

THE FIGHT FOR RECOGNITION It is hard to believe now that the plain and forthright flatlands of Robeson County could have hidden an entire people for generations. Most every part of North Carolina used to be tobacco country. But many, perhaps most, of the tobacco fields are abandoned now. The generation that has gone off to work the assembly lines in the Converse plant down at Lumberton, at Kelly-Springfield in Fayetteville, or at Campbell Soup over in Maxton hardly even remembers the grueling work of plucking tobacco and twisting it up to dry in the gap-sided sheds that still stud the fields. The speckled brick houses and the tidy mauve and aquamarine trailer homes, the new Chevy pickups, all speak of modest success and steady jobs, of people suspicious of ornament, who take pride in their surroundings. Nothing here hints of secrets. But then the hiding of the Lumbees was not entirely (perhaps not even primarily) a physical thing as much as it was a concealment of blood, a deliberate and nuanced blending into the moral and cultural order of the place. The Lumbees have done well. There is little of the gritty, shaming poverty that scars the human landscape of Indian communities in much of the United States. Lumbees run most everything in Pembroke: the Hardee's, the Piggy Wiggly, the Rite Aid, the filling station, and the store that sells Christian music tapes and license plates that say such things as 'Expect A Miracle!' They have been landowners since property records were first written up in the 18th century. They may be correct when they boast that they have produced more doctors, lawyers, and Ph.D.'s than any other Indian group in the United States. Many Lumbees hold elected office, and a Lumbee currently represents Robeson County in the state legislature. At the same time, as long as anyone can remember, they have been a prickly and cantankerous folk, troublemakers, who drove off Confederate tax collectors during the Civil War and, perhaps uniquely in the South, forced the Ku Klux Klan to flee Robeson County after attacking the Klansmen in a pitched battle in 1958. Religious convictions are held with an equal ferocity; within recent memory, a doctrinal dispute at the White Heel Community Church provoked parishioners to bring shotguns with them to Sunday service. Encounters here begin invariably with the swapping of genealogies, endless linkings of marriage and births, obscure couplings and linkings both legal and casual, of rivulets of blood that connect, divide, and then link up again, joining together in great streams, into the great sprawling clans that are the most vivid, and perhaps the only hint of the remote tribal past. Locklears, Lowrys, Dials, Oxendines, Hunts, Maynors; the names repeat endlessly, like mantras. 'People here believe in blood. Blood, or least the idea of blood, is the root of everything here, of character, history, identity.' But blood has always been the Lumbees problem. The Lumbees' century long quest for identity is a story as crooked as the Lumber River, whose swampy course shielded, and perhaps even created them and their ambiguous world, held it fast for centuries beyond the reach or understanding of the European settlers who flooded in around them. It is in large part a guesswork story that says much not only about the contradictions of Indian identity but also about the deep ambiguities of race and ethnicity in late twentieth century America. The Lumbees challenge almost every preconception of what Indians should be: they are an anthropological no-man's-land located beyond the conventional boundaries of race and political organization that traditionally define Indians' identity. They run the physical gamut from blond hair and blue eyes to nearly 'Negroid'. They have no chiefs or medicine men and no reservation. They have no memory of the tribe from which their ancestors may have come, nor of the language they spoke, nor of any religion older than the pious and passionate Baptist faith that, to a person, they today profess. Even their present name is a neologism, coined in the 1950s from the way old people pronounced the name of the Lumber River. There is, in fact, nothing at all about the Lumbees that fits conventional notions of what it means to be Native American. Yet for as long as any Lumbee can remember, they have possessed an unflagging conviction that they are simply and utterly Indian. A tenacious faith that is troubled only by the failure of most other Americans to recognize it. 