THE PEKIN CHINKS:
A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF A CITY’S TRADITION

A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL.
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS
BY
JOE LANANE
ADVISER: MARK H. MASSÉ
BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
DECEMBER 2011
CREATIVE PROJECT DESCRIPTION

THE PEKIN CHINKS

A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF A CITY’S TRADITION

STUDENT: Joseph Dennis Lanane

DEGREE: Master of Arts (Journalism)

COLLEGE: College of Communication, Information, and Media

DATE: December 2011

Tradition is not something easily changed and is rarely forgotten. For decades, the small Midwestern city of Pekin, Ill., embraced a tradition considered by many to be an act of prejudice and ignorance. It was not until 1980 that Pekin Community High School students no longer called themselves “Chinks,” and the school united under a different mascot, the Dragons. However, the derogatory stereotypes continued as evidenced by city memorabilia that states, “Old Chinks don’t die – they just ‘Drag-on.’”

This creative project sought to identify how this city’s controversy compared to related debates about the use of derogatory team names and mascots across the country and, most importantly, what impact the nickname Chinks still has on the community. Varied research methods, including interviews, ethnography, and secondary research, were utilized to produce a historical case study of the community.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There have been a variety of questionable racially and ethnically insensitive sports mascots and nicknames in United States history, but, arguably, one of the most blindly offensive originated in the small central Illinois city of Pekin.

For nearly fifty years, Pekin High School proudly attached the derogatory, anti-Asian name “Chinks” term to its athletics programs. The school and the Pekin community held tightly to this moniker until it was ordered changed in 1980 by the school district’s new superintendent.

While Chinks is an offensive nickname, many derogatory sports titles have come under fire in recent years in the name of “political correctness.”

Perhaps the most stereotyped culture in all of sports is that of Native Americans. “Indians,” “Redskins,” “Chiefs,” and “Braves” are a few of the controversial Native American nicknames to garner negative attention in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since the late 1960s, Native American mascots have been strictly scrutinized. Many high school, college, and professional programs using these nicknames have
dropped the offensive titles, due to either protests or regulations, but many other teams continue to use stereotypical nicknames and mascots.

When forced to defend these nicknames, many programs tout their long-standing history and deep-rooted traditions. Such arguments, used in nearly every documented case, typically draw little sympathy from advocates against ethnically offensive nicknames, who argue what was not right then still is not right today (Woo 1995).

However, as minorities try to reclaim their heritage, they are often challenged by traditionalist thinking and rigid attitudes. Political leverage is often weighed by community leaders, university boosters, and team owners to thwart these opponents. Nevertheless, negative public outcry often prevails against these mascots (Woo 1995).

Studies have compiled the impact of these controversial mascots, particularly those related to Native Americans. Both the repercussions faced by the community and the psychological impact of minority students have been tracked. However, before now little research has focused on the effects of derogatory Asian nicknames.

Because of the lack of such data, it is argued that research on the impact of the Chinks nickname and its history in Pekin, Ill., will generate meaningful data and contribute to the body of knowledge in minority relations.

Thirty years have passed since Pekin eliminated the anti-Asian nickname, but the effects of the racial slur continue to linger.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Case History: A Background of Pekin

The central Illinois city of Pekin, or “The Celestial City” as it is often called, was first settled by Robert de La Salle on Jan. 3, 1680 (Miglio 1951). Jonathon Tharp and his father, Jacob, were also credited as the first founders of Pekin, although they occupied an area that would not become part of the city until years later (Heaton 1980).

Ann Eliza Cromwell, the wife of pioneer Major Nathan Cromwell, is often credited for naming the city Pekin, based on the Chinese capital of Peking (Miglio 1951) — now known as Beijing. Ann Eliza Cromwell named the city Pekin in 1829 “for reasons still obscure (Soady, An Essay Concerned with the City of Pekin, Illinois 1824-1849 n.d.).”

Pekin folklore professes these two communities at opposite ends of the world have a closer connection. Some lifelong Pekin, Ill., residents believe a hole could be dug through the center of earth from Pekin (40° 34' 3" N, 89° 38' 26" W) to present-day Beijing (39° 55' 44" N, 116° 23' 18" E). Simple calculations disprove this theory, although any expert would be hard-pressed to convince certain Pekinites otherwise.
On Aug. 1, 1835, the Pekin settlement became officially recognized as a city (Miglio 1951). In 1873, the first official class of all six students graduated from Pekin High School.

The first recorded Pekin High School nickname was the Celestials, but in the 1930s the term Chinks became attached to the school’s athletic programs in the local sports pages (McNaughton 1980). The name caught on, and it was not until 1974 that local newspapers such as the Peoria Journal Star and later the Pekin Daily Times stopped calling Pekin teams the Chinks.

In 1975, the school followed suit by discontinuing its tradition of featuring a Chink and Chinklette ceremony before athletic events (Pekinian 1965). Published reports describe a boy and girl duo, dressed in Chinese attire, who would enter the playing field and greet members of the opposing cheerleading squad by bowing in ceremonious fashion (Associated Press 1980).

By the mid-1970s, the school had all but disowned the terminology. The nickname Chinks no longer appeared on band or athletic uniforms. However, the derogatory term continued to be used in signage at the football field – “Memorial Stadium. Home of the Chinks” – until the school officially changed nicknames in 1980 (Associated Press 1980).

The change in the school’s and community’s uses of the term Chinks was attributed to the influence of several activist groups in 1974. Members of both the National Organization of Chinese Americans (NOCA) and the New Youth Center of Chicago visited Pekin on multiple occasions to protest the school’s mascot (Baker, Pekin
students veto 'Chinks' name change 1974). Despite a decisive 1,034 to 182 vote by the school's student body to retain the Chinks nickname, activists were persistent — often holding town hall-style meetings in Pekin to display their distaste toward the slur.

Kung-Lee Wang, president of NOCA, addressed the forty-three-member Pekin High School student council in October 1974 in an attempt to raise awareness of the bigotry associated with the word Chinks.

We don't think [Chinks] should be a source of pride. It is an insult to the Chinese people around the world and we don't feel it is a good way to honor us. You have to realize we are no longer living in a fishbowl ... America is a melting pot that takes the good of all cultures and combines them (Baker, Delegation still pressuring to rename Pekin 'Chinks' 1974).

Chinks nonetheless continued to be used in the community despite the growing controversy surrounding the nickname. In March 1975, the Pekin School Board voted five to two to keep the nickname, and District Superintendent William Holman considered the issue “dead.”

The controversy continued until Aug. 24, 1980, when newly appointed Superintendent of Schools James L. Elliott announced a new school nickname, the Dragons (Pekinian, Names Make News 1981). The name change was met with instant resistance. Reports from the first week of September 1980 indicated more than 200 students and at least a dozen parents protested outside the school (Associated Press 1980).

Former Pekin Chamber of Commerce Director Lee Williams was one of the few public figures at the time to publicly discourage opposition to the name change. He was reported as saying: “If the name is hurting anybody, it should be dropped. It's nothing
sacred. In fact, I am sure it will be changed. Five years from now you will never hear
[‘Chinks’] again.” (Baker, Delegation outraged at 'racist slurs' 1974) Eventually, public
protest about the name change subsided.

The “Mascotting” of Minority Cultures

According to social science scholars, mascots mock minority cultures, and this
can be demoralizing. The stereotyping of minority cultures through derogatory
nicknames and mascots may even remind minorities of past abuses by oppressors (Black
2002).

Given the near genocide of Indians by Euro-Americans over the course of several
centuries – a period of oppression that has been called the ‘conquest of America’
– the practice of naming sports teams ‘Indians,’ ‘Chiefs,’ and ‘Redskins’ has been
compared to ‘contemporary Germans naming their soccer teams the ‘Jews,’
‘Hebrews,’ and ‘Yids’ (A Public Accommodation Challenge to the Use of Indian
Team Names and Mascots in Professional Sports 1999).

Researchers note that caricatures may symbolize a community’s predominant
values (Smith 1997). School nicknames often have a storied history behind their origins,
particularly those featuring more controversial ethnic representations. Over the decades,
activists have become increasingly conscious of racially insensitive mascots (Smith
1997). However, hundreds of high school, college, and professional athletic programs
still specifically feature Native American names and mascots.

Smith (1997) said it is important to evaluate how these names are used in more
current contexts to determine their context and intent. He argues that there is a distinct
difference between using racial identifiers and derogative slurs. Such ethnic designations
as the Irish, Hoosiers, and even Indians “do not carry clear derogatory meaning from
current general users,” while the terms nigger, jap, and chink are almost universally recognized as offensive and scornful in nature.

By using Chinks as its nickname, research suggests Pekin Community High School crossed the acceptable – albeit nebulous – line of ethnic mascots. While proponents may argue the nickname was nothing more than another racial identifier, Smith (1997) said such negative associations only promote harmful stereotypes hurtful toward minorities. Although some advocates may contend such nicknames help promote a sense of “civic pride, courage, honor, and fair play” (Smith 1997) during athletic events, others believe these nicknames only foster and encourage more negative ethnic associations.

Offensive mascot imagery often perpetuates stereotypes as well. Many of the negative connotations associated with ethnic nicknames result from the use of these logos and costumes. Smith (1997) said it is discouraging when the public is no longer able to distinguish the difference between team names and ethnic stereotypes and caricatures. Over time, he said the nicknames lose their meaning by those who use them.

Use of stereotypical nicknames arguably leads to sports rituals such as war songs, ethnic dances, and “tomahawk chops,” which are nothing more than “sham rituals” meant to manifest blatant racism. Commentating on the use of professional Native American mascots, the Harvard Law Review called the use of any other racial or ethnic group as a team nickname “socially repugnant” and “reprehensible” (A Public Accommodation Challenge to the Use of Indian Team Names and Mascots in Professional Sports 1999).
Prior to the 2005-06 college basketball season, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) President Myles Brand (2002-09) announced his organization would no longer tolerate the use of “hostile or abusive” nicknames by its membership in postseason competition. Smith (2005) called the decision an important step in the NCAA’s campaign to outlaw derogatory minority images as mascots. At the time, the decision directly affected eighteen Division I institutions, including the University of Illinois, which had used “Chief Illiniwek” as its Native American mascot that performed what was thought to be authentic dances at home basketball and football games.

Despite changes at the high school level and at colleges and universities, professional sports teams have remained the most adamant in their refusal to change discriminatory nicknames and mascots (A Public Accommodation Challenge to the Use of Indian Team Names and Mascots in Professional Sports 1999).

*What’s in a Name?*

Athletic nicknames and logos have come to serve two primary effects at their universities or communities. Not only do they evoke allegiance to the athletic teams they represent, but they also shape the image for that school’s students, faculty, alumni, and fans (Connolly 2000).

Researcher Connolly found three universities that have been forced to defend and ultimately alter their Native American nicknames and logos. Miami University, the University of Illinois-Champaign, and Eastern Michigan University have had to respond to “critics of these symbols as well as to boosters who dearly embrace them” (Connolly 2000).
Boosters (i.e. alumni who make financial contributions and other donations to these universities) are typically white upper- and middle-class men. Booster culture is unique in that most of its members share “many values and assumptions, such as prejudices and stereotypes.” This can be confirmed each time plans to discontinue a Native American mascot arise. Those who adhere to booster culture often defend these mascots as part of their alma mater’s “beloved traditions,” revealing their closed-minded values and assumptions as a result (Connolly 2000).

According to Connolly (2000), throughout the 1920s, glorified depictions of Native Americans crossed into the realm of high school, collegiate, and professional athletics. He said this may explain not only how these nicknames and symbols became prominent during that era, but also why many institutions have defended their nicknames so adamantly through the years. He said the history of an institution may provide insight into the social attitudes that influenced the mascot’s selection, but it also allows the researcher to measure to what extent their attitudes toward Native American nicknames have changed.

The first documented argument against the use of Chief Illiniwek at the University of Illinois occurred in 1975. The controversy subsided eventually, and the antipathy toward the “Fighting Illini” logo did not arise again until the late 1980s when additional protests occurred. By March 1991, the UIUC Student Government Association voted thirty-four to two to approve a resolution stating the university should cease using the chief as its symbol (Connolly 2000).
Efforts to keep the chief mascot intact were hindered again in 1994 when a Native American group within the school filed discrimination suit with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights. The complaint argued the use of the Chief “contributed to the racially hostile environment.” After a twenty-month investigation, the Office of Civil Rights concluded the university did not in fact discriminate against Native Americans (Connolly 2000).

In his research, Connolly found three common themes among the schools he studied. The University of Illinois, Eastern Michigan, and Miami all began their “Indian” traditions during the 1920s, about the time that pro-Native American sentiment was significant. He noted that all three schools associated its nickname and symbols with a particular tribe “that formerly lived in the geographical region where the institution was located” (Connolly 2000). Such claims of respect and cultural sustenance appear genuine at face value; however, no records suggest that, other than in the school’s name, these universities made any effort to portray the tribes accurately (Connolly 2000).

Once boosters attempted to “authenticate” their school’s respective symbols, simple steps were taken that ultimately changed very little about their mascots and nicknames. For example, when Chief Hiawabop was deemed an inaccurate representation by the Miami tribe, the school updated its mascot’s costume to become “Chief Miami.” Similarly, the University of Illinois removed Chief Illiniwek’s inappropriate face paint and gave him a more “realistic” dance in 1994 (Connolly 2000).

Proponents of maintaining stereotypical symbols often bolster their arguments by claiming that these mascots represent long-standing traditions. But, protestors have
claimed that the need to make a mascot or logo “less cartoonish and more realistic” only asserts how humiliating and oppressive these symbols were to begin with (Connolly 2000).

The second method employed by all three schools was the comparison of Native Americans with other cultural groups. By doing so, these advocates frequently argued how no other U.S. ethnic groups were protesting nicknames such as “Fighting Irish” or “Quakers” (Connolly 2000).

