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## **RON BROWN'S "ORISKANY INCIDENT"**

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### **A METAPHOR FOR THE CLINTON ERA**

by  
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**Austin Deuel watercolor purloined by Ronald H. Brown from the Oriskany Inn**  
(Reproduction by Mercer Harris Photography, Washington, Georgia)

#### **Canaan Valley, West Virginia, 1992**

**W**est Virginia's Canaan (pronounced kuh NĀn) Valley, near Davis in Tucker County, is a popular resort area less than 200 miles (three to four hours) by auto from Washington, D.C. Late Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown owned two residences at the Valley's Timberline Ski Area, a house (Lot 43 Northwestface Section) and a condominium (in the Herzwood Condominiums).

Brown often visited the Canaan Valley with his family and intimate friends. In the course of these visits he was a frequent patron of the Oriskany Inn, an upscale continental restaurant on Route 32.

From 1984 to 1999 the Oriskany was owned by petroleum geologist Franklyn Engler and his wife Bessie (“Bunny”).<sup>1, 2</sup> Reflecting Bunny Engler’s interest in art with an American Indian motif, the dining room of the Inn was decorated with two original watercolors by Arizona artist Austin Deuel. A finely-framed print by Franco-Russo-Canadian artist Nicholas de Grandmaison, also with an Indian theme, was displayed prominently in the reception area of the Inn.

A Vietnam War veteran also known for his paintings and sculptures of that conflict, Deuel’s distinctive signature identifies him as an “American Indian and cowboy artist.”



Austin Deuel  
FAICA

The Deuel paintings which adorned the Oriskany’s dining room had been acquired by Mrs. Engler several years earlier for about \$1,800 each. One of the paintings was hung quite high and thus was relatively inaccessible, but the other was within easy reach of patrons.<sup>3</sup>

The more accessible of the Deuel paintings and the de Grandmaison print disappeared from the Oriskany in the early 1990s, the Deuel between October and early December 1992.<sup>4, 5</sup> The Englers suspected an “inside job,” but the disappearances remained unexplained when, in 1999, the Inn was converted to the headquarters of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

In fact, the theft was not an inside job, but the Englers were well acquainted with the thief.

Late one evening Ron Brown and a companion found themselves as the last patrons in the Oriskany. Departing the deserted Inn, Brown took the more accessible of the Deuel watercolors from the wall, placed it under his arm and walked out. Asked by his startled companion why he had taken the painting, he responded, simply, that he was “entitled” and that, if detected, he would offer to pay for it.

Already the subject of a Florida grand jury investigation for the alleged solicitation of a bribe in exchange for normalization of trade relations with Vietnam and of congressional inquiries into his financial disclosures, by 1993 Brown had begun to secrete sensitive records in the Washington townhouse of his Oriskany dinner companion. Five years after Brown’s April 3, 1996, death, she discovered, under a staircase among Brown’s other effects, the purloined Austin Deuel watercolor.<sup>6</sup> Knowing the recent provenance of the painting (having been present at its

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- 1 Previously known as the Canterbury Inn, the Englers renamed the establishment. “Oriskany,” referring to the intermediate or transitional period between the Silurian and Devonian ages and to certain beds, chiefly limestone, characteristic of the latest period of the Silurian age, reflects Franklyn Engler’s geological training and career.
  - 2 At the time the Englers resided in Pittsburgh, but they have subsequently retired to Harlingen, Texas. They were located with the assistance of the Tucker County Sheriff’s Department.
  - 3 Other Deuel paintings and prints can be seen at [http://askart.com/artist/D/austin\\_deuel.asp](http://askart.com/artist/D/austin_deuel.asp).
  - 4 From contemporaneous auction prices of Austin Deuel watercolors, at the time of its theft the painting had an estimated value of between \$2,500 and \$3,500.
  - 5 Neither the Tucker County Sheriff’s Department (304-478-2321) nor the local West Virginia State Police post in Bretz (304-478-3101) has been able to locate a report of the theft. Franklyn Engler indicates that his brother-in-law was managing the restaurant at the time and that the disappearance of the painting was not immediately noted. He does not know if the theft was reported to the sheriff or state police.
  - 6 Although she did not observe its theft and does not know its disposition, another close associate of the late secretary of commerce reports that Brown was responsible for the disappearance from the Oriskany of the de Grandmaison print as well. One can only speculate that that stolen work of art currently adorns the wall (or is hidden away) in the home of a Brown associate or relative.

theft), she requested assistance in securing its return to its rightful owners.

Eventually located, the Englers confirmed that Brown had been a regular patron of the Oriskany Inn. Reflecting Brown's outgoing manner and the frequency of his and his family's visits to the Inn, the Englers revealed substantial knowledge of the Brown family. For example, they recalled that in 1993 Tamara Smith Barnes, then wife of Brown's son Michael, gave birth to twin sons. Because Brown would frequently arrive for dinner at the Oriskany with a female companion on one day and with his wife, Alma, on the next, Brown was a popular topic of gossip among the restaurant's staff.

Informed that the thief was their high-ranking, friendly and loyal patron, Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown, the Englers expressed shock and disbelief.

The Austin Deuel watercolor purloined by Ron Brown has now been returned to the Englers. Would that it were so easy to rectify, even belatedly, the other depredations of the Clinton kleptocracy.

### POSTSCRIPT

With thirty-four others (thirty-two American citizens or residents and two Croats — business executives, employees of the Department of Commerce, a CIA agent, the U.S. Air Force crew, a photographer and an interpreter) Ron Brown died on Sveti Ivan (St. John's Hill, near Dubrovnik's Cilipi Airport), when the plane carrying his Balkan trade mission, a U.S. Air Force CT-43A, Tail No. 31149, crashed en route from Tuzla, Bosnia, to Dubrovnik, Croatia, on April 3, 1996.<sup>7</sup> While the bodies were examined by staff of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, no autopsies were performed.

Michael Arrington Brown and Tamara Smith Barnes Brown, the birth of whose twins the Englers recalled, are now divorced. Although he has never passed a bar examination, Michael continues to be employed (as a "legislative analyst") by Patton Boggs, the politically-connected law firm with which his father had been associated, and is a politically-appointed boxing commissioner in the District of Columbia. Several years ago Michael, Ron Brown's associates Eugene and Nora Lum and the Lum's daughter, Tricia, were convicted of violating federal campaign-finance laws (making "conduit contributions" to Senator Edward M. Kennedy's 1994 reelection campaign). Since Brown's death his widow, Alma Arrington Brown, has purchased a condominium in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and an estate on Long Island (probably in Sag Harbor).

Former president William Jefferson Clinton occupies a Manhattan office near Harlem's Hotel Theresa (now an office building). The Theresa had been managed by Brown's father, and Brown lived in the hotel for much of his youth, soliciting autographs from visiting black celebrities which he would then sell to his friends and passersby on 125<sup>th</sup> Street.

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, USAF Tech. Sgt. Shelley Kelly was discovered alive but died en route to a Dubrovnik hospital.