

“Do you know where some Indian relics for the walls might be secured?” Fielding H. Yost wrote in a 1933 letter.<sup>1</sup> Yost led the University of Michigan’s football team on a victory streak to win dozens of games and bring national fame to Michigan. The Yost Ice Arena on campus is named in his honor. However, in 1933, he embarked on quite a different mission: to acquire “genuine Indian relics” for the Michigamua, an all-male and all-White elite fraternal organization and semi-secret society for final-year undergraduates.<sup>2</sup> The Michigamua’s main traditions all involved “playing Indian,” where its male members among them future U.S. President Gerald Ford (Indian name Flippum’ Back Ford) dressed up with face paint and warrior outfits in the style of Indigenous peoples, and they spoke in the accent they assumed Indigenous people to use.<sup>3</sup> We must use “good Indian speak with clear head” committee members scolded new initiates, known as “Braves” and “Bucks,” at a 1957 meeting in their “wigwam” in the top tower room of the Student Union building.<sup>4</sup> Their main event of the year was a hazing ritual known as Rope Day when new initiates stripped nude as late as 1957, smothered themselves in red war paint beneath Tappan Oak on the University Quad, adopted new Indian warrior names, shouted war cries, and vowed to “fight like hell” for the University of Michigan’s endowment, athletics, and reputation.<sup>5</sup>

Coach Yost wrote to dozens of land surveyors, hunters, libraries, and private collectors in search specifically of Indian relics and Birch bark for the walls and roof of the Michigamua’s fraternal clubhouse. Yost’s search for genuine relics and genuine history for the Michigamua comprises over 100 pages of correspondence in the university archives. The wigwam clubhouse, Yost wrote, must be as authentic to the interior of an Indian longhouse as possible. And the relics must be genuine ones from the “prehistoric” age, not new ones or reproductions. In its inventory of Indigenous artifacts and the prices of each, one advertiser added at the end: “I guarantee every piece on this list to be a genuine prehistoric Indian relic.” How they had acquired said artifacts was more likely a matter of “don’t ask, don’t tell.”<sup>6</sup> Another donor wrote back that we will “take steps to have this property removed from the local [public] library where it has been stored for some time”<sup>7</sup> and will then give these artifacts to Yost for his private display. Director George R. Hogarth from the Michigan Department of Conservation, the state agency tasked with land, forest, and water management on behalf of Indigenous peoples, wrote back: “Do you have all the Indian material that you want for the decoration? I can help you out with that if you still care to have me.”<sup>8</sup> Other donors described how their frequent contact with the “Injuns” and “savages” afforded them unique abilities to acquire artifacts from tribes with little “contact” with

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<sup>1</sup> “Wigwam Furnishings and Decorations 1933, 1940,” Box 3 of The Order of Angell records: 1902-1992, Bentley Historical Library: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhlead/umich-bhl-87248?view=text>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Joseph Deloria, “Preface,” in *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. ix-xvi.

<sup>4</sup> “Meeting Minutes 1957-58,” Box 2 of The Order of Angell records: 1902-1992, Bentley Historical Library: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