Should ranchers get upset about the Dallas Cowboys? ... Scandinavians about the Minnesota Vikings? Greeks about the [Michigan State] Spartans? Should people of Irish Catholic descent get upset over the silly fighting leprechaun of Notre Dame? Should the Audubon Society fight over names like the Lions, Tigers, Cardinals, and Orioles? (Connolly 2000)

Native Americans who protested use of stereotypical symbols were often considered nothing more than isolated cases of “political correctness” and oversensitivity. The majority of Americans did not resent the Native American culture, but their civil rights movement often did not seem justifiable to whites who had no idea of the oppressed conditions forced upon American Indians (Connolly 2000).

Unfortunately for Native Americans, members of their culture were still represented as nothing more than “vanished” mythic figures. Their efforts to alter the dominant culture’s perceptions of Native Americans not only failed, but “manufactured misrepresentations” of “replicas with no original” continued to be produced as athletic mascots for years to come (Connolly 2000).

It will only be when American people realize that Indians are living, twentieth century, honest-to-goodness human beings that our lives, hopes, ideas, and lands will be respected and appreciated. As long as we are stereotyped and abstracted into college and product names, cowboy movie backgrounds, advertising
gimmicks and tourist attractions, we will continue to be unreal shadows on the American scene. Even if our request to abandon the use of our names for college teams is irrational and emotional, we ask that it be honored for one reason that should be sufficient if it is really true that you give us respect: We, the people you call Indians, ask that you not use our name that way. That should be reason enough (Connolly 2000).

The third common thread among all three schools Connolly (2000) analyzed was the evidence of divisive opinions among minority groups.

Both Miami University and Eastern Michigan University, for example, had signed endorsements from leaders of the respective tribes they symbolized. Illinois claimed no members of the Illini existed, although the school’s administration did not shy away from utilizing non-affiliated Native Americans as spokespeople. They were willing to state publicly they found nothing wrong with the Chief, which boosters routinely exploited to further their argument (Connolly 2000).

Researcher Mary Rivers (2002) studied the history behind the Illini tribe for which the University of Illinois is nicknamed. She found it was the Peoria tribe the school honors, but the origins of the “Chief” lay “more in Anglo-American lore rather in the actual history of Illinois.”

...the University of Illinois mascot does not originate as the personification of a carefully crafted plan, but as an on-the-spot response to a challenge from the University of Pennsylvania to produce a character who could greet William Penn at the start of the [October 26,] 1926 football game between the schools (Rivers 2002).

The three institutions (University of Illinois, Miami University, Eastern Michigan University) used three points of justification while defending the use of their respective mascots: “(1) using such nicknames and symbols is a way of respecting and remembering Native Americans; (2) Native Americans are no different from other groups used for
nicknames and symbols; and (3) only a militant minority of Native Americans has a problem; the rest of them do not take offense.” Boosters vehemently defended their own strong sense of pride, affection, and nostalgia they felt these images elicited. “Thus, to threaten these dearly loved symbols was to threaten how boosters constructed their own cultural identity.” (Connolly 2000)

Booster culture may be defined by several features aside from school nicknames and mascot logos. The school colors, pre-game rituals, and other symbols “play a fundamental role in constructing a common culture” in that community or institution. Boosters do not consciously associate these nicknames and logos with contemporary Native American culture, and they instead embrace these symbols as their own (Connolly 2000).

Regarding reform efforts, one suggested method is to quickly change symbols and nicknames without warning as was done by Eastern Michigan University. It may also be possible to negotiate terms – “some sense of give-and-take” – among all parties. By doing so, the booster culture can adapt to these changes while surrendering these shared symbols (Connolly 2000).

A creative example of change exists at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, which had used a controversial Indian logo to complement its “Mocsains” nickname. In 1996, the school switched its nickname to that of Tennessee’s state bird, the “Mockingbirds.” This helped enhance regional affiliation and also allowed the school’s sports teams to still be referred to as the “Mocs.” However, according to Connolly (2000), by only focusing on the nickname and not its coinciding symbols, school
administrators “are only treating symptoms and not the oppressive attitudes and practices they reflect.”

Minorities Fight to Take Back Their Heritage

Controversy surrounding Native American mascots first reached national prominence in 1968 when the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) “began a campaign to address native stereotypes found in sports and media” (Black 2002). This was the beginning of several grassroots movements led by The American Indian Movement (AIM) and the Conference on the Elimination of Racist Mascots.

While their focus was primarily on collegiate and professional sports teams, high schools also felt the effects of reform efforts. Pekin, Ill., didn’t garner notable attention toward its nickname until 1974. This was almost a decade after the school’s first state basketball championship. The relatively unknown central Illinois city had gained much notoriety throughout the state in the 1960s during its basketball prominence. In the mid-1970s, the school’s nickname, Chinks, was being scrutinized by people outside the community as well as by Pekin residents.

Similar to Pekin’s defenders who tried to rationalize their Chinks nickname, university and professional team boosters argued that their Native American mascots stood as symbols of “honor, respect, and dignity.” Black (2002) argued that the “mascotting” of minority cultures only further perpetuates white hegemony. Hegemony is defined as “a broad based and coherent worldview that ‘leads’ by gaining active assent from allies and passive assent from other classes or groups.”
If the majority truly wanted to honor Native America, Black (2002) said the only true solution is to retire the Indian mascot. By doing so, white America will have, for once, “listened to what [Native America] has to say and internalized how it feels about the issue.”

During a period of American antipathy toward Asian countries in the early twentieth century, the use of the term Chinks by Pekin High School illustrated prejudice and racism. Such negative public opinion may arise due to inaccurate ethnic representations and media portrayals that perpetuate certain stereotypes. Mascots, in particular, misrepresent these cultures, which only “bolsters white power and weakens” minority stature (Black 2002).

Black said the University of Illinois, for example, has replaced true Illini histories with Chief Illiniwek folktales. Consequently, their identities have become connected to the “dominant society’s rhetorical redefinitions of ‘Indian’ ... to sustain and perpetuate suppression of Native Americans” (Black 2002).

By capitalizing on false Native American culture, these ‘Indian’ representations can be considered nothing more than a “parody or farce.” This is indicative of Native Americans continuous struggle against white culture. Black said not only was past Native American culture conquered and made profitable through slave labor and land sales, but now “their current identities were also being sold” (Black 2002).

School mascots, whether they are controversial or not, draw a loyal following from athletic events and other forms of school spirit. Individuals identify symbols
(mascots) with their academic experiences. For decades, Pekin Community High School (PCHS) alumni proudly identified themselves as Chinks.

Black (2002) found that neither Florida State nor Illinois “commemorate nor honor their respective Native mascots.” He suggested that these universities should allow American Indians to once again define their own image rather than be turned into the stereotyped figures they have become through the long-standing use of derogatory symbols.

Case Study: School Team Names in Washington State

The state of Washington served as an early model in correctly addressing the use of controversial mascots. In summer 1993, the state’s superintendent of schools requested the names of all athletic teams and mascots grades kindergarten through twelfth, public and private (Smith 1997). Smith said the superintendent’s notice revealed that other states were conducting similar reviews to address racially insensitive nicknames. A little more than forty percent of the state’s schools responded over the next year, and the results served as a statistical sampling from which Smith could draw conclusions. Of the 287 participating schools, sixty-five (almost twenty-three percent) featured ethnic related names – including thirty-eight “Warrior” mascots (Smith 1997).

He noted many of the schools used the analysis as an opportunity to question the use of mascots. Nicknames were classified by their degree of violence, with all but thirteen deemed “aggressive.” The majority of these human mascots referenced Native American “culture,” which sports columnist Derrick Jackson once condemned during his coverage of the 1995 World Series matchup of the Atlanta Braves and the Cleveland
Indians. “The nicknames are not meant to honor Indians but to pump up the teams’ athletes with any old-fashioned symbols or stereotypes of violence they can find” (Smith 1997).

He also noted that kindergarten through twelfth grade schools typically must consider community-wide attitudes and political correctness when deciding on mascots and nicknames. Many Washington school officials ultimately chose less offensive alternatives to avoid further controversy, often looking at animals for inspiration when selecting a new mascot. Smith (1997) concluded that team names may be reinterpreted over the years, eventually losing their initial reference. Whether genuine or not, these names may become entrenched into the community culture, and he said only a renewal of local history will help these schools truly realize the insensitive nature of their nicknames.

This research contradicts sentiment that Indian mascots are complimentary and honorable, not because their context is necessarily negative, but because there are relatively few alternative characterizations of Native Americans. This is particularly pertinent because identity is socially constructed, thus limiting the way Native Americans can view themselves. It is suggested that to reduce this negative impact requires restraining the use of Indian mascots or increasing the amount of social representations of American Indians (Fryberg, et al. 2008).

Psychological Impact of Degrading Ethnic Nicknames

The impact of popular Indian caricatures not only damages the public’s knowledge of Native American culture but also affects the group’s assimilated youth.
Many Native American youth attending schools with offensive mascots reportedly have lower recorded achievements and self-esteem levels (Fryberg, et al. 2008).

Basic and applied social psychology theories analyze the impact of stereotypes. They were found to be particularly powerful when the target group in question – in this case, Native Americans – are unfamiliar to the majority. Because most Americans have minimal or no direct personal experience with Native Americans, given they constitute less than two percent of the nation’s population and are relatively invisible in mainstream media, the average person may be naïve about the consequences of such stereotypical behavior (Fryberg, et al. 2008).

Further research has confirmed that, if American Indian mascots are regarded as negative stereotypes, then their psychological effects will also be negative. These minorities feel compelled to act the way they are perceived, similar to how Asian Americans are expected to act as the “model minority” with superior performance in mathematics and other academic areas of study (Fryberg, et al. 2008).

Social representation theory, which analyzes images that have skewed public meanings and are widely distributed, suggests Native Americans are constrained by the images that stereotype their heritage. Even when these mascots are viewed positively, the researchers found this theory still holds true. So when these Native American students see an Indian mascot parading around a gymnasium, they may subconsciously witness the expectations the majority ethnicity attaches to them. This prevents the American Indian student from feeling a sense of competence, consequently preventing them for attaining academic success (Fryberg, et al. 2008).
While relatively few, if any, Asian American students—exact figures could not be obtained—attended Pekin during the years when the nickname Chinks was used, these students may also have suffered the same skewed social representation effects when confronted by the derogatory symbols.

*How Preexisting Laws Can Combat Offensive Nicknames and Mascots*

The *Harvard Law Review (HLR)* found that Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 best outlined “how public accommodations law can be applied against professional sports teams.” While these franchises benefit from using a form of commercial speech protected under the First Amendment, the *HLR* argued that prohibition of derogatory names and mascots under Title II would not infringe upon the free speech rights of these organizations involved (A Public Accommodation Challenge to the Use of Indian Team Names and Mascots in Professional Sports 1999).

Title II ensures equal treatment for all ethnicities wishing to enter an athletic facility. According to the legislation, Native Americans should no longer be discouraged from full enjoyment at these events because Indian team names deny them that right. Whether their intent was genuine or not when contrived, Title II determines these nicknames discriminate nonetheless (A Public Accommodation Challenge to the Use of Indian Team Names and Mascots in Professional Sports 1999).

In order to successfully ban oppressive mascots without violating teams’ First Amendment rights, a case must satisfy four levels of criteria. First, it must be proven that such commercial speech does not extend to “forms of communication more likely to
deceive the public than to inform it (A Public Accommodation Challenge to the Use of Indian Team Names and Mascots in Professional Sports 1999).”

Further, the plaintiff must also garner substantial government interest and prove such litigation would directly advance its goals. The *Harvard Law Review* said such revisions would “directly advance the substantial state interest in remedying racial discrimination in places of public accommodation,” the third criteria listed in order to ban controversial mascots (A Public Accommodation Challenge to the Use of Indian Team Names and Mascots in Professional Sports 1999).

Finally, the doctrine must also feature flexibility to allow “reasonable tailoring” of the law once enacted. Former Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Drew Days said he has observed that “overt forms of discrimination ha[ve] been replaced in many respects by subtle and sophisticated techniques of discrimination which are often difficult to detect and prove in a court.” As a result, the *Harvard Law Review* said it is essential such language be translated to take into account evolving and more subtle forms of discrimination through the use of symbols and mascots (A Public Accommodation Challenge to the Use of Indian Team Names and Mascots in Professional Sports 1999).

Who Is Responsible For These Irresponsible Uses of Minority Images?

According to Delacruz (2003), community members who show support for maintaining controversial mascots come from different backgrounds and income levels. He said it is often “thoughtful, well-educated, and not particularly racist” individuals making pleas to keep many Native American names intact. The Issaquah Indians, the team nickname for a Seattle-based high school, came under scrutiny by the town’s school
board in 2002 after being met with much resistance, the school board adapted a new policy prohibiting derogatory mascots that would “divide the community in significant controversy.”

Delacruz (2003) also analyzed the controversy surrounding the National Football League’s Washington Redskins team use of Native Americans symbols. The history of the “R-Word” as it is often referred by Native Americans, has been lost after its repeated use in the sports world. Redskins was a term originally used by early white settlers to describe the number of Indian scalps collected after each hunt. Raymond Apodaca, one-time governor of a Texas American Indian tribe, said the word was comparable to how African Americans perceive the “N-Word.”

Delacruz’s study analyzed the impact of two collegiate mascots, Chief Illiniwek (Illinois) and Chief Osceola (Florida State). The University of Illinois mascot has been one of the most scrutinized Native American mascots in sports. The end of Chief Illiniwek as a mascot began in 1998 when University of Illinois student and Native American Charlene Teters confronted the faculty-student senate with disparaging eyewitness accounts. University of Illinois students often perpetuated Indian stereotypes, she said, leaving her disenchanted with the school she once adored. She elaborated:

The very presence of 20th century Indian people challenge the ignorance, and your students are arrogant about their ignorance of Native Americans and their history ... This issue is much larger than the University of Illinois and ‘Chief Illiniwek.’ We are not mascots or fetishes to be worn by the dominant society. We are human beings (Delacruz 2003).

