

On a sun-drenched July afternoon in 1912, thirty thousand spectators thronged the closing ceremonies of the fifth Olympiad held that year in Sweden's capital of Stockholm. The event was quite a spectacle, punctuated by pomp and circumstance befitting a royal pageant. The stadium, especially constructed for the games, was electric with excitement. As a chorus of four thousand voices filled the air, a procession of young athletes representing twenty-eight nations paraded across the track, assembling in front of the royal box in which King Gustav V of Sweden was seated.

During the awards presentation, Jim Thorpe (1888-1953), a Sac and Fox Indian and member of the United States delegation, captured the hearts of all. The winner of gold medals for both the pentathlon and decathlon, the two most grueling events in Olympic competition, Thorpe had established himself as an international celebrity. Amidst deafening cheers, the twenty-four year-old Native American made his way to King Gustav to accept his honors.

A King Crowns the World's Greatest Athlete

by William C. Kashatus III

After placing a laurel wreath on Thorpe's head, the king presented Thorpe with a gold medal for each of the two events he had captured, as well as a bronze bust of himself and a thirty pound silver chalice fashioned in the shape of a Viking ship lined with gold and set with jewels. These gifts were bestowed in formal recognition of Thorpe's remarkable athletic feats, but the king broke with tradition by adding a personal note. "Sir," he declared as he grasped Thorpe's hand, "you are the greatest athlete in the world." Stunned for but a moment, Thorpe managed a smile and replied with simple and quiet dignity, "Thanks, King."

The royal compliment would follow—or, perhaps, haunt—Jim Thorpe for the rest of his life. He would often remember those words to his peers at the Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Cumberland County, where he had prepared for Olympic competition. King Gustav's tribute meant more to Thorpe than the gold medals which were taken from him just one year later by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for violating its rules on amateurism. For the rest of his life, Thorpe considered the king's tribute a validation of his greatest achievement ever.

Today, the unforgettable words of King Gustav are inscribed on a twenty-ton granite mausoleum which marks Thorpe's final resting place. Located in the small town in northeastern Pennsylvania bearing his name, the memorial commemorates the remarkable achievement of a Native American who was embraced by white society as "one of their own," while struggling to retain his

H. Pratt, the Indian Industrial School was a federally-supported vocational school which enrolled students ranging from ten to twenty-five years of age. While the institution enjoyed the academic reputation of a college among Native Americans, it was in reality, more of a secondary boarding school for American Indians. Its creation was a triumph for Pratt who had launched a personal crusade to "reform" Native Americans by integrating them into society.

Pratt's personal crusade is most likely rooted in his earlier associations with American Indians. After the Civil War, while an officer of the Tenth Regiment Cavalry (Buffalo Soldiers), Pratt developed a deep understanding and great appreciation of both African Americans and Native Americans. After eight years as an officer, Pratt was transferred to Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida, where he served as a jailer to the Plains Indians. In his position, Pratt advocated better

living conditions for the prisoners and implemented a program which included outside employment opportunities. These experiences led to his interest in Indian education, culminating in the establishment of a boarding school in Carlisle. Pratt convinced the secretary of the interior to create a school for Indian children in an abandoned barracks at Carlisle. The school, which opened its doors with an enrollment of one hundred and forty-seven students, would serve as a model for a nationwide system of off-reservation boarding schools "to discipline and civilize" the children of

from good intentions, the school was subjected to rather paternalistic and ethnocentric notions of its founder. Pratt advocated "immersing the Indians in our civilization and when we get them there, holding them under until they are thoroughly soaked in the white man's ways." The Indian Industrial School at Carlisle resembled a military training camp. When children arrived at the school their long hair would be shorn, and their Indian garb exchanged for uniforms. They would be assigned a trade such as tailoring, carpentry, or stenography. Students were required to speak English at all times and were severely punished if heard speaking in their native language. The school also conducted an Outing Program through which students would spend summers working in the homes of families throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey. According to Pratt, the purpose of this program was "to learn English and the customs of a civilized life." Although students had been told they would become "part of a family," many were made to feel like servants. Given little time away from their chores, they received low wages which were held in trust by the school.

