



A Grave Concern

Two towns united to give Olympian Jim Thorpe a final resting place 59 years ago. And ever since, his sons have fought to bring his body back home.

by Neely Tucker
photographs by Bonnie Jo Mount

A statue of Jim Thorpe
in Jim Thorpe, Pa.



“
We were just so
astonished when she
came in that nobody
really said anything.”

says Bill Thorpe,
Jim's son speaking of Patsy Thorpe

Funerals, like weddings, can be messy family affairs. Not everything goes according to plan. Emotions run high. Even pleasant people can be tense. ¶ Few people who met Patsy Thorpe — third and most difficult spouse of Jim Thorpe, that primordial American athlete — accused her of being pleasant, in particular Thorpe's children from previous marriages. ¶ So when she pulled up to her husband's in-progress Native American funeral service at a farm near here on the night of April 12, 1953, with a hearse and a highway patrolman in tow, everybody knew something bad was about to happen. ¶ What transpired, however, is perhaps unmatched in the history of American funeral proceedings. ¶ She barged into the service and announced that her dead husband was “too cold.”

PRAGUE, Okla.

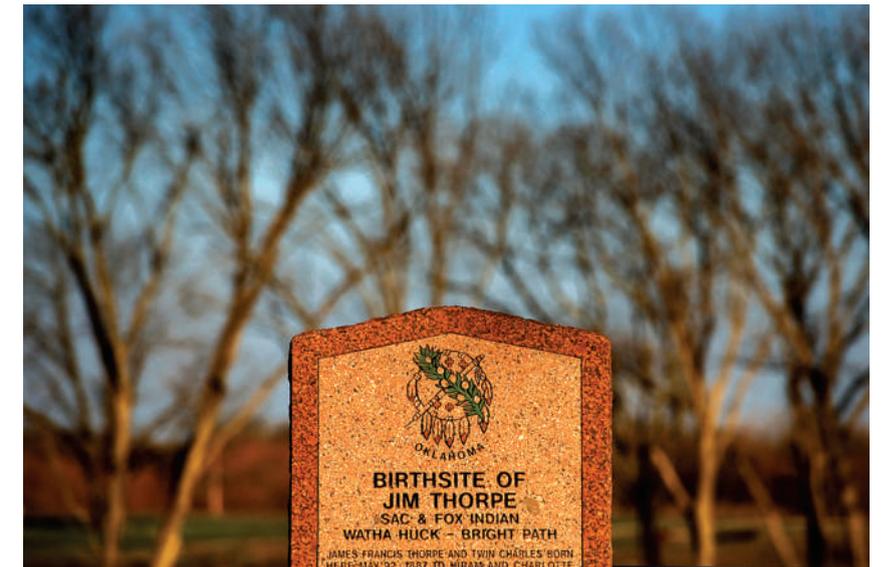
PHOTOGRAPH OF BILL THORPE BY MEGHUNJAU

She ordered the coffin loaded into the hearse, then drove away, taillights disappearing into the darkness.

Over the next several months, she shopped the body around, looking for a memorial for him and cash for her. After alienating almost everyone, she wound up 1,340 miles away in the Poconos of Pennsylvania, asking two tiny boroughs straddling a bend in the Lehigh River — Mauch Chunk and East Mauch Chunk — to unite under the name “Jim Thorpe” in exchange for his corpse.

It was macabre, it was bizarre, but

Left: Bill Thorpe holds a drawing of his late father, Olympian Jim Thorpe. **Below:** A marker commemorates Jim Thorpe's birthplace in Oklahoma.



the Chunks, once vacation getaways for U.S. presidents and the East Coast smart set, were desperate. Their coal-based fortunes had devolved into mid-century squalor. Civic leaders hoped the name change and a memorial might be their ticket back to prosperity.

With a parade, tooting horns and a marching band, they signed the deal, and today Jim Thorpe lies in a red marble mausoleum in Jim Thorpe, Pa.

This might be the end of the story, except for the fact that the four sons of Jim Thorpe never forgave and they never forgot.

