

## The Native American Mascot Controversy: A Case Study of Eaglebeak the Mascot

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2019 State Finalist

*Kathryn Kummel is a high school junior at William J. Palmer High School in downtown Colorado Springs. In her free time, Kathryn enjoys reading, playing music, engaging in scientific research, and taking care of her ducks and chickens. She became curious about the mascot Eaglebeak when she first learned that he was the previous mascot of her high school and the namesake of the school's current mascot. As she continued encountering vestiges of Eaglebeak in school rituals that mimic Native-American practices, she grew interested in studying the emergence, the official termination, and then continued use of the mascot at her school.*

When the U.S. federal government established the Courts of Indian Offenses in 1883, American Indian religious practices, such as participation in traditional ceremonies and possession of particular ritual objects, were outlawed.<sup>1</sup> This persecution of Native American cultural identity stopped almost a full century later with the passage of the American Indian Freedom Act of 1978.<sup>2</sup> Cultural oppression also took the form of boarding schools such as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. In schools such as these, Native American children were separated from their families and severed from their culture. They were banned from using their original names and from practicing their indigenous cultures, replacing them instead with Anglo-American customs in appearance, communication, and religion.<sup>3</sup>

Paradoxically, while Native Americans were restricted from expressing their culture, white Americans were dressing in native costumes, imitating native dances, watching western films, and reading works like the "Song of Hiawatha."<sup>4</sup> These behaviors built on the stock idea of the "noble savage"—the idea of the American Indian—who exists in an uncorrupted state of nature, is an expert outdoorsman, and fights valiantly yet loses with dignity and resignation. This concept emerged in the early days of settlers' interactions with Native Americans. In describing his travels among the Sioux in 1766-1768, Jonathan Carver, an early American explorer wrote, "These savages are

possessed with many heroic qualities and bear every species of misfortune with a degree of fortitude which has not been outdone by any of the ancient heroes either of Greece or of Rome."<sup>5</sup>

Enduring into the twentieth century, the idea of the noble savage appealed to the public who felt nostalgic about the past.<sup>6</sup> This led to the widespread use of Native American images as sports mascots. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, many of these mascots were eliminated due to the controversy of oppressive and demeaning stereotypes that the mascots perpetuated. In some instances heated debate preceded these removals. The issue of Native American mascots proliferated at the national level, and locally, such as in Colorado Springs at William J. Palmer High School. A focus on the issue at the local level enhances the broader picture of Native American mascots.

In the late 1920s, William J. Palmer High School (formerly Colorado Springs High School, CSHS) in Colorado Springs, introduced as mascot a Native American in a headdress, and in 1945, updated the mascot as Eaglebeak—a caricature of an American Indian. Colorado Springs was originally inhabited by the Utes. By 1882, the Utes were forcibly relocated to reservations and were not allowed to return to their ancestral lands in the Pikes Peak region until 1912, and at that only to participate in a carnival as performers of Ute dances at the opening of the highway that crossed through Ute Pass highway.<sup>7</sup>

This paper focuses on Palmer High

School and Eaglebeak as a case study of the creation and use of Native American mascots. It is an examination of images and texts of the yearbooks of CSHS/Palmer High School from the early 1900s to 1991, as well as early twentieth century texts on scouting, and local historical news articles. Yearbooks are useful primary sources because they describe students' thoughts and activities over time.

The research traces "Indian warrior" imagery prior to the adoption of Eaglebeak as the mascot, the late 1940s when Eaglebeak became the mascot, the 1960s and 1970s when the popularity of Eaglebeak eroded, the time from 1984 to 1985 when Eaglebeak saw a revival, and Eaglebeak's retirement in 1986. To some, the retirement of Eaglebeak was a triumph for justice. To them the use of Indian mascots was doubly tragic because while idealized notions of Indians and their rituals were celebrated, actual Native Americans were denied agency to express their culture. However, to the supporters of the mascot, using Indian mascots honored the triumph and nobility of the Native American warrior culture, and Eaglebeak's removal was a tragic censorship of "Palmer Pride." From these contrasting perspectives the story of Eaglebeak can be seen as both a triumph and a tragedy. This local issue reflected a larger national debate on the nature of Native American mascots. What happened at Palmer High School demonstrates similarities to other organizations, such as the University of Illinois' Chief Illiniwek, and the Cleveland Indians baseball team.