Strict rules and rigid routines were deeply offensive to Indian culture which placed great value on personal and tribal freedom. Those who eventually returned to the Plains found themselves aliens among their own people, with no place to apply their newly acquired vocational skills. Questioned about the harshness of his program in an article entitled "Why Not Let the Indian Boy Keep His Long Hair and the Girl Her Dress?" Captain Pratt responded, "Because in the work of breaking up Indian customs, there is no room for sentiment. The Indians must be taught to abandon their traditional practices for their own good."

There was another, more appealing side to the school, though, and it was its athletic program. Although more of a secondary school than an institution of higher learning, the Indian Industrial School did compete against the country's top collegiate teams. The school's football program particularly enjoyed great success and constantly sought to expand its pool of talented players. It was primarily for this reason that sixteen-year-old Jim Thorpe was enrolled at Carlisle.

Born on May 28, 1888, in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), James Francis Thorpe was named *Wa-tho-huck*, or "Bright Path," by his mixed-blood parents, Hiram P. and Charlotte V.



Sweden's King Gustav V (center) presents awards to laurel-wreathed Jim Thorpe (far left) at the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm.

own cultural identity. At a time when the federal government attempted wholesale assimilation of the American Indian, Thorpe was able to transcend barriers that separated the two distinct cultures. His achievement was, in great measure, forged on the playing fields of the Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, known commonly as the Carlisle Indian School.

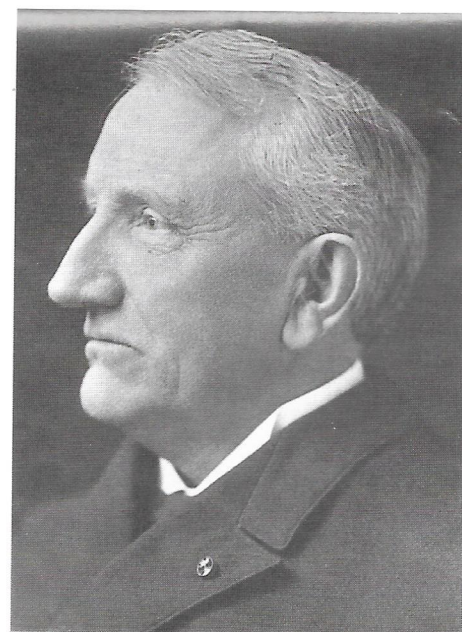
Founded in 1879 by Captain Richard

Thorpe. Hiram Thorpe was a descendant of Black Hawk, chief of the Sac and Fox Indians, as well as from the first Irish to settle on the Great Plains. Charlotte Vieux Thorpe was part Potawatomi, part Kickapoo, and part French. Although the Thorpes framed the federal land grant for their one hundred and sixty acres in Indian style and observed many Native American customs, they wore white society's clothing, hunted with guns, and adopted the white man's penchant for selling bootleg whiskey. They were also caught in the undercurrent of the assimilation policies of the time.

Jim Thorpe's childhood was marred by tragedy. By the age of ten, Jim Thorpe had lost his twin brother Charlie to pneumonia. Not long after, Hiram Thorpe, wanting his son to receive a quality education, enrolled him at the

Not long after he arrived at Carlisle in early 1904, his father also died of septicemia. Jim Thorpe was on his own. There was no football to act as a diversion this time. Standing less than five and a half feet tall and weighing one hundred and fifteen pounds, he was too small to compete at the varsity or junior varsity levels. Reserved by nature, he grew increasingly despondent. School officials thought it best to send the youngster on an extended "outing" assignment to recover. For three years, the adolescent Thorpe would work on farms along Pennsylvania's broad Susquehanna River and in Trenton, New Jersey, trying to

Richard H. Pratt founded the Indian Industrial School at Carlisle (below), in which Jim Thorpe enrolled in 1904.



Haskell Indian Institute in Lawrence, Kansas. At the institute Jim was introduced to football, and he played the game with such exceptional agility and speed that he became popular with his peers. His newfound love appeared to be an emotionally stabilizing outlet for the youngster. His happiness was short-lived, though. A year later, Charlotte Thorpe succumbed to septicemia (blood poisoning). Hiram sent his son to Carlisle, believing the school's rigid discipline—as well as its fine reputation for football—would help him overcome his grief. But Jim Thorpe would again meet with adversity

come to terms with his grief.