They have asked, pleaded and two years ago sued in federal court to force the borough to right their stepmother's wrong. They want to bury their father where he wanted: in or near the Thorpe family plot on the Great Plains of rural Oklahoma, about a mile from where he was born.

It is, to them and the Sac and Fox Nation, a fundamental human right for Native Americans to bury their people where they wish them to be buried.

Jim Thorpe, Pa., has politely but steadfastly refused to return the body.

“We lived up to our end of the bargain,” says Michael Sofranko, the mayor. “That's about as American as

you can get.”

As the years have passed and the shadows have lengthened, the sons' quest has taken on a Homeric aura, as if lifted from the pages of “The Odyssey.” It has lasted 59 years, through 11 presidential administrations, Vietnam, Watergate, the civil rights movement, Reaganism, the collapse of the Soviet empire, Nelson Mandela and the end of apartheid, the birth of the Internet and the entire life span of Barack Obama.

Their lawsuit may have, at last, brought them to the brink of victory.

“I've got nothing against the town,” said Richard Thorpe, one of two surviving Thorpe children. He is sitting in a truck stop diner in Waurika, Okla., on a recent Sunday afternoon. He's a thin, wiry man, sporting a Chevy gimme cap, an NFL Hall of Fame jacket and a countenance that shows all of his 79 years.

Outside, there is brilliant sunshine, a hard wind and miles and miles and miles of rolling prairie. This time of year, it's all brown: brown grass, brown trees, brown dust blown up by the tractor-trailers breezing by on Highway 70.

“But we want Dad back here in Indian Country. We want to finish that funeral.”

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, THE Sac and Fox athlete Wa-tha-sko-huk, a.k.a. Light After the Lightning, a.k.a. Jacobus Franciscus Thorpe, became an American Colossus. He has stood astride that pedestal ever since — the most famous Native American of the 20th century, perhaps the greatest athlete the continent has ever produced. At this remove, he almost seems more akin to the mythical John Henry and Paul Bunyan than contemporaries Babe Ruth and Bronko Nagurski.

In the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, he won the decathlon and the pentathlon, a feat never duplicated. His scores in the combined 15 events were off the charts. He set records that took decades to break.

Sweden's King Gustav V presented him the gold medals and said, in awe, "You, sir, are the most wonderful athlete in the world."

People tend to splutter when trying to describe Thorpe's athletic ability. It's a little like trying to quantify Beethoven's musical genius or Leonardo da Vinci's artistic skill. But let's look at one small example, Thorpe's performance in the final of the decathlon's 10 events, the 1,500 meters.

His winning time was 4:40, which is running 12 miles an hour for five minutes — try it on your treadmill — but let's talk to the world's current greatest athlete, Bryan Clay, to put that in an athlete's perspective.

Clay won the gold medal in the decathlon in the 2008 Olympics and the silver in 2004. He is primed to go again this summer in London. Texas-born, Hawaii-raised, Clay is a monster, a freak, an athletic marvel.

He trains six to eight hours a day with the most sophisticated equipment, coaches and dietary nourishment science can offer. The 1,500 meters isn't his best event, he says, and other decathletes have run it much faster. "It's a beast, it's brutal, it comes after nine other events in two days."

But if Bryan Clay ran his all-time best, at the peak of his world-champion powers, he would beat Thorpe by *one second*.

It's fair to note here that Thorpe was running in mismatched shoes (see cover



Thorpe almost single-handedly created professional football as well as played pro baseball for six years.



photo). Someone had taken his just before the competition, and he had to hustle up two different shoes to make an ungainly pair.

Yet, this is only a fraction of his legend.

Standing 5-foot-11 and weighing about 185, he played college football at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. He was by far the nation's best player and led his team to unofficial national titles.

A halfback, he would amuse himself by calling out to the defense where he was going to run, then plow over the massed defenders anyway. During half-times, he sometimes entertained crowds by drop-kicking a football 50 yards over one goal post, then turning around and drop-kicking another 50 yards over the opposite goal post.