### **The Noble Savage, Scouting, and Sports Mascots**

The Boy Scouts used the exemplar noble savage as an image for scouting and masculinity. In the 1910 Boy Scouts Manual, Ernest Thompson Seton, the author of many Boy Scout guidebooks, wrote that scouts should learn the "way of the Indian" by making teepees, wearing Indian clothing, and singing Indian songs.<sup>8</sup> He stated, "The idealized Indian of Hiawatha has always stood as the model for outdoor life, woodcraft, and scouting," and an ideal Indian "was a master of woodcraft ... manly, heroic, self-controlled, reverent, [and] truthful."<sup>9</sup> The Indian was a top warrior: "He [the ideal Indian] can teach us the ways of outdoor life, the nobility of courage ... the glory of service, the power of kindness, the super-excellence of peace of mind and the scorn of

death."<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, "playing Indian" was a way to pay homage to Native American values.

Another value emphasized by the early scouting movement was to improve the masculine physique by learning the way of the Indians.<sup>11</sup> Seton wrote, "We know that white men's ways, vices, and diseases have robbed them [the white men] of much of their former physique."<sup>12</sup> He pointed out how, in contrast, "The wonderful work of the Carlisle Indian School football team is a familiar example of what is meant by Indian physique."<sup>13</sup> The connotations of bravery and strength made Native American mascots attractive for sports. Football saw an influx of Indian mascots in the early 1900s.<sup>14</sup> Many Native American mascots were created around the time of the First World War and during the 1920s.<sup>15</sup> One such mascot was the University of Illinois' Chief Illiniwek, which was created in 1926 (retired in 2007) by two former boy scouts based upon their knowledge of Indian scouting rituals.<sup>16</sup>

### **Palmer High School—The Lead Up to Eaglebeak: 1905-1944**

The first instance of Native American imagery in CSHS yearbooks occurred in the 1923-24 yearbook in the form of pictures and text associated with boy Scout troop #12. Troop #12 had amassed \$12,000 worth of Indian paraphernalia (equivalent to over \$170,000 in current dollars) including teepees and costumes.<sup>17</sup> They ran ceremonial Indian pageants, and had gatherings to imitate Indian tradition with dance, songs, and costumes.<sup>18</sup> The group grew to over 60 members in 1924-25.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, an



*The drawing of a Native American that was adopted in 1928 as the mascot of CSHS. This photo is of the mascot on CSHS clothing stored in the alumni historical room at Palmer High School.*

unnecessarily tragic difficulty occurred in New Mexico as tribal governments had to defend American Indian rights because the Pueblo Indians were not permitted to do ceremonial dancing and their children were not allowed to learn traditional rites.<sup>20</sup>

In 1928, CSHS adopted a customary depiction of a “Traditional Indian” as the school’s mascot.<sup>21</sup> In the 1928-29 school year, art teacher Pansy Dawes wrote a poem titled, “The Palmer Legend,” describing how CSHS students became the “Terrors” Indian tribe with the initiation rites of the tribe in the style of Henry W. Longfellow’s Song of Hiawatha.<sup>22</sup> Associated visual art was designed by students and featured prominently in the 1929 yearbook. The poem would later be named the “Terror Legend.” It has remained in use at Palmer High School for new student orientation activities and is printed in yearbooks.<sup>23</sup> Around the time of the creation of Troop #12 and the “Terror Legend,” the U.S witnessed an increase in the use of Native American mascots.<sup>24</sup> The movement of romanticized American Indian imagery likely played a part in the formation of both the Troop and the Legend, and probably affected other American communities in similar ways.

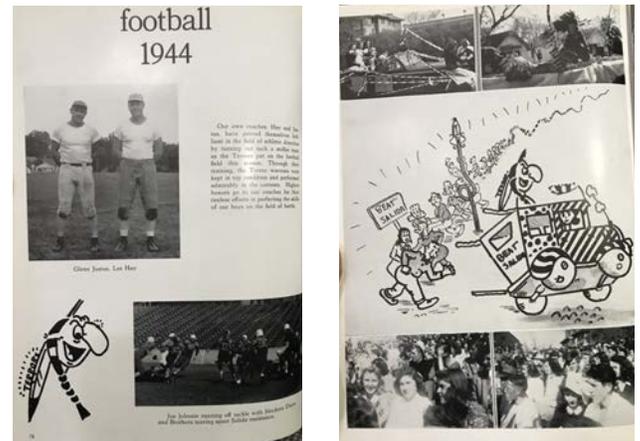
After the 1929 yearbook, yearbook themes varied but none returned to Native Americans or showed the mascot again until 1947 (Table 1). The opportunity to create another Native American themed yearbook was there, but student interest was seemingly low, and the theme did not generate support in yearbook committees or the student bodies.