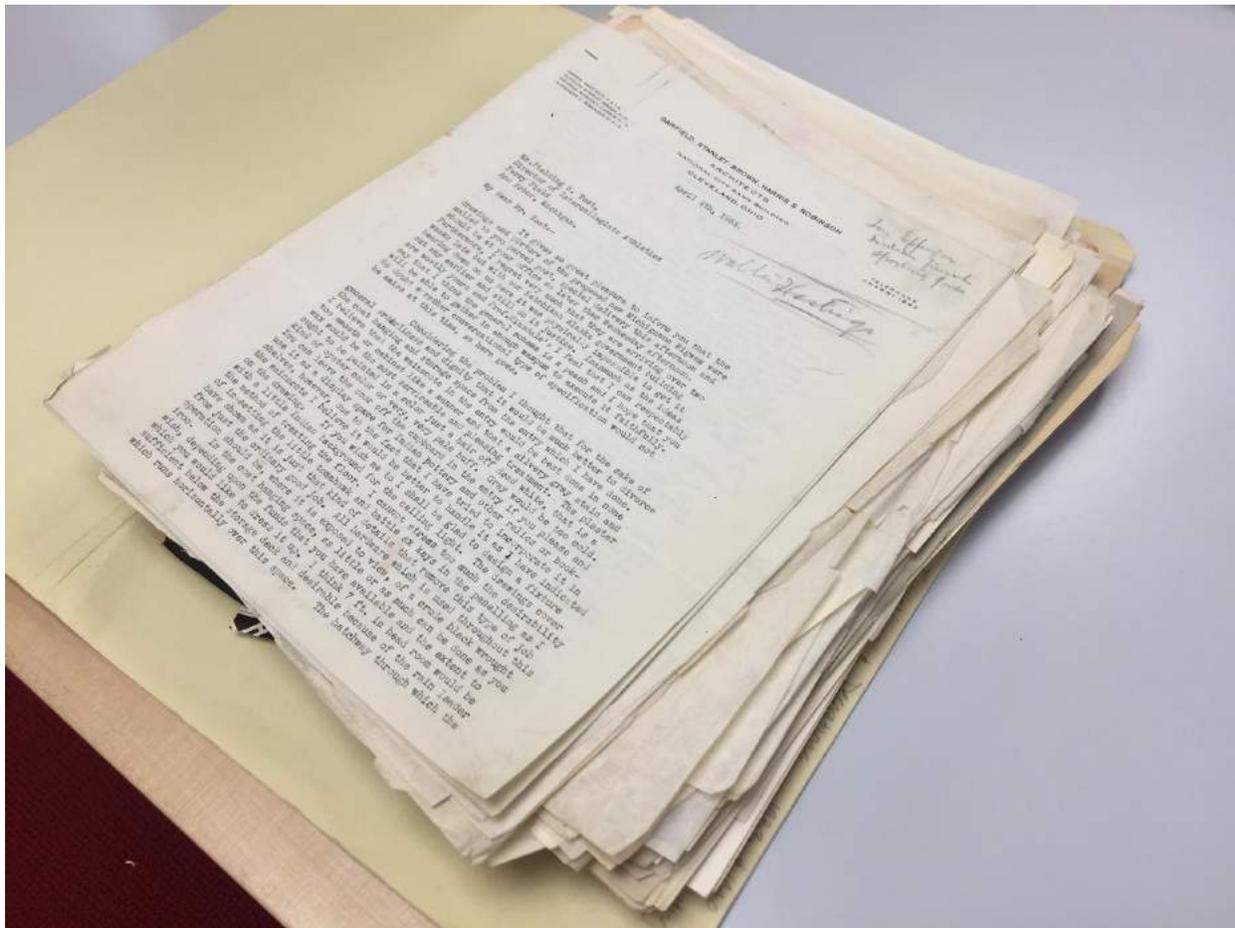
<sup>5</sup> “History and Traditions General, (includes The Great Charter) 1923 undated (2 folders)” Box 3 of The Order of Angell records: 1902-1992.

<sup>6</sup> “Wigwam Furnishings and Decorations 1933, 1940,” Box 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

civilization.<sup>9</sup> And yet, for all his efforts, Yost came up dry aside from a few relics and a smoking pipe acquired for ~\$15 and sent by the U.S. Postal Service from a collector in the West. One collector wrote back to explain why Yost was finding more relics from Western tribes than from tribes in Michigan. The collectors explained in short: There is almost no history of Indigenous people in Michigan.<sup>10</sup>



*The pile of Coach Yost's letters to trophy hunters and gravediggers for Indigenous artifacts<sup>11</sup>*

And yet in the absence of Indigenous history, the Michigamua invented a history of how they thought the “noble savage” would have behaved. Or to phrase their actions in different terms: In the Michigamua’s willful ignorance of there being actual Indigenous history in Michigan and Indigenous peoples’ claims to the land on which the university sits, they set about creating an origin story that positioned themselves as Indians and therefore as the rightful owners to the land. From the 1940s onward, the Michigamua closed each Rope Day with powwow and war-like ceremonies on a 200-acre tract of land in the far northeast of campus. The land was purchased in the 1930s by Frederick Matthaei Sr., who was a member of Michigamua’s class of 1914 known by his tribal name Battle Chaser.<sup>12</sup> From the 1942-43 meeting notes written in

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Larry Bush, “Regent-Emeritus Fred Matthaei Dies” *Ann Arbor News*, March 26, 1973.

