

To Catch A Plastic Indian

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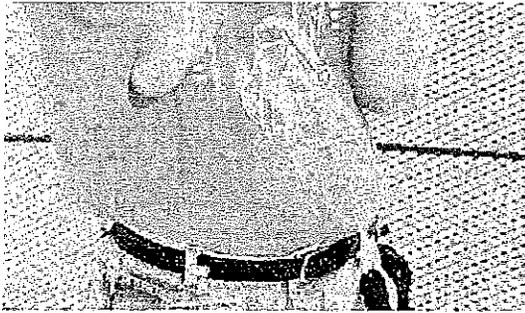
Introduction

Plastic Indians are one of the more pressing issues that face Native America today. These are white people who, for the attention or money, dress up and try to pass themselves off as Indians. Usually these people pretend to be medicine men (or in the rare case, women) and sell religious ceremonies (usually a sweat lodge) to other white people. The plastic Indian also takes other forms, however. They might be an artist who tries to pass their work off as Indian for more money. They might be writers who have published books about their plastic Indian views.

A much more rare occurrence is the white man who plays Indian but takes the roll of the Indian Advocate. This would be someone who passes themselves off as Indian and works on Indian issues such as treaty issues. This web page details the height of irony: a Plastic Indian, working in an AIM office, protesting other Plastic Indians. What you are looking at is a step-by-step description about how I have managed to expose one such person: Sheridan Murphy, Executive Director of the Florida American Indian Movement.



I wont pretend I am being objective in my reasons for doing this. I have a history here, and it's only fair that I make that clear from the beginning. In 1995 I did a one-month internship with the Florida American Indian Movement. From there, I started volunteering regularly at the Florida AIM offices. For three years, I ran the West Florida AIM Support Group. With a friend, I helped begin a Native American Studies program at my college, and helped organize two symposiums on campus that featured speakers such as Vern Bellecourt, Aaron Two-Elk, and Charlene Teters. I drove members of FLAIM from meeting to meeting across the state, and helped organize volunteers for mascot protests. I put a lot of effort into the work that I did and was very proud of it. I even considered some of those I worked



Sheridan Murphy: A white man pretending to be Indian protesting other white men dressed up and playing Indian. Photo taken at a FSU mascot protest.

with to be like family.

That family fell apart in 1998 when the Executive Director, Sheridan Murphy, and his girlfriend, Najah Tamargo, broke up. Their relationship had been volatile to begin with, and when things finally blew up they did so in a big way. When the dust cleared, my ties with the organization were abruptly severed as I realized I had been lied to and deceived by some those in it from the very beginning.

As you can see, that was five years ago. I walked away from the American Indian Movement, never saying anything publicly about the things I witnessed or the way I was treated. I was fine with simply making a clean break. I got on with my life - I got married, graduated from college, moved back to Chicago, started a career and a family. About once a month I talked to Najah, and I kept in sporadic touch with Deborah Two-Elk after

her husband passed away. But that was it. I never so much as even made a financial donation to any Indian Group. I was over it.

Apparently, not everyone has the ability to move on with their life. Sheridan never let his girlfriend go, and I would occasionally hear weird stories about the things he was still doing. None of these amounted to more than minor nuisances, however. Until now.

Najah is currently in the process of adopting a young boy who was more or less abandoned about four years ago. She's the only mom this little boy knows, and she has been in the system trying to get full custody of him for a long time. Last October a letter was sent to Child Services trying to derail her adoption process. While the letter was anonymous, it detailed information that few people had and twisted that information in a way that only one person could. I have no doubt that, five years after they broke up, that Sheridan Murphy is still trying to interfere with the life of his ex-girlfriend.

Which is just sad.

What's even sadder is this: Sheridan is not an Indian. The very man who protests other white people dressing up like Indians is actually Irish, Finnish, and maybe English. Don't believe me? You can follow the steps I took to prove this and see the evidence for yourself. Sheridan Murphy is no more Indian than, well, I am.

Google Me, Google You

I thought tracking down someone's ancestry over the Internet was going to be time consuming and difficult. And with a newborn, I didn't have a lot of free time on my hands, just a quick hour here and there when the baby was asleep. I thought that this could take months, but it wasn't as if Sheridan was going anywhere, right?