When Thorpe returned to Carlisle in 1907, he stood 5'9" tall and weighed one hundred and forty-four pounds. Although he lacked the weight to compete on the gridiron, his speed and agility caught the attention of Glenn S. "Pop" Warner who doubled as the school's track and football coach. When Warner saw Thorpe clear a high jump bar easily over the 5'9" mark, he coaxed him to join the track team and made Albert Exendine, Carlisle's greatest track star, his private coach. Exendine proved to be such a remarkably successful coach that Thorpe would eventually break all

of his school records. Exendine believed Thorpe could have easily set a number of collegiate records, but he didn't seem to care about breaking records. "He wanted to win," said Exendine, "but that was enough. In races he sometimes took the last hurdle far in front and then just strolled across the finish line."

Thorpe's track career was one of unparalleled success. In 1908, only his second year of competition in the sport, he competed at the Penn Relays in Philadelphia, one of the nation's most prestigious intercollegiate meets, and captured first place in the high jump. A



Coach Glenn S. "Pop" Warner, a great innovator in the game of football.

Syracuse University, he placed first in five events—the high and low hurdles, high jump, broad jump, and shot put—and took second place in the hammer throw. Later that season, at a triangular meet against Dickinson and Swarthmore Colleges, he set a school record in the 220 yard hurdles with a remarkable time of twenty-six seconds. His greatest single day came in an outstanding performance against Lafayette College in 1909. In that contest he won six gold medals, capturing first place in the 120 yard hurdle, the 220 yard low hurdle, the broad jump, high jump, shot put, and discus. But these early successes were merely portents of what lay ahead in 1912.

Thorpe's true passion was football and the Indian Industrial School was on the cutting edge of the modern collegiate game due, in large measure, to Coach Warner. An outstanding player at Cornell University, Warner joined Carlisle in 1899 after highly successful coaching stints at Iowa State College and the University of Georgia. A great innovator, he pioneered the modern game of football by creating the first playbook, designing new offensive plays and defensive formations, and hiring a publicity agent to help develop collegiate football's popularity. His program was noted, too, for its emphasis on sportsmanship and integrity.

At the time Warner arrived in Carlisle, college presidents were ordering reform of football and, in some cases, prohibiting the game on their campuses. With mass tackles, flying wedges, and

ruthless kicking, collegiate football was a brutal and dangerous game. It was played in two halves of thirty-five minutes each, which could be better described as a war of attrition rather than a test of ability and endurance. Injuries were common since the players wore little protective padding. In 1905, a number of reforms were instituted to make the game safer and more enjoyable, such as eliminating mass tackles and flying wedges; cutting the playing time to two periods of thirty minutes each; replacing most of the kicking with the forward pass; and adopting a rule that ten yards had to be made in three plays for a first down instead of the five yards required earlier. Warner capitalized on these reforms and in so doing transformed the game into one that required more speed and dexterity than brute physical force.

In little time, Thorpe became the embodiment of the modern game. He was quick, agile, and possessed a sixth sense when it came to running the ball. He was not only skilled at eluding tacklers, but by his third year on the squad he had filled out to one hundred and eighty-five pounds and possessed the strength to carry an opponent into the end zone for a touchdown if necessary. "Jim could go skidding through first and second defense, knock off a tackler, stop short, and turn past another, ward off still another, and escape the entire pack," Coach Warner remembered. "If he was finally cornered, Jim could go further with a tackler hanging onto him than any man I ever knew." Warner admitted that he "never had to do much coaching with Jim" and credited his exceptional ability to his "powers of observation which, like all Indians, were remarkably keen."

Nevertheless, Thorpe did not show any sign of true gridiron greatness until the 1908 season. In early games against powerhouses Penn State and Syracuse, his running and kicking were instrumental in the Indians victories. But his greatest game came against the University of Pennsylvania. Entering that game both teams were undefeated. Penn, at 7-0, had scored a remarkable total of one hundred and four points to their opponents' four and were looking to avenge the 26-6 defeat the Carlisle Indians had handed them a season earlier. Carlisle, at 6-0, traveled to Philadelphia not knowing what to expect. To the surprise of many, the Carlisle Indians dominated the game, compiling 272 total yards to Penn's 196. But for all their efforts, they could only

manage a 6-6 tie. Thorpe ran for the 5-point touchdown and kicked the extra point to tie the game. Carlisle completed that 1908 season with an impressive 10-2-1 record, their only defeats coming at the hands of Harvard (17-0) and Minnesota (11-6). The season established the Indians as a national collegiate powerhouse and Jim Thorpe, the backbone of the team.

