FOR WHOM THE DRUM BEATS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

Brothers, we thank you for educating our children in your schools; but we have observed that for a long time after our children return home they are not good for anything.

—The Onondagos to the English (circa 1760)

THEY CAME from all corners of the state to help their brothers in Elgin improvise and celebrate a gala school boycott that they called Indian Pride Day. There were Comanches, Crows, Kiowas, Cherokees, Kickapoos and many others—for this was Oklahoma, famed Indian territory of frontier days, into which the U.S. Army had kicked or cajoled more than 150 Indian tribes. Once resettled, they would be little noted nor long remembered, or so the theory went. Yet here they were, a century later, gathered at Tia-Piah Park and waving placards that pleaded, "Save Our Children!" All day they picnicked, sang, danced and beat their drums.

Elgin is a tiny waystop in Oklahoma's Comanche County—a dusty, not-quite-forgettable village where ranchers and Indians buy supplies and send their children to school. The school is an American Pandora's Box, a pressure-cooker stuffed with the darkest emotions of a divided red and white community—fear, rage and mutual contempt. About a year ago the safety valve jammed.

The immediate pressure came from a feud between Burt Waysepappy, an Indian high school freshman, and Randy Prather, a white senior. Feuds between the red and the white are not uncommon in such schools; they mirror the towns they serve. Some white students find it amusing to beat up "blanket butts," a term roughly equivalent in splenetic content to "wops" or "kikes"; some Indian youths repay the compliment by roughing up "farmers," an unloving label for members of the predominantly white Future Farmers of America.

In any case, the Prather-Waysepappy feud was "settled" in the traditional manner: with a grudge fight in the presence of the boys' friends, the match taking place during lunch-hour in an alleyway a few blocks from school. Prather won the fight, and that might have been the end of it; but someone watching had run back to the school for help, whereupon two athletic coaches, David Sanders and Dale Osborne, drove to the rescue.

By the time they arrived the fight was finished. The coaches found Waysepappy and ordered him into the car. Farther down the alley they spotted Prather, whom they told to report to the gymnasium. Driving back to school, they saw Raymond Paddyaker, another Indian freshman, and sent him to the gymnasium, too. (Paddyaker had watched the fight; no one can explain why the coaches dragged him into their act.)

In the car, according to Waysepappy, the coaches informed him he was going to fight Prather again, only this time it would be "a fair, supervised fight." Waysepappy timidly demurred, pointing out that he and Prather were "quits." But the coaches had made up their minds.

A class in physical education was going strong in the gym. The coaches chased the students back to their

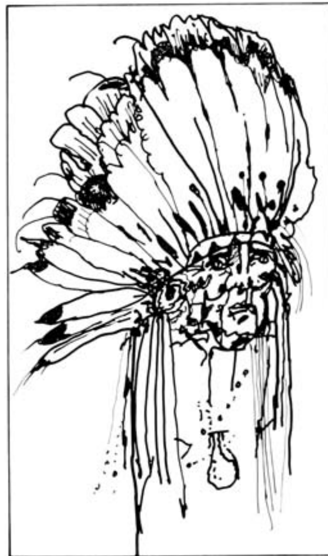
classrooms, told the puzzled Paddyaker to wait in an adjoining office and ordered Prather and Waysepappy to remove their shoes and strip to the waist. At this point the school principal, Larry Payne, happened to walk in, and Waysepappy shouted to him across the length of the gym, "Mr. Payne, are you going to let them do this to me? Do I have to fight?" Payne didn't answer; he simply turned around and walked out. ("I had to get back to my office," he explained later. "Another student had been hurt.")

So the reluctant fighters fell upon each other, and once again Waysepappy got the worst of it. He began to cry. He wrenched free of Prather and ran out the door; and he kept running, barefoot and bare-chested, till he reached Taylor Noyabad's house a mile away. Sobbing and gasping for breath, he blurted his story to Noyabad. (Meanwhile, the coaches were presiding over a second "supervised fight," this one between Prather and Paddyaker. By all accounts it was a lackluster bout—Paddyaker lacking the desire, and poor Prather lacking the strength.)

Taylor Noyabad is a Comanche elder, pastor of a Pentacostal church. He listened without surprise; it was not the first time he had been told a sad tale out of school. Contempt for Indians was part of the social landscape in hundreds of red-and-white towns like Elgin. It was literally in the air. (A radio disc jockey joke: "He used to be a member of the Blackfeet tribe—then he wiped his feet.") It was on the billboards ("See a Real Squaw Weaving Rug"), and in the souvenir stores (a plastic hip-flask, for instance, displaying a besotted, red-nosed Indian, with the caption, "I'm one drunk injun!" Price: $1.00).

Noyabad wondered how Indian children, despised and derided, could be expected to grow up with a sense of their own worth, and how a school that promoted fights between whites and Indians could be expected to enlarge racial understanding. That night he called a meeting, the first meeting of the Elgin Indian Education Association; and the new organization dispatched a petition to the Elgin School Board demanding a full inquiry into the gymnasium incident, as well as the dismissal of Osborne, Sanders and Payne.

UNTIL THAT moment the Indians in Elgin had never *demanded* anything, so we may excuse the school board's initial skepticism. "What do they want?", a board member kept asking. "What do those people want?" Nevertheless, the board scheduled an open hearing.



The meeting was a model of confusion, with charges and countercharges twanging through the Oklahoma night. Paddyaker claimed Sanders had given him "four licks with the paddle" just before his fight with Prather, and had threatened to beat him if he told anyone. Sanders and Osborne accused the two Indian students of attacking Prather outside the gym door. All three boys drifted into an intricate dispute over who had really won those fights. And Payne, the principal, speculated on the incident's hidden meaning: "This conflict is not basically Indian and white—it's Randy and Burt."

In the end, Payne and the two coaches conceded they may have made "a mistake in judgment." But the fight was far from finished. The next day school board president Homer Hise, a hardware merchant, sent Noyabad a fussy little note. Having made "a thorough investigation," Hise wrote, the board had decided "that it was in the past, is currently, and will continue to be in compliance with state and Federal laws." In other words, no apologies would be tendered and no teachers would be dismissed, or even reprimanded.

The legalistic double-talk suggested to Noyabad and the Indian Education Association that they were in another of those "supervised fights." They threatened to sue Osborne, Sanders, Payne and the school board for damages. Then they startled everyone by organizing Indian Pride Day, the first concerted Indian protest in Elgin's history. All day the dancing; all day the drums.

Before long Payne announced he would not be back next year. Sanders soon followed suit. The Indians were surprised; they were unaccustomed to the spectacle of whites retreating. Emboldened, the Indians drew up a new petition demanding that the schools hire Indian teachers and bus drivers, serve free lunches to all Indian children, and consult with Indian parents on matters relating to their children's education.

The school board's response was entirely predictable. Said Harry Leonard, a banker: "They want everything free." Said another board member: "We don't have to consult with nobody." But the gentlemen were whistling in the dark. The drums will surely overtake them just as they overtook Payne and Sanders, just as they are overtaking school officials across the land. Do not ask for whom the drums beat; they beat for us all.