

## Appeal Beyond History: Filmmakers Kelly and Tammy Rundle Document Iowa's Forgotten Past

Written by Mike Schulz

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In 1989, area natives Kelly and Tammy Rundle moved to Los Angeles in the hopes of jump-starting their movie-making careers, armed with little more than a title for their nascent production company: Fourth Wall Films.

And in the spring of 2007, after the release of their first, mostly self-financed feature, and with a second film nearing completion, the married couple took the next logical step.

They moved back *here*.

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"Fourth Wall Films had outgrown our space," says Tammy during a recent interview in the Rundles' new Moline home. "*Completely.*"

"We had one spare bedroom that we were using as our office, that looked like an *attic*," continues her husband, Kelly, seated beside her.

"

We had inventory, DVDs, boxes literally stacked to the ceiling. ... I mean, it was just getting out of hand."

But there was another reason for the move. "We're basically a Midwestern documentary business," Kelly says, "and we were sort of hitting a wall working from a distance."

While in L.A., the Rundles found success with their documentary *Villisca: Living with a Mystery* - which explored a little-known, early-20th-Century slaying in a formerly tranquil Iowa town, and which played at more than 50 theatres nationwide.

And the couple's latest offering, *Lost Nation: The Ioway*, details the plight of the Ioway Indians for whom the state was named, and has its local premiere at the Putnam Museum & IMAX Theatre on October 21. According to Kelly, this latest project - which required frequent treks from Los Angeles to sites in the Midwest - found the filmmakers logging "over 20,000 highway miles over two years," and as the Rundles plan to produce even more projects in the area, relocating just made sense.

"We have an interest in Midwestern stories," says Tammy. "We just feel that stories from the West Coast and East Coast are often overexposed and done over and over and over again - "

" - while a lot of great Midwestern stories sort of languish untold," finishes Kelly. "We like the idea of taking a story that has a regional awareness that deserves something *wider* than that."

### A Master's Degree from Columbia Pictures

As with many fledgling filmmakers, Kelly got his start in high school. "I guess I made my first documentary over at U.T. [United Township High School]," says the East Moline native. "I teamed up with two other friends and we made a film about the Civil War. Our teacher forced all her classes to watch it."

Meanwhile, in Waterloo, Iowa, Tammy was pursuing similar interests.

"I started making my own little eight-millimeter films when I was in, I guess, my early years of high school," she says. "I just borrowed my mom's camera and started shooting my own stuff. My sisters would babysit and go and buy clothes, and I would go and buy *film*, and get my films processed. And force my family to sit down and watch them."

The couple met at a church camp when Kelly was 20 and Tammy was 17 - smiling, Kelly says, "She was the first girl I'd ever met who made films" - and were married a year later. ("People said it wouldn't last," says Kelly to his wife's laughter, as they recently celebrated their 27th wedding anniversary.) The couple attended Park University in Kansas City, and not long after graduation, Kelly landed upon a trade-publication ad for an assistantship at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. Among its perks would be the chance to direct his own film.

Kelly says, "I kind of pitched the idea to Tammy that maybe I could apply for it and see what happens. And she said, 'Well, if you can *get* that, we'll move to L.A. and *do* this,' thinking that there's no way it'll ever happen."

Kelly applied, and it *did* happen. ("She was rather stunned," Kelly says of his wife's reaction, to which Tammy responds, "I *was*.")

But after arriving in California, Kelly discovered that "all the rules had changed" involving his assistantship, and the opportunity to direct was now highly unlikely. "Within a couple of weeks, I realized it was the wrong thing for me to continue doing," he says. "Which left us in kind of a quandary."

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Tammy found an immediate position at *Los Angeles Magazine*, working as an editorial assistant for the advertising department

Kelly, though, spent nearly six months looking for a job, finally finding one in the mail room at Columbia Pictures - a studio located just down the street from the couple's apartment. ("He *walked* to work," laughs Tammy. "I couldn't believe it. I *never* have that luck.")

