

REMEMBERING THE OORANG INDIANS

By Chris Willis

Most people don't know who William Guthery Sr. is, but he has experienced something only a few people have done and he loves to talk about it. In 1922 William was a senior at LaRue High School located north of Columbus in the tiny town of LaRue, Ohio, population about 800 people. During that year two important things happened to LaRue and William. The town got a NFL franchise, for about the great sum of \$100, purchased by a local businessman named Walter Lingo. The other event was that the high school, with interest from the professional team making news, fielded a team of its own which made young William very happy.

The only problem was that the tiny town of LaRue had only one field adequate enough to hold a practice. So on most occasions the two teams had to practice on the same field, at the same time. Imagine being a 16-year old and having to cover Jim Thorpe on a pass play or take on a block by Joe Guyon, even if it was only half speed. What a nightmare and what a thrill at the same time. Well young William had that pleasure and on June 26, 2000 in his hometown of LaRue, Ohio I sat down with William Guthery, Sr. at 95 years old he told me everything, he surely does remember the Oorang Indians.

Growing up in LaRue, Ohio, a small town of about 800 people at the time, what was the personality of the town in the early 1920's?

I was just a youngster, but LaRue had 6 or 7 groceries, 4 garages, 3 automobile dealers and about 4 churches. Now there's one grocery store, no garages and no automobile dealers. Times change. The town never had more than 1200 people. The town was also was divided by railroad sections. It had 2 sections. Men worked on the railroad because of the steamers in the river. That's where they got their water. Trains would stop all the time in LaRue. There were 27 trains that went through LaRue. I don't know how many go through today.

What did you know about football at that time and had you heard much about professional football?

I really didn't know much, back in the 1920's it was just starting, in northwestern Ohio and western Pennsylvania. That was the birthplace of pro football. When the Oorang Indians were organized in the early 20's it wasn't probably over 3 or 4 years old, at the most.

LaRue High School fielded a team for the first time in years in 1922, you were a senior in high school who really hadn't played football, why did you go out for the team?

It was the thing to do. I don't know how many in a squad, maybe 15, 20. We were just anxious to play. Everybody didn't have that privilege. I think maybe some of the other communities were a bit jealous of us because we had the only football team in the county. Of the 9 schools in the county we were the only one that had a football team.

Walter Lingo was the mastermind of the Oorang Indians, a successful businessman who ran a profitable dog kennel. He brought Jim Thorpe in to lead the All-Indian team, one of the NFL's all-time most colorful teams. What was your opinion of him?

Walter Lingo, I didn't know enough about him except he was pretty successful, he owned a general store, a tire mill and of course the dog kennel. So they were pretty well established. I guess he made a lot of money at one time. But the depression came along and the flow stopped. But he had, I think 15, 20 people working for him. That was a lot of people in a little town like LaRue. Of course all the dogs were shipped out from here. Wasn't any trucks in those days. They all went out by railroad. You had celebrities come in. I missed Jack Dempsey but I remember Lou Gehrig and Charley Paddock. They got off the train and Lingo would have his picture with them for publicity.

The town of LaRue had just one practice field, so sometimes the inexperienced high school team had to practice with the NFL's Oorang Indians, probably the only time in NFL history that has happened. How did your high school team react to practicing against grown men, who also happened to be native Americans?

Well you can imagine none had every played football before. They didn't know the rules. How to handle the ball or how to catch a ball. The Indians, Thorpe and the others showed us how to do it. The just explained the game to us. What to do and how to tackle, and how to block, how to straight arm, pass and kick. They kind of enjoyed it.

What was your opinion of Jim Thorpe?

He was just a nice guy. He had his faults, but as a player he was a big man. He was fast. Good coordination. As I remember there wasn't any fouls or dirty playing or anything like that. It was just a clean sport, a lot of them played without headgear for awhile. In those days it was a pretty rough sport compared to today. I mean, your padding and your helmet, and all that sort of thing didn't exist. No comparison.

Thorpe ran the practice sessions, how were they organized and did you think the team could be successful?

