CHAPTER ONE

THE LIFE OF JIM THORPE

MIXED BLOODLINES

James Francis Thorpe was born in 1887 in the ***Indian Territory*** that would later become the state of Oklahoma. Jim, as most people called him, has most often been described as a Sac and Fox Indian, but his ancestry was complex. He sometimes wryly referred to himself as an "American Airedale" – referring to the popular breed of hunting dog that blends many bloodlines.

Charlotte Thorpe
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

Jim's mother, Charlotte Vieux, was a member of the Citizen Pottawatomie Band. Charlotte's parents, Jacob and Elizabeth Vieux, shared between them a mixture of Pottawatomie, Kickapoo, Menominee, and French ancestry. In 1867, when Charlotte was only four years old, her entire family and the thousand other members of their band were forcibly relocated from their home in Kansas to Indian Territory. Jim's father, Hiram Phillip Thorpe, was born to a Sac and Fox mother and an Irish-American father. Summing up his lineage, Jim observed he was five-eighths Indian, one-fourth Irish and one-eighth French.

THE THORPE FAMILY

By the time Hiram and Charlotte got married, Hiram already had at least three children by two earlier wives. Charlotte gave him eleven more. It was common in the late nineteenth century for both white and Indian men to marry more than once, especially since women frequently died in childbirth (as did Charlotte with their last child). Polygamy was a common practice among many American Indian nations. Hiram married more than most. After Charlotte's passing he fathered two more sons by one further wife. Of Hiram's fifteen or more children, less than half survived to adulthood.

Hiram Phillip Thorpe
Jim Thorpe Association

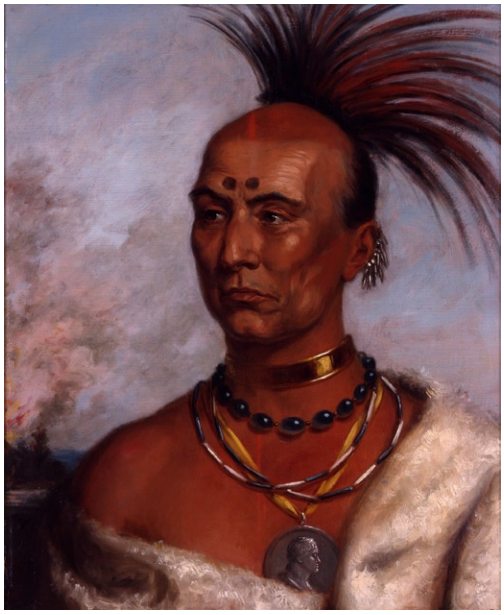
Six of the eleven children born to Charlotte and Hiram died before the age of 12, most of them at a much younger age. Jim Thorpe's brothers and sisters, in order of their birth, were George (1882), Rosetta (1882-1889), the twins, Mary (1883-1884) and Margaret (1883-1887), Jim's twin brother, Charlie (1887-1897), Mary#2 (1891), Jesse (1891-1892), Adeline (1895), Edward (1898), and Henry (1898, died at birth).

Family has special meaning among American Indians. Even today, when one talks about oneself, one is expected to mention family first. Sharing rather than accumulating personal wealth was and remains a strong tradition among the Sac and Fox and most other Native American peoples. An individual's accomplishments are measured not in personal terms but in terms of what one does for one's people. Throughout his life Jim was loyal to his family. After his parents died, he kept in close touch with his siblings, helping them in any way he could. He often returned to Oklahoma to visit. When he played professional football, he recruited one of his brothers to play on his team.

Family in American Indian cultures goes beyond blood relationships. You are related to those who are of the same clan. A ***clan*** is a grouping of people that traces its descent from a common ancestor in the distant past. Sometimes this is a real person, sometimes a totemic figure. The word totem comes from the Ojibwa word *nindoodeem,* which refers to that object or animal to which one is ancestrally related. Those of the same clan, even if there is no blood connection, are considered relatives, and they are entitled the same respect and consideration that one would give to one's own blood uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins, etc. Clans also play an important role in political, religious and social relationships within Native American communities.

