

The Highlights - Pine Ridge: An interview with Jim Houck

JOHN HOUCK: It has always been a mark of distinction for me to have been born on an Indian reservation. When did you move to Pine Ridge South Dakota, and why did you move there?



Travel by Horse in the Badlands

JIM HOUCK: I graduated from the University of Northern Colorado in May of 1976, and sent out many job applications around Colorado but did not have any luck. There were a lot of kids graduating with teaching degrees, but very few jobs in the area. Then one weekend we were up in Estes Park visiting Mom's parents, and I was out walking with Erv (father-in-law) when we ran into some of the neighbors. Erv struck up a conversation with them and came to find out that they lived on the border of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in Gordon, NE. The father, whose name was Ty, was an art teacher at a school in a town called Batesland on the Reservation. He and his wife Lana, and their four children, had lived up in the area for many years and seemed to like the Lakota culture they had become a part of. He told me that there would be a Social Studies job opening at the school, and I should at least go up and check it out. So Mom and I decided that night I would apply for the job. It would be a good experience and would help me get a job back in Colorado.



7th Grade Dance Club

JOHN: I didn't realize Ty was an Art teacher. Do you have memories of what art class was like on the reservation? It seems like a lot of your friends on the reservation were into crafts and art. Many of them made drawings, paintings, and created beadwork. Can you talk about what kind of artistic production you took up when you moved to the reservation, and what sort of arts you experienced there. How were they different from the culture of Colorado?

JIM: I don't remember much about the art classes in Batesland, except that the kids loved to draw and spent a lot of time drawing images of their culture, especially horses. For Middle School kids they were very good. I got into beadwork after buying some pieces from the locals. I loved the beauty, and how they put colors together, and how the geometric patterns they used flowed so beautifully. It was such a pleasure just to look at the work that was created by the Lakota people. The way they worked with colors was so natural to them, it was a gift that I had never seen before, and it led me deeper into their culture. I mostly taught myself how to bead. I learned the lazy stitch used on moccasins and had a loom. I loved going to the old trading post in White Clay to look at all the beautifully colored beads and buy hairpipes, bone tube beads, and various sizes of glass beads. I saw for the first time how color could be used to create such strong emotion, such beauty. I guess it was a way to bring life and color to the plains that lacked the brightness found in the art of beads.



Remains of a church at Wounded Knee after takeover in 1972

JOHN: I love the idea that the art work was so vivid against the context of the plains. Something akin to that for me is the memory of going to pow-wows, driving along a road in a field of beige and then seeing this cacophony of color and rhythm as we approached the pow-wow. What was it like to go to your first pow-wow?

JIM: I felt alone, even though I went with Ed, due to the fact I was the only white guy there, and I did get some curious looks from some of the people. The first pow-wows I went to were outside of Kyle, and you did not see any whites, it was mostly just a Lakota affair and I figured that was the way they wanted it. Ed Young Man Afraid of His Horses was a big powerful man and very intimidating, so I was really safe, but there were some people who had a great deal of hatred for whites. You only have to look at history to understand why that was. I just kept an attitude of respect for the culture and when the people saw this it was easier to be accepted. Later I became sponsor of our dance club at the school and took Lakota kids all over the state for pow-wows. You, in fact, accompanied me along with your mother.



Jim Houck's classroom in Batesland, South Dakota

JOHN: Whenever we would visit the reservation growing up, it felt like a very isolated community. Did it take a while to integrate into the culture, and what was that process like?

JIM: Communities on the reservation are very remote and it is difficult to get from place to place. The roads were very bad and dangerous with all the horses running free. Lakota culture is very much closed to the outside, and it took awhile for me to break the barrier. I guess it happened one night, when Pete Plenty Wounds came over to talk to me about his son, who was in my 5th grade class. Well, I invited him in for a cup of coffee and some lemon pie, and we talked for hours. I later came to find out that he was an important leader of the American Indian Movement (AIM), and since most white people wouldn't have let an indian in their house, this did a lot to break down the barriers, and may be why they thought they could trust me. Whatever it was, I was then invited to ceremonies such as the yuwipi, vision quest, and sun dance.



Dancer adjusting his costume

JOHN: That is very inspiring. Were you interested in AIM (The American Indian Movement) before moving to the reservation, before you met Pete Plenty Wounds? I have a vivid image of a photo of you in Vietnam with an AIM patch on your fatigues.



