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# The Turtle's Beating Heart

Denise Low

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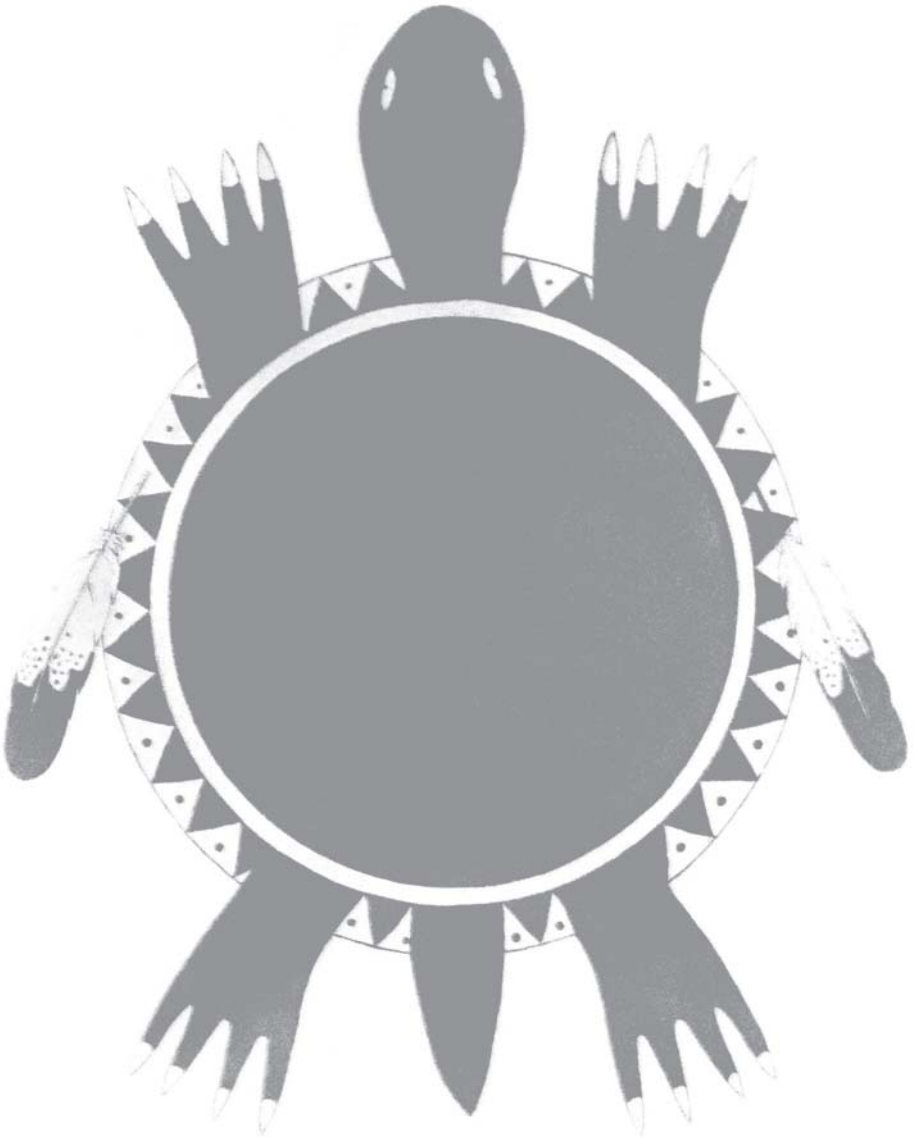
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# THE TURTLE'S BEATING HEART

*One Family's Story of Lenape Survival*

DENISE LOW

University of Nebraska Press  
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*For Thomas Pecore Weso and our families*

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## *Preface*

My family's Delaware tribal history became official in 1626 with the "sale" of Manhattan Island. Many paintings exist of this moment. Tattooed "Indians" wearing deerskin robes, my forebears, meet with Dutch traders, who wear breeches and plumed hats. Peter Minuit presents guilders and trade goods as tribute to the Native leaders. In return the Dutch enjoy a trade alliance. From a European perspective this iconic moment transferred legal title of *Manahatta*, Island of Hills, and the Delawares left. Or did they? Delaware groups persisted through the resettlement of New York City by Dutch traders, the English, and then colonial Americans. Delawares continued to play major roles in the fur trade, the French and Indian Wars, the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. When their political power finally diminished, most Delaware people went west along forced migration routes, while some populations stayed in the East. The major remaining clans are Wolf, Turkey, and Turtle. All of them adapt to many different conditions. All are survivors, like my family.

