

More than a lifetime of troubles

Jim Thorpe's sons have a good case for returning his remains to Oklahoma.

By William C. Kashatus

For the last quarter-century, the sons of the great Native American athlete Jim Thorpe have tried to persuade the picturesque northeastern Pennsylvania town bearing their father's name to return his remains to Shawnee, Okla., where he asked to be buried. But their pleas have fallen on deaf ears.

Now they are taking their case to federal court in Scranton. Here's hoping they succeed.

Born in 1888 on the Sac and Fox Indian reservation (now part of Oklahoma), Jim Thorpe came to Pennsylvania to attend the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, a boarding school designed to assimilate Indian children into the white mainstream. Thorpe excelled at football there, leading Carlisle to victories over such powerhouses as Harvard, Penn State, and Syracuse.

In the summer of 1912, Thorpe went to the Olympics in Stockholm and won gold in the pentathlon and decathlon. He became an almost mythical figure, romanticized by sportswriters as a "noble warrior" and lauded by the U.S. government as exhibiting the "bravery, strength, and indomitable spirit" of his people.

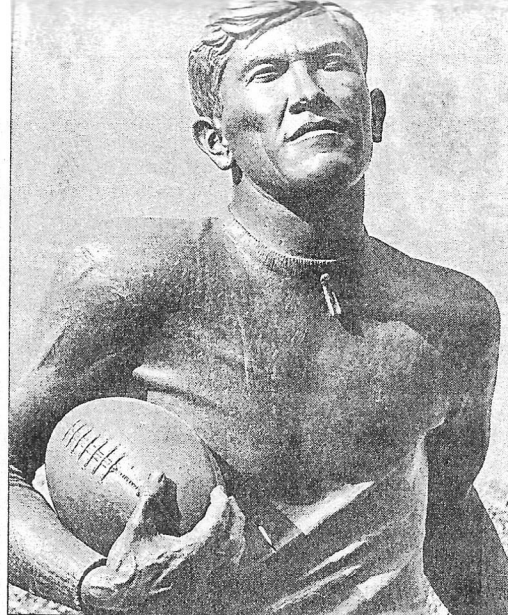
Then, in 1913, Thorpe was stripped of his medals when it was discovered that he played professional baseball during his summers at Carlisle, a violation of Olympic rules. It wasn't until 1983, long after his death, that his medals were restored.

Thorpe was deeply embarrassed by the incident. But he tried to move on, playing seven seasons of pro baseball and an additional six of pro football, as a star halfback for the famed Canton (Ohio) Bulldogs.

After he retired from football, in 1929, Thorpe initially worked as a laborer for \$4 a day, most of which he spent on whiskey. Twice divorced, he decided to exploit his Indian heritage for pay. He would sing and dance in Native American dress before football games and occasionally appear in westerns.

Thorpe died of a heart attack in 1953. His third wife, Patricia, was destitute and set out to make money off Thorpe's name. She learned that Mauch Chunk and East Mauch Chunk, two economically depressed boroughs in Carbon County, Pa., were desperate for a tourist attraction. Though Thorpe had never set foot in the region, his widow marketed his corpse to the towns.

In May 1954, the boroughs agreed to merge and, at Patricia Thorpe's suggestion, name the new town after her husband. She reportedly received an unspecified sum of money in the deal.



TOM GRALISH/ Staff Photographer

A statue of Jim Thorpe stands by his tomb in Jim Thorpe, Pa. Thorpe never set foot there.

Using a fund to which hundreds of residents contributed a nickel a week for industrial development, the town built a \$10,000 red-granite mausoleum for Thorpe's remains. Boosters and bankers believed the fabled athlete's corpse would attract a modern medical center and the Pro Football Hall of Fame to their town. But the hospital never materialized, and the Hall of Fame went to Canton in 1962.

Thorpe's three surviving sons from his second marriage have always regarded their father's burial in Pennsylvania as the same kind of exploitation that haunted him during his lifetime. They want to give him a simple grave near his parents', a mile from his boyhood home in Shawnee.

For more than two decades, Jack Thorpe, 72, and his brothers, Richard, 77, and Bill, 81, tried to negotiate a settlement with the Carbon County borough. But Mayor Ronald Confer has insisted "it's too late." Borough Council President John McGuire said, "Jim Thorpe is the heart and soul of this town. He's such a part of us that we could never consider losing him."

As a result, Thorpe's sons recently filed suit against the town in U.S. District Court. They have a good case.

Under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, agencies and institutions that receive federal funding are required to return American Indian cultural items and remains to their peoples. Since Jim Thorpe Borough receives federal funding for housing, community development, and education, it is subject to the law.

The cultural implications are equally important. The Sac and Fox tradition holds that Thorpe's soul will never be at peace until his body is laid to rest in his native land. It would be deeply offensive to many Native Americans if our judicial system disregarded that tradition.

Ultimately, the courts will decide if Jim Thorpe will continue to be exploited in death, as he was during his spectacular but troubled life.

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