The eight Sac and Fox clans are Bear, Partridge, Elk, Black Bass, Fox, Swan, Wolf, and Thunder. Jim's Sac and Fox grandmother was of the Thunder Clan. Her name was No-ten-o-quah, which means "Wind Before a Storm." It was the Thunder Clan that gave the Jim the name Wa-tha-sko-huk, which means "The Light After the Lightning." Watho-Huck (as most books record it) has often been mistakenly translated as "Bright Path" by Jim's biographers.

That Thunder Clan name made Jim a clan relative of the famous chief ***Black Hawk*** (described in the next chapter). Jim grew up hearing stories of Black Hawk's deeds and feeling a connection to his illustrious clan ancestor.



Chief Black Hawk
WESTERVELT-WARNER MUSEUM

Jim's mixed-blood family, and the forced migration of his Indian ancestors, was both a result and a reflection of United States Indian policy in the nineteenth century. Many different tribes from various parts of the continent were brought together in "Indian Territory," and intermarriages frequently resulted.

Whites also found their way into Indian country on a regular basis. Jim's paternal grandfather was an Irish-American named Hiram Grace Thorpe. Born in Connecticut in 1811 and trained as a blacksmith, Hiram went west to Iowa in the 1840s, where he got a government job as the tribal blacksmith for the Sac and Fox. There he formed a lasting bond with his wife No-ten-o-quah and her people. Their first child, Mary, was born shortly before a smallpox epidemic devastated the tribe, killing 300 Sac and Foxes. Hiram's family survived, but as a blacksmith, Hiram had the job of making coffins for the victims of the epidemic.

When the government relocated the surviving members of the tribe, sending them to Kansas, Hiram and his family went along. There Hiram and No-ten-

o-quah had their second child: Hiram Phillip Thorpe, born in 1850 or 1851, who would become Jim's father. Tribal elders observed that he looked a lot like Black Hawk, and like Black Hawk he was defiant towards any who dared oppose him.

JIM'S FATHER, HIRAM PHILLIP THORPE

Jim's father was a well-known figure in Indian Territory, both feared and respected. He was a successful rancher who raised hogs, cattle, and horses and grew wheat and corn on a 1,200-acre spread on the North Canadian River. English was the common language in the Thorpe home, and the everyday clothes that Jim and Hiram wore were not traditional garb but cotton shirts and trousers.

Hiram had a reputation as a bootlegger, a bad man, and a heavy drinker. He went on sprees in the nearby town of Keokuk Falls, famed for its "Seven Deadly Saloons." A frequently told story is that he was present at a gunfight in one of those saloons. One of the gunmen, after killing his rival, dared anyone else in the place to take him on. Hiram stepped up, stuck his finger in the bullet hole in the dead man on the floor, and then licked it clean. "Let's go outside," he said. At that the gunman grew pale, lowered his weapon and backed off, saying, "I'm sorry Hiram. I didn't know you was here."

Hiram was also one of the few Sac and Fox tribal members who could read and write. He believed you needed learning to beat whites at their own game and was determined that his children would be even better educated than he was.

Hiram also instructed his sons in the natural world and how to hunt and fish. Jim was only eight when he shot his first deer. Though the era of buffalo hunts and plains warfare was over, Sac and Fox men still competed in feats of physical prowess and endurance. Wrestling matches, foot races, and horse racing were favorite pastimes. Hiram was the undisputed champion in all these contests, and he passed on his love of physical contest to Jim.

At one point, when Jim was about fourteen, he and some friends were charged by a mean bull belonging to a local rancher. According to Sam Morris, a Sac and Fox elder who was there that day, everyone ran except Jim. He held his ground and shot the bull dead with a bow and arrow. Hiram had to pay the farmer for the bull, but instead of punishing Jim, all he said to his son was "No more bulls." The story suggests he was proud of his son's courage.

Jim took to the outdoors and the physical skills that Hiram taught him, but he hated the schools he was forced to attend.

GOING TO SCHOOL

In 1893, when Jim and his twin brother, Charlie, were six years old, their father sent them to the Sac and Fox Agency Boarding School twenty-three miles away. Their older half-brother, ***Frank***, their half-sister, Minnie, and their older brother, George, were already enrolled there.