Thorpe had a policy, that was always tackle. Don't jump on a guy. I mean always get him off his feet when he's through running. Now I only went to see one game (Indians played most of the games as a traveling team), I think it was against the Columbus Panhandle. At halftime, no at the beginning of the game Thorpe would drop kick, they didn't have place kickers in those days. He'd drop kick from the 50-yard line one way and turn around and kick it over the goal the other way. And passing, they had one play, one characteristic, they would line up real quick before the other team really got in position to start the next play (interviewer note- was that the start of the hurry-up offense?). I don't remember the score.

The Oorang Indians were also known for their famous half-time shows.

It was more of advertising for the Oorang Airedales than it was really for the football team. That was Lingo's idea of course, get the name out in front. He was a great promoter, I remember I was going to school in Cleveland. This friend said, "Hey you're from LaRue aren't you?" I said "yea". He said "Look here in the Plain Dealer newspaper." There was a picture of Lingo, Thorpe and a bear. The caption was "It's been a long time since there was a bear killed in Ohio." Well Lingo had a bear on his kennel to help train the Oorang dogs, but the paper didn't know that. That's the kind of promotion he would do.

Where did the team stay in LaRue?

They lived in a couple of the houses in town. They also had what they called the "Coon Pawn Inn". It was operated by a character that ran the "LaRue News". There was a bunch of them who lived there during the season. They seemed to get along alright.

How did the citizens of LaRue respond to the Indians being in town?

They enjoyed them. They worked around here sometimes. A few of them worked on a farm out here. Nick Lassa, who's Indian name was Chief Long Time Sleep. He was a blackfoot. He was the first one to arrive. I first saw him east of New Bloomington. He was jogging to Marion. He was the first man I ever saw in shorts around here. He stayed around until the 1930's. He worked for the Lingo's and he worked on farms. The other ones kind of split up. Some of them went back to the reservations and some stayed in Ohio. Pete Calac became a cop in Canton. Another one (Lo Boutwell) had a printing establishment over here in Mechanicsburg, Ohio. They just kind of spread around in different communities.

You met Nick Lassa (Long Time Sleep) several times.

Well Nick Lassa stood out because he was here for so long. He was a nice fella. He raised a little hell once in awhile. He was just nice to have around. I remember going to a county fair with him once and you'd have these fellas that had a wrestling ring and they usually had an older wrestler with him. Nick would wrestle this poor sap and win some money. Sometimes he'd win \$50.00.

Any of the other Indians stand out?

Well of course Joe Guyon, he was probably the tallest man on the team. Quiet sort of a man. He was just a hell of nice guy. Yea. He must've stood 6'4" and weighed 230, 240 pounds.

The Oorang Indians only lasted the two seasons (1922-23) how do you remember the team?

Well it was an oddity, to the extent that you had to become accustomed to them. I don't think people resented them being here because they didn't cause any trouble. Everybody was glad to see Lingo make a go of it because he was quite a success.

Did the Oorang Indians help the NFL in those early years with the publicity they created?

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I don't know how many teams were in the NFL. But everybody noticed it. They didn't play for much money or glory. They just had a hell of a good time doing it.

How does the town of LaRue remember the team, has it forgotten about them?

Yea, it did for awhile. Because they didn't pick it up until about 8, 10 years ago when they started what they call the "Oorang Bang" (community celebration). It was just kind of died out and everybody forgot about it. Pro football has become so prevalent that it kind of brought Jim Thorpe and the Oorang Indians back onto the scene again. It was something just to kind of get people together again. It was a good thing.

Looking back at it, how do you remember that time of your life?

"We appreciated the team, there probably wasn't any other town in the country that size that had a pro football team. You were proud to be from LaRue where the Oorang Indians were from."

William Guthery, Sr. continued to live on his family farm in LaRue until the early 1970's when he retired and moved to Fort Pierce, Florida. His son continues to live on the farm. Guthery is now 97 years old and is the only person living who can claim he played on the same field as the Oorang Indians.
