

## **Michigamua: An Investigative History**

We're a very powerful clan  
Rally round, ding ding  
We're a very powerful clan  
Our Den is in Michigan  
Rally round, ding ding ...

We are the Pride of Old Michigamua!  
We fight'em like hell for Michigan and Michigamua  
With an "M" on our chest and we don't give a damma! And a Ki-Yi-Yi!

– *Lyrics from the Michigamua Song "Rally 'Round"*

The story broke quietly: on page three of a Monday's Michigan Daily. Titled "Students of Color Coalition seize Michigamua office," it read like any number of other stories in a genre: students of color were making demands, the University gave a tepid, mealy-mouthed response. "We're obviously very much concerned about our student's concerns. I think the main issue is to have everyone talk about the concerns with Michigamua and just what those concerns are," University Provost Nancy Cantor told the Michigan Daily for the story.<sup>1</sup> A small group of students had taken over the meeting space of one of the University of Michigan's secret societies, claiming the evidence they found there proved that organization failed to follow a 1989 legal agreement in which they agreed to drop all references to Native American culture. The office, referred to by Michigamua as their "wigwam," was the seventh floor of the Michigan Union – the top of the tower.

What must have initially appeared to be simply the next chapter in a long-standing

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<sup>1</sup> Tiffany Maggard, "Students of Color Coalition seize Michigamua office," Michigan Daily, 7 February 2000.

dispute between native students and the campus society would spiral into a major campus controversy. When students refused to leave the office for thirty-seven days, they attracted national media attention, and forced the University to permanently reform allocation of office space, ultimately ejecting Michigamua from the tower.

The following Sunday, the occupation found its way into *The New York Times* in a story buried inside the front section. “[the students] found sacred Indian pipes and drums, feathered headdresses, a cradle board, and club memorabilia depicting decades-old practices of club members dressing up in headdresses and loincloths,” the newspaper would report, “The demonstrators put the items on display and have been conducting tours – for about 1,500 students so far – of Michigamua's club den, where members have met since 1934.”<sup>2</sup>

The occupation thrust into the public limelight the history and practices of Michigan's oldest and largest secret leadership society. For nearly 99 years, Michigamua had existed quietly as part of Michigan life, each year selecting (“tapping”) twenty-five men entering their senior years to be members of the invitation-only group. After passing through a week-long initiation process the new members would celebrate with the organizations alumni at a party held at the Mattheia Botanical gardens. Membership consisted mostly of varsity athletes, but also other campus leaders – men active in ROTC, the interfraternity council, and student government. Members attended weekly meetings in the organization's Michigan Union office to discuss ongoing campus issues, held social events, and at times helped raise funds from their members to fund work at the Michigan union. However, the 2000 occupation would challenge this role on campus, revealing not only their office and members, but also that organization's troubling and long history of abusing Native American culture.

Like most campuses, early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a number of prestigious organizations arose

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2 Robyn Meredith, “Michigan Students Protest Campus Club's Indian Relics,” *New York Times*, 13 February 2000, Sec. 1, P. 18.

on campus, and at Michigan the mens-only Michigamua was the first, when University President James B. Angell encouraged a group of students to create an organization. The group decided on the name “Michigamua,” adopting for themselves the identity of a mythical Native American tribe. New members were called “young bucks” and alumni were “old wolves,” nonmembers “pale-faces” and in order to join the “tribe of Michigamua” inductees were covered with red brick dust, and learn the Michigamua song “Rally 'Round,” one stanza which reads “Whoop and raise the great scalp lock / Rally round, ding ding / Whoop and raise the great scalp lock / Cut 'um off with tomahawk / Rally round, ding ding.”<sup>3</sup> New members adopted Michigamua nicknames, which in general reflected the member's activities or character.

The organization gave honorary memberships each year, frequently to important alumni, faculty, or staff of the University. These honorary members include Fielding “Great Scalper” Yost, an important early athletic director inducted in 1922, University President Grant “Peace Maker” Ruthven (1931), President Harlan “White Eagle” Hatcher (1962), and President “Silver Feathers” Fleming (1979). Other members include popular football coach Bo “Big Ten Wrecker” Schembechler (1983), tennis coach Brian “None Coach'Um” Eisner (1988) and popular history professor Sidney “Teaches So” Fine (1996).

