

mascot memories

From a kid named Collins to an orange named Otto,
the evolution of SU mascots has taken *many*

twists and turns

This is a short history of mascots at Syracuse University.

A fine line has to be followed backward into the 1890s, when the first football team gathered on campus. It's a mixed-up story, with only pieces of paper to help us understand it.

The best early guide is the Arthur Evans '04 masterwork, *50 Years of Football at Syracuse University, 1889-1959*. Evans tells us the first practice game of the new sport—literally the very first University football game—happened November 2, 1889, against a pickup team of city high school students. SU won, 28-0. The lads from "Piety Hill" wore snowy white canvas suits with pink and blue trim. The University opened in 1872 with the "shades of dawn" as the official colors. This changed in 1890, when we adjusted to orange. Then briefly, by Evans' account, the football team was called the Orioles, for its brilliant orange togs.

No mascots are mentioned in early accounts, but old team photos in the Evans book speak for themselves. The 1894 picture shows a young man seated front-row center with the caption "Collins, mascot." He also appears in 1895, 1896, and 1898. That year, Collins—later identified as Frank, or Collie—was photographed holding a dog. The next two years only the dog's there.

Evans explained in his text that Collins became a student and graduated in 1904, although he "failed to make varsity" football, except before the camera.

Shall we elect "Collie" our first mascot?

A crosscurrent that will affect later mascot history needs to be recognized. This was the adoption by 19th-century Syracusans of Native American motifs to represent the school. By 1996, an Ithaca College researcher, Ellen Staurowsky, would report that an astounding 1,500 high schools, 74 colleges and universities,

50 junior colleges, 15 minor league baseball teams, and five professional teams owned these symbols.

At Syracuse, for instance, student editors named the first yearbook, "published by the secret fraternities" in 1884, *The Onondagan*, "in honor of the tribe" of the Iroquois Confederacy located near campus. The cover had a warrior in headdress. The same motif is found in other early yearbooks. Meanwhile, the school color slowly found its way into the language as a way of describing sports teams. The earliest mention I found in a yearbook of "The Orange" was 1924.



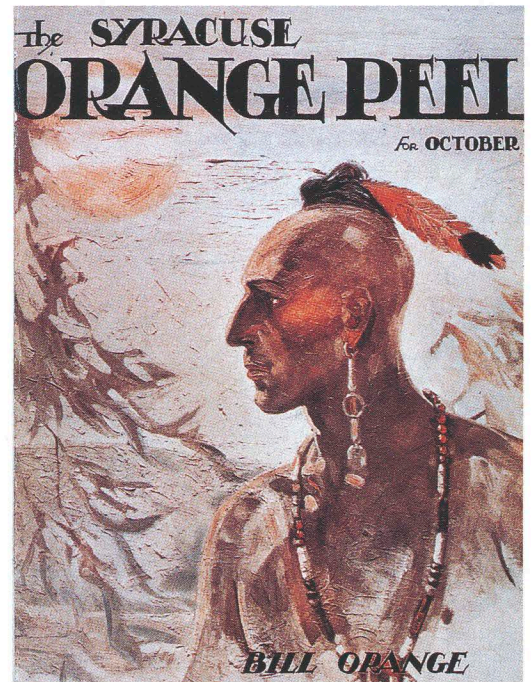
1894



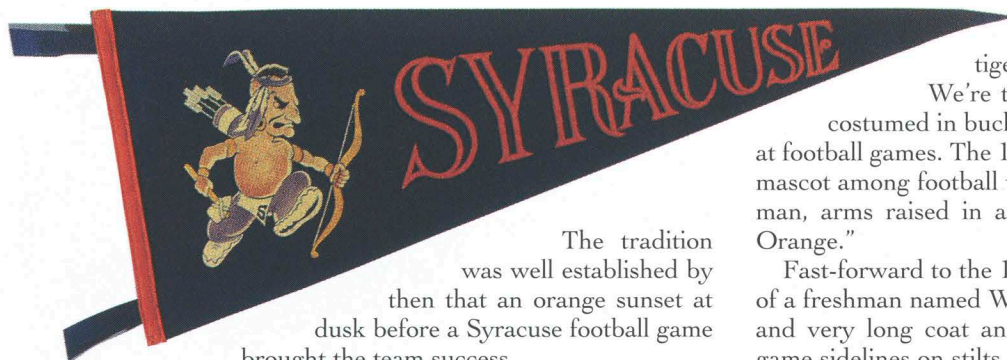
1898



1899



The earliest record of an SU mascot (left), a young man named Frank Collins, appeared in an 1894 photo of the University's football team. By 1899 Collins was gone, replaced by a dog sporting a football helmet. Three decades later, a student publication, the *Syracuse Orange Peel* (above), called for adoption of Big Chief Bill Orange as University mascot.