He was the star who almost single-handedly created professional football. He was the first president of what became the National Football League. (The Pro Football Hall of Fame is in Canton, Ohio, because of Thorpe's championship career with the Canton Bulldogs.)

During this period, he played pro baseball for six years.

In 1950, sportswriters overwhelmingly named him the nation's greatest athlete of the half-century. In second place — drawing barely a third of Thorpe's first-place votes — was Babe Ruth.

Pause right there. More than 300 sportswriters, many of whom would have seen both men perform, held that Babe Ruth — the Bambino, the Sultan of Swat, the man who hit more home runs than some *teams* in some years, the greatest baseball player in history — drew 86 first-place votes. Thorpe got 252.

"Thorpe," Clay says, "did things that were just insane."

THE MAN'S PERSONAL LIFE was mortal, messy and sad.

Born on the remote Sac and Fox reservation in 1887 (often incorrectly reported as 1888), three years before the massacre at Wounded Knee put a bloody end to the Indian wars, he was five-eighths Indian and endured a lifetime of racist slights and insults.

His twin brother died when he was 9. His mother died when he was 14. His father died when he was 16.

He was stripped of his Olympic medals in 1913 for having played semi-pro baseball before the 1912 Games, a ticky-tack violation of his amateur status. (The medals were posthumously returned in 1982.)

Pro football paid a pittance, so he never accrued much wealth. When he did make money, he shared it with friends or squandered it. His first-born child, Jim Jr., died in his arms at 3, a blow friends said hobbled him for the rest of his life. He divorced, remarried, divorced and remarried. Hollywood god Burt Lancaster played him in a biopic, but even that did not revive his fortunes.

Thorpe preferred to listen than talk. He was often away from his seven later-born children and distant even when present. He eventually drank to stunning excess (Thunderbird wine),

PHOTOGRAPH BY PFC/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES



Opposite page: Thorpe was an All-American in 1911-12 and played for the New York Giants in 1914. In 1950, sportswriters named him the nation's greatest athlete of the half-century. **Left:** By 1930, Thorpe was working as a laborer at the County Hospital in Los Angeles.

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failed to plan for the future and moved constantly, even after he retired from sports. He bounced from Oklahoma to New York to California to Michigan to Florida to Nevada and stops in between. He tried everything: football coach, security guard, ditch digger, house painter, car salesman, bar manager, Hollywood bit actor and public speaker.

His health worsened, his third marriage deteriorated. He was so itinerant at the end that he preferred living in a house trailer so he could move when the mood struck. He died of a heart attack in his trailer in Lomita, Calif., on March 28,

THORPE HAD THREE DAUGHTERS from his first marriage, Charlotte, Grace and Gail; and four sons from his second, Carl, Bill, Richard and Jack.

Though Patsy was technically in charge, the entire family voted to take him home for burial, as was his wish. The plan was that he would be given a Sac and Fox traditional rite, then a Catholic Mass, then be held in a mausoleum until the state of Oklahoma could finalize plans for a memorial. Gov. Johnston Murray set up a memorial commission.

“Patsy was all on board with it at the

time,” says Bill Thorpe, now 83 and a retired aircraft factory worker in Arlington, Tex.

The site of the memorial wasn’t determined, but the burial would likely be in the family plot in the Garden Grove Cemetery, about a mile from the old homeplace, surrounded by prairie and cow pastures. Thorpe’s father, Hiram, lay in Row 2, near the shade of an overhanging tree. Thorpe’s twin, Charlie, lay beneath a small stone obelisk reading “SON.” Sister Mary was buried a few feet away.

To Jim Thorpe’s children, this was their father’s native earth. He was as much a part of the place as rainwater. He was no international icon. He was just Dad.

Most of them were sent to Indian boarding schools, as was common at the time. But during his second marriage, when the boys were in California, Thorpe would roughhouse with them. “He would get under our bed and shake it, yelling, ‘Earthquake!’ Earthquake!” Bill remembers, laughing. Thorpe took the boys hunting. He played catch in the yard. He got them bit parts in the movies he acted in, introducing them to Tom Mix and other celebrities.