Similar resistance was met at Florida State University, where Chief Osceola performed “ritual” ceremonies at major athletics events. Susan Aschcroft, former senior reporter for the St. Petersburg Times, refuted any claims that the school had received
approval from the Seminole tribe, noting the mascot is intended to represent all Indians – not just a particular tribe (Delacruz 2003).

Ashcoff said popular use of offensive caricatures has resulted in public apathy toward Native American heritage. It is this cultural disinterest that she said makes ethnic mascots particularly insensitive. “For many American Indians, the biggest insult is not the slur in a book read by school children, the name of an NFL team, or the presence of a pretend chief on a football field,” Ashcoff said. “The true affront comes, they say, when their obligations are met with indifference” (Delacruz 2003).

Most Anglo-Americans are significantly unaware about any of the beliefs, values or cultural practices Native Americans – past or present – hold true. As an educator, she said it is vital university faculty not associate with this “halftime entertainment” that shames indigenous people from participating in school events. By remaining silent, even unintentionally, proponents of social change only cater to “dysconscious racism,” which promotes the ignorant and comical portrayals of Indian mascots (Delacruz 2003).
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Approach

To produce a historical account of the Pekin Chinks issue, multiple sources were analyzed. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) recommended a case study approach to help researchers understand this type of phenomenon. They said such a method is often used when analyzing cases of medicine, anthropology and history.

Researcher Robert Yin defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that uses multiple sources of evidence to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident” (Wimmer and Dominick 2006). After analyzing the impact of the nickname issue within a community context, it was possible to study its historical effects in Pekin, Ill., by placing focus on a thirty-five-year period (1975 to 2010).

This creative project satisfied the four criteria that Merriam suggests be included in case study research (Wimmer and Dominick 2006). First and foremost, this is very particularistic in that it focused solely on the impact of derogatory ethnic mascots in one small Midwestern city. With the vast amount of data available on controversial mascot
debate, there was also opportunity to be very *descriptive* in the final analysis, detailing how the Pekin case compares to other controversial mascot debates.

While many studies have been conducted about the impact of Native American nicknames, very little has been uncovered about other ethnically offensive mascots before this research. As a result, this research had the opportunity to be very *heuristic* in that it offers “new interpretations, new meaning, and fresh insights” on a subject previously unstudied (Wimmer and Dominick 2006). Rather than verify existing hypotheses, this study was *inductive* in its approach by discovering new relationships. For example, this analysis compared anti-Asian stereotyping with the effects of other racially insensitive American symbols.

*Sources*

This project involved interviews with multiple city and school administrators who served during the time of the mascot controversy. One city official who was important to interview was former Pekin mayor William Waldemeier, who called himself a “hard-headed kraut” at one town-hall meeting (Baker, Delegation outraged at ‘racist slurs’ 1974). Former Pekin Community High School Student President Bob Saal also provided the student perspective of the controversy’s peak during the 1974-75 school year. Additionally, Former Pekin Chamber of Commerce Director Lee Williams was another valuable resource because he publicly advocated a name change in 1975.

Open-ended personal interviews were also conducted with former Pekin school board members Dennis Stoller, Julian Smith, and Paul Shields. Longtime Pekin
Community High School teachers Bob and Gloria Neal as well as current faculty member Rick White also agreed to speak about their recollections of the Chinks controversy.

Veteran local journalists Chuck Dancey, former managing editor of the nearby *Peoria Journal Star*, and Jim Haas, *Pekin Daily Times* sports editor and reporter since 1976, both provided long-term objective insight into the issue as it unfolded. Dancey also spent years researching the nickname’s origins.

Many former students also provided insightful analysis of the community’s dedication toward the Chinks nickname. Both Jerry Norman and Claudie Huey commented on the Pekin high school championship era before the nickname was ever widely criticized. Joe Alesandrini, Class of 1980 reunion committee chairman and Pekin school board member the last twenty-five years, explained feelings his graduating class had as the last class before the nickname change.

This study also involved on-site ethnographic observations of Pekin’s customs and traditions. Secondary research was also examined to provide a timeline outlining the school’s mascot conversion from Chinks to Dragons. Fortunately, no Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests were necessary to release the documents related to the mascot controversy, which included school board minutes, memoes, and correspondence from 1974 to 1981. Past copies of the Pekin Community High School yearbook, the *Pekinian*, and the school newspaper, the *Pekinois*, also helped uncover additional information about the mascot debate. Finally, central Illinois publications such as the *Pekin Daily Times*, *Peoria Journal Star*, and *The (Bloomington, Ill.) Pantagraph*, helped tell the story through accounts of local residents.
Because the researcher grew up in Pekin, there was the potential for personal opinion or bias to influence results. Every effort was made to ensure objectivity and credibility in the research process.

Conclusion

Although case study analysis was the primary methodology employed, grounded theory was also essential for researching this issue that had not previously been studied. Grounded theory is a general method of analysis that accepts qualitative, quantitative, and hybrid data collection from surveys, experiments and case studies (Fernandez 2004).

By focusing on a different culture that has also faced prejudice, the researcher hopes this community-based case study will enhance the body of knowledge regarding controversial sports mascots and nicknames beyond existing research on Native American imagery.

Regarding research limitations, it was difficult to acquire the names and contact information for several people involved with the Pekin, Ill., controversy. Many school board members and community officials have died. Others admitted to not vividly remembering the details of several events. There were also time and distance barriers that limited the extent of this research. Several weekly trips back to central Illinois were required to personally interview sources and collect records. The researcher was grateful for the cooperation of sources in commenting on the controversial era of the town’s history.
CHAPTER IV

BODY OF THE PROJECT

Introduction

High school mascots often embody the culture of small-town America. Nicknames are cheered at local sporting events, such as fall football games. But such loyalty may have ramifications beyond athletics, lasting long after the Friday night lights fade. High school nicknames may unite diverse community members regardless of income, education, and other demographics. Though often harmless in nature, many high school, college, and professional sports nicknames have been scrutinized in recent years for their racial insinuations.

The Pekin (Ill.) “Chinks” illustrate that level of scrutiny. Deemed “one of the most infamous mascots in American history” by Marc Sheehan in his collection of distinct extinct and dropped mascots, the high school’s nickname nevertheless avoided criticism for decades despite its anti-Asian connotation. Most ethnically derived mascots in America feature Native American depictions, but the small central Illinois city of Pekin displayed a much more obscure Chinese representation for its community high school. His name: Mr. Banboo, according to the school’s 1962 “Chink and Chinklette Rulebook.”
The school rulebook touted him as a representation of school spirit and good sportsmanship in all Pekin high school athletic endeavors. His stereotypical depiction was also displayed in the gymnasium after a school-wide contest selected Mr. Banboo as his name.

“Wise sayings, such as ‘Have spirit will win!’ and ‘Boos don’t make baskets!’ were submitted by the student body and posted beneath this little Chinaman,” the 1962 Chink and Chinklette rulebook read.

Now considered blatantly inappropriate, at the time such imagery was apparently never questioned. Defenders learned the Asian mascot represented Pekin’s adopted Chinese heritage. The wife of an early settler, Ann Eliza Cromwell, was credited for naming the city in 1829 after Peking, China – now Beijing.

According to local folklore, Cromwell thought Pekin was located on the direct opposite side of the world from Peking. Modern mapping (Pekin: 40° 34' 3" N, 89° 38' 26" W; present-day Beijing: 39° 55' 44" N, 116° 23' 18" E) would quickly disprove this myth, but that did not stop Pekin from experiencing a period of “chinois” – the French word denoting a fascination with Chinese items. The Eastern theme influenced the town’s commercial and residential architecture as well as its Asian cuisine and Chinese antique stores.

The influence carried over to Pekin high school athletics, as the school became known as the “Celestials” in the 1870s after Peking’s iconic status as the “Celestial City.” By the 1920s, both the “Reds” and “Red Robots” also became attached to the local sports teams. A decade later the Chinks began making headlines.
Pekin native Chuck Dancey, longtime managing editor of the nearby Peoria Journal Star, researched the origins of the controversial Chinks mascot. His unpublished report chronicled the measures early journalists took to avoid the monotony of repeatedly calling Pekin by the same name.

“Where did ‘Chinks’ for Pekin athletes come from, originally?” Dancey asked.

“Not from Pekin Community High School. Perhaps, not in Pekin.”

The “Red and White” and the “Red Riders” were among many other nicknames used by local publications, but in 1932 a Peoria Journal Transcript reporter supposedly coined the nickname, Chinks.

Dancey remains skeptical whether the name first originated in one of the two Peoria publications – the Journal or the Star, which later merged, or the hometown Pekin Times, where it appeared the next year on Nov. 2, 1933, in a football preview subhead. Just ten days later, the term Chinks was again included under a banner headline, but in neither case did the nickname appear in the text of the story.

“A headline writer not only has to find a substitute word to avoid repeating Pekin again, but it needs to be a word that will fit the space and size decreed,” Dancey said, explaining how concisely newspaper headline writers must work. “It is, of course, possible that the term appeared in some lost or blurred form, somewhere, sometime (in the text of a sports story), but the fact is that once it appeared, within ten days, it was repeated – and for the same use.”

Two years later, Pekin Community High School (PCHS) published the Chinks nickname in its “Red and White Pictorial.” Chinks appeared intermittently across local
headlines and high school publications the following years, and by the early 1940s the basketball team’s continued success helped propel the nickname into full-time usage.

“It was, in any case, clearly the success we enjoyed under that name at state that popularized ‘Chinks’ in Pekin and invested a lot of sentiment in it – after I graduated (in 1934),” Dancey said. “Until then it was, apparently, just another of a headline writer’s option to make things fit, and/or sportwriters’ device for livening up his copy.”

Despite never being officially declared the school mascot, ardent supporters of Pekin athletics embraced the nickname for nearly five decades. Yet thirty years since changing to the “Dragons,” a small yet contentious faction continues to embrace the term Chinks. This fading minority has been muffled by supporters of the current mascot, but according to some residents, Pekin still struggles to shake the racist reputation its old mascot helped generate.

_The 1960s – The Glory Days_

Pekin residents in the early- to mid-twentieth century may have claimed they were unaware their Asian mascot was derogatory. Because the actions of the city were largely unknown beyond central Illinois, supporters were rarely challenged. In fact, the controversial nickname itself avoided significant attention through the mid-twentieth century.

Until 1964, Pekin was rarely in the state or national spotlight. By that time, Pekin Community High School had established itself as a perennial athletic powerhouse, particularly in basketball. Pekin native Claudie Huey said she was overwhelmed her
freshman year by how crowded basketball and football games were because the school was so successful in sports.

“They were building East campus at that point, and my freshman year was the last year all four grades were at the old West campus,” Huey said. “And as a freshman, I thought it was so wonderful we could go to the basketball games in the old gym that had a big second story.”

Even as a newer, larger gym opened the next year, she said the school continued to play in front of packed crowds each weekend. Huey said her days in high school were indicative of better times in Pekin.

“We had a very strong blue-collar community, but they had a very strong work ethic,” Huey said. “They believed in education, and the parents still backed the school and disciplined their children.”

The Pekin community embraced its Chinks wholeheartedly during her sophomore year when the team successfully defeated the Cobden Appleknockers fifty to forty-five to win the 1964 Illinois high school state basketball championship.

Ironically, it was the southern Illinois-based Appleknockers that received the majority of attention for its unique school nickname. For many out-of-towners, this was also the first time being exposed to athletes and fans from Pekin.

“Pekin businessmen and other fans who were asked to sum up their sentiments concerning the Chinks’ victory … almost without exception expressed displeasure of the publicity, or maybe we should say the lack of publicity given Pekin and the Chinks in
most news coverage of the tournament,” *Pekin Daily Times* writer Helen Parmley wrote in her reaction article immediately following the 1964 state championship.

*Pekin Daily Times* sports editor Jim Haas, an area resident since he started working at the local newspaper in 1974, was eleven when he watched Pekin win its first state title on television. That was his first introduction to Pekin, but like most people at the time he said he did not question the school’s nickname.

“I didn’t even know where Pekin was. I just knew they were in Illinois because they were playing for the state basketball title,” Haas said. “In the mid-sixties before all the great social interest, it was a pretty innocent time so you didn’t give two thoughts about what these schools were named – nor did anyone else.”

PCHS golf coach Bob Neal first learned about Pekin while attending nearby Illinois State University during the 1964 and ’67 state basketball championship seasons. The soon-to-be Pekin resident roomed in college with a recent Chinks graduate during those championship seasons, but he said the nickname was never brought up in conversation.

“We were well aware they were the Pekin Chinks, and I don’t remember anybody ever saying anything about the word Chinks. It was just accepted,” Neal said. “Same thing with ’67 (state championship); it wasn’t something I thought about as an outsider coming here. That was just their nickname – period.”

The two state championships infused Pekin residents with pride, enough so that on both occasions longtime mayor and local politician William Waldmeier publicly declared “Chinks Week” in recognition of the teams’ successes.
“Traveling in the state, one need only to mention he is from Pekin,” the first-year mayor announced during a 1967 Pekin city council meeting just days after Pekin’s 75-59 win over Carbondale High School to win the school’s second state title in four seasons. “Everyone knows where Pekin is – thanks to the Chinks,” Waldmeier was quoted as saying in the Pekin Daily Times.

Victory celebrations rallied the community behind the nickname, but while it was a great time to live in Pekin, being considered a “Chink” was not as glamorous. The basketball team’s continued success raised the city’s reputation outside central Illinois. Huey was a freshman at Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., during the 1967 state basketball championship season. Nearly sixty miles from home, she was still able to cheer on old friends through a faint radio broadcast.

Her high school’s nickname did prove to be an issue for her college friends, much to the surprise of Huey.

“My college roommates found out my team nickname was the Chinks, and I found out how other people reacted to that, and I was embarrassed,” Huey said. “I was horrified people thought we were a racist town.

“We were probably naïve to even understand that many other communities and people of Chinese origin thought that it was offensive,” she continued. “Why would we name ourselves something that is a horrible, offensive name?”

