

## **Mascots, Mask Off Transcript**

**Noel:** Hi, it's Noel

**Tyler:** and Tyler.

**Noel:** A quick note: This is the LAST episode of season 1 of *Lost Highways* from History Colorado.

**Tyler:** We'll be back next fall with a new season, and if you haven't already reviewed or rated us on your podcast app, please do. The feedback will help us make Season 2 even better.

**Noe:** If you've enjoyed this first season, and want to support us, the best way to do that is to become a member of History Colorado. You can go to [HistoryColorado.org/podcastdiscount](https://HistoryColorado.org/podcastdiscount) for a great rate and all the benefits that come with it, like tickets to the Georgetown Railroad and free admission to our 8 museums statewide.

**Tyler:** Thank you so much for your support!

**Underwriting:** *Lost Highways*, from History Colorado, is made possible by the Sturm Family Foundation, proud supporters of the humanities and the power of storytelling, for more than twenty years.

**[Music fades in]**

**Noel:** In early 2002, a young Crow Indian named Solomon Little Owl and some other Native American students at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley formed an intramural basketball team.

**Little Owl:** We had a Crow. We had a Lakota. We had a Mohawk. We had a Pawnee.

**Tyler:** Little Owl was the head of Native American Student Services at the time. He says they weren't very good at basketball, but it was a good way to get the different American Indians on campus together for some fun.

**Little Owl:** Basketball is a really important asset to the reservation for a lot of Native Americans, I'm sure it's a lot for the different nations or other people in society as well, but we kinda take it to the heart. So we're very competitive.

**Noel:** When it came time to pick a name for their team, says Little Owl, they decided to make a statement, if not a joke.

**Tyler:** At the time, almost 50 high schools in Colorado used some variation of a Native American mascot or logo. They had names like The Savages, The Indians, The Warriors, & The Reds.

**Noel:** One of those high schools was just up the road from Greeley in the small town of Eaton. Their mascot was The Fightin' Reds. Here's Peggy Ford Waldo, development curator for the City of Greeley Museum.

**Peggy Ford Waldo:** So the mascot for the Eaton High School athletic teams is the caricature of a bow legged Indian brave with a really large nose and a feather sticking out of a headband that's around his forehead.

**Noel:** A small group of protestors had begun to demand that the high school change their mascot.

**Tyler:** So Solomon Little Owl and his teammates came up with an idea to support them.

**Peggy Ford Waldo:** The team decides on the mascot of a oh, gosh, a white guy, businessman with a white shirt, a tie, you know, clean shaven, clean cut and so on.

**Little Owl:** I think it was clip art that we got it from. And it was a clean-cut business guy with a tie, and a suit jacket, and smiling and -

**Peggy Ford Waldo:** And they produced T-shirts, put this logo on their team shirts with the saying "Everything's going to be all white."

**Noel:** The Fightin' Whities played the whole intramural season without much fanfare.

**Tyler:** And then, right before the end of the season, the student newspaper wrote an article about them.

**Noel:** That article led to a local TV news story.

**Little Owl:** And that's when it hit the national media.

**[Music]**

**[Whistle]**

**[CNN American Morning "The Fighting Whitties" clip audio]**

**Reporter:** "Big question" this hour, who are the Fighting Whitties, what kind of name is that for a sports team? Well, think about it for a moment. Most of us were brought up with teams named the Redskins, and the Braves, and the Indians, without giving it a second thought. Well now a group of Native American students from Northern Colorado are protesting a nearby highschool's use of the name "Fighting Reds" by naming their own intramural team the "Fighting Whitties".

**[audio fades out]**

**Noel:** They were talking about the Fighting Whitties on CNN.

**Little Owl:** One night we had CNN, MSNBC and ABC in my office all wanting to interview me at the same time. MSNBC kicked out CNN and ABC and it was - it was a sight to see.

**Tyler:** Almost overnight, they were famous.

**Little Owl:** People wanted to be my lawyer, my doctor, my dentist. You've got a group of women, I think it was out of Arizona, that wanted to be our cheerleaders... and people were willing to take me on cruises and cruise ships. Man, it was just crazy.

**Noel:** And there was a huge demand for their T-shirts.

**Noel:** Within the first year, Fightin' Whities t-shirts raised more than a hundred thousand dollars for Native American scholarships at UNC.

**Little Owl:** All we wanted to do was just share our mascot and also let the world know that there's representation of the Americans Indians not just in Colorado, but everywhere in America. And I wasn't in it for the money. I was just in it to make sure that our message was not twisted.

**Tyler:** But the message DID get twisted.

**Noel:** White people loved it.

**Tyler:** Right-wing talk radio host Rush Limbaugh loved it so much that he plugged the t-shirts on his show. It was a huge success, but nothing changed.

**Noel:** The Eaton Fightin' Reds went right on being the Eaton Fightin' Reds.

**[Lost Highways Music]**

**Tyler:** From History Colorado Studios, this is *Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains*. I'm Tyler Hill.

**Noel:** And I'm Noel Black. On each episode, we explore our home state of Colorado and The American West to uncover overlooked stories we can't believe we'd never heard.

**Tyler:** There are still more than a thousand public high schools across the country that use stereotypes of American Indians as their mascots.

**Noel:** And Colorado is no exception. We still have more than 30 of them.

**Tyler:** On this episode, we look at the history of American Indian mascots, and the different ways that tribes, teams, governments, and communities have grappled with the controversy.

**[Ambient sounds: teenagers running around, chatting]**

**Noel:** It's a bright, warm Autumn morning at the steps of the Colorado State Capitol. A group of about 40 Northern Arapaho teenagers from the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming are getting ready to run two laps around the gold dome.

**[Drumming sounds and chanting]**

**Tyler:** This final symbolic stage marks the end of the Northern Arapaho's part of the 21st Annual Sandcreek Massacre Memorial Healing Run.

**[Ambient of running on pavement, drumming, and chanting continues]**

**Noel:** For the past week, these students have run sections of the 175 mile route from the site of the Sandcreek Massacre in southeast Colorado to Denver. Normally, the Northern Cheyenne, Northern Arapaho, and the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes all do this run together over the Thanksgiving weekend to mark the anniversary of the massacre. But this year, the Northern Arapaho decided to make the run earlier.