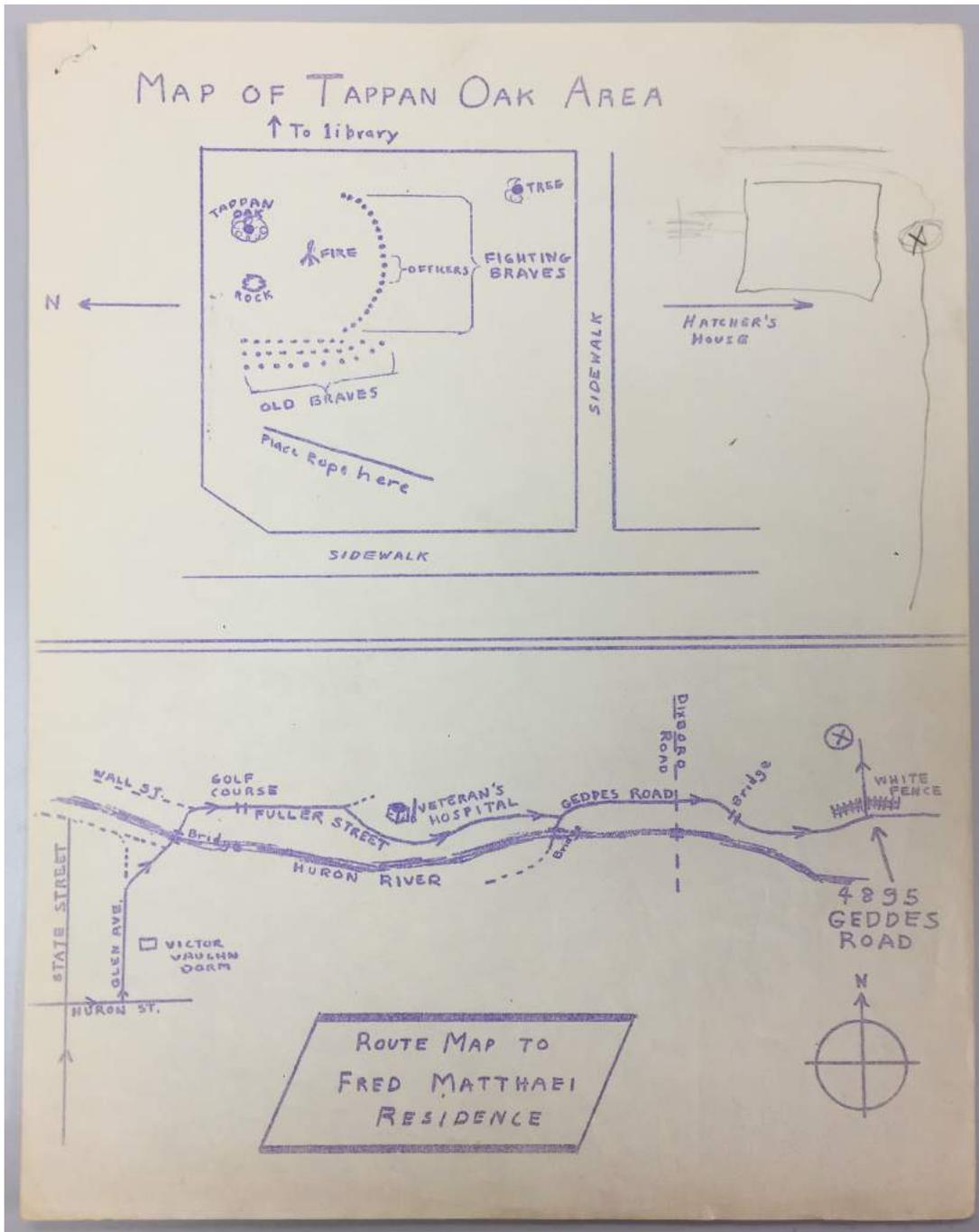
Indian speak: “Supple Sinew [Ciethum] sayum Battle Chaser Matthaei’s place beum available for sleigh ride Sunday, Jan 17<sup>th</sup>. Wiskinski bringum bear meat, firewater, + toilet water.”<sup>13</sup> Bear meat is “Indian speak” for meat in general, and firewater is “Indian speak” for alcohol. January 17, 1943 was a brutally cold day and only twelve students showed up. As described in the meeting minutes: “Beum last tribe meeting for several of um Fighting Braves. Have um damn poor turn out, many Braves late. Sleigh ride beum damn fine success, but only 12 Braves showum up. Battle Chaser beum damn fine Old Buck.”<sup>14</sup> Future near-annual events held at Battle Chaser’s place, however, were a success. In later correspondence, the Michigamua drew a map to guide the tribe from campus to Battle Chaser’s farm.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “Meeting Minutes 1957-58,” Box 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “60<sup>th</sup> Reunion 1961” Box 3.