"The nice thing about working in the mail room," Kelly says, "is it exposes you to every part of the studio - you have to learn all the names, all the places. And it's fun just to be *around* the filmmaking. I mean, for a kid that grew up *here*, loving the movies ... to be around that whole process, during the seven years that I *was*, was a joy."

During his tenure at Columbia, Kelly was eventually promoted to the international division, where he worked in advertising, publicity, and distribution. But while grateful for the experience ("I didn't get my master's degree from Pepperdine; I got it from Columbia Pictures," he says), by 1992 Kelly was growing disenchanted with the studio's commercial output.



"Most of the stuff the studio was producing," he says. "was nothing that I was necessarily thrilled about having some minor *role* in of any kind. I just thought, 'Well, maybe we should think about producing something on our *own*.'"

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Kelly says he found particular inspiration in the Columbia picture *Thunderheart*, in which Michael Apted dramatized themes taken from *Incident at Oglala*, his own 1992 documentary on the Native American experience. "He [Apted] had sort of created a fictional story very, very loosely based on this *true* story, and it made me think about this story that we had heard when we were back *here*, about the Villisca ax murders."

During the summer of 1912, six family members and two overnight guests were found murdered in the southwestern Iowa town of Villisca; despite an intensive investigation that yielded a number of suspects, the killer was never found. Says Kelly, "I thought, 'Well, now, there's another story that probably could be treated in both ways. It could be done as a historical documentary, but then it's got enough components to the story that it could be a *drama*, too.'"

Kelly broached the idea with Tammy, who says her initial response was, "'Sure! Let's try it! Why not?' We felt that it was probably a commercial-enough topic, something that would have appeal beyond history. Not to be disrespectful.

"But we were, I think, a little naïve in the beginning," she adds, "not really realizing what it was going to *take*. It ended up being about a 10-year project for us."

### Our Own Archive

"There were plenty of resources in terms of historical data," says Kelly of the filmmakers' early investigation into the Villisca murders, and most resources were provided by Dr. Edgar Epperly, a crime historian who had spent several decades researching the killings. Yet Kelly and Tammy knew that before filming could commence, a trip to Villisca - where, more than 80 years later, the murders were still a sore subject - was essential.

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"We knew there was some sense of a community split," says Kelly, "and some disagreement about acknowledging the ax murders or *not* acknowledging them. So we kind of wanted to discover how much support or opposition we would get from local people."

On their first trip to Villisca in 1993, the Rundles quickly discovered that "we weren't really *gettin g* support from the community," says Kelly. "There was a lot of smiling and nodding, and that was it."

They did find assistance, though, in the publisher of the town's *Villisca Review*, Carolyn Gage. A native of Atlantic, Iowa - some 45 miles away from Villisca - Gage, says Kelly with a chuckle, "was kind of an outsider to the community, even though she'd been there for 20 years. She did an editorial in the paper saying that these kids - 'kids' is what she used to call us - are from the Midwest and have 'Midwest values,' and they're gonna do this film, and we need to give 'em support. So that helped a lot." (The film is dedicated to Gage, who passed away in 2002.)

With Kelly directing and Tammy producing, the pair began filming in 1994, despite limited resources (Kelly describes their equipment as "a book and a camera and some film and a light meter") and a crew of the Rundles themselves. And for nearly a decade, the couple *continued* filming, as the production - primarily funded, the director says, "by us ... and MasterCard and Visa" - was frequently halted by financial setbacks.

"We did get a couple of grants for *Villisca*," says Tammy, "but it was very hard to convince people that this was historically *relevant*."

"There was a sense that it was sort of Iowa's dirty laundry," adds Kelly.

The interruptions in filming, though, had an upside. "As people began to realize we weren't doing something that was sensational or exploitive," says Kelly, "then more resources would come. Suddenly photographs would surface. And people would kind of contact us from out of the blue. That image of the ax and the lamp - the *only* image that we have that's related to the crime scene - came to us from a guy in San Diego. So one advantage to this thing draggin' out like it did was that it gave us plenty of time to *gather*

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those kinds of things.

