

LELOOSKA



The Life of a Northwest Coast Artist

by CHRIS FRIDAY

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Puffin Rock





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*Title page illustration: Kolus with Sisiutl
Frontispiece, title page, this page, and page 1 illustrations courtesy of Ralph Norris*



Raven Rattle

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PREFACE

OVER THE SPAN OF FOUR DECADES, from the 1950s to the 1990s, Don “Lelooska” Smith emerged as a superb storyteller, performer, and Northwest Coast Indian artist. His family’s daytime educational programs and evening shows of Northwest Coast Indian and other Indian stories and dances exposed literally tens of thousands of people to the diversity and complexity of American Indian lives past and present. His own Northwest Coast carvings earned him a national and international reputation among a generation of carvers that included luminaries such as Bill Reid, Robert Davidson, Douglas E. Cranmer, Henry Hunt, and Bill Holm. That generation helped propel Northwest Coast carvings into the realm of art.

Lelooska’s life story was by no means simple and uncomplicated. Born of mixed ancestry, Lelooska grew up with significant Cherokee influences from his mother and her father. In addition, his family’s deep friendships with Indians from Oklahoma, the northern Plains, and Eastern Oregon and Washington created multiple layers of identity for Lelooska as a Cherokee, a “breed,” and an “Indian.” The associations he developed in his adult years added formal and informal ties to tribes and families along the Northwest Coast. In spite of these unusual experiences and his own charisma, skills, and artistic abilities, Lelooska’s story also reveals much that is central to understanding twentieth-century Indian lives. When Lelooska and I started this project, his unique capabilities stood out, but as I learned

more about his life and experiences I began to realize how much his life story reflects common themes. I hope that readers keep in mind his exceptionalism and the larger picture he represents.

When we began taping Lelooska's life narrative, neither of us was absolutely clear about the end result of our collaborative effort. We were driven by a sense of urgency. Doctors had discovered cancer in Lelooska and the prognosis was not good. At the prime of his life as an artist, this was a devastating blow to Lelooska, his family, and those who knew him. Before we started the interviews, we agreed on two basic goals: that his narrative should be recorded for the younger generations in his family and that it should be made available for a broad audience.

Over the course of nearly two years we taped multiple interviews, and I began creating a verbatim transcript and then editing that for this volume. I had the good fortune of hiring Lelooska's niece Mariah Stoll-Smith (now Reese) to assist with the initial transcription. As she laboriously transferred each word, phrase, pause, and chuckle from tape to paper, Lelooska and I began to pass the narrative on to the younger generation in his family. When I handed the final transcript to Lelooska and his family just before his health went into rapid decline, we took another step toward that goal.

Attaining the second goal took longer. Lelooska agreed that the interviews should be placed in an archive so that they would be available to interested parties. I also had tentative thoughts of some kind of publication, but was not sure what kind of collaborative narrative we might produce any more than I could predict how this information might be disseminated. It eventually appeared in several forums and formats ranging from public talks, elementary school presentations, and collegiate-level classroom lectures to academic conference papers and a volume of scholarly essays in progress about twentieth-century Indian cultural and social history. Lelooska and I have understood these efforts to be a continuation of his long-standing commitment to educational endeavors and his love of performances.

This volume is a collaborative narrative of Don "Lelooska" Smith's life. It is largely the story that Lelooska chose to tell, though it is influenced by the questions I asked him during the many hours of taped interviews and less formal, untaped conversations we had between sessions. My ques-

tions were guided by more than a quarter-century association with Lelooska and his family as well as by my training as a historian. Knowing Lelooska and his family long before I became a historian, combined with later work in that discipline, allowed me to look at his life in a unique context.

As a boy, I spent many hours with the Lelooska family. I ate many meals and saw movies there. At the regular, entertaining, and spontaneous black-powder musket shoots, Don, his younger brothers Dick and Smitty, his nephew Jay, and my father, Harlow, and I blazed away in smoky glee at any number of targets. These occasions were always as full of stories as they were lead shot. Fishing with Dick for most of one summer was too. My teenage antics with Jay only sometimes got us in trouble with our families. (They were *very* tolerant of us.) As well as just being around the Lelooska family on a regular basis, I worked at evening shows and sanded carvings for Smitty, all of which has had a deep and lasting impact on the way in which I see the world.

