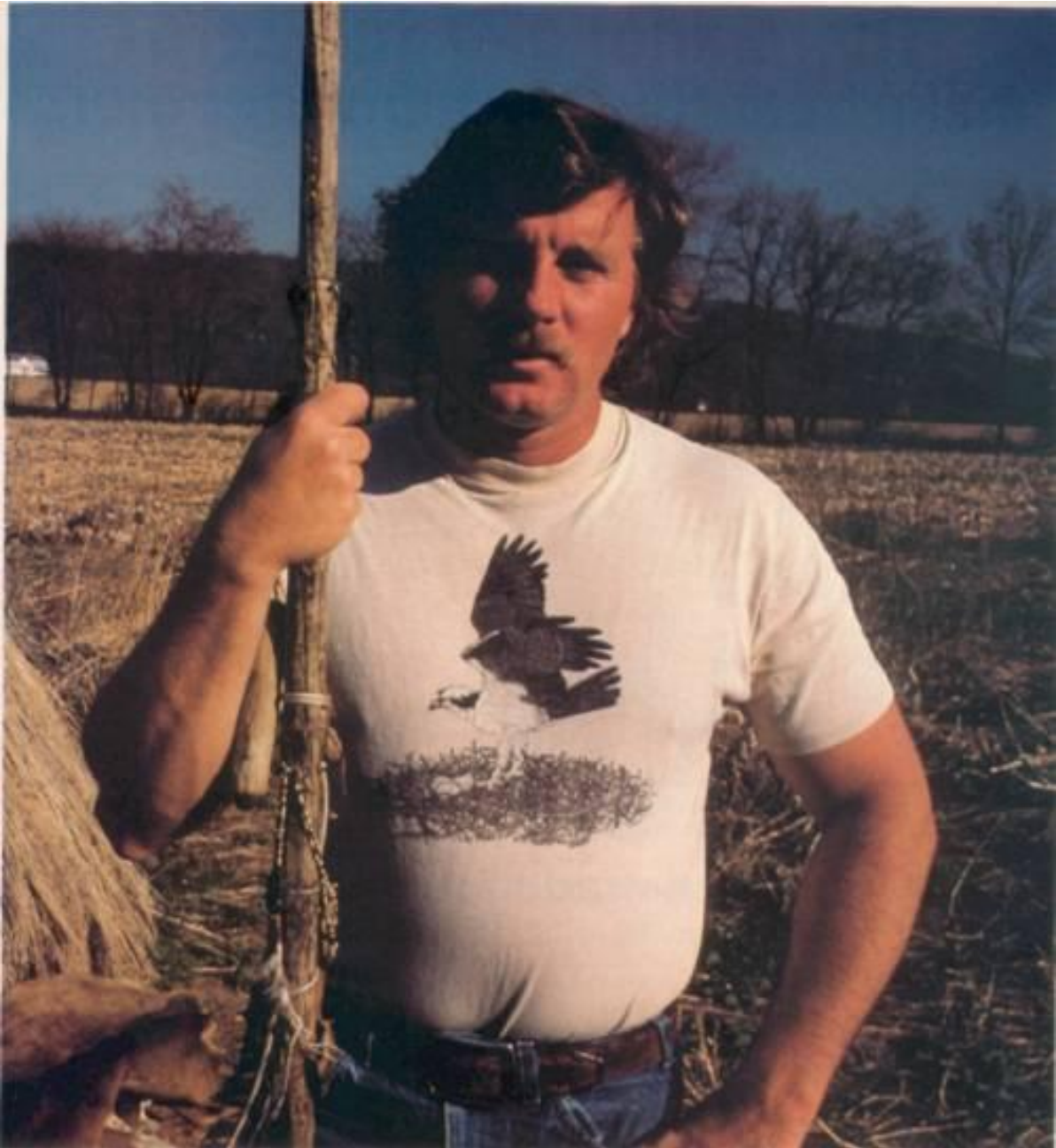


Walk Like an Apache

Celebrity Survivalist Tom Brown believes he could save the world — if we'd just adopt his Indian ways.

Tom Dunkel

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In his book *The Gospel of the Red Man*, Ernest Thompson Seton, father of the American Boy Scout movement, tells of an encounter he had with a particularly energetic Indian. “In 1882 at Fort Ellice I saw a young Cree who on foot had just brought in dispatches from Fort Qu’Apelle 125 miles away in 25 hours. It created almost no comment.”