During his time on the 1967 state championship basketball squad, Jerry Norman said there “was an incredible sense of pride you had to be a Pekin Chink.” He associated the nickname with winning and success, as did many Pekin residents at the time.
“Looking back, we were a white community, we were naïve, and you never thought that Chink would be a negative,” Norman said. “We always thought we were standing for something to be proud of.”

Adding to the controversy, the high school held a unique introduction before each game. During this welcoming ceremony, one cheerleader from the opposing team would greet two PCHS students, known as the Chink and Chinklette, at mid-court for a reverent bow. This was intended as a gesture of respect toward the visiting team. Pekin Community High School. Faculty member Rick White recalls the ceremony in “Pekin: A Pictorial History”:

Each year the student body voted who would have the honor of serving as the Chink and Chinklette for the pre-game basketball ceremonies. The gymnasium lights were turned off with a spotlight on the Chink, Chinklette and a member of the visiting squad of cheerleaders. The Chink entered from one corner, the Chinklette from the other corner and the visiting cheerleader walked down the center with all three meeting in the middle of the court. The Chink and Chinklette, dressed in embroidered Chinese outfits, bowed as a sign of friendship and welcome to Pekin High School. Each took one of the cheerleader’s arms and together all three walked across the basketball court. It was quite an honor to have been chosen to serve as Chink and Chinklette for the year.

One of Huey’s good friends was elected to be the Chinklette during high school, a role not taken lightly by students or community members.

“It was classy,” Huey said, “and it was silent in the gym during this ceremony because it was a moment of pride.”

According to Norman, even those outside the community appreciated and anticipated the next time they would see the Chink and Chinklette ceremony.
“A lot of my friends were other players on other teams in Peoria, and they thought it was classy and it was impressive,” Norman said. “In fact, one of my best friends told me it was the classiest thing he’d ever seen in his life.”

Some Pekin residents from the controversial era liken the Chink and Chinklette ceremony to the Chief Illiniwek dance that once took place before each University of Illinois home basketball and football game. Intended as a symbolic tribute, proponents of the Illiniwek dance touted its authenticity. The Pekin ceremony, on the other hand, carried no claims of accurate Chinese culture.

Nonetheless, former sports editor Haas said the ceremony actually had positive effects for the community already hampered by a racist reputation.

“You are talking about an era where you have an all-white community playing in a conference that is predominantly all black student-athletes, and I’m sure the racial tensions in the sixties were a lot higher than they are now,” Haas said. “This was a show that welcomed them to our house to speak and try to disarm those thoughts, feelings, and fears at the time.”

**The 1970s — The Awakening**

Whereas many Pekinites may have been impressed and touched by the Chink and Chinklette ceremony, not all residents supported the pregame ritual.

Gloria Neal and her husband, Bob, moved to Pekin in the late 1960s, where they both served as high school English teachers until the turn of the twenty-first century. The duo acclimated to their new community, where they still remain actively involved long
after retirement. More than forty years after she first arrived in Pekin, Gloria admitted she was never a keen supporter of the Chink and Chinklette ceremony.

“The Chink and Chinklette, who were our mascots, really were kind of pathetic,” she said, admitting she much preferred the Dragon mascot that later greeted fans. “You wonder if (the University of) Illinois will ever get over Illiniwek. That dance made you move. The Chink and Chinklette never gave fans the same warm, fuzzy feeling; whereas, the Chief dance did give U. of I. fans a warm, fuzzy feeling.”

Although she is of Chinese descent, she didn’t consider the nickname and mascot offensive. She simply found the ceremony in poor taste. As one of very few Asian-American residents of Pekin at the time – the self-labeled “token Chink back then” – she came to the nickname’s defense in 1974, according to Pekin Daily Times accounts, when cultural activists such as the National Organization of Chinese Americans and the Chinese Image Promotion Organization publicly demanded the Pekin high school to change its nickname and mascot.

“I can see the point of the organizations protesting,” she told the Peoria Journal Star in July 1974. “It is normally an ethnic slur, but people here don’t use the word in a derogatory sense. ... I guess I prefer Chinks because it’s so nice to see somebody use it in a nice instead of a nasty way.”

Her sentiments were featured the following day after Connie Seals, executive director of the Illinois Commission on Human Relations, announced in a July 1974 Peoria Journal Star article that she would legally pursue a nickname change for all Pekin athletic teams.
“(Chinks) is derogatory to Chinese people,” Seals said in her statement. “Every ethnic group in this country is trying to improve its image and its lot in America, and I think even the people in Pekin would want that.”

Seals said her efforts to recommend a nickname change were supported by then-Illinois Gov. Daniel Walker. But her pursuit again of a new nickname did not sit well with then Pekin Mayor Waldmeier, who voiced his displeasure during a city council meeting.

“...some damnable institution is spending taxpayers’ money worrying about the name of a basketball team or a football is ridiculous,” Waldmeier said before the council, explaining how he was “upset to no end” over the negative media coverage Pekin received as a result of Seals’ inquiry, according to a Pekin Daily Times report.

A Pekin Board of Education memo notes that Seals later withdrew from publicly involving state agencies in the debate – reportedly as a result of “a blistering editorial” produced by Peoria-based WIRL radio station, although a Pekin Daily Times article from the time suggests Seals simply had a prior commitment. Her absence did not stop the nation’s cultural and academic communities from weighing in.

“What I can’t understand is that many schools with names like Indians, which is to my mind a neutral term, have voluntarily changed their names,” said Samuel C. Chu, professor in Chinese history at Ohio State University, in a July 11, 1974, Peoria Journal Star article. “This is the only school I know of that has dug in their heels.”

The reluctance was shared by community members and school administrators alike. Pekin school district superintendent William H. Holman said both parties would have to come together before considering a name change. From his perspective, which
was documented by the *Peoria Journal Star*, the oft-mentioned Dragons seemed more suited as the school’s insignia than its nickname.

“Can you see,” Holman said, “cheerleaders leading a cheer on ‘Dragons’?”

Neal, on the other hand, already expressed interest in the replacement mascot even during her defense of the Chinks.

“I guess I wouldn’t mind something like Dragons after all,” she told the *Peoria Journal Star* in 1974. “I’ll always think of the Chinks in terms of two state basketball championships, but it would be kind of neat to have a fire-breathing dragon mascot.”

Before Seals’ personal crusade against the Chinks nickname, both Bob and Gloria Neal said little attention was paid to the controversial mascot. Had the nickname carried into the era of instant news, they agreed a huge media blitz would have prevented Pekin from remaining under the radar for so many years.

After the death of beloved Pekin native and U.S. Senator Everett Dirksen in 1973, then-current President Richard Nixon visited the city for his personal friend’s funeral, according to the 1985 PCHS yearbook. Such a spotlight had an adverse impact on Pekin, as the Chinks nickname aroused national attention as a result. Even after the Nixon visit, the Neals said opposing fans were still more inclined to judge Pekin for being an “all-white town” rather than ridicule the school’s nickname.

“That may be a sad commentary on people back then because none of us, and that includes people from surrounding towns or opponents, thought anything about it,” Gloria
Neal said. “We were all happy in our ignorance.” Despite the town’s reputation as a racist community, Neal insisted her Chinese origins were never used against her.

“I taught at Pekin for thirty-two years, and never to my face were there any racial slurs by students,” Gloria said. “Now, they might have but never in front of my face. That’s like I never heard them cuss me out, but I’m sure they did when I couldn’t hear them.”

“I think another thing that showed how this community viewed Chinese is that sometimes a lot is made about interracial relationships,” Bob Neal (who is white) said. “Well, this is one (referring to his marriage to Gloria), and I don’t think to our face anybody has ever said anything about that at all. Obviously, it’s not something that’s on the minds of people in this community.”

Despite coming to the community’s defense, Gloria Neal admitted her opinions on the school’s nickname changed as scrutiny mounted against the mascot. Even before the Nixon visit, school board documents from the time revealed concern expressed over the steady stream of unhappy letters, culminating in a Dec. 12, 1972, memo:

The situation has been mentioned to individual board members in the past, but no mention has been made of it in an official meeting,” the memo read. “It seems the problem must soon be faced and some action taken regarding it. It might be advisable to discuss this at our dinner meeting in December (1972) and decide on a plan to follow in involving students and alumni in the final decision.

The school board instead allowed the matter to linger, and by the time the 1974-75 school year began, every school and city administrator had been contacted by advocates across the country. As a result, a dividing line was quickly drawn. The community overwhelmingly supported keeping the nickname, Chinks. But according to
community observers, Pekin “transplants” were less inclined to support the Asian moniker.

Rick White, Pekin Community High School faculty member since 1973, said those closest to him questioned his employment at the school – not for its mascot but because of the town’s racist reputation. As quick as he was to denounce such claims, White also sided against the longtime school nickname.

“You never really know your craft until you teach it, so once I taught history I soon learned (Chinks) was a racial slur,” White said. “Although it was not meant as such, it was taken as such, and I came to the viewpoint it should be dropped.”

Once the mascot debate was covered in the media, White said the controversy correlated perfectly with the Chinese-American history portion of his social studies courses.

“Having that kind of thing happen in your own backyard was a rare opportunity to get involved,” White said. “I know we debated in my classrooms all the time about issues such as this.”

For the teacher who prided himself on engaging students in classroom discussion, White said the controversy allowed him to educate students on the nickname’s origins. The struggle, he admitted, was hearing contrasting viewpoints.

“It’s often difficult when I thought I saw the position so clearly to hear people tenaciously hold onto their views about retaining the name when I could see absolutely no justification for retaining it whatsoever,” he said.
The debate came to a boiling point when one of White’s most impassioned students disagreed with her teacher’s position enough to storm out of class. White suspects the girl contacted her father, who arrived at the classroom shortly after to settle the issue and “wasn’t going to leave until he had his satisfaction.” White said he can’t recall in thirty-three years of teaching anything similar occurring at PCHS.

“That is an example of how impassioned many people became, me included, on this issue,” White said.

The girl’s father was likely among many second- and third-generation PCHS graduates in the community. Those who blindly supported the nickname carried resentment toward anyone promoting change.

But by October 1974, supporters of the nickname, Chinks, could no longer dodge adversity. City and school officials agreed to host a group of Chinese-American visitors on Oct. 7. Rather than stage a formal protest, an Aug. 30, 1974, Pekin Daily Times article says the cultural advocates had decided to visit Pekin in an attempt to educate the city on the nickname’s disparaging origins.

Lee Williams, executive director of the Pekin Chamber of Commerce at the time, recognized the spotlight about to be cast on his city. Through public statements and constant communication with the Chinese-American organizations, Williams said he did what he could to prevent permanent damage against Pekin’s reputation.

“I think the whole town was chagrined to find out the word Chink was considered derogatory,” Williams said in July 12, 1974, article in the Pekin Daily Times. “So when the Chinese representatives from Chicago came down to talk to the city of Pekin, I met
with them with an open mind in trying to figure out what exactly would happen if we opposed them. And that was not something we wanted to do,” he later said.

Williams was among less than a half-dozen Pekin city officials to publicly consider changing the nickname. Before visiting with students, Williams attended a meeting between Waldmeier and the Chinese-American visitors.

“If the name is hurting anybody, it should be dropped,” Williams told the Daily Pantagraph, a Bloomington, Ill., publication. “It’s nothing sacred. In fact, I am sure it will be changed. Five years from now you will never hear it again.”

His prediction proved to foreshadow the controversial nickname’s demise. It was among very few positive statements made during the initial meeting with the Chinese delegation that included Kung-Lee Wang, president of the National Organization of Chinese Americans, Ted Liu of the Midwest steering committee on health, education and welfare, and David Moy of the New Youth Center of Chicago.

Warm welcomes and introductions quickly turned into a back-and-forth battle between parties, with both sides holding firm on their position. Bloomington (Ill.) Daily Pantagraph reporter Rick Baker wrote that “niceties were short-lived” once Liu and Moy expressed their dismay toward the Pekin population.

“I am very shocked and outraged at your gall and audacity in using a very racist slur,” Liu said.

“I express the same outrage,” Moy added. “I suffered the slurs of being called a Chink while I was growing up. I am not a Chink. I am a Chinese-American.”
The mayor was quick to defend the use of the school’s mascot, likening it to other ethnically derived nicknames used at the time.

“I’m often referred to as a ‘hard-headed kraut.’ I’m proud of it,” Waldmeier said. “I will be happy to show you a group of Italians here which calls itself the Dago club. One of the Chinese mothers in this town has a ‘Chink Power’ sticker on her door.”

Waldmeier’s defense did not sit well with Liu and Wang.

“The Dago Club and kraut are your choices, but you have to understand that we do not want to be called Chinks,” Liu said. “It is our choice to be called Chinese-Americans or Asian-Americans – but not Chinks.”

“We believe you took this name Chinks with good intentions with no intention to slur anyone, but unfortunately, in reality, such a word is a racist slur – the same as nigger, Polock and Jap,” Wang added in the newspaper story.

He then insisted Mayor Waldmeier “use the power of his leadership to effect the change,” but both the mayor and Pekin city attorney Alfred Black insisted the city could do nothing to force the school to change the name of its athletic teams.

“If the city would pass an ordinance that no one could use the word Chinks, the ordinance would not be worth the paper it was written on,” Black said. “Neither can we control what young people say.”

Black suspected the Chinese delegates likened the city government to the same system used in Chicago at the time in which the city could dictate decisions made in the educational system.
"When you really think out, this was a title that was given to a high school. It was not given to the city itself," Waldmeier later said. "So, really, it was a job for the high school to perform and decide how to resolve the question."

Even if formal action could not be taken, the Chinese-Americans were adamant the mayor’s office still serve as a leading voice against the derogatory nickname.

"The great mayor is a leading citizen and has the power of moral persuasion," Wang said. "He also has a moral duty."

Waldmeier instead continued to defend the nickname’s usage, calling the Chinks mascot a tribute to China.

"No it isn’t," Wang retorted. "You are slurring 800 million people. Choose a better name for your teams."

At that point, Waldmeier insisted he would not be “cross-examined” and held his ground on retaining the nickname, Chinks, unless town sentiment changed. The contentious debate marked the last time Waldmeier and the Chinese delegates publicly met.