Of the years he played for the Carlisle Indians, the 1912 season was Thorpe's crowning achievement. He scored twenty-five of the team's sixty-six touchdowns, led the nation in scoring with one hundred and ninety-eight points, and made first-team all-American at halfback for the second consecutive year. In one particularly telling performance against Army, Thorpe ran ninety-two yards for a score only to have the touchdown canceled by a penalty. On the next play, however, he ran ninety-seven yards to score—the only time in collegiate football history when one touchdown covered nearly two hundred yards!

While Thorpe's stunning moves on the football field captured the country's imagination, it was his performance in the 1912 Olympics that made him an international hero. He was expected to do well in the pentathlon, but Ferdinand Bie of Norway and Hugo Wieslander of Sweden were favorites. Thorpe, however, finished strong in all five contests. He won the long jump with a leap of 23' 2.7"; the 200 meter dash with a time of 22.9 seconds; the discus, with a throw of 116' 8.4"; and the 1500 meter run with a time of 4:44.8. Despite finishing third in the javelin, his overall performance was convincing enough to capture the gold medal. Bie followed in second place, winning the silver.

Thorpe's performance in the decathlon, a grueling three-day event which incorporates every aspect of track and field, proved even more impressive. On the first day, he nosed fellow teammate E.L.R. Mercer to capture the 100 meter dash and followed the performance by defeating Wieslander in the shot put with a throw of 42' 5.45". Although he fell inches short of a first place in the long jump, his score of 22' 2.3" was good enough to end the day well ahead of his opponents in total points. On the second day, Thorpe captured two first place finishes in the high jump with a leap of 6' 6" and in the one hundred and ten meter high hurdles with a record setting 15.6 seconds. His second place finish in the four hundred meter run did not have much of an effect on his total point accumulation. On the final day, Thorpe placed second in the

discuss and third in both the pole vault and javelin competitions. But his performance in the final event—the fifteen hundred meter run—left no doubt in the minds of the international judges as to the winner of the event. He completed the run with a remarkable time of 4:40.1, nearly five seconds better than his performance in the pentathlon. That performance allowed him to not only capture first place for the event, but the gold medal for the decathlon as well. His points totaled 8,412,955—a record that remained unbroken for two decades.

At a time when government officials attempted to make amends for what had been questionable treatment of Native Americans, Jim Thorpe became an almost mythical figure. Americans romanticized his Native American heritage, making him the glorious prototype of the noble warrior, and he ultimately came to represent a people who were uniformly strong, brave at heart, and indomitable in spirit. “Jim Thorpe of Carlisle,” wrote W.J. MacBeth of the *New York American*, “will go down in athletic history as the ‘noblest redskin of them all.’ It is doubtful if any human being ever combined the manifold athletic proclivities of this young buck of the Sac and Fox tribe. By winning the pentathlon and decathlon in Stockholm, this aborigine proved to be the greatest individual star in the world.”

By December 1912, Thorpe had reached the pinnacle of his popularity. He had been named first team All-American for the second consecutive year, won Olympic gold medals in both the pentathlon and decathlon, and was in great demand to play professional baseball. Within a month, however, tragedy would again befall him. In January of 1913, a sportswriter for a Massachusetts newspaper reported that Thorpe had played professional baseball in the Eastern Carolina League before the Olympics. Thorpe’s involvement violated the strict rules on amateurism imposed by the International Olympic Committee. According to rules established in 1896, an athlete who accepts money for sports can not qualify for Olympic competition which is restricted to amateurs.

Thorpe had spent the summers of 1909 and 1910 playing professional baseball. Even though his earnings amounted to less than fifteen dollars a week, he had taken a salary for his services and could be considered a professional athlete. Upon learning of Thorpe’s violation, officials of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) demanded an explanation. Thorpe could not

definitely complied. In a letter to AAU Secretary James E. Sullivan, he confessed he was “not wise in the ways of the world and did not realize that [playing professional baseball] was wrong.” After apologizing for his mistake, he added: “I hope I will be partly excused because of the fact that I was simply an Indian School boy who did not know that he was doing wrong, especially since I was doing what other college athletes had done under another name.” He closed the letter with a plea that the AAU “not be too harsh in judging me.”