Tom “the Tracker” Brown — Scottish by ancestry, a 37-year-old New Jerseyan by birth, and an Apache scout by choice — often quotes that passage during the classes

he teaches in wilderness survival. Seton's observation that the long-distance messenger failed to elicit so much as a "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" from onlookers is intended to impress upon students that Native Americans regularly performed seemingly extraordinary feats. It also may make it easier for them to accept some of Tom Brown's larger-than-life accomplishments, such as, oh, the time he hacked a hunk of hair off the behind of a hibernating grizzly bear, or his self-professed ability to diagnose cancer by examining someone's footprints.

On a raw Monday night in April, 34 backpacking pilgrims from across the United States and Canada converged on the 200-acre Tracker farm in Asbury Township — one of many Warren County hamlets that cling to Route 78 as if it's a highway made of corduroy and they are incorporated burrs — to take Brown's entry-level "Standard Course." The students ranged in age from 17 to 48; six were women. They ran the lifestyle gamut from ordained Lutheran minister to Woodstock generation refugee. Each paid a \$515 registration fee (which did not exempt anyone from cooking, cleanup, and wood-chopping chores), unrolled a sleeping bag in the loft of the open-faced barn that would be their live-in schoolhouse for the next week, eyeballed the grass tepee and squat sweat lodge that stand outside by the fire pit, dined from a pot of communal chow mein, and generally shuffled around like a shy summer camper waiting to be whistled into action.

There was some nervous anticipation over the impending appearance of the man whom many people consider to be part Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, and Geronimo: a human trifecta of guile, guts, and backwoods know-how. Critics dismiss Brown as a P. T. Barnum in moccasins, but no one denies that he is a marquee name among outdoorsmen. Nearly 500,000 copies of his books — which include two highly dramatized autobiographies, *The Tracker* and *The Search*, and six field guides — have been sold. Brown has been featured in *Reader's Digest* and *People*. He has done several guest shots on *Late Night with David Letterman*, was one of Charles Kuralt's *On the Road* video pitstops, and a movie of his life is in the works. More than 15,000 students have passed through Brown's survival school since it opened nine years ago. A few have run the eleven-course gauntlet that takes one from the spiritual eye-openers of the Philosophy Workshop ("If you're ready to see thunder on a clear night and fire where there's no wood, this is the course for you," Brown cryptically remarked) to the Advanced Expert excursion, 21 days in the Pine Barrens — in February — equipped with only the clothes on their backs. The latter is a scaled-down version of Brown's most famous exploit: about 1970 (the exact year slips his mind) he walked naked into the prickly Pine Barrens, emerging some twelve months later swaddled in skins and twenty pounds heavier. During that time he never once had pizza delivered to his campsite.

"He tells you how to go out and blend in with the environment, which is a much more gentle way of going," observed student Jim Helton, a middle-aged business consultant from Connecticut with a master's degree in theology from Yale, explaining what makes Brown different from other survivalists. "He has classic heroic proportions. The things he's done are things you read about in mythology...He's very much an individual in

the classic American sense.” Half of the ground floor of the Tracker barn has been converted into a rustic classroom. Students sit like bleacher bums on rump-busting planks supported by tree stumps. Animal skulls and tomahawks decorate the walls. Two 50-gallon drums serve as a makeshift stove. Shortly after 9 PM, Brown strode in, dressed in a gray sweatshirt, jeans, and unlaced Reebok sneakers. Dozens of brains scrambled to fine tune their image of him. His physique and presence are more imposing than expected. The arms and upper body are plated with muscle, raising the possibility that he spends his spare time uprooting redwoods. Yet, surprisingly, this devout worshiper of the Earth Mother sports a slight paunch, chain slurps decaffeinated coffee, and puffs away furiously on Marlboros. He also lapses into verbal bravado that seems uncharacteristic of someone who cherishes survivalism as a way to reconnect one’s soul to “the spirit of the land,” not as a paramilitary romp in the woods.

“There’s no such thing as free time in this course. None!” declared Brown, a hint of the ass-kicking drill instructor in his voice. “My goal on Sunday is to make you look like hell...I’ve spent all my life perfecting these skills. I gave up everything — college, friends, high school, everything — to learn them...By the time I’m done with you on Sunday you’ll be able to survive any place in this country other than a parking lot. You’ll be able to track mice and deer across that gravel out there. You’ll see more in a flash of an eye than you see in a year of your life.”

Brown went on to say that 38 of his students became light-footed enough to grab an unsuspecting deer after finishing this course, that he has been called upon to track 600 criminals and missing persons, and that FBI agents, police officers, and “all the Army survival groups” come to him for special training.