The daughters stayed with their mother after the first divorce. “When I saw my father, it was a joyous moment and one that sufficed until the next meeting,” Charlotte told Bob Wheeler, author of “Jim Thorpe: World’s Greatest Athlete.”

ONCE THE COFFIN WAS BACK home, friends and family gathered in the evening for the Sac and Fox service. The Daily Oklahoman reported that cooking pots bubbled with “chicken, beef, deer meat, and corn.”

Thomas Brown, the tribal member officiating at the ceremony, knelt and prayed to the Great Spirit over a sacred fire a few feet from the coffin, tossing in flecks of tobacco. Friends told stories of the old days. The rite was to last until dawn, when Thorpe’s body would be carried through a door facing west, thus freeing his soul to the afterlife.

It was about 9 p.m. when Patsy burst in. She was white and didn’t care for her late husband’s Native American roots, Buford and other biographers have noted.



1953, poor if not impoverished.

He was 65, fat, bloated and misshapen. Thorpe biographer Kate Buford writes that Patsy left the body in the trailer overnight. Friends transported him to a morgue, then arranged (and paid for) the trip back home to Oklahoma.

Buford spent eight years working on her seminal biography, “Native American Son,” published in 2010. She says she was moved by Thorpe’s generosity, his warmth, his genuine nature and his refusal to act like the egotistical, self-entitled athletes of the modern era.

“He wasn’t a complicated man,” she says, “but what happened to him was.”

“Nothing like it had ever happened before, and hasn’t happened since.”

says **Henrietta Massey**, above, an elder tribe member of the Sac and Fox Nation who was at Jim Thorpe’s funeral

“We were just so astonished when she came in that nobody really said anything,” Bill remembers.

The children, sons and daughters alike, were mortified. To the tribe, removing the body was not only a cultural insult and an act of sacrilege, it also left Thorpe’s soul adrift.

There is no theology to explain exactly where his soul is now, says Henrietta Massey, an esteemed elder member of the tribe who was at the funeral. “Nothing like it had ever happened before,” she says, “and hasn’t happened since.”

PATSY WENT AHEAD WITH THE Catholic service the following morning, then stored the body in a mausoleum, awaiting the state’s memorial. But later that summer, Gov. Murray vetoed the measure, citing budgetary straits.

Patsy was, by all accounts, furious. She was adamant her husband would get a

fitting memorial (and equally adamant in private that she would be paid in return, many involved in the affair have said).

Five months after Thorpe died, Patsy showed up at the mausoleum one night and had Thorpe’s coffin trucked to Tulsa, hoping that city would build a memorial. It turned her down. The children were now so angry that Bill asked the governor to stop her from moving the body again. Murray declined, calling it a family argument.

By summer’s end, Patsy was looking for (and alienating) other bidders. Carlisle, Thorpe’s college town, turned her down, because “Pat just wanted too much money,” a city official told Sports Illustrated in 1982.

With her options running out, she visited Philadelphia in September. She saw a television report about the Chunks, two tiny boroughs in western Pennsylvania trying to shore up finances by getting residents to chip in a “nickel a week.”

The boroughs were splintered by ethnic tensions — mostly Irish settlers on one bank of the Lehigh, mostly Germans on the other — and they were economically hamstrung by dual city services.

When Patsy showed up a few days after the television report, making her unorthodox pitch, civic boosters thought unification under the Thorpe banner might attract the proposed NFL Hall of Fame, a 500-bed hospital center, a sports stadium and a sporting goods factory.

Townspiece went for it 10 to 1. It flopped, badly.

Few tourists came. Neither did the Hall of Fame. There was no research hospital, no stadium, no factory. (Patsy, who ended her days caring for elderly invalids, apparently got nothing more than a check for her expenses.)