**Tyler:** The annual run was started to commemorate the brutal massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians camped near Sand Creek in Southeast Colorado on November 29th, 1864.

**Noel:** Despite the fact that the tribes flew an American Flag and raised a white flag of peace and surrender as soon as the attack began, Colonel John Chivington and more than 400 soldiers from the Colorado 3rd Cavalry slaughtered over 200 native people. Two-thirds of them were women and children.

**[Ambient sounds fade out]**

**Tyler:** Lee Spoonhunter is the current Chairman of the Northern Arapaho tribe. In his remarks afterward, he reminded the small crowd gathered at the Capitol of the real history behind the symbolic run.

**[Capitol Runners Audio Clip]**

**Lee Spoonhunter:** I think about the children who were running with their moms. Because there was - this camp was a lot of, mostly elders, chiefs, women, and children. I think about these little

ones and how their mothers were running for their lives with them and trying to get them to safety, knowing that if they stayed within the camp they would be murdered.

**[End of clip]**

**Noel:** At the end of the ceremony, run organizer Gail Ridgley invited a stocky caucasian man with gray hair and a red shirt with an American Indian logo on the chest to the podium.

**[Capitol Runners Audio Clip]**

**Gale Ridgely:** I'd like to introduce Jeff Rasp just to say a few words here, on behalf of our relationship as a partnership with the Arapaho people.

**Jeff Rasp:** Thank you Gail. I have to say our school is honored. Honored and humbled to be a partner with the Northern Arapaho tribe. We - it means everything to us that we're able to share our school, share our land, that really is your land. We feel like we're guests on your land. So we do have the Indian as our mascot and Eugene Ridgely has drawn a very authentic mascot depiction for us to use.

**[End of Audio Clip]**

**Noel:** Jeff Rasp, whose name all-too perfectly describes his voice, is the Principal of Strasburg High School.

**Tyler:** Strasburg is a small town on the plains just off of Interstate 70, about 45 minutes east of Denver. It's also one of the stops on the Sand Creek memorial healing run.



**Noel:** AND it's one of the 50 or so Colorado high schools that used Indians as both their name and their mascot.

**Tyler:** And they still do.

**[Music]**

**Dr. C. Richard King:** Initially mascots are, I think of them more as sort of like these emblems or entities that were meant to bring the team good luck almost kind of like a sort of a sympathetic magic that's - that's translated into the sports realm.

**Noel:** This is Dr. C. Richard King. He's Professor of Humanities, History and Social Sciences at Columbia College in Chicago. And he's been studying the use of American Indian mascots for much of his career. Most recently, he's the author of the book *Redskins: Insult and Brand*.

**Tyler:** Dr. King says that college sports teams began using mascots about a hundred and fifty years ago. At that time, a mascot could be anything from a totem to an actual person or child. And it could change from one game or season to the next.

**Dr. C. Richard King:** I mean in the early years of inter-collegiate athletics and professional sports, you know, mascots were in some ways changeable. There were schools that might have a mascot just for a period that a particular coach was there, or they would have a mascot and then the students would decide a different mascot was more appropriate and it would become, or has become, sort of the fixed image or name...

**Noel:** The widespread use of Native American mascots began in the early 20th Century. It was shortly after Fredrick Jackson Turner declared the American Frontier closed in 1892.

**Tyler:** It was also around the same time that photographer Edward Curtis began to take highly romanticized portraits of American Indians.

**Tyler:** King says the rise of stereotypical images of Native Americans as mascots at this time can be partly explained by what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo calls “imperial nostalgia.”

**Dr. C. Richard King:** Once something is almost gone, once modernity has almost wiped something out, whether that be, you know, the expansion of industrialism or colonialism, people really long to have it back or long for certain aspects of it and want to to retain them. And at the exact moment that sports teams are being created, you have Americans who are looking around them and saying something about Native Americans like, “Wow! They were really wonderful fantastic people. We should emulate them or we should take something from them to remember them by.”

**Noel:** Of course, it’s also about the power and entitlement that comes with having so nearly destroyed Native Americans and their cultures.

**Tyler:** Lawrence Baca is a lawyer and Pawnee Indian who spent 32 years working in the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice. He argued some of the most important American Indian Civil rights cases, including *Meyers & United States v. San Juan*

**County School District**, which is considered to be the Native American equivalent to Brown V. Board of Education.

**Noel:** Baca grew up in the 1950s and 60s near San Diego in El Cajon, California. The mascot for the El Cajon Braves was a caricature of a dancing Indian called “Little Ugg.”

**Lawrence Baca:** Little Ugg is a dancing figure with a tomahawk in one hand. He's got two eagle feathers in his headband and one of them is broken. Well, if you know much about Indian culture and our use of eagle feathers you would never dance around the broken eagle feather. It's a sacred object - it's a religious object. It would be burnt. There would be prayers over it.

**Tyler:** Baca and his brothers were the only Native Americans at their high school. The dissonance between their real lives as teenagers in Southern California at the time, and the way the culture saw them in the caricatures of Indians, greeted them every day when they arrived at school.

**Lawrence Baca:** In the center of campus, a grassy area where everybody met for lunch, there was this 25-foot-tall carved wooden warrior. He's got a loincloth on, nothing else, hair hanging down his back, a war club sitting on the ground, his arms are crossed in the stoic Indian looking off to the west position.

**Noel:** Baca himself was able to blend in because he wore his hair short. But his younger brother got singled out.

**Lawrence Baca:** He was kicked off the cross-country team because he grew his hair down to his shoulders. And they said that violates the school regulations. I explained to the school district that he grew his hair long because in our tribe we wear our hair uncut for religious reasons. The school said well we're not telling him he can't practice his religion. We're just telling him they can't participate in after school sports if he wears his hair past his ears.

**Tyler:** Desperate to be part of the school and to feel included, Baca's brother offered to BE THE LITTLE UGG MASCOT at sporting events. But his long hair still prevented him from participating in after school events.

