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Remembering Tallahassee

Sudie Hofmann is an associate professor in the Department of Human Relations and Multicultural Education. She has been active in addressing the issue of American Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames through writing, research and educational rallies on campus.

It was Labor Day weekend 1981 and I thought I was Mary Richards in the “Mary Tyler Moore” show as I drove into Tallahassee on Highway 10. Just like Mary, in the opening scene of her 1970s sitcom in which she peeks up at the green sign on 35W directing her into Minneapolis, I was looking for signs for north Tallahassee. Mary was starting a new life in her sitcom, and I was starting a new life as a doctoral student at Florida State University. Although I did find the sign for my exit, I was startled to see a tomahawk with the caption “Scalp Em Seminoles” next to it on the overpass on Highway 10. When I arrived at the apartment I had rented over the phone from Wisconsin, I asked my new roommate about what I had seen on the overpass. She looked confused and said, “Well, we’re the Seminoles.” Still not understanding, I inquired further. She explained that the sports teams at FSU identified themselves as the Seminoles. Oh, no!

I had recently been recruited by FSU shortly after receiving my M.S. degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, so the decision to move to Tallahassee had been a hasty one with little research. Apparently the thought of warm weather played too big a part in what I had just done. While researching FSU’s academic programs in policy studies, the institution’s nickname had been of no concern to me; the nickname and all the behaviors associated with it would be a major concern – very soon. As an undergraduate at SCSU and a student in the Department of Human Relations and Multicultural Education, I had been exposed to information about indigenous people that never made its way into any of my history courses. The late Henry Greencrow had been a speaker in one of my human relations courses, and he included in his talk a historical overview of scalping and its origins in Europe. He discussed how the practice spread to what is now the United States as part of Indian bounty hunting. He explained that scalping is usually done with a long, very hard knife and that the image of a tomahawk being associated with scalping is just one aspect of Hollywood fiction. Wanting to be absolutely sure that Henry’s research was accurate, I spent weekends in the graduate library at FSU looking into the history of scalping. There was very little information available in sources that were published in the United States. I eventually found sources published in European countries that were in agreement that the practice started in Holland. I wanted to share this information in some public way in an attempt to get the dialogue started about the general issue of the FSU nickname. I wanted to test the water.

Coalition building seemed to be the top priority at this point, so I started by contacting the executive director of the Governor's Council On Native American Affairs. When I reached the director by phone and explained my concerns about the use of the nickname and how it perpetuated stereotypes, he told me that he had a good relationship with the Seminole Boosters at FSU and would not help me pursue any actions that would embarrass the university. I couldn't turn to any American Indian student group on campus. There wasn't one.

I then approached the director of Florida Public Interest Group (FPIRG), the nationally affiliated Ralph Nader student group on campus. FPIRG and its director had a solid reputation for supporting progressive causes in the community. Rather than listening to my concerns, the director asked me whether I had heard about the horse's tail starting on fire Friday night. "What horse?" I asked. "Chief Oseola's horse," he replied. I received a quick historical overview of the FSU tradition of a white person dressing up as Chief Oseola and riding out on the football field and throwing a flaming spear into the turf. The FPIRG director attempted to tell me how funny the incident was and how much he enjoyed being President Bernie Sliger's guest in the president's box at the game. Okay, he wouldn't be much help.

The next stop was the Women's Center on campus, but they weren't interested. They were still reeling from the 1978 Ted Bundy murders at the Chi Omega Sorority, as well as from a series of rapes in graduate housing in Alumni Village and the general Tallahassee community. Women's safety was their central concern and I could certainly understand that.

I decided to write a letter to the Tallahassee Democrat about the issue of American Indian mascots and how they perpetuated images of American Indians as violent savages ready to scalp the next victim. I dropped the letter off at the Democrat and checked the paper for 10 days to see if they published it. I had high hopes that a dialogue would begin but I eventually gave up when it was not published. One quiet Sunday morning two weeks later, I answered the phone to hear a man slowly state that he was going to "scalp me." As I put down the receiver, I was suddenly aware that the letter had been published. The calls kept coming in with endless threats – one more vulgar than the next. It was clear that these were different individuals: some calls were long distance; some were from older men; and some of the calls later in the day were from young men in groups quite certainly under the influence of alcohol.

Reporting the phone calls to the Tallahassee Police Department was something I was reluctant to do, believing they would not take the threats seriously and, more importantly, fearing they were local supporters of the "Seminole" tradition. Luckily, the officer who took my call was willing to help me and suggested that I leave my Alumni Village apartment immediately. The graduate student apartments, similar to individual motel rooms with single outside entrances, left me vulnerable with my address published in the Tallahassee phone directory. I told the officer I had nowhere to go so he said he would assign a "squad car" to watch my apartment that night but he would have to pull it in the morning. We agreed that it was unlikely that someone would actually physically harm me but he thought that vandalism or attempts to "scare me in the middle of the night" were possibilities.

I had the good fortune of having a wonderful professor who took me in for a week, and he and his wife looked out for my safety, driving me to and from my classes. I would call my neighbors every day to see if there was any suspicious activity, always receiving the good news that everything seemed normal. I returned after a week and never again received a threatening phone call. However, the letters to the Democrat were not in short supply and failed to address any of what I thought were substantive issues in

my original letter. One reader claimed to agree with me and thought FSU should change its slogan to “Depilate Em.”

The husband of the office manager in my academic department put his arm around me one day and said, “You just don’t get how much we love football here.” He went on to explain that the “war paint” worn by fans is part of the FSU tradition and the tomahawk chop is essential for fan spirit. He said that the Seminole Reservation outside Tallahassee supported the logo, nickname, and “entertainment” at games. Pointing out that Seminole students were absent from the campus and that American Indian programs were nonexistent did not seem to sway the argument. Indians were for him a matter of entertainment.

Leaving Tallahassee in 1983, I realized that I made many good friends there, especially among the faculty in my department. I also realized, however, that I had a deep sadness about the lack of awareness of native issues among progressive activists in the community. I had failed miserably in building any type of organization.

Returning to SCSU many years later I was encouraged to see an article in the Chronicle about a Native father and his children protesting the UND logo and nickname at a basketball game in Halenbeck Hall. I asked him how I could help. He pointed the way, and so have many others on this campus. Through the efforts of students, staff, administrators and faculty, we have pushed this issue to an unprecedented national level.

Postscript:

The history of scalping is complex and controversial. James Axtell, in “The European and the Indian” provides archeological data supporting the thesis that scalping was practiced in what is now the United States prior to the European invasion. There also are sources documenting that scalping was done in England and Holland in the 11th Century. Nonetheless, there is evidence that settlers scalped Indians, Indians scalped Indians, and Indians scalped settlers. There also are irrefutable records documenting that colonial governments paid bounties for Indian scalps. Attributing the practice of scalping solely to American Indians is another crime against Native people.

Protests at FSU games have taken place over the last decade. The groups have been small but highly committed. They have endured some of the worst taunting and ridicule that has been reported in national press. In some cases, campus security has erected a circular fence around protestors outside Doak Campbell Stadium, ostensibly to protect them from angry fans. One protestor told me she felt like an “animal in a cage.”

A quick check on the FSU Web site reveals that the university has no American Indian Studies program. When I entered “Seminole” in the university’s search engine to possibly find cultural information on the Seminole tribe, I found three matches. Unfortunately, they were Seminole Dining Services, Seminole Torchbearers, and the Seminole Boosters. And only a few Seminole students have ever graduated from FSU. Florida AIM (American Indian Movement) puts the number at five.