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Good Old Siwash: A Century of (Mis)appropriation

This paper offers an historical and socio-cultural analysis of the mis- appropriation of the word “siwash.” In the 1930s “siwash” was a term that came to stand in for “anyman’s” college, but more specifically, provincial inland colleges. At various points in the history of this term, and prior to the 1930s especially, the term has been pejoratively applied to Native Americans, and in some definitional sources, cited as the social equivalent of the “n” word to African Americans. More broadly, siwash was connected to Chinookian based tribes of the northwest and implicated notions of the “uncivilized,” and Indian savagery.

In the 1920s Knox College (est. 1837) a small college in the midwest adopted this term and in so doing credited an alum, George Helgeson Fitch (1897) with the term’s “invention.” Fitch was a nationally reputable author, journalist, satirist and Progressive politician who wrote what became known as the “Siwash Stories.” The stories were serial pieces about a fictitious

college that depicted a humorous, yet idolized notion of college life as centering on fun, frivolity, football and pranks. A series of twenty stories were printed in the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Kansas City Star*, from 1908 to 1914. Later, these stories were serialized in three books; *The Big Strike at Siwash* (1909), *At Good Old Siwash* (1911), and *Petey Simmons at Siwash* (1915). Knox College referred (and still refers) to itself as “Old Siwash,” and although Knox’s teams are no longer called the “Siwash,” previously, they were known to be made up of “Siwashers.”

As suspect pieces that contributed to the genre of sport fiction, the Siwash stories have also been recorded as classic satires on college football and college life in general. Moreover, they are inclusive of Theodore Roosevelt’s rhetoric on Muscular Christianity and the “strenuous life.” While the inclusion of Fitch’s work with Roosevelt’s influence seems overstated, Roosevelt was to Progressives nationally, what Fitch was to Progressives in the state of Illinois. Moreover, Fitch idolized Roosevelt, his rhetoric and cultural appeal. Predictably, the Siwash stories reflect numerous analogies to Roosevelt’s political efforts and his verbal nuances. The Fitch books that were published as serials offered yet another perspective on cultural influences and anxieties, in that the visual imagery, or artists’ renditions of the stories-albeit caricatured, spoke to turn of the century sensibilities about manly men, but mostly under the guise of Indians, behemoth footballers and uncivilized “others.”

In 1940, Paramount Pictures bought Fitch’s stories and produced a film that centered on college life. The studio however, felt that the originally projected title of the film (also) “At Good Old Siwash,” was indefensible given its application to the American Indian, particularly in the northwest. Hence, the producers’ opted to change the name of the film to “Those Were the Days.” The film was a modest success and starred William Holden, America’s “golden boy” of the era. The film rendition of the Siwash tales, offers still another rendering of college frivolity, one that intersects football primarily with fraternities and the heterosociality of college affairs. Paramount Pictures’ disposition toward the film title offers a controversial interpretation of the supposed meaning of the term, and clearly pre-dates the rendering of such action as a consequence of “political correctness.”

By 1990 however, “political correctness” came to serve as the vanguard for team naming controversies. Ironically, in 1992, an internationally distributed college magazine entitled *Case Currents*, called on “Old Siwash” (Knox) to reconsider its nickname given its historical and especially pejorative implications. From this controversy emerged yet another set of documentation about Siwash’s meaning, a public and contemporary discourse that primarily included letters and responses to this team/college naming process. What makes this particular case unique among the team naming controversies across the country is that, unlike any other college or university caught up in this process, the application of the term Siwash to Knox College never included an icon, a mascot, nor a visual image of a “Siwash.” Indeed, no other college in the country had such a nickname, and “siwash,” if anything was supposedly ‘just a word.’ Yet the images imputed from Fitch’s work, combined with the history of the term itself, have and continue to be, at the center of this dilemma.

Key questions to be addressed in this paper include: what can we know about Fitch’s intention to engage the word “siwash” in his stories; what social and ideological precepts are woven into the “original” Siwash stories; what can be inferred from the naming process relative to Paramount Pictures adaptation of “Old Siwash,” and its application to college life; how do the current controversies surrounding team naming issues intersect with a naming process that offers a unique and distinctive historical pretense (Siwash according to Knox, was a name only); and lastly, what does this “story” tell us about the history of team naming practices? Here-in, each temporal moment addressed in this re-telling of yet another Siwash tale, rendered a different meaning for this controversial term and social process.