In the 1870s my grandfather's Delaware parents relocated to the Kansas plains, far from Manhattan. Still, Grandfather lived with the consequences of transactions between Europeans and Delawares, as

do I. *Historic trauma* is the term that suggests long-lasting effects of grief through generations, and it frames my account. Restoring my family's suppressed ethnic background adds a small part to the marginalized Delaware history.

I am among the uncounted numbers with "Indian heritage" who are doubly marginalized by misunderstandings of mainstream society and by federally enrolled tribal members who denigrate Natives without official recognition. Many United States Indigenous nations are fortunate to have a more continuous tradition, especially those whose members live in remote areas such as North Dakota and New Mexico. Delawares, in contrast, lived in Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania—centers of early European settlement. After several hundred years of resistance, from the 1500s to the mid-1700s, they were overwhelmed but not finally defeated.

Dozens of Delaware communities continue to exist from the Atlantic Ocean to Idaho and from Canada to the southern plains. Two federally recognized tribes are in Oklahoma and one in Wisconsin. State-recognized Delawares are in Delaware, New Jersey, and Ohio. Others meet regularly, including the Kansas Delaware Tribe of Indians near my home in Lawrence.

Twenty years ago, as an adult, I discovered my grandfather's Delaware origins. Although Frank Bruner appeared to be Native, my parents never talked about this open secret, and his tribe was uncertain. When I was young, he and my grandmother kept apart from our family, even though they lived only a few miles away. As I grew to adulthood, I questioned this distancing. Now I recognize the workings of historic crosscurrents within my own family.

Grandfather's life span, 1889–1963, is an era when lives of ordinary people, including Native individuals, were of less interest to those who recorded history. The nascent civil rights movement had not yet resulted in social and legal equities. Education of Indigenous Americans, overseen by the federal government, focused on assimilation and manual trades. As a workingman, my grandfather left behind no written records and only a few belongings. Among us descendants only brief stories survive. In this account I preserves as

much information about my grandfather as possible, from research and family stories. Grandfather Bruner lived a rich, even heroic life, despite prejudice, and I aspire to honor his legacy.

Family members who shared knowledge with me are my grandfather, Frank Lathrop Bruner Junior; mother, Dorothy (Bruner) Dotson; uncle, Robert Lathrop Bruner; father, William Francis Dotson; and sister, Mary (Dotson) Marchetti. Other family members who contribute are my sister, Jane (Dotson) Ciabattari, and brother, William David Dotson. Other sources are family members Theress (McCann) Bruner, Robin Bruner, Becky (Bruner) John, Barbara (Bruner) Johnson, and Gail (Bruner) Murrow. I appreciate the support of my husband, Thomas Pecore Weso, and his family, of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, especially Mary Walker Sanapaw.

Kimberly Blaeser has been a valued guide for this project and also Matthew Bokovoy. The anonymous readers provided invaluable suggestions for revision as well as project editor Joeth Zucco and copyeditor Elizabeth Gratch.

My writing draws on some oral traditions shared by descendants of the Fall Leaf, Journey Cake, and Segundin families. Janet Allen has been especially helpful and generous. Other sources are publicly shared historic Delaware tribal stories and historic sources. Some of the early commentators, such as Reverend Peter Jones, were Algonquin cultural brokers with blood ties—his mother was Mississauga Ojibwa. Reliable Native sources may have Anglicized names or not. I appreciate the inspiration of Clara Sue Kidwell, Ojibwa and Choctaw scholar, who first delineated for me how Native experiences are unique to United States history because of connection to the homeland, orally transmitted literary traditions, nation-to-nation status of tribal governments to the federal government, and identity of tribal communities. These issues are a critical baseline.

My appreciation to those who took time to read and comment on the manuscript, including Alice Azure, Kelly Barth, Mitchell Bush, Robert Day, Joseph Harrington, Susan Harris, DaMaris B. Hill,

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Gratitude to these individuals and many others who help me as I attempt to express personal, family, and tribal experience in the medium of language. All errors and misunderstandings in this account are my own.

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“Silence Is Alive” and “Urban Grandmother.” In *Yellow Medicine Review*. Edited by Carter Meland (Spring 2014): 109–12. “Gambling in the Heart of Winter.” In *Yellow Medicine Review*, edited by Chip Livingston (Fall 2012): 49–51.

“Winter.” In *Imagination & Place Anthology: Weather*, edited by Kelly Barth, 65–68. Lawrence KS: Imagination & Place Press, 2012.

“My Mother Is a Garden.” In *Riding Shotgun: Women Write about Their Mothers*, edited by Kathryn Kysar. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008.