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—Johnny Rocca, speaking of his grandfather

JOHNNY ROCCA'S GREAT RUN

Johnny Rocca, Native American, successful businessman, drag strip legend and tireless tinkerer, settles comfortably into an over-stuffed leather chair and fires up a Cohiba cigar—one of three he allows himself each day.

Swirling smoke surrounds him and curls upward, enveloping Rocca in a kind of ethereal presence. He has been asked to share his story—one that covers everything from his multi-million-dollar business ventures in the manufacture and marketing of traffic signals to drag racing championships and relentless service to those in need.

BY JEFF COWART . PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFFREY PREHN

“If I give you the gift of my recollections, the story of my life, out of respect you need to give me a gift back,” says Rocca, his sharp blue eyes focusing intently and reflecting a still-developing wisdom of 61 years of life. “Generally, I would look for tobacco. This is not to smoke. I will put it into my medicine bag and the next time I go to the sweat lodge I will use it to carry my prayers and your good wishes to the creator.”

This is the other side of Rocca’s story—the warrior of the clan of the bear of the southern band of the Native American tribe of Tuscarora. As war chief his job is to keep peace, and preserve and teach the ways of the people. He is a seeker and a keeper of wisdom and some day he may become a medicine man.

The roots of Rocca’s story begin in earnest with his grandfather, a full-blooded Tuscarora Indian who lived and farmed in Loudoun. “My family has lived here for generations and generations,” says Rocca. “My grandfather lived on his dairy farm and just kind of kept to himself. He had had some very bad experiences with discrimination at the turn of the century and he kept the fact that he was a Tuscarora Indian very quiet.”

In his teenage years, Rocca explored the woods around his grandfather’s farm and he felt himself continually drawn to the front porch of a house where an old man lived in the hills. Johnny knew the man was an Indian and he thought his name was Charlie Two Shoes. After nearly two years of visits, the old man revealed that Charlie Two Shoes was, in fact, Johnny’s grandfather.

“None of us knew,” says Rocca. “I confronted my grandfather and for the longest time he wouldn’t talk to me about it. And then, finally, he told me one day he would teach me the ways of the people. He told me he wanted me to go to school and get an education. He also told me he wanted me to live the first half of my life as a white man and learn about the modern world and find success.”

Rocca was not exactly sure how long the first half of his life would be, but he got started. Early steps along the path took him to the U.S. Navy where he served on an underwater demolition

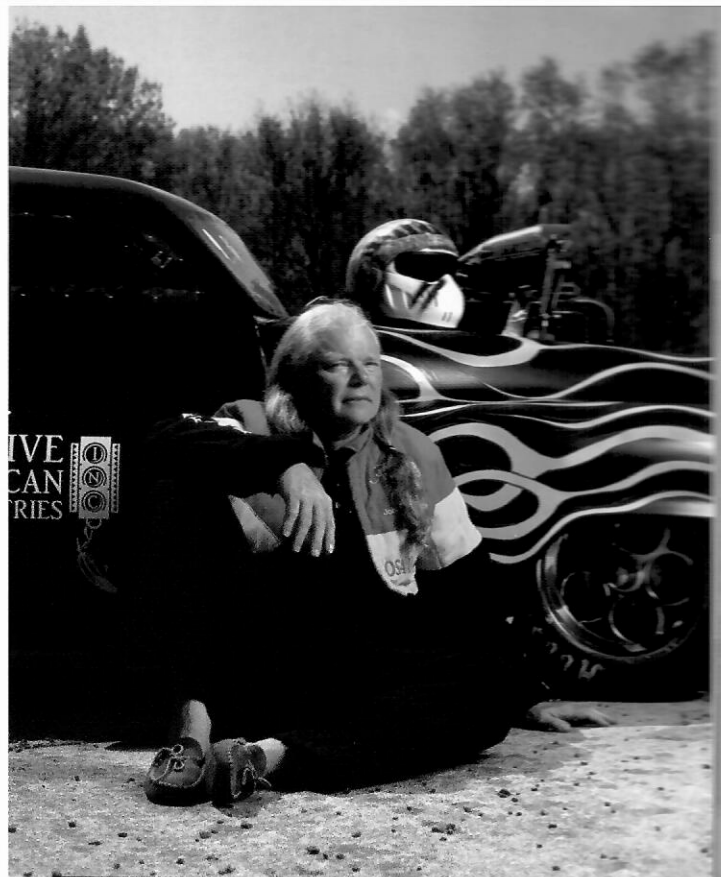
team. In the early 1960s, he was deployed to the Bay of Pigs to help clear safe passage for boats involved in the ill-fated U.S.-backed invasion of Cuba. Anyone familiar with history knows things didn’t go well in the exercise, and that was particularly true for Rocca, who was the sole survivor of his 21-man unit. Badly injured, he was taken captive and spent nearly two months in a Cuban prison before finally being released. It took nearly a year to recover from his wounds.