Through all of those years, I was no ethnographer taking field notes; I was a typical teenager focused on my own universe. Because of that teenage vision, during the interviews and editing I turned to my parents, Anna and Harlow Friday, to help me overcome the gaps in my knowledge and perspective about those years. They know the Lelooska family well. Over the years, my mother has served as a bookkeeper, booking agent, jewelry-making assistant, housekeeper, and dancer in the shows. My father helped with construction projects and played an extra in the fur-trade and other workshops, but most often he could be found in the back room watching videos and eating popcorn with Don. Their experiences with the family and insights on this project make them, at least indirectly, part of this collaborative narrative.

My family's close association with the Lelooskas forces me to admit that those same advantages create problems. I cannot be dispassionate and indifferent about Lelooska. I have great respect for him as an artist and a student of history and culture. I am in awe of his abilities to hold large crowds or small groups spellbound for hours with equal ease. I have obligations to him and his family to represent his life story as he chose to tell it that have only been strengthened by doing the interviews. Others who might have conducted such a series of interviews with Lelooska may have cho-

sen to ask different questions, broach different topics, cast the narrative in a different form, or be more of an advocate or critic than I.

Still, no others came forward in the final months of Lelooska's life or in the many decades before that to listen to and record his life story. I have spent several years preparing this narrative for Lelooska's family, for my own, and for the many people who knew Lelooska through his art or his family's educational programs. This narrative is also for those who never had the opportunity to consider the circumstances of Lelooska's remarkable life.

For this project, I returned to the Lelooska family as a friend—and as an academic, which is no less problematic. Scholars have an often deserved reputation for reworking personal narratives at the time of the interviews and during the editing phase to fit their own conceptions rather than those of the people they interview. I am not wholly immune to those tendencies, and this narrative is after all collaborative. I started each interview with a set of questions, but I quickly found that those were only the starting points of the discussions. Don often took control of the conversation, and with his skills as an orator and storyteller he created the narrative structure and plot lines as he recounted his life. For example, I began the first interview by asking him about his early life, but almost immediately he went back to earlier relationships of family and acquaintances that connected to a deep vein of indigenous cultures of North America. He was not going to tie himself to the narrative structure that I envisioned. That has been a powerful lesson for me.

Not every interview session ran so smoothly as that first. Sometimes the interviews were disjointed as we revisited topics or re-engaged those that came up in informal conversations during other visits. I recall one incident when I had driven the 250-odd miles from Bellingham, Washington, to Ariel, Washington, near Mount St. Helens to tape Don, but he was pushing to finish a mask. He was in good spirits and voice, so we chatted for several hours while he carved. I did not tape the discussion, because that would have disrupted his carving; our idle conversation did not. When I returned three days later, Don and I tried to recapture some of what we had covered, with only limited success. Most of the other interview sessions went smoothly, mirroring the roles he and I assumed in the first.

Don was a spectacular orator, which meant that he had significant control over the narrative as it emerged. This complicated my role as a collaborator, and my “voice” is not consistently evident. I am there in the interviews with Don as the “you” against which he measured his “I.” I am there, asking questions, guiding the discussion at times, along for the ride at most others. Because of that activity and presence, I should neither claim full authorship nor stand aloof as the all-seeing, invisible ethnographer/biographer so common in many earlier as-told-to texts. To overcome this dilemma, some recent anthropologists include the “voice” of the ethnographer as a consistent and obvious part of the narrative or take more explicit control of the narrative to create an analytical biography.¹ Taking the first approach would have inserted me into Don’s life in ways that would not reflect my actual involvement in it. Taking the second option would have meant that I would violate an understanding Don and I had from the outset of this project: to record a series of conversations in which Don spoke about his life and to put those conversations forward for his family and a broader public. Thus, I made a conscious decision to limit explicit exchanges between Don and me to brief passages in the section and chapter introductions, and to those places that require some bridge to span gaps in Don’s narrative. Those curious about the differences between the edited version and the full verbatim transcript may consult the copy I have placed in the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington.

