About the Author: My name is Morgan Weller and I am a freshman at the University of Illinois. Originally, I am from a town called Greenfield, Illinois which is located directly in the middle of Springfield and St. Louis. My hometown is very small and we only have about 1200 people. Currently, I am undecided on a major, but am considering a communications with a minor in business. Both of my parents are teachers. My mom teaches 5th grade while my dad teaches high school industrial technology and farms. I have two older brothers who both farm and are deputy sheriffs, as well. My oldest brother’s wife is a physical therapist and my younger brother’s girlfriend teaches and manages a daycare. We are huge animal lovers, especially dogs, and we also have a farm with a pond. Both of my grandparents also attended the University.

Keywords: university of illinois, chief, tuition, differences, controversy, history

Abstract: My research methods were to get as much info from current students as from alumni. I wanted to ask them questions that would prompt emotional responses. I asked them all the same questions. I also wanted to do it in a setting that they were comfortable in. In the end, I found that most of the people that I interviewed wanted the Chief to come back. The older the people were the more passionate they were about this. I found that my grandparents were incredibly emotional about it and upset. They were sick about the fact that he was gone. Students that were seniors or had just graduated were irate about the situation. They were furious that he was being taken away after being here for 80 years and they wanted to do something about it. Younger students that had just gotten here and hadn't really experienced the chief one way or the other still seemed to want him back, but didn’t have the emotion that all of the others did.

Initial Exercises: First, I looked up some secondary sources to get background on the issue of the chief. I then did my bibliography. I also had to do quite a few interviews for this project. I made up a list of questions and figured out who I was going to try and interview and when. I got my consent forms signed so I could use these people and their answers for my research. I tried finding artifacts as well, but was not as successful. I then started drafting my paper little by little. I started out with my introduction and went from there. I pieced things together and eventually got my full paper incorporating facts and interview answers. After this I just edited and revised my paper until I was happy with the results.

Question: What did my grandparents go through during their time at campus? How was their time different than mine? What was their favorite part of school? What was their least favorite part?

Some of the questions I asked myself were the following. What kind of problems did students face in 1944? Was race an issue then? What did they do for fun? What kind of housing did they have? How much did it cost
them for tuition? Were students at that time offended by the Chief?

Plan: I think that I would like to focus on either racial themed parties or the history of race on campus...as in how was race back fifty years ago. Was there a lot of diversity? How did they define diversity then? In terms of race, how much of a difference was there in terms of numbers? Has racism gotten significantly more severe, has it gotten better, or has it changed at all? For the themed parties it would be more on where they occur the most, who has them, what is does that makes them racist, and what is being done to prevent them.

i think maybe i might be interested in the history more than anything...i would talk about race within this research but i think it would also be interesting to focus on the differences in prices of things, how they got around, the different things they did for fun...just in general how times have changed from then to now

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Campus Life: Then & Now

When I first arrived at the University of Illinois I never dreamed that race would become an issue for me. I never thought twice about the subject. I come from an incredibly small town that has a population of twelve hundred people. Out of those twelve hundred maybe five of them are of a race other than Caucasian. However, I work at a water park in the summer as a lifeguard and
because of that I have become accustomed to all races and colors. The park is located near St. Louis, Missouri, so working there I am exposed to a great deal of African Americans as well as Asians. There have been a lot of instances at the park that whites are actually in the minority, so I did not feel that campus life would be much a culture shock to me. I was wrong. While I have had to work with many people of different ethnicities, I have never had to live with them and that is a great change, regardless of what race you may be. Upon learning that this transition would not be as easy as I had once thought, I began to start thinking about how the culture has changed here over the years

My grandparents attended this school as well, but when they were here it was 1944. What kind of problems did they face when they first got here? Was race even an issue at that time on this campus? What did they do for fun? What kind of housing did they have? Were the rules that they abided by the same as the ones we must obey today? How much did it cost for them to be educated at this institution? All of these questions were flooding through my head. I have heard them talk about their college experience more than once, especially now that I am attending the University as well. They had nothing but good recollections to say about it, however, I knew my experience was most likely going to be vastly different from theirs. After all, since they had been here the layout of campus had drastically changed and the beloved mascot had been taken away. That was another aspect that I was incredibly interested in, as well.

