Running Chief
Aylett Art Foundry, 2015
Sarasota, FL
Bronze
IN THE BEGINNING

My ancestry dates back to the earliest days of colonial America. Nathanial Peacocke, an Englishman, was among the colonists who, in 1607, arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, America’s first permanent English colony. While English on my father’s side, my mother’s heritage is native American. Her father’s surname was Yountz and her mother’s Craven. Her parents were listed as Yonz and Craver in the Catawba Indian registry, due to common misspellings. Given migration paths of native Americans, and the constant intermingling between peoples, her specific tribal origin is unknown. From my earliest childhood recollections, family members frequently made reference to our native American heritage.

I came into the world – specifically Winston-Salem, North Carolina--on September 8, 1941. As a child, I was often left alone, which may have led me to be more inward focused. My father was at work as a sheet metal draftsman and supervisor at R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. in Winston-Salem, while my older brothers were in school. During the day, my mother would catch up on sleep, after working the night shift at Western Electric. Alone to entertain myself with very few toys, I took advantage of our rural surroundings. Every day the woods, meadows, and creek offered a world of fantasy for me to explore both physically and mentally.

Roadside picnic with Mom and brothers, Blue Ridge Mountains, 1946
The family’s first substantial journey away from home saw the three Peacock brothers—Earnest Franklin, Albert Roland and myself—atop a pile of camping gear viewing the world from beneath the stick-propped trunk lid of a 1935 Ford Coupe. What was my father thinking, when he bought such a car for a family of five? Carbon monoxide—seemingly of no concern to anyone—was being sucked into the trunk. Fortunately, these trips resulted in no fatalities or embarrassment for our dad, a founding member of the Winston-Salem Volunteer Rescue Squad, badge #13.

Off we went rattling along the byways in this coupe, headed for the forests, streams, and glades of the Blue Ridge mountains, with the three trunk passengers sharing journeys that stretched for endless miles. Fortunately, my brothers and I got along well making this tight travel arrangement tolerable. In defense of Dad’s judgment, it was a good size trunk.

At our destinations, we ran barefoot most of the time, swimming the rivers, exploring and eating wild game: squirrels, rabbits, frog legs and fishes of all kinds. These kills were only partly for sport; the main incentive was to eat. This was just after World War II when both money and food were in short supply. I well recall food rationing stamps and blackouts during the war.

Despite the hardships, our family survived intact, healthy and happy. I was shaped by a sense of barefoot, adventurous freedom, ingrained in me as a child.
At some point, my father traded the Ford coupe for a maroon 1949 Dodge four-door and our weekly Sunday travels took on a new meaning and comfort. Our rural lifestyle was without frills otherwise and included a well and an outhouse, which served us for several years in the early 1950s when the city of Winston-Salem expanded service to our vanishingly rural area.

For years, our Sundays were devoted to family travel through various counties searching for sights and adventures. This seemed to be especially prevalent in the fall. Near the top of our list of searches was finding the perfect river bottom fields to search for native American relics.

Autumn was the best time to search, after the crops were harvested and the fields plowed for winter. Following a few heavy rains, the ground would settle, leaving stones and relics exposed. Finding Indian points (arrowheads) and holding history in my hands made a lasting impression on me. Imagine the thrill of casually handling an object of carefully crafted beauty that may not have been touched by another human hand for more than 1,000 years.

I collected hundreds of relics, after searching the fields for miles. Back then, these farms were worked by mules and small machines instead of the large tractors that destroy everything in their path, including precious fragments of the past. Mom and Dad would cut wild creasy greens, one of our favorite foods in those lean times, while my brothers and I searched the fields for more evidence of the earlier inhabitants.
My formal education began at South Park Elementary School, which compared badly to my experiences in the wild. The classroom bored me. My thoughts were elsewhere.

In fourth grade, music caught my attention. I took percussion lessons, which continued throughout high school. Also, in fourth grade, a wonderful teacher, Mrs. Curtis, assigned us the task of making something three-dimensional that related to another culture. For my project, I dug clay from a creek bed near our house and on a piece of plywood formed a small adobe house with cut sticks for the roof. The process excited me and I was proud of the results: my first construction in clay. To this day, I enjoy working in clay to model certain aspects of my sculptures.

