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Tape-recorded notes on Chief Rolling
Mountain Thunder (Frank Van Zandt)

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Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Notes on Chief Rolling Mountain Thunder

in Thunder Mountain, Nevada

June 1981

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections. The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes. Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "theirselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: " 'cause," was transcribed as "because," " 'fore" as "before," " 'yo" as "your," etc. Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "_____" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

Interview

WV: Willem Volkersz

[Segment from end of Volkersz's original tape H3-1, which originally was missing from Tape W-2. The missing material has now been copied to tape W-2, but the order is reversed from the original. This transcript, however, is in the original order—Ed.]

WV: [Reading from signs posted at the site—Ed.] "Thunder Mountain. Welcome to the Indian of the West. The Monument. Established 1968. The Thunder Temple, aka Monument to the West's earliest peoples, a sculpture of today's man."

[Another sign]: "Entering Indian's home. Home of the Tri-O-Bay-U- Dah-Wah-Ee-Wee-Path-Dahl-Nee, Sacred Home Place."

[Another sign]: "All of the efforts here in this arid prairie were and continue to be a prayer for America and its people, hoping to increase all peoples' faith in man, God, country, and freedom." "—Inscription under two figures —Sid Van Zant, Kamo Park"

[Another sign]: "Die Deutschen sint hertzliche nim geladen. Greatest sculpturing effort ever. Theme idea of free man. Help America. A family without unity is a nation in chaos."

[Another sign]: "Welcome to Thunder Mountain, Nevada. Sure and by- gorra 'tis rolling [donner boss]. To view or photograph from outside fence—1.00; Inside fence is \$5.00. Private roads and property." [Another sign]: "Grave marker: Killed 1972: March: Raymond Yellow Thunder; September: Richard Oaks. Beyond the thunder."

[Another sign]: "Magazine publications about this place include May- June 1981, Art Express cover and several pieces; May 10, 79, Europe's largest magazine, The Stern; Spring '75, Nevada Highway magazine; '80 PM Magazine, etc. Books American Art and Artists, Scoundrels in Architecture, etc. Been compared to Gaudi [Spanish architect—WV], Leonardo of America."

[Another sign]: "When gate is locked, call (702) 538-7530. Inside these fences is an American's home. All areas inside fences are living areas. No dogs allowed. Our children are healthy; we'd like to keep them that way. No

exceptions. Canine worms kill people, especially infants, so keep dogs out. Thank you."

[Another sign]: "Educational, recreational, philanthropic."

WV: Here, let me go through there.

Jason Volkersz (JV): But ____.

WV: Well, okay.

Diane Volkersz (DV): Hurry up.

WV: Yeah, I got some ____ ____ shots of it.

[Again reading from signs:—Ed.] "The monument's dedicated to the Indian nations of the West—1968. Some were the finest civilizations known."

[Another sign. WV was assisted by DV in reading partially obscured words, which from the sound of WV's voice, appear to be in a difficult-to-reach location:] "We are sorrowed by the state of Nevada, Department Highways' vandalistic behavior, approximately Christmas '78, when they maliciously destroyed young trees, created the health and traffic hazards by denuding, digging hazardous holes, trenches, steep banks, potentially endangering all passing, in attempt to prevent the American public from safely parking or approaching this fence. At some time 90 percent of our water ____ and many dollars damage."

[Another sign]: "Welcome to view or take pictures in the museum and rest area. Free campground. Please do not enter fenced areas."

[Another sign]: "Home of the winds. Pak-dal-nees [nest]. Five ton of concrete tops fourth floor. Two layers of one-inch sheeting on all roofs and on all floors. Railroad ties and old mine timbers form walls from ground to top. Laminated with cables, spikes, mortar over, this is a one- to three-inch layer of stucco inside and out, except for north outside wall."

[Another sign]: "The hostel. A sculpture to those in need. Home of Chief Rolling and Ahtrum Thunder. Children free." [Correcting himself:] Wrong, "and children three." [So the sign reads "Home of Chief Rolling and Ahtrum Thunder, and children three."—Ed.]