Two angry referendums to repeal the name change in the early 1960s drew about 40 percent of the vote. Vandals once attacked Thorpe’s mausoleum

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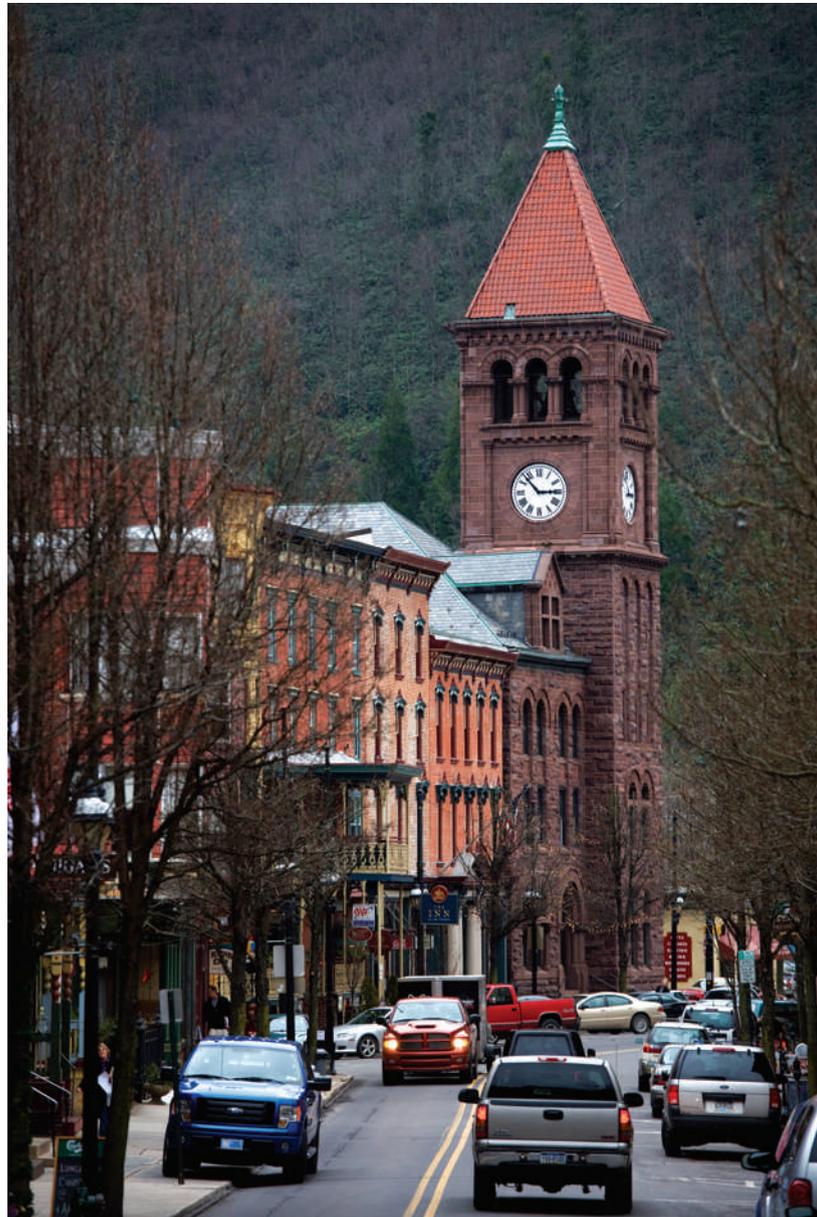
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Above: Downtown Jim Thorpe, Pa. **Right:** Jim Thorpe's daughter Charlotte, left, third wife Patsy, civic leader Frank Bernhard and Joe Boyle, editor of the Jim Thorpe Times News, at a hotel in Jim Thorpe, Pa.



with a hammer. Johnny Otto, a local contractor and county official, was notorious for telling visiting reporters: "All we got was a dead Indian."

But as the 1980s turned into the 1990s, the town of 5,000 began a slow resurgence as a regional tourist destination.

"It's all heritage tourism, mountain biking, white-water rafting," says John Drury, former head of the local Chamber of Commerce. "It's certainly not due to the mausoleum."

