*Hear, Here* Field Trip: Ho Chunk in Downtown La Crosse

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**Directions/Instructions:**

Before starting the tour enter the *Hear, Here* number into your phone’s contacts:

1-844-432-7529.

You will be visiting three *Hear, Here* signs, starting and ending at Downtown Mainstreet, Inc, at 500 Main Street in Downtown La Crosse. Your route is as follows:

* Your first sign is in Riverside Park, at the **Hiawatha Statue** down at the north end of the park. The story is narrated by **Dan Green** and is **Location #1, Story #2** in the phone system.
* Your second story is by **Elmer Peterson**, located at the **Lacrosse Players Statue, Location #1, Story #3**. Head back south in Riverside, following the walkway. Take a left onto State Street, and then at the intersection of 2nd St. and State, take a right. Continue one block until you are at the end of Main Street, at the Lacrosse Players Statue.
* From the Lacrosse Players Statue, continue heading south on 2nd Street. At the intersection of 2nd St and King, take a right turn, and continue to **The Pump House** on the right side of the street. The Pump House has a mural on the side of the building, the location of your third story by **Tracey Littlejohn (Location #1, Story #5)**.
* To go back to Riverside Park, continue walking down King Street towards west or the river, and at the corner of King Street and Front Street take a right turn. Follow Front Street until the intersection of State Street, and then take a left onto State St. Continue on State to get to Riverside Park.



Story #1: Dan Green

Story #2: Elmer Peterson

Story #3: Tracey Littlejohn

**Introduction**:

Before Europeans came to America, there were many different Native American Tribes throughout the Midwest. While the Ho-Chunk people are most commonly associated with La Crosse, the Oneota Native Americans settled in current La Crosse and Onalaska prior to the Ho Chunk. There is extensive evidence that links the Oneota here for a long period of time until they abruptly left.[[1]](#footnote-1) Archaeologists still have many questions about this period and where the Oneota culture originated.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Archeologists have more information about the Ho Chunk’s early settlement in the area, as they occupied a significant amount of land from Green Bay, Wisconsin to here along the Mississippi River. After European settlement of the area, the Ho-Chunk Nation was moved multiple times by the United States’ government in a pattern of forced removal of Native American tribes across the nation. They were moved to Iowa and then in 1846 to Northern Minnesota. The Ho-Chunk were placed in the middle of two warring tribes and were raided frequently. They requested to be moved once more and were relocated further West, transitioning further into areas of vast, flat plains. The Ho Chunk’s reservation size was reduced drastically to only 9 square miles; in 1863, they were put into a reservation near the Lakotas, before exchanging those lands for land near the Omaha in Nebraska in 1865. Throughout time, many Ho-Chunk members moved back to Wisconsin on their own and have purchased the land of ancestors privately. There are currently no Ho-Chunk reservations in Wisconsin. The Ho-Chunk Nation Government Headquarters today is based out of Black River Falls, with local divisions across the state, including La Crosse. The Ho-Chunk Nation has over 6,500 members, as of 2010, spreading all across the state and into Minneapolis and Chicago.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Historically, Native American tribes would frequently move around depending on hunting or the cultivation of land. The Ho Chunk that settled here came from the Western plain states of the US. They settled La Crosse with the Ojibwa to the North and the Sauk tribe settling to the South. Europeans arrived in the Midwest in 1634 when Father Nicolet of France claimed the shores of Green Bay (and modern day Wisconsin) for the French. France would keep this territory for 129 years. When the French arrived in Wisconsin, they saw the Ho Chunk playing a traditional game and dubbed it “la crosse.” Although the origin of the name is uncertain, one possible explanation for the naming of "La Crosse" is that Catholic Bishops held a crook, or hooked staff, called "la crozier," during worship services that looked similar to the lacrosse sticks. In addition to playing games such as lacrosse, the Ho-Chunk people also engaged in trade. The Midwest became a trading hub with the French looking for fur and pelts, while the Native people wanted modern conveniences like pots, knives, blankets, and metal items. The French began to establish forts along the Mississippi, that ranged from military defense forts to simply log forts. The years 1754 to 1763 brought the French and Indian War, which, contrary to its title, was not the French fighting the Native people, but rather the French and Indian allied against Britain. The British were entering into the Ohio Valley that the French had claimed. After a series of battles the French, in the Treaty of Paris, would cede North America to the British, including modern day Wisconsin. This did not last long, as I’m sure you all know, since America gained its own freedom from Britain not long after, in 1776. In 1836, Wisconsin became a territory of the US.

Now that you have a little background on the Ho-Chunk in La Crosse, we encourage you to keep in mind how Native Americans are portrayed in our society today, including in our media, during this tour.