Brown owes most of this sundry knowledge to Stalking Wolf, the mentor he reverentially refers to as “Grandfather.” Stalking Wolf was a Lipan Apache scout who wandered the world for 63 years before coming to Southern New Jersey in the 1950s to be near his son, a serviceman stationed at McGuire Air Force Base. Brown, born and raised in Beachwood, was seven when he met the mysterious Indian through his pal Rick. Stalking Wolf was Rick’s grandfather, but he made both boys his blood brothers. For ten years, Grandfather, who was 83 when the apprenticeship began, used the Pine Barrens as a wildlife laboratory to teach his two disciples how to live and think like Apaches. He taught them to hunt. He taught them to fish. He blindfolded them and turned them loose in the forest for a weekend. He taught them the edible plants and wildflowers. He had them spend so much time on their bellies tracking animals that Brown remembers having a callus on his diaphragm. “Grandfather was barely five-foot-seven, weighed maybe 135 pounds,” he told his students, “and he beat the hell out of us at 90 years old. That man could outrun me by miles. He could outclimb me. He could outlift me. And he could outwork me.” At an age when most men have trouble fetching their slippers, Grandfather “had the body of a 25-year-old gymnast” and could scamper across dry leaves without making a sound. So said Tom Brown.

After graduating from Toms River High School, Brown put Grandfather’s collective wisdom to the test by roaming North America alone for ten years. He followed the beat

of his nomadic Indian heart to the Badlands, Death Valley, and beyond, perfecting his survival skills until he didn't even require a knife to subsist in the harshest terrain. He then returned home, married, began writing books — recounting serial adventures that have Tom Brown rescuing a lost child from a pack of wild dogs and Tom Brown coaxing a badger into drinking water from his hand — and opened his school. The transition from wanderer to teacher fulfilled a vision that Grandfather had had: that young Tom would some day spread the Native American philosophy in the white man's world, sensitizing all those muckamucks who have poisoned the Earth Mother, depleted her precious natural resources, and imprisoned themselves in a ghost dance of conspicuous consumption.

Brown paused, knowing his students could not buy one element of that biographical sketch. It stretched credulity beyond reasonable limits.

“Why are you still in New Jersey, Tom Brown?” he asked rhetorically, anticipating their question. “Well, that's simple... Wherever this state goes, the rest of the nation will follow. We've got most of the toxic dumps here. We've got most of the cancer. We've got most of the problems. So when you're trying to fight a war to save somethin', you get on the front line.” He muttered under his breath, while stamping out a cigarette, “Yeah, I'd like to be somewheres else.”



Comedian Pat Paulsen once wryly observed that the epic battle of man versus nature is no more. Alas, man has finally succeeded in beating his environment to a pulp. Survivalism in its purest form is an attempt to put that relationship back on its original harmonious footing by discarding the creature comforts of civilization like ballast from a sinking ship. At 8:30 AM on Tuesday, Brown tossed the matches overboard. Although the Native Americans were master fire builders capable of cooking a meal without sending up smoke (indeed, Brown says he once camped out undetected for two weeks on the median strip of the Garden State Parkway), the emphasis was on starting a fire properly rather than keeping one going. Brown and an assistant instructor demonstrated the bow drill, a friction method in which a pint-size bow is used to turn a short, pointed stick in place until it makes a tiny ember.

By eleven o'clock the Tracker students had carved their own implements and were gamely trying to eke out flames. Their initial efforts produced more noise than heat. Close your eyes and stand next to a bow driller and you'd swear you were standing next to someone who was either washing a window or abusing a piglet. A group of bow drillers in action create a high-pitched symphony of squeaks. Fire starting, however, became a symbolic milestone on the road to pure survivalism. The week was punctuated by sudden yelps of "I got it!" — accompanied by the faint odor of burning wood and the eruption of a triumphant smile. This was, after all, a novel experience for everyone but Judy Burns, who, having taken the Standard Course last summer, was back with her teenage daughter, Meghan, in tow. Burns had brushed up on her bow drilling at home in Los Angeles, although she had to cut short one practice session when her living room rug began smoldering.

After a lunch of communal stew, Carl "Bear" Povich, another Tracker instructor, led the class into the cornfield behind the barn where he showed them Survival Step Two: how to construct a debris hut — an emergency shelter of branches, leaves, and random detritus. The remainder of the day was devoted to throwing the rabbit stick — a crude billy club used to clunk small game in a pinch — and to building a variety of animal traps. Following another stew break, there were evening lectures on fish spearing, the making of primitive tools from rocks ("the bones of the earth"), and the Duck Island Hunting Technique: Weave a camouflage headdress of ferns and cattails, slip into the water, and, according to instructor Frank Sherwood, "sneak up on the ducks, grab their feet from underneath quickly, then pull them under." If you pull hard enough, the neck will break. If not, you must resort to choking a very angry duck into submission.