But in the end, it was actually a piece of cake. It took no more than a few Internet searches over bagels and eggs at breakfast. I bet you can follow what I did in less than an hour.

The first thing anyone should do when Internet researching someone else is to Google them. In fact, you should take a moment and Google yourself. Few things get published on the net that don't get caught in the web of a Google search. It's truly an amazing thing.

If you Google Sheridan Murphy, you get mostly press releases and various web pages related to Indian issues. And I won't lie; the man has done some impressive work on behalf of Indian people.

You also get the obituary of Sheridan's father, John Joseph Murphy and his mother, Mary Aili Murphy. It turns out that the local paper in the city they lived in archives its obituaries on its web site. There are a lot of interesting things one can learn from an obituary. What was most pertinent to me was the information on Sheridan's family tree. From these web pages, we learn that John Joseph Murphy was born to Joseph B.

Murphy and Catherine Sheridan Murphy in 1928 in Norristown, PA. And that his mother was born to Jean and Grace Divine Teslof in 1930 in Arkon, OH. I couldn't have asked for a better starting point.

Nothing is Secret When You Die

Did you know that, when you die, your social security information becomes part of the public record? I'm sure the very same search engines that I used to look up the social security info of Sheridan's parents is the very same search engines people use when they look up Social Security numbers to steal. Incredible.

You can go through these death records in a couple different places, but the best I found was RootsWeb.com. Try to do an advance SSDI (Social Security Death Index) search on John Joseph Murphy using his name and birth date. Of course, the results of this search pretty much tells us what we already know, right? When he was born and when and where he died. And lets face it, Joseph and Catherine Murphy are pretty common names, so we're not going to waste our time trying to pin down Grandma and Grandpa Murphy this way.

What we can do, though, is get a little more info on Grandma and Grandpa Teslof. By entering the Teslof name into the search engine, we now know that Jean Teslof was born on June 25th, 1884 and died in March of 1966 in Miami Florida and that Grace Teslof was born on February 14th, 1900 and died in November of 1980 in Miami.

And while that does add a bit of color to our family tree, it really doesn't give us any real documentation about whether or not any of these people were Indian. In retrospect, I probably could have skipped this step, and if you are playing along at home, you can to.

It's 1930. Do You Know Where Your Family Is?

From the SSDI records at RootsWeb.com I found myself on Ancestry.com. This web site has a searchable database of the 1930 and 1920 census records. Now, they charge for this service, but they also have a 14-day free trial, which is what I used. They actually have images of the census records for all of the US censuses, but not all of them have a searchable index.

Now, Sheridan always told me that he was Lakota, and that he got his Lakota blood from his father's side. His mother's family was, he said, Scandinavian. So lets start on Dad's side of the family. Into the search engine we put John Murphy, and we want to look at the records from Norristown, PA. The last record that is returned is for a John Murphy who was 1 at the time of the census. Bingo.

What we find is a Mary Sheridan, who is listed as the head of household. Mary (70 at the time of the census), lived with her daughter, Catherine Murphy (33), her son in-law Joseph Murphy (34) and their baby John Murphy (1). On the form, there's a lot of different information - for instance, Mary owned her own home and had quite a few boarders. But what we're interested in is where everyone was born. The census asks each person not just their place of birth, but also their parent's place of birth. Catherine lists her place of birth as Pennsylvania and Joseph lists his as New York. But both list their parents as having been born in Ireland. Which means that all four of Sheridan's great-grandparents on his father's side were Irish.

65	501 28 41	Sheridan Mary	Head	W	60	70	W	25	70	W	Ireland	Ireland
60		Murphy Joseph	Lawson		W	34	M	33	70	W	New York	Ireland
67		Murphy Catherine	Daughter		W	33	M	30	70	W	Pennsylvania	Ireland
65		Murphy John	Boarder		W	1	M	3	70	W	Pennsylvania	New York

Now, if you want to flesh this out a little further and find the name of Mary's husband, you can look up the name Sheridan in the 1920 census records for Norristown. There we find John Sheridan (60), married to Mary Sheridan (60), with a daughter, Catherine Sheridan (22). Again, John and Mary - both were born in Ireland.