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**Story #1: Dan Green** (Location #1, Story #2)

 The Hiawatha Statue is better known as the “Colossus of Kitsch” or the “Big Indian.” The area from La Crosse to Hastings, MN is historically referred to as Hiawatha Valley, hence the name of the statue.[[4]](#footnote-4) This version was created by Anthony Zimmerhakl in October of 1961; however, there is another Hiawatha Statue in Ironwood, Michigan that is 54 feet tall and credited as the “Tallest Indian.” These statues attempt to symbolize the Native American chief who has been credited with the organization of the Five Nations, along with keeping the peace between European settlers and Native Americans.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Two divergent opinions arose in La Crosse regarding the statue: those who supported the statue as a cultural symbol, and those that opposed the statue as cultural appropriation, or misrepresentation. Individuals who support the statue claim it was created with the intention to represent the many Native American people that populated the area over the last few centuries~~.~~[[6]](#footnote-6) This opinion holds that the statue was not intended to be offensive and was for a genuine purpose of promoting the heritage of La Crosse prior to European settlement. The statue’s creator, Zimmerhakl, was rumored to be part-Native American and this reasoning is attributed as to why he shares a passion and bond for the culture. These supporters also point to the historical value of the Hiawatha statue as it has stood in Riverside Park for over 50 years.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Others, however, believe this statue to be problematic and unrepresentative of the Ho-Chunk people. In this first story, Dan Green offers a different perspective on the Hiawatha statue. Dan Green believes that this statue may have been well intentioned, but, nonetheless a major mistake was made in allowing the statue to go up.[[8]](#footnote-8) For example, the statue is dressed in non-traditional Ho Chunk attire, developing controversy after its completion. Dan Green, a Ho Chunk professor at UWL, offers insight into how the Ho-Chunk themselves view the controversy surrounding the statue.

**Dan Green’s Story Transcript**: We’re in the north end of Riverside Park. I just turned my back, symbolically, on what the UW-L Native American students used to refer to as “the Colossus of Kitsch” or as Riverside Park calls “the Big Indian.”

First, my name is Kera Cho Mani ga. That means “the person who paints the sky blue.” You know me as Dan Green – what Malcolm X might call my slave name. At the time, the late nineties, the chamber of commerce in La Crosse proposed fifty-thousand dollars into a paintjob on the colossus – something that reinforces stereotypes about Native Americans. As a sociology student, I had for years looked into the influence of imagery, statuaries, and I was a part of the national anti-Native American sport mascot movement. I traveled to University of Illinois, University of North Dakota, and Cleveland Ohio on a regular basis to demonstrate and to teach about the harms, the largely psychological harms, of this kind of imagery of the big Indian standing behind me. So that was my interest, that here it is, in my hometown where I’m raising children that look like me – they’re brown-skinned, they’re dark-haired, we don’t get mistaken for anything but Native American, and here’s something in our hometown reinforcing harmful thinking about us, so I was compelled to do something.

By fortune, in the late eighties I had a friend who was the editor of the editorial page for the local paper and he had a new idea where he would have guest editorialists every Sunday, and he called me up saying that there were no people of color on his list – would I volunteer to do four editorials over the course of the next year? I said wonderful. So I chose the opportunity taking a look around me, not just the colossus of kitsch but The Freighthouse Restaurant right there, and there’s a number of stores just a few blocks away, all with the same archaic imagery – out of date, primitive, savage, Native American imagery out there. So I took that opportunity to write these editorials using scientific principles and concepts as to how we’re influenced by this imagery, and I got hate mail. People actually called. That was very violating to, in my own home, to have somebody calling me names and never attacking my principles, never even addressing the science of it. It was very demagogic, it was all emotion-laden, never an appeal to reason, and that’s exactly what I was trying to do – I was trying to get people to use their head, to make them think and not just react on an emotional level, but it went by a whole lot of people.

Over the years, the big Indian has become a symbol with what is wrong with our perception of Native America. Columbus Day, how we teach about Columbus, we make a hero of this mass-murderer, this initiator of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, did so many things that were just against humanity, and yet we hold him up as a hero. Well, here is this maybe well intended statue, but what we have to remember is that intentions do not determine consequences. Maybe these things were supposed to be honoring of Native Americans, and we appreciate the intention, but do we appreciate that maybe that’s not what they resulted in, maybe a mistake was made – well intentioned, but a mistake was made. So the big Indian became this symbol for not only what was wrong, but what to do about it. And so the Native American Student Association began using it as a gathering point and they would march down here from the university and we would have invited speakers and others who had an interest in changing how we perceive Native Americans and others for that matter.