A subtle lesson in observation had also been slipped in during the day. At one point, Brown interrupted himself in mid-lecture to exclaim, "God, wasn't that a splendid herd of deer that passed this morning!" Not one student had seen them. Later, he claimed to have crept to within ten yards of the class during their debris hut demonstration. Not one student had seen him. "Pay attention," Brown warned. "Never get so involved in one thing. Do that in bear country, you get it!"

The next morning, Chris Waelder, a wiry truck driver from Long Island, roused himself at 5:30 and — like Linus awaiting the arrival of the Great Pumpkin — squatted out in the cornfield on a self-imposed deer watch. He paid rapt attention, but no deer materialized. Waelder had to be satisfied with spotting an owl in the barn.

Most of Wednesday was gobbled up by mundane tips on finding potable water, cooking and drying food, making cordage, tanning hides — and, of course, more communal stewing. In the afternoon, Brown began touching on the nitty-gritty of nature awareness. “You will have the ability when I’m done with you today to track any animal you choose,” he promised. “It’s incredible the transformation in a person once they learn how to stalk and walk the correct way.”

The correct way meant Grandfather’s way, which meant the Fox Walk: lift, don’t slide, the feet; roll from the outside to the inside of the foot upon hitting the ground; keep the back and head erect. All 34 students, resembling a tango line of zombies, practiced an exaggerated Fox Walk in the driveway behind the barn. When executed in super-slow motion, with slight variations, the Fox Walk becomes the preferred method of sneaking up on animals in the wild — for either photographic purposes or to bonk them with a rabbit stick. It is often used in combination with the Weasel Walk, a half-crouch that approximates the position assumed by a man lugging a piano on his back.

The Weasel Walk is a tortuous form of locomotion that produces smokeless fires of pain that burn uncontrollably through the thighs. Brown noted that as a teenager he once Weasel Walked twenty miles. No student could conceive of doing that without first having his or her vertebrae welded into a jackknife position. But Chuck Cox, a 36-year-old custodian from California, is the type who’d be willing to give marathon Weaseling a shot. To get in shape for class he had done a lot of preliminary stalking the previous month: “I just walked around like a dog and hopped around like a rabbit for three or four hours a day.”

Although Brown is occasionally inspired to eat meals in the Weasel Walk position, his passion is tracking. He figures that by age 27 he had spent 21 years — averaging 80 hours a week — pouring over animal tracks.

“From now on, don’t look at the earth as the earth,” he said, opening his Thursday lecture with a poetic flourish. “It is for all intents and purposes a manuscript, something that is written upon everyday. Day after day, with the eroding effects of the wind and the weather, new chapters are always coming into play. It’s an open book, every inch. And every trail is a paragraph or a sentence or a chapter of an animal’s life. ”

To those able to decipher them, tracks can speak volumes. Every turn of the head and blink of the eye is transmitted to the feet, explained Brown, which leave hundreds of telltale “pressure releases” on the ground. From these tiny ripples of dirt he deduces a wealth of information. “There are pressure releases in your feet that are exactly where your lungs show up,” Brown informed his astonished students. Footprints, he added, will eventually replace fingerprints as the definitive means of identification.

That is assuming that the FBI can learn Brown's classification system. He has developed an intricate vocabulary to accommodate every conceivable disturbance a shoe can leave in its wake: cliff, ridge, crest, crest-crumble, cave, cave-in, plate, plate-fissure, explosion, disk-fissure, and more. Brown walked over to a large sandbox in the rear of the classroom. He stepped in and made five distinct prints in the surface, twisting, jamming, and sliding his right foot in the sand. Students elbowed around the perimeter of the box, noses nearly touching his tracks. A few snapped flash pictures.

"Where's the secondary plate? This one here?"

"That's a spike or something."

"A peak."

"Yeah, that's it. A peak!"

"I'm trying to figure out the difference between a plate and a plate-fissure."

"This is a plate."

"This is a primary right here. So this is a secondary fissure area."

"Is that an explosion right there?"

"I don't think it's quite an explosion."

"It's a lot like geology," a voice proclaimed. "Plate tectonics."

Later that evening, after another thirteen-hour day of survival instruction, Bob Tymstra placed a call home to Ontario, Canada. "You won't believe how complicated tracking is. The guy here, Tom Brown, can tell what a guy's doing, if he sneezed! It's fun. We learned how to build a debris hut, stalk, throw sticks. All sorts of weird stuff."

