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EDITOR'S PICK TOPICAL

Sean Kirst: An 'exclamation point' at Silo City for Seneca Nation, heritage shaped by great eclipse

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Artist Bill Crouse, dressed in his traditional Seneca regalia, designed the new sculpture at Silo City.
Derek Gee/Buffalo News

By Sean Kirst
Columnist

Sean Kirst

The timing was chance – tied more to pandemic delays than anything – but Bill Crouse figures this kind of chance can sometimes be the best instructor.

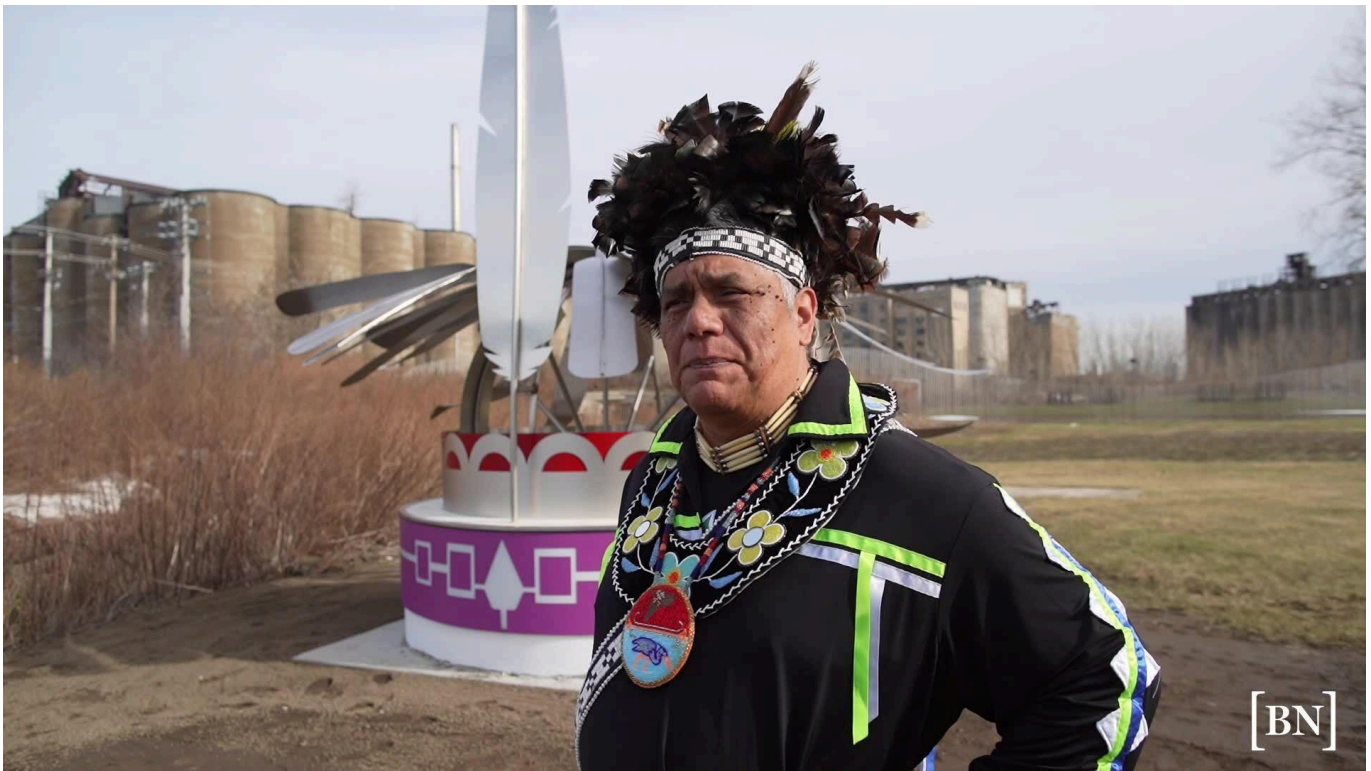
Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims are expected to pour into Western New York next month to witness a total solar eclipse. Some will undoubtedly find their way to musical and cultural events beneath the once-in-a-lifetime shadows created as the April 8 eclipse begins to happen above the old grain elevators known as **Silo City**.