Howard Peckham coyly mentions the organization in his definitive volume on University history, writing:

A variety of honor societies was organized in the first decade of this century to recognize excellence in attainment in several fields of activity. Michigamua (1901) was for senior men holding leading positions in athletics, publications, student government, the Michigan Union, interfraternity council, or scholastic societies. Each spring, they selected the juniors who would succeed them and offered a public initiation in Indian style. ...<sup>4</sup>

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3 Michigamua 1997 Directory, 8.

4 Howard Peckham, ed. Nicholas and Margaret Steneck, *The Making of the University of Michigan 1817-1992*, (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994), 119.

Peckham goes on to note a number of others: Sigma Xi, The Barrister's Society, Vulcans, Mortar Board, Sphinx, Tau Beta Pi, Triangle, Alpha Omega Alpha, Druids (1909), Phi Beta Kappa (1907). Volume IV of the Encyclopedia Survey of the University of Michigan, published in 1958, lists the following “campus societies”:<sup>5</sup> Michigamua, Druids, Sphinx, Mortar Board, Owls, Vulcans, Triangles, The Engineering Council, The Barrister's Society, Galens, Toastmasters, separating out “Honorary Scholastic Societies.”<sup>5</sup> In 1967, a Michigan Daily would list the following societies: “Druids, Hectorians, Mortarboard, Scabbard & Blade, Scroll, Sphinx, Triangles, Vulcans, Wyvern, and Michigamua.”<sup>6</sup>

Peckham also writes about the origins of the long connection between Michigamua and the Michigan Union. “It was Michigamua which initiated action at the end of the 1903 to form a Union to bring together all the men students, increase their acquaintance with one another, and provide a center for various activities ... Michigamuan Edward F. Parker, '04, is credited with the idea for a Michigan Union.” Peckham editorialized: “It is worth noting that the most aristocratic of the honorary societies worked hardest for the most democratic of campus organizations,” although not noting women wouldn't be allowed to even enter the Michigan Union, let alone be members of the organization, until the 1950s.

The organization was provided the 7<sup>th</sup> floor space in 1934 in return for their assistance fund raising to construct the Michigan Union. A copy of a fund raising letter sent in 1986 solicits members for donations to continue Michigan Union renovations, deciding the goal of \$160,000 was “attainable.” The letter requests “old braves” make their checks out to “University of Michigan – Michigamua Account” suggesting that organization had an official account with the University.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, Michigamua has helped raise money to renovate the fourth floor for

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5 *University of Michigan An Encyclopedic Survey*, Vol. IV, (Bentley Historical Collections, The University of Michigan, 1958). Available online at <http://www.hti.umich.edu/u/umsurvey/>) 1919-1929.

6 “Campus societies induct new members,” *Michigan Daily*, September 1967.

7 Letter from Tony Gant to Old Braves, Michigamua Papers, BHC.

use as student organization office space, and construct the fountain and plaza at the North Entrance named “Michigamua Plaza.”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout its history, Michigamua would have two overriding characteristics. First, on a campus which had enrolled women students since the 1870s and where in 1920 women constituted over one-quarter of the University's graduates, Michigamua was all men. Second, in a nation which had systematically violated every treaty signed with Native American tribes and pursued a national policy of warfare and genocide, Michigamua flaunted their organization's appropriation of Native American Culture. A document circulated by Native American students during the 2000 occupation explains this paradox well:

In 1902, when Michigamua started "playing Indian," our parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, and sisters were being forcibly taken from our homes and communities, placed in boarding schools and white homes to be stripped of our heathen culture, whitewashed, and shamed into thinking that the traditional ways of our ancestors were inferior. We were punished for speaking our languages. Until 1979, we were legally forbidden to practice our own religious beliefs while Michigamua performed mock rituals on the lawn of the University Presidents house. Today, Michigamua continues to perform rituals and naming rituals that insult the ceremonies that we and many of our communities hold central to our identity today.<sup>9</sup>

Michigamua first admitted women in 1999, ninety-eight years after its founding. First, however, in order to comply with the US federal government's Title IX legislation which prohibited gender discrimination in public accommodations, University administrators would create an all-female companion society in 1978, establishing a “separate but equal” organization so that Michigamua could continue unchanged. According to the 1997 Michigamua member directory, a leadership organization for women was founded in 1979 named Adara, described as “An organization with a philosophy of support for women in leadership roles at the University of

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8 A small plaque on the Michigan Union near the doors reads, “Construction of this Plaza was made possible through the generosity of the members and alumni of Michigamua the Senior Honorary Society.”