The narrative proper begins with Chapter 2. Chapter 1 offers readers an introduction to Lelooska’s life, and places it in the context of contemporary debates about ethnic and racial identities, twentieth-century Native American history, and Native American art history. The Conclusion revisits those same points. The beginning of the remaining chapters as well as sections within the chapters give added historical background, a brief introduction to critical scholarly debates, and a sense of what that chapter reveals about Lelooska’s life. The short passages that accompany most of the sections often afford an understanding of the context in which the interviews were conducted and represent a nod toward the collaborative nature of this narrative.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS VOLUME REPRESENTS more than collaboration between Lelooska and me. Behind it are the influences of our respective families and networks of associations. For my part, my wife, Katie Walker, has been an indispensable friend and critic. She kept me on task, offered encouragement and support, and, as usual, went over many different drafts. From the beginning, she was convinced of the merits of this project, for she knows how much Lelooska has meant to our three children—Any, Becca, and Miles. Without the input of my parents, Anna and Harlow Friday, I could not have filled the gaps in my own knowledge about the Lelooska family. My brother-in-law Joe Walker and his wife, Rachel Belcher, deserve thanks as readers, ad hoc research assistants, and patient friends in awaiting the completion of the project.

My colleagues at various universities provided critical intellectual stimuli and support. John Purdy, Peter Iverson, Steve Haycox, and Andrew Fisher generously gave wonderful guidance on many aspects of Native American studies. Alan Gallay, Kevin Leonard, Beth Joffrion, Diana Shenk, and Midori Takagi provided good conversation about this project, paid careful attention to my writing, and offered helpful critiques. Valerie Matsumoto deserves a special commendation as a consistent booster of this project. Phone conversations with her invariably left me with

renewed confidence; early in my work she pointed to other collaborative narratives and started me on an important path.

Western Washington University has been helpful, too, in seeing this work through to completion. Work-study funds paid for the rough transcription of the tapes. A Bureau for Faculty Research summer research grant allowed me to explore Makah history and Native American literary criticism. Western also granted a leave of absence for the 1995–1996 academic year so that I might spend time at Washington State University's Northwest Center for Comparative American Cultures and Race Relations, funded by a Rockefeller Humanities Grant for an unrelated project. That time and my colleagues there—Paul Wong, Rory Ong, Shelli Fowler, the late Collin Beckles, William Willard, Paul Hirt, Sue Armitage, T. V. Reed, and Noel Sturgeon—gave me new insights into the fields of ethnic and Native American studies. Most recently, a yearlong sabbatical from Western afforded the opportunity to finalize this study and work on a second, related book. The students in my history courses at Western Washington University gave me a chance to place Lelooska's life in historical context and have been positive about what I shared with them.

Many others have lent their aid to this project. Gilbert A. Giles, Edward Malin, and Ralph and Karen Norris shared their photographs and time, which were invaluable. Lita Tarver and Pat Soden at the University of Washington Press demonstrated faith in Don's narrative. I am grateful for their ongoing support. They also selected reviewers whose comments proved most helpful and challenging. I am in their debt. I thank Xavier Callahan for shepherding the manuscript through its final stages at the press and Kris Fulsaa for her watchful (and helpful) copyeditor's "eye."

In the end, none of this would have been possible without Don. Thank you.

CHRIS FRIDAY
Bellingham, Washington

NOTE TO THE READER

THROUGHOUT THIS VOLUME, I refer to Don “Lelooska” Smith as “Lelooska” or “Don” rather than as “Smith,” for two reasons. First, the public knew him as Lelooska or Chief Lelooska, and his family and close friends knew him as Don. Second, this is a personal narrative to which I am closely connected. It would be absurd for me to pretend to be objective by referring to him as “Smith.” There is more to be gained from understanding Don’s life on a personal level than from some supposedly objective, abstract, and impersonal academic level. No disrespect to Don is intended by not employing this more formal usage.