Thorpe's three daughters, meanwhile, grew to love the little town, though Charlotte went back and forth on whether her father should be buried there. Grace even helped sanctify the burial spot in a religious rite — putting his long-wandering soul to rest, she said.

The mausoleum sits in a tiny park a hundred feet off State Road 903, which winds downhill and into town. The view is of hills in the distance, a vocational school in the background and a neighborhood across the street. The park features two statues of Thorpe, a sculpture garden and landscaped azaleas. The house next door has a handmade sign out front that reads: "Baby Gerbils for Sale."

Sofranko, the mayor, thinks Thorpe is just fine right where he is.

A hometown kid in his 40s, Sofranko has a day job on the Mack Truck assembly line at a nearby factory. He settles in for a companionable beer after work at The Inn at Jim Thorpe, the town's nicest hotel.

He politely points out that his borough has done far more than required in the three-page legal contract with Patsy. That some of Thorpe's children are disgruntled by their stepmother's burial plans, he says, is probably not unusual in terms of family disputes. It certainly shouldn't compel a town to give up its namesake.

"Bringing Thorpe here, changing our name, all that we've invested over the years, that's part of who we are now," he says. "He brought a divided town together."

THE SONS, MEANWHILE, MADE pilgrimages to the memorial after it was built. If the town wanted to call itself Jim Thorpe, they were flattered. But to use his body to do it, they thought, was using his corpse like some sort of mascot.

THORPE FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE BOB WHEELER COLLECTION

"Dad had never been there in his life," Richard says.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jack, who would become chief of the Sac and Fox Nation, began asking the town to return the body, Bill remembers. "The answer was an emphatic no," he says.

Wheeler, the biographer, says he has interview notes and a letter from Jack Thorpe in July 1982, documenting a trip Jack made to the borough, asking once again for the body.

"It went nowhere," Wheeler says. "He met with numerous people in a conciliatory fashion, not threatening lawsuits."

The borough's reaction, as quoted in that Sports Illustrated piece: "No way," said then-mayor Michael Hichok, also one of the town's barbers. "They can't take it back."



All that we've invested here over the years, that's part of who we are now."

says Michael Sofranko, mayor of Jim Thorpe, Pa.

There was a far darker source of the sons' outrage than a family spat, however.

By the latter half of the 1800s, as the frontier moved west and Native American tribes were relocated and massacred and resettled, whites began to regard them as two-legged curios, a breed about to vanish.

As early as 1867, the Army Medical Museum began using native corpses for infectious disease studies. A few years later, the museum was advertising for skulls to enhance its "scientific" study — as if the Choctaws and Apaches and the Cheyenne were prehistoric mastodons.

In the following decades, tens of thousands of graves were looted, the bones and relics often shipped off to museums,

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Designers Warmly Welcomed

Thorpe brothers Carl, left, and Bill, learn how to play football from their father in 1929.



if not traded on the collectibles market.

In 1936, the ancient skeletons of 146 men, women and children were discovered in an Indian burial mound in Salina, Kan. The landowner shellacked the skeletons and displayed them as a roadside attraction for nearly 60 years. In 1989, relic hunters dug up a burial mound on the Slack farm in Kentucky, looting graves that were 500 years old, tossing skeletons to the side.

“We’ve been treated as curiosities and specimens rather than as people,” says Joe Watkins, a Choctaw Indian and director of the Native American studies program at the University of Oklahoma.

In 1990, Congress enacted the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, a sweeping bid to redress more than 150 years of abuse. It is designed to force museums to return human remains and sacred artifacts to their tribes of origin.

Sherry Hutt, national program manager for the act, says museums are not required to file annual reports of returns, so there is no comprehensive number of how many bodies have been transferred. What is known are the cases voluntarily reported: In the 22 years since the law was passed, the remains of 41,000 Native Americans have either been returned to their tribes or have been identified as eligible to be returned.

About 119,000 more are either unclaimed or unidentified.

