

REMEMBERING THE OORANG INDIANS

Part 2: An Interview With Bob Lingo

By Chris Willis

In 1922 Walter Lingo, a successful dog kennel owner from LaRue, Ohio bought an NFL franchise and named them the Oorang Indians. The team was made up entirely of Native Americans and were coached by the great Jim Thorpe. Lingo created the team mainly as a way to promote his dog business and for two years the team did just that. Even though the team won only four games in those two seasons, it did help Lingo's dog business as well as getting the newly founded National Football League some needed publicity. On June 26, 2000 I interviewed Bob Lingo, the son of Walter in his hometown of LaRue.

What kind of town was LaRue, Ohio when you and your family were living there?

I think LaRue is a typical small town (population about 800). We had our restaurant. We had the youth hangouts. More young people worked on the farms. I think we had less free time than the youth of today. We didn't have TV, so we relied on more creativity as far as ice skating in the winter time, football, baseball and activities of that nature in the summer and fall. But it was a great little community. You could leave your doors open. A different time.

Your father, Walter Lingo, combined his love of dogs and his friendship with Indians to develop a football team named the Oorang Indians. How did that come about?

My father was not an athlete but he was an outdoorsman. He loved to be outdoors. He loved working with dogs and that was one thing that joined him with the Indians, is the fact that they both loved the outdoor life. He also was a great fan of some of the old wild west shows. I think perhaps that was the starting of his idea of halftime activities during the NFL games. He felt the people needed something to do during halftime. So he came up with the idea to have halftime shows to promote the dogs and also to entertain with the different Indian activities.

How did your father start the dog business?

He started the dog business when he was about 12 or 13 years old. He started on a very small scale with hounds. Then as he got older he had a desire to raise a particular breed of dog. So he came up with the Airedale. The Oorang Airedale, which is different than the Airedale terrier because of his breeding. It has a stronger jaw, broader head and it's a more muscular dog. It was designed for hunting. Particularly big game hunting, bear and mountain lion and so forth. A dog that requires a lot of stamina in the field. But that's how he got started.

How did your father get Jim Thorpe involved in running the Oorang Indians?

He had met Thorpe before the team was organized (1922), and at that time Jim Thorpe was looking for a business enterprise to get into. He had his natural athletic abilities which were at a premium at that time. He was a well known international athlete. So I think they just got their heads together and decided that Jim Thorpe was a great coach as well as an athlete and he knew a lot of Indians that were great athletes from his days at Carlisle (University). I think they just got together and thought they give it a try. In those days that's what you did. You'd just give it a try.

But your father did want to use the football team as a way to advertise the dog kennel?

Yes. I believe he was an entrepreneur ahead of his time, perhaps like the dot.com folks today. He saw an opportunity, he saw something different. Professional football was in its infancy. There weren't many teams around and he liked new ideas to help his business. At that time he was shipping about 100 dogs a day. I don't think it's ever been passed, that record of accepting that many dogs of any kennel in the world. I think he was very proud of it. He tried anything to sell more dogs.

What was your father's relationship with Jim Thorpe like?

They were very good friends. Much more than just business associates. Jim Thorpe and his family came back to visit us many times, even after the team disbanded. Unfortunately we lived in rather a small house, so they all had to sleep on the living room floor, which was alright to them. I remember my mother getting up at the crack of dawn with bacon and eggs. I never saw anybody who could eat so much bacon and eggs in my life. As a child I was amazed at the amount of bacon and eggs that they could eat for breakfast. It was a very close relationship.

Did you ever play football with Thorpe?

I guess somehow the local boys and my friends always seemed to know when he was here. We'd go out to the big field and play. He'd show us how to kick the ball. He enjoyed being around the boys and they enjoyed him. One time I had a rather cheap child's football. He kicked it and it burst. I don't know whether he felt worse than I did. Anyhow, he replaced the ball. He sent us a new one, it was an interesting experience.

While Thorpe visited did he and your father go hunting a lot?

Yes. Anytime any of the Indians would come back, my mother knew they were going to be gone. As soon as they'd showed up they wanted to go hunting. They used to take off and go out hunting with the dogs. Sometimes I'd think they just go find a log and sit on it and talk. I was a little young to go with them. I had a few trips, not many.

How much did your father pay to join the National Football League in 1922?

The franchise was \$100 at the time. There's some debate whether he actually paid the \$100 or not, or whether he gave somebody a dog or something. The \$100 was the going price at that time. He used to say he paid his players less than the average peanut vendor would make in an NFL game today.

What was the Indians practice/training schedule like?

They would practice every day, depending on the workload at the dog kennel. Football was a secondary mission for these players. They did everything at the dog kennels, from training the dogs to building crates to ship the dogs in. They kept in good physical condition, that was more important than an actual practice. Some of the plays were made up as they went. During the game if they saw a weakness in the other team, they'd just make up a play and say, "Jim, I'm gonna go this way, Joe (Guyon) you go the other way and I'll throw you the ball." More like sandlot football.

How did your dad react after the team disbanded following the 1923 NFL season?

He gave it a try and I think he was glad he attempted it. He then went through a small depression. Naturally when you lose all your money (stock market crash) you go through a depression. He was feeling pretty blue. I think my mother was very inspirational in getting him back on his feet. He suddenly saw there still was a place for a dog business, even though during the Depression people couldn't feed their children. But after the Depression people got feeling better about themselves and the economy. He got back into the dog business on a much smaller scale. Due to my mother's effort, he had quite a list of previous owners of dogs. So they started mailing out mailings and it got back moving again, on a smaller scale though. He was happy with it.

Are you proud of your family's contribution to the early years of the NFL?

Oh yes. If you can make a step forward in it, I think it's important. I think they did make a contribution to get the thing moving, get it recognized.

Did you like sports and how involved was your father when you started to participate?

After the team disbanded my dad got really interested, he became a boy scout leader. We had the largest boy scout troop in the state of Ohio, right here in this little town. My dad was greatly interested in all kinds of youth activities. When I played football the thing I remember most was that he never missed a game. To me that was the most important thing in the world. That was more important than the NFL at that time. He was always there, he was a great dad.

How involved was your mother?

My mother used to be the chief cook and bottle washer for the boy scouts. She'd go along on the camping trips. Oh yes, she loved the outdoors also, fortunately. They worked well together.

In the town of LaRue there is a big historical marker honoring the team as the smallest town to ever have a NFL franchise, how does it make you feel that the team and your family is being remembered?

It made me very proud. Very proud. I knew my dad had done a lot. I'm glad the team picture is up there on the historical marker, because it gives you a sense, a feeling of who was there. It puts a personality to the thing rather than just looking out at an empty field (the marker is located at the old field where the Orang Indians practiced). It's important that we remember these places, the events that happened here.

What are your lasting memories of the team?

My memories are the fact that they were able to do as much as they did with as little as they had to do it with. The equipment was poor. The training facilities were poor. They were still able to come together as men. They respected each other and they played hard. They tried hard and I think that's all you can ask of anybody. I'm proud of my father for his foresight and his willingness to take a chance and do something new and different.