After military discharge, Rocca trained as a barber, owned a series of barbershops, and worked as an electrician to earn

money to go back to school. He also learned a great deal about traffic signals and, over time, he became widely known for his expertise in signal technology and traffic engineering. Meanwhile, a love of cars and speed was drawing Rocca toward auto racing. With few funds and an abundance of skills, he started building the early prototypes of what would become his now-legendary hot rods.

Circumstances led him back to the federal government and during the cold war years, Rocca and his hot rod went on a tour behind the Iron Curtain. He and his wife, Barbara, whom he married in 1968, set out to see the world on a government transport plane.

“The government said they couldn’t pay me, but that they would send us and the car over there and feed us,” says Rocca. “People all over the world love cars. We were going to trade fairs in places like Bulgaria, Romania and Poland and they would take us out to the track and demonstrate the car. We had a great time, and the experience certainly broadened my knowledge of the



Left: Rocca pays homage to his ancestors at a 300-year-old battle site. Above: Rocca and one of his famous hot rods, Iron Horse.

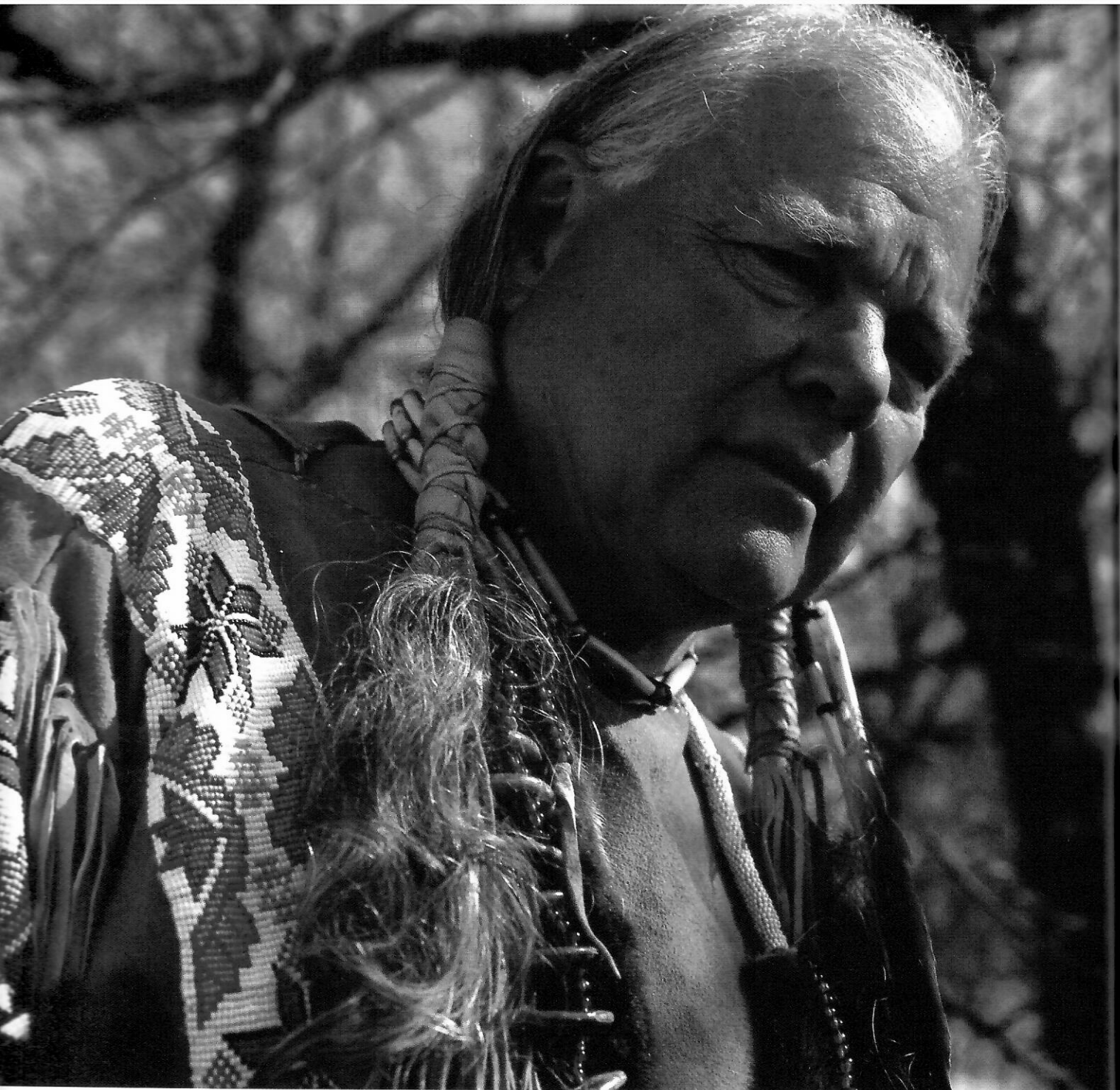
world.”