The tradition was well established by then that an orange sunset at dusk before a Syracuse football game brought the team success.

So where did "Bill Orange" come from?

Probably not from William, the given name of most of the kings of the Dutch House of Orange. We need to notice still another current, this one musical.

The first mention ever of the school color personified also took place as football got its legs. "Bill Orange" was the title of a song written by a student minstrel who played the banjo, Harry Lee '98. What he had in mind, he said years later, was a cheerleader. "I conceived the idea for the antics of the cheerleaders," the composer said in a newspaper interview in 1926. The article claimed it was from the song that Syracuse football teams acquired the name "Bill Orange."

Harry Lee seemed vague about just when he wrote the song, other than it happened while he was a student, putting that between his undergraduate years, 1894-98, or law school in 1901. He was definite that "the college color was orange and Bill seemed to fit it well. I don't know how I happened to get the name."

Lee's lyrics clearly put Bill on the "sidelines with megaphone and flag in hand," not on the field. Maybe time made that subtle change—Bill Orange as player rather than spectator.

Then there's the "Saltine Warrior." The two blended, somewhere out there.

The warrior also came to us in song, as a piece in a student (Tambourine and Bones) minstrel show in the spring of 1911. Believe it or not, the first public appearance of the Saltine Warrior occurred in a show in which a group of white guys put on makeup and imitated a bunch of black guys. The song, by Sam Darby '13, was an immediate hit, according to the *Daily Orange*, and shortly turned up in the *Syracuse University Song Book*.

Darby called his warrior "a bold, bad man and his weapon was a pigskin ball." In days of old, he wrote, "every city had its warrior man."

And a university a mascot, in 1931.

This happened when the student humor magazine, the *Syracuse Orange Peel*, published a spoof, "The True Story of Bill Orange," that year. The story, later admitted to be a hoax, recounted the discovery of fragments of ancient textile in a campus excavation that showed the likeness of "an early Onondagan chief" with the name "The Salt (or Salty) Warrior."

The article urged the school to adopt "the saltine warrior, Big Chief Bill Orange, with the orange feather in his scalp lock" as Syracuse's answer to Yale's bulldog and Princeton's

tiger, and reprinted Sam Darby's song.

We're told this happened quickly. A student costumed in buckskins and war paint started to appear at football games. The 1932 *Onondagan* carried a picture of the mascot among football team pictures. The unidentified young man, arms raised in a gesture of peace, is captioned "Bill Orange."

Fast-forward to the 1946 yearbook. Here we find a picture of a freshman named Wayne Doerr, who's shown in a top hat and very long coat and pants walking around the Colgate game sidelines on stilts. He's called "Bill Orange" too.

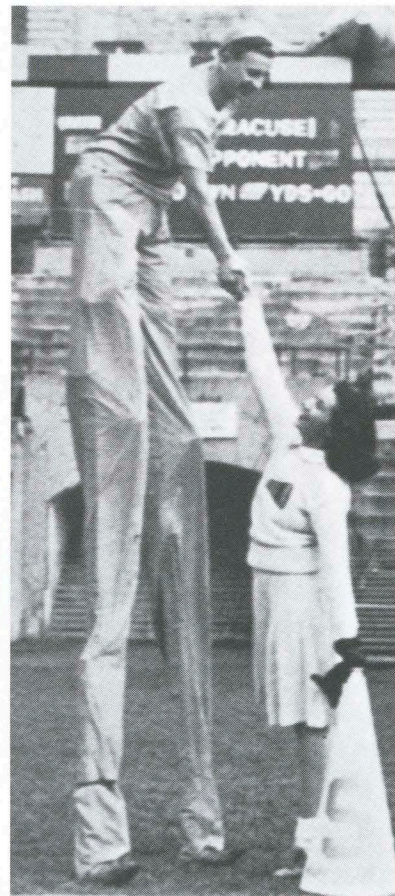
The warrior seems to have become more of a formal tradition after 1954, when students in a University fraternity, Lambda Chi Alpha, stepped up with a costume and head-dress and a brother to play the part. The brothers credited the idea to Warren "Cookie" Kimble '57, a student leader who served as class president and head cheerleader.

Kimble, a successful artist who lives in Vermont, confirmed the account in fraternity records provided by Brian Masters '76, the fraternity advisor and a retired warrior himself.

"I had the idea and got the act together," Kimble explained. "I went to the Onondaga Reservation and bought the headdress. The costume was made and we found a brother, Bill Heizler '57, who was crazy enough to do it."

He explained the inspirations were the Darby song and Saltine Warrior statue donated by the Class of '51 and a familiar landmark on the campus by the time Kimble arrived. The sculpture was the work of a graduate student of the time, Louise Kaisch.

