

Natives Talk

Dennis Banks and The Shinnecock and Montauk Indians



Ken Weisinger, Frances Alenikoff & Robert Salas in *Wheels Over Indian Trails*, opening July 28.

Those familiar with human rights issues in this country concerning Native Americans will recognize the name of Dennis Banks as a co-founder of AIM, the American Indian Movement, and an organizer of the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973. Those familiar with Peter Matthiessen's *In The Spirit of Crazy Horse* will know a great deal more about Banks. And even those who go to a lot of movies will recognize him. He played a key part in *Last of the Mohicans*.

Last Saturday at the Old Whalers Church in Sag Harbor, Dennis Banks along with local Native American leaders Chief Anthony Miller, East Hampton Town Councilman Robert Cooper, attorney Harry Wallace, and Southampton Town Councilwoman Roberta Hunter discussed the current problems facing Native Americans. The presentation, organized by Maria Pessino and Oddfellows Playhouse as part of their *Wheels Over Indian Trails* series, included singing by the Thunderbird Sisters, drumming, story telling and heated political debate. And though each of the leaders had his or her own particular style, several themes came up over and over again.

The first was the case of Leonard Peltier who was convicted of killing two FBI agents seventeen years ago. Although much of the evidence used to convict Peltier has since been disputed (there were no eyewitnesses, the murder weapon is no longer in existence and the chief witness against Peltier has since recanted her story), he still remains in prison and efforts to get him a retrial have been unsuccessful. Both Dennis Banks and Anthony Miller urged people to write to the President about Peltier's case asking for an executive clemency order or, at the very least, a new trial.

Mr. Banks said that if Leonard is not freed soon, there will be a long walk on February 11 of 1994 from Alcatraz, in San Francisco, to Washington, D.C., as an act of protest. Banks said he will personally lead the walk and invited the Shinnecocks to meet him in Washington.

The one issue which all the speakers addressed was the state of the planet and many reiterated the Native American commitment to caring for the Earth. Mr. Banks described the belief most eloquently with the story of how Native Americans became the "Caretakers." He told the story of the "beginning of this hemisphere" when the creator asked the native people to take care of the environment. "And the answer was 'Yes, we would do that,'" Mr. Banks told the audience

and continued his story, "And the creator asked, 'How long do you want to take care of her?' So we said, 'Forever.' The creator said, 'That's a long time.' And the people said, 'Then we will be here a long time.'

"So our commitment, our responsibility is quite simply as caretaker, to take care of the land, to understand that in that caretaking responsibility we are given strength," Mr. Banks continued, "All of our songs are about this relationship that exists between human beings and this planet that we call Mother Earth. It is a relationship that has guided us for thousands of years. It has made us strong. That's our responsibility every day...to stop any kind of abuse of Mother Earth."

Roberta Hunter expressed the same idea, but with a different emphasis. She said that we need to "rethink our notions of discovery," referring to Columbus and rather than being discovered, her people "survived 500 years of contact." "We are that essence of the original spirit of America," Ms. Hunter affirmed and then asked, "Who has to live in harmony with whom? That's the lesson we have tried to put out from the beginning. We must live in harmony with nature."

Part of this living in harmony with nature, according to Mr. Miller, is taking a careful look at development and understanding how new housing and more people will affect the environment. He advised thinking long and hard before allowing more building.

Then he told a story about a developer who wanted to build a golf course on a sacred burial ground. The women of the local tribe stood in front of armored personnel carriers and refused to allow the desecration of their sacred site. Their protest attracted media attention and the site was spared.

Other sites have not fared so well and more stories were told. Mr. Banks said he was in Kentucky in 1989 and witnessed the desecration of a burial site there. Over 1,200 graves were attempted to return to their land in the spring, they were told it no longer belonged to them. A court case ensued, which the Montauks lost. The battle still goes on to gain official recognition for the tribe and to re-instate them on their land. "It's a slow process," Mr. Cooper admitted, but

"We must live in harmony with nature." —Roberta Hunter

dug up. "It looked like a war zone," he said. "There were skulls and arm bones all over the place." Locally, Mr. Cooper told of the fight to save Fort Hill in Montauk, which was only a limited victory. "We only saved a piece of it," he lamented. "Countless numbers of graves were desecrated."

Living Indians have not fared that much better, even here on the East End. Mr. Cooper told the story of his own tribe, the Montauks. The Montauks were seduced off their land into warmer and more comfortable quarters and invited to winter in East Hampton by a Mr. Benson, according to Mr. Cooper. When they added with vigor, "But we're gonna make this one count!"

Mr. Wallace from the Poospatuck tribe in Mastic talked about ways Native Americans can regain power. He said that in the 70s and 80s the fight was to reclaim ancestral lands and re-assert sovereign rights. "In the 80s," he said, "we began to translate rights into actions. Now we are using rights to develop economic power as Indian people."

He used the example of "the little bingo hall that could." Native Americans have been roundly criticized for opening cigarette shacks which don't pay taxes and running bingo halls which rake in profits. Mr. Wallace says these are not acts which are in any way illegal or even immoral. They are acts of sovereignty. The local and federal governments have no rights to regulate these activities on Indian land. Asserting those rights is important to maintaining them, according to Mr. Wallace.

He told of a bingo hall that was next to a proposed nuclear power plant. The native people did not want the nuke next door, so they used their bingo proceeds to stop the construction. Otherwise, he said, they would have had to rely on the BIA and everyone laughed at the prospect of the BIA actually helping the Indian people.

Mr. Wallace said once again, what his brothers and sisters had said before him, "The land is sacred to us. We are the caretakers of the earth."

Throughout the evening there was evidence of a quiet strength emanating from these people. "We are alive and well," Mr. Cooper affirmed, "We are not extinct. We are still Montauks and we will continue to fight for our lands and our rights." Roberta Hunter said it in her own words, "We are here. We're alive. We are the fate keepers. Always. Forever." And Dennis Banks summed it all up this way, "We're not a weak people. We're still here. We will always be here," he said in his quiet, yet forceful way, "Even if they wipe us off the face of the earth, our spirits will still be here."

—Ellen Keiser

"Wheels Over Indian Trails" continues on July 28 with an airing on LTV of the documentary "A Common Destiny" at 7:30. An art exhibition "Indian Territories" opens at Rene Fotouhi Fine Art East in East Hampton on July 31 at 6 p.m. and the play "Wheels Over Indian Trails" will open at LTV Studios in Wainscott on July 28 at 8 p.m.. For further information, call 324-3708.