By 1970, Rocca was feeling unsettled. He remembered those days in the woods on his grandfather’s farm in Loudoun and felt drawn to return. He and Barbara made a key decision to take up farming and bought acreage on a hilltop south of Leesburg, populating it with 100 head of cattle and 300 hogs.

“I had developed a reputation in traffic signals and engineering, but when I came to the farm, I left all that behind me,” says Rocca. “Contractors continued to call me and I would tell them I didn’t want to leave the farm. We didn’t make any money, but we were happy here. We decided to have children because we thought this would be a great place to raise a family. And, this has been a terrific place for our daughter and our son.”

Rocca, of course, never stopped fiddling with cars. He also started taking a call or two from the signal contractors. Accumulating contracts one by one, he decided in 1979 to form the Brothers Signal Company. Several years later, the common-

world. He came to be known as a man of his word, even if he lost money in the process. His business grew accordingly.



Above and at right: Each piece of Rocca's regalia was hand-made specifically for him, and each has special significance.

wealth determined that minorities should have a right to participate more fully in government contracts. As a Native American in a business that supplied goods and services to governments, Rocca was one of the first to apply. As he describes it, the process took him through "the hinges of hell" to prove that he was a Native American.

"This recognition didn't get me one dollar in contracts," says Rocca. "But, it elevated my visibility with a lot of people and I became known

as one of the signal experts on the East Coast. And, I learned some things about my heritage that were important to me."

From his grandfather, Rocca had learned the Native American values of trust and respect and applied them to his dealings in the business world. He came to be known as a man of his word, even if he lost money in the process. His business grew accordingly. Last year, Rocca bought a signal manufacturing plant in Michigan and moved

the operations to Vint Hill in Fauquier County, renaming the company Native American Industries. His business ventures also include ownership of Darlington International Dragway in South Carolina, adjacent to the legendary NASCAR speedway.

Today, he oversees enterprises worth more than \$20 million. And he never stopped fiddling with his cars.

Rocca turned professional in the racing world

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in 1987, building and racing pro-modified cars. His Ironhorse, a modified 1949 Mercury with a blown engine, fast became a crowd favorite for its style, uniqueness and speed.