Jim excelled in sports. Charlie was better at schoolwork. But they were close and they encouraged each other. Then in early 1897, when they were nine, disaster struck. An epidemic swept the Agency school. According to one account, Jim's father had just taken him out of school for a few days to go hunting. Another version is that Jim was not in school because he had run away. In any event Charlie remained, became sick, and died.

The loss of his twin affected Jim deeply. He believed that when Charlie died his brother's strength came into him and that this ultimately contributed to his athletic prowess. Though Charlie was gone, he was always with Jim.

HASKELL INSTITUTE

Jim's distrust of school deepened after the loss of his brother. Hiram took Jim back to school after Charlie's death. But as soon as his father left him, Jim ran all the way home, cutting across fields and rivers to get there before his father did.

Evidently Jim was not afraid of Hiram, and Hiram, tough as he was, found his son hard to handle. Eventually, in 1898 at the age of eleven, Jim was put on a train to ***Haskell Institute***, an Indian boarding school in Lawrence, Kansas, 270 miles away.

Founded in 1884, Haskell Institute had a student population of close to a thousand Indian boys and

girls from nearly a hundred different tribal nations all over the United States.

At Haskell Jim was first introduced to organized sports, especially football, which fascinated him. Small for his age (Jim would not get his growth until his late teens), Jim idolized such Haskell football players as Chauncey Archiquette. Archiquette gave him his first homemade football, stitched together from scraps of leather from the school's harness shop and stuffed with rags.

Haskell Students
KANSAS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Jim was adjusting to life at Haskell when he received word that his father had been mortally injured in an accident. Jim's request to go home was denied by the school authorities, so he took off on his own. He hopped a freight train but then discovered it was going in the wrong direction. He jumped off and walked. It took him two weeks to get home. By that time Hiram had unexpectedly recovered from his injury. Jim was allowed to stay and help around the ranch.

In 1901 Jim struck out on his own. His mother had died giving birth to her eleventh child, and he'd had another argument with Hiram. There seemed nothing to hold him. He was just fifteen, but he got a job catching and breaking wild horses on the Texas high plains.

Jim returned a year later with a team of horses he had bought from his earnings. Hiram had remarried, and Jim's older brothers had moved out. Jim went back to school again, this time at a public, non-Indian school. The Garden Grove school was only a few miles from his home, making it possible for Jim to live at home and help care for his four younger siblings.

Jim also took part in sports at Garden Grove, including track and baseball. He became a star on the local baseball team, and Walter White, the teacher who had opened Garden Grove, suggested that Jim go to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, because it was a great place for an athlete. According to Jim's own account, an assistant superintendent from Carlisle, who was recruiting promising athletes, came to Garden Grove and met with him and other students.

THE CARLISLE SCHOOL

In any event, in early 1904, Jim Thorpe boarded a train that started him on the long journey to Carlisle. His father's last words to him were these: "Son, you are an Indian. I want you to show other races what an Indian can do."

At this point in history Hiram's words were particularly poignant. In 1904, the general consensus was that Indians were a "Vanishing Race." Census figures showed that only 250,000 American Indians remained in the United States. It was assumed that the Indian would simply disappear before the end of the twentieth century. American Indians were virtually powerless after years of fruitless struggle to protect their land. By law they were not American citizens; they had the legal status of dependent children.

Proving what an Indian could do was a formidable task. And it was made no easier when Jim learned, soon after his arrival in Pennsylvania, that his father was dead from blood poisoning.

Jim's first years at ***Carlisle*** were not promising. When he enrolled at the age of 16, he was only 5 foot 5 1/2 inches tall and weighed 115 pounds, according to school records. Nor did he do much in the way of schoolwork. Instead, he was sent out as a low-paid laborer (at $8 a month) to various farms in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, as part of a Carlisle ***Outing Program*** intended to teach students the white work ethic.