THE THORPE SONS WERE intrigued with the sweeping power of the graves protection act. It had been 37 years since their father’s funeral. The law offered them their first legal tool to reclaim the body.

The act essentially asks only three questions: Is the entity a museum? Does it have control over the remains? Can those remains be identified as members of a tribe?

If so, then federal law mandates they be returned.

The statute’s definition of “museum” is extremely broad: any state, city, municipality, school or institution that re-

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says Joe Watkins,
a Choctaw Indian and professor

ceives any federal funds, for any purpose, even indirectly.

The sons thought they could sue under the act with a slam-dunk case. There was just one problem: their half-sisters.

Grace and Gail by now wanted their father to stay put. (Charlotte died in 1998.) Grace was an activist for Native American causes and often came to the town for events related to her father. The sons did not want to file a lawsuit only to have it blow up in public when

the sisters disagreed.

So, for more than a decade the issue simmered, with neither side able to persuade the other. Then Gail Thorpe died in 2005, and Grace died in 2008.

Jack thought the end was in sight at last.

“I’ll see it in my lifetime,” he jauntily told AOL FanHouse in 2009, referring to a court victory even before he filed the paperwork. The next summer, in U.S. District Court in Pennsylvania, he filed the suit to bring his father home.

He didn’t live to see anything else happen in the case he had worked on for so long. Eight months later, he was dead, too, eaten up by cancer.

He now lies beneath the red dirt rectangle of grass and weeds in the family plot where, for 58 years, he had wanted his father to be buried.

THERE WERE TWO BROTHERS left alive to continue the fight, Richard and Bill (Carl had died in 1986). The 3,000-member Sac and Fox Nation joined the suit as well, with Principal Chief George Thurman and the tribe’s historic preservation officer, Sandra Massey, at the forefront.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE BOB WHEELER COLLECTION

They were not surprised that the borough council voted 6 to 0 to fight them.

In court papers, William G. Schwab, the borough’s attorney in the case, has argued that the borough is not a museum, that the graves protection act was not intended to cover cases of “modern” people, and, most recently, that Thorpe was a Catholic and Catholicism forbids disinterment.

U.S. District Judge A. Richard Caputo has agreed with some of Schwab’s arguments. Caputo has pruned punitive damages from the suit and has knocked out claims that the borough should pay the fees of the sons’ attorneys.

But more important, Caputo has ruled that the borough *is* a museum — the key victory for the plaintiffs. The other two prongs of the act are not in question.

His latest ruling, handed down in November, said several of the borough’s objections to returning the remains were “erroneous.” There is a clause in the act, however, stipulating that if the holder of the artifacts has a “right of possession,” the holder may keep them; if the judge holds that Patsy’s contract gave the borough such a right, it will not have to return Thorpe’s body.

There is no timetable for a final ruling.

A LIFETIME OF STRUGGLE. IT all comes down to people talking.

“This is not a game, it’s not a legal technicality, it’s not something bothering a couple of people,” says Stephen Ward, the Tulsa-based attorney for the sons and the tribe. “It’s viewed as a widespread injustice by a large number of people in the Sac and Fox Nation. ... I don’t think the larger community really understands what it’s like to be a Native American.”

Michael Koehler, Charlotte’s son, is 73 and the oldest of the grandchildren. He supports the town.