Translating the spoken word to the written is not an easy task. Aside from the differences between informal and formal usage, capturing the nuances of tone and cadence of a speaker is nearly impossible. This narrative of Don “Lelooska” Smith’s life is no exception. It is not a strictly verbatim transcript of the interviews I conducted with Lelooska. I have edited the transcripts for clarity and have done some limited rearranging of certain sections. I have dropped only those portions of the transcripts that Don indicated he did not want to be public, that might take readers off onto unrelated tangents, or that were repetitive. I do not believe that this editing has undermined the original narrative Lelooska and I created during the many hours of taped interviews. In an effort to help readers get a feeling for his speech patterns, I use punctuation in specific

ways. I have employed an exclamation mark whenever he laughed. Readers will note many such points in the text. They are signs that the two of us enjoyed the conversations. Words that Lelooska emphasized are in italics. Contemplative pauses are indicated by ellipses (. . .). These were unusual and significant moments, for Lelooska seldom lacked words. In no instance does the presence of ellipses indicate that some portion of the text has been cut. Again, the curious may refer to the verbatim transcripts for comparison; I have placed a copy in the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington.

Competing orthographies make translating Native languages difficult, and dealing with numerous tribes in a single volume only compounds the problem. The ways individuals write their names, which sometimes shifts over the years, also presents a dilemma. Most specialists will have some familiarity with the orthographies, but general readers will find it almost impossible to use some. Because this volume is intended for both audiences, on this count I have favored general readers and attempt to render words in forms that can be pronounced. For the names of individuals, I use the forms they most often employed in their own lifetimes. In many instances, I offer alternate spellings in the footnotes. Although a mishmash of orthographies results, I believe the end product remains comprehensible to specialists and general readers alike.

Native North American politics and history are fields tied to present concerns and issues, part of which revolve around names and naming. I have used the terms “Native Americans,” “Indians,” and “Native” or “Indigenous peoples” interchangeably. When possible, I have used a tribal designation. Like the orthography, even that is tricky. A modern tribe is a product of many interactions, including relations with other Indian bands, with European American colonizers, and eventually with the U.S. and Canadian governments.¹ Those tribes have asserted themselves, often by choosing names more reflective of indigenous languages. One prime example are the Kwakwaka’wakw (meaning “the speakers of Kwak’wala”) of coastal southern British Columbia and northeastern Vancouver Island, with whom Don had significant interaction. Commonly referred to as the Kwakiutl (though with significant spelling variations) in the anthropological and historical literature, the term *Kwakwaka’wakw*

better reflects the political and social relations of the many bands that make up the “tribe” and is used as the official label today. The Kwakiutl are in fact one of those bands or tribes that make up the larger group.² Don knew of this and other changes in designations but, like many people, tended to stick with those terms he had known for decades. I have indicated such “newer” labels in notes and have not made changes in the text of Don’s narrative. I believe this allows readers the opportunity to find familiar “old” terms but to match them up with more recent names. Therefore the Nuu-chah-nulth appear in the text as Nootka, the Kwak-waka’wakw as Kwakiutl, and so on. Don frequently used band and clan associations alongside such broader labels, which I have tried to explain in the notes.

Don knew a great many people, had contacts with many different groups, and was a voracious student of history and culture. Because of the specificity of his references and their wide variety, I have used the endnotes to provide explanations in addition to the usual expounding on academic debates and references to sources. In passages where references need immediate elucidation, brief explanations are given in footnotes or brackets.

LELOOSKA

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Large Cormorant Bowl



Eagle Box

1 / A Life (Un)Masked

PLACING PERSONAL NARRATIVE

In the fading gray light of a rain-soaked April day in 1996, carloads of people began to arrive at the Lelooska family complex of two coast-houses,* a museum, and an art gallery in Ariel, Washington. They came to see the evening program of Northwest Coast Indian dances, songs, and stories that have awed and inspired children and adults for more than three decades. Most made the forty-five-minute drive north from the Portland-Vancouver area. Anxious for the show to begin but curious about the items on display in the museum and the gallery, they ventured among the trees and bushes to find those buildings. Off to one side of the path that connects the museum and gallery, they could just make out a cramped one-story structure almost buried in the trees, then home to Don “Lelooska” Smith and his mother, Mary. In the past, his grandmother Lady Elizabeth Hinkle, father Fearon, brother Fearon Jr. (“Smitty”), and sister Patty Fawn had lived there, too. Most of the visitors never ventured into that space, though Lelooska hosted many guests after shows amid the swirling sea of loud, neurotic dachshunds that always inhabited it.