"You know, if we'd been *smart*," he adds with a laugh, "we would've picked some subject that was already sort of *documented*. But we had to create our own archive."

Filming was completed in 2003, and after the editing process and a series of feedback screenings ("six months of continuous criticism," laughs Kelly), the Rundles took *Villisca: Living with a Mystery* - shot on film but eventually planned as a broadcast-television and DVD release - on a self-booked Midwestern tour of 24 screening dates over 90 days.

"Sometimes we had good crowds, sometimes we didn't," says Kelly. "It was always a function of 'Can we get the word out?', because we didn't have the money to do a lot of advertising." (*Villisca* did, however, premiere at Des Moines' State Historical Building and, says Kelly, "We hold the record for the largest attendance of any event they've ever had. About 1,200 people came.")

After the tour ended, Kelly says that he and Tammy "thought, 'Well, that'll be *it*.'" Until, that is, they received a call from Brian Fridley - president of Iowa's Fridley Theatre chain - who was interested in booking the film, and scheduled a test-run at one of his theatres in Atlantic, Iowa ... on what are typically theatres' slowest nights of the week.

"He gave us Monday and Tuesday night to prove ourselves," says Kelly. "The worst nights *ever*. And they're used to, on a Monday or a Tuesday, maybe five, 10 people.

"But we did 175 people on Monday and 185 on Tuesday, which," Kelly adds with a laugh, "Fridley said was like a *Star Wars* opening."

Fridley began booking the documentary in theatres in Iowa and Nebraska, another chain also picked up distribution rights, and *Villisca* eventually found its way to more than 50 theatres, including two in Los Angeles. (For reviews - mine among them - and more of

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*Villisca*

's history, visit

<http://www.villiscamovie.com>

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Yet the Rundles also continued to tour the film independently, and in 2004, screened *Villisca* in Red Oak, Iowa, at the courthouse where the film's original murder trials took place. Even considering the historic locale, Kelly and Tammy admit they had no idea how momentous the trip would turn out to be.

"We stopped at the Montgomery County Historical Society," says Kelly, "and there was a woman there named Betty McKenzie. Betty had been a former president of the society, and she said, just sort of out of the blue, 'You know, you ought to consider doing a documentary on the loway Indians.' And she started talking about the loway Indians ... who I had never *heard* of. I didn't know what she was

*talking*

about."

"And *I'm* thinking," adds Tammy, "I am so tired of doing documentaries right now, I just want a

*break*

."

### The Lost Chapter of Iowa History

At McKenzie's suggestion, however, the Rundles began researching the loway, and what they discovered was, says Kelly, "a really interesting story about the people for whom the state of Iowa is named, and nobody knows anything *about* it."

In the early 1800s, the loway Native Americans - a tribe of some 2,000 - controlled a Midwestern expanse of more than 60,000 square miles, which included the entire current state



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of Iowa, and areas of southern Minnesota and northern Missouri. Yet as settlers continued to colonize the west, the U.S. government planned to usurp the loways' land, and in 1824, two members of the tribe - White Cloud and Great Walker - were dispatched to Washington, D.C., to meet with Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Clark.



"White Cloud was an assimilationist," says Kelly. "He felt that there was no stopping the onslaught of the Americans. He just felt they *couldn't* stop it, so his thought was, 'I can preserve my people by acquiescing to these demands.' And Great Walker's feeling was, 'We shouldn't give in, we should just continue to live in the traditional way, and not go down the white road.' So they represent the two options, in a way, that Native Americans faced. That choice - fight or assimilate."

To Great Walker's eternal regret, he and White Cloud did sign a treaty that ceded a large portion of their land for settlement, a decision that would irrevocably divide the loway people. And while the Rundles (to say nothing of the rest of the world) certainly weren't blind to the injustices committed against Native Americans in our country, they admit to being astonished at how this particular piece of Iowa's history had eluded them, and everyone *else* they talked with.