One block away, there is The Freighthouse, and if you look in front at the main entrance you’ll walk by a fiberglass statue of a Pullman porter, and if you look at it that person’s skin is colored to resemble a Caucasian, but if you take a look, I found original photographs of that, and it was a Black man. So at some point they re-painted it, I’m assuming not to offend African Americans. So, that was well intended. Well, why don’t they do the same thing to the colossus of kitsch? Bring him into the modern era. If you take a look at all, with incredible exception, all of Native American imagery from Leinenkugel’s beer to Land ‘O Lakes butter etcetera, is always Native Americans in the past. Dressed in buckskins if dressed at all, with feathers, drums, horses, primitive weapons – never are they shown as rock and roll artists or using a laser printer or anything like that, and that’s what’s wrong, so if it’s got to stay, let’s at least make a statement: let’s bring him into the present.

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**Story #2: Elmer Peterson** (Location #1, Story #3)

The La Crosse Players Statue, by Elmer Peterson, is located on the corner of 2nd St. S and Main St. prior to major downtown development and the buildings behind the statue (Harborview and the Radisson); this area was once a large open space where individuals played the game lacrosse, which was once a popular sport for the Ho Chunk. Involving a player-made stick, the tribe created a deer-skin sphere with hair as filling, while in the late 1800s, a wooden ball was used.[[9]](#footnote-9) Each man had his own stick, a sapling almost four feet long bent at one end to form a circular loop which was then filled with netted leather. Many tribes used the game for spiritual practices, turning to the sport if a tribe member was ill, while some would play the game and place wagers.[[10]](#footnote-10) After the white community adopted the game it has remained a favorite, although the Iroquois-style ball and stick has remained popular due to its intricate netting.[[11]](#footnote-11) The metal sculpture, however, depicts the Ho Chunk style ball and stick with its large-holed netting.

Elmer Peterson, our next narrator, created the Lacrosse Player’s statue, amongst several other statues in La Crosse.[[12]](#footnote-12) Elmer Peterson decided to create a statue of lacrosse players to honor the traditional history of the area.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Elmer Peterson’s Story Transcript**: We’re down at the end of, at the west end of Main Street, where it ends you know? And there located is the Lacrosse Players. And I was asked to a, got given the opportunity to make a sculpture because I had brought Pat Zielke the mayor down to watch me in making the Gambrinus. And he says we can, we have some money for a sculpture so… And it was wide open, what I should do and so I read the history of La Crosse and I came up with the idea of the Lacrosse Players. And so, and then I checked it out with Ed Hill, over at the University. Whenever I got an idea of what I wanted to do I’d check with him, and if it didn’t bother him in any way that I would do it. So I came up with it.

I wanted to be accurate enough to be acceptable so that it just isn’t disgusting to anybody, and would demean anybody, and just somehow be a bad thing. And so I did enough research that it would come out okay.

This was the place where, this plain, this large plain here was a field where they played lacrosse. And they’d pick sides and they even had their favorites, the women and so forth. On the racquet as you look at the sculpture there’s a couple little things hanging off the side, those are little cloths, some colored cloths they would give the people to put on their racquet see?

I moved slowly over to the Sister City thing. Now the piece that we traded, that little boy there, it’s not as big, but it sure is a dandy little piece and it’s a gem. And it’s not original in Epinal [France] either but it’s their, their uh, symbol. This is our symbol, that’s their symbol. And I got a good place, I found a good place for it. But I was thinking of having six, this be a park of Sister City sculptures, on each side as you go down. I thought it would be just great. This piece here, the La Crosse Players, the Gambrinus, I think their, I think their pieces that both artists and non-artists could like.

My name is Elmer Petersen and my connection is that I made the La Crosse Players sculpture.

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**Story #3: Tracey Littlejohn**  (**Location #1, Story #5)**

Our third stop is the Pump House mural, where we will listen to a story narrated by Tracey Littlejohn. The Pump House mural is done in the trompe-l'œil style of art. This type of artwork was often found in 17th century well-to-do English homes.[[14]](#footnote-14) The main objective of this art style is to strike the eye with discernable objects within the work, fabricating an optical illusion of depth perception. This mural was created by John Pugh, an internationally known artist, who has mastered optical illusion mural painting. Pugh saw a special opportunity when meeting Tracy Littlejohn, as she had insight about the region, personal connections, and sound opinions to allow him to create both a personal and historical mural.

The historical significance of this story includes the Navajo code talkers. This group of Native Americans were recruited by the US Marines to create a code that was used to help transmit secret messages throughout World War Two. Other code talkers went through intensive training to learn and use the language. They are credited with saving thousands of US and Allied lives. During the Battle of Iwo Jima, Navajo code talkers translated over 800 messages, all without a single error. After the war, no one had heard about this elite coding squad until 1968, when information about them was declassified. The Navajo language code remained undecipherable throughout the war. The code talkers are one of many pieces of history that is included in the Pump House mural.