"Well, they were more heated than anyone else, really and truthfully," Waldmeier later said. "Did it really matter to us as much as it mattered to them? So, in seeking a change, obviously they were going to more direct, more critical, and it was just a case of everyone going along and trying to figure out what a solution was."

Taking the city officials’ advice, the Chinese delegation shifted its focus to the high school. They encountered similar reluctance from the school administration, as Supt.
Holman insisted in an Oct. 8, 1974, article in the *Peoria Journal Star* that his job hanged in the balance if he were to change the name.

"Traditions aren't easily changed; superintendents are easier changed than traditions are," Holman told Wang during a school tour. He also explained how the nickname was never made official and instead evolved over time. "It won't be changed by evolution this time."

When questioned by Wang and company, Holman insisted he had no personal opinion on the proposed name change, although Holman was recorded months earlier in a newspaper story supporting the Chinks nickname.

"As far as the local community and the student body are concerned, it is not used in a derogatory manner," Holman told the *Pekin Daily Times* in July 1974 shortly after the state began its crusade against the mascot. "When ninety-nine percent of the people (in Pekin) think of Chinks, they think of the basketball team or the football team. They're not thinking of any Chinese people."

Nonetheless, he told the *Pekin Daily Times* that such a decision "would be up to the student council to present to the student body."

As a result, Wang, Liu and Moy agreed to meet with the PCHS student council and the rest of the student body to plead their case against the use of Chinks as the school's nickname. During a special session with the PCHS Student Council, the thirteen-member delegation discussed the beloved mascot with student representatives. And beloved it evidently was, with a random student poll taken just days earlier going 79-4 in favor of retaining the Chinks nickname, according to a *Daily Pantagraph* article.
White considered the meeting a step in the right direction.

"I was very proud of Pekin High and whoever else was instrumental for inviting them here and trying to get that perspective," White said. "We could have, as we did for decades, stayed closed to the situation and pretended that all those people who were looking at us were doing so with no cause when there really was cause."

An Asian-American-targeted "Youth Magazine" was also distributed by the high school defending the use of the nickname, which included an explanation of why school officials suspected the name’s origins remained unknown across the community.

"Ignorance of the ‘true’ meaning of the word may be the result of the lack of teaching of racial terminology in Pekin schools," the statement read. "We do not apologize for not acquainting Pekin students with terms like ‘chink,’ ‘nigger,’ ‘gook,’ or ‘honky.’"

The visit enacted the first action taken against the nickname, as student council members agreed to hold a school-wide referendum on the issue. Student Council President Bob Saal later said he was surprised the vote was not confined to student representatives, but he said he believed the administration greatly influenced the day’s events.

"(The school administration) didn’t want to leave it in the hands of just a handful, and the buck was passed to the student body from the people who ultimately should have been decision makers, and that’s the school board," Saal said thirty-six years after that day – one he still vividly remembers. "They wanted me to handle it in a particular way,"
and then there was a way I thought it should be handled. Well, I’m sure there’s a way our guests thought it should be handled.”

The principal of Pekin Community High School’s west campus, Ray Morelli, insisted he remained open-minded about the day’s events despite his insistence in a 1974 article of The Pekinois that no real action would come as a result of the meeting.

“The Pekin students should not be pressured into making a definite decision about using the Chinks name,” Morelli told the high school student paper. “The decision, contrary to popular belief, is not the students’ decision. Legally, I believe, the school board is the only entity which has the legal authority or responsibility to make such a decision.”

Morelli limited the minority group’s visit to the school’s east campus, where only juniors and seniors attended class. He rationalized that underclassmen were too young to maturely debate the matter, and he also told the representatives from National Association of Chinese Americans that any additional visits would disrupt the day’s educational process.

“We are putting pressure on these kids that is not fair,” Morelli said in an Oct. 8, 1974 article in the Peoria Journal Star. “I don’t think we can pressure or place the responsibility on this group of students. It’s an adult decision.”

Such exclusion was among many reasons why Saal said he felt school administrators did not want students to engage with their Asian-American visitors.
“The administration would have preferred this never happened, so you can lead to your own conclusions how they wanted it to be handled,” Saal said. “They wanted it to be as low key as possible.”

The visit was far from low key, drawing publicity from local, regional and even national media. Reporters representing the Associated Press, Chicago Tribune, Pekin Daily Times, Peoria Journal Star, NBC-TV, Time-Life Inc., and local television outlets were all in attendance to chronicle the controversy that had already grabbed national headlines, according to the PCHS student newspaper.

“The teams here have had national exposure and now the (Chinks) insult is known around this country,” one delegate said while addressing the PCHS student council. “Give us a mutual respect for each other and the name.”

Wang, a Maryland resident at the time, told the Pekin Daily Times he was “shocked” when he first heard the Chinks nickname during a television broadcast two years earlier. Saal said the meeting yielded mixed results for the Chinese delegation.

“These folks coming down sort of opened the eyes of a lot of people, but it didn’t change the way they felt,” Saal said, “the allegiance and the pride of being the Chinks.”

Saal said he recommend the group expand and promote their cause to the general student body. During the lunch hour, members of the Chinese-American delegation randomly approached students to gauge their awareness on the issue by asking if they truly knew what Chinks meant.
“Most of the kids said, ‘Well, you know, I grew up here and my dad was a Chink, and we look at it with a sense of pride and honor,’” Saal said. “Then, they would get frustrated because they were sitting there looking at someone who was telling them what was a dirty word to them was something we had a source of pride in. They found that pretty consistent throughout the day, and they realized their task was going to be a lot tougher than what they anticipated.”

Recorded student reactions were both constructive and unreasonable in nature, as many students left school on Oct. 7, 1974, with an opinion on the visit. While some felt educated, others told student newspaper The Pekinois they felt harassed.

“‘It was very good,’” student Marggie Seeyle told the student paper. “‘They changed a lot of people’s minds and were very positive in their thoughts.’”

“‘It was worthwhile because it planted a seed of guilt in the hearts of many people,’” senior Brad Helmer added.

Other students considered the visit less worthwhile in nature.

“I think the visit was a waste of money for the Chinese-Americans,” senior David Rockhold said.

“Put them on a boat and send them back to China,” Dave Pope said to a student reporter.

Saal admitted he was equally as reluctant as city and school administrators to be “the student body president who changed the name,” although he said he “may have been” among those students who voted in favor of a name change.
He was vastly outnumbered, however. In the November 1974 school-wide vote that resulted in 1,234 votes to retain the name versus 182 votes to change the Chinks mascot. The overwhelming margin came as no surprise to Williams.

“\textit{I was pretty sure it wouldn't be changed if it was put to a student vote,}” he told newspapers. “\textit{The name is derogatory not only to Chinese-Americans, but to the city of Pekin. The chamber of commerce hasn't taken an official position because the issue is stupid and ridiculous.}”

It did not take long before media noticed the lopsided vote. Central Illinois papers touted the late-November vote as an unwelcomed Thanksgiving present for the Chinese-American representatives who visited Pekin High School the month before, while the \textit{Chicago Sun-Times} wrote its own scathing editorial.

Pekin Community High School has voted to retain the nickname of ‘Chink’ for its sports teams, even though the Organization of Chinese Americans and others tried to convince students and faculty the nickname is a slur. The student council faculty advisor said the decision was a vote in favor of tradition. He also said the seven-to-one margin reflects the student resentment over outsiders telling them what they should do. So be it. If Pekin prefers to ignore the feelings of ‘outsiders,’ no one can do much about it. It is a pity, nonetheless. Eventually, the students who voted to retain the nickname will graduate. At least a few of them will move into a larger world where they will have to live with some of the outsiders they now resent. We hope they will develop more concern for the feelings of racial and ethnic minorities than they have now.

Williams instead turned to an alternative approach in order to gradually phase out the controversial nickname. Rather than abruptly announce the mascot change, he claimed he worked privately with local media as well as city and school administrators to initiate the change.
"We got the name from newspapers. They can make it disappear," Williams told the Daily Pantagraph in November 1974, possibly alluding to his confidential efforts to eliminate the name of Chinks.

He may have yielded immediate results, as the Peoria Journal Star – Illinois’ largest paper south of Chicago at the time, announced the next year it would no longer associate Pekin Community High School athletic programs with the nickname Chinks. The decision to stop using the slur gained headlines across the country, thanks to an Associated Press wire story.

"To the people that coined the nickname in Pekin, it still is not used in an offensive way in their minds," said Tom Pugh, associate editor at the time. "But any Chinese readers we have that read the term will be offended by it. There’s no reason we have to offend Chinese readers every time we cover a Pekin athletic team."

Dancey sided with his colleagues despite having lifelong ties to Pekin. While the first known reference to the Chinks nickname occurred two years before his graduation at the same newspaper he later managed, the Pekin high graduate said the mascot had not yet caught on. As a result, Dancey said he had no emotional connection to the Chinks mascot.

"I think it was appropriate not to want to be associated with (the nickname) and not play a part in it even though we truthfully probably played a part in it originally," Dancey said from the same Pekin house he has called home for decades.

He received letters of recognition from minority groups complimenting the new policy. Vice president Marian Shaw of the Chicago-based Asian Forum group said the
Journal Star's efforts influenced the organization to join "the vanguard of a coalition of Asian-American groups which seeks to have this name either dropped from usage or changed to something more appropriate to the Oriental image."

Since their immigration to the U.S. one-hundred and twenty-five years ago, the Chinese in this country have had to live with a "coolie" stereotype, despite the many contributions they have made to American life. Except for comic masquerades, they – as well as other Orientals – have been the "invisible men." Now, they feel they can remain invisible no more, and want to be accorded their rightful place in American society.

The nickname's omission from the Peoria Journal Star headlines, which circulated to more than 100,000 homes across central Illinois, was all reportedly part of Williams' master plan to phase out the nickname.

Rather than have the mayor or chamber of commerce demand a public, high-profile nickname change, Williams said he instead let the nickname's use decline over time.

"So, we talked to the sports reporters (from the various local outlets), and they agreed they would also just let it happen," Williams said later.

Former Mayor Waldmeier refuted having any involvement with such an arrangement. He said many closed-door meetings about the controversy did occur, but to his knowledge he did not recall such a discussion taking place.

"Why not just do it if it has to be done?" Waldmeier said. "My point being, what would you have gained by saying we'll change it in five years? That doesn't make sense. You either change it or you don't change it."
After students overwhelmingly sided one way, the matter was handed to the district school board. Saal presented the final tally at the December 1974 meeting, and board president Julian Smith reacted by creating a subcommittee “to see if common ground can be established” about whether the nickname should indeed remain intact, according to a *Pekin Daily Times* article.

“I’d like to thank the Student Council – on behalf of the board – for conducting the vote concerning the school nickname,” Smith said in the Dec. 17, 1974, newspaper story. “The result is a clear indication that the students oppose a change. A majority of adults in the community who have talked to me about the subject support the student position. Obviously, the name Chinks has earned a position of high respect in this community.

“We cannot ignore completely, however, the feeling of persons outside the area – in the state and in the nation,” he continued.

Many outside parties personally expressed their dismay to Smith. As an employee of the Peoria-based Caterpillar corporation, he received calls from Chinese-American advocates as well as the company’s vice president – all of whom urged Smith to take action against the Chinks nickname.

“(Wang) actually said, ‘I understand exactly what you’re situation is,’” Smith said, recalling his phone conversation with the NOCA president. “‘You don’t consider it as that, but I have a bunch of people here just eating me alive because they don’t like the fact that you’re using the name.’”
While the overwhelming majority of PCHS students voted to keep the nickname, not all student representatives shared the same position. PCHS Student Council secretary Michael Masters offered a contrasting view to the board through his written statement, which was saved in the board meeting’s minutes.

A school name is necessary to give a school a sense of character and individuality, but it is not the definitive factor in a school’s success or failure. Rather, it is the character of students, faculty and administration themselves which make a school what it is. It is our sincere belief that Pekin Community High School would be a worthwhile institution regardless of the name of our athletic teams. Our success in sports would not change because of a name. No matter what we might like to believe, the name Chinks is offensive to Americans of Asian ancestry. Obviously, we do not wish to offend a sizeable ethnic group, and changing the school’s name would be a simple enough task, improving the reputation of the school statewide.

Prior to his appearance before the school board, Masters also wrote an editorial in the school newspaper The Pekinois chastising his fellow students for turning their backs on the Chinese-American visitors.

“Are we, the students of PCHS, prejudiced?“ Masters asked. “When you get right down to it, are we red-necked, prejudiced, white bigots? Hate to say it, but that’s the way it looks.

“When you know – you’ve been told a thousand times – that the word Chink offends the Chinese-Americans, and you keep the name, you must be a bigot!” Masters continued before including an asterisk containing the Webster’s Dictionary definition of bigot: “one obstinately and irrationally, often intolerantly, devoted to his own church, party, belief or opinion.”
Staff artist Marcia Brandl then presented a drawn depiction of one unnamed Asian delegate beneath the editorial as he questioned motives behind keeping the nickname of Chinks.

“Man, can’t you understand you’ve hurt their feelings? Let’s change the name!” the caption read.

Both Masters and Brandl were part of a student newspaper staff that collectively supported a nickname change, led by *Pekinois* editor Nancy Walker. She said she sympathized with the arguments made by the Chinese-American activists.

“These guys have told us the name Chinks hurts their feelings,” Walker said before the school-wide vote, according to an Oct. 8, 1974, *Peoria Journal Star* article. “It doesn’t matter why. It hurts their feelings. Why do we want to keep the name when it really hurts them?” Her viewpoint was received with immediate applause from the Chinese delegation.

Listening to cries from both sides of the issue, Smith exercised his power as board president to create a new “Chinks subcommittee” to further evaluate the issue before taking any action. He named Paul Shields chairman of the group, and a *Pekin Daily Times* story says fellow board members Chuck Burson and Dennis Stoller were also appointed to oversee the controversy.