*The Palmer Student Council performing the Terror Legend during the October 12, 2018 Assembly. One student wore an Indian headdress acting out the Terror Legend.*

### The Creation of Eaglebeak: 1945-1947

Don Willis, in the class of '45, drew a caricature of a Native American and named it Eaglebeak.<sup>25</sup> It first appeared in the 1945 yearbook football page as well as in a comic anticipating the CSHS vs. Salida football game, suggesting the football team might have unofficially accepted it in its first year.<sup>26</sup> In the academic year 1946-1947, Eaglebeak had been adopted as the mascot, and the 1947 yearbook was saturated with Eaglebeak imagery.<sup>27</sup> The theme was prominent even on the teachers’ page.<sup>28</sup>



*The first yearbook appearance of Eaglebeak in the 1945 yearbook.*

In the 1947 yearbook, a poem emphasized Eaglebeak as a noble savage— a “symbol of ... greatness ... loyalty, and power.” Eaglebeak was associated not just with athletics but also with academics and arts, encompassing all of student life. However, the drawings perpetuated the stereotypical appearance— short, potbellied, extremely prominent nose, and braids with feathers. The caricature was also portrayed as uncivilized and unrefined; Eaglebeak was drawn misspelling “organizations” as “organizashuns,” mishandling sports equipment, and wearing nonsensical loincloths, thereby perpetuating the stereotype that Native Americans lacked sophistication.

In the mid-1940s, the Cleveland Indians also developed their mascot, a cartoon caricature named Chief Wahoo.<sup>29</sup> The designer was probably influenced by the cartoon style of the day—exaggerated features that lent themselves to the use of stereotypical features and the creation of caricatures. Both Chief Wahoo and Eaglebeak appear in this cartoon style, suggesting that the style that likely influenced Don Willis.



1947 yearbook cover, and sports and organizations cover pages.

### The Years of Convention, Challenge, and Change: 1950-1980

After its inauguration in 1946-47, Eaglebeak was regularly seen in yearbooks but was relegated mainly to sports, often appearing on team uniforms. Eaglebeak became central to student morale, and in pep clubs, as well as at alumni events such as Homecoming and the Powwow football game. For both events, people dressed up and had parade floats with Native American themes. Eaglebeak and Native American themes were featured in the yearbooks a few times during these years. The 1953 yearbook used the ghost of Wankanago, the Chief in the Terror Legend, as the narrator of the yearbook.<sup>30</sup> In the 1957 yearbook, Eaglebeak was on section cover-pages, doing activities associated with the topic of the section (e.g., academics, arts, athletics).<sup>31</sup>

CSHS changed its name to William J. Palmer High School in 1959. Perhaps due to nostalgia for the “old school,” the 1960-61 yearbook depicted Eaglebeak participating in school activities. There were derogatory portrayals of Eaglebeak as unsophisticated and girl-obsessed.<sup>32</sup> The final yearbook to prominently feature Eaglebeak was in 1977, portraying him as a superhero. This issue included the superhero Eaglebeak on the cover, comics of him, and pictures of a student dressing up as him.<sup>33</sup> During these decades, another Native American “ritual” appeared at Palmer High School—the performance of the Terror Legend during first-year orientation as a rite of passage for new students. Yearbooks regularly showcased this event. This tradition continues into the present.

Some groups started moving away from the use of Eaglebeak. In 1967-68, the B-squad cheerleaders acquired new uniforms without the Eaglebeak logo and the Publicity Committee did not have any Eaglebeak related signs in the yearbook.<sup>34</sup> In the 1973-74 school year, the

Student Organization tried to change the school’s mascot after controversy arose due to an investigation that was conducted by Palmer students concerning the possibility that Eaglebeak was offensive, undignified, and demeaning. This disagreement was revealed in yearbook commentary.<sup>35</sup>



Eaglebeak takes centerstage in the 1977 yearbook as a comic strip hero.