Map of public induction ceremony on main campus for Rope Day, followed by map of driving route from main campus to private after party at Matthaei's farm. Pow Wows at Matthaei's farm were almost as frequent and as important in the Michigamua calendar as Rope Day.<sup>16</sup>

Yet Battle Chaser Matthaei Sr. (U-M Class of 1914) and Little Battle Chaser Matthaei Jr. (U-M class of 1947) were no Indians. Father and son were both regents of the university's highest governing body, businessmen, land developers, speculators, and owners of the American

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Metal Products Company in Detroit.<sup>17</sup> Matthaei Jr. 's correspondence with the Michigamua was even written on company letterhead, indicating that his participation in red face rituals was official business and a networking opportunity.<sup>18</sup> In 1957, he donated the Michigamua's ancestral stomping ground to the university of Michigan, a gift the university still honors by naming its botanical gardens in tribute to him.<sup>19</sup>

One of Michigamua's main missions, in addition to playing Indian, was to raise school spirit through participation in sporting events and to raise funds for the university endowment through their extensive alumni network of largely bankers, doctors, and lawyers. Generations of athletics coaches participated in Michigamua events. Matthaei specifically complained to Michigamua leadership when the university had planned so many games away from campus that Matthaei and his Michigamua buddies had trouble attending.<sup>20</sup> Then, as now, sports remain a key vehicle to funnel alumni donations to the university. Undergraduates described in their membership applications all the work they had done selling tickets to sports games or raising funds for university buildings. The funds and resources Michigamua undergraduates, and therefore future alumni, would contribute to the university was a key criteria for acceptance as Indians.<sup>21</sup> Battle Chaser was no different, and his financial and land gifts to the university did not go unrecognized by the grateful members of the Michigamua.

Four years after Battle Chaser's 1957 land donation for the Botanical Gardens, the Michigamua celebrated at 4pm on May 12, 1961 the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their founding. Equal to the 50<sup>th</sup> reunion of 1951, the 60<sup>th</sup> was the largest alumni event in the organization's history. To celebrate the occasion, the organization gifted Battle Chaser a 30-foot-tall totem pole. Of Michigamua's 1,000+ members, 188 alumni each paid \$15 membership fees to descend on the site of the Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Radrick Farms Golf Course.<sup>22</sup> In suits and ties, they came dressed for the totem pole dedication. An all-Black staff of waiters served "firewater" and "bear meat" to the all-White audience of men only.<sup>23</sup> A pamphlet was circulated from a speech given three years earlier, where the Michigamua's leader or "Sachem" Reed Leg Coe described

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<sup>17</sup> "Obituary of Frederick Carl Matthaei Jr.: 1925 – 2016," *Ann Arbor News*, June 11, 2016, <https://obits.mlive.com/us/obituaries/annarbor/name/frederick-matthaei-obituary?id=11109623>

