

'A Matter of Individual Choice'

Timmons . . .

Editor's Note: Boyce Timmons for many years was University registrar. He now is director of Indian programs and chairman of the American Indian Institute. His wife is a librarian in the Phillips Collection, a vast and important collection of materials relating to the history of the Southwest. His children attended OU, and one of them was Little Red. He has for many years worked with various Indian organizations on the campus as well as with Indians throughout the state.

Little Red at the University of Oklahoma originally was started, to the best of my knowledge, by a student named Jack Redbird who was a music major.

Before the opening of a football game, Redbird, in full Indian costume, would lead the band onto the field. He did this for the years he was at the University. After that, the Athletic Department and the public relations office thought there should be some kind of Indian representation as part of the cheerleading group to try to work on the spirit of the student body. So that evolved into Little Red, and newspapers added the word mascot.

As far as I'm concerned, at this point I don't like the word mascot. The term Little Red is all right if the student who participates as Little Red doesn't object.

Little Red has never really been sponsored by anyone, not by the University and not by the Sequoyah Club, one of the Indian clubs on campus.

For the many years that I remember, candidates for Little Red competed, just like the cheerleaders did. If there was only one Indian, and if he wasn't good enough and couldn't justify what they wanted done in the matter of school spirit, then they just wouldn't have one. About three years ago there were two Indian students that tried out, and they were so good that they selected both of them.

At one time, and this is a matter I'd like to see discussed with the appropriate people, Little Red had a waiver on his fees. That's a type of scholarship. He was able to make trips with the football team. It was a broadening experience.

To my knowledge there was never any resentment about Little Red among Indians over the state. Many times I've been to Indian gatherings where Little Red has been, and they've honored him with special recognition. They were proud of the fact that Indians were represented at the University on the football field.

As far as I know the first effort to abolish the position of Little Red was in October of 1969 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I attended a national conference for American Indians. Albuquerque is the national headquarters of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC), and they were discussing at that time that OU was going to be a target for their national convention at which time they hoped to abolish Little Red.

They had their national meeting here in November 1969 and brought in Indian students from other states. At that time they made their resolution asking the University to abolish Little Red.

They admitted to me at Albuquerque, and some members admitted to me last year that there was a two-pronged approach to this. They were sincere in wanting to get rid of Little Red; he was not the kind of

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dead. It's been solved already by Hollomon and the recommendations of the Human Relations Committee. Little Red is legally abolished. We see those who would want to bring the Little Red issue back for their own political gain as just more white men using the Indian for their own gain. When they get through using the Indian for their political needs, then they say, "Go on back, Indian, we don't need you any more. We know you're socially and economically deprived, but we use you for what we need, and right now we no longer need you. You can have Little Red, but you can't have Indian university professors; you can't have Indian university presidents; you can't have things that pertain to the true American Indian problems."

What they want is Little Red, something meaningless. If Mr. Bartlett was so concerned about Indians, why didn't he answer my plea to him to talk to him about Indian studies, Indian recruitment, cultural houses across the state, and broad programs to bring social and economic equality to the American Indian?

We are the true Americans, and yet we're the most deprived ethnic group in the United States. We think this is wrong. We were the first ones here. We should have first priority on everything.

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image they wanted to appear out there on the football field. On the other hand they were trying to start the NIYC at OU where we had had an Indian club (Sequoyah Club) since 1914. They needed immediate publicity, and this was a neat gimmick to use to get it. They got state and national publicity on it.

The thing that has disturbed me most is the pressure. The Little Red of last year, Ron Benally, was so disturbed by the pressures that it actually had some effect on his health and his school. He didn't enroll the second semester. And the pressures have been pretty great this fall on Randy Palmer, both from the University students and from the outside.

To me it's a matter of individual choice. If an Indian student wants to do this sort of thing on the football field in costume as part of the cheerleading body of the students, part of the school spirit program of the institution, and there's no serious objection from the Indians of Oklahoma, I can't see why he shouldn't be allowed to do it.

The mistake that I think was made last year, and I told the NIYC students that it was a mistake, was they made themselves self-appointed Indian spokesmen for the Indians of Oklahoma without ever asking the Indians of Oklahoma anything about it.

The method in which this whole thing was done last year was similar to what has been done over the last 200 years in a sense. This is nothing against the integrity of the president of the University or some of the Indian students who worked on it. Some of them are sincere about it. I think the Human Relations Committee did everything it could to listen to both sides.

But here's what I'm trying to say. All through the Indian history in this country if the federal government couldn't get what it wanted through the legally constituted authority of an Indian tribe, it would send out a white commission to listen to the Indians' problems; the

commission could find Indian leaders who were sympathetic to what the government wanted done, and then the commission would recognize those leaders as the spokesmen for the tribe. Read through your Indian history. It's that way all the way through.

To me the sad thing was that here we had a man, a white man at the head of the administration who was not an Oklahoman. He appointed a committee with no Indians on it; the committee listened to self-appointed spokesmen for the Indians of Oklahoma and made a recommendation back to the president of the University.

I will say this, the committee left a loophole which has never been publicized. If you will read the recommendation, it says Little Red is abolished as a mascot, but there was no objection to an Indian in authentic costume doing an authentic Indian dance as part of the cheerleading group. The committee recognized there were two sides in this thing and left an out for it, which has never been publicized.

