

The Turtle-jack Killings

Prologue

Getting no response when I knocked on the door of apartment 204, I went to the building manager's office, told her that I was checking on the wellbeing of the woman who lived in that apartment, and asked her to open the door with her master key. She asked me for identification, and I showed her my press credentials from the St. Paul Daily Dispatch. Apparently assured that I was not a serial killer of women who was seeking my next victim, she said, "All right, Mister Mitchell. Come along with me."

She took a ring of thick metal keys out of her top desk drawer and led me to the antique elevator. It creaked as we got on and it groaned when it responded to the push of the second-floor button. In this complaining carriage, we reached the second floor in about twice the time it had taken me to climb the stairs.

When we reached apartment 204, she unlocked the door, told me that she would go in first, opened the door, and walked in. A second later, I heard her shriek, "Oh, my god!"

I went charging through the door into the living room and was stopped after four quick steps by the reason for Madeline's ear-shattering cry.

Chapter 1

Three Days Earlier

The deeply-lined bronze face of the man standing in front of me was topped by a ring of upright eagle feathers that made him eight feet tall. The age lines rippled into a smile as this intimidating figure reached both hands out to me and gently placed a turtle into my upturned palms.

Not a living, crawling, snapping kind of turtle, mind you. This turtle was carved from a block of white pine and painted by the same hand that had carved it. I thanked the donor, whose name was Chief Raymond Hardshell Turtle, and whose title was president of the Minnesota Ojibwe Tribal Council. I promised the Chief that I would continue researching and writing about a proposed nickel mining project adjacent to the western boundary of the Ojibwe Reservation, where we were standing onstage in front of about three hundred Native American residents and a television news crew from Moorhead, the nearest major city.

A month-long investigation by the St. Paul Daily Dispatch, where I work as a reporter, had exposed the probability of severe environmental damage if the application for the mining project was approved by state officials. The project would require draining a spidery expanse of wetlands that provided a constant flow of fresh water to a lake abounding with walleyed pike on the Rez, as it is known. In addition, the threatened swamp waters were the home of an endangered species of turtle, which members of the Ojibwe turtle clan revered as a source of strength for the warriors of the tribe.

The remaining lake water would be fouled by the process used for extracting nickel, which is known as sulfide mining. Separating the metal from its sulfide ore leaves a substantial pile of sulfurous waste rock that contaminates any disposal site. Both a news report and an Opinion page editorial had been based on a national environmental study that said that the operation of every known use of the sulfide mining technique has caused pollution of nearby lakes, rivers, or groundwater.”

When our managing editor’s attention was called to this potential environmental outrage by Ojibwe leaders, four members of the newspaper’s staff, including me, Warren “Mitch” Mitchell, were assigned to immerse ourselves in the wetlands story. Although there still was no guarantee that the mining permit requested by Coordinated Copper & Nickel, Incorporated, would be denied, our stories, editorials, and photographs had resulted in a delay in the investigative process, giving the Pollution Control Agency more time to thoroughly examine the potential consequences of issuing an approval.

Now the four of us who'd been submerged in the threatened wetlands were on the Rez by invitation, being thanked for our preservation efforts by those who lived there. I was at the stage-right end of a line that included photographer Alan Jeffrey, Opinion page editorial writer Ben deLyne, and business reporter T.J. Kelly.

We had spent Saturday afternoon on a guided tour of the Reservation and the turtle-sheltering wetlands that would be drained if Coordinated Copper & Nickel, Inc., was given the requested permit. We saw no turtles, of course, because it was January, and the wetlands had become a sheet of ice covered with a foot of snow. The wetlands' herpetological residents were spending the winter tucked deep in the mud beneath these two frozen layers.

Our guide, Barbara Laughing Turtle, told us that among the varieties of turtles occupying these wetlands was an endangered species known as the northern red-bellied cooter. With guidance from the Division of Fish and Wildlife, a group of Ojibwe school children had been conducting a program to increase the cooters' survival rate by collecting the eggs laid in the spring and nurturing the hatchlings until they were big enough to escape many of the creatures that would prey on them when they were released into the wild.

"Those little critters are only about the size of a silver dollar when they're hatched," Barbara said. "That makes them easy pickings for almost any kind of vertebrate you can think of. They grow up to be ten to twelve inches long, which still leaves them vulnerable to some of their largest stalkers, but they're also quicker and smarter by that time."

She told us that the red-bellied cooters that Rez children were helping to save from extinction are the only cooters that live in the northern states. Several other types have chosen to bask in the warmer climate of the Gulf Coast. "The theory is that it was much warmer here 6,000 years ago and that a small population of the red-bellied cooters survived when this area cooled," Barbara said. "They'd become acclimated to this area, but the population is small and they probably would have been wiped out by predators that were gobbling up both their eggs and their hatchlings if the kids hadn't taken their survival on as a project twenty years ago. Now they'll have no place to live if these wetlands are drained and dug up as a nickel mine."