*The wide cedar-plank houses are one of the key architectural features of the Northwest Coast culture area, which extends from coastal northern California to Yakutat Bay, Alaska. Until the early twentieth century, these were primarily living quarters with significant cosmological meanings inherent in their design and doubled as ceremonial halls. Since the 1950s, coasthouses have taken on more singular ceremonial roles.



The dressing room in the coasthouse at Ariel in the spring of 1996, with the order of the program taped to the mirror and various masks, rattles, costume parts, and clothes scattered about. Photo by the author.

As darkness closed in, a line began to form in front of the newer of the two coasthouses. A few guests—family friends, relatives, and special customers—filed in through the back door before the front doors opened to the general public. On the way to the main performance area, they passed through the cramped room where the dancers changed. In the center of the room sat a worn portable electric heater that dancers used to warm their numbed bare feet between performances. Benches atop a piece of plywood laid directly on the dirt and many pegs in the walls for parts of various costumes as well as coats and sweaters made the room seem even smaller than it was. A large mirror hanging on one wall would have made the room feel bigger, but an oversize piece of paper with the order of the evening's dances and stories boldly scrawled across it had been taped over much of the mirror. The room, disheveled as it was, revealed none of the chaos it would soon hold. The dancers were still down at Don and Mary's house, amid the cedar and alder shavings, tortilla chips, and Pepsi.

Just before the program started, they would tumble into the back room in a rush. Someone would warn them that Don insisted *this* time they keep quiet, but scarcely a performance went by in which that happened.

Passing through the room, the group of honored guests went behind the large painted cedar screen that separated the staging area from the main room of the coasthouse, with its dirt dance floor and plywood-and-plank benches. Behind the screen, masks lay scattered in apparent disorder. Some seemed deflated, even lifeless. Tsonoquah,¹ Wild Woman of the Woods, emanated none of the fearsome power she exhibited when her mask was danced. She casually sat atop a pile of fur, now just a mask staring at the ceiling. Others, carved in the dramatic style of the Kwakiutl,* feigned sleep. Huxwhukw,² one of the great cannibal birds and part of the Hamatsa dances, reclined on the floor with its slender six-foot-long beak resting on a bench, almost touching Tsonoquah; its small carving of a human skull dangled almost to the floor.³ Crooked Beak of Heaven, another of the great cannibal birds, rested on a stool, its jute fringe hanging to the floor. In some cases the fringe is cedar bark, but for the day-in, day-out performances, jute lasts better and in the dim firelight it gives off the same warm red glow of cedar. Above Crooked Beak and next to Tsonoquah slumbered Numas, Old Man, with his oversize head, great white mane, and bushy white eyebrows. His blanket was draped over the bench as if he was there on his haunches with his back against the wall. Antlered Deer sat high on the shelf, nervously hiding from the power of the others below her. Ducking under the blanket stretched between the performance-area wall and the great painted screen, the early guests took their places on the hard benches. Regulars chose their favorite spots to see the masks as they were danced and to watch Lelooska as he told stories.

Within a few minutes, the front doors to the coasthouse opened to the remaining guests. Some had been standing in the rain for quite a time outside, lining up nearly as soon as they had arrived in order to get a good seat. The best were high along the sides against the walls, but there the

* Kawkiutl, or more accurately the Kwakwaka'wakw (meaning "the speakers of Kwak'wala"), live primarily along coastal southern British Columbia and northeastern Vancouver Island. They are particularly well known for their elaborate ceremonies and powerful masks.

small horizontal pole stabilizing the wide cedar planks that made up the walls of the house invariably hit heads, necks, or shoulders in precisely the wrong places. Experienced members of the audience brought blankets with them, but even those were not quite sufficient to keep out the moist chill or to act as padding on the hard benches. As the audience settled in, children bounced excitedly on the benches close to the dance floor, busied themselves with digging holes in the dirt, and repeatedly asked the adults with them, “When will it start?”

Everybody waited and the benches only seemed to get harder and harder. The rain was visible through the rectangular opening in the ceiling meant as a smoke hole and the large double doors that served as the main entrance to the building. The raw cold radiating from the dirt floor conducted a deep chill into the bones of all but the most active children. The layer of dust ground into the benches by countless others who had seen the shows over the years helped conduct the chill. The stack of split wood far away in the center of the room tauntingly sat in the fire pit unlit, and many longed for the eye-watering, smoke-filled feeble heat it promised.