Kimble and Masters say having the tradition of the Saltine Warrior was a proud one for the fraternity and they regret he's gone. "He wasn't a drunken idiot on the field," Masters, a suburban Syracuse school-teacher, explained. "We held it in high esteem. We cherished it."



During the 1940s, characters like "Big Bill," pictured above, and "Bill Orange"—students in costume who walked around on stilts during sporting events—vied for mascot status. But as this 1950s banner (top) shows, the Indian warrior remained most popular.

By 1978, a movement to change mascots had taken hold among Native American students and University administrators. Oren Lyons '58, artist and Onondaga Nation leader, called the warrior derogatory. The character was sidelined and two replacements tried, a Roman gladiator and a Greek warrior, still played by Lambda Chi.

Neither had staying power. Makeshift warriors snuck into games and unofficial mascots ran out of the stands, including the Dome Ranger, Dome Eddie, and the Beast of the East. The course needed to be steadied.

University officials, Lambda Chi brothers, and cheerleaders sat down and worked up a new tradition: a cute, soft figure with legs that looked like an orange in a hat. Linda Bell '74, the University's cheerleading coach, believes the first concept



Objections from Native American students and University administrators led to further experiments with the SU mascot, such as the example above, before the orange took hold. In 1995, an Orange Pack of wolves (top) was proposed and rejected, and Otto the Orange became the official University mascot.

came from one of the cheerleaders in 1982; the fraternity recollection is that it was a brother.

The idea, Bell explained, was to find a character mascot, rather than a human. The critter apparently had two early names—Clyde and Woody—before today's Otto the Orange evolved.

The character is played by four students who audition and are assigned to the cheerleading squad.

Otto had a close call in 1995 when Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw appointed a committee to look at the notion of yet another mascot for University sports. The group took a lot of testimony and finally recommended an "Orange Pack" of wolves. That fall, before the decision was announced, the football team produced its annual game poster with a drawing of a wolf and a couplet from Rudyard Kipling, the one about the wolf being the strength of the pack, and vice versa.

This wasn't an end-run, according to Kathy Bilbrough, director of sports promotions, but an expression of the team's personal motif, which players also had printed on the T-shirts they wore under their jerseys during the 1994 season.

In the end, the Chancellor decided to keep the orange, and assigned a committee to tinker a little with the look of the mascot. "It's over," he said. "Otto is now ours," Kathy Bilbrough remarked.

With his own web site, no less.



Color Me Orange

SU's founders picked rose pink and pea green the colors of dawn, as the new school's official colors in 1872. So they remained, shading slightly into pink and blue, until the University beat Hamilton College in a track meet at Clinton in 1890 and "derisive remarks" were heard about the visitors' ribbons.

Several students went to see the Chancellor and he agreed "pink and blue were not very suitable colors." A committee formed and on June 24, 1890, orange was approved by the Alumni Association as SU's true color.

In 1898, the association brought blue into the picture with a Syracuse flag of "orange on a blue background."

In 1903, the shade of orange was defined as "a color midway between the blood orange and Princeton orange."

The Evolution Continues

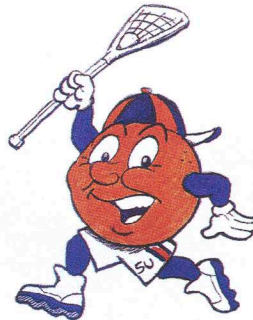
Toward the end of 1996 a committee of SU students, alumni, faculty, and staff was formed to examine the graphic identity of the University mascot. With the help of a professional artist, a number of possible "looks" for Otto the Orange were developed. We now invite you to cast your vote for the image you think best represents Otto and Syracuse University. Fill in the form below and send it in. The deadline is April 18, 1997.

Thanks for participating!

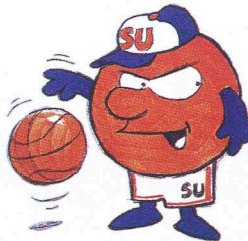
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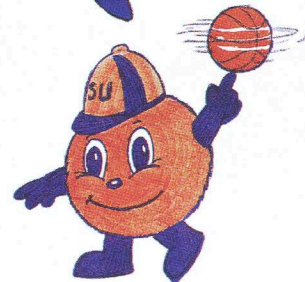
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C



D



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I like

Otto

A

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B

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I am an SU student alumnus faculty member staff member fan

Additional Comments (optional): _____
please print

Name (optional) _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Deadline: April 18, 1997

Send your vote to:

Otto Vote, c/o Syracuse University Magazine, 820 Comstock Ave., Room 308, Syracuse, NY 13244-5040;

Or vote from our mascot ballot web site: <http://www.sumag.syr.edu>