'Recognition psychosis. I feel as if I'm not a real Indian until I've got that BIA stamp of approval. You think, maybe I'm not a real Indian if I don't wear feathers. Just thinking about it, I get all bent out of shape. You're told all of your life that you're Indian, but sometimes you want to be that kind of Indian that everybody else accepts as Indian.' The Lumbee's ancestors seem to hover mysteriously on the rim of history, never quite becoming clear. Early visitors to the region spoke of 'light skinned Indians' who tilled the soil and dressed like Englishmen. In 1739, Welsh settlers complained of 'Indians running amongst their settlements under the pretense of hunting.' In 1754, there were reports of barbarous folk dwelling in the swamps, 'a mixt Crew, a lawless people' who 'filled the lands without patent or paying quit rents.' In 1773, another report mentioned Locklears and Hunts, two of the most common present day Lumbee clans, among 'a mob raioulsly assembled' against the colonial government. By the nineteenth century, the Lumbees were already a people apart, confusingly and interchangeably described in censuses as 'free people of color,' 'whites' and as 'mulattos', a people who didn't quite 'fit'. For more than a century, the Lumbees have sought official federal recognition as Indians with a single mindedness unmatched by any other group in the United States. They have applied for certification nine different times, under almost as many names. In 1888, without any historical evidence, they applied as 'Croatans,' the alleged descendants of the 'Lost Colony' of Roanoke, who, their petition stated, 'during the long years that have passed since the disappearance of said colony have been struggling unaided and alone to fit themselves and their children for the exalted privileges of American freemen.' In 1910, they lobbied to have Congress declare them 'Cherokees' instead. In 1911, they successfully petitioned the North Carolina legislature to change their name to 'Indians of Robeson County.' They petitioned again in 1913 for another change, this time over the protests of Cherokees in both North Carolina and Oklahoma, to be called 'Cherokee Indians of Robeson County.' In 1932, a bill introduced in the U.S. Senate called again for recognition of the Robeson County people as 'Cherokees,' but just a year later another bill sought to have them recognized as 'Cheraw Indians.' In 1936, the Bureau of Indian Affairs sent down a Harvard anthropologist by the name of Carl Seltzer to Robeson County to sor

t out the Lumbees once and for all. His techniques were state of the art; in fact, they were similar to the ones that the Olympics' Nazi sponsors were employing to distinguish Aryans from Jews at just the same time. Using calipers and steel tape, Seltzer measured the prominence of chins, the thickness of lips, the droop of earlobes, the width of noses. He put a pencil in each subject's hair, meticulously noting down 'Indian' blood if it slipped easily through and 'Negroid' if failed to. He reported in detail on every person he examined. The results were ludicrous. Children appeared on the approved list while their parents did not and brothers and sisters fell on opposite sides of the racial line. In 1956, the United States Senate finally voted to permit the Lumbees to call themselves Indians. But it was a hollow, even demeaning victory, for it came just as the Eisenhower Administration was committing itself to terminate federal obligations to even well-established tribes around the country. The Senate explicitly declared: 'Nothing in this Act shall make such Indians eligible for any services performed by the United States for Indians because of their status as Indians, and none of the Statutes of the United States which effect Indians because of their status as Indians shall be applicable to the Lumbee Indians.' The Lumbees were, in the most literal sense, Indians in name only. In their current petition for federal recognition, the Lumbees assert that their native ancestors, the 'outlaws and fugitives' cited by the Welsh, the 'mixt Crew, a lawless people,' were mainly the descendants of the Cheraw Tribe, a hazy grouping that may have been identical to the 'Xuala' whom Hernando De Soto encountered on his trek through the Southeast in 1540. There is no doubt that until the 1730's the Cheraws were a real and continuing threat to the English colonies, appearing sometimes in Virginia, sometimes in South Carolina, stirring the smaller tribes of the frontier into war against the encroachments of white settlers. But then, suddenly, they disappeared from history. If the Lumbees are now correct, and they may very well be, one should try to imagine the last Cheraws, probably diminished from smallpox and overcome by war, retreating family by family into the safety of the swamps. They are joined by the enfeebled remnants of other bands; Waccamaws, Enos and Keauwees. Beyond the horizon of colonial sight, the swamp dwellers adopt frontier trader's English as their language, along with Christianity of their immigrant neighbors, in an effort to construct some kind of workable moral order within the ruins of the old Indian world. They mingle uninhibitedly with frontiersmen, surveyors, and outlaws, with white, mulatto and black in an era before color consciousness became a national obsession. For generations, according to anthropologists who back the Lumbee petition, the swamps were a terra incognita without newspapers or schools. Even