The subcommittee received instant input, not only from students and town residents but also from many passionate onlookers across the country who flooded Pekin with letters. Nearly every letter expressed dismay toward the townspeople’s reluctance to embrace change. These letters were not only sent to school board members, but they were
also carbon copied to city and school administrators as well as local publications and politicians.

The Organization of Chinese Americans pushed its agenda to other Asian-based cultural groups both near and far. Many groups joined the cause, including the Midwest Asians for Unity, the Chinese Club of the Greater Kansas City area, the Pacific/Asian Coalition and the Japanese American Citizens League – among many others.

A letter from Maxine Chan, representative of the Washington state Commission on Asian-American Affairs, wasted no time berating the PCHS student president. “Dear ‘Honky,’” her letter began – an attempt to raise attention to the irony Chan considered at hand.

“Did you enjoy being called a honky?” Chan asked. “I don’t think so. Just as we, the Asian-American community, do not enjoy being called ‘Chink.’ No matter how much pride is put into the usage of the word, it’s still derogatory.”

Additional outcries were heard from groups holding no cultural affiliation, hailing from various religious, educational and state agencies where substantial Asian populations exist. Dozens more with no group affiliation also criticized the Pekin community. Many individuals cited their own Asian ancestry when scolding Supt. Holman and the rest of the school administration, including Min Chueh Chang, of Shrewsbury, Mass., who wrote a letter to the school.

“Perhaps you don’t have sufficient influence over those who voted for bigotry; however, none in your position can escape responsibility for the shame your school must bear,” Chang wrote. “As a member of the human race, I can only pity your school for the
ignorance it displays, and as an American citizen, may I ask how you are educating our youth?"

Philadelphia lawyer William M. Marutani, who served in World War II alongside his two brothers – despite their Japanese heritage, provided his own commentary in a written letter to the school. From a legal perspective, Marutani wrote that some grey areas existed over the nickname’s legitimacy, but from a moral perspective he insisted the school board failed its students. He continued:

To adopt, adhere to and perpetuate a racial epithet, no matter how “innocently” or with so-called “good intentions,” is contrary to, and destructive of these high ideals of Americanism that we so proudly espouse and advocate. Accordingly, in the name of American decency and our common desire to make this, our land, a better place for all of us, this request is submitted to you and to the school board: do not perpetuate racism by adhesion to the racial term Chinks.

Law professor George Cho of St. Louis-based Washington University also offered a legal critique of the nickname’s usage. But regardless of Pekin’s “right” to use the mascot, he said the city should evaluate whether to “exercise that right at the expense of others.”

Citing several instances of institutional racism in United States history, Cho said the country failed to adequately provide equal support to all races. By refusing to change its nickname, he wrote in his letter that Pekin will only continue to cultivate such racism.

“If you decide that you want to change your name, I sincerely hope that you do it for the right reasons, as I hope all of the ‘Pekin High School’s’ of this country might,” Cho wrote. “But until that day, the nightmare continues, and you are the living proof of that.”
By February 1975, the matter was revived once the subcommittee returned to the school board with several proposals. First and foremost, it announced the mascot would continue to represent Pekin athletics for the remainder of the school year. Shields presented the school board with a four-point proposal, which was documented in the meeting minutes.

He said this allowed more time for the subcommittee to research recommendations. In the meantime, the group hoped to distribute fact sheets and questionnaires across town to gauge sentiment toward the continued use of the nickname, Chinks, as well as to educate Pekin residents on its meaning.

He also requested the decision be made by all board members rather than the three-man committee assigned by Smith. But perhaps the proposal that proved most detrimental was the committee’s fourth and final suggestion:

...that the (Pekin High School) Board of Education submit to the voters of School District #303 at the election in April 1975 a ballot, which would read:

a. Retain the name “Pekin Chinks”

b. Change the name ‘Pekin Chinks’ to something similar, such as “Pekin Chings”, “Dragons”, etc.

c. Go completely away from the Chinese theme.

One nickname proposal, the “Chings,” was not merely a proposal intended to smooth the transition, but it actually referred to the Ch’ing Dynasty that once ruled China. Pekin resident William R. Blanford submitted the suggestion to the Pekin school board just two months after relocating to the city.
“It is my experience of living elsewhere which allows me to testify to the feeling of uncomfortableness which Chinese-Americans experience from the use of the word Chink as a team name,” Blanford wrote in his December 1974 letter.

Blanford said his two Chinese-American friends also found the Chinks mascot offensive and assisted his search for alternative nicknames, which the previous school vote lacked. He rationalized three reasons for his suggestion of “Chings.” First and foremost, he said Pekin would have a more honorable school nickname derived from Chinese history. The Ch’ing Dynasty also ruled with an iron fist much like the successful Pekin athletic programs at the time had, Blanford wrote in his letter to the school board, explaining that the change would naturally be made easier by the similarly sounding nickname.

The Dragon, on the other hand, had long been associated as the emblem of Pekin athletics, many advocates agreed the mythical creature was a suitable replacement mascot.

Smith offered compliments to the subcommittee for a “fine report,” but then quickly criticized the fourth recommendation. Looking back, he said the logistics of a city vote did not consider “feeder” communities that sent students to the high school.

“I don’t think it’s an acceptable thing to put on a ballot – that’s my opinion, anyways,” Smith said in a 2010 interview. The matter would have only been complicated further by making it a city-wide issue, he said.

Considerable discussion followed after Shields officially moved to place the issue on the upcoming city ballot. Because multiple board members did not originally hail from
Pekin, Shields later rationalized that the decision be left to those who once called themselves Chinks.

"I think it was our feeling that rather than us take a stand on it, let the community that's been here for many, many years and graduated from Pekin High have a decision on it," Shields said.

While, according to Shields, some people would argue the decision should be made by the school board, he defended his proposal of a city-wide referendum.

"We thought this might be a good time to let the people decide," he said in 2010. "Maybe it was a bad decision, but you've got to do what you've got to do."

The proposal evenly split the board, with criticism received from both sides. Board member Donald Martin expressed his dismay toward the suggestion, as cited in a Feb. 18, 1975, article in the *Pekin Daily Times* in which he explained how he felt more board discussion was necessary before a motion should have been made.

Martin, Smith, and Jack Lowman all voted against the motion, while Shields, Burson, and Melvin Wood favored the city referendum. According to local news reports, the stalemate failed to be broken because Stoller could not attend the meeting.

Despite being a member of the Chinks subcommittee that brought forth the recommendation, Stoller reportedly expressed to Smith beforehand that he was not in support of the ballot proposal, according to the *Pekin Daily Times*. As a result, the deadlocked vote killed the motion, and the subcommittee was forced to start from scratch.
Stoller did not oppose a nickname change, but he said the decision should be left to board members to ultimately make. In fact, the El Paso, Ill., native admitted that he brought a different perspective on the nickname controversy that most homebred school officials often did not share.

“I didn’t have it ingrained in me that this was the way it had to be because this is the way it always was,” Stoller said in a 2010 interview. “I tried to look a little bit deeper into it about what it did mean to have Pekin known as something that might be offensive to other people.”

It was an easier decision for Stoller to make, he said, simply because he did not grow up using the nickname. While he empathized with advocates against using the term Chinks, Stoller at the next meeting voiced his dismay toward the “pressure” they placed on Pekin by demanding the nickname be changed.

“In spite of all that, I think we should change the name,” Stoller said during the March 1975 deliberation, according to the *Pekin Daily Times*. “I think we have the opportunity to show that we have compassion and understanding for others.”

Following a motion made by Shields to retain the Chinks mascot, both Stoller and Wood offered arguments against keeping the name. Shields admitted later he was surprised to see Wood go against the nickname he followed during high school, and the Pekin native also told the board he hated to relinquish the school’s mascot.

“Is it or is it not the right thing to do?” Wood asked after hearing months of objections to the Chinks mascot. By clinging to the nickname, he said in a *Pekin Daily Times* story that the board failed to fulfill its moral obligation to PCHS students.
The duo cast the only dissenting votes against the motion, while Shields, Smith, Burson, Lowman, and Martin all voted in favor of maintaining the nickname.

"I just thought we had to go with the students’ decision at the time," Shields said in 2010. "I had talked to people that just didn’t like the word Dragons – they thought it should stay the Chinks. They didn’t see that it treaded on anyone personally. They felt the way it was used enhanced the Chinese more than anything, so it was a tough decision."

"After all, we represented the people who felt they wanted to keep the name," Smith added. "You represent people by hopefully presenting their views and voting accordingly."

The result came as no surprise to Stoller, but he said he “wasn’t going to change [his] way of thinking.”

While Stoller’s ‘nay’ vote went against the sentiment of local voters, he maintained that he was not willing to alter his position on the matter.

“I definitely want to represent my constituents, but if it goes against my core belief, I can’t do that – I just can’t do it, and the constituents are just going to have to accept that,” Stoller said in a 2010 interview. “If they don’t accept that then they can vote me out, and they didn’t do that.”

Stoller was not only reelected, but he was also appointed the school board president the next term. It would be years later, however, until the nickname debate once again hit headlines.
The March 1975 vote blocked efforts to eliminate the controversial Chinks mascot, but that did not stop ongoing scrutiny. Objections continued as the Asian-American Educators Association took its case to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. Following a lengthy investigation released in 1980 by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare Civil Rights office, it was determined the nickname did not have discriminating effect on Asian-American students at Pekin Community High School – perhaps because there were few, if any, enrolled at the time.

"On the basis of the facts presented, there is no evidence of a denial of programs to these students because of the nickname," the ruling read. "Therefore, Pekin High School is not out of compliance with Title V of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with respect to this issue."

Many local newspapers joined the Peoria Journal Star by refusing to print the nickname, and the Chink and Chinklette ceremony was also abruptly eliminated from pregame ceremonies in the late 1970s.

By 1980, only three members remained – Stoller, Lowman, and Smith – from the school board responsible for retaining the Chinks mascot. It was a period of transition for the school district as board members searched to replace Superintendent Lester T. Foote. He had retired two short years after relieving longtime administrator Holman.

James Elliott was among the candidates to succeed Foote. He had previously served eleven years as assistant superintendent of Lyons Township High School near Chicago, another two-campus high school, according to the Peoria Journal Star.
Stoller and Lowman ventured to Elliott’s home in the Chicago suburb of LaGrange, Ill., to conduct a preliminary interview. The meeting met Stoller’s expectations, and he was confident Elliott could be the next school district superintendent.

“He was articulate, very easy to talk to – you could just tell he had it as far as the ability to run a big school district,” Stoller said.

By June 1980, board members unanimously hired Elliott to replace Foote, paying the experienced administrator $10,000 more than his predecessor, according to a report in the Peoria Journal Star. According to Stoller, there was no inclination Elliott’s first intended item of business would be to eliminate the nickname, Chinks, from Pekin athletics.

“To my knowledge, I had no conversation with him about that,” Stoller said. “I was truly one of the two most involved in his hiring, and I do not recall that being an issue at all.”

During a teacher’s orientation meeting on Aug. 25, 1980, Elliott nonchalantly announced that Chinks would be immediately replaced by Dragons as the school’s mascot. The statement was reportedly met with no resistance, and the change was made so discreetly that local newspapers did not document the change until two days later.

“He came up with a Dragon, he got someone to produce an image, and all of a sudden instead of it being just a name, Dragon, it was something that they could relate to,” Smith said in a 2010 interview. He called the Dragons a much more identifiable mascot – the “whole package,” he said, rather than just a controversial nickname.
Two days later, both the Pekin Daily Times and Peoria Journal Star reported the news. Lowman, who served as board president that year, called the decision "administrative action," and the matter would not be discussed at the next board meeting.

In Elliott’s eyes, the decision had already been made before his hire.

“The evolution of this change has been in part the staff members’, students’ and the entire media’s refusal to use it,” Elliott told the Journal Star. “It’s time to be called something.”

Athletics director Joe Venturi told the Peoria Journal Star that efforts were already underway to replace the “Home of the Chinks” sign that hailed outside the football stadium. Additionally, new football coach Vic Clark admitted he already ordered jerseys with the Dragons nickname.

Even Holman, an ardent supporter of retaining Chinks during the mid-1970s controversy, said the transition occurred before his 1978 retirement.

“We just talked about it among ourselves, the administrators, and felt that was the way to go,” Holman said in a 1980 newspaper story. “It was a gradual operation. It was done easily and quietly.”

Reaction to the nickname change was not as subtle, and once residents learned of the replacement, it did not take long for protests to ensue. By the next week, dozens of students began walking out of class to join the organized assembly at the high school’s east campus.
According to the *Pekin Daily Times*, the thirty-person crowd swelled to one hundred and fifty later that day. “Chinks Forever” and “We are the Chinks; Dragons stink!” were chanted by protesters throughout the day. In addition to the organized protest, students distributed petitions throughout the school and across town.

“We want to get our name changed back from Dragons to Chinks,” junior Lory Phillips told the *Peoria Journal Star* in a Sept. 3, 1980, story. “I’m not afraid of getting suspended. My parents are behind me 100 percent. My daddy was a Chink, and he doesn’t want to see it changed, either.”

Students were not alone, as Pekin residents and “Chinks faithful” joined the fray. Lloyd Cottingham and his wife, Audrey, were the first non-students to join the congregation gathered in the school parking lot. The father of two PCHS students said the protest proved what power the Chinks mascot had on Pekin, and he insisted the city get behind the students’ efforts to reinstate the old nickname.

“It brought spirit to the community; it made people feel good. Now everything’s going down the drain,” Cottingham told the *Peoria Journal Star*. “I’m not by myself in this thing. We’ve got petitions. We’ve also got a lawyer. We’re going to do this by the book.”

In less than one day, 1,200 signatures were reportedly already gathered — all in support of the old nickname. Protesters told the *Associated Press* that they hoped to gather 10,000 signatures in support of a city referendum to reinstate the old mascot.

“Chinks is tradition. You’d have to grow up and live in Pekin to understand,” Pekin student Bill Rodriguez told one *Journal Star* reporter while cars repeatedly stopped...
to sign his petition against the Dragons mascot. “Now they’re taking the tradition away from us. You should see it; everybody that goes by is signing our petitions.”

