Telling Stories About Indigeneity and Canadian Sport: The Spectacular Cree and Ojibway Indian Hockey Barnstorming Tour of North America, 1928

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Filed away in the archives of the City of Toronto, Canada, are two photographs from the winter of 1928 that capture a peculiar moment in the histories of North American sport and race relations. The first of these shows 16 Native Canadians divided into two teams dressed in ice hockey gear, buckskin jerseys, and feathered headdresses. The teams are assembled along one side of a chartered bus (equipped with chained tires), which was parked in front of the Ontario Provincial Legislature and festooned with a sign announcing the “Cree & Ojibway Indian Hockey Tour” (Figure 1). The second image captures the two teams assembled at an outdoor stadium in Toronto—a warm spell in mid-January having melted the outdoor ice and leaving the hockey players standing in slush (Figure 2). These pictures are at once compelling and puzzling because they compress a bundle of images and understandings of the Native past. They demand explanation. What was the Cree & Ojibway Indian Hockey Tour? What did it mean? This essay, a study in the cultural history of sport and race in North America, focuses on a rare moment when sporting events became forums for racial imposture and counterfeiting. Racial mimicry has been the subject of a good deal of recent scholarly focus among social and cultural historians, most of it addressing stock caricatures, such as blackface minstrelsy and the Indian “dress up” cultures of campfire girls and fraternal orders. The Cree & Ojibway Indian Hockey Tour belongs to a different order still. And unpacking its meaning is akin to pulling the loose bit of yarn on an old sweater: the more one pulls, the more the fabric unravels, and the more we appreciate how complex the construction was in the first place.

Between December 1927 and February 1928, 18 hockey-playing members of the Cree and Ojibway First Nations in northeastern Ontario undertook a celebrated barnstorming tour of 22 cities and towns in Canada and the United States. Traveling by charter bus, the “Cree & Ojibway Indian Hockey Tour” was a well-promoted and cleverly planned road trip that began in Timmins, Ontario, and swung through southern Ontario before it crossed the U.S. border and performed in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. In
Figure 1 — Cree and Ojibway Indian Hockey Tour, Queen’s Park, Toronto, 11 January 1928. (Credit: Alfred Pearson, Commercial Department, City of Toronto, Courtesy of City of Toronto Archives).