**Tracey Littlejohn’s Story Transcript**: We’re looking at the west wall of the Pump House where a mural was unveiled in June of 2014. It’s a mural that was done by John Pugh in the trompe-l’oeil style of artwork. It was a pretty big event. I first got involved with it because I had seen that they had gotten a grant to get this mural done and I knew it was going to be in the trompe-l’oeil style, and then the artist was in town last fall, 2013, and he stopped in at the Hmoob Cultural and Community Agency to talk with some of the elders and let them know what he was doing because he actually has quite an interest in the diverse populations. And it was at that point that I realized I was actually an admirer of his work.

And that same night they were holding an open meeting for people to come in and see what the art mural was going to be about, so I attended that. It was really an interesting night, at one point they had asked what La Crosse meant to people in the audience. And I actually wanted to say it felt like home to me, because I’m Ho-Chunk and my family has been here for a very long time of course. But I didn’t feel like everyone would understand it to the same extent that I do. And then after that got done I actually just went up to say hello to John Pugh and he invited me and one of my coworkers to go have dinner and we ended up talking for a couple hours. I was really impressed with how he wanted to go about doing this because he really wanted to get a picture of the diverse populations of La Crosse actually in the art work. And at one point while he was working on it he was asking for pictures of Ho-Chunks.

And I came over because he had been here for about a month working on it and it was all covered with tarp so nobody could really see it, and he invited me to come up and take a look. And I got up there and one of the primary persons or portraits that’s on there right in the center I, I almost cried because that’s actually in Ho-Chunk tradition one of my grandsons, Levi Blackdeer. Kinship structure is very different but, my great grandmother and his great great grandmother were sisters. And I was just awestruck that he had taken that particular image because the image he was using was from when my grandfather was granted the Medal of Honor for being a code talker during WWII. So I remember that exact moment in time when that picture was taken that he based that portrait off of. And than I looked and I saw other individuals that I actually knew or I knew about, like Merlin RedCloud, and then there’s even a picture of three Hmong elders who are actually elders that I recognize. So I was just really, deeply, impacted by the photographs he used to base some of these portraits off of on this mural.

The mural just, it represents basically the people of La Crosse, you can see someone rowing in the water, you can see images from Oktoberfest, a medical doctor. And, you know, the backset is the bluffs and you see the water and the steamboat, and I just think he did a really great job of portraying La Crosse as a community. I love it, and I know part of the reason that they chose to put it on the wall of the Pump House was because this is kind of more of an art district, it is a good way to get people to come down here and get to know the arts area of La Crosse. And I think it’s important for people to come here and remember some of the history of La Crosse. Some of these are more historical portraits; some of them are more contemporary. There’s someone on there that is still a young person, there’s people that have passed on. And I think it is just a great thing to see and to remind people of everyone that’s been here, not just in the last hundred years but everyone who’s been here.

I just really appreciated that they wanted to go with the trompe-l’oeil, because a lot of art work around La Crosse is statue or it’s very traditional two dimensional, and with the trompe-l’oeil you get the three dimensional and I think it is a really great way to show more contemporary types of artwork. My name is Tracy Littlejohn, I am a member of the Ho-Chunk nation, and I was born and raised here in La Crosse. I think it’s important to hear stories from all kinds of people. We are used to hearing a lot of stories from the mainstream community, and I’m not quite there, part of the mainstream community, and I appreciate that people seek out our thoughts about things.

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**Conclusion:**

 From oral history to monuments and murals, the Ho-Chunk community has played a significant role in the overall cultural representation of the La Crosse area. The visual depictions in downtown La Crosse represent Ho-Chunk individuals while portraying history correctly illustrating it or not. Regardless of the story being told, the statues and monuments in downtown have inspired many souls to speak out and become engaged in their hometown community in relation to the place of the Ho-Chunk people. The Hiawatha statue has been in the spotlight of controversy in the local media. The La Crosse Players statue aims to represent the significance of the Native American sport of lacrosse, and the Trompe l'Oeil mural holds images of significant members of local Ho-Chunk people. Each of the monuments has a connection to representing the Ho-Chunk Nation, furthering discussions about the relationships between art, cultural identity, and history.

 To conclude this tour, consider these questions: How are Native Americans represented today in our society, including in popular culture, media, mascots, and other representations? How do the monuments we saw today in our tour represent Ho-Chunk culture? How do monuments to cultural groups, or even events such as wars, function to preserve or change their historical memory? How do these monuments affect people of the present?

Why is accurate, non-biased representation of Native Americans, and other minority groups, important? How should La Crosse, and the U.S. as a whole, remedy misrepresentation of cultural groups?

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