At last the front doors closed. Suddenly a tall, thin woman appeared before the crowd wearing a dark wool button blanket* with a red-flannel appliqué of Supernatural Waterbird and an apron with Salmon stitched on it. Her cedar-bark head ring was trimmed with ermine and festooned with a large abalone square worn at the forehead.⁴ She clutched the Tsimshian†-style Moon rattle as if it were a club meant to fend off the crowd. She need not have done so. She cut an imposing figure, at least for the adults, whose conversations quickly ceased. The children continued to scuffle for position, flick dirt at each other, and extend their earthwork projects in the house floor. Parents grabbed shoulders and issued commands to hush, and order slowly settled over the house. In a school auditorium voice, the woman in the button blanket announced that the

* The indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast quickly adapted European-introduced blankets to their own ends, decorating them with buttons, shells, and appliqués, and using them as symbols of power and lineage at ceremonies.

† Tsimshian is the name generally used for the clans and bands in coastal British Columbia just south of the southernmost tip of southeast Alaska in the area between Portland Inlet and Milbanke Sound and including the lower Skeena and Naas Rivers.

program would soon begin. She warned, to little avail, that the children were *not* to dig holes in the house floor or to stick out their feet during the performance because it endangered the dancers, who sometimes cannot see out of the masks. For those same reasons, neither were the adults to use flash photography.

Just as suddenly as she had arrived, she turned and disappeared behind the carved screen. As she left, the feeble electric lights went dead, leaving only a single red bulb glowing dimly. Everyone became a shadow. Behind the screen, spirit whistles wailed, drums sounded, and a song began. The audience unconsciously turned toward the noise, and just as it stopped, a huge figure emerged from behind the screen. *This* was who they had come to see—Lelooska. As he began another song, the entire audience flinched when a wild, disheveled figure exploded from the blanketed entrance with a skin-tingling screech. The masked shaman, draped in his blanket with rattle in hand, circled the room and used his powers to coax flames out of the cold fire pit. He danced in his crouching way around the room once more, then disappeared back behind the screen. Lelooska finished the song, put down his drum, and took up an elaborate speaking staff. Stepping in front of an eight-foot-long, double-headed Sisiutł* drum, he slammed the staff into the floor with such force that even those along the walls felt the impact. “Klahowa tillicum six,” he thundered to the assembled crowd in Chinook Jargon.⁵ “Welcome, friends,” he said, more softly in English. Within seconds, the audience knew that this man was a master orator able to send his voice to every corner of the house. He could take on the high-pitched squeak of Mouse’s voice or the timid sound of Deer as easily as the gruff growl of Bear or the menacing howl of Wolf. Those in the house that night did not just hear the stories and history, they became participants in the performance of them. “Welcome to our house,” Lelooska continued, pulling them in with his majestic voice.

On one side of the house, the larger-than-life Welcoming Figure† with

* Sisiutł, the double-headed serpent, is a powerful symbol representing a mythical sea monster. Don had created a long, low, benchlike drum with that design, behind which he sat during the shows.

† This large, humanlike carving typically was placed outside a house to greet guests arriving for some special event; Lelooska kept this one inside the coasthouse.

its huge hands held up to either side of its mouth yelled a welcome and blew a huge puff of white down onto the people seated before it, much to the delight of the children there. For the next several hours the audience watched with awe, listened intently, laughed, and shouted aloud as Lelooska took them through the night's performance. The adults lost track of their aches and pains and the chill. The children watched, rapt in the dances and stories.