"I mean, absolutely not one person that we've ever spoken to in Iowa who's not an archaeologist or an anthropologist - or an loway Indian - knows anything *about* these people," says Kelly. "I'm not saying there isn't an isolated teacher here or there who might mention it, but by and large, if people are talking about Native Americans in Iowa, they're talking about the Meskwaki because they're *there*,

" referring to those living in central Iowa's Meskwaki Indian Settlement. "And because the loway are no longer there, they've been forgotten. For all intents and purposes, they're sort of the lost chapter of Iowa history.

"It was this great story that hadn't been told," he adds, and the Rundles had found the subject

for their next film.

Compared to their experience on *Villisca*, research materials for what would become *Lost Nation: The Ioway*

were relatively easy to come by ... so long as they went to Wisconsin to get them. "The Milwaukee Public Museum has a large collection of Ioway artifacts," says Kelly. "Oddly, I mean, there aren't any Ioway artifacts in

Iowa

."

"All of the Native Americans were removed from the territory before Iowa was a state," says Tammy, "and so, in a way, all of that history was sort of wiped away *with* it."

The Rundles did, though, find several experts willing to speak about the tribe's history. "We did interviews with archaeologists, anthropologists, historians ...," Kelly lists. They also interviewed a number of Ioway Native Americans, whose tribe is legally divided into two sects: the Ioway Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, and the Ioway Tribe of Oklahoma. (Information on both tribes is available at <http://ioway.nativeweb.org> ).

Yet the filmmakers admit that, despite *Lost Nation's* heartbreaking subject matter, they were still unprepared for their interviewees' responses.

"I wasn't expecting there would be so much *emotion*," says Tammy of the tribe members interviewed, "even after all these generations since they were removed from Iowa. There's still a deep emotional scar in the people we've talked to."

"We've never had so many people who have been in tears on camera," adds Kelly. "It almost seemed like they were re-living a memory of the tragedy their people had to go through," and the director believes that these conversations led to a freer filmmaking method than the one the Rundles employed with *Villisca*.

"We were less structured about it," Kelly says, "in a way kind of responding to that aspect of

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Native American culture. We didn't do as much planning; we kind of let things happen as they occurred, and there were a lot of serendipitous moments that would come up. It was much less calculated and so the end result, I think, has got more of that feel to it. I hope."

Planned as a two-year project, *Lost Nation: The loway* was finished on schedule, and before its area debut at the Putnam, Des Moines' State Historical Building (on October 11) will again host a world premiere by the Rundles, which has the filmmakers feeling both amused and slightly embarrassed.

"That phrase is kind of funny to me," says Kelly. "'World premiere.' Somebody said, 'Can we call this a world premiere?' And I said, 'Well, technically it *is* a world premiere,' but that 'premiere' word gets abused a lot.

"And we abused it *ourselves* when we were doing *Villisca*," he admits, laughing. "'The Los Angeles Premiere!'"

"'The Central Iowa Premiere!'" counters Tammy.

Yet the Rundles admit they're looking forward to *Lost Nation's* eventual DVD premiere even more. "One of the features on the DVD is gonna be this alternate soundtrack in the loway language, with English subtitles," says Kelly. "There's one person left who is a fluent speaker in the language right now, so it's kind of a precarious situation for that aspect of their culture.

"There was an article that came out on *National Geographic's* Web site," he continues, "about certain areas around the world where these indigenous languages are *disappearing*

, and that's something else that I didn't really know anything about before we started this project. How language is not just, you know, the words and the phrases, but encapsulated in the language

*is*

the culture. Once language is gone, then a

*lot*

of things are lost."

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"And when you sit down and start *talking* to these people," adds Tammy, "the story just comes to life."

"That, in a way, is what interests us with these projects," says Kelly. "I mean, there's nothing wrong with a great story that's just about the past. But for us, it's this idea about its connection to the *present*. What are the *effects* of this thing that happened a long time ago? That's really where our interest lies."

Lost Nation: The Ioway *will be presented at Davenport's Putnam Museum & IMAX Theatre on Sunday, October 21, at 4 p.m. For more information on the film, visit (* [h](http://www.iowaymovie.com)  
[tp://www.iowaymovie.com](http://www.iowaymovie.com)  
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