Tymstra neglected to mention that there had been plenty of opportunity to acquire a taste for stew. By Friday morning some stomachs were in a mutinous mood. "Hold it! Don't do that," Chuck Nichols, a portly retired Navy man, said to a fellow student preparing to pour a batch of scrambled eggs into a pan of diced ham and onions. "We've had everything in stew all week. Let's eat something that's separate for once."

Nichols got a second gastronomic reprieve at lunch. Karen Sherwood, a fresh-faced, gracious woman who is the staff botanist, took the class foraging for edibles. Within the confines of the farm, they collected enough wild produce to whip up garlic mustard-and-dandelion fritters, spicebush tea, salad, and a side order of fresh vegetables.

"How are the greens?" Sherwood asked Mark Culleton, a social worker from Pennsylvania who was digging into a plateful of chickweed, nettles, and garlic mustard. "They're palatable," nodded Culleton. He smiled. "But I don't have anything to compare them to except my lawnmower."

Dave Wescott had trouble digesting a few things unrelated to lunch. He is the director of the Boulder Outdoor Survival School in Idaho, and Brown had invited him east to observe his operation. Wescott had mixed reactions.

"Probably the biggest service I've seen since I was here is the opening of the mind of the general public," said Wescott. "You know, 'Look around you because there's more to it than concrete and chain-link fences.' That I admire."

He was less impressed with Brown's tales of surviving without equipment in 30-degree-below-zero weather, of spending a night in an oak tree in Montana during a

lightning storm (“There are no oak trees in Montana,” Wescott noted), and of Grandfather’s superheroics. “The metaphor goes to the heart,” he sighed, “but the literal translation gets stuck in the craw...It’s just really hard to buy. But that’s not to say it’s not true.”

Tracking the Tracker is a formidable task. You might as well try to stalk a flea inside a coal mine or Weasel Walk across a hotplate. The biographical trail twists and turns. Much of it has grown cold. In his books, Brown says that Stalking Wolf eventually returned to the Southwest and died, while Rick (who is never given a surname) was killed in a horseback-riding accident in Europe. So much for the two principal corroborators. To complicate matters, Oscar Collier, who edited *The Tracker* and *The Search*, acknowledges that both names are pseudonyms, although that is never explained in the text. Collier, in fact, concedes that he himself “may have come up with” the folksy appellation *Stalking Wolf*.

Other aspects of the Tracker legend seem to flirt with reality. Brown, for example, contends that he started his school partly because he was inundated with 10,000 letters after *Reader’s Digest* published an excerpt from *The Tracker* in November 1978. One inside source puts the mail total at “tops, 200.” Brown tells his students that he made the front page of the *New York Times*. That is so, and the 1977 news story — which involved a rapist Brown tracked down in Bergen County — garnered him national attention and led to a book contract. He does not mention, however, that the suspect was acquitted at the grand jury level and subsequently successfully sued Brown and the township for false arrest and libel. Furthermore, spokesmen for Army Special Operations Command say they have no record of Tom Brown’s having trained any personnel. His wife claims the arrangement is kept hush-hush for security reasons.

During his tracking lecture, Brown regaled his class with an anecdote about the Smithsonian Institution. Researchers there had brought him plaster casts of ancient footprints found at a dig in Africa. From analyzing the prehistoric pressure releases, Brown postulated that the walker had been carrying something in his right hand and looking over his left shoulder. He predicted that the man also had a hunting companion.

“This so intrigued the Smithsonian Institute that now — they’re in the process, I’m waiting for it any day — they’re gonna dig in more and over to his left. If I’m right, I’ve read my oldest set of tracks correctly that I’ve ever read.”

That’s interesting — but not entirely correct. Dr. Kay Behrensmeyer, a Smithsonian anthropologist, took Brown’s standard Course in 1984. She brought along with her photographs taken of casts made from footprints found in Kenya that were a million and a half years old. It just doesn’t have anything to do with the Smithsonian,” says Dr. Behrensmeyer. “The reason that I wan him to look at these tracks was because I thought his viewpoint would be interesting to me personally. Nothing more has been done.” No additional digging is under way. No news of another find is due “any day.”

Embellishment has caused Brown problems in the past. He relied on three different co-authors for his first six books. Two of them admit to having lost faith in the veracity of the narrative. “I got real uncomfortable with it,” says William Jon Watkins, a pro-

fessor at Brookdale Community College who carried the writing load on *The Tracker*. Watkins got so uncomfortable he refused to do a sequel. Among other things, he was never able to determine whether “Rick” even existed or not.