Once

there, those visitors will watch as the sun gradually diminishes above a new sculpture called “**The Gustoweh**,” designed by **Crouse** – a sculptor, artist and faithkeeper for the bird clans within the Seneca Nation. A “gustoweh” is the anglicized version of what Crouse spells as “gastowe,” the Seneca word for a ceremonial headdress.

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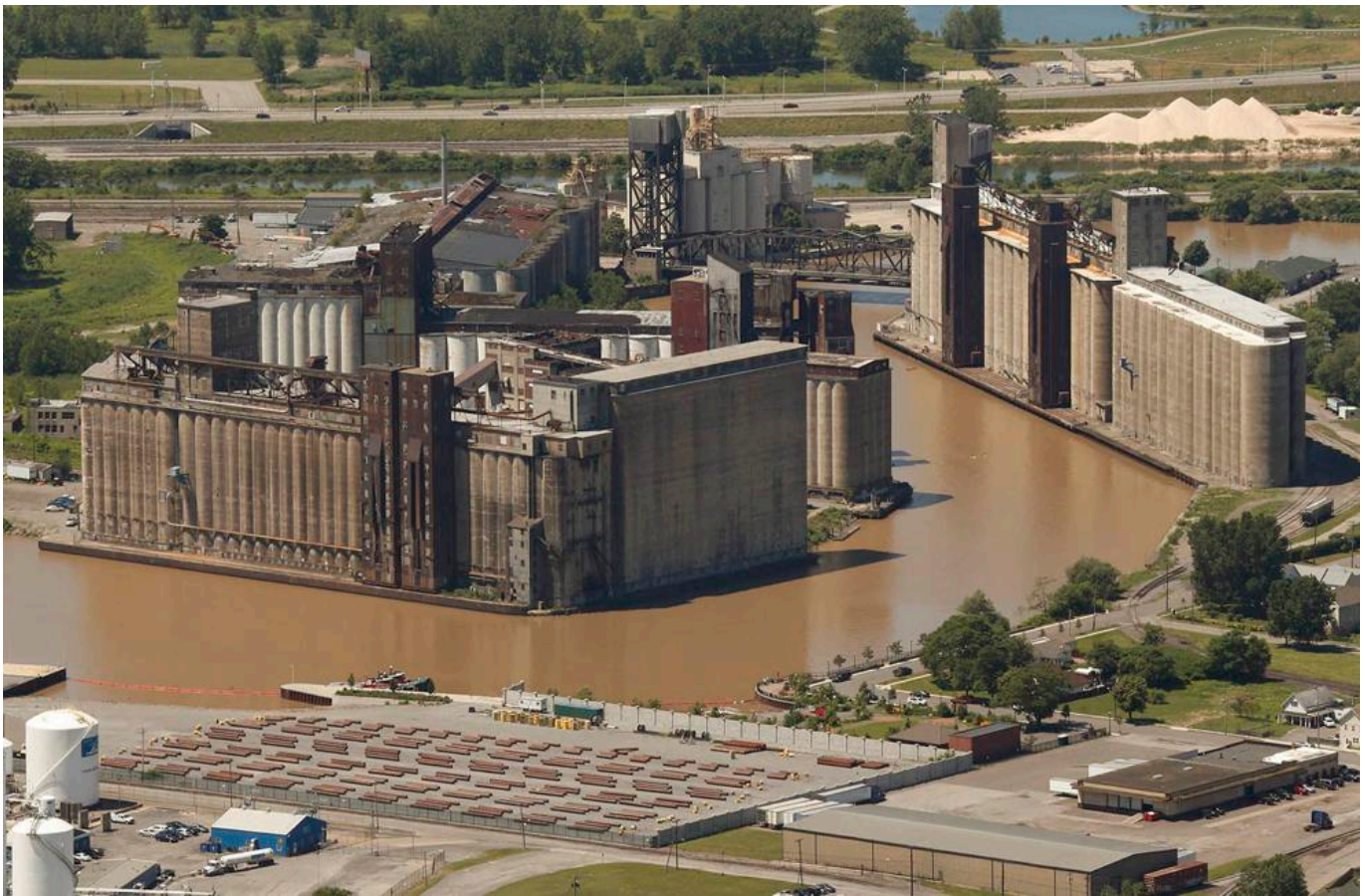


Seneca artist Bill Crouse created a new metal sculpture based on a Gustoweh, or traditional headdress, that is now installed at Silo City.