Throughout my childhood, the greatest influences came from outside the classroom. Although our family was not particularly religious, my brothers and I were baptized at Trinity Moravian Church by Dr. Douglas LeTell Rights, the long-serving pastor. Dr. Rights became a friend of our family and he took a special interest in me and my brothers, because of our shared native American ancestry or, perhaps, because he'd lost a son during World War II. For whatever reason, we had a special bond.

Often, during the summer, Dr. Rights would take me and my brothers to his farm to help with chores. At the end of the day, he'd pay my brothers 50 cents and me a quarter as I was too young to be of much help. One day on the farm, I found a dark-colored arrowhead of unusual shape. After some study, Dr. Rights identified it as being from the Cherokee mountains, about 200 miles away. It reinforced the migratory paths of native Americans. He asked if I'd consider giving it to the Old Salem Museum in Winston-Salem. Reluctantly, I agreed, not knowing what a museum was.

That afternoon Dr. Rights drove me to Winston-Salem and opened the museum door with his personal key. At that moment, my eyes opened to the world of museum collections. There were thousands of native American relics found in North Carolina as well as hundreds of artifacts from the German settlement of Old Salem in the Colonial era. Dr. Rights made some notes on “our” arrowhead and left it with the collection, escorting me on a tour of the German settlement houses, one with a two-level basement. I'd never seen anything like it. This eye-opening visit took place at a time when the restoration of Old Salem was just the dream of a few individuals. Now, it has evolved well beyond its humble beginnings. For a quiet, introspective kid this adventure reinforced my enthusiasm for history and collecting.
In the fifth grade, I discovered that Dr. Rights has authored several books. The first one I found in the school library was a history of American Indians in North Carolina. It contained photographs and maps indicating the many migration routes of various tribes in North Carolina over hundreds of years. I loved holding that book. Somehow, it ended up in my collection and I continue to cherish it.

Another of Dr. Rights’ books, “A Voyage down the Yadkin-Great Peedee River,” records his trip taken in 1928 from the navigable headwaters of the Yadkin River to its mouth in Georgetown, South Carolina, a 400-mile voyage. This book, with its visually colorful description and historical facts, inspired me to seek out my own adventures of personal discovery.

The Boy Scouts had a major influence on me. Camping trips, the preparation for those trips and the anticipation of new camping destinations, filled me with a spirit of determination and a visual appreciation of the natural world. These adventures to the Blue Ridge Mountains enriched my mind and inspired creativity. I made the rank of Eagle Scout and was honored to be inducted into the Order of the Arrow.

My scouting activities kept me occupied through middle school and high school. However, high school itself held minimal
interest for me with the exception of mechanical drawing, history, and music. In addition to playing in the school band and junior symphony, I played drums in dance halls on weekends.

Often, I’d skip school to go duck hunting with my buddies, never killing a duck or goose, but returning with arrowheads. We were always walking in the fields along the river. I sometimes think the only reason I went hunting was to search for relics.

When I was 15, I was drawn to the idea of making sculptures. When classes were over, I headed home to carve stones and wood. My school offered no serious art training. It wasn’t until college that I began to look at art history books. Ironically, James A. Gray High School, from which I graduated, became the North Carolina School of the Arts.

Another example of how my education evolved outside of school is my study of taxidermy. An article in Popular Science magazine led to my enrollment in a correspondence course offered by the Northwestern School of Taxidermy. Following step-by-step instructions, I learned to completely skin fish, birds, and animals. The process of taxidermy requires the construction of armature and body to be constructed of excelsior, which is then covered with the original skin. This practice added to my detailed understanding of body mass and shape.
Winged Messenger
University of Georgia, 1965
Athens, GA
Aluminum and Red Granite

My first experimental stone and aluminum casting.
Throughout my teen years, music continued to play an important part in my life. Slowly, I built a good reputation and worked with many local musicians and bands.

After acceptance at Wingate College in North Carolina, I received a call from a disc jockey, who asked if I’d audition for a traveling rock and roll band from Georgia. Postponing college for a year, I packed my drums into the band’s brand new 1960 pink and white Lincoln. Off we went, playing along the way to California.