Since the mascot controversy had begun I had heard them talk numerous
times about how sad that was to them and they could not believe that it was actually
taking place. I was curious to see if when they were here if the mascot even
remotely represented something racial. Were any of the students at that time
offended by the Chief or were there even minorities that attended this institution at
that time? I had no clue, but I wanted to find out. I was fairly sure that most things
from then to now would be vastly different, and I was right, however, I was not
prepared for how remarkable the changes have been. It is like a completely different
world, but somehow still very much the same.

When I applied to the University I had to pay a $40.00 fee just to
apply. When my grandfather went to school here his entire tuition was $43.00. He
also had to pay $21.00 per month for room and board (Ford, J). That was it. On top
of my $40.00 dollars I had to pay just to apply, I also had to worry about housing,
food, and books. In the end I was required to pay approximately $8,500 for housing
and food, another $8,500 for tuition, somewhere between $800 to $1,000 for books
for two semesters, and an additional $1,300 for smaller fees such as a general fee,
transportation, and health services, among other things (“Billing Statement”). There
was also the gas money that needed to be considered since my hometown is two
hours away, as well as spending cash in case of emergencies. In the end, my grand
total was somewhere around $25,000 (“Billing Statement”). That is quite a
substantial difference from my grandparent’s measly $200. Of course they had other
expenses as well, but that was basically it. They did not have to worry about gas
because students were not allowed to have cars on campus and they only went home
three times a year, for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter (Ford, L). I went home three times in the first three weeks and many students go home as much as every other weekend (Rhodes, L.). When they traveled they took the Inner Urban Terminal that dropped them off thirty miles from home and their parents came to pick them up from there. Today, most students use their cars or the bus system (Dust, J.). They also did not have to worry much about entertainment money. Back in those days things did not normally get too wild. One of their favorite things to do during the week was go to building we now know as Foellinger Auditorium on Wednesday nights and participate in the “Sing.” This is where students from most of campus would come and sing along with the people that were on the stage (Ford, J). I can just see a bunch of 18-22 year olds doing that today instead of going to Kam’s or Firehaus. The main attractions on today’s campus are sporting events, concerts, and getting together for dinner (Dust, J.). It also must be taken into consideration that in those days $0.25 was enough to get in to a movie, get a large bag of popcorn, a soda, and then a Root beer float at the ice cream shop afterwards. Today, that $0.25 would not even give you enough gas to get to the theater. All of their meals were paid for with their room and board, except for Sunday evening. On that night they all went to Steak and Shake with their combined pennies to get the food that they wanted. Those were their favorite nights of the week (Ford, L). Today, the average class has about 10,000 students in it and the campus as a whole has just under 40,000 students. In 1943 the attendance was around 12,000 which means that the attendance rate has almost quadrupled in size. While they were in school African Americans only took up 5% of enrollment
and there were no Hispanics or Asians (Ford, J). That is clearly not the case today. Today’s enrollment consists of a large number of minorities with some students saying that they felt like the number of African Americans or Asians was just as large as the number of Caucasians (Dust, J.). It just goes to show how much times truly have changed.