Nonetheless, Elliott insisted the change was permanent, and he said he had no intentions of altering his decision.

“We are the Dragons, and we are going to stay that way,” Elliott told the Journal Star. “I think (Chinks) has become dysfunctional. The community, our staff and the media – nobody will use it.”

Elliott had the support of other administrators, including East Campus Principal Art Keller.

“For the past three, four or five years, we’ve had a nickname we couldn’t use,” Keller also told the Journal Star, piggybacking off Elliott. “Now, we’ve got something to be proud of.”

The majority of student protestors were upperclassmen from his campus, but he insisted the number was such a small percentage of the overall student body – 2,863 reportedly enrolled at the time – that each case could be handled on an individual basis. Keller said he was also approached by several students seeking rationalization for the change.

“After I explained to them why (the nickname was changed), they wanted to know why we didn’t put it to a vote of students,” Keller told the newspaper. “I told them that the majority of people don’t always protect the rights of minorities.”
The student body decisively favored retaining the Chinks nickname, with one Peoria Journal Star straw poll finding that 98 percent – or 196 of 200 surveyed students – were in favor of keeping the old mascot, according to the Journal Star. Despite their feelings against the nickname change, many said they were not willing to risk suspension by joining their schoolmates in protest.

Those students willing to face consequences were soon joined by additional city residents on days two and three of the protest. The group’s numbers fluctuated throughout both days, but by Friday, Sept. 5, Associated Press reports estimated more than 200 students and a dozen parents congregating beneath the East Campus hill despite a “driving rain storm.”

The contingency claimed to have gathered thousands more signed petitions – well on the way to its 10,000-signature goal. One protestor cited one of the city’s most famous residents, the late U.S. Sen. Dirksen when making her argument.

“Remember Everett Dirksen,” said Pekin High graduate Pat Hagen in an Associated Press article. “He was a Chink. He was born a Chink, he died a Chink and he’s known around the world as a Chink.”

Those students unwilling to skip school to protest instead took out their anger in other ways. PCHS junior Melanie Perrin, student council member and cheerleader at the time, told the Pekin Daily Times that rumors circulated across school that many students would skip the week’s football game. She said they also were confrontational toward her and other student representatives who had no control over the nickname change.
“I like the name Chinks, but everyone blames the Student Council and it’s not our fault. I wish they could change the name back, but [Dr.] Elliott says we can’t,” Perrin said in a Sept. 4, 1980 article in the Pekin Daily Times. “I myself wouldn’t go down (to protest) because I don’t want to get in trouble. We’ve put ‘Dragons’ in our cheers, so maybe the kids will like it. It seems strange, though.”

Carolyn Jennings, inter-campus student council president that school year, told reporters the nickname had caused commotion since her freshman year, but she said the real student frustrations stemmed from being phased out of the process.

“Most of the kids down there (protesting) aren’t even involved in school activities,” Jennings told the Daily Times. “Kids are mostly upset because they didn’t get to voice their opinions, not because of the name change itself.”

Those involved in extracurricular activities, she said, actually favored the name change. Football and basketball letterman Brian Benassi told the Peoria Journal Star that other schools used to mock the Chinks nickname on road visits. “Dragons sounds tougher than Chinks,” he added.

“They’d say, ‘Chinks, what kind of a nickname is that?’” said football teammate Kurt Zuercher in the same newspaper story.

Protestors fell short of gathering 10,000 signatures by the Sept. 15, 1980, board meeting, although it was not documented in local newspapers how many signatures were collected. Protesters insisted they had additional petitions to present, but the Dragons nickname had already been registered with the Illinois High School Athletics association and the Mid-State 10 conference, according to school board minutes.
After the meeting filled with “honest expression and opinion,” Superintendent Elliott agreed to meet with protest leaders later that week but also insisted, “We are the Dragons, and we will continue to be.”

Despite not being including in the final decision, Lowman and the rest of the school board adamantly insisted they would not take any action against the nickname change. Additionally, school board minutes show that Elliott garnered unanimous support from the Pekin Teachers Alliance, which represented more than 160 PCHS teachers.

West Campus Principal Larry Stone said the nickname controversy was just a way for many PCHS students to avoid attending class.

“I think they were using it (the name change) as an excuse to leave because there weren’t that many protesting anywhere,” Stone said in the Pekin Daily Times. “We know of several instances where there were parties. They may use the demonstration as an excuse, but it was just plain skipping.”

Many parents met with Keller and Stone to ensure students were not unfairly reprimanded for boycotting classes. They were reportedly ensured participating students would not be harassed by teachers or faculty. But during the October 1980 board meeting, the Pekin Daily Times reported that dozens of students and parents claimed their legal right to protest was threatened.

According to Elliott, teachers simply followed school policy by lowering the grade of any student with three or more unexcused absences, and boycott participants would not be exempt from the rule.
A determined dozen supporters continued to fill the school board chambers each meeting, but each time their efforts were hampered. Lowman said the board would take into consideration the group’s request to allow students to vote on the nickname change, but ultimately they stood by the school administration’s final decision, according to a November 1980 article in the Pekin Daily Times.

“After about three of these meetings, I got tired of hearing the same old stories,” Smith said. “Before we allowed public comments, I moved that we hear anybody who had anything to say except for those that still wanted to gripe about the Chinks nickname. It stopped then.”

That concluded the controversy that spanned more than a dozen years, and the end of a unique nickname proudly supported by generations of Pekin High graduates. But it was the Class of 1980 that proudly claimed bragging rights as “The Last of the Chinks.”

In the immediate years after the name change, the Class of 1980 began sporting the phrase on T-shirts and other memorabilia, first at reunions and then across town. Joe Alesandrini, PCHS Class of 1980 reunion committee chairman, said it became a sense of pride for the group – for better or worse.

“Yes, we were the last graduating class of the Chinks, but on the other side if we weren’t, chances are we wouldn’t put anything on the (reunion) book,” Alesandrini said. “My guess is the Class of ’81 doesn’t put we were the first year of the Dragons.”

Some of his classmates still sport shirts that say “Chinks don’t die – they Drag-on,” but as years progressed, many 1980 graduates started expressing their dismay toward
the committee’s use of the nickname. Alesandrini said they eventually agreed to no longer use the Chinks mascot on reunion materials.

“Obviously, in the four years I was there, that’s all we knew,” Alesandrini said in a 2010 interview, stressing that no nickname protests were conducted during his time in high school. “I don’t remember in those four years people telling us it was bad and we shouldn’t use it.”

Alesandrini said school athletics never gained statewide headlines during his four years at Pekin High, and the Chink and Chinklette ceremony had already been discontinued. As a result, the nickname debate went largely unnoticed by him and his classmates. It was the following graduating classes that suffered the real repercussions, Alesandrini said.

“I think the Classes of ’81 and ’82 and those coming up felt they had something taken away from them,” Alesandrini said. “Whether they truly embraced it (the Chinks nickname) at all — no matter what it is, if you take something away from somebody then all of a sudden that becomes the world’s best thing to me even though fifteen minutes ago it may not have been. Don’t take it away from me.”

By the time the nickname change became official, Alesandrini was already out of town at college. He later heard rumblings that Elliott took the superintendent job contingent upon changing the school nickname, but regardless of his intentions, Alesandrini said the Chicago native did what was necessary.

“Dr. Elliott brought a fresh perspective from the outside,” Alesandrini said, rationalizing how it also took an out-of-town superintendent to convert Pekin to a one-
campus high school in the late 1990s. “He came in and said it’s time. You need to drop
the nickname and be more politically correct.”

Five years after graduating, Alesandrini successfully became the youngest
member ever elected to the Pekin School Board at the time. Twenty-five years later, he
continues to serve on the board that once voted to retain the Chinks nickname. As a
lifelong community member, Alesandrini said it is often a complicated balancing act
making decisions that benefit his former school.

“You have to deal with the information that is in front of you at the time, and
when it comes down to it, you have to make the decision you believe is best for the
community – for both the current students and the future students of that community,”
Alesandrini said. “Quite frankly, I know every time I make a vote, chances are 49 percent
of the people in this community are not going to be happy with this decision because they
don’t have all the facts I have.”

Had Pekin been closer to an Asian-American contingency who regularly berated
the community for its mascot, Alesandrini said he felt the board would have been quicker
to take action.

“Obviously, if there would have been a suburban (Chicago) school district with
the nickname Chinks when we had it, it probably would have been an issue long before it
became an issue here because we just didn’t have any Chinese influence here,” he said.

Alesandrini admitted it was highly unusual the board did not have some public
input on the nickname change. Illinois Open Meetings Laws today, enacted long after the
superintendent’s final ruling, would have prevented Elliott from privately discussing the matter with board members beforehand.

“Today, that conversation could not have been done during closed session – it’s not closed-session material,” Alesandrini said. “So, are you going to go to a public meeting and have everyone hash out why it should be this name or that name?”

The abrupt and anti-climactic decision continues to frustrate many lifelong residents, but there is evidence across the city that Pekinites have embraced the Dragons mascot.

“Nowadays, the kids really feel like they’re Dragons, and they’re starting to get Dragons pride,” Norman said. “You see the signs all over town now. They’re trying to instill the pride and the work ethic it takes to get them to the level of success they want to be at” – the same level of success that has not been reached since Norman’s 1967 basketball squad won the state title.

Thirty years after the name change, local residents have replaced the once-popular “Chink Rink” with modern favorites such as the “DragonLand” swim facility and the “Putt the Magic Dragon” miniature golf course.

With more students graduating as Dragons each year, fewer Pekin residents are even aware of the town’s controversial past.

“Today these kids probably, unless they’re told about the history, probably don’t know anything different than the Dragons – much like in ’75 we didn’t know anything but being the Chinks,” Saal said. “Not an excuse, but an analogy.”
But Saal said those who did graduate from the Chinks era quietly continue to grumble about the nickname change.

“They’re out there – let me tell you,” he said. “I would say it’s still the majority.”

White, on the other hand, called the opposition a “close-knit, tight but vocal minority.” With the issue well behind the community, the longtime Pekin faculty member said the “quiet, overwhelming majority” against the old, controversial nickname can now proudly admit their Dragon devotion.

“It’s easy for people to talk about it now because they knew all along that’s what needed to be done, and they supported what needed to be done,” he said. “But, at the time, they stayed quiet and observed, and they let it run its course.”

“By 1980, it had been phased in already,” White continued. “It was already done – Dr. Elliott’s coming just made it official policy.”

Despite not living in Pekin during the peak of the Chinks controversy, Haas said he could see the passion his wife and friends felt toward the old nickname – as if their identity had been removed. But as Pekin became more exposed to the outside world, he said “maybe then they reflected and said, ‘Well, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.’”

“Now that we have become more politically correct and more politically educated, the chance of having a nickname that outrageous in 2010 probably would be non-issue because it wouldn’t even come up as having a chance to make it,” Haas said.

The longtime Pekin sportswriter said grade school students nowadays are getting more of a cultural education than his generation received in high school or even college.
Still, Pekin wages an ongoing battle to overcome a racist reputation that stems long before the Chinks controversy.

“I think there might be a connection between the Chinks and the bad reputation with the black community,” Dancey admitted. “I think they figure that’s the kind of place it is, and it’s unfortunate both ways.”

Dancey insisted that he has witnessed no prejudice to match the outside criticism against Pekin.

During his three-term tenure as mayor, Waldmeier said there were many times he would work with mayors from culturally diverse communities, and he was never under the impression that the controversial nickname perpetuated the community’s unfavorable reputation.

“Well let me tell you, if there was ever a case of racism in Pekin, it was not in the case of dealing with the nickname,” Waldmeier said. “If you went all over the country, you would find that there was probably more than one instance exactly like Pekin where there were nicknames for every nationality.”

By changing the nickname, Stoller said the city took a significant step toward shedding its closed-minded reputation with outsiders. He is among many local residents who have witnessed the city’s evolution – from a point when black people were once afraid to enter Pekin to now living in town. Nonetheless, the percentage of black people living in Pekin actually dropped from 2000 to 2010 from 2.5 percent to 2.1 percent, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics. The number of Asian-Americans living in Pekin increased slightly from .4 percent to .6 percent in that same time frame.
“I’m upset when people say Pekin is a racist town because yes, it has racist people in it – so does everybody else. But we are trying to do something about it,” Huey said.

She is among many lifelong residents who agree that Pekin no longer warrants the label many neighboring towns continue to place on the city.

Three decades after Pekin eliminated the nickname, Chinks, Alesandrini said the name and mascot continue to plague the community every time the controversy is rehashed, but there is movement in the right direction.

“Will Pekin ever get rid of that connotation? I don’t know,” Alesandrini said. “It’d be nice to say you could wipe the slate clean, but we relive history in this country over and over.”

But if there’s anything the nickname controversy did provide, White said it’s a greater cultural awareness for future students.

“I think the students paved the way for older generations in this community toward more open-mindedness, open discussion and acceptance,” he said.

After all the “hoopla,” Gloria Neal said she can no longer imagine the high school being called anything other than the Dragons.

“The bottom line is change many times is good,” she said. “You look back, and this was a good one – Pekin Dragons. Other things, maybe not so good, but this was a good one.”
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

There has been a change in attitudes across Pekin, according to the subjects interviewed for this project. But, even by their own admission, there is still much sentiment remaining for going back to the “Chinks” nickname some thirty years later.

Others believe the city will struggle to shake its racist reputation held by surrounding communities as long as Pekin’s minority population remains relatively stagnant – or, in the percentage of reported black people, actually decreased the past 10 years, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

Statements recorded during the heat of the nickname controversy (1974-1980) were very defensive of the Chinks nickname regardless how much outsiders insisted it was racist in meaning. Nowadays, however, Pekin residents interviewed for this project were quick to acknowledge the actual meaning of the word, even if they were to still defend its use as a school nickname. This especially applied to younger subjects interviewed for this story – particularly those who were students during the final years of the nickname’s use.