This consideration coincides with multiple public Native American protests of the oppression that they had endured. In 1964, one year after its closing, five Sioux landed on Alcatraz and tried to seize it, citing an 1868 treaty that permitted Native Americans to claim unused federal land.<sup>36</sup> Another small group of Native Americans tried again. Their efforts sparked another movement in late November 1969, when a group of eighty-nine men, women, and children claimed the island for all the tribes of North America. More activists joined them. At the height of its occupation, the island housed about 600 people and was organized under a governing council and even had a clinic, public relations department, and school.<sup>37</sup> However, this movement did not last. During its second year of occupation in 1970, the island had a leadership crisis, and from then until the end of the settlement conditions only worsened and the population dwindled. The last of the occupants were removed in 1971 after succeeding in holding Alcatraz for fourteen months. The push for Native American rights continued.

In 1968, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded and began to stage protests to stop police brutality against Native Americans.<sup>38</sup> The notoriety and respect they gained through their fight for equality threatened the political power of Dick Wilson, the conservative Sioux tribal chairman. On February 27, 1973, approximately 200 AIM members occupied the hamlet of Wounded Knee, a culturally significant place due to the Wounded Knee Massacre that

had taken place there in 1890, to protest Wilson and his part in keeping the Native Americans oppressed.<sup>39</sup> Wilson responded by besieging Wounded Knee. The siege lasted 71 days during which AIM members and federal officers often clashed, leading to exchange of gunfire and hundreds of arrests. The AIM protesters stood down on May 8 after they negotiated a settlement with federal officials. The siege and protest at Wounded Knee brought AIM and their goals for Native American rights into the national spotlight, bringing the issue to the public's attention.<sup>40</sup>

In another move to bring Native American rights to the forefront of news, Marlon Brando, a celebrated actor, used his fame to bring more attention to the oppression of Native Americans, particularly in the negative stereotypes of them in films and media. During the 45th Academy Awards on March 27, 1973, Sacheen Littlefeather, an aspiring Apache actress and Native American rights activist, represented Brando at the ceremony to decline his Best Actor Award in order to protest "the treatment of Indians today by the film industry and on television in movie re-runs, and also with recent happenings at Wounded Knee."<sup>41</sup> This, again, brought to light the issue of Native American rights, reaching out through media to inform the American public. The students of Palmer most likely encountered news of the occupation of Alcatraz, the siege of Wounded Knee, and of Sacheen Littlefeather's speech due to the publicity that all three received, any of which might have changed their opinions of Eaglebeak.

Nonetheless, there were still organizations that were staunch supporters of Eaglebeak, the most notable of which were the Terrorrettes, a pep squad club founded in 1956 who performed during halftime and pep rallies, and had at one time over four hundred members.<sup>42</sup> Their uniforms consisted of native-themed short dresses with leather fringes, headbands with feathers, and jackets with large Eaglebeak logos. Numerous photos across the years showed them in stereotypical Indian "crossed-arm" poses.<sup>43</sup> Terrorrettes' gear did not change until Eaglebeak was retired in 1986.

### The Reintroduction and Controversy: 1984-87

The 1984-85 academic year saw a reinvigoration of Palmer traditions. The forgotten 'Legend of the Terrors' was retold, accompanied by a pantomime of the legend by the school's drama club, and the

Homecoming Bonfire was reinvigorated. Carolyn Churchill, the president of the Palmer Pride Club, in collaboration with Don Willis, designed and made a new Eaglebeak costume and mask.<sup>44</sup> The resurgence of old traditions succeeded in giving the student body a morale boost. The yearbook reported that "there is a feeling of worth this year at Palmer."<sup>45</sup> A resurgence of Native American imagery appeared during the Vietnam War and after in movies in the 1980s about the War; perhaps as a way to revive or recast the past in the face of changing times.<sup>46</sup>

The revival of indigenous imagery also brought community attention to Palmer's mascot. Two attempts were made to change it. The Lone Feather Indian Council sent representatives to talk to school officials about the retiring the mascot in January 1985. Council Chief Robert Talltree asked the school to present a "'more realistic, more proud picture' of the Native American."<sup>47</sup> Principal Gary Wisler told the Council that Palmer would make the change, but he only "put the process into motion through discussions."<sup>48</sup>