61	461 143 174	Sheridan John	Head	W	60	70	W	25	70	W	Ireland	Ireland
57		Mary E	Wife		60	70	W	25	70	W	Ireland	English
22		Catherine	Daughter		22	30	W	22	70	W	Pennsylvania	Ireland

So, then I think to myself, I might as well go ahead and look up the Teslof's. After all, what if Sheridan suddenly changes his tune after all these years? How many Teslof's could there be? I entered the name into the 1930 search index and found them easily. Jean (43) and Grace (29) Teslof were living in New York at the time of the census (their daughter Mary had yet to be born). They were both singers. Jean Teslof lists his, and his parents, place of birth as Finland. Grace list herself and her parents as having been born in Ohio.

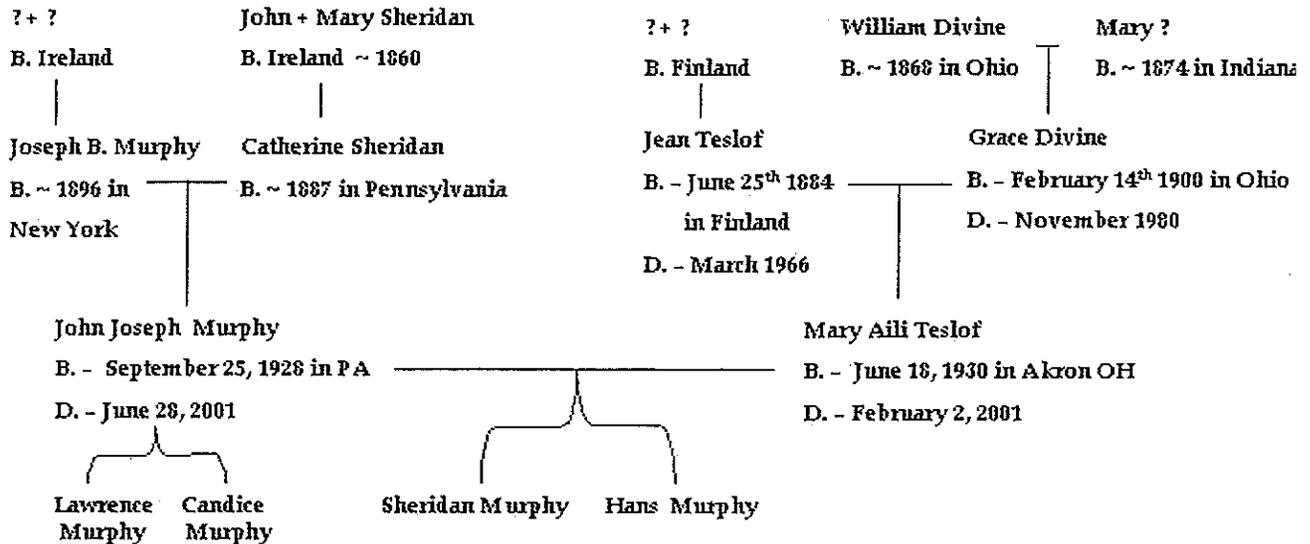
PLACE OF ABODE				NAME of each person whose place of abode on April 1, 1930, was in this family	RELATION Relationship of this person to the head of the family	HOME DATA				PERSONAL DESCRIPTION				EDUCATION		PLACE OF BIRTH		
Street	City	State	Zip			Married	Single	Widow	Divorced	Sex	Color of face	Age at last birthday	Married over 10 years	Age at last birthday	Number of years attended school	Number of years in school	Place of birth of each person enumerated at the United States, the State of Territory, each territory it now created, (see 1 Fresh from Canada, English, and Irish)	RELIGION
736	38	385		Teslof Jean	Head	R			M	W	43	7	12	10	Finland	Finland		
				Grace	WIFE-H				F	W	29	7	10	10	Ohio	Ohio		

Now, Divine, Grace's maiden name, is English. But, it did occur to me that perhaps, perhaps, Sheridan might claim that there was a Lakota named Divine living in Ohio in the 1900's when Grace was born. So I decided to try to find Grace's family. Now, if you go into the 1920's census and do a search for Grace Divine, you don't find anything. So instead, I tried simply looking for Divine's in Ohio and seeing if Grace might be listed (the searchable index isn't perfect, and for the 1920's it only returns the head of the household). Nothing came up. But, since it seems as if Jean and Grace were married in New York, I searched the census for Divine's in New York who had been born in Ohio.