Carlisle Students at work in the school's cabbage patch
CUMBERLAND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

JIM IS DISCOVERED

In the spring of 1907 Jim was noticed by ***Glenn Scobey ("Pop") Warner***, Carlisle's ambitious athletic director and football coach. Pop asked Jim to join his track squad. That same fall, despite Pop's fears that his budding track star would be injured, Jim joined the football team. As one of Pop Warner's "Athletic Boys" Jim got to live in a new dormitory with special food and accommodations. It also meant that he shared in the financial perks of being a Carlisle athlete. The Carlisle Athletic Association, controlled by Pop Warner, kept all receipts from ticket sales. Some of the money was used for improvements around campus – the athletic dorm, the building of the Leupp Art Studio and Pop Warner's own house. Thousands of dollars also went directly to the student athletes, who had expense accounts at local stores and were given cash in the form of "loans" that were never expected to be paid back. Jim's drinking habit probably began at Carlisle, where school employees actually made occasional beer deliveries to the athletic dorm and Pop sometimes invited his best athletes over to his home for a drink.

Jim distinguished himself in both track and football during 1907 and 1908. Then, at the end of the 1909 school year, he went south with several other Carlisle players to play minor league baseball in the Carolina Class D leagues. (School records indicated that he left to play summer ball.) It was common practice for college athletes to play semi-pro baseball in the summers, but they usually did so under assumed names. After two summers in the poorly organized Eastern Carolina League, where he had earned about $15 a week – much less than he'd been given as one of Pop Warner's boys at Carlisle – Jim returned home to Oklahoma, where he lived with relatives and continued to play baseball.

OLYMPICS AND COLLEGE FOOTBALL FAME

While Jim was gone, Carlisle's football fortunes went downhill. Pop Warner kept trying to convince Jim to return, and he finally did so in 1911. That year, Jim and his teammate, Louis Tewanima gained national prominence in track and field. It led to their being selected for the ***Olympic Games of 1912***. (Tewanima had already taken part in the previous Olympics in 1908.) Getting Jim to the Olympics had been one of Pop Warner's aims in inviting him back to Carlisle, and Warner traveled with his two stars to Sweden as their coach. In the Swedish Olympics, Jim gained world fame, winning both the decathlon and the pentathlon, while Louis Tewanima took second place in the 10,000-meter event. Returning to Carlisle from Sweden, Jim refused numerous offers to become a professional athlete. Because of his loyalty to Pop Warner, he went on to play another season of football, where his team won their famous victory against the West Point Military Academy, on November 11, 1912. For once in modern history, it could be said: "The Indians beat the Army."

For the second year in a row, Jim was named to that elite group of players known as the All-Americans.

It was ironic that Jim and Louis Tewanima came to represent the United States in the Olympics. Like most Indians, Jim and Louis were not citizens of the United States, and lacked the rights of American citizenship. Louis Tewanima was in fact technically a prisoner of war. He had ended up at Carlisle after troops from Fort Wingate were sent in 1906 to the Hopi Reservation by Indian Commissioner Francis C. Leupp, to quash continued Hopi opposition to white schooling. Twelve years earlier, in 1894, similar opposition by the Hopis had resulted in nineteen Hopis being sentenced to hard labor at ***Alcatraz***. In the 1906 invasion of Hopi

lands, seventy-two resisters were captured. Seventeen Hopis ended up imprisoned at Fort Huachuca, the two main Hopi leaders were banned for life from the reservation, and ***Tewanima and eleven other "hostiles"*** were ordered to serve five years at an Indian boarding school of their choice.

THE OLYMPIC SCANDAL

Jim's great successes of 1912 were followed by scandal. An article published in January of 1913 claimed that Jim Thorpe had played professional baseball and that he was not an amateur athlete when he took part in the Olympics. Pop Warner and Moses Friedman, the Superintendent of Carlisle, at first denied it, even though both knew Jim had played summer ball. According to Joe Libby, one of the Carlisle players who went with Jim to Carolina, the $15 per week they earned in the ***East Carolina League*** went straight back to Pennsylvania to be placed in their Carlisle accounts to pay for their clothing for the next school year. When the evidence mounted that Jim had played in East Carolina, Warner and Friedman drafted a letter for Jim to rewrite in his own hand, taking all responsibility on himself for hiding the fact that he had played summer baseball. He was subsequently stripped of his Olympic medals and records.

