The Squabbling Illini: Rallying Cries Lead to Rift

Debating the Merits, and Meaning, of a Mascot

By Mike Wise

URBANA, Ill.--The history books say the last Indian tribe in Illinois was forcibly relocated to Kansas and then Oklahoma early in the 19th century.

But there is one Indian left, according to members of the Honor the Chief Society: Chief Illiniwek.

Of course, the chief is not a typical Indian, and he is not even a real one. He is a student dressed in Hollywood-style regalia, created 77 years ago by an assistant band director at the University of Illinois. He dances at halftime of football and basketball games.

A debate over whether mascots with Indian themes are offensive or harmless has played out on college campuses and at professional stadiums for more than two decades. But there is something singular here, a fierce loyalty to a student in war paint that makes the hair stand on grown men's forearms. The passions aroused by the chief also make the great-great-granddaughter of Sitting Bull, a junior at Illinois, fear for her safety.

The catalyst for the debate was a proposal last month by Dr. Frances Carroll, a new member of the university's board of trustees, to have Chief Illiniwek "honorably retired." She set aside her proposal after her support on the board eroded unexpectedly, but she intends to raise it again in March.

The proposal has divided the board and the university along political and, at times, racial lines. A symbol of pride to many students and alumni, Chief Illiniwek can at the same time be a hurtful reminder to American Indians of their mistreatment, of the misappropriation of their culture.

The chief's presence at football and basketball games flies in the face of a national trend. In 1970, more than 3,000 American athletic programs referred to American Indians in nicknames, logos or mascots, according to the Morning Star Institute, a Native American organization. Today, there are fewer than 1,100. At a time when American Indians are reclaiming their heritage, the use of Indian mascots and nicknames has ceased at all but a handful of major universities.

At Illinois, though, the forces of change have met strong resistance. Roger Huddleston, a local home builder and the president of the Honor the Chief Society, calls Carroll's proposal the "November ambush at the O.K. Corral."

"Chief Illiniwek is part of my geographic heritage," he said. "For anyone to dismiss that because I'm Caucasian, that's racist."

John Gadaut, a lawyer in Champaign, said he had spent more than $5,000 on keep-the-chief billboards and buttons.

"I'm a Native American," said Gadaut, who is white. "I was born and bred in Illinois. The chief
means something to me, too. People keep saying we have a mascot. No, we have a symbol."

But those who think it is time to do away with the chief note that the symbol for the past three years, and for almost all of the past eight decades, has been portrayed by a white college student.

More than 800 faculty members have signed petitions, contending that the mascot interferes with fulfilling an academic mission, diversity. Nancy Cantor, the chancellor of the university's Champaign-Urbana campus, supports doing away with the mascot.

Carroll said: "It's time for it to be put to bed. It's tough, but we have to do it."

Their success is still very much in doubt, with well-financed boosters and alumni determined to keep the chief.

"It's got all the subtexts," Lawrence C. Eppley, the chairman of the board of trustees, said. On one side, he said, are "the people who see themselves as the do-goodie white person."

"On the other, you got the old, bad white people from the Midwest who can't change with the times," he said. "This is about the chief, of course, but it's partly about the tail end of the p.c. backlash of the 90's. When you start throwing the word racist around, the other side becomes firmly entrenched."

Genevieve Tenoso, an anthropology major who is a seventh-generation descendant of Sitting Bull, the legendary Hunkpapa leader, experienced a dose of the roiling emotions when she ran into a group of students demonstrating on behalf of the chief under the banner "The Illini Nation."

"I think I said, 'Look, now they've got their own tribe,'" she said. "And a guy told me if I didn't shut up he was going to pop me in the lip."

"Who knew," she said, "that this would be the issue on campus to get people to resort to a threat of violence?"

**The Battle Begins**

The movement to abolish American Indian nicknames began in the 1960's in Indian communities and on several college campuses. Oklahoma's "Little Red" was the first nickname to be retired, in 1970. Stanford and Dartmouth soon followed, dropping Indians from their team names.

The movement to do away with the nicknames and mascots appeared to have won a key battle in 1999, when a panel in the United States Patent and Trademark Office ruled that Redskins was a disparaging moniker and violated federal law. Six trademarks involving the Washington Redskins were revoked.

Last month, federal District Court Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly overturned that ruling. Suzan Harjo, one of six plaintiffs in the case, said they had appealed.

At Illinois, Charlene Teters, a member of the Spokane Nation, took her children to a football game in the late 1980's and decided to do something about Chief Illiniwek.

Soon after, Teters, a graduate student at the time, started holding up a handmade placard outside the stadium that read "American Indians are people, not mascots." News accounts of her protest spurred the movement.

"When you see a community erode your child's self-esteem, you act," said Teters, now an
artist and professor at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, N.M. When she arrived at Illinois, a campus sorority was still holding a Miss Illini Squaw contest.

"I felt then we needed to kill the fake Indian," Teters said. "They say, 'We're doing it to honor Native Americans and the history of the state.' But it just seems like misplaced atonement, especially when they want to dictate the boundaries of that atonement."