Appropriately, the awards that we were being given for defending the turtle habitat came in the form of four identical wooden turtles carved by an artist on the Rez. They were about six inches long from the tips of their noses, which were turned slightly upward with a look of awareness and attention, to the tips of their tails, and they stood a little more than two inches high.

Before starting to hand out the wooden turtles, Chief Hardshell Turtle had made a short speech about the environmental value of the threatened wetlands, emphasizing the special need to preserve the turtles' habitat, and praising the Daily Dispatch coverage of the issue.

Al, the next recipient after me, got a round of applause when he said, "When the full story about this proposed mine has been told, all that nickel won't be worth a dime."

Ben deLyne promised to continue his Opinion page efforts to preserve the Rez's wetlands, and T.J. Kelly went a step further. She reached into a pocket of her navy-blue pants suit and withdrew a tiny object, which she held up between her thumb and forefinger for all to see as she said, "This little thumb drive contains information that will help me drive this proposed environmental disaster into oblivion when I write my next story. Until then, it will rest inside this symbolic turtle." With a flourish, T.J. raised the removable shell on the turtle's back, placed the thumb drive inside the turtle's tummy, replaced the shell and held the turtle up high with both hands. This drew another burst of spontaneous applause, along with a couple of war whoops.

I turned my attention to my turtle as the Chief and his entourage were leaving the stage. The top of its shell was decorated with a circular painting in various shades of green, brown, white, and blue that depicted the Western Hemisphere of the globe, in accordance with Native American fables about Mother Turtle giving birth to the world and bearing it on her back. I gave the shell a quick try. It offered some resistance, but when it came off it revealed an inch-deep hollowed out area where a person could store coins, keys, or candies—or a valuable thumb drive. It was a work of art with a practical use, in accordance with another Native American tradition.

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City Editor Don O'Rourke had ordered all of us to bring our turtles to the Daily Dispatch office for a group photo Monday morning. With T.J. Kelly standing on my left and Al Jeffrey and Ben deLyne on my right, we passed our turtles around to each other, looking for variations in the hand-carved, hand-painted figures. The artist had worked with such painstaking skill that when the four were laid side by side on a desk they looked like they could all have been produced by the same mold and painted by the same robotic hand.

Staff photographer Henny "One Shot" Paulson ordered us to hold as still as a turtle sleeping on a rock and took his single shot of us displaying our trophies while smiling the requisite smiles. As the four of us dispersed, T.J. drew me aside. She held the turtle up to her chin and spoke almost in a whisper. "I've still got that thumb drive that I showed the crowd Saturday night tucked in this little guy's tummy. There's some stuff on that thumb drive that's going to blow this whole wetlands wrecking project out of the water, pun intended." She gave the turtle a quick kiss on the tip of its nose and said, "I need to get some confirmations from a couple of places before I can write the story, but once this stuff is out in the open there won't be any danger of the turtles getting dehydrated or the walleyes swimming in sulfuric acid up there on the Rez."

"Our friends up there on the Rez will be glad to see that story," I said. "What have you got that makes you so sure it'll kill the project?"

"You'll see it in the paper after I've made some calls. Probably write the story tomorrow," she said. "This is so good it could put us up for a Pulitzer."

"What kind of a trophy would we get with that?"

"I'm not sure. Probably bigger than a pretty little wooden turtle."

“I can’t wait to see that story,” I said. “Who do you have to call?”

“EPA and FBI,” she said in a whisper.

“I can understand why you’d call Environmental Protection, but why the FBI? Is there skullduggery afoot?”

“You can read all about it in my story,” said T.J. Kelly. “Gotta go make those calls.” And off she went to her desk, with that pretty little wooden turtle in hand.

That evening, my wife, Martha Todd, pointed to the pretty little wooden turtle sitting to the right of my dinner plate, and said, “We have to find a permanent home for the Earth Mother.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Mother Turtle deserves to reside in a place of honor, not next to a bowl of mashed potatoes.” Martha Todd, who works as a lawyer, is always right. She is also always beautiful, displaying a blend of the best genes of a Cape Verdean mother and a British naval officer father in her coffee-with-cream-colored facial features and a slender, yet enticingly rounded female form.

After dinner, we carried Mother Turtle all around our duplex apartment, placing her in various spots on shelves and tables. We finally settled on a bookshelf about waist high in the hall near the front door. “She can greet us every night when we come home from work,” Martha said.

“And give a quiet welcome to any guest who appears,” I said. “We don’t want her to be shell-fish with her greetings.”

Martha turned and walked away at triple the speed of a turtle.