When this whole issue came up again this fall, the Indian students at the University are Indian enough they should have known the reaction of the older Indians in the state. Those Indians are real sensitive about having someone say, "I speak for the Indian people." Even within your own tribe, you speak for yourself, and you let others speak for themselves.

Last fall a group wanted to bring 50 adult Indians in full costume here to the football game to dance, and I recommended that they not do anything until the University had an opportunity to study the whole thing and make a decision. And they didn't. The adult Indian is not the type to demonstrate and cause a lot of trouble.

I'm not saying Little Red might not be degrading to some of these young Indian students, but what they tried to infer was that it was degrading and embarrassing and insulting to all the Indians of Oklahoma, which it wasn't.

I went to the registration of the NIYC convention in 1969. There were Indian students there from other states that were dressed in an imitation Indian fashion that to me looked exactly like early motion pictures of cowboys and Indians, of

the Indians that stay on the steps of the saloon waiting for the white man to come out so they could ride off into the prairie.

Those people rode across this country on commercial airplanes with their sleeveless jackets, their flat-brimmed Navajo hats with the feather, with beads around their necks and in jeans with fringe on them. To me that was perpetuating the white man's stereotype image of the Indian.

Little Red was trying to portray the Indian as a real Indian with the Indian costume and the Indian dances. But that's a personal observation. I think Little Red was a lot less embarrassing to the Indian race than some of those students that came here last year in the dress they wore.

I had a son who was Little Red for two years. I was very happy he had the opportunity to do this. He went to Florida and Texas and on some other trips with the team. He met lots of people and got acquainted with many more students than he could have in a classroom situation.

As far as the Indian student groups are concerned, I've already made a recommendation to both of them that they have one Indian club on the campus and give it a new name — eliminate NIYC and Sequoyah Club and call it the OU Indian Club because they're all working for a common goal, really.

I've discussed these problems with many Indian people. We have discussed the possibility of the University having an Indian week with Indian displays, art exhibits, jewelry, lectures by Indians from over the state in various classes. This could be aimed at Homecoming with a big powwow like we usually have on the Friday night before Homecoming and with a halftime ceremony of some beautiful Indian dances.

Several years ago the Indian club used to have half the halftime at Homecoming. We've had as many as 50 Indians in the middle of the field with their drums and doing beautiful dances. But the time kept being cut down. It takes a little time to perform the type of thing they wanted to perform and do it right. So rather than doing it in a way that would not be complimentary to the Indian culture and tra-

dition, they just discontinued it.

Ever since I've been in higher education and working with Indian groups, I've found the state of Oklahoma has much the same attitudes as most other states with large Indian populations. There's no concern about the education of Indians — from first grade up through college. The attitude has been that if the Indian makes it, that's fine, but if he doesn't make it, then the federal government should do something about it. The Indian has been a ward of the federal government.

In 1937 a faculty member, working through his representative, had a bill introduced in Congress to establish an Indian institute here at the University. I don't know any institution in the state, until just recently when it's become popular to be working in Indian culture, that's been too active with Indian groups other than maybe with an Indian club. They've done very little on the academic side.

The University of Oklahoma should have been into this business 30 years ago with an Indian institute or an Indian studies program. Other schools and colleges in the United States started this years ago.

I submitted a plan to the College of Arts and Sciences about two years ago for an Indian studies program. I don't know what's going to be done with it now, but I think the University is going to get more involved in some special programs in the history of the Indian culture, not just for Indians but for any student who wants to know more about it.

There are many things more important than an Indian dancing at football games. I think we can be concerned about helping stop the large dropout of Indian students at the junior high school level. Most of them don't even finish high school.

I think our student groups could get together and do what the original purpose of the Indian Club was in the early days—provide mutual moral support. There can be a lot more done in securing financial assistance and jobs, too.

The greatest lack is not when a student gets to college. By that time he's just about over the hump. The problem is at the lower levels. In one heavily populated Indian area in northwestern Oklahoma

they had five Indians graduate from high school over about a 10-year period.

The Sequoyah Club has made many trips over the past years to high schools and Indian boarding schools talking to the students about college and about some of the problems and some of the advantages, hoping they could maintain interest in education. I think that's where the emphasis should be placed.

Once an Indian student gets in college, there are enough facilities already here. Most of those students are aware of the kind of help they can get and who they need to ask to get it.

There are exceptions. Last year there was a young man from Stilwell who came over here and went to admissions and records. The people there told him his records were in order and sent him to the business administration building to finish enrolling. He went over to Adams Hall, told them who he was, and they said they had his records, asked him to take a seat and told him someone would get to him. He sat there until 5 o'clock and nobody got to him, so he packed up his clothes and went back home.

Now, that's an exception, but if we had an active club, they could help people like that. Sequoyah Club used to have a table at enrollment with a sign — all Indian students sign here. If students had any questions, they could get help right there.

I think to the best of their ability the Human Relations Committee did make a fair and unbiased report on the information they had. They just had no way of knowing the real feelings of some of the adult Indians out over the state.

I appeared before the committee and told them some of the history of Little Red and tried to explain to them that the older Indians and the young ones over the state who are not here at the University hadn't been consulted about this at all, and they resented the fact that a small group of Indians were trying to speak for them. I think the committee did the best thing they could; they explored every avenue for information, and I think they came to a good decision because they made it possible for us to have an Indian out on the field.