

The Turtle & Dennis Sun Rhodes

A Reminiscence by Rick Hill

The Turtle started as a dream. Actually, it was a tiny sketch that Duffy Wilson made for a funding application in 1976. Duffy was an arts entrepreneur buying and selling authentic Native American crafts. Himself a sculptor, he had a creative mind. He envisioned an art centre in the shape of a turtle - the enduring symbol of the earth from the Haudenosaunee creation story.

Operating out of a storefront art gallery on Third Street in Niagara Falls, Duffy inherited an organization called the Native American Centre for the Living Arts (NACLA). Originally organized in New York City, NACLA, was conceived by a group of Native artists that included Duffy, Dennis Sun Rhodes (Northern Arapaho), Arthur Junaluska (Cherokee dancer), Rubert Costo (Cahuilla writer) and others, driven by Buffy Sainte Marie, who at the time was recognized as an Indigenous folk singer.

The vision was to create a respectful place to honor and celebrate Native American Creativity.

But, as luck would have it, New York City did not embrace the idea and the organization ran out of steam. It was turned over to Duffy in 1975 who reconstituted the Board of Directors in Niagara Falls.

That's how I got involved. I had been working at the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. Separately, Duffy and I formed the Haudenosaunee Council on the Arts in 1973. It included the artisans who would be the new Board of NACLA - Duffy Wilson (Tuscarora sculptor), Elwood Green (Mohawk silversmith), Irvin Chrisjohn (Oneida corn husk artist), Jake Thomas (Cayuga wood carver), Oren Lyons (Onondaga painter), Neville Spring (Tonawanda Seneca turtle rattle maker) and myself a Tuscarora photographer and painter. I was the youngest member of the Board and served as secretary.

We received a bit of funding from New York State and put on exhibitions, taught art classes, held Mohawk language classes, crafts demonstrations and dance programs.

One day, two men walked into our store front (I forget their names) and explained about a funding opportunity from the federal Economic Development Administration. They offered to help put together a construction proposal to build an art centre in Niagara Falls. All they asked is that if the funds were granted we would hire them as project coordinators.

I was a bit skeptical because it was really for shovel ready projects. All we had was Duffy's sketch of a turtle and a big dream.

They worked on the proposal, through the night and hoped to drop it in the mail in time to meet the deadline. Something happened that it could not be sent. A snowstorm hit so no flights were available. Duffy drove through that storm all the way to Albany to hand deliver the proposal.

Santa Claus visited early, I think it was a few days before Christmas when we heard that we received \$4.9 million to build the Turtle. Our proposal was among the highest rated for the competition.

Then reality set in. We had 90 days to break ground. We had no design, not one single architectural drawing. We had to secure the land from the city, hire an architect, and develop an operational plan.

Needless to say, it was an exciting and hectic time. We hire Hodne/Stageberg Partners Architects from Minneapolis. Dennis Sun Rhodes, an Arapaho architect from Wind River, Wyoming work for that firm.



Dennis Sun Rhodes

At our first meeting I shared a slide show on the sequence and meaning of our Creation Story in which this world was made on the back of a giant turtle.

Together we took that simple sketch made by Duffy and created the design of a 50,000 s.f. Multiple use arts faculty.

To meet the deadline we took my idea of an intertribal village that was originally slated for the main circle within the Turtle, and instead, designated the International Indian Village for ArtPark in Lewiston, NY.

It was a simple design of a circular palisade that contained several thatched roof Miccosukee of Florida style of lodges.

The time it took to build that village gave the architects more time to design the Turtle. It works. The dollars flowed and construction was continuous.

Dennis and I became fast friends. Ray Gonyea and myself went to his home community in Wyoming to shot a video on Arapaho teepee raising.

Dennis and I, along with other Haudenosaunee advisors worked to create the Ganondagan Historic site trails and conceptual plan of a visitors centre at the state historic site in Victor, NY.

Ron Melchert, Oneida landscape architect, who also worked for Hodne/Stageberg joined us in creating an interpretive experience in that historically significant park.

One time, Dennis and I drove from Minneapolis to South Dakota, stopping at the sacred Catlinite mines, sacred Black Hills and the hollowed ground of Wounded Knee. Dennis took me to see his latest project of a Oglala Lakota College to honor a prairie hawk and a tribal center designed in the shape of an eagle. As we stood there looking at these buildings, Dennis said that he liked the idea that inspired by his culture his designs would outlast him. from concept to design to concrete, his work was really monumental sculptures.