Shortly after receipt of the letter, AAU officials demanded Thorpe return his medals and trophies to the International Olympic Committee. They were later sent to Ferdinand Bie and Hugo Wieslander who had finished second in the pentathlon and decathlon. Thorpe’s records were also stricken from the books. Yet he never criticized either organization for his punishment; rather he tried to go on with his life. The general public, on the other hand, became incensed.

Both the AAU and the IOC were widely criticized as “patronizing” and “discriminatory” to athletes of modest circumstances. Carlisle residents, in particular, grew upset when they learned of Thorpe being stripped of his medals and offered to sponsor a trophy in his name to be given to the best all-around athlete in the world. Such a trophy would be awarded each year to the winning athlete, regardless of race or class. It was decided that residents would make donations, and banks in Carlisle would serve as depositories of the funds. Two weeks after the project was announced, donations came streaming into the town’s financial institutions. Thorpe, a modest individual who was actually embarrassed by the attention, asked that the fundraising be halted and that all money be returned to donors. Unclaimed contributions were turned over to the Children’s Fund of Carlisle at his request.

Thorpe tried to put the incident behind him. He spent seven years in professional baseball as an outfielder with the New York Giants, Cincinnati Reds, and Boston Braves. Despite an excellent throwing arm and outstanding speed, he spent most of his first three years in professional baseball in the minor leagues. His fielding and hitting skills were mediocre and he simply could not compete at the major league level. To his credit, he worked hard and, in his last season of baseball hit .327 in 156 plate

Olympic medals continued to haunt him.

According to “Chief” John Tortes Meyers, a fellow Indian and Thorpe’s roommate during his early years with the New York Giants, “Jim was very proud of the great things he had done and it bothered him that his Olympic medals were taken from him. I remember late one night, Jim came in and woke me up. ‘You know, Chief,’ he said to me as the tears began to roll down his cheeks, ‘the King of Sweden gave me those trophies, he gave them to me. But they took them away. They’re mine, Chief, I won them fair and square.’ It broke his heart and he never really recovered.”

In 1915, Thorpe signed to play professional football for Ohio’s Canton Bulldogs. For six seasons he would be the cornerstone of a national powerhouse, replicating his collegiate performance as a halfback. He would become, for the American public, the greatest athlete to perform on the gridiron and his feats, the stuff of legends. Popular accounts of the period report that Thorpe could run—in full pads—the length of a one hundred yard football field in ten seconds flat; he never missed a tackle; his average punting distance was eighty yards; and, on occasion, he could boot one hundred yards. His legendary status later earned him election as the first president of the American Professional Football Association, the predecessor of the present-day National Football League. His personal life, on the other hand, was not so fabled.

By 1930, Jim Thorpe had been married and divorced twice, and he had lost an infant son to polio. Because of his financial problems he was reduced to using the sport he loved for promotional purposes, the most dramatic example of which was the formation of the Oorang Indians. Members of this All-Indian football team, sponsored by the Oorang Airedale Kennels of La Rue, Ohio, the world’s largest breeder, would don Native American dress before each game and sing and dance for audiences.

When Thorpe did retire from football at the age of forty-one, he drifted from job to job, from city to city, and from coast to coast. He occasionally acted as an extra in movies, appearing in westerns or short football features. Although Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer purchased the rights to his life story, it never produced such a film. It was not until 1951 when Warner Brothers purchased the rights and

Chiricahua Apaches (top) upon arrival at Carlisle in 1886; photographed after indoctrination four months later (bottom).



buried Burt Brundage in Jim Thorpe—All-American that the great athlete's life came to the silver screen.

During the Great Depression, Thorpe worked as a laborer in Los Angeles until a lecture bureau hired him to make a nationwide tour to speak about his life experiences. During these addresses he would appear in Indian dress and lecture before thousands of high school students. He returned to Oklahoma to campaign for the abolition of the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, which he believed actually retarded and did not promote his people's political and social progress. When the Wheeler Bill, which proposed the abolition of the bureau in favor of an all-Indian body, came before Congress, Thorpe made an appeal to the U.S. House of Representatives. "The six thousand federal officers now employed in political jobs administering Indian affairs should be dismissed," he testified, "and the Indians should begin management of their own business affairs. The Indian should be permitted to shed his inferiority complex and live like a normal American citizen."

