

# Hurons or Eagles? That Was the Question

BY KATHY CHAMBERLAIN

## Questioning an Old Mascot

In October 1929, students Gretchen Borst and George Hanner won first place in a local contest to rename Michigan State Normal College's athletic teams. Their winning entry, the Hurons, edged out the second place Pioneers. It certainly sounded better than Normalites or sometimes "the men from Ypsi," as teams were then called. The name also gave a boost to Ypsilanti's elegant new Huron Hotel located on the corner of Washington and Pearl Streets where Hanner worked to help pay for his education. Neither student could have predicted that sixty years later their winning name would spark heated debates, protests, and lingering animosities.

In 1988, the Michigan Department of Civil Rights suggested that the use of Native American names and cultural symbols as team mascots promoted racial stereotypes. Such concern was not entirely new. Back in the 1940s, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) had begun to examine the impact between negative images and discrimination against Native Americans. The rise of Indigenous civil rights movements and the organization of the militant American Indian Movement, in 1968, pressured the NCAI to intensify its study and focus more narrowly on media and sports. The University of Oklahoma became the first school to retire its Little Red mascot, in 1970.

The dilemma reached Michigan in April 1988. Faced with the possibility of dropping the name Hurons, Eastern Michigan University appointed a review committee to consider the matter and make a recommendation. At first, the committee found only lukewarm support for change. Jim Harkema, EMU's then football coach, insisted the image portrayed Hurons as strong, tough, and "high-fiber people." Native American students wavered between "kind of an insult" and "kind of a compliment," although they considered the so-called Indian war whoops during games disrespectful.

Letters from across Michigan to the *Detroit Free Press* overwhelmingly opposed a

change. But by July 1989, a forum of students, alumni, university officials, and locals revealed greater differences of opinion than before, and these mounted over time. According to one camp, the Huron name exemplified tradition at EMU. Under no circumstances would they support a name or logo change. On the other side, a growing number of individuals on campus and in the community believed the Huron nickname cast Native Americans in a negative light, which they found particularly distressing in a university setting. They advocated for replacing the name.



Eastern Michigan University versus Toledo at Rynearson Stadium, 1989

### Here Come the Eagles!

Ultimately, the EMU Board of Regents had the last word. They put together a fourteen-member committee to again study the issue. In February 1990, the committee announced that it did not find the nickname discriminatory. Its members suggested, however, that EMU make every effort to recruit more Native American students and expand library holdings on Indian history and culture. These recommendation did not end the debate. While some regents genuinely believed that most of the university community supported the Huron symbol, chairman John Burton saw rising opposition and convinced his fellow regents to reject the committee's report. Advocates on both sides dug in.

By September, there was still no decision on the horizon, so the regents asked university president Dr. William Shelton to weigh in on the debate. They gave him until their January 1991 meeting to reach a conclusion. Shelton came down in favor of retiring the Huron name and logo. The regents voted accordingly and launched the search for a new team name. From 315 entries submitted, the regents selected three finalists: Green Hornets, Express, and Eagles. At their May 22 meeting, they chose Eagles by a six-to-one vote.

But controversy dominated the meeting. Nearly two hundred people attended, and the regents permitted one hour of public comment. Chief Leroy Yellow Hawk spoke. His tribal affiliation lacked specifics, but he appeared in full headdress and regalia, and claimed to represent a coalition of Michigan and Ohio tribes. He spent more than a half hour criticizing the Huron logo and praising the change. Others at the meeting urged the regents to change their minds and even threatened cutting off monetary support for the university until the Huron name was restored.

Burton shocked fellow regents and attendees alike when he made a sudden reversal and moved to invalidate the Eagles vote. He proposed rejecting the other two finalist names as well. Why? “There comes a time in everyone’s life when you make mistakes,” he explained. As chaos threatened, Regent Richard Robb, who had chaired the logo committee, defended the vote. He noted that he was tired of the obscene phone calls and threats directed at him and his family. He wanted this to end. The vote held, and Eagles became the official nickname. Afterward, student government president, Geoffrey Rose sighed, “I’m just glad it’s over.”

### **Some Strong Disagreement**

Sadly, Rose had spoken too soon.

A newly created Huron Restoration, Inc. (HRI) circulated petitions and crowded monthly board of regents’ meetings. Members sponsored letter-writing campaigns. They invited Leaford Bearskin, chief of the Oklahoma Wyandots, to visit Ypsilanti, discuss the matter with President Shelton, and address regents at their July meeting. The chief informed a gathering of alumni, students, and faculty that he did not object to the use of the Huron name. “I would be as proud as any chief could be to observe the Huron logo at the entrance to the university and in classrooms,” he declared. The regents canceled their July meeting, and Shelton informed Bearskin that the process was complete and the conclusion irrevocable.

The restoration group openly urged donors to withhold monetary gifts to the university. According to the *Ypsilanti Press*, alumni pledges fell from \$414,000 in 1990 to \$213,000 in 1991. Development Director Jack Slater blamed the recession, but some donors proudly announced otherwise. One couple put their annual donation in escrow “until EMU readopts the Hurons.” An individual changed his decision to donate altogether and declared “No Hurons, no money!” A corporate donor told the university to seek contributions from the ACLU or Michigan Civil Rights Commission, and added, “I no longer support EMU. I am a loyal Huron.”

