sustained in a car accident.