The Wheeler Bill was defeated in the House, but Thorpe's efforts were recognized in the subsequent Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 which resulted in an orderly decrease of federal control over Indian affairs and the increase of Indian self-government and responsibility in the areas of land ownership and education.

The last years of Jim Thorpe's life were bittersweet. A third marriage gave him great personal stability and his athletic achievements were given a degree of permanency in 1950 by Associated Press sportswriters and broadcasters who voted him "Best Male Athlete of Half Century." A year later a modest monument honoring "The Greatest Athlete and Football Player of the First Half of the 20th Century" was unveiled and dedicated in Carlisle. Meanwhile, the American public's battle to restore Thorpe's Olympic medals continued to meet with resistance by the International Olympic Committee.

When Avery Brundage, an Olympic teammate of Thorpe's, became president of the IOC in 1952, many believed he would respond to public opinion and restore Thorpe's gold medals. He did not. Some believed Brundage still resented Thorpe's outstanding performance in the Olympic Games forty years earlier. (Brundage placed sixth in the pentathlon and failed to complete the decathlon.) Others associated with the United States Olympic Committee

believed that Brundage's feeling simply reflected the anti-professional elitism of the IOC. Whatever the reality, Thorpe would not live to see his Olympic medals restored; he suffered several heart attacks, the third of which ended his life on March 28, 1953, in Lomita, California.

Jim Thorpe's body was transported to Oklahoma for burial on April 12, 1953. Thorpe's tribesmen, the Thunderbird Clan of the Sac and Fox Indians, conducted a Native American funeral in his honor. He was laid to rest the following day with a traditional Roman Catholic service. Plans had been made to erect a mausoleum and shrine in his honor, but when the local Chamber of Commerce withdrew its support, Thorpe's wife Patricia looked for an alternative burial site.

Pennsylvania's Governor John S. Fine and U. S. Senators James H. Duff and Edward Martin launched an aggressive campaign to have the body returned to the grounds of the Army War College in Carlisle. Duff, who headed a blue ribbon committee of forty civic, governmental, and athletic leaders, said that while Thorpe was "one of the greatest athletes in the world, and in that sense, belongs to all America, it was here in Pennsylvania that he came to fame."



Duff added that he knew Thorpe personally and that it would "probably be his wish to be laid to rest at Carlisle."

In May 1954, Thorpe's body was exhumed and taken to Pennsylvania—but not to Carlisle. Patricia Thorpe had negotiated with the boroughs of Upper Mauch Chunk and East Mauch Chunk in Carbon County which were considering a merger. In return for the body, the two

boroughs would merge and adopt the name of "Jim Thorpe" with the understanding that money from the Olympian's estate would help to fund a hospital and cancer research center. In addition, an impressive mausoleum was to be erected in Thorpe's honor.

While Thorpe's body still rests in the Pennsylvania town that bears his name, the hospital and cancer center is a dream of the past; the value of his estate did not allow the plans to materialize. Today, a statue of Jim Thorpe stands at the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, where he was posthumously inducted as a charter member in 1963. Twenty years later, on January 18, 1983, he was fully vindicated when the International Olympic Committee voted to restore his Olympic medals to his children.

Jim Thorpe's significance to American history, however, transcends mere material rewards. As an Olympic champion and outstanding professional athlete, he demonstrated that the Native American could, indeed, succeed in the white man's world and on the white man's terms. It does not matter where he is interred; it is his remarkable spirit of competition that is honored. But even the title "World's Greatest Athlete" does not

give him justice. While his stunning abilities made him a great legend, it was his more human, intensely personal struggles that made him a great man. And it was his sense of sportsmanship and respect for his game, his fans, and his fellow players that made him a great American athlete. ✦

Thorpe married Iva Miller of Carlisle in 1913 (facing page); they divorced within a decade. On August 23, 1951, he enjoyed the unveiling of a monument and the premiere of *Jim Thorpe—All American in Carlisle*. Taking part were (from left to right): Carl Phillip Thorpe, his eldest son; Thorpe; actress Phyllis Thaxter, who portrayed his third wife, Patricia; Governor John S. Fine; and General Arthur Trudeau of the Carlisle Barracks. He was honored by a motorcade through the community where his career began a half century earlier (bottom).

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