Racing a heavy car—known as a "lead sled" in racing circles—hasn't brought Rocca to the highest-paying winner's circle as often as he might like. Yet, he was Canadian champion two years in a row in 1999 and 2000. "My racing career has never paid that much," says Rocca. "But it is something that I just thoroughly enjoy."

The racing crowds enjoy Rocca, too, with his colorful cars like Ironhorse, Mohegan Sun and the Tin Indian. His name is without doubt a legend in drag racing circles. Last year Rocca announced his retirement, at least from the active racing side. He immediately signed a contract as a drag racing announcer for ESPN, yet another wrinkle in a multi-faceted career.

Throughout all his success, Rocca never forgot about his grandfather and the ways of his people. About a dozen years ago he had no idea if he had indeed lived half his life in the traditional world of business—as his grandfather had suggested—but he came to the conclusion that he had achieved a level of success that felt like the first half of his life had been well-lived.

"At age 50, I started publicly living my Indian life," says Rocca. "I knew my heritage and what my grandfather had taught me, but I became very serious about rediscovering my tribe and about becoming reconnected with it. I knew my grandfather's name and I sent a letter to the tribe. About six months later, I got a letter back welcoming me home. That has tended to shape my life and who I have become."

Rocca's tribe, he knew, had its roots in Bertie County, NC in the northeastern part of the state, in what is known as the Albemarle region. The Tuscarora are one of the six tribes that make up the Iroquois. Through his research, Rocca found that many of the Tuscarora left North Carolina in the early 1700s, heading for New York and the Iroquois Nation. This northward march took them through Loudoun and the surrounding area. Many of those on the journey dropped off along the way to farm and hunt, including Rocca's ancestors. The more he learned, the more Rocca became drawn to his heritage and its traditions. His

clan mother for the Clan of the Bear appointed him war chief, and he grew his hair long as a sign of that honor. He started visiting the reservation in North Carolina on a regular basis.

"Our history is we lived on the land, then others came and told us we had to move to another piece of land, and then we had to move again," says Rocca. "We were finally given land that nobody wanted. It wasn't fit for anything and 90 percent of the time it wouldn't grow two stalks of celery." As a result, reservation life has been poor and hard for Native Americans. In the last dozen years, Rocca has spent a great deal of his time working with the Tuscarora reservation to improve schools and establish new businesses.

"We are starting our own schools, taught by native people," says Rocca. "They teach the language and see to it that sacred things are not lost." Rocca believes it is critically important to create learning environments for the Native American children about these spiritual and sacred things. "Our spirituality taught me as a young man and is teaching me as an old man to respect the elders," says Rocca. "With age comes wisdom. Our elders have taught us to care very much about each other. In our culture, nobody will ever go hungry or freeze in the winter."

Bearing witness to the struggles of his people on the reservations and this sense of spirituality has helped direct much of Rocca's community life. True to Native American custom, he keeps a low profile in his own community, though he donates generously to local individuals and organizations. About 10 years ago, he was named chairman of the county's affordable dwelling unit advisory board. This group works directly with the board of supervisors and the commonwealth to advance programs that create af-

fordable housing.

"We have firemen and policeman and teachers in Loudoun County who cannot afford to own a home here," says Rocca. "I am very concerned about that and want to do something to make a difference for them."

"I have really had a great run," says Rocca. "My life is a gift. I get satisfaction by feeling that I am actually doing something. Native people don't fear death. For us, it is only a matter of moving on to our next life and that's why we respect all things on this earth."

On a second visit with Johnny Rocca, I hand him a leather pouch with tobacco in it and thank him for the gift of his story. He opens it and looks in.

"There is another part to this process," says Rocca. "I have to look at the gift to decide if I will accept it." And then he says, "Perfect."

Leesburg resident Jeff Cowart is a former news editor, investigative reporter, and press secretary for the Louisiana governor's office. He is president of MediaNational Consulting, which develops and implements strategic communications projects. Jeff's writing has earned awards from the William Randolph Hearst Foundation, the Associated Press and various state press associations.