9 “A Statement from the Native American Community” 19 February 2000. (Available at [umich.edu/~aium/statement.html](http://umich.edu/~aium/statement.html))

Michigan, which before 1979 was unused, uncultivated, unexplored.”<sup>10</sup>. Together, the two constitute the “University of Michigan Tower Society” - an umbrella organization.

The experience of other all-men's collegiate societies would be more turbulent, and one example will provide a useful comparison. The most prestigious society at Yale, Skull and Bones, first admitted women in 1991, it was after nearly three decades of internal debate. That organization's class of 1971 formally proposed they make the society co-ed, however the proposal was quickly rejected by alumni. The proposal would spark an internal debate which would culminate with a narrow vote in favor of admitting women in 1991 after that year's class of men wrote a six-page letter to living alumni explaining why they thought it critical Skull and Bones admit women. However, as in 1971, the change couldn't happen without any conflict: Skull and Bones member and conservative activist William F. Buckley would seek a legal injunction prohibiting the the initiation from moving forward. In October of that year, women would be admitted.<sup>11</sup>

Michigamua faced no such internal turmoil that I know of, however the official records in the Bentley historical library seem to end somewhere in the early 1990s. However, at the time of the 2000 Tower occupation by the student of color coalition, the organization had admitted its first women – as members of the Pride of 2000.<sup>12</sup> This had come about when in 1998 University administrators instructed the organizations their single-sex membership was in violation of Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, assistant dean of students Frank Cianciola said at the time that if the groups didn't come into compliance “Their association with the University will discontinue.”<sup>13</sup>

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10 1997 Directory, 14-15.

11 Alexandra Robbins, *Secrets of the Tomb: Skull and Bones, the Ivy League, and the Hidden Paths of Power*, (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2002), 152-158.

12 Meredith.

13 Katie Plona, “Secret societies pressed to go co-ed,” *Michigan Daily*, 28 October 1998.

Michigamua's history also contains frequent references to Native American Culture in virtually every activity of the organization. A publication from 1966 contains a photo taken during “rope day,” or the day of initiation of the organization, as well as photos of men standing around the Tappan oak wearing headdresses. The pamphlet is written in a unique internal language:

“Tepee called Weber's be'um place of final Rally Round for Sesquicentennial Pow Wow. After eat'um up much bear meat, Tribe hear'um wise words from the Ground South Wind Niehuss, '57H. Discussion which follow'um show'um strong truth that all Braves care'um damn lot about great paleface University and will always “Fight'um Like Hell for Michigan and Michigamua.”<sup>14</sup>

This “Michigamua language” persists in virtually all society correspondence, minutes, publications, songs, and even alumni letters well into the 1980s. It exemplifies exactly how steeped a quasi- Native American culture the organization is. The sometimes public use of this language, the use of feathered head dresses, “peace” pipes, and other objects and practices had long been subjects of criticism by Michigan's small native community. In 1989, Michigamua would enter into a legal contract agreeing to undergo nothing short a dramatic internal cultural transformation. This 1989 agreement became the basis of many claims of the Native American Student Association and other members of the Student of Color Coalition during the 2000 sit-in. According to a February 19 document titled “A Statement from the Native American Community,” the agreement

... was signed between Michigamua, the University, and a Native American complainant, in which Michigamua promised "to eliminate all references to Native American culture and pseudo-culture and extensions and parodies thereof." Realizing that the agreement had not been upheld, Native American concerns were reiterated in 1997. Our struggle continues today.<sup>15</sup>

The document suggests the following steps, if “Michigamua is sincere about a healing

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14 Michigamua Directory, 1966, Michigamua Papers, BHC, p. 7.

15 “A Statement from the Native American Community”

process,” an apology, abiding by the 1989 agreement, vacating the tower, holding open meetings, and ending the practice of tapping honorary members. The document also asks the University administration to apologize, sever any connections to Michigamua, and establishing a policy prohibiting any “administration, faculty, or staff” from being affiliated with the group.<sup>16</sup>

Documents and objects found in the Michigamua tower during the 2000 sit-in proved that the organization was far from complying with the terms of the agreement. Additionally, a 1997 member directory found in the tower contains the member's nicknames, the lyrics to “Rally 'Round” and a short “Legend of Michigamua,” or a version of the founding story invented by the organization's founders.

Internal documents reflect an organization making a tepid effort to change. As an example, a March 1991 memo reflects the changing relationship between Michigamua and the University's administration. For the first time, among the records is a sense that the University administration's interest is diverging from the organizations: “Michigamua is probably fortunate in having confronted, accepted, and moved forward away from this difficult condition in the last year.”