“It’s a great story,” Watkins says, “but the longer you’re around Tom, the more you tend to think, ‘Well, is this true or not?’ There’s nothing verifiable... Tom is really twelve years old, and once you accept that basic fact you know exactly what you’re dealing with. You can never really pin a twelve-year-old down...Once he [Brown] says something twice he really believes it. The weird thing is, every once in a while something will check out.”

The Tracker, for instance, concludes with a massive rescue effort to find a retarded man lost in the Pine Barrens. The police and the National Guard couldn’t turn up any clues. Brown was recruited and — “tired and thirsty and frustrated beyond words” — finally zeroed in on his target.

The incident took place in 1977, and a captain with the Howell Township police department confirms that Brown “was instrumental” in resolving the case.

Colonel Bill Donohue, commanding officer of the search-and-rescue unit of the Cape May County Sheriffs Department, speaks glowingly of Brown. “He is the premier tracker in the United States today...He knows more about tracking than anyone will ever know.”

Donohue has taken five of Brown’s courses. He has also worked with him on several criminal cases, including a pending homicide investigation. “I’ve been with him where he’s predicted a guy was gonna urinate shortly — and he did!” says Donohue. “It’s not that he’s some fantastic superhuman. It’s just that he’s so interested in tracking he’s spent literally years on his knees.”

According to Brown, the amount of “dirt time” he accumulated made for a painful journey to adulthood. As a kid he collected animal skulls, teeth, hair, and scat. After school he immediately bolted for the woods with Grandfather and Rick. His mind was filled with the spirit-that-moves-in-all-things — not sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. John Young, the owner of a natural-food restaurant in Red Bank, grew up on the street in Holmdel where Brown lived in the early 1970s. Brown was a leader of Young’s Boy Scout troop and often let him and his sister tag along on walks in the woods. Young has “verifiable evidence” that Brown did know an old Indian, although “the exact nature of the story isn’t exactly as he says it is.” The factual deviations, says Young, are simply a way of preserving and protecting sacred memories. He adds it’s important to keep in mind that Indians place spiritual truth above literal truth. Don’t expect hard facts from Tom Brown: “Tom is more of a native man than he is a white man, so he doesn’t always subscribe to the principles of white people first.”

Young confirms that dancing to the beat of a different tom-tom brought Brown hard times. “He couldn’t hold a job because he was always off in the woods,” says Young. “He couldn’t find a respectable position, and it seemed many people were always telling him he was a loser. My parents told me that he was some kind of nut. You know, ‘He must be a queer or something. Why’s he hanging around with all these young people?’

Basically people his own age couldn't deal with him. People that were older than him just looked down on him as some kind of irresponsible bum. Because they didn't know anything about his native side."

Young knew that side and appreciated it. He has no doubts that Brown is authentic. He remembers that on one of their jaunts in the Pine Barrens they came upon the newly laid foundation of a house. Brown "went into what looked like a meditative trance." Nothing spooky, just total concentration. He then methodically kicked and punched the cement foundation to smithereens.

"Tore it down with his hands," remarks Young. "The guy is incredibly strong and capable of that kind of demonstration of mind over matter."



Tom Brown has adopted a black paw print as a personal and corporate logo. It is a coyote track. Among Native American Indians a coyote teacher is the most powerful and wildest of men. A trickster. A manipulator. He will lie to you, play dumb, fake you out — anything to convey his lesson. Is Tom Brown a coyote teacher, a legitimate miracle man of the outdoors, or a slick businessman with a hyperactive imagination? Is he out to save the world or save a bundle? A former associate, who requested anonymity, notes that Brown barely made \$2,000 a year chopping wood before he became a celebrity survivalist, whereupon his gross income rose to more than \$300,000.

Brown acknowledges that he's not entirely comfortable with his adopted role himself. "At times I feel like a cross between an old hellfire-and-brimstone minister and a snake-oil salesman. 'Trust me!' You know?"

He is sitting by a rolltop desk in his office, which is on the first floor of a modern farmhouse located about 100 yards from the Tracker barn. Brown rents the property and lives there with his wife, Judy, their son, Tommy, age nine, and Judy's twenty-year-old son, Paul, from a previous marriage. The office is tastefully appointed with feathers, arrows, and knives. A stuffed owl perpetually threatens to fly out the window.

There is less of the bluster Brown displays in public, but an emotional wall remains in place. As one student complained: "I don't know who this guy is...He's just a blank." In terms of sociability, Brown has a tendency to be as cold as yesterday's campfire.

"It's still an alien world. I just don't mix well," he says, not a surprising admission coming from a man who wishes he'd been born 300 or 400 years ago. "I had a hard time — I still have a hard time — dealing with society."