[Another sign]: "Statement written by the Chief."

[Tape 1, side A; Volkersz' Original No. H3-2; new recording marked W2]

WV: [Reading from article(s) posted at the site:] "Introduction. For 64 years an Oklahoma Creek Indian named Rolling Mountain Thunder followed the Great Spirit Trail. As a truck driver, as a preacher, as a policeman, Thunder worked at various jobs and lived in the white man's world, yet he was never really a part of that world. Then seven years ago his life trail led him to Thunder Mountain, Nevada, where he sensed immediately the presence of the spirit he sought. The place was, he says, the site of an ancient Indian community. When his car broke down, seemingly refusing to leave the place, Chief Thunder accepted it as an omen. Next came a fortuitous meeting with a landowner and an offer he couldn't refuse. The land offered was important to Thunder's philosophical needs, as it was land that has never been lived on by man, rejected land. On this place, using materials discarded by a wasteful world, he would build a monument to the ancient beliefs of a people who treasured their environment. Here he would welcome, and help to realize their power, those who for various reasons felt themselves strangers in their own land. In the years that followed, Chief Thunder raised his monument to the Great Spirit and surrounded it with a community of people who are attempting to recast their lives in the ancient mold. It was from the spirit of this place that the School of Thunder Mountain was conceived. Chief Thunder is a man on a journey raising his monument to the power of his people. He has created the potential for the beginnings of a movement toward certain basic truths, certain ancient knowledge that has been mostly forgotten by all but a few. "His monument, built only with pride and a strong need, stands at the beginning of a new trail, one that, hopefully, will lead our people back to reality. Too many have been lost. "Philosophy. The School at Thunder Mountain celebrates the ritual of growth due to independent and contributory selfhood. Through study, through work, through involvement with ecological, cultural, social, and political realities we create an opportunity to think about the higher points of consciousness, to sense the power of the self. We're learning to treat ourselves and our environment with respect, realizing that when we harm that environment, we harm ourselves. Such respect is more than a feeling or an attitude. It is a way of life.

Such respect means we never stop realizing and never neglect to carry out our obligations to ourselves and our world. We develop a way of looking into an understanding what is meant to be according to each individual's

progress and unfoldment. We see that as the only way to blaze a trail for that child that leads him to self-responsibility and social awareness. "From the ancient knowledge, we see nature as sovereign and man's inner nature as sovereign. Nature is to be respected as all life and all living things are to be respected. In line with this, the historical learnings on which the curriculum draws derives from all of man's experiences and traditions through the ages. The educational mosaic created fittingly has as its base here on Thunder Mountain the environment, the teachings, and the ceremonies of the Native American. Here, we examine the ceremony of becoming a self in a natural world. From a compositive of tradition and discovery, we weave in the teaching of Jung and Maslow with those of the shamans of ancient cultures to a celebration of each individual's inherent life force. We use our wilderness as well as the surrounding society as an experimental arena of learning where each student embarks on a trail. Initially carefully marked and symbolled, it leads to the point where they embrace themselves as a positive mover of their world and as participants in the societies in which they live. "We believe: A child should learn by seeing the magic of becoming by testing his growing strength in the school of nature, by making love to his world. His eyes should stay as clear and as full of wonder as at birth, and he should see his growth as a ceremony of life, a promise of strength and contribution. "For 40 years the sculptor has worked with his own and other people's children, having over 40 children, society's discards, in his complete care as early as 1949, a time when their. . . [skipping to more relevant passage—Ed.]

[Interruption in taping]

"Chief Rolling Mountain Thunder was born Frank Van Zandt in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, on the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1911. He is 64 years old. His lovely wife is half his age, and as a seventh anniversary present they gave each other a child. 'Van Nahtrum Lightning Thunder gave birth last February,' the chief says. 'We kept the name we had decided on even though the new baby was a daughter.'"

[Interruption in taping]

WV: Biographical information from 1975, Spring Issue of Nevada Magazine. "Thunder Mountain, Nevada 89418."

[End of recording]