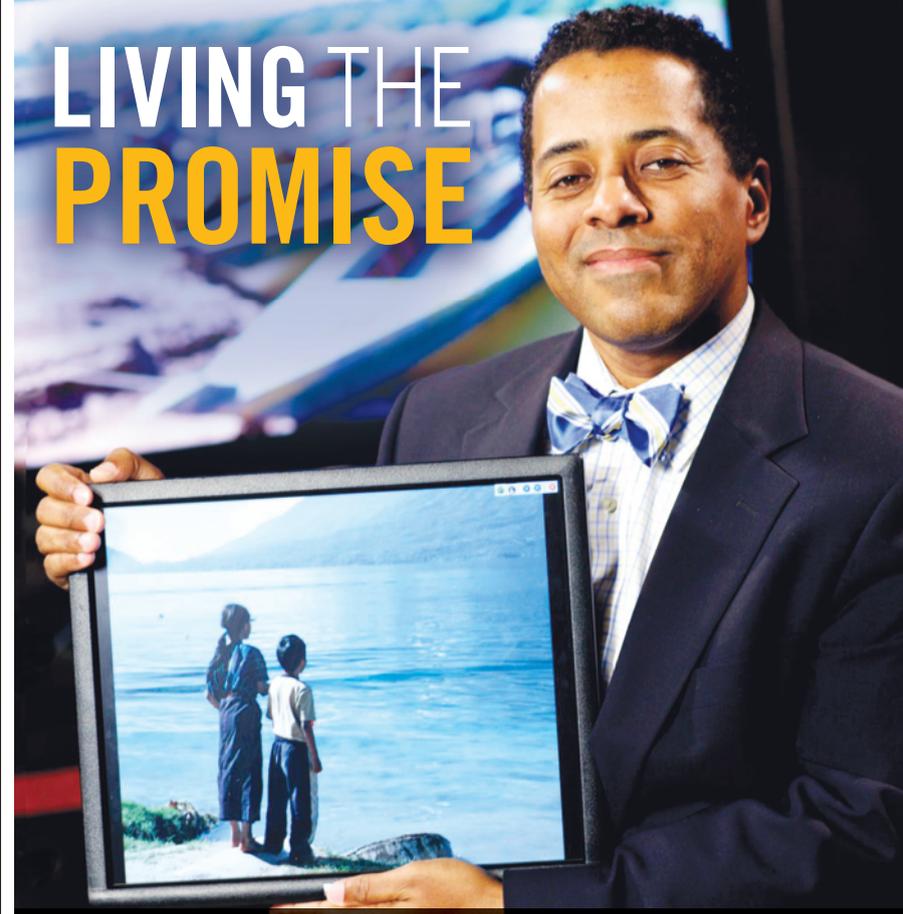
“Aunt Grace has already conducted a Native American burial ritual [at the site], and on that basis we’re convinced he lies in sanctified ground,” he says from his home in Bonita Springs, Fla. “I’m disappointed [the sons] want to do this, to get a crane and destroy a 15-ton mausoleum to pry him out of there.”

Rob Wheeler, the son of Thorpe’s biographer, has started a Web site to build

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support for Thorpe's body to be returned to Indian Country. He says the site has drawn 3,000 testimonials in five months.

Schwab says the borough is dug in. If it loses at the District Court level, he says it will appeal.

Sofranko, the mayor, considers all this over his barroom beer. It's getting on in the evening and it's snowing, the flakes dusting the village with a hushed, white blanket. The street out front is deserted, dark, the pavement icing up.

"You want an issue like this to be put to rest," he's saying. "But sometimes there's really no way to do that. Sometimes in life, there just isn't."

NOTHING REMAINS OF THE Thorpe family homestead. It's a pasture at the dead end of a county road.

Cows outnumber people here by a significant margin. Coyotes are such a problem that on a recent evening two rotting corpses are strung up by their heels on a fence by the roadside, mouths open and teeth bared. The stench is thought to ward off their chicken-roasting brethren.

A mile or two farther out, a stone marker by the side of the road notes that the Thorpes' log cabin stood nearby.

At dusk, the sun fades over a small rise that gives onto grasslands and the open expanse of the Great Plains. The sky goes from blue to black, a half-moon brilliant overhead. Lights from a few homes blink in the distance, a quarter-mile, a half-mile, a mile away. The land is that wide open.

It would have looked almost exactly this way — more wooded, more pastoral — in the 1890s, when the last of the Indian wars had not yet been fought, when Jim Thorpe was a boy in these fields, running after his father's horses, playing with his brothers, sleeping in the loft of their cabin, the family together in the deep nighttime blackness.

All that remains of most of them lies a mile to the west, beneath the stars, beneath the stone markers that bear their names, buried beneath the plains of their ancestors.

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