

Detour: Thunder Mountain Monument

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For 40 years, the Thunder Mountain Monument, cobbled out of rusty cars, bottles, and eroding statues, has survived like a bizarre mirage beside I-80. A man known as Chief Rolling Thunder built this 80-foot junk-art monument in 1968 with two goals in mind: to illustrate the plight of the Native Americans and to make an ecological statement.



Born Frank Van Zant, this former police officer and WWII vet reinvented himself in his latter years, and moved his new bride and 3 young children to the side of the highway in Inlay, NV, a remote 120 east of Reno, to spend his retirement scavenging the desert and building Thunder Mountain out of man's trash.

Eldest son Daniel Van Zant, a man of 22 at the time, recalls his father working from daylight till dark to construct the monument. He says many hippies also gravitated to Thunder Mountain in the 60's and 70's to help with the construction.

"I thought he'd slipped a cog for sure. (I'd say) 'Why do you want to do this? This is a lot of work. Most people retire and play golf, go fishing,'" recalls Van Zant, caretaker and owner of Thunder Mountain since his father's 1989 death.



Van Zant says his father had no more than a quarter of Creek ancestry but had always been passionate for Native American culture. He told some that an old medicine woman predicted he would build Thunder Mountain. To others, he said an eagle had instructed him to 'build a nest' in a dream.

"He was a pretty good story-teller. I never knew how much to believe. I don't know how much he believed," says Van Zant, who admits he didn't initially share his father's enthusiasm for the monument.

After Chief Rolling Thunder's death, many encouraged Van Zant to maintain the property. Despite the 5-hour commute, Van Zant and his wife Margie have spent most vacations and many weekends during the past 20 years working on the restoration, paid for out of pocket and by private donation. Ultimately, the Van Zants hope to see the monument taken over by a group and preserved for posterity.

"I understand {now} what he was trying to do," he explains. "It was definitely a Holocaust. There was a deliberate attempt to wipe out the Indian culture. He wanted to build something that people could be reminded," says Van Zant.

By Cat Cutillo

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