A second move against Eaglebeak was from Ned Locke, who filed a complaint in 1985 with the Colorado Civil Rights Division against Eaglebeak because it was a "racially offensive caricature of an Indian."<sup>49</sup> The school district



*A brief description in the 1974 yearbook of the disagreement about continuing the use of Eaglebeak reads, "Eaglebeak was one of Palmer's oldest traditions, a quarter of a century to be exact.... Times were changing for what was yet to be known, and Palmer wanted to stay current. Eaglebeak wasn't anything but offensive and poor taste anyhow.... What actually did happen to that roaring Eaglebeak controversy that swept through? Did the silent majority that kept the minority on top all of a sudden speak up? Whatever the reason Eaglebeak was a stalemate."*

conceded and retired the mascot, but the student body and alumni were opposed. The Student Organization held a student vote for the new mascot in 1986, but the winning answer was the write-in response “Bring Eaglebeak Back!”<sup>50</sup> Many students viewed Eaglebeak’s removal as a tragedy as they had lost their beloved mascot.<sup>51</sup> Many community members spoke out against Eaglebeak’s removal in the local newspaper, calling into the newspaper to have their comments anonymously aired. Some examples include: “Eaglebeak is not racially demeaning to anyone.” “Indians are part of Colorado heritage. Leave Eaglebeak alone and leave him at Palmer where he belongs.” “As a recent Palmer graduate, I know how strong the tradition of Eaglebeak is.... Eaglebeak will prevail in the end.”<sup>52</sup> Less common were people who supported the removal of Eaglebeak. One of the few community members who expressed support for removing Eaglebeak commented in the newspaper, “Is Palmer High School’s Eaglebeak offensive to American Indians? I can see how it could be, so throw it out.”<sup>53</sup>

School District 11 did not change its policy. Eaglebeak did not return. Eaglebeak disappeared officially from the yearbooks from 1986-1991. The Eaglebeak mascot could still be seen in the background of alumni pictures in the 1987 and 1988 yearbooks after which he disappeared entirely.<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

Palmer High School settled on having a Bald Eagle as its new school mascot. As a nod to their old mascot, they kept the name Eaglebeak. The adoption and retirement of the original Eaglebeak as Palmer High School’s mascot was experienced simultaneously as triumph and tragedy to people with different perspectives. To those who viewed Eaglebeak as a symbol of Native American exploitation, and as a paradox of non-Native people “playing Indian” and celebrating the idealized noble savage while American Indians were oppressed; his removal was a triumph. To others, it was the tragic loss of a beloved mascot and tradition, and censorship of their notion of Indian warrior imagery. The contrast between the two perspectives reveals the importance of comprehending the historical context of different points of view. The Terror Legend is still performed at Palmer High School. It is presented by students at new student activities, performed

during assemblies, including student orientation, and is printed in the Yearbook. This may be considered a triumph to some as a reminder of Palmer’s past identity. However, with deeper understanding of the cultural background of this practice, the activity can be considered a tragedy due to the misrepresentation of Native American culture and history, that has often been demeaning.

Many schools and organizations still have American Indian mascots, several of which are controversial. They too are having debates like the one surrounding Eaglebeak. For example, the Cleveland Indians Major League Baseball team quit the use of Chief Wahoo, a caricature of a Native American, in 2018 for on-field use, but continued to use the name and sell merchandise with the caricature mascot on it.<sup>55</sup> This sparked irritation on both sides: the fans of the mascot were upset that official use of it had ended; while those who were against its use felt that the team had not fully purged its usage.<sup>56</sup>

Native mascots on a cultural level, can be viewed as similar to blackface. Both are caricatures of marginalized and oppressed racial groups that were and are used by the dominant culture as a form of entertainment. Considering the history of Eaglebeak and observing the continued use of contemporary mascots raises the question: Why is it so difficult for more people to recognize the tragic and problematic side of Native American mascots? People came to understand the offensiveness of blackface. It is important that people learn about the tragedy of Native mascots as belittling caricatures of oppressed people that are used for public amusement, and not as symbols of respectful tribute, genuine tradition, and dignified triumph.