After a tough year of travel, I entered Wingate College (now Wingate University), in the fall of 1961, where I studied for one year. One of my electives was a painting class with a seasoned painter, then in his 70s, who made a lasting impression on me. A patient man, Mr. Ives taught the usual techniques and range of artistic style, I learned from him something more important though. “Don’t be afraid to make mistakes while being your own artist,” he said. “Art is free from rules.”

In 1962 I transferred to the University of Georgia in Athens, where I earned Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees. My sculpture instructor was Leonard De Longa, a passionate man, and serious working artist. My first lost wax bronze casting was done under his guidance. Immediately, I was intrigued by the limitless possibilities the process offered. If you can make it in wax, you can cast it in bronze. Slowly, a personal style and technique began to emerge that year.

Another instructor who influenced me was William Thompson, a competent sculptor who always had time to listen and teach. Mr. Thompson preached experimentation. During this period, I began to cast aluminum using Styrofoam for the original casting models. Later, this grew into a personal approach by incorporating natural and carved stones in the casting process to produce sculptures combining the two materials.

However, not all my time was spent on campus in the studio. I paid my way through college by traveling with various bands, playing jazz, blues, country and rock and roll as a union musician. I toured one summer with country music singer Don Gibson, famous for songs like “Old Lonesome Me” and “A Blue Blue
Day.” At the Grand Ole Opry, I remained backstage since drums were not allowed on stage in those days. For several months, I traveled with Del Reeves, famous for his song “Looking at the World through a Windshield.” While the money was good - thanks to my union card--I came to the same conclusion expressed in a Willie Nelson song: “the nightlife is not a good life.” My two years in the Peace Corps following college confirmed a growing sense that I’d had my fill as a traveling musician.

My Peace Corps experience began with a chance encounter at a recruiting table while at the University of Georgia. The Peace Corps was new at the time and President Kennedy, whom I admired, actively promoted it. A young artist in search of adventure, I applied in my sophomore year. Upon graduation in 1965, I was accepted as a trainee.

I reported to a summer training camp at the University of California in San Diego. In my initial application, I had requested Nigeria, in part due to my interest in the renowned Benin bronzes. The Peace Corps had other plans for me. I was assigned to the mountains of Jamaica. In the early 1960s, Jamaica was off the radar for the average tourist. It was anything but the dreamy vacation destination it is today.

The training was demanding of our time from early morning to late at night. Both physically and mentally, we were rigorously scheduled. Three of us were assigned to Camp Cobbla, a youth
training camp in the center of Jamaica, high in the mountains. As part of our training, we worked in Tijuana, Mexico, laying a cement block retaining wall for a small school. We also worked at several youth camps long distances from San Diego. One camp I recall most clearly was located deep in the desert and held youth detainees. The dreadful isolation of the camp sharply contrasted with its scenic beauty.

Back on the campus, our days and nights were occupied with lectures and movies on every subject imaginable, including how to deliver a baby. Mostly, however, the lectures were about political matters, the dos and don'ts. Discussing politics or being seen near political events while in Jamaica was forbidden. There was a general, unspoken belief that the CIA would be watching for any breach of this protocol.

As Peace Corps trainees, we had individual meetings and evaluations with psychologists and psychiatrists looking for any flaws in our characters that would affect our service as volunteers. We also had to do peer evaluations as a type of reverse psychology. Some trainees dropped out for personal or non-medical reasons, some were drafted into the military, some left for health reasons, and others disqualified. Out of 70 trainees, 47 were selected for service. After a barrage of inoculations every day for a week, we were given a return ticket to our hometowns to make our final plans for two years of service, without the option of a return to the U.S. for the duration of our service.

Finally, our group of volunteers flew from New York to Kingston, Jamaica. After a two-day layover in Kingston, weakened by extreme heat and humidity, we were transported to our various assignments. Fifty years later, the details of my arrival at remote Camp Cobbla -high in the mountains--remain fresh, vivid, and shocking.