churches were so rare that births, marriages, and deaths went unrecorded. By the time the modern Lumbees emerged, they were already a demographic anomaly, dark-skinned but free, clearly not colonists yet farming, dressing and praying like Europeans. But seeing no feathers, and no beads, the white authorities, in effect saw no Indians at all. Relations between whites and non-whites grew steadily worse after Nat Turner's slave uprising in Virginia, in 1831. In 1836, North Carolina stripped every 'free negro, free mulatto or free person of mixed blood' of the right to vote, serve on juries and to bear arms. The Lumbees had thus far survived in the interstices of race, but now they were faced with a cruel dilemma. Proclaiming Indianness risked expulsion to the West at a time when the United States government was routing the Cherokees and other Eastern tribes from their homes. Acquiescence with the law, on the other hand, must lead to oblivion in the helpless 'colored' underclass. The solution was simple and cruel. The Lumbees discovered that hating black people was a way to avoid being considered black themselves. But they became slaves of a different kind; to the terrible tyranny of genes, to the spread of a lip, the accidental angle of a nose, the tint of flesh that sealed one's fate for life. The Lumbees's problem has always lain, in part, in the Euro-American tendency to see Indian tribal identity as something immutable that may be fatally breached by new blood or alien culture. Instead, as the Lumbees would have it, true tribal identity may reside less in the buried secrets of seventeenth century bloodlines than in the very process of cultural change and reinvention that has been the defining experience of their community for more than two centuries. As, generation after generation, it has coalesced in moments of crisis, faded away, then reappeared once more under a different name. The fate of the Lumbees's aspirations lies, in all probability, at the end of a beige corridor in the Department of the Interior's building on C street, in Washington, DC. Dreams, fantasies, and frail hopes lie thick on the plain metal shelves where the Bureau of Indian Affairs decide whether or not beads and feathers make an Indian real. BIBLIOGRAPHY Mihesuah, Devon A., American Indians: Myths and Realities, Clarity Press, Atlanta, Georgia, (1996). Ramey, Joanne Oxendine, personal account, www.ornl.gov/diversity/ramey.html, (1995). 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fight recognition hard believe that plain forthright flatlands robeson county could have hidden entire people generations most every part north carolina used tobacco country many perhaps most tobacco fields abandoned generation that gone work assembly lines converse plant down lumberton kelly springfield fayetteville campbell soup over maxton hardly even remembers grueling work plucking tobacco twisting sided sheds that still stud fields speckled brick houses tidy mauve aquamarine trailer homes chevy pickups speak modest success steady jobs people suspicious ornament take pride their surroundings nothing here hints secrets then hiding lumbees entirely perhaps even primarily physical thing much concealment blood deliberate nuanced blending into moral cultural order place lumbees have done well there little gritty shaming poverty scars human landscape indian communities much united states lumbees most everything pembroke hardee piggly wiggly rite filling station store sells christian music tapes license plates such things expect miracle they have been landowners since property records were first written century they correct when they boast produced more doctors lawyers than other indian group united states many hold elected office lumbee currently represents robeson county state legislature same time long anyone remember been prickly cantankerous folk troublemakers drove confederate collectors during civil perhaps unique south f

forced klux klan flee robeson county after attacking klansmen pitched battle religious convictions held with equal ferocity within recent memory doctrinal dispute white heel community church provoked prisoners bring shotguns with them sunday service encounters here begin invariably with swapping genealogies endless linkings marriage births obscure couplings linkings both legal casual rivulets blood connect divide then link again joining together great streams into great sprawling clans vivid only hint remote tribal past locklears lowrys dials oxendines hunts maynors names repeat endlessly like mantras people here believe blood least idea root everything character history identity always been problem century long quest identity story crooked lumber river whose swampy course shielded even created them their ambiguous world held fast centuries beyond reach understanding european settlers flooded around them large part guesswork story says much only about contradictions indian identity 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