A few years ago my grandfather came back to visit his roommate from school, who now had his doctorate and was the head of the Agriculture Department, and his wife. He did not think that he would have any problems getting here or moving about campus. He knew this place like the back of his hand when he left and he did not think he would ever have to be in fear of getting lost once he returned. He did not find himself in any trouble trying to get to Champaign; however, it was getting around campus once he got here that proved to be the problem (Ford, J.). Other than the Quad, virtually everything has been altered in some way or the other since he and my grandmother attended this school. Most of the houses that they had lived in have been replaced or torn down. We went around campus trying to find all of the important buildings to him and almost all of them were gone. While it was kind of sad, he said he also kind of expected it (Ford, J.). The home my grandmother once lived in was now a parking garage. It was a surreal experience for them. They had not been here in awhile and everything that they expected to see was gone. It made it nostalgic and got me to thinking about what I would do if I came back to visit and everything I remembered was basically gone. He was also in a fraternity when he was here called Alpha Gamma Rho. That fraternity still exists
today, but their frat house is not the same as it was before. He was well acquainted with Stratford House as well as Neighbor House and while those houses are still on campus, they have also been altered since my grandparents’ time on campus (Ford, J.). I also found it very interesting that when they went to school here my grandfather worked as a waiter in the KAT house, or the Thetas. While they were working there the sorority paid his tuition (Ford, J). He and his roommate worked there for three years of college whereas today, I have not even heard of students working in a sorority or fraternity. Normally, they hire cooks to work in those houses, but they are not students and they do not have waiters. I find it so interesting how monumental the changes truly have been. This university was prestigious when they were here and was well respected, so it is interesting that even with that in mind the school still has to make a lot of changes and progress with the time in order to be able to keep its prestigious name.

Another important issue to my grandparents was the Chief, so much so that they did not even want to discuss the issue with me. To them, he represented a truly iconic symbol. It was heartbreaking for them that he would no longer be around. It was hard for them to even understand why so many people were offended by his presence. He represented pride and honor to their generation. Without him they though that the school would lose pride and energy that had been instilled in everyone (Ford, L). They feel sorry for all future students who will never be able to experience the pride and excitement that was felt by all when Chief Illiniwek entered the room. Everyone stood to honor him and what he represented (Ford,
That seems to be similar to what a lot of current students feel as well. They thought that he represented school spirit and was something that all students honored (Rhodes, L.). They felt like the departure of the Chief would hurt the school in many ways, but especially with sporting events (Dust, J.). The older generation does tend to feel more strongly about the subject than those students who never got to fully experience the Chief, but the general consensus is that his removal was a poor decision. I also found that the older they were the more passionate they were about their beliefs. My grandparents were incredibly emotional and hurt by the issue, while my cousin who graduated last year was not as emotional as she was irate. She, as well as her boyfriend who graduated with her, think that the whole situation is ridiculous and they both have a hard time understanding it. However, the students of my class are not as opinionated. Most of them do have an opinion one way or the other, but they are not as willing to take action on that opinion and they are not nearly as affected by it emotionally. Personally, I believe that is because they never got to experience the Chief so to them it is not as important because they never experienced him and got to form an opinion or get emotionally invested on whether or not the Chief was our mascot.

While attending the university, my grandparents remembered that the individual that portrayed the Chief had to take certain Native American classes before he could even be considered to take the position and even then he still had to audition with around ten other individuals vying for the position as well. This set up was still in place when the Chief was taken away in 2007. To them it was hard to
imagine attending the University of Illinois without the Chief at the forefront.