Camp Director, Owen Batchelor, greeted us. He assigned me and my co-workers Bill Milisen and Frank Moore to plumbing, welding, and electrical duties despite our formal education in biology, sociology, and art. The camp consisted of 15 staff members assisting 500 young men in search of professional trade skills as well as a meaningful direction in life. The conditions we experienced were new to all of us, including the repetitiously
revolting food. Within the first three months, we each lost 20 lbs.

Boredom became an issue after the completion of my daily routine as an electrical instructor. In the evening, with time on my hands, I began to think about sculpture. Some camp members, who saw me carving one night, took an interest in my work and wanted to try it themselves. We soon formed a small group and “captured” or, as the locals would say “put the ghost on” an unused building as our studio. This slowly evolved from a stone and wood carving studio to a make-shift foundry. There, we produced many castings in aluminum and bronze that can still be found around Jamaica and abroad.

One of my students, Clifford Osbourne, continued his career as an artist and became a recognized sculptor in Jamaica. Near the end of my second year in the Peace Corps, I had an exhibition in Kingston at the Bolivar Gallery. The exhibition included many aluminum castings and six large ink drawings. Promoted as a scholarship fund raiser, it was supported by the Peace Corps Director Jack Shafer as well as the Director of the U.S. Information Service, Homer Gayne. Attendance was overwhelming and included many dignitaries, among them five ambassadors. We raised sufficient funds to give two of my promising students one-year scholarships to the Jamaican School of Art.
Upon completing my tour in Jamaica, I was honored to be selected as a Peace Corps training instructor in San Diego. After two years of living deep in the mountains under primitive conditions, it was difficult to convey to the new volunteers the occasionally nightmarish conditions facing them. At the same time, I was preparing them for cultural shock in Jamaica I was experiencing a head-twisting re-entry into my country. It was 1967. A cultural hurricane was uprooting the U.S. Without phones, TVs, and newspapers for the two previous years, I was isolated from the mainstream, blindsided by the upheaval reshaping the world I’d left behind. Writers and musicians like Tom Robbins, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendricks, and The Beatles blasted onto the scene with new sounds and new voices. Everyone was obsessed with things I knew almost nothing about. Outside of these dam-breaking currents of change, I had developed an artistic path of my own.
Giant Slayer
Spaulding, Jamaica, 1965
Cast Aluminum and Stone

Photo Credit: Ewalt Gold
Bird Form
Spaulding, Jamaica, 1966
Cast Aluminum

Photo Credit: Ewalt Gold
Peacock's brilliance as a sculptor is in his ability to suggest forces just to the point of definition.

“Peacock's brilliance as a sculptor is in his ability to suggest forces just to the point of definition.”

Teresa Annas, The Virginian - Pilot and Ledger Star, Norfolk, VA, July 10, 1983
Two Birds in Flight
Spaulding, Jamaica, 1966
Cast Aluminum

Photo Credit: Ewalt Gold
SCULPTOR: RUBIN PEACOCK

The major lines of sculpture can be traced this century: Figurative and Constructivist.

Sculptors Rodin, Epstein and Moore redefined classical forms, essentially figurative, gradually to the abstract. A development continued by Giacometti, Marini and was almost exhausted by the English figurative sculptors of the fifties. This movement essentially involves the modelling of material, romantic, literal and anti-machine.

The other source of development was based on an enthusiasm for technology, having its roots in the Constructivist Movement around 1910, and being developed along with the Modern Movement in Architecture, by sculptors Malevich, Gabo, Pevsner and Max Bill. Originating in Russia, it continued in the Bauhaus, and owes its revival in the fifties to American sculptors.

Rubin Peacock is an American sculptor developing an arts programme at the Cobbila Youth Camp, as a Peace Corps Volunteer. It is interesting to see the new direction in his work. Oddly, after leaving a technologically-based society for the isolation of rural Jamaica, his work has changed from the romantic-figurative to a constructivist nature.

All the work shown is cast in aluminium from an expanded polystyrene original. Three series are illustrated, clearly showing changes from one to the other. The Jordan Almond series is the earliest, figurative man/bird creatures. Next, the wing series, slightly less figurative, and finally the very different constructivist-type Crane series. We see the end of one stage of development and the beginning of a new one.
Flying Angel
Spaulding, Jamaica, 1966
Cast Aluminum

Photo Credit: Ewalt Gold