Things are better, though. Conversation is tolerable now. A few years ago it was painful. Slowly, carefully, Brown will venture forth from the debris hut of his own defenses. He crosses the room and grabs an arrow off a shelf, like a proud Little League parent showing off his son's first home run ball. Young Tommy carved the arrow when he was five. The shaft is straight, the fletching precise. The boy is deadly with a rabbit stick and "just about gettin' interested in starting the bow drill."

Brown is most relaxed when in motion — scampering upstairs to show off his son's budding collection of animal skulls, bounding into the living room to inform Judy that the osprey just coasted across the back of the house again" — but he's never completely at ease. ("Do that in bear country, you get et.") Questions about his background are addressed, but not in depth. No, he doesn't have any photos of Grandfather. "We never had cameras when we were kids... We were too busy doing everything." His record, Brown insists, speaks for itself.

"I've got my reputation to go on. I've got things that work. I've got students who've field-tested things. How are you gonna be a critic against that?.. I tell people, 'You will have the ability to track deer' — and I've had students go out during a Standard Course and touch deer."

The problem from Brown's perspective isn't that his life is so unbelievable but that most men's lives are so uninspired. "Indians in general are mythological. What they could do on a daily basis compared to what we do as a society...was phenomenal. Being able to walk out with nothing and survive — lavishly — blows people away. See, to me, that's commonplace. I find it more difficult to survive in this society than out in the woods."

Saturday morning, Survival Day Six. The Tracker stood at the edge of the woods, surrounded by field grass, wildflowers, and a large knot of students. The uninitiated had no idea that the meadow was a Broadway and 42nd Street of subhuman activity.

"What you're sitting on is a huge network of highways and byways and rolls and pushdowns," exclaimed Brown. "What you're looking at is the world of the voles."

Commonly known as field mice, voles are dietary staples, the chopped chuck of the animal kingdom. Brown dropped to his knees and probed the matted grass. "I start parting the grasses going down to the bare earth," he said. "The first thing you'll notice is a vole tunnel, then vole chews...If there's voles, there's damn well gonna be rabbits, weasels, and everything else."

His students poked arms into the grass, feeling for tiny pathways. They spread across the field, crawling and peeping, 34 rear ends jutting skyward as if this small New Jersey hillside were the repository for America's lost contact lenses. Somewhere below, hidden like minute Easter eggs, were bits of nibbled grass, vole hairs, and vole droppings.

"Now, vole scat's neat," declared Brown, with boyish delight. "If it's bright green, it's fresh. Brown-green, it's a day old. Brown, two days old. Black, it's a week old."

Unseasoned eyes began to focus on miniature signs of life. One student unearthed dried fox scat. Another spied a vole mustache hair. They weren't close to nature, they were covered with it. Dead grass adhered epaulet-like to the shoulders of wool shirts. Burrs nestled in long hair. Pants were drenched with dew.

"Tom!" yelled a man with a ponytail. Brown high-stepped into the brambles to examine the discovery. The verdict came quickly. "We got rabbit hair! Middle back!"

"It's an awareness that grows every day," marveled Jim Helton. He grinned. "I never thought the day would come when I'd be happy to find shit." Helton paused to consider the practical ramifications of taking the entire Tracker curriculum. "I was thinking, if you get hooked on this stuff, you could spend three or four grand." Brown meanwhile was circumventing the field. He had progressed beyond the realm of scat. Over there, five deer tracks. Over here, a deer lay. He lingered by a depression in the grass the size of a potato sack. "Look at that fox lay right here. It's gorgeous!" he cooed. "You can see the whole outline of the fox. Fox, when they lay down, are very round. Rabbits are egg-shaped. Deer are very long."

Unable to contain himself, Brown hollered to Carl Povich. "Bear, it's time to go runnin' naked in the pines!"

Actually, it was time for sittin' semi-naked in the sweat lodge. The only bit of survival business remaining was to do some tricky tracking in the driveway. Brown sprawled in the gravel as if working his way through a minefield, pointing out pockmarks and scratches with a two-inch safety pin. See that egg-shaped mark? Fox track. "Week and a half old. Before the rain." Nearby, four teensy claw marks. "See 'em?" Yes, yes. "It's a mouse... That one's pretty fresh."

The Saturday night sweat was to be conducted exactly as Grandfather had taught Tom and Rick. In the pitch-black cornfield, two Tracker workers tended what appeared to be a funeral pyre. They were superheating dozens of rocks. The fire pit glowed molten orange. The two silhouettes labored against a curtain of spewing sparks.