PROFESSIONAL SPORTS

Despite the scandal, Thorpe's career as a professional athlete was just beginning. In 1913 he signed a lucrative contract with the ***New York Giants*** baseball team and went on a round-the-world baseball tour with the team, accompanied by his new wife, Iva Miller, who had been called "the prettiest girl at Carlisle." He also brought life to the new sport of professional football as a player and in 1920, he became the first president of the American Football Association, which would later become the National Football League (NFL). In 1922 he founded, coached and played for the Oorang Indians, the only all-Indian professional football team.

Thorpe on Oorang Field
ROBERT WHITMAN

FAMILY

Though Jim Thorpe was a money-making machine for others, he never became wealthy. He and Iva, his first wife, had a comfortable home in Yale, Oklahoma, and together they had four children, Jim Jr., Gail, Charlotte, and Grace. But the demands of his life as a professional athlete kept Jim on the road, and Iva was often alone. After the tragic death of their first child, Jim Jr., in 1917, the marriage became troubled. Jim's long absences and his drinking led to a divorce in 1923.

He married again, to Freeda Kilpatrick, in 1925. The two of them had four sons, Carl Phillip, William, Richard, and John. Once again, however, the demands of his professional life meant that he had little time to spend with his family. That second marriage also ended in divorce in 1941.

THE DEPRESSION AND HOLLYWOOD

After his professional sports career ended, Jim weathered the Great Depression and found work in Hollywood. He had small speaking parts and appeared as a extra in numerous films. He also was an advocate for other Indians seeking roles and equal pay in the movies. In 1929, he sold (for $1,500) the rights for a movie to be made about his life, to be called "Red Son of Carlisle." Nothing came of it at the time, in part because of the Olympics scandal. Employment was often hard to find, and Jim had a series of jobs, making a countrywide lecture tour for the W. Colton Leigh Bureau in 1940 and working as a gate tender at a Ford Motor Company plant in Dearborn, Michigan, in 1942. He made numerous unsuccessful attempts to enlist in the armed forces during World War II. Finally, in 1945, he was able to join the Merchant Marine as a ship's carpenter. After the war he found part-time jobs, including one as a bouncer at a Los Angeles bar and grill in 1947.

RECOGNITION AND THE FINAL YEARS

Interest in Jim Thorpe was reignited when on January 24, 1950, an Associated Press poll of 391 broadcasters and sports writers voted him "The Greatest Football Player of the Half Century." Several days later, a second Associated Press poll, in which he received 252 of the 393 votes cast, chose Jim as "The Greatest Athlete of the Half Century." A popular movie, ***Jim Thorpe, All-American***, starring Burt Lancaster, was made in 1951. Jim no longer owned the rights to his life story, but MGM hired him as an advisor during the production of the film.

During his last years, Jim traveled as a lecturer and advocate for Native rights. He was known for his generosity, often giving away the money he earned at speaking engagements to friends in need. He received numerous accolades. No American Indian of the twentieth century was better known or more beloved than Jim Thorpe. A series of heart attacks weakened him, and he was hospitalized in 1952 with lip cancer. Jim's third wife, Patricia Askew, whom he had married on June 2, 1945, declared: "Jim has nothing but his name and his memories. He has spent his money on his people and given it all away." Funding drives were started throughout the nation to pay for his medical expenses, and Jim recovered enough to return home to their trailer in Lomita, California. The iron man of Carlisle, the indestructible Jim Thorpe, passed on from a final heart attack on March 28, 1953, at the age of 66.

After Thorpe's death some of his children followed in his footsteps as advocates for Native American rights. Jim's youngest son, Jack, served as chief of the Sac and Fox nation from 1980 to 1987 and remains active in Indian affairs. Jim's daughter ***Grace Thorpe*** successfully led a drive to prevent the dumping of radioactive waste on first her own Sac and Fox and then other American Indian reservations.