The 16-foot-tall sculpture – made almost entirely from stainless steel – was created to emphasize a solitary eagle feather, rising from that headdress and into the air.

That’s how Crouse said his people wear the gustoweh as a means of distinction within the Haudenosaunee – or Six Nations – where the headdress of each nation is singular, a specific means of identification.

The whole Seneca role in that great Indigenous confederacy is symbolized by the idea of five fingers creating a tight fist, as Crouse demonstrated during a recent interview on a sunny morning at the sculpture. Centuries ago, five separate nations – the Tuscarora people would join later – became much more powerful as one woodland empire.



An aerial view of Silo City.

Derek Gee/News file photo

That decision, as Crouse explained, pivoted for the Senecas on the appearance of another total solar eclipse, in ancient days.

He speaks of the new sculpture, which went up in the autumn, as “an exclamation point, a statement of our identity on that land.” Silo City is located within what once was the Seneca territory known as Buffalo Creek, refuge and sanctuary for the Haudenosaunee and many Indigenous people following the tumult of the Revolutionary War, and well into the 1800s.

As historian Alyssa Mt. Pleasant told The Buffalo News last year, that land was lost in the harsh 1838 “Treaty of Buffalo Creek.” While the federal takeaway was so legally heavy-handed and dubious that the Senecas would eventually regain pieces of their once-vast expanse of land in Western New York, the Buffalo Creek territory was swept up instead in the industrial expansion of greater Buffalo.



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The meaning and lasting Indigenous importance of that location – which Crouse said is known as “between the basswoods,” in Seneca – is not forgotten. Rick Smith remains convinced that among all the stories of how Buffalo gained its name, the most likely involves the translated name of a Seneca fisherman so prominent he was the namesake for what European and colonial newcomers called Buffalo Creek.

“There’s a spirituality to this place, and it’s not because of the grain elevators,” said Smith, founder of Silo City. He said he’s always wanted to work with Seneca artists in creating striking expressions of Indigenous presence and culture within the old industrial waterfront property, whose website speaks of promoting “ecological restoration, community engagement ... and site-responsive arts.”



Silo City founder Rick Smith: He said it's imperative to honor the Seneca Nation heritage of that lakefront land.
Joseph Cooke/Buffalo News

Silo City already includes a path honoring the Seneca, created with Crouse's artwork and counsel, called "Dosyoweh Atainogeh," referring back to a trail between the basswoods. A major part of the mission is "healing the land," said Olivia McCarthy, Silo City's director of arts and culture.

She said that cemented a natural partnership with Crouse, of the Seneca Allegany territory, who for years was an instructor of Seneca language within the Salamanca school district. Though he's retired from that job, Crouse – who turns 61 this week – may be busier than ever.

He has his traditional duties as a faithkeeper, built around making "sure our ceremonies continue." He is also a singer, dancer and choreographer for the Allegany River Dancers – and beyond that there is his work as a sculptor and artist.

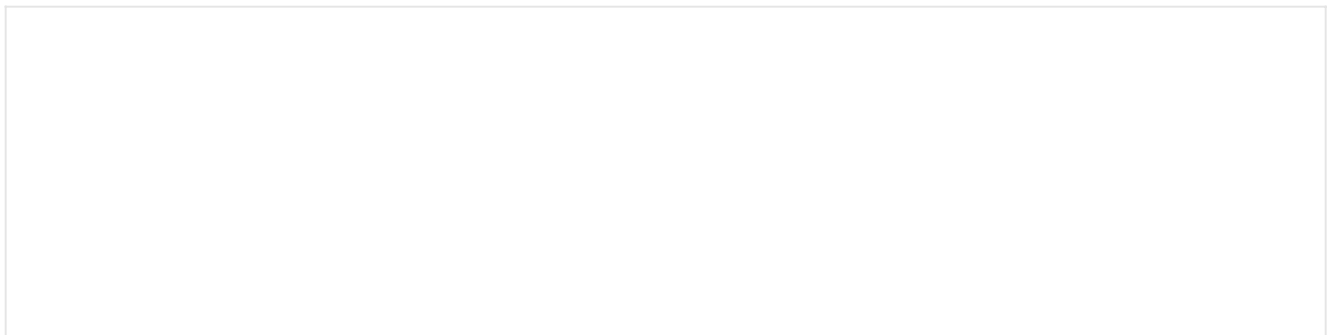


A new sculpture by artist Bill Crouse: A statement of identity, he says, for the Seneca Nation.

Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Through that role, Crouse met Smith about five years ago. Crouse embraced the chance to take part in a digital display of Seneca artwork in one of the grain siloes. Afterward, Smith showed him other artwork on the property, and asked if Crouse knew any Seneca artists who might be willing to help shape a prominent sculpture, emphasizing the Seneca connection to that land.

Crouse was the right guy for the question. He had a vision for a statement that fit well with stainless steel, a monument that will be formally dedicated at noon on May 18 with traditional Seneca song and dance.





Sean Kirst: 'Skywalker Way' pays tribute to three workers who died building Skyway

So the idea was born before the pandemic, though it did not really get rolling until the days of isolation ended, more than two years ago. At that point, Crouse began close collaboration with a team from Smith's company, Rigidized Metals, led by fabricator Tom Schunk and engineer Jason Zaepfel, already involved in many pieces of art around greater Buffalo.

After studying Crouse's drawings, the work demanded at least 100 hours of laser-cutting and welding, Schunk said. He particularly recalls the day last autumn when all the small and separate pieces came together in the final sculpture, clearly visible from Ohio Street.

Both Crouse and Schunk said the most striking aspect is the way the stainless-steel feathers ripple slightly in any gust of wind, in the fashion of the actual headdress upon which they're based.

“I think the spot where Rick put it is the windiest in Buffalo,” Schunk said, noting that the bull’s-eye force of a couple of Lake Erie winter storms was enough to rattle some quarter-inch bolts. “But if it can survive there, it can survive anywhere.”

The single ascendant feather from the headdress rises above smaller “feathers” and a base featuring the Hiawatha belt, symbolic of the bond of the Haudenosaunee. That led Crouse to share the story of how the Senecas became part of that great confederacy, an account of particular relevance right now:

Centuries ago, he said, a visionary prophet known as the Peacemaker brought together five warring nations on the shoreline of Onondaga Lake – the Seneca, Mohawk, Cayuga, Oneida and Onondaga nations – and called on them to join in an alliance. Several Seneca war chiefs were among those resisting the proposal, Crouse said, fearing their strength would suffer and decline.



Artist Bill Crouse, dressed in his traditional Seneca regalia, designed the new sculpture at Silo City to represent the traditional headdress, or Gustoweh, used in his culture as a tribute to the Seneca’s historical ties to the land around the Buffalo River.

Derek Gee, Buffalo News

Crouse said the Peacemaker responded: “What I’m telling you is the truth,” and told them he would leave them for a while – though they would soon see a sign in the sky to guide their choice.

While he was gone – as it happened here then, Crouse said, and as it will happen here again on April 8 – the Seneca people looked in awe at a full solar eclipse above their lands.

That did it. They were convinced. Crouse said the Peacemaker reassured the Senecas, keepers of the Haudenosaunee “western door,” that the choice was wise. They would no longer be alone if threatened or attacked, but instead would have the strength of the confederacy behind them.

Crouse offered that account by his new sculpture on a blue sky morning, late winter’s bright sun at his back. He said he was born into the imperative for protecting and sustaining his culture.

His parents spoke Seneca inside the house, where he learned how his mother had been sent as a child to a residential school – an unsuccessful state attempt at a kind of spiritual genocide, he said, intended to destroy his people’s language and beliefs.



In Six Nations game of 'snow snake,' bonds as strong as fathers and sons

Those beliefs endured, and Crouse became an artist, a singer, a dancer – all part of the larger mission of being a teacher, of making sure it all rolls on.

“The Gustoweh” at Silo City is really a part of that instruction. If visitors for the eclipse decide to take the time to see it, the message at Buffalo Creek is far more about what lasts and what continues, than what’s gone.

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