The Chief was created in 1926 by the university’s assistant band director for halftime entertainment and he was an instant hit (Selingo). He was dressed in a matching feathered war bonnet and Lakota-made buckskin, with face painted orange and blue, and performing his fancy-foot and leaping dance to a march that is similar to a tom-tom beat. At the end of the dance, he stands with his arms folded on his chest while the band plays the university’s alma mater (Selingo). The controversy started at a men’s basketball game in 1989 when graduate student Charlene Teters was appalled by the Chief’s halftime entertainment show (Selingo). Teters is a member of the Spokane Nation and considered the student dressed in war paint and Hollywood-style Indian regalia to be racist and an affront to her heritage (Selingo). In retaliations she started a one-person protest, holding up signs outside of the basketball gym before games that read, “Indians are people, not mascots.” Over the next fifteen years Teters’s protest grew with around 600 faculty members signing a petition calling for the Chief’s elimination by 1998. Since then more than 200 more have signed the petition as well (Selingo). Like my grandparents, proponents considered the Chief to be historical, instructive, and complimentary (Saraceno). Before long the controversy had heated up and was becoming a more sensitive subject by the minute. At one point it nearly divided the 40,000 student campus. State Senate Emil Jones said that he did not like his tax dollars going toward promoting the stereotyping of any individual (Selingo). A former law student by the name of John Gadau however, said that his first
experience with the Chief made the hair on his arms stand up and brought tears to his eyes (Salingo). In coordination with that Matt Leonie, a former Chief portrayer, said it was a good tradition. “Everything that we do is respectful. I do not agree that is it offensive. If you are going to be proactive for Native American issues then there are other things you can do than try to get rid of the symbol that gets people more aware of Native American issues,” Leonie added (qtd. In Salingo). The issue got so heated that it had a part in former chancellor Nancy Cantor’s decision to leave the university after she was vilified for supporting the termination of the chief. Unlike her predecessors who had largely stayed out of the drama over the chief, Cantor interjected herself into the middle of it simply by talking about diversity on campus (Salingo). It also seems that faculty members, students, and alumni seem to have differing opinions regarding the termination. The majority of faculty members voted against the Chief, but more than two-thirds of the students that voted in a March election and seventy percent of alumni said that they wanted the Chief to stay (Salingo). Considering those numbers, Madge Sodeman, a member of the Board of Trustees, says he is worried that removing the chief could do far worse damage to the university, especially in terms of lost financial support from alumni, however, he also adds that there is no easy way out of this situation (Salingo).

This situation has also brought attention to underlying racial tension already existing on campus; the majority of which has been focused on American Indian and Latino/Latina students (Meimer). One of the biggest issues was when a group was
formed on Facebook that made racist comments, forcing UIUC Chancellor Richard Herman to issue a series of letters to university students over racist behavior. The controversy was also linked to two themed parties, entitled “Tacos and Tequilas” and “Pilgrims and Indians,” that were organized by Greek organizations which also prompted letters from Herman (Meimer). At the parties students came dressed like illegal aliens, farm workers, and pregnant Latinas, and also gave a degrading display of anti-Indian behavior. The parties almost got one sorority shut down (Meimer).

In the end though the opponents of the chief would win this battle, however the war is still not over. In 2005 the NCAA ruled that the sports mascot was “hostile and abusive” to Native Americans (Ruibal). As a peace offering to the chief’s supporters, which include some of the university’s biggest donors, the institution’s teams would keep their nickname, the Fighting Illini because it was based on the state, not a tribe (Ruibal). The chief’s opponents wanted all references to him removed, including the nickname; the supporters want both the mascot and the nickname to remain (Selingo). The University did appeal, stating that the NCAA used a flawed process, it should be the responsibility of the Board of Trustees, and that they were interfering with the university’s right to self-determination (Ruibal). However, since the Chief has been eliminated the University has come under some scrutiny from those who think that their sole purpose is for monetary gain. After all, with the elimination of the chief the university becomes immediately eligible to host postseason championship events. UIUC is also behind a long list of other colleges and universities that have already gotten rid of their seemingly racist
mascots and replaced them with something much less controversial (Saraceno).

The final outcome of this lengthy controversy still remains to be seen. It is obvious that parties on both sides take the situation seriously and it is close to their hearts. The question in the end is where do we draw the line between racism and honor? That is what is inevitably being disputed. One side wholeheartedly thinks that the Chief is a great source of pride and admiration, while the other is completely offended and cannot believe it has taken this long to draw so much attention. No matter what the outcome may be the situation itself has already proved to be a loss. It has caused tensions on campus, it has caused the school to lose money, and it has hurt an enormous amount of people. This debate has been going on for an ugly 19 years. Wars do not even last that long. It truly is sad that perhaps the most colossal object or symbol that has held this university together for the last 80 years is now the very thing that is tearing it apart.

Works Cited