**Lawrence Baca:** So instead, the white kid puts on a wig down past his shoulders and a brown face which my brother already had, and he's the school mascot. That is what I call the personification of irony: When an Indian kid can't be the school mascot that's an Indian, but a white kid can.

**Noel:** These experiences made Lawrence Baca hyper-aware of the ways that caricatures and romanticized images of his culture were used to cover up and soften what he calls "the original sin" of America.

**Lawrence Baca:** The original sin in America is the slaughter and subjugation of American Indians. American Indians were being slaughtered and the lands stolen for a hundred and fifty years before the first slave was brought over. Slavery was ugly, it was nasty, it was bad, it was vile, but it wasn't the original sin.

**Noel:** Quite simply, says Baca, Americans haven't come to terms with the fact that their country is built on stolen land nearly cleared of its original inhabitants in a centuries-long campaign of genocide.

**Lawrence Baca:** Psychologists will tell you: couple that with the concept of defeat and ownership -- we own you, therefore we own your image. We get to glorify your image because we're embarrassed by what we did to you two and three hundred years ago. And so, we then create all of this fantasy around certain native images. And then, as I say to audiences, we use Indian imagery to sell products to white folks.

**Noel:** The magnitude of this "sin" can be measured, in some ways, says Baca, in the sheer number of products that have used Native American imagery.

**Tyler:** His extensive collection of everything from Land-O-Lakes Butter, Calumet Baking Soda, and American Spirit cigarette packages is now at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

**Noel:** Just walk down the aisles in your nearest grocery store and still you'll spot half a dozen on the shelves.

**Tyler:** And you'll also see products like Aunt Jemima pancake mix and syrup, Cream of Wheat and others that trade on African American stereotypes.

**Noel:** But it's mascots for sports teams, says Baca, that really magnify the extent of the problem where Native Americans are concerned.

**Lawrence Baca:** We get told as native people all the time that everything from the Washington football club to Chief Wahoo honors Indian people. Well I will tell you how we know above all else that it is not an honor, because there is no other race coming forward and saying, "Why is it always the Indians? Why aren't you mocking my race and culture at halftime?" You don't have African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanics coming forward and saying, "Why is it only them that gets honored by having caricatures about them and racial pejoratives used to name your teams?" If it were an honor, all of those groups would be standing up and saying, "We want it, too". But they don't want it. We got it. We'd like to give it away because we'd like to get rid of it but nobody comes up and says I want to be honored in that same fashion.

**Noel:** Some critics also point out examples like the Notre Dame University Fightin' Irish. They use a caricature of Leprechaun as their logo and mascot, which could be considered offensive by some.

**Lawrence Baca:** OK you're Irish and you're offended by it. Have you ever called the chancellor of the school and said I'm Irish - I'm Irish and I'm offended? Have you ever written them a letter and said I'm Irish, and I'm offended? Have you ever gone to the stadium and carried a sign that said I am not a little leprechaun, I am a human? Because if you do that I can get 200 Indian people who'll stand there with you with a sign because we know how it feels. But the reality is you said no to me and showing signs because you're not offended by it. But then of course, the secondary argument is the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame is self identification, as a group of

people who perceive themselves as being of Irish heritage and they *chose* Fighting Irish as something to be proud of.

**[Music fades into Underwriting]**

**Underwriting:** Support for History Colorado comes from the Coors Brewing Company. Coors is proud to sponsor “Beer Here: Brewing the New West”, now on view at the History Colorado Center in Denver. The exhibition features artifacts and insights that reveal why Coloradans today enjoy 360 breweries and counting. More than just a tale of Ale, “Beer Here” is a story of Colorado, told over a few beers.

**[Music fades out to Tyler narrating]**

**Tyler:** There are currently five PROFESSIONAL teams that use Native American names or mascots.

**Noel:** Though the Cleveland Indians dropped their Chief Wahoo mascot just this past season, there are still: The Atlanta Braves, The Chicago Blackhawks, The Kansas City Chiefs, and the football team from Washington whose name many won’t even say.

**Lawrence Baca:** I call it the R word because I compare it to the N-word all the time. And of course I’m known for using both words when I speak to audiences. I don’t say R-word or N-word. I say the words flat out because I want the audience to feel the punch of the word and say to them, when a black person hears the N-word spoken completely that’s how an American Indian hears Redskin.

**Noel:** The team from Washington was originally from Boston, says Lawrence Baca.

**Tyler:** At first they were the Boston Braves.

**Noel:** As team lore would have fans believe, they soon changed their name to honor a Native American coach and four native American players. But it was always something of a lie, says Baca.

**Lawrence Baca:** They named the team the Redskins because they had an American Indian coach named Lone Star Dietz. Well Lone Star Dietz wasn't an Indian. Now he led his whole life claiming he was, and so maybe the team believed that he was. But the fact is he was a fraud. He was a white guy passing himself off as an Indian. But then the team moved to Washington D.C.

**Tyler:** But by the time the team moved to the nation's capital in 1937, the name had already stuck.

**Noel:** Then, 30 years later, protests and demands to change the name began as part of the civil rights movement, says C. Richard King.

**[Music fades in]**

**Dr. C. Richard King:** So activism around and questioning mascots really begins in the late 1960s in association with the broader resurgence of Native American political, intellectual, and



cultural life and act - and activity, right? This is the same time period that African-Americans are saying why there is a restaurant called Sambos in the United States? Why is Aunt Jemima still on a pancake box?

**Tyler:** But protests against the Native mascots in professional sports have had little effect.

**Dr. C. Richard King:** You know, the Washington football team has been the subject of protests for 50 years, and there's been really no change other than the rhetoric and the tactics that various owners have taken in an effort to deflect the critique and deny the assertions of the activists. And so, I think that that contrast is really important to note...

**Noel:** Further complicating the matter, some polls have found levels of support for native mascots among Native Americans. But these polls typically survey anyone who self identifies as having native ancestry rather than actual enrolled tribal citizens.

