

*DANCING AT DEER ROCK:  
TOWARD COMMUNITY AMONG WARRIORS*

Daniel Lee Henry

*Overview*

In the first week of November, 1879, famed naturalist John Muir stood before hundreds of Chilkat-Chilkoot Tlingit Indians who for a century had denied white men access into their rich homelands. Listeners tore planks from the timber frame of the chief's great house to hear the man they called *Glate Ankow*, Ice Chief. In his brief talk, the voluble Scot witnessed to his audience the power of glaciers, but also of the kinship he shared with them. The “most feared Indians of Alaska” softened, then declared their conversion to the Church of Muir.

John Muir's speech—and the remarkable history of the community he inspired—provide powerful insights into the way residents work through difficult public processes toward a functional community identity. As America sinks further into her national “crisis of civility,” *DANCING AT DEER ROCK* examines seven generations of conflict and reconciliation among passionate residents defending their conceptions of home on the Last Frontier.

A hundred years after Muir's visit, residents of Haines, Alaska, exploded over a proposal to protect the largest gathering of bald eagles in the world by “locking up” fifty thousand acres of the Chilkat Valley. Windshields of “eagle lovers” were smashed, tires slashed, brake lines severed. Millworkers picketed teachers for their pro-eagle views. Star-chamber public meetings left scars that persist today.

As a last-ditch effort, Governor Jay Hammond appointed fifteen stakeholders to reach an accord. Following a ragged string of meetings in Haines, a late January blizzard stranded committee members. Confined, they pressed on. The next morning, state officials carried back with them an agreement creating the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle

Preserve, a feat that Hammond later called “a Mission Impossible” that became “the crown jewel of collaborative resource management.”

Author Daniel Henry stepped off the ferry on the day Jay Hammond signed the Preserve into law—June 15, 1982. As a graduate student writing his thesis on the rhetoric of American land use conflict, Henry was drawn to this frontier stage. In the ensuing years the author built his house on a roadless shore near Haines, raised a family, attended hundreds of local public meetings, collected the oral histories of community elders, broadcast their stories, taught their grandchildren, and wrote essays describing ways local citizens communicated their views about land use.

Startling acts of desire and diplomacy fueled the emerging story. Ice, ocean, and tectonics shape the steep walls of this theatre-in-the-round in which a few truly concerned citizens regularly take the stage. The ritual exchanges are legendary. Relationships loom large, beginning with early Tlingit land use agreements among clans, later broached by historical figures like George Vancouver, William H. Seward, John Muir, Sheldon Jackson, and Jack Dalton. Chilkat-Chilkoot people neither warred nor capitulated with the newcomers, but maintained a sense of propriety still evident in contemporary public discourse.

In the past three decades, Henry’s work with Haines, Klukwan, and Skagway residents shaped a contextual view, complemented by encounters with visitors like Senator Howard Baker, Charles Kuralt, Ken Kesey, Gary Snyder, James Michener, David Rockefeller, Scott Simon, Laurie Garrett, Ethan Hawke, and Steve Earle, as well as a coterie of Alaska political figures such as U.S. Senators Lisa Murkowski, Ted Stevens, Frank Murkowski, and Mike Gravel, and Governors Jay Hammond, Bill Sheffield, Tony Knowles, and Sarah Palin. Each marveled at the thought of living with such scenery, then left town.

Remaining are locals—the stubborn, ingenious cast of *DANCING AT DEER ROCK*. This uncommon mix of people and place yields a story of impassioned Alaskans who clash repeatedly, then forge unlikely alliances to build a vibrant, collaborative community.

In a state known for small-town drama, Haines earned its title as “Alaska’s Little Theatre Town,” by being home to the oldest active players group in the state. Off-stage, righteous passion permeates potlucks and public meetings. Our Shakespearean squabbles prompted a member of the Alaska Tolerance Commission to say, “Haines has a reputation, and it’s no secret.” In response one elder clucked, “We’re a fifty-fifty town. Doesn’t matter how you slice the pie, we’re always fifty-fifty.”

Gladiators spring from the woodwork into meeting-hall showdowns, especially around resource-based issues like fish and wildlife, forests, mining, planning, tourism, roads, and energy, each of which is highlighted in a chapter.

Extraordinary community foment inspired Henry to a range of creative efforts. In 1987 he wrote and directed a play in which actors sat with audience members and behaved as if they were at a rowdy school board meeting. *The Barkeater* toured for sold-out audiences in Alaska and the Yukon, and was named best original play at the Alaska Theatre Festival. In 1995, Henry led fifty Haines-Klukwan community leaders through a series of meetings to create a community code of conduct which was adopted by local government. In 2009 the Sheldon Museum sponsored a year-long discussion series about local rhetorical history, weekly installments of which Henry aired on KHNS. As town rhetorician, the author collected and processed 25 years of meetings, interviews, brochures, news clippings, and other crucial moments of engagement in a place where residents still believe that their voices count.

Haines’ roguish reputation aside, residents retain a vibrancy absent from town halls across the nation. The passion that ignites local bonfires sometimes offers heat against the bitter Alaska cold. “Hainiacs” are idealistic, engaged, and deeply committed to their home. The Delaware-sized fishbowl contains 2200 scrappy residents with a 150-mile road between them and the next town. Rivals stand in line for coffee or share an aisle in the supermarket. You yell for the same team at basketball games. Your children marry *their* children.

The continent’s biggest fjord contains most of Haines’ angsty brushfires, but the scorched-earth tactics wielded in America’s meeting-halls today pose a more insidious

problem. Without reasoned public discourse, democracy fails. Where bluster rules, empathic people stay home. They don't run for office, they don't go to meetings. Not since the red-hot roadshows of the Sagebrush Rebellion in the anti-Clinton era have media and *faux*-citizen groups stirred so much passion among a target demographic. Hell-bent on saving democracy, partisans shout down elected officials so they'll REALLY hear their concerns. Beer summits notwithstanding, *pathos* still snags headlines.

In *The Great Sort*, Bill Bishop shows the rapid Balkanization of American communities by class, race, age, and attitude. The trend toward security enclaves, he suggests, is yoked to an intolerance that threatens basic democratic assumptions. In a nation of walls, is democracy still viable? How do some parents justify Joe Wilson-style torchings to their kids? Do town halls function when mobs shout down congressmen with "This is America!" Can we agree, asks editorialist Gail Collins, that it is inappropriate "to heckle the president of the United States when he's making a speech about replacing acrimony with civility?"

Where can readers find true examples of positive transformation among rivals?

*DANCING AT DEER ROCK* offers an inside story of people struggling to overcome deep, personal differences as they seek to build a functional community, often with national and international implications. A clear account of Native American cultural influence lends continuity to a history that has never been told. To dovetail the ancient protocols of Tlingit people with forty years of environmental clash within their domain reveals powerful, new insights into the democratic process, and the soul of a nation.