<sup>18</sup> Matthaei's Sr. business empire, alumni affairs, and Michigamua events all overlapped. The ribald humor from his college years extended into professional life through Linsdale University, a mock university he created. The organization's main activities involved business executives and former Michigamua members writing and circulating amongst each other jokes about rape, sex, and female genitalia. As documented in "Frederick C. Matthaei papers, 1910-1914 and 1940s." at the Bentley History Library, Matthaei assembled these jokes into a book-length anthology of smut. One joke is a mock "consent form" for undergraduate females to sign, where they agree "never to appear as witness against him" or to prosecute him for trafficking her for sex work. Another sketch encourages males to "stick" their penis in as many women as possible because that is "God's will." Another joke by Matthaei suggests that the first rule on campus should be "positively no clothes permitted, except Jewish members may eat with their hats on." Matthaei's joke goes on to state that females should never have been accepted to university. A November 13, 1955 article in the *Detroit Free Press* was titled "Marvelous Matthaei" and described Linsdale as "mythical" and as "his marvelous creation."

<sup>19</sup> "Matthaei Botanical Gardens, in *Matthaei-Nichols History*, pp. 5-8. [https://mbgna.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/MBGNA\\_History.pdf](https://mbgna.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/MBGNA_History.pdf). <https://mbgna.umich.edu/about/history/>.

<sup>20</sup> Meeting Minutes 1957-58," Box 2.

<sup>21</sup> Questionnaires (completed) regarding Michigamua history for Tribes of 1920-1941, Box 3.

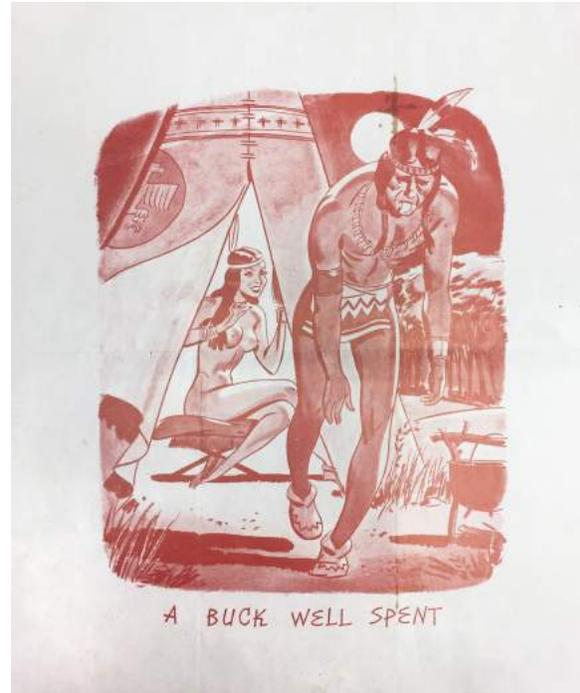
<sup>22</sup> "60<sup>th</sup> Reunion 1961" Box 3.

<sup>23</sup> Reunion, (includes totem pole) 1961 (2 folders (black and white positive prints)), Box 3.

the vanishing tribes of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous culture is disappearing, he warned, and the few genuine native artists “look with sad contempt at the many atrocities which are offered for the tourist trade or to decorate modern establishments.”<sup>24</sup> And yet, Reed Leg Coe reminded his audience of what the all-White and all-male Michigamua peoples could do to advance Indigenous culture: “In order to get one of the few hereditary carvers to create the Michigamua Totem Pole, it was necessary to build up a legend of our Tribe, which then could be translated through carved symbols to become a ‘talking pole’ for all the initiated to read. This legend is the basis of the Scroll which accompanies our Totem Pole.”<sup>25</sup> The next day on May 12, the *Detroit Free Press* wrote about Matthaei in an article titled “Top Man on the Totem Pole.”<sup>26</sup>



Totem pole dedication in Matthaei's honor<sup>27</sup>



Cartoon from Matthaei's private collection of news clippings and sex jokes<sup>28</sup>

For all the rituals of Indigenous culture, however, Matthaei won more than gratitude for his land donation to the university. The *Ann Arbor News* reported in 1978 on Matthaei's decision to subdivide the land he still owned adjacent to the botanical gardens. The plan was for 72 “luxury homes” priced between \$205,000 and \$400,000.<sup>29</sup> The article described: “Matthaei said the subdivision has been planned to ‘preserve as much as possible of the woods and natural settings. I plan to live there myself, and that is the way I want it.’”<sup>30</sup> In no small part, these homes commanded high prices because of their location adjacent to the university's extensive

<sup>24</sup> Totem Pole Legend 1958, Box 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Beltaire, “Top Man on the Totem Pole,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 13, 1961.