**Tyler:** Critics argue that many of the respondents who like the mascots have no real stakes where discrimination is concerned.

**Noel:** In a series of LEGAL challenges to the team's trademark was revoked on the grounds that it was disparaging to Native Americans under a 1946 trademark law called the Lanham Act.

**Tyler:** But the case was ultimately overturned in 2017 when an Asian American band ironically named THE SLANTS challenged the Lanham Act under the first Amendment.

**Noel:** And so the team from Washington kept their name and their logo.

**[Music fades out]**

**Noel:** Getting rid of Native American mascots at the collegiate and high school levels has been far more successful, says C. Richard King.

**Dr. C. Richard King:** Right, so, you know, some - someplace like Marquette or Stanford or the University of Oklahoma. Those places have all - all made changes and in some ways made changes rather quickly in response to concerns from Native American students and citizens.

**Tyler:** In 2005, The NCAA announced sanctions against any team that continued to use a mascot deemed “hostile or abusive” to Native Americans.

**Noel:** Teams with American Indian mascots were required either to secure an explicit endorsement of their logo and mascot from local tribes, or to change their mascot.

**Dr. C. Richard King:** The University of Illinois and the University of North Dakota, for example, were unable to find tribes to endorse them. Florida State University was able to get an endorsement from the Florida tribe of - before the Seminole Tribe.

**[Audio of Crowd, fanfare from FSU stadium]**

**Noel:** Despite the endorsement from Seminole tribes in Florida, the mascot remains problematic. OKLAHOMA Seminole tribes never gave their endorsement. Then there’s the issue

of the actor, who plays the chief, Osceola. He rides an Appaloosa horse to center field to drive a flaming spear into the turf to get fans fired up for the game. But he's played by a white actor in dark makeup.

**Tyler:** Beyond those concerns, says C. Richard King, one of the biggest problems is that fans of opposing teams don't often share the respect for the tribes that their fans at home might have.

**Dr. C. Ricahrd King:** You know, for their homecoming they're playing a team with an Indian mascot and they'll have banners up like, "Welcome to the second Trail of Tears" or something like that. And to me it's clear that, obviously, the opposing fans have not shifted at all in terms of how they're thinking about Indians, and Indianness, which begs a bigger question to be thought of. It's like, local change is really important but what happens when local change travels?

**Noel:** The Utah Utes have what may be the most successful example of a tribal endorsement in the NCAA. They had already dropped their "Runnin Redskins" nickname all the way back in 1972 in favor of Utes. Then, after the NCAA forced them to get tribal endorsement in 2005, they quickly changed their Mascot to an Eagle named "Swoop" but kept their name and added the Ute tribal flag to their football helmets with Ute endorsement.

**Tyler:** They also kept their logo. It's a circle with feathers attached, meant to symbolize a drum with a large red U in the middle.

**Noel:** Beyond that, the University has gone to great lengths to make sure that fans don't disrespect the Ute tribe at sporting events.

**Tyler:** Everyone attending Ute home games gets a pamphlet that clearly outlines acceptable behavior and warns against racial slurs, war paint, feathers, headdresses, and other American Indian symbols, chants, or demeaning signs that play on stereotypes.

**Darius Smith:** They don't just do it one time a year, they do it every time. And so the stuff that you - that ridiculous stuff that you hear at Florida State and you know, chants at the Kansas City Chiefs games and Atlanta Braves, that tomahawk chop, they - it's not allowed anymore. They don't do it there in Utah.

**Tyler:** This is Darius Smith.

**Darius Smith:** I'm the director of the Denver anti-discrimination office and I also provide staff - I'm the staff liaison to the Denver African-American Commission as well as the Denver American Indian commission. I'm Navajo on my mother's side and African-American on my father's side.

**Tyler:** Smith believes the University of Utah handled the NCAA crackdown as well as any school could, short of changing the mascot altogether.

**Darius Smith:** But in this brochure they also give information about the tribes and their state, not just the Utes, But, you know, my tribe also, is in the state of Utah, the Navajo, the Paiute, The Shoshone, and the Goshute. And basically, it's an acknowledgement in showing that

natives are contemporary contributors to the state of Utah. And it's a beautiful thing, and I'm all for it.

**[Music]**

**[Whistle]**

**Noel:** In 2014, John Hickenlooper became the first Colorado Governor to publicly apologize for the state's role in the Sand Creek Massacre.

**[Audio clip from State of Colorado Public Apology]**

**John Hickenlooper:** Today we gathered here to formally acknowledge what happened: the Massacre at Sand Creek. WE should not be afraid to criticize and condemn that which is inexcusable. So I'm here to offer something that has been too long in coming, but on behalf of the state of Colorado, I want to apologize.

**[Chanting, drums, cheering]**

**[Clip fades out]**

**Tyler:** For American Indians like The Ute, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Navajo in Colorado at the time, it looked like many issues that had gone largely unaddressed for years might finally begin to change.

**Noel:** Among those issues was the fact that in 2015 there were still more than thirty K through 12 schools in Colorado that used some version of Native American names, mascots, and logos.

**Ernest House:** There was already legislation that had been proposed by then-Representative Joe Salazar and others prior to him who were looking at running state legislation to make it illegal for the use of Native American mascots.

**Noel:** This is Ernest House, Jr.

**Ernest House:** I'm a member of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe from southwestern Colorado and I'm a senior policy director for the Keystone Policy Center. Along with being the Director for the American Indian Alaska Native program there at the Keystone Policy Center.

**Noel:** House also comes from a family of Washington football fans, which complicates HIS perspective and feelings about American Indian mascots.

**Tyler:** At the time of the legislation, House was the Executive Director for the Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs. When the legislation to make Indian mascots illegal failed, he began to look for other solutions.

**Noel:** House had followed the national and collegiate mascot controversies. Short of legislation or a mandate, he wondered how they could get schools to change.

**Ernest House:** I brought that back to our lieutenant governor then at the time, Joe Garcia, and our staff and we thought about a way to really increase and engage in a dialogue. And how could we educate folks maybe taking a step back, getting that perspective.