That April show was one of Don's last performances. The cancer that had struck him four years earlier and gone into remission was back. Few in the audience knew of his health problems. Nothing in the performance that night indicated that anything out of the ordinary was taking place. It was a show like countless others before it, and was the way in which the vast majority of people came to know Don ("Lelooska") Smith, or "Chief Lelooska," as most of the visitors thought of him. These family performances at Ariel started in 1963 and grew over the years. Buoyed by the success of those programs, Lelooska and his family regularly added buildings. A second, larger coasthouse followed the first. Then the family put up a large A-frame museum for Don's private collection of artifacts from nearly every culture area in North America as well as items from the fur-trade and Wild West shows. Ultimately, the family established a gallery to display and sell their works of art. It eventually became a showroom for a broad range of Native artists. The growing family complex only added to the huge success of the programs. In the 1980s and into the 1990s, annual attendance at the daytime school programs and evening family shows reached as high as 30,000.⁶ Those programs at Ariel introduced children and adults to the variety, complexity, and beauty of Northwest Coast peoples. The present-day performance of Northwest Coast, especially Kwakiutl, dances and songs took viewers beyond the simple images of feathered Plains Indians on horseback, beyond the notion that Indians were of a past era. Although Lelooska produced significant pieces of art, these programs may well stand as his greatest legacy.

Who was Don Smith? How did he come to do Northwest Coast art and these performance programs? How had he negotiated the difficult waters of being a "mixed-blood" Cherokee? How had his art evolved over the

years? Over the decades, journalists and photographers have tried to capture Don's life story.⁷ While informative, these materials fall short on at least three counts. First, the purposes and brevity of those studies do not provide space for Don's voice to emerge, for him to tell his story. Second, they reveal little about what it means to be Indian in the twentieth century. Finally, they offer only glossy overviews of what it may mean to be deeply engaged in producing Indian art.

This narrative, which brings Don's voice forward in ways not done in previous accounts, is based on a series of interview sessions conducted between 1993 and 1996. The transcripts of those interviews and this edited narrative represent Don's life as he viewed it from the perspective of his sixth decade and facing his own mortality; a diagnosis of colon cancer gave Don and me the impetus to undertake this project. The tapes resulted in a "collaborative text" generated in a dialogue between us.

For more than two decades, ethnohistorians (anthropologists and historians) have recognized that as-told-to (auto)biographies and oral histories are not objective retellings of lives so much as "texts" or constructed "metaphors of self" created at a given moment between the interviewer and the interviewee.⁸ This recognition came with a move away from "salvage ethnography" efforts to reclaim an "authentic," primitive, precontact past before it passed away under assault from assimilative, modern forces.⁹ While some work of that nature persists, ethnographers have moved into explorations of cultures as flexible, changeable, and diverse systems. They have also begun to examine the choices and limitations involved in the creation of individual and group "identities." They have begun to examine the "mediative" role that individuals, especially "mixed-bloods," play in cultural formations and the mobilization or performance of "culture" for political purposes (such as treaty rights, land claims, or position within a broader "racialized" state).¹⁰ These more recent considerations provide the underpinnings of my writings about Don and my attempts to come to terms with Don's complex life.

Scholars have also come to argue that collaborative works have a number of intended audiences beyond those present at the taping and editing stages.¹¹ In this case, Don had at least three audiences in mind. I was one, albeit in the somewhat contradictory position of family friend and

academic. His family* constituted another, for I had promised to give to the family a copy of the transcripts and any publications that might result from the tapes. The broader public formed the third, including those who had attended the shows and purchased pieces of art, as well as academics and other artists. Don knew from the beginning that the sessions we taped would appear before these audiences in one form or another. The tapes thus reveal what Don chose to tell me in those interviews and what he wanted the others to hear about his life. They also reflect what I asked him at the time and my thoughts during the editing phases that stretched several years beyond the interviews. What emerges from the narrative is not only the story of one exceptional individual, but also one that illustrates many of the larger issues central to the lives of Native Americans in the twentieth century, especially that of identity formation.

Don Smith was born in 1933 in Sonoma, California. His mother, Mary, was three-fourths Cherokee, from Oklahoma; his father, Fearon, was born near the Flathead Reservation in Montana. Although they were around other Indians on a regular basis, neither Mary nor Fearon lived on reservations nor did they seek formal, official affiliation with any single tribe. According to Don, his maternal grandfather, Enoch Fountain Hinkle, “didn’t see any future for his grandchildren on a reservation, never wanted them to go to Indian school. He was just adamant about that.”¹²