He took me horseback riding for the first time in my life. As we wandered over the rolling hills of the Wind River reservation, our horses became agitated and it was hard to keep them from running off.

It turned out that a beautiful wild black stallion appeared on the horizon and was tempting our horses to run to him. It was a beautiful and powerful moment. Nature, men and horses. I have admired that stallion ever since. He was truly free.

I attended the opening of the American Indian wing of the Buffalo Bill Historical Centre in Cody, Wyoming. I introduced Dennis to my new son, Travis. Dennis was delighted. His whole family was. So, he gave me his black Chevy muscle car to drive from Cody, through Yellowstone National Park and on to Wind River where we would meet up.

Once there Dennis took me hunting near mysterious Dinwoody rock petroglyphs, 45 miles east of Riverton, WY.

He explained that the petroglyphs were made by an ancient people, and his people have lost the meaning of the floating figures depicted high upon a cliff. We both marvelled at the way the figures were depicted. Powerful designs or powerful beings. They supported our mutual admiration of creativity and spiritual transcendence within which our ancestors existed.

Over the years we shared many a conversation about art, tradition, family, community and the unique place we found ourselves within the intersecting indigenous and mainstream cultures.

We saw ourselves as creative interpreters of what our ancestors had hoped for us. Dennis was a deep thinker, often pensive, but always seeking, but never so serious that he couldn't laugh at the contradictions of our modern lives.

Dennis was deeply saddened when the Turtle closed. A mutual dream deferred. A missed opportunity.

When you were so deeply involved in birthing the Turtle as we all were, its demise created unresolvable grief in our hearts. A wound we carry. All of those unmet expectations. All of the national excitement it created. All of the creativity energy expended on turning a dream into reality.

To Dennis and me, it was like a death in our family. We mourned its loss but it stung too much. Our hearts were tugged any time there was the possibility of reviving the Turtle. There was always a glimmer of hope. There was always new disappointments.

Like all deaths, you have to reconcile it sooner or later. We had to except that it was closed and we moved on.

Dennis continued to design Indigenous intent buildings. I continued to support Indigenous arts and culture through a variety of museum projects.

About 20 years ago I began to write about the people, places and performances of culture that affected me the most. One chapter was on Dennis.

As time has a habit to do, I put that manuscript aside for over ten years.

A friend, professor Daniel Coleman encouraged me to complete the manuscript. We worked on editing it for over a year.

It stimulated me to want to have another conversation with Dennis as we had fallen apart when I moved to Canada in 2005. I needed to see how he felt about what we tried to do.

So, in 2024 I tried to track Dennis down. His old firm had folded and his own architectural company was no longer in operation. All of the phones numbers I had for him were disconnected.

Finally, I came across a recent interview of him and contacted the agency that conducted the interview to see if they could forward my email to Dennis.

I could already hear his voice in my head. I could already hear him chuckling.

But I got no response. I then found out that his diabetes has taken its toll and he had to have his legs amputated. When I saw the age that had set into his face in newspaper articles, I could only regret not keeping in touch.

Then the announcement of his passing came to me. It was not a shock. It was however, very sad to know that my intellectual and artistic companion no longer would put pencil to paper to create space for indigenous lives. We would no longer meet around the county to reflect on our lives.

I'm left with complete sorrow over the loss. At the same time, there is such joy knowing that our lives crossed and became intersected like a strand of DNA.

There are only two of us left from the original Turtle days. All of the board member except for Oren Lyons who turned 95, have passed. Duffy passed. Tom Hodne passed. I'm not sure what happened to those two men who helped craft the funding proposal.

Now, in my mind I can see Dennis on his favorite horse, giving into that wild stallion as they ride off into the Wyoming sunset and towards a purple eagle that forms when you look to the mountains in the west. I'm sure that Dennis hopped onto that eagle and was carried to the place where the drum are always drumming, where people are always dancing, where kegs are not needed to still be mobile, and where turtles live forever.

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Rick Hill in 1980

Rick Hill Sr. is a citizen of the Beaver Clan of the Tuscarora Nation of the Haudenosaunee at Grand River. He holds a Master's Degree in American Studies from the State University of New York at Buffalo. He is the former Assistant Director for Public Programs, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution; Museum Director, Institute of

American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, NM; and Assistant Professor, Native American Studies, SUNY Buffalo. He recently retired as Senior Project Coordinator of the Deyohahá:ge: Indigenous Knowledge Centre at Six Nations Polytechnic, Ohsweken, Ontario. Rick is currently working as an interpretive specialist to develop exhibitions for the recently renovated Mohawk Institute, the oldest Indian residential school in Canada.