**Tyler:** Some schools like Arvada, Montbello and Arapaho High Schools in Denver had already either changed their mascot or worked to redesign their logo and mascots and build relationships with the tribes.

**Noel:** It followed logically that if more schools were going to change, then THEY'D need to be educated, too.

**Tyler:** So on October 5th, 2015, Governor John Hickenlooper signed an executive order creating The Governor's Commission to Study American Indian Representations in Public Schools.

**Noel:** The commission was formed to QUOTE "facilitate discussion around the use of American Indian imagery and names used by institutions of public education."

**Tyler:** The only objectives going in were education and dialogue.

**Ernest House:** I hadn't seen this type of approach very often by anybody else. It was a long - It was a longer approach. It might have been easier just to try to focus on state legislation, but it seemed like what we're missing here was that key: education. And who - I had heard Darius give these presentations, but I'm also an American Indian, I talk with him and visit with him regularly, but I also had taken a step back going wow, there's probably a lot of people who don't know yours, and others' history.

**Noel:** The commission was comprised of 16 people including Darius Smith, various tribal members from around the state, educators, and students.

**Tyler:** One of those students was a young woman named Lindsey Nichols from Strasburg High School in Eastern Colorado.

**Lindsey Nichols:** I'm Lindsey Nichols. I'm a senior at C.U. Boulder. So I actually started this project four years ago, my senior year of high school at Strasberg, and I really got involved. I think it started at an early age because I was really interested in Native American history, culture. I used to go to the library, the town over, because we don't have a library in Strasbourg. So I used to go to the library a town over and just check out books on Native American culture and history.

**Noel:** When Nichols got to High School she was surprised not only by how little her friends knew about Native American history, but how little was taught in the school.

**Lindsey Nichols:** And so I really wanted to see change not only in, like, the curriculum but also since our school is the literal Strasburg Indians, I thought that we should be learning way more about the people who used to live in Strasbourg and who were first in America in general.

**Tyler:** Nichols also played sports, and she began to notice the way rival schools' mascots portrayed American Indians.



**Lindsey Nichols:** We used to play teams and sports like Lamar, and they're "The Savages", we used to play Eaton and they're "The Reds" and I remember comparing what we had in our school, on our gym floor, on our walls, on our jerseys, to what those schools had. And I remember seeing a disconnect because they had more of a caricature and you know the word savages in general. It's terrible to describe a group of people. And, so, I really noticed it more with other schools first but then that meaning kind of how this introspective of like wait, well, is Indian even respectful, like or the way we are portraying these people even respectful?

**Noel:** With the help of Principal Jeff Rasp, Nichols began to reach out to tribal leaders of both the Cheyenne and Arapaho -- the tribes that inhabited the place that's now called Strasburg before American settlers arrived.

**Tyler:** At that exact time, Ernest House, Jr. was just beginning to assemble the Governor's Commission.

**Noel:** It wasn't long before word about Strasburg got back to him. He asked Nichols and Principal Rasp to join the commission.

**Noel:** In turn, Strasburg also volunteered to be one of four communities the commission visited to discuss changing their mascot.

**Noel:** The only criteria for visiting communities were that they had to have a Native American name, logo, or mascot, and...

**Ernest House:** The commission actually at the very beginning said that they didn't - well they weren't gonna go to any community that didn't want them there. And I think that was really important. I mean, there needed to be clearly respect, there was gonna be a lot of emotional testimony, the way that these meetings were structured.

**Tyler:** The communities that invited the commission were:

**Ernest Smith-House:** Strasburg, Colorado, the Strasburg Indians. Loveland, Colorado which were the Loveland Indians. Eaton, Colorado which are the Eaton Reds, and Lamar, Colorado which are the Lamar savages.

**Noel:** Loveland had already begun having conversations with a tribe in the Dakotas when they asked the commission to visit.

**Tyler:** And Eaton High School, where the Fightin' Whities had staged their protests 10 years earlier, didn't invite the commission to come. The members of the student newspaper, *Red Ink*, did.

**Noel:** Eaton has only recently stopped using their Indian mascot, which looked almost exactly like Chief Wahoo, the mascot of the Cleveland Indians baseball team.

**Tyler:** Perhaps ironically, the community *least* receptive to change was Lamar, Colorado, who's mascot is the savages. Still, they invited the commission to come.

**Noel:** Lamar is just a 45 minute drive from the Sand Creek Massacre site near the Kansas border.

**Tyler:** Ernest House, Jr. went in with an open mind.

**Ernest House:** It was just to try to gain an understanding of why they still have this mascot, why they still refer to not just the term Savages, but link the name -- the term savages -- to American Indians and have that as an ongoing mascot.

**Noel:** Lamar's logo looks like something out of a 1950's *Lone Ranger* comic. Unlike some logos that use profiles of American Indian caricatures, their's a frontal view of a menacing face in a headdress. And many other schools across the country, says Ernest House, Jr., use the same image.

**Ernest House:** It's clip art and it's easy to get, and I think that's why a lot of the other schools use these clip arts, because you really don't have to - you know, you just select from what's already been used out there or what's available and that's the easiest to get to.

**Tyler:** Not only is it clip art, which is free, it's *old* clip art that plays on stereotypes. This is what the commission wanted to help the schools it visited understand.

**Noel:** For one thing, not all tribes wear headdresses. And such depictions tend to homogenize Native Americans into a singular monolith when, in fact...

**Ernest Smith-House:** You know, you have 500 over 570 federally recognized tribes today. A lot more one hundred and fifty, two hundred years ago. Right? And all of our indigenous cultures had our own name for ourselves. I'm a member of the Ute tribe. Ute is not a name we gave ourselves. It's a Spanish - that the Spanish explorers gave us. We call ourselves Nuuchi-u. But the first written document of Spanish exploration prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo referenced us as Utah's. And then that translated into Utes and then now it's what we go by, Utes today.

**Tyler:** Such clip-art images that reinforce European perspectives also perpetuate the notion that Native Americans only live in the past, says House.