Wounded Knee post office after takeover

JIM: Yes, while I was in Vietnam, there was a lot of protest against the war, and there was also a lot of organization of minority groups demanding equal rights. I do not remember how I became interested in AIM, I just agreed with what they were fighting for and respected the courage they showed when they were up against our government. During the 60's there was something heroic about Native America and it carried through in the literature of the time and cinema, so I was quite influenced by this movement. I found it quite normal to support what they were trying to accomplish, since I had always been interested in the culture and myth of Native Peoples. I think it began when I was very young and my father took us to Little Big Horn and I read everything I could about Crazy Horse. He still remains one of my heroes. I did wear an AIM patch on my uniform in Vietnam to support what they were struggling to accomplish. I sensed that Native Americans had a sacred connection to the land that we were losing, and as I look around today, I can say that we have lost that connection, that sacred sense of the earth. I doubt that it will return and maybe only exists in the heart of Native People.



Camping with students at Harney Peak, South Dakota

JOHN: Something that has always struck me about the reservation is that it is a border fully contained within the United States that isn't talked about. The only border that receives attention is the one with Mexico, but in fact there are large tracts of the US with quite distinct borders. When you cross the line into Pine Ridge it's pretty apparent. What is like to travel across that border?

JIM: Well, let's face it, it can be dangerous, especially at night. The ranchers who live on the border will tell you that, and they are pretty tough individuals. The main reason for this is, of course, due to alcohol and drugs. Also, the crushing poverty can make it dangerous, as the people try to sell things like beadwork and if you do not buy, they can become a bit angry, but again this could be related to alcohol. When we lived there in the late 70's, it was still quite dangerous because of all the AIM activity, and there were sometimes road blocks set up at night when we were driving home and I would drive off the side of the road to get back home. I always carried weapons in the car while traveling on the reservation, everyone did. Today, one of the main problems is the presence of gangs. When I lived there, it was the battle between AIM and the goons. (Natives who sided with the whites, a lot of time they were part-white/part-indian) The reservation is a world of its own and the majority of Americans have little knowledge of the horrible conditions that are part of life there. There is little hope there except in the beauty of a culture that was almost completely devastated. Again, the bright colors of beadwork the energy and beauty of the dance, the heart beat of the drum. That is still alive and I would guess never will die.

JOHN: You also have friends that are ranchers that live on the edge of the reservation. What was it like for you to be a part of both of these tight-knit communities?



Field trip to Ft. Robinson, Nebraska (where Crazy Horse was murdered)

JIM: We had friends who were ranchers on the border of Pine Ridge and we spent about half

our time with them, and the other half with our Lakota friends up in Kyle. A lot of the Lakotas did not like the fact that we were spending time with the the ranchers, because whites could not be trusted. It caused some tense situations at times and actual fights. The ranchers in that area are a very independent lot and they have found a way to survive and co-exist with their neighbors, the Lakota. They did not trust one another very much and though our friends who ranched near the reservation never said much about the fact that we spent lots of time with our Lakota friends, you could feel their fears especially since there had been so many tragedies that had occurred between the two groups over the years. The protests, the murders, the hate and mistrust that has existed between the two groups for a hundred years is not easy to heal. There are many though, on both sides, who strive to understand and respect one another and I think some things are improving since we lived there.

JOHN: I'm struck with the way teaching allowed you a way in to that closed community. Visiting your classrooms has always been one of my greatest joys. They feel more like an artist's studio or museum with artifacts and colorful imagery that are carefully curated. What is your approach to teaching?



Uncle Ed in the Badlands of South Dakota

JIM: My approach to teaching can be summed up in one word, creativity. My aspiration was always to encourage and allow kids to be creative and open up to that inner world of personal expression. This is what I wanted for my students. I also wanted them to question

everything, especially government, and to understand that all governments lie to their people, so everyone needs to be aware and vigilant in any society. If kids are allowed to express creativity, school can become more meaningful and their own lives more full. I loved living on Pine Ridge in ways I can't quite understand. It's dangerous, and yet the desolate plains are full of romance. Life in this place can be very difficult, but there is some mystery at Pine Ridge that gnaws at my heart and drives me to paint or write about the images of light, and the images of darkness that still live within. There is this connection I have with the place that is always with me. The names of all those kids I taught still spin in my head, and I have never forgotten any of them.