Teters MFA ’91, a member of the Speoke Nation and a founder of the Native American Students for Progress. She led the recent efforts to examine the use of Chief Illiniwek as a symbol for the University of Illinois. Powless is a Native American and the president of a tribally-owned high-tech environmental firm.

By Norma Linton

We in Memorial Stadium has not felt the electrifying sensation of thousands of voices raised in concert when the fanfare-styled trumpet notes signal the start of a performance which is at the heart of the Chief Illiniwek tradition! The feeling is contagious and everyone hangs on to the traditions in a multi-layered and rich in meanings which reach out far beyond the walls of Memorial Stadium and the Assembly Hall. I would like to reflect with you on Chief Illiniwek as symbol and as meaning.

Humans are, by nature, a symbolizing species. We delight in making one thing stand for another, then in transforming, playing with, attaching meaning to and investing emotion in these things. We use everything as symbols: physical objects, ideas, other people, other species, even other symbols. Symbols are a kind of language through which we express emotions for which words seem too small. We speak with symbols, believe they have power, and think that symbol and ritual serve us at best as a pre-conscious level, wherein awareness and articulation are insufficient.

Over time, things are hung on to a symbol like hats are tossed onto a hat rack. Onto collective memory people hang memories of carefree youth, self-discovery and intellectual revelation, of crisp fall days and the bonding of masses. Symbolizing the image, hearing the band music, we reach back through the years and touch our past. Onto our bodies is hanged a symbol we hang in an additional constellation of meanings associated with The American Indian, a legend- ary and sacred site, in complete harmony with the natural elements, surviving tribulations with acute fortitude. If men and women cry when Chief Illiniwek dances, surely they weep for their halcyon days, but do they not also yearn for that mystical union with primordial forces, for a state of being in which they recognize the apotheosis of human physical development? The American Indian-symbolemun

By David A. Powless

I was not aware of a conflict over Chief Illiniwek until I attended the reunion of the 1960s football teams at Champaign during Homecoming in 1990. I had played on the 1963 Rose Bowl team with Dick Butkus, Jim Meggert, Pat O’Hara, Don Adams, Sam Price, Gary Eckman and others.

My teammates turned to me and asked how I felt about Chief Illiniwek. I knew why they asked me. I am an enrolled Oneida Six Nation Iroquois Indian of the Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin. I participate in our Onondaga Traditional Long House and our traditional ceremonies, and I am a Men’s Traditional Dancer at the Native American Pow-Wow Dances. I live in my reservation near Green Bay, Wisconsin, and I am employed by the Oneida Tribe. I have a degree from the University of Illinois, and I am president of ORTEK, a tribally-owned, high-tech environmental laboratory.

I heard my teammates talk of a chill running up their spine, choking up with a few tears and the crowd’s excitement as they watched Chief Illiniwek. It was discussed that the dance was performed very close to the traditional form, and that it was done with respect and that Chief Illiniwek’s clothing was based on traditional dress. The conversation went from what he looked like in the clothing to what he did. It was said that he wasn’t a mascot as some thought, but that he had brought a spirit to the campus. The spirit he brought to us all gave us an thrill, and a sense of belonging together, a team in unity.

I told them that we, as Native Americans, would respect that I shared those feelings. The thrill also came up my spine when I heard the music and saw him dance. Asked to make a formal statement about Chief Illiniwek, I went to seek the advice of our traditional leaders. I told them about Illiniwek—the music, the clothes, the dance and even offered to bring a film for them to view. I was told the film wasn’t necessary and was simply asked how I felt when I saw him. I described my feelings and relayed the story our coach, Pete Elliott, had told us.

It was at a game during our Rose Bowl year so long ago. It was half time, and we had played badly and were losing. In Coach Elliott’s half-time speech, he said we had an advantage, and that our team was playing in the game. He told us we weren’t like the Iroquois Prophet—The Peacemaker—who gave us instructions to share the words and feelings of peace with all people over the land.

So what do I feel about Chief Illiniwek? I have already said that this is not me or the form of a spirit, dance or feathers. It is the spirit of a people, the Fighting Illini. The spirit of a force people fought for survival on this land and lost it. As a tribe they are all gone, but their spirit is awakened and called upon many times in athletics, students, facul- ty, fans and alumni. Collectively the crowd roars even as Chief Illiniwek appears. As Chief Seattle said in 1807, “When you walk across this land you walk on the bones of your ancestors, and they will rise up to greet you.”

But what is the feeling that stirs up inside the spirit of those Fighting Illini ancestors is letting you know you are near. The feeling of encouragement grows into a sense of unity—a team spirit. I know from my own experience with the spirit of the Fighting Illini and the University of Illinois is alive and well.

So come to you with what your elders gave to me—words of encouragement. I have been told to tell you these things this way with the hope that it will bring our history to all of our Native American Indian Ances- tors—those who have been here, the ones who are here and the ones to follow. And I ask you, the students, alumni and fans, “What do you feel about Chief Illiniwek and the Fighting Illini?”

If you feel as I do, I ask you to stand up with me and let your feelings be known. Be a Fighting Illini!