**Ernest House:** I think my experience in terms of being a member of the Ute Mountain Reservation or a member of the Ute tribe, the longest, oldest continuous residents of what we know is the state of Colorado, but then also running into folks who have never heard of Utes, who don't realize we're still around, that we still exist, that - what - we've been here around 8, 10, to 12,000 years of what we know of what is now Colorado. And so I think it's just part of that ongoing education effort. And so for me it was more of - of educating myself. And I think it's - it's also that education process of a lot of that historical context, you know nationally, American Indians make up 2 percent of the U.S. population.

**Noel:** Ernest House, Jr., Darius Smith, and Lindsey Nichols all remember how uncomfortable the commission meeting at Lamar felt. The School Superintendent had recommended police presence. Some Lamar residents were already upset about the proposed legislation to do away with all American Indian mascots across the state.

**Tyler:** Many who came out that night wore their Lamar Savages letter jackets, hats, shirts, and jerseys in support of the mascot.

**[Music fades in]**

**Noel:** Darius Smith gave his presentation. It's a PowerPoint that outlines the many ways that racist images and stereotypes hurt not only American Indians, but prevent non-Natives from having more meaningful relationships with living tribe members.

**Tyler:** After the presentation, they opened up the discussion with the audience.

**Darius Smith:** I remember now there was a person that stood up and said "I am a savage!" He's a savage, he's a savage, and then pointing to people that went to high school there, that live in the community, and it was I think just - out of all of the - the mascots out there in the state of Colorado, that one's probably *the* most offensive one. And I think that people on the panel, I'm looking up and I'm like wow this is weird. It's weird to hear this. And so I think it was the actual just the repeating of "I'm a savage" and there was actually some people who stood up and said before they started, I consider myself a savage.

**[Music fades out]**

**Noel:** Lindsey Nichols remembers how hard it was to reconcile that negative stereotype of the SAVAGES with the positive feelings of community identity people in Lamar felt it gave them.

**Lindsey Nichols:** I think a lot of them had that mentality of like you're coming in here and you're trying to take away everything that we've built. And for some reason they, like, correlate their experience in that school with a mascot, which is part of their pride, I guess, and just part of their own personal history.

**Tyler:** We reached out to Lamar High School Principal Greg Eddy for comment.

**[Voicemail of Lamar Principal]**

**Voice machine:** Message One.

**Greg Eddy:** Hi, this is Greg Eddy the principal of Lamar High School, and I just was leaving a message. I did get your message for the podcast you're looking at doing, and I don't think we'd be interested in participating, but uh, thank you for the phone call. Have a good day. Bye.

**[End of voicemail]**

**Tyler:** And Lamar high school Superintendent Dave Tecklenburg didn't return our calls.

**Noel:** Ultimately, after Lamar invited the commission to give their presentation and hold a conversation with the community, they decided not to change their name or their mascot.

**[Drumbeat, music]**

**[Whistle]**

**[Drumbeat fades into Underwriting]**

**Underwriting:** Support for History Colorado comes from Colorado State University. CSU embraces the critical role that History Colorado plays in preserving and telling the stories of our state and the West. As Colorado's land grant university, CSU is proud to be a partner in programming and outreach state wide. As they celebrate 150 years of education, research, and service, CSU remains committed to preserving the past, and creating a brighter future. Learn more at [COLOstate.edu](http://COLOstate.edu).

**[Drumbeat, music fades into Tyler narrating]**

**Tyler:** Strasburg, Colorado, which is even smaller than Lamar, welcomed The Governor's Commission to Study American Indian Representation in Public Schools with little community resistance.

**Noel:** Lindsey Nichols, who was a senior at Strasburg at the time, had already been educating friends and members of the community about issues around Native mascots and the history of the tribes in the region when the commission first came to visit.

**Lindsey Nichols:** A lot of people were super supportive and knew who I was, I basically knew every single person who was there. So that was a completely different dynamic.

**Tyler:** Principal Jeff Rasp had also supported Nichols from the beginning.

**Jeff Rasp:** It was a topic that was kind of near to her heart about studying the mascot and studying the origins, and right up, it was almost a perfect storm, right about the same time that

she came to me and we were starting to do some research on it. The bill that was going through the legislature to ban mascots came to our attention, in fact one of our school board members...

**Noel:** Changing their mascot and logo met with very little pushback, says Rasp.

**Jeff Rasp:** And then over the course of that first year that Lindsay was in charge of it, we established this fantastic partnership with the Northern Arapaho tribe and one of their leaders, one of their elders, Eugene Ridgley, designed a new mascot for us anyway. So that was - we knew at that point we had their blessing and we were - we used that depiction ever since. And then we eliminated any of the other symbols that - that might have been out there. We didn't have a consistent symbol until then including for athletics using an S and the symbol that we that Eugene Ridgley drew has largely been on almost everything else including a lot of our academics and stationery and things like that.

**Tyler:** Changing the logo was a symbolic gesture, but it quickly opened the doors to build more meaningful, long term relationships, says Nichols.

**Lindsey Nichols:** The major relationships that I built were with the Ridgley brothers, who were three Northern Arapaho brothers. My parents and I went up to the Wind River Reservation and spent some time with them, and they took us to their school, and their casinos up there, and just kind of showed us around, and I had no idea what to anticipate with talking to these tribal members, like would I be terrified, would they hate me, would they tell me that this was never going to work and then it was so disrespectful, and I think the Riddleys kind of surpassed all those expectations for me, because they were just so kind and so welcoming, and they were



more like well, what do you guys want to do with your school, and how can we help you, and how can we support you, and it was completely reversed of what I had expected.

**Noel:** For Principal Rasp, education and awareness had been the biggest benefit of changing their logo.

**Jeff Rasp:** One of the major changes I think, just the fact that we were, used our partnership or this - have benefited so much from the partnership with the tribe has been to me the biggest thing. We educate our students on the history of the Arapaho and Cheyenne, particularly Arapaho. We bring *them* to our school at least once a year to do a major powwow with our students, we've done it ever since Lindsay was here.

