

Nicknames on the rez...

Nicknaming has always been something special at the Indian mission school I attended in the 1940s and 50s. A boy with the last name Livermont quickly became “Gizzard” Livermont; Charles Swallow became “Spit” Swallow. Then there was Squash Head, Spud Head, and Bull Moose. One boy was given the name “21.” He was a very quiet sort, and one of the students supposedly followed him around for a full day counting the words he uttered. That’s how he got his nickname.

My childhood friend, Tim Giago, got the name Little Peaky, after one of the nuns. She had a turned up nose which reminded us of Mont Blanc, so we called her Sister Peaky; Tim was her favorite, and that was how he came by his nickname.

My nickname throughout youth was Wobby, which I adopted early on. Being the youngest of eleven siblings who survived infancy in our family, I was called Baby until around age three when I got tired of it. So, I named myself Wobby. How I thought up the name, I have no recollection. I kept the nickname through high school, and on into junior college in Oklahoma. Me being of Sioux blood, students at the college assumed it was an Indian name and were always asking what it meant in “the Indian language.” They wouldn’t accept my explanation that the word had no meaning beyond the fancy of a young boy, so I decided to have some fun, and would answer that it was a Lakota word meaning “Brave Eagle,” or “Great Warrior,” or some great masculine physical attribute.

But after awhile I got tired of the game. So, when I transferred to the University of South Dakota I vowed to not ever mention my nickname and to introduce myself instead only by my Christian name. But then I got to thinking that with the name Charles I would immediately be called “Charlie,” and I hated that prospect. The name Charlie doesn’t sound complete without “good old” in front of it; and I didn’t want to go through life as “good old Charlie;” so I decided on Chuck, which is how I’m known to this day...except to the people back home on the reservation. To them, I will always be Wobby. In fact, several years ago when my wife and I visited my home town of Wanblee, one of my relatives came up to her and said, “You must be Mrs Wobby.”

But people outgrow nicknames. I figure there ought to be a statute of limitations on them anyway. When folks return to the reservation for reunions or pow-wows, guys especially will pull one another aside, “Listen, Herb, I won’t call you Squash Head if you don’t call me Duck Butt, OK?”

On a visit to one of the reservations several years ago I was riding around with some friends when a huge Lakota wearing a big black cowboy hat lumbered over to where we were parked. “Hey, that’s Dopey,” I said as he approached. A friend next to me nudged me hard, and reminded me that the guy’s name is Robert, and he hates anybody calling him by his old nickname. As we drove away after visiting with Robert, I mentioned how massive he was compared to the cute little tyke we used to call Dopey – which was no reflection on his IQ; he was a bright kid, but had a squidgy nose like the Disney dwarf. “Yes,” my friend says, “and you’re lucky you kept your mouth shut, ‘cause he’s also meaner’n any dog on the rez.” The huge silver belt buckle he

was wearing, I was told, wasn't a prize he had won in a rodeo – but a trophy nonetheless because he took it off the near corpse of a champion bronc rider he left on the floor of a border town saloon. And he's amassed a whole collection of buckles that way. (By the way, his name really isn't Robert, either, but I'm still not taking any chances.)

So, savor those wonderful memories of youth. But about those old nicknames, be awful careful how you use them when you go home to the rez. The cute little chick you used to call Snake Hips now weighs in the neighborhood of 250 lbs and has laid up two of her last three husbands; and little Dopey collects belt buckles.

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