Ever since, the chief's three-minute halftime performance has divided the university, sometimes along political lines.

Carroll, the trustee seeking to retire the mascot, is an African-American former schoolteacher with Democratic leanings who grew up and still lives on the South Side of Chicago. Carroll insisted that her motivation had nothing to do with being an African-American woman and everything to do with "being a human being."

Marge Sodemann, one of two voting trustees on the university's 10-member board who adamantly defend the chief, is a staunch Republican from the prairie. The license plate on her sedan reads "GOP Lady."

"The chief stands for the values, trust and honor of everything that went on in the past," Sodemann said. "It's not a racist mascot. Everything he's done is honorable. The people here really dote on him."

More than 200 students, including dozens of members of the marching band, held an all-night vigil in support of the mascot before the board meeting Nov. 13. The day of the meeting, other students demonstrated in favor of retiring the chief. And during the public board meeting, some white students sang Indian songs and performed tomahawk chops.

Proposal Must Wait

Carroll needs 6 of the board's 10 votes to retire the chief. At the 11th hour, she said, at least two trustees waffled in their support, so she shelved the proposal until March.

Anti-chief factions contend that wealthy alumni have long pressured Illinois governors to maintain the mascot, and they say that governors, through channels, have pressured their appointees on the university's board. Governor Rod R. Blagojevich has said that the decision is a university matter.

While her fellow trustees were aware of Carroll's passion for the issue, they did not know the ancestry of the woman for whom she is named. Frances Graves, Carroll's grandmother, was a Creek Indian from York, Ala. Carroll brought a photo of Graves, a light-skinned woman with straight hair who was wearing a cloth hat and a collared, white powdery sweater, to an interview at the university's Chicago campus.

"I haven't really told anyone about that, just didn't see the need," Carroll said. "They always said she was full-blooded, but I'm not really sure.

"Anyhow, I never thought about it, being a black woman sticking up for the American Indian or doing this for my grandmother. I just thought about doing what's right."

Chief Illiniwek was created in 1926 by the university's assistant band director, Lester Luetwiler.

The chief's first appearance came during a game against Penn; he offered a peace pipe to a mascot of William Penn.

Red Grange was the Illini star then, and many alumni associated the Galloping Ghost with the
Meet the New Chief

Matt Veronie, a white graduate student with spiked, gelled hair and neatly ironed khaki pants, is the current chief. (An assistant chief sometimes fills in for him.) At games, Veronie's cheeks are painted Illini orange and blue. He wears a matching feathered war bonnet and Lakota-made buckskin; at halftime, he dances and leaps with a solemn countenance. He wonders about all the fuss.

"I think what I'm doing is a good thing," he said.

After graduating next semester, he said he would work to do "whatever I can to help people to see the chief tradition in the way I see it, for the good that it is, for the respect that it deserves."

"It would be very tough to see the Chief go right now," he said.

The pull of the mascot for many people involves tradition, the lure of Illini athletics and college memories.

"I can still remember the first time I saw the chief in law school," Gadaut, the lawyer from Champaign, said. "The hair stood right up on my arms. It's my whole heritage in front of me. Hey, these people can be my heritage even though this guy's skin is not my color."

He dismissed Carroll and other opponents of the chief as "leftist social engineers."

The people who want to retire the mascot note that virtually every major American Indian organization has long called for the elimination of sports-based Indian references, as has nearly every civil rights and national church organization.

American Indians have rarely been heard in the dispute over the chief, but several members of the university who are American Indians talked about it one afternoon at the Native American House on campus.

"The chief is symptomatic of how American society co-opts the Indian identity and simultaneously romanticizes and denigrates that identity," said John McKinn, a Maricopa from the Gila River Indian Community who is assistant director of the Native American House. "Pseudo-spiritual dances are passed off as authentic. It just dismisses who we are."

Tenoso, the great, great granddaughter of Sitting Bull, described herself as a "reluctant activist."

"I wanted to ignore it and join the Native American club to learn to make fry bread and go to powwow," she said. "But I looked up on the wall at a fan shop and saw the chief head on a seat cushion. Then I went online and noticed one of the new items for sale is a chief bathroom scale and a little two-piece toddler set that said, 'Love Me and Love My Chief.' I was pulled in."

Eppley, the chairman of the board of trustees, acknowledged that he was uncomfortable with the rationale for retaining the chief.

"A lot of people see it as the dancing rabbi or the black minstrel," Eppley said. "Logically and historically, it is really tough to build a case for having it. It's likely a Boy Scout dance, at best.

"But you can't draw a straight line back to that for people who like the chief. It's more complex."
Eppley said he would have voted against Carroll's resolution last month, because he thought she had rushed it onto the board's agenda.

"I do think it's a matter of when rather than if," he said, "but we have to find the right time."

Carroll, among others, isn't willing to wait much longer.

"We're in the 21st century in a global society," she said. "We have to be sensitive to images, thoughts, behaviors that affect other cultures--cultures that we now know we were misinformed about."