Although this was essentially a recreational sweat, the students were respectfully subdued, novice survivalists about to be confirmed. They sat quietly in the barn in their bathing suits, waiting for the rocks to cook to perfection. "I could crank up a

sweat lodge that could blister your ass,” remarked Brown, filling time. “I can direct the heat. I could stick you to the ground.”

It was, however, a Teflon sweat: No behinds stuck to anything. The temperature held at health-club level. After six days of beans, stew, Porta-Johns, and bucket baths, it was a relief to cleanse the body from the inside out. The sweat lodge is a waist-high, oblong construction of bundled grass. The students sat in the dark in three concentric circles, heads resting on drawn up knees. During the twenty-minute ceremony, no one spoke but Brown. He sprinkled sage, sweet grass, and cedar on the steaming rocks. He chanted in Apache, his voice sad and low as an old Indian’s. He recited prayers in English, and rain started to fall. Prayers for his enemies. Prayers for the Earth Mother. Prayers for humanity “lost in a world we do not understand.” Three times, as if on cue, thunder rolled majestically over the hills of Northern New Jersey.

“Maybe it was coincidence, but I don’t think so,” Chris Waelder said on Sunday morning, referring to the heavenly sound effects of the night before. He called it “a great ceremonial sweat,” even though Brown had declined to use the sage Waelder brought from home. He had had it specially blessed by a medicine man named Johnny Free Soul. With only one or two exceptions, his classmates were equally pleased with the sweat lodge and the week’s indoctrination. Half seemed to have taken Brown’s every word literally. The other half believed the message, if not always the messenger. “I’m a 36-year-old man,” said Mark Culleton, who had a hard time swallowing Grandfather whole. “No one’s gonna bullshit me.”

All the students gathered in front of the Tracker barn for a graduation picture. Brown was conspicuously absent. He may have been busy putting on his game face for the closing lecture. It lasted about two hours. He opened with some farewell tracking tips — and some last-ditch braggadocio about the 40 concussions he’s incurred, the four times he’s been shot, and the burden of being the target of “at least” twenty criminals whom he’d helped put behind bars.

The talk then turned to more serious matters. To famine in Africa. To Grandfather’s prophecy about holes in the ozone layer. To aquifers running dry. To time running out.

“Mankind, away from the earth, no longer obeys the rules of creation,” Brown said sorrowfully. “And every time nature throws up a warning, mankind ignores it... I see people walk outside and never feel the sunshine, never feel the wind in their hand, never bend down to the ground and smell the soil. They don’t even know what grass looks like.”

The sermon gathered momentum and fury. The preacher’s voice welled up as he recollected the birth of his son. In keeping with a promise made to Grandfather, he had taken his baby to their “sacred place” in the Pine Barrens, where he was to bless the boy with his ceremonial pipe amid the sweet silence of the forest. To his shock, the old campsite was foul and smelled of man: It had been turned into a gypsy garbage dump.

Students dabbed at red eyes with hankies. Sobs and sniffles mingled with the chirps of birds in the cornfield. Tears streamed down the face of the Tracker.

“My greatest hope in life is that I die right here, giving it all I can give,” he moaned, struggling to complete sentences. “I hope you never have to lay your baby down in a pile of garbage. People, there’s a voice crying out there. It’s the Earth Mother, crying and dying. Do something... We are so far gone as a planet I wonder if there’s any hope left. And that’s why I teach and why I’ll always teach...And that’s why I can’t run anymore.”

Brown sank back in his chair, emotionally spent. Students exchanged long hugs, rocking in each other’s arms. Was it hellfire or snake oil they’d bought? Whether the sermon flew straight to the heart — like a perfectly carved arrow — probably had a lot to do with how deeply the heart ached for this troubled world.

There is a quote on a wall of the Tracker barn, tacked up among skulls, skins, and other survival souvenirs. It is attributed to Sitting Bull. The broken Indian was addressing representatives of the land-grabbing federal government, but his words could be uttered by any unsatisfied twentieth-century soul who seeks Tom Brown’s guidance in putting his life back in balance: “If a man loses everything and goes back and looks carefully for it, he will find it. And that is what we are doing now when we ask you to give us the things that are ours.”

In and out of the woods, however, survival can depend on being able to distinguish between truth and illusion. Lapses in judgment turn predators into prey. A cautious Weasel Walker will recall how one of Tom Brown’s assistants explained the logic behind a Rolling Snare animal trap: “Your traps gotta blend in with the terrain. Most animals are smart. But they’re not brilliant.”

The Ted K Archive

Tom Dunkel

Walk Like an Apache

Celebrity Survivalist Tom Brown believes he could save the world — if we'd just
adopt his Indian ways.

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