As the university unveiled new uniforms and green Eagles T-shirts in time for the 1991 football season, HRI members told the regents at their August meeting “We are going to be your worst nightmare until this thing turns around.” The following year a renovated Rynearson Stadium welcomed football fans with an \$11 million facelift. It boosted seating capacity to 30,000. An upgraded scoreboard that could pull up and display players’ pictures at an instant’s notice stared from across the field. And a sign reading “Home of the Hurons” greeted fans in the south grandstands.

President Shelton also complained about harassment aimed at him and his family. Critics hounded him, he said, mostly shouting vulgar names and leaving threatening telephone messages. But at a December 21, 1991, away game in Auburn Hills, a vocal group focused its animosity at his son and daughter-in-law. Shelton declared “Your

battle is with me. If you think this is worth attacking my children, you're wrong."

In March 1992, a Republican state representative from Shelby Township introduced two bills in the state legislature. The first mandated that students and alumni vote on all team name and logo changes. It denied state appropriations to any university that refused to allow such votes and made the law retroactive five years. This law, if passed, would have nullified the EMU regents' 1991 decision. The second was a constitutional amendment to remove university governing boards and hand control over to the state legislature. Dave Trusty, president of EMU's Native American Student Organization at the time, commented, "This is the same old argument. . . I don't think it's going to pass." Neither bill was adopted.

The HRI Alumni Chapter then decided to produce clothing and promotional items bearing the old Huron logo. Their reasoning: "We thought the university didn't want that name." It met with a curt response from EMU's lawyer: "We originated it, and we still own it, even if we aren't using it." The argument proved a public relations mess for both sides.

### **An Educational Opportunity**

Fortunately, the debate also proved educational. Some students and community residents wondered why they knew so little about Huron people and their history. Why were some members of the Huron nation offended while others were not? Many learned for the first time that the word "Huron" came from the Old French "*quelle hures*" and referred somewhat derisively to the bristly coiffures sported by most seventeenth-century Huron men. Clan based and matrilineal, Hurons were a confederacy of four groups rather than one monolithic people.

In 1649, Dutch traders armed the Hurons' most formidable enemy, the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee), and encouraged a surprise winter attack on villages generally located between Lakes Huron, Erie, and Simcoe, and Georgian Bay. The Dutch wanted an expanded role in the fur trade, and their greed destroyed what had once been the Huron nation. The confederacy scattered. Some remained in Canada. Others settled around the Detroit area, kept the Huron name, and maintained their French alliance. Many gravitated to northern Ohio, rejected the French, and reclaimed their original name of Wendat or Wyandot. Huron history proved a troubled one on the subject of their relations with white people.

Under the U.S. government, treaties written in 1807 and 1809 forced the Hurons to cede most of their Michigan lands. Ohio Wyandots were formally removed to Indian Territory in 1843. Those Ypsilanti residents who chose to read about Hurons and students who enrolled in new EMU classes on Indigenous peoples came to understand why some Native Americans today find team nicknames, logos, and war whoops disrespectful. Of course, other Native people interpret things differently and take pride in such symbols, as is their right.

## The Controversy Continues

While animosity surrounding EMU's team nickname and logo has subsided over time, some individuals were still ready to stir the pot. A 2008 blog blamed poor football and basketball team performances on the name change. In 2012, university president Susan Martin quietly approved sewing the former Huron and Normalite logos onto newly designed marching band uniforms. Asked by Native American students to remove the logo, Martin countered that the images were hidden inside band jackets and would not in fact be seen. She insisted her goal was to unite the university and community after its long and contentious debate. Many more examples could be cited as well.

In 2023, there are alumni who still resent loss of the Huron name. But many students and newer faculty barely understand the debate. It is difficult to say whether Huron or Wyandot people hold a grudge or have long since accepted the decision. The controversy came at a time in our history when Americans began to understand that negative stereotypes could have an impact on legal issues and on how society has treated minorities. Some people argued that this went too far, but in most cases, they did not represent those on the receiving end. As one Native American student said, "Dropping the Huron symbol will help break down the distorted perception of natives and promote education on Indian life and culture." Let's hope that's true.



Huron and Normalite logos on 2012 band uniforms

## A Note on Sources

The archives in Halle Library at Eastern Michigan University have two boxes of Huron Restoration, Inc., records that contain correspondence, newspaper clippings, and board of regents' files; there are also copies of the *Normal College News* and a full run of the *Eastern Echo*. The Ypsilanti Historical Society and Ypsilanti District Library have files of newspaper clippings regarding all aspects of this controversy, from the *Ann Arbor News*, *Ypsilanti Press*, *Detroit Free Press*, and others between 1988-2017. Charles E. Cleland, *Rites of Conquest: The History and Culture of Michigan's Native Americans* (University of Michigan Press, 1992) offers a solid study of Michigan Indian history. All images are from the EMU Archives.

## About the Author

Ypsilanti resident Kathleen P. Chamberlain, Ph.D., is Professor Emerita of History at Eastern Michigan University. A historian of Native Americans and the U.S. West, she

is the author of several books including *Under Sacred Ground: A History of Navajo Oil, 1922-82*, *Victorio: Apache Warrior and Chief*, and *In the Shadow of Billy the Kid: Susan McSween and the Lincoln County War*.