Grandfather Hinkle kept the family away from life on a reservation, but that did not mean that the family severed ties to reservations and Indians. Hinkle kept in contact with people he knew from his days with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and made sure to introduce Don to them. Don’s exposure to this world grounded him in the cultural patterns of many different tribes. It also let him see how Indian cultures, even if as caricatures, might be performed and consumed by non-Indian audiences but not lose their relevance to Native Americans, either individuals or groups. The stories that Don learned at his grandfather’s knees and Don’s own actions later in life help clarify Native American lives in the twen-

* Don included the members of the Sewid family, who are prominent in the Kwakiutl tribe in British Columbia and who formally adopted him in the 1960s, as part of an extended clan to which he belonged and owed a great debt. See chapter 6, “Openings to New Worlds,” for details.

tieth century. One of the most important is how identities are forged through choices people make and the experiences they carry with them. Indians have refused to be glassed-in museum-case models of culture but instead have taken the forms of expression available to them and have made them their own.

The connections and friendships Don's grandfather, father, and mother had with many different Indian people—reservation and nonreservation Indians—also reveal that Indians do not live in isolation from each other or the “non-Indian” world. Don's life illustrates how he and others like him created pan-Indian identities through contacts like these and how those identities were not necessarily in conflict with tribal and family identities. Lelooska's life represents the significant multitribal and multi-ethnic heritage of many Indians today.

As Don's life suggests, however, legal and political definitions of who Indians are do make a difference and may not reflect multiple generations of cultural influences. For much of his adult life, Don struggled against allegations that he was “not Indian” or not the right kind of Indian. Sometimes these were simply narrow, jealous jibes by supposed (non-Indian) experts that a Cherokee should only do “Cherokee art.” At other times, the fact that Don was not enrolled with a particular tribe left him vulnerable to charges that he was not officially an “Indian.” Many twentieth-century Native Americans have faced similar dilemmas. Don's experiences show how at least one person negotiated them.

In addition to offering a window on twentieth-century Indian identity, Don's life also connects with the rise of the mass-produced Indian “curio” trade and the transformation in artistic circles of perceptions of Native American artifacts from utilitarian craft to high art. For Don and many others like him, the first introductions to the curio trade came through women in their families. While grandfather Hinkle bounced from war to war and job to job, and Don's father, Fearon, started and restarted a series of automobile-related small businesses, Don's mother, Mary, provided a regular cash income for the family through her craft work, especially small carvings of animals and people.

In the 1880s, Indian women across North America entered into the cash and wage-labor economy through the production of items ranging from baskets, weavings, and moccasins to “Indian” and “Western”

figurines.¹³ Before that time, trade with tourists was irregular and promised unpredictable returns. After about 1880, traders on reservations and then off-reservation mail-order “trading houses” emerged as middlemen in the exchange. This left Indian producers of the goods with less control of the market as well as the production, for the traders tried to get Indians to make specific items. A greater regularity and predictability of income from the enterprise offset the loss of control, however, and Indian women especially became the primary producers of the curios. Most in the art world looked askance at what they perceived to be the low quality of these mass-produced items and refused to consider any utilitarian items as “art.”

By the 1930s, though, private and federal patronage of Indian art fostered a new sense of what might be artistic, even if whites frequently determined what was “authentic Indian art.”¹⁴ The possibility that some items produced by Indians were high-priced art promised greater returns to certain individuals. Increasingly, though not exclusively, producing “art” fell to men. Ironically, the demand for high art strengthened the curio trade, as did the mid-twentieth-century imagery associated with Indians that offered many Americans a way to distinguish the uniqueness of the American experience from war-torn Europe. Regardless of the motivations, the growth of consumer capitalism in the United States served to expand the demand for Indian curios, and women continued to mass-produce cheaper items for the trade.

Mary Smith’s participation in this sector of the economy not only was typical of many Indian and “mixed-blood” women, but also provided an important role model for Don. From her example, he realized that he could make money and even a living in the curio trade. Like the Wild West shows, making curios was not simply playing to white ideas of what authentic Indians were. Neither was it a purely mercenary activity. Grandfather Hinkle’s habit of carving animal figures as he told their stories instilled in Don the realization that these arts had a multiplicity of meanings ranging from a commodity to be sold to symbols and metaphors of deep cultural significance. The two activities were not mutually exclusive. Following that line of thought and frustrated with what he was being told in his schools about savage Indians, in his midteens Don abandoned school and took to craft production for his livelihood.