<sup>27</sup> Reunion, (includes totem pole) 1961 (2 folders (black and white positive prints)), Box 3.

<sup>28</sup> “Frederick C. Matthaei papers, 1910-1914 and 1940s.” Bentley History Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, <https://search.lib.umich.edu/catalog/record/990042844930106381>.

<sup>29</sup> Kathy Hulik, “Matthaei's Break Ground for Luxury Homes.” *Ann Arbor News*, September 30, 1985.

<sup>30</sup> Zada Blayton, “Natural-area subdivision proposed,” *Ann Arbor News*, November 7, 1978.

forests and botanical gardens, held in the public domain and maintained with public funds. Related gifts also included the now university-owned and managed Radrick Farms Golf Course, where a dedication plaque thanks the “Matthaei family for a legacy of stewardship and service” to the land.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the official history of Radrick Farms posted to the university’s website describes the Matthaei family’s efforts to restore the desolate scrub land and gravel mine they had purchased into the way it was before.<sup>32</sup> To prepare land for future use and profits, Matthaei restored it to the way it was before. To create the future, Matthaei and the Michigamua evoked the past as they thought history should be.

That a developer should donate a portion of his lands so as to increase the resale value of the rest is no new phenomenon. Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. advised the New York City Council as much in his 1857 plan for Central Park. Olmsted rightly predicted that public funds for the park would be recouped many times over through higher property taxes on adjacent lands, among them the nation’s now most prestigious addresses on the Upper West and Upper East Side.<sup>33</sup> Designer of the University of Michigan’s Nichols Arboretum described in his 1920 book *Landscape Gardening*:

If a man can secure an acre or two next to a golf course, the club grounds would form a large part of his estate. His front yard and broad acres would be mown and taken care of without expense to him save in his annual dues. His domain might, therefore, contain a hundred acres or even more while he would be required to pay taxes on only one or two.<sup>34</sup>

The Matthaei Botanical Gardens, located five miles from the main campus, are in a strange location indeed, strange not from the perspective of Matthaei but from the perspective of students. It is not accessible by public transit, and until the recent paving of a dedicated bike lane and footpath through the forests and experimental farm, the only way to get there was by car. And yet, the university was in no position to choose prime real estate and had to make do with what it was given. As a university official described at the June 1962 dedication ceremonies for the Botanical Gardens: “The Ann Arbor vicinity was fast becoming urbanized, and it was important for us to get adequate land this close while it was still available.”<sup>35</sup> The irony is that these words were spoken on land ceded to the university by a real estate developer, who worked for the auto-centered suburban sprawl that now surrounds Ann Arbor and the former grounds of the Michigamua.

Furthermore, the main customers of Matthaei’s American Metal Products Company included auto companies needing aluminum. Hence, Mattaei was financially invested in the very

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<sup>31</sup> Joshua Flickinger, “Radrick Farms Golf Course: The story of Frederick Matthaei's Ann Arbor estate,” Radrick Farms, University of Michigan, 2017, <https://arcg.is/1HrjzX>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted and American Social Science Association, *Public Parks And the Enlargement of Towns: Read Before the American Social Science Association At the Lowell Institute*, Boston, Feb. 25, 1870, (Cambridge: Printed for the American Social Science Association, at the Riverside Press, 1870), pp. 35, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008726621>.

<sup>34</sup> Ossian Cole Simonds, “Golf Grounds,” in *Landscape Gardening* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), 265.