**[Arapaho Day Assembly Audio Clip]**

**Speaker:** Good morning Strasburg, did I say that right?

**[Crowd murmurs]**

**Speaker:** Strasburg, ah, yeah! I said Good Morning!

**[Crowd, louder, replies Good Morning]**

**Speaker:** We can do better than that! Good morning!

**[Crowd replies Good Morning]**

**Speaker:** There we go.

**[Chanting, Drumming, audio clip fades under Rasp narrating]**

**Jeff Rasp:** And then students, the last few years from the tribe, we've had our students meet with them and they've talked about their life and their culture. So, and we educate all the kids

starting in about seventh or eighth grade all the way through high school about the history and talk a lot about the Sand Creek Massacre and how that impacted, obviously, the Arapaho and Cheyenne and our mistreatment of them over centuries is a - we want our students to be aware of - of how our country has not treated them well and and that we own some of that.

**[Audio clip, Football game]**

**[Ambient: Football Game, Band playing, cheering]**

**Announcer:** And now ladies and gentlemen, here come the Indians!

**[Clip fades under Tyler narrating]**

**Tyler:** When we talked to students and faculty at the Strasburg homecoming football game this Fall, there was nothing but support not only for the logo and mascot change, but for the relationship with the Northern Arapaho.

**Noel:** Here's Cliff Smith. He graduated from Strasburg High School in 1974 and now teaches History there. He says the relationship with the Northern Arapaho has allowed him to teach a richer, more complicated version of American history that connects to the present.

**Cliff Smith:** Because this land was owned by the Native American peoples. And you know, that the white man came in here. They took it. That's that's all there is to it. And that's what happened to most of the West. And so I think that that's why important rights are important to kids too. They - they look at this and they see where our part is in this, and what we can do to - to rectify some of that. Well, we need to show respect to those - those cultures and I think that's where a lot of this - the respect from these students come from, and they were here in this

classroom. You know, they were actually, physically here. Yes. So I think that's - that's a huge part of that.

**Tyler:** The Strasburg students who've continued Lindsey Nichols' work with the Northern Arapaho feel just as fortunate to have a more meaningful relationship with both the past and present of the land they live on.

**Noel:** Here are Maddie Douglas, Victoria Mariano, Amity Howard

**Maddie Douglas:** Well, personally, I don't like Native American mascots. I think they're degrading and wrong almost. But I think this is the best way to do it because I've had opportunities that no other school has. And we've met all these wonderful people and we have the opportunity of having them come down and talking to their students. And so, even though I don't agree with it, I feel that being a part of this makes it more respectful.

**Victoria Mariano:** I think it's impacted me a lot in the way that I look at people around me that I don't know what their backstory is, or what they've been through, or their culture really. It's taught me a lot about the importance of learning about other cultures because that ensures that people are respected around you. So I'll definitely always be thinking about that and everywhere I go.

**Amity Howard:** I went to an internship last week. There was a variety of schools, but they kind of asked about Strasburg and what are some of the things we stand for. So, I actually got to teach about 50 some-kids about that and kind of explain what and why we're called the Indians

and what we're doing to continue our partnership with that, so, that was one of the main ways  
nad it was really cool to be able to tell all of them about that.

**[Capitol Runners Audio Clip continued]**

**Jeff Rasp:** ...want to move forward, and continue to be partners along and in the future, it  
means everything to us. Thank you.

**[Clip fades out]**

**Noel:** Back at the Capitol in Denver, we spoke with the students and runners from the Northern  
Arapaho tribe after the Sand Creek Memorial Healing Run. We asked them about their thoughts  
on Strasburg's mascot.

**Tyler:** Here are Hunter Lone Dog, Darien Barreza, and Zianna Hubbard.

**Hunter Lone Dog:** I feel they have a lot of respect for us. So I ain't going to trip over that, over  
just a mascot or anything. I mean, they show love to us, so we gotta show love back.

**Darien Barreza:** I feel like they give us more respect than that because they represent and they  
show us respect about it. But like, most like, if other people would, like, disrespect us about it,  
and you know, it wouldn't be a good thing. But. If they're just respecting us like that and showing  
us love that we came there, that'd be a good thing.

**Zianna Hubbard:** Strasburg it's really important because everyone there, they - they really want  
to learn what happened and I really like that.

**Noel:** We also spoke with Lee Spoonhunter. Again, he's Chairman of the Northern Arapaho. We asked him what he thought schools like Lamar were missing out on by not updating or changing their mascots and building relationships with the tribes.

**Lee Spoonhunter:** What they missed out on is a very good friendship with tribal people in that they don't learn the rich history and the heritage, and what our ancestors had to go through, and to be strong and to be resilient, and to teach us how to live today. I think there's just a lot of education, and good fellowship, and, and friendship that they're missing out on.

**Noel:** For Governor Hickenlooper's Commission to Study American Indian Representations in Public Schools, Strasburg High School's handling of their Indian Mascot was, in many ways, an even better outcome than they could have hoped for. Even if they'd changed their logo and mascot altogether.

**[Music fades in]**

**Tyler:** Again, here's Ernest House, Jr., the former Executive Director of the Colorado Commission on Indian Affairs.

**Ernest House:** Strasburg was just complete - I mean - I use them as an example across the board, of how... the goodness that could come out of this conversation. A prime example of now, not only are they using that image respectfully and with the tribe's consent, but they're also teaching American Indian history in their school. And that's a win-win across the board.

**[Music fades out]**

**Noel:** There's no question that many positive relationships have been built from reimagining mascots like the Strasburg Indians and the Utah Utes.

**Tyler:** Still, some American Indian activists and scholars believe that such compromises simply aren't enough. And they have research to back up their claims.

**Noel:** Dr. Stephanie Fryberg is Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan and a member of the Tulalip tribes. She studies the psychological effects of stereotypes like school logos and mascots on Native American students.

**Dr. Stephanie Fryberg:** We exposed Native American high school and college students to American Indian mascots and looked at the effect on self-esteem, community efficacy, and future achievement related possible selves. And so, when exposed to the mascot image relative to being exposed to nothing, what we refer to as a control condition, what we find is that exposure decreases, self-esteem decreases, self-esteem, decreases the - the student's belief that their tribal community can improve itself. So what we refer to as community efficacy, so their confidence that their tribe has the... both ability and power to improve itself over time and it decreases achievement related possible selves which are effectively their future goals, achievement-related goals. So they have less future aspirations, achievement related aspirations, in school when exposed to the mascot.