The newsletter describes how “a number of old Wolves met with the complete current “pride” for dinner at the Alumni Association building on the main campus.” in order to discuss “new directions” for the organization, saying they heard “wise words” from “More Councils” Foreman, '77, which carried the weight of the University's administration.” and a desire to adopt “new symbolism that will 'defuse' any possible criticism from native Americans or any other pressure lobbies that place their individual causes ahead of the overall success of the University of Michigan.”<sup>17</sup>

However, as the administration is gently pressuring the organization to change their ways,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> “Tower Talk – Michigamua Honor Society,” Michigamua Papers, BHC.



the same newsletter suggests at least some resistance. The newsletter's "President's Report" from "Tough as a Smurf" Murphy writes that "I have always found myself extremely uncomfortable about putting eighty eight years of grand heritage by the wayside." Mr. Murphy continues, writing he has instituted a time during the weekly meetings "dedicated to the past" where a member "delivers a short disclosure on a past event, happening, ritual , or tradition of Michigamua."

Indeed, it seems Michigamua today can best be understood on this note. Originating on an overwhelmingly homogeneous and male campus, the organization has resisted changing to reflect either the changing demographics of Michigan, or changing attitudes about the appropriateness of Native American references and elitism in general.

In spring of 2004, after receiving a tip from a friend of a current member, nearly a dozen members of a coalition opposed to a variety of student budget cuts confronted Michigamua members near the Tappan Oak. During the encounter, Michigamua inductees who found their "Rope Day" initiation ceremony disrupted told members of the Native American Student Association their organization had changed, and existed to the benefit of all.<sup>18</sup>

Although the 2000 occupation succeeded in evicting Michigamua, Phoenix, and Vulcan from their offices in the Michigan Union tower, all three continue to exist, and Phoenix members were given a tour of the tower during their initiation week, and the tower remained unlocked during Vulcan's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, recently celebrated in the Michigan Union. Accepting the recommendations of a committee he appointed to examine office space, Lee Bollinger said "I have decided that it is not appropriate to continue any special tenancy in the [Michigan Union] tower space for Michigamua, Phoenix and Vulcan."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, however, that decision is not

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18 Rob Goodspeed, "Michigamua Confronted During Initiation Week Rituals," *Goodspeed Update*, 31 March 2004. ([http://www.goodspeedupdate.com/2004\\_03\\_01\\_archive.html#108072032888432072](http://www.goodspeedupdate.com/2004_03_01_archive.html#108072032888432072) )

19Julie Peterson, "Three student groups to be relocated," *University Record*, 14 August 2000.

being enforced today.

Michigamua's long history of cultural insensitivity, racial and gendered exclusivity, and resistance to change makes that organization's future uncertain, however at the minimum it is clear they must take seriously their new motto, adopted on a website designed during the 2000 occupation, that they are an organization with "New Traditions for a New Millenium."<sup>20</sup> The Michigan Daily perhaps has put the position of Michigamua in the University best in a 1999 editorial after it was announced the organization would, for the first time, admit women:

University sponsored secret societies seem outdated for the 1990s. While Michigamua claims to have rid itself of Native American ritual and will be desegregated next year, the existence of such an elitist society under University auspices should be brought under examination. Unlike other University affiliated groups, such as the Michigan Student Assembly and social activist organizations, Michigamua doesn't have much to offer the University.<sup>21</sup>

In 2000, Native American students said "Since European contact, we have fought to retain our dignity in the face of oppression and assimilation. Sadly, we continue to struggle at the University of Michigan," their later statement continues to be true: "Our struggle continues today."<sup>22</sup>

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20 michigamua.com (Accessed 19 April 2004)

21 Staff editorial, "Secret societies not worthy of 'U' funding," *Michigan Daily*, 20 April 1999.

22 "A Statement from the Native American Community"

## **Michigamua Glossary**

Angell – President

Bear meat – food served at a formal dinner

Den – Meeting Room

Fighting Braves – Members of Michigamua at the end of the senior year

Matthaei – Treasurer

Murphy – Secretary

Old Wolve – Alumni

Old Wolves Council – Alumni Organization

Paleface – Anyone not in Michigamua

Pride - Class

Rocks – Dollars or Money

Temple – Historian

Ufer – Spirit Raiser

Wigwam – the organization's headquarters located in the Michigan union

Yost – Vice-President

Young Bucks – Members selected to become members

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