<sup>35</sup> “To Dedicate New Botanical Gardens June 14,” *Ann Arbor News*, June 6, 1962.

forces of suburban sprawl that were destroying America's rural landscapes. Frank Lloyd Wright predicted that, in his sprawling and utopian Broadacre City of the future, residential land uses would be mixed with commercial, light industrial, civic, agricultural, and educational. Residents would speed around by car or by helicopter, the personal mobility device of the future. Indeed, Matthaei himself commuted to work in Detroit by a personal helicopter painted the university colors of maize and blue.<sup>36</sup> The area around the Matthaei Botanical Gardens resembles Wright's Broadacre City, if not in architectural style then in the spirit of mixed use development.

Native vs. foreign, civic vs. self-serving, genuinely Indigenous vs. cultural appropriation of Indigenous culture, the origins of the Matthaei Gardens illustrate the tensions of the settler colonial university on unceded land, or in this case "ceded" land "gifted" to the university by a "genuine" member of a "tribe" in exchange for a "totem pole" celebrating that tribe's "history." In this imagined history, undergraduate "pale faces" become Michigamua Indians and then graduate the university into manhood, where they serve capital and the university in their positions of power and influence. To be an Indian is a form of child's play. To be Indian therefore becomes a symbolic identity, a means of creating belonging and group identity among an in-group of select undergraduates. But this identity can just easily be discarded for the more important business of governing society, hence the strange imagery of "modern" men in suits dedicating a "primitive" totem pole on Matthaei's lands. The reunion becomes a return to and an evocation of an imagined history.

Land cannot have been taken from the Indigenous peoples if it was gifted to the university by Indigenous peoples, in this case not genuinely Indigenous peoples but at least White men who saw themselves as Indigenous and who were accepted by most others as Indigenous. Indeed, to reword from the grave robber's response to Coach Yost: There *is* almost no history of Indigenous people in Michigan. And there can be no history so long as the only Indigenous people that exist are – to quote from the Michigamua's meeting notes description of tribal outsiders – "pale faced" peoples.

Above the entrance to the University of Michigan's Angell Hall, built 1920 in the image of the a Greek temple front, is carved an excerpt from article three of the Northwest Ordinance: "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."<sup>37</sup> This 1787 act of the U.S. government described the political mechanisms for the acquisition, division, and sale of Indigenous lands in most of present-day Ohio, Michigan, and other states. The Midwest was endlessly divided into six by six mile grids of 36 square miles each; profits from the sale of one of those 36 squares in each grid was to fund school and university construction. Among the thousands of lines that divided the west into an endless grid of square miles, several of those boundary lines border the Matthaei lands. The ordinance expands: "The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed."<sup>38</sup> Perhaps, as can be inferred from the building names and plaques honoring

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<sup>36</sup> "George Stripp & Charles Betz With Frederick C. Matthaei's Helicopter," *Ann Arbor News*, March 19, 1956.

<sup>37</sup> "Northwest Ordinances: United States [1784, 1785, 1787]," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 16, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Northwest-Ordinances>.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Matthaei's gifts to the university as well as the gifts of dozens of other Michigamua Tribe members whose names appear around campus, "the utmost good faith" was "observed towards the Indians." At least, if America can tell itself that Indigenous peoples vanished without a trace and that the "pale-faced" peoples took their place to become more Indigenous than the actual Indigenous ever were, then our American culture has no reason to feel unsettled.

As Grand Sachem Reed Leg Coe described in 1961, we all need an origin story, and if there is no story, then it must be written.<sup>39</sup> Those who believe the truths of these stories can absolve themselves of settler guilt. If we were always Indians, the Matthaei father and son could tell themselves, this land was ours to give. Perhaps Coach Yost's eagerness over hundreds of letters to find prehistoric artifacts is more than a search for artifacts; it is a search for the kind of history that frees, history that absolves, and history that whitewashes in shades of red face paint. The truth – or rather however you construct the truth – will set you free.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Totem Pole Legend 1958, Box 4.

<sup>40</sup> For further reading, see passages about "settler moves to innocence" and "settler adoption fantasies" in: Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 1, No. 1, 2012, pp. 1-40.