**Noel:** In other words, says Fryberg, the way we see ourselves represented in the society and culture we live in has a huge impact on what we believe is possible. For ourselves, our families, and our communities.

**Dr. Stephanie Fryberg:** You know, one of the things that we have learned across all of our research is that it's really tied to the fact that contemporary native people are relatively invisible in mainstream society. And this, the use of Indians as mascots, is sort of one of the ways in which we are represented. And the problem with it is that it represents us in a very stereotyped way. We all do this. We look out into the world to see how our group is represented. And we use that information to influence whether or not we attempt to take on a particular representation or whether we want to go out and become a doctor or a lawyer. It very much depends on how we are seen in society.

**Tyler:** Darius Smith saw this effect on students firsthand when he was the Director of Indian Education at Denver Public Schools.

**Darius Smith:** And what fascinated me was there wasn't that many American Indians playing high school sports.

**Noel:** This was before Arvada, Arapaho, and Montbello High Schools had changed their American Indian Mascots.

**Darius Smith:** I was aware of what was happening at Arvada, Arapahoe, and Montbello, and I started saying there is a direct correlation with this, in terms of the self-esteem of American

Indians. But at the same time the perception of non-natives that they have about American Indians. I was - I would talk to a lot of the high school students who are American Indians in Denver Public Schools and say, why don't you play sports? I don't want to say stereotypes but often they said, I couldn't beat those - those fast black guys, I can't beat those big white guys. And I started realizing that there was a connection, and that maybe I needed to look at, you know, how that imagery was impacting Native people.

**Noel:** The problem, says Fryberg, is that even redesigning respectful mascots and logos with tribal blessings and school support doesn't significantly benefit Native people.

**Dr. Stephanie Fryberg:** What the research shows, other research that we've done with non-natives in particular with whites, shows that keeping these representations boosts their self-esteem and makes them feel good about their group. And so the desire to keep it is very much tied to them and not to native people. In fact, we see very little in terms of support for keeping Indian mascots. We don't see that connect to support for, say, policies that would help native people or support for different programs that might benefit native students. So it's very much...

**Noel:** Here's Attorney Lawrence Baca again.

**Lawrence Baca:** The fact is, you can't assure that in all futures the only people who will go to the school are members of that tribe who will say, "Hey I'm - I'm truly honored by this". And quite frankly, while the tribal government is stepping in and helping out it doesn't necessarily mean that even the tribal members themselves all uniformly agree. And I applaud them for doing it, I



applaud the tribe for coming forward and saying let's help you out. But because underlying it all is still this concept that the Indian child sees that my race is used as a mascot, and no other race isn't, has the potential of some very negative long-term - long-term effects on their - on their educational process and their psychological well-being.

**Tyler:** Dr. Fryberg doesn't dispute the positive outcomes of the relationships built between Strasburg High School students and the Northern Arapaho. She thinks such exchanges should be happening between as many schools and tribes as possible. However...

**Dr. Stephanie Fryberg:** It should happen regardless of whether or not they're able to use the Indian mascot. And if it were the case that getting rid of that mascot would stop that educational educational exchange, then it really wasn't premised on the right motivation anyway.

**Noel:** Lawrence Baca is blunt about the consequences:

**Lawrence Baca:** Until we get rid of stereotypes, Indian people will not be able to escape being trapped in the amber from two hundred years ago and come into the modern world as real people. Even though we maintain our culture, as long as we continue to think of Indians as romantic figures out of history we're not going to give them the rights that they deserve today.

**[Music]**

**Tyler:** Neither Baca, Dr. Fryberg, Darius Smith or Ernest House, Jr. believes that the problem of Native American mascots can or should be solved with legislation or legal challenges.

**Noel:** And though tribes giving their blessing to American Indian mascots may not be the ideal outcome in the long run, it has opened the doors to more meaningful change. It will take MORE education, MORE outreach, and MORE personal connections to help change perceptions about American Indians past, present, and future.

**Tyler:** Darius Smith remembers one such connection after his first presentation at Strasburg High School. For him it was one of the most meaningful moments during his time on the Governor's commission.

**Darius Smith:** So I think that what was so powerful for me was the enthusiasm because the kids came up to me afterwards and there was hundreds of them and they wanted to shake my hand, and they were like, this is the first time we ever heard a native speak. And then there was one girl in there and she was Navajo. That's my tribe, and I guess, I had a necklace on and I put it over her neck and she just looked at me and smiled, and all the - everybody just got quiet. And she's all like - she was staring at me - and Principal Rasp didn't see that. But - I - I left there and I just felt so good. And - and it was a powerful moment because those students they were like, "Yeah this is wrong".

**[Music fades out]**

**Credits:**

**[Lost Highways music]**

**Tyler:** *Lost Highways* is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios. It is made possible by a generous grant from the Sturm Family Foundation, with particular thanks to Stephen Sturm and Emily Sturm.

**Noel:** Again, if you enjoyed this podcast and want to support it, PLEASE become a member of History Colorado. You can get 20% off your membership at [historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount](http://historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount). Plus you get all kinds of great benefits like free admission to our 8 museums around the state. And you can see things on exhibit and in our collection that help tell this story, like a Fighting Whities t-shirt, a Utah Utes football helmet, and Strasburg High School gear with the new logo.

**Tyler:** And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

**Noel:** Special thanks to Susan Schulten, our History advisor on this episode, and to Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, our editor. And to Conor Bourgal who composed our theme and the music for this season.

**Tyler:** And to Morgan Ferris, Program Assistant for the Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs.

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Emily Sturm

Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson

Thomas Andrews

Jonathan Futa

Charlie Woolley

Susan Schulten

Tom Romero

and Cara DeGette

**Noel:** Finally, thanks as always, to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black

**Tyler:** And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.