There is evidence of pride for the school’s new nickname, Dragons, further suggesting the community has moved away from being known as the “Chinks.” But,
memorabilia, posters and T-shirts still exist displaying the old nickname. As a result, the Chinks nickname is likely to continue to be a part of the city’s culture to some extent.

This report provides insight into the events that occurred leading up the nickname change, but there is still much work that can be done to track perceptions of Pekin residents in the thirty-plus years since the high school changed mascots.

While city and school officials provide an authoritative view that brings credibility to their statements, the best way to pinpoint general citywide sentiment is to interview more of the Pekin’s lifelong residents. By doing so, however, runs the risk of talking to residents ignorant of the events that transpired during the nickname controversy. These residents rely on second-hand – and perhaps inaccurate – information, a primary reason such interviews were limited for this project.

By spending at least one year interviewing a scientific sample of subjects on a daily basis, quantitative research might reveal the percentage of Pekin residents who report information in contrast with sources reported in this project. This could provide information that examines the dedication fans show for controversial mascots.

A trip across the United States to cities and towns with similar mascot controversies would help determine whether misinformation is a universal pattern or exclusive to Pekin. It would be particularly beneficial to analyze those communities that once possessed ethnically derived nicknames. This would serve as a meaningful comparison to Pekin’s unique situation, although it is unlikely any other U.S. community could lay claim to ever having such a distinctive and controversial nickname.
CHAPTER VI

EVALUATIONS

EVALUATION I

Bill Knight, deputy director
Journalism program
Western Illinois University
226-II Simpkins Hall
Macomb, IL 61455
(309) 298-1217
(309) 657-5965 cell

Nov. 14, 2011

Mark Massé
Professor of Journalism
Department of Journalism
Ball State University
300 Art and Journalism Building
Muncie, IN 47306
Greetings:

This is my evaluation of Joe Lanane’s narrative study “The Pekin Chinks: An Historical Account of a City’s Tradition,” which I understand he’s submitting as part of his requirements in earning a master’s degree from Ball State University.

This response will follow BSU’s recommended structure.

1. Brief discussion of evaluator’s credentials (e.g., knowledge and experience of the subject area).

I’m a journalist who teaches at Western Illinois University (WIU), where I’m a full professor, a member of the graduate faculty and deputy director of the Journalism program.

I’ve done presentations and papers for AEJMC, the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, the Popular Culture Association, the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors, and individual and state community colleges, plus scholarly essays for the Dictionary of Literary Biography, the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture Journal, and various Salem Press encyclopedias. My books range from collections of my journalism to anthologies of others’ nonfiction, from coordinating a round-robin murder mystery (Naked Came the Farmer) to a reissue of an out-of-print 1935 novel by a journalist/labor activist, Tom Tippett.

In newsrooms I’ve covered the environment and written arts and entertainment reviews and features, done award-winning business journalism, editorials about labor, and sports stories. I still write a current-events column that runs twice a week in five area daily newspapers and a standalone news website, plus regular journalism for an Illinois monthly and a twice-monthly publication based in Peoria, and weekly broadcast commentaries on Macomb’s public radio station.

Further, I’ve lived in Central Illinois’ “Tri-county area,” including Pekin, since 1977, and worked at newspapers in that market, so I’m familiar with the broad outline of Lanane’s topic.

II. Relationship to the student and subject matter.
Besides the aforementioned familiarity with Pekin and its school nickname (albeit a vague and, I realize now, inaccurate familiarity), I taught journalism classes in which Lanane was enrolled during his time working on his bachelor’s degree from WIU, and he was active with the student newspaper, which is advised by a full-time adviser and a publications board on which I served.

III. Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor

The line between scholarly and creative activity is not clear, but there’s a parallel to the Gore Vidal remark about filmmakers (“A good director will sometimes make a bad movie; a bad director will always make a bad movie”). I think a creative student will sometimes do lousy scholarship; a non-creative student will always do lousy scholarship.

Lanane is creative, so that’s half the battle won immediately, and this subject matter is so challenging in that it cries out for some regional version of documentary filmmaker Ken Burns to use a sizable budget to alternate slow pan-and-scans of decades-old photographs with stylistic interviews with people with pertinent comments on facts.

With much more limited resources, Lanane has drawn on his talents as a journalist (most of whom write the “first rough draft of history,” as Washington Post publisher Phil Graham said in 1963). Here, Lanane writes creative nonfiction about history. And with this research he has started a foundation for others: historians, journalists and curious people who yearn to know more about small-town battles, big-time issues, and the places where they intersect.

IV. Evaluation of the student’s approach

His approach is respectful, even-handed and detached; his sourcing is well-rounded and comprehensive, using both primary and secondary people and documents.

It’s accessible and enjoyable, informative and attributed to understandable sources (as opposed to arcane, obscure or confusing citations). I think it was Poynter Institute scholar Roy Peter Clark who said that “the journalist grounds his report in the language of eyewitness testimony,” and Lanane does so quite well.

The engaging narrative is a case study, yet more: almost a time-travel travelogue to an era that Lanane has fortunately captured before it become less available or passes entirely, bolstered by valuable reflections and hindsight from participants and witnesses.
V. Evaluation of the body of the project

a) Quality
As a member of WIU’s graduate faculty, I have worked with graduate students and read theses that were, well, almost unreadable – sacrificing clarity for density. In contrast, Lanane uses short, declarative sentences; avoids redundancies; appropriately identifies stakeholders, sources, institutions and issues; and effectively uses research, dialogue and words to communicate in a plain, unadorned, straightforward manner.

It’s a relief to read and absorb something that he makes understandable and compelling.

His journalistic interviewing adds immensely to the research. The substance of Lanane’s seemingly exhaustive interviewing shows his abilities in putting people at ease, making conversation, and harvesting relevant memories and insights.

b) Depth of treatment
Lanane uncovers or reminds readers of details on legends and misinformation, challenges and choices, ideas and outcomes. It’s a formidable work that avoids the shallow treatment without demeaning past casual handling of the issue.

c) Coverage
“Coverage” is unclear, but I assume it is the breadth to the previous line item’s depth.

Briefly, the literature review alone is an ample contribution to the contemplation of how derogatory nicknames came to be, came to be realized as offensive, and came to be relinquished in consideration of others – sometimes a surrender to “political correctness,” sometimes a prudent compromise to avoid risks of legal fights or discord, and sometimes a settlement to simply move forward. It’s assembled and drafted to provide great context for the changes in society and its institutions – from school boards and media to sports fans and citizens – with an appreciation for legal precedence and athletic boosterism alike.

The body of the work elaborates and fleshes out the background with timely perspectives and memories that enliven surviving documents.

Further, the short video product he made serves as a convenient supplement, even complement, to this more substantial work.
VI. Evaluation of the student's work as contributing to the field (e.g., body of knowledge)

This point could lead to very subjective judgment but, striving to be as impartial as I can, my response is “Of course it does.”

I think Lanane’s research

- successfully bridges the scholarly and the popular in style and substance,
- insists on including derogatory school nicknames beyond Native American references into the larger discourse,
- seriously researches a grassroots topic heretofore merely superficially addressed, or one covered in journalistic media by necessity on deadline,
- respects the topic as both a local phenomenon (which too often are ignored or dismissed) and as a situation with applications to the broader nation and culture,
- connects history, sociology, journalism and other social sciences and humanities in a package that’s meaningful and interesting, and
- achieves his goal of building a community-based case study about controversial school mascots and nicknames to expand existing studies of similar imagery.

Thanks for the opportunity to read this and weigh in; it was a pleasure.

Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any questions,

Bill Knight
EVALUATION 2

OUTSIDE EVALUATION by Richard L. White, Jr. of

“The Pekin Chinks: A Historical Account of a City’s Tradition” by Joe Lanane

Ball State University, October 2011

Evaluator’s Credentials

Richard L. White, Jr. is a retired history teacher and Social Studies Department Chairperson who taught at Pekin Community High School, Pekin, Illinois, from 1973 through 2006. Since that time, he has worked as administrative assistant to the Career and Technical Education Department for two and one-half years, and as administrative assistant to the superintendent of Pekin High for three years. While assisting with research for the book, *Pekin: A Pictorial History*, published in 1998, he explored the history of Pekin Community High School and the nickname issue which is the topic for Mr. Lanane’s project. White had been a young teacher at the time of the controversy, but vividly remembers aspects of the event which his research for the book corroborated.

Relationship to the Student and Subject Matter

Mr. Lanane approached White in search of any materials pertinent to his research for his project. As luck would have it, White had access to old *Pekinians*, or school yearbooks, and other documents of historical interest which he had used as a teacher in various student projects, as well as to official minutes of Board of Education meetings from the period covered by Lanane’s research. Lanane’s request for materials led to one for an interview as well.

Evaluation of the Topic as Appropriate for the Creative Endeavor

The Pekin Chinks nickname issue is shrouded in mystery and misunderstanding. The truth has been almost impossible to discern amidst a grudging reluctance by locals to embrace a broader perspective and a deep-seeded belief by many outside the community that Pekin’s inability to overcome its racist reputation means the name “Chink”—not to mention the ethnic prejudice that accompanies it—will live on, to some degree, forever. Accurate, nonbiased accounts of the issue are very difficult to find. Many people who lived through the event are deceased or suffer from faded memories. Some may consider a topic such as this the stuff of legend and beyond the scope of solid historiography. This writer believes, however, that attempts by serious students of history to shed light on such subjects can lead to understanding, constructive change—even healing, and there’s plenty of need for that.

Evaluation of the Student’s Approach

Mr. Lanane adequately sets the stage for his project in the “literature review” section of his paper. Using nicknames with racist or ethnically inappropriate connotations is part and parcel
of American athletics programs. So are attempts to shed these monikers in an age of political correctness. He deserves praise for his attempt to cover case studies of institutions and communities that have grappled with this issue in search of effective solutions. He is careful to point out the dissimilarities that exist between Pekin's case and others. He also establishes the soundness of his methodology which is enhanced by the use of historically reliable sources to keep bias at bay wherever possible. One could easily have been daunted by the prospect of returning to his childhood home to dredge up a troubled aspect of its past; searching for obscure, long-forgotten documents, many of which may well not withstand scholarly scrutiny; speaking with eye witnesses who may be uncomfortable with a topic that was and may still be emotionally taxing; and then attempting to arrive at meaningful conclusions of some historical value in hopes of adding to the body of knowledge in the field and perhaps bring some degree of closure, if not healing, to this chapter of a small town's history.

**Evaluation of the Body of the Project**

**Quality**

This writer found Mr. Lanane's writing engaging and largely readable. Editing suggestions have been marked and sent to him for his consideration. The reader was admittedly tempted to impose his own set of rules and style, and it has been a long time since he wrote his own master's thesis some thirty years ago. Still, suggestions might afford a degree of clarity. He was somewhat troubled by the choppiness that resulted due to the use of extremely short paragraphs, realizing that doing something about that now would result in the need for a major rewriting of the project.

As already mentioned, Lanane's scrutiny of his sources and sound methodology lend a scholarly tone, one that establishes his credibility and skill as an author. To be greatly admired is the depth of his interview pool. This required long hours of taping and many trips back to Pekin, not to mention great patience in discerning the value of information gathered and distilling its significance to his research. Mr. Lanane is to be applauded for this herculean effort which would have discouraged more timid researchers.

**Depth of Treatment and Coverage**

Mr. Lanane has examined all aspects of the Chink issue thoroughly, in this reader's opinion. Of particular interest was his treatment of the offensive nature of the nickname to ethnic communities outside of Pekin while taking care to present the views of natives who continued to cling to its use based on tradition and other factors less ignoble than the blatant racism of which they were often accused. As a long-time resident (thirty-five years) of the community, this reader also appreciated knowing that many diehards ultimately changed their position, if only on their own terms and in their own time.

**Evaluation of the Student's Work as Contributing to the Field**
To be absolutely honest, only time will tell about this project’s significance as a contribution to the field of knowledge and understanding of this issue. The reader would like to find a copy on every student’s desk in the U.S. history and sociology classes of Pekin Community High School. (He would also like to find his own master’s degree thesis dealing with Senator Everett Dirksen and McCarthyism in the history and political science wings of every university library in the nation, but that will not happen either.) Pekin has long struggled with its reputation as a racist community which eschews the opinions of outsiders. Those who teach here know the value of facing up to its heritage and have seen the significant positive changes that have been achieved when all sides of an issue are exposed. One hopes that students of the social sciences will be encouraged by Lanane’s project and similar attempts to tackle topics that will be lost to history forever unless some brave and talented soul takes up the challenge.
CHAPTER VII

BIBLIOGRAPHY


—. "Pekin teams remain 'Chinks'." The Daily Pantagraph, March 9, 1975.


—. "Students Predict Half of City to Sign." The Daily Pantagraph, September 17, 1980.


—. "Pekin students veto 'Chinks' name change." The Daily Pantagraph, November 28, 1974.


Chamberlin, J. "Indian psychologists support retiring of offensive team mascots." 30, no. 4 (April 1999).


—. "Nickname 'Chinks' To Be Used for Remainder of School Year." *Pekin Daily Times*, February 18, 1975.

—. "PCHS Board Votes 5-2 To Retain The Name 'Chinks'." *Pekin Daily Times*, March 18, 1975.


Dancey, Chuck. "Where did 'Chinks' Come From?" *Peoria Journal Star*. 


*Edwardsville Intelligencer*. "It Was The Right Thing To Do." February 21, 2007.


Ihejirika, Maudlyne. "Lemot High Drops 'Injuns' Team Name; South Suburban School Ends Years of Debate, Will Go By 'Titans'." *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 16, 2005: 12.


*Pekin Daily Times*. "Miss Seals Won't Be Attending." September 27, 1974.


Soady, Fred W. "An Essay Concerned with the City of Pekin, Illinois 1824-1849."


The *Post-Crescent*. "Schools' Indian Nicknames, Logos, Racist 'Tradition'." March 11, 2005: 8C.


Woo, William F. "Racist Team Names Need to be Retired." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 22, 1995: 1B.