In 1982, thanks to the efforts of the Thorpe family and countless others, both Indian and non-Indian, the International Olympic Committee restored Jim Thorpe's amateur status and returned his name to the Olympic record books. In 2000, in a national poll conducted by Wide World of Sports, Jim Thorpe was voted the Greatest Athlete of the Twentieth Century.

Throughout his life, Jim Thorpe moved between the white and native worlds. His life reflects the complex relationship between Native people and an American nation burdened with lingering race stereotypes, stereotypes of Indians as a doomed and degraded race.

Jim Thorpe in Hollywood, 1940s
JIM THORPE HOME

THE LIFE OF JIM THORPE
Concepts and Discussion

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students learn about the major events of Jim Thorpe's life, his family and tribal background. The story of Jim Thorpe should also be understood within the context of the larger story of American Indian history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the development of amateur and professional sports in the United States.

TEACHERS' QUICK REFERENCE

- Jim Thorpe's mixed ancestry
- Large families were common, many children did not survive.
- Special place of family in American Indian culture
- Clans and clan relatives
- Jim receives the Thunder Clan name Wa-tha-sko-huk, which means "The Light After the Lightning."
- Hiram P. Thorpe, Jim's father, rancher, bad man, and believer in education for his children
- Twins go to school at the Sac and Fox Agency. Jim hates it. Charlie dies.
- Jim goes to the Haskell Institute in Kansas.
- Jim enrolls in the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1904.
- First successes in track and field and football at Carlisle, 1907-1908
- Plays baseball during the summers of 1909-1910 in minor leagues.
- Returns to Carlisle and leads football teams in victorious seasons 1911-1912.
- Wins two gold medals at the 1912 Summer Olympics and wins the sobriquet "The Greatest Athlete in the World."
- Olympic scandal, Thorpe judged not to have been an amateur.
- Professional sports. Jim signs with New York Giants baseball team.
- Marries Iva Margaret Miller. Their first son, Jim Jr., dies. Seven more children are born, from Iva and Freeda, Jim's second wife.
- Hollywood and the Great Depression
- Jim becomes an advocate for Indian actors in Hollywood during the 1930s.
- Goes on lecture circuit in 1940.
- Selected as best Football Player of the Half Century in 1950.
- Movie based on Thorpe's life is released in 1951.
- Jim Thorpe dies in 1953.

KEY CONTENT

- Jim Thorpe's tribal and family background
- Indian Schools, Haskell and Carlisle
- Pop Warner, Carlisle Athletic Director and Thorpe's mentor
- Thorpe's successes in track and football at Carlisle
- The 1912 Olympics and ensuing scandal
- Jim's career as a professional athlete
- Jim Thorpe's life and advocacy in Hollywood and beyond

CONTENT REVIEW

- What led to Jim Thorpe's family being of such mixed ancestry?
- How many American Indians were there at the start of the twentieth century?
- Why did Charlie Thorpe die and Jim survive?
- How did Jim react to school?
- Where was Jim first sent to school?
- Where was the Haskell Institute?
- When was Jim sent to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School?
- Who was Jim Thorpe's coach at Carlisle?
- Was the Carlisle system truly amateur?
- Why was Jim Thorpe stripped of his Olympic medals?
- What was Jim Thorpe's career in sports after Carlisle?
- Why did Jim Thorpe's first two marriages fail?
- Why was Jim Thorpe never a wealthy man?
- What else did Jim do aside from sports?
- Were Jim Thorpe's Olympic records ever restored?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Identify three factors that led to Jim's mixed ancestry.
- How do family and clan affect American Indians? How did they impact Jim Thorpe's life?
- Did Jim Thorpe succeed in showing other races what an Indian can do?
- What is the difference between an amateur athlete and a professional one? How are today's ideas of amateurism different from those of the early 20th century?
- Was Jim Thorpe's life a tragedy? What elements in his life were tragic and what parts were triumphant?
- What was the place that American Indians occupied in American culture in the early twentieth century? How is that place different today?
- If American society were a ladder, what rung did the Native American occupy in the early twentieth century? Why? What rung do they occupy today? Why?

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