What I found was a William Divine (52), married to a Mary Divine (46), who had two children: Grace Divine (19) and Lawrence Divine (23) who were living in Manhattan. William was born in Ohio, as were his parents. Mary was born in Indiana, as were her parents.

Now, there really is no way for me to determine what Mary's maiden name was to trace her family further back. And, unfortunately, there is no way to search an index for the 1870 census, which would be the best place to find a William Divine listed with his parents. Which means we have reached something of a dead end. However, I thought this was pretty much a moot point. Both were white enough to be listed as 'white' by the census taker. And think about it: William was born around 1868 in Ohio. Mary was born around 1874 in Indiana. Does anyone really want to make the argument that there were Lakota roaming around either of these places at that point at time?

With all this work, here's the Sheridan Murphy family tree.



From the Horses Mouth

Well, if Sheridan's dad is Irish and his mother is Finnish and (probably) English, where does this Lakota blood come in? I'd love to see what Sheridan has to say himself about his bloodline, wouldn't you?

So I went back to Google. Not only does Google let you search the web, but it also lets you search newsgroups. I entered in "Sheridan Murphy"+Lakota and came up with quite a few responses. This actually ended up being the most tedious part of this exercise since the signal to noise level of a place like alt.native is pretty low.

But I came across a post made by Sheridan in December of 1997. It reads the following:

My name is Sheridan Murphy, my father is Lakota my mother Finnish I am a member of the American Indian Movement of Florida and an Indian rights activist. Thank you for answering my questions.

Further searching on the newsgroups finds us a post where Sheridan addresses someone who calls him Irish:

A little IRISH there, eh, O'Murphy?

Actually no. Perhaps you should study the Dawes Act and assorted assimilation acts.

Here we have Sheridan not only claiming that his father was Lakota, but also denying that he is, in any way, Irish. Which, from the above census records and obituaries we know isn't true. Assimilation laws and programs were a horrible, horrible thing that caused a great deal of pain and suffering. Makes you wonder what kind of a man would hide his identity behind something like that.

Which brings us to another post that dealt with accusations made about Sheridan's heritage. It's made by Gabriel Provancia, one of Florida AIM's board members (see below for more on such posts).

I believe if Mr. Murphy were anything but the mixed blood he claims we would remove him in a heartbeat.

That seems like a pretty good idea to me.

Conclusions

It's not as if this should really come as a surprise. It's not as if those involved with the National AIM office haven't been warned, in the past, of Sheridan's destructive behavior.

And it's not as if Sheridan hasn't lied about his identity before. Anyone who reads newsgroups or mailing lists has probably realized that there is no Don Foster who works for Florida AIM, and that Don Foster is an alias that Sheridan uses. I know this because I was the one who upgraded the Florida AIM computers way back when and helped Sheridan get involved in newsgroups and mailing lists. There wasn't a Don Foster working in the AIM office back then but I saw Sheridan use his name on posts on many occasions. It's my understanding that Sheridan did once know a man named Don Foster, but he was no longer involved in Florida AIM during the time that I volunteered in the office. Sheridan just used his name as it was convenient. (With that in mind, a particularly amusing thread on alt.native in 1998 was [Don Foster defending Sheridan's bloodline](#)).

Sheridan didn't even stop with using the name of a former member of the group. He also posted to mailing lists and sent email to people using the name of a current member of the group, Jennifer Smith. And I would be very surprised to learn that the above newsgroup post made in the name of Gabriel was actually written by him. Anyone who knows Gabe knows he would never use language or phrasing like that. It's not enough that Sheridan has to hide behind his own false Lakota identity and the names of former associates, but he tries to hide behind those he works with as well.

If Sheridan isn't Lakota, where did this notion that he was come from? Well, we know that Sheridan's father served in Korea, and he probably ended up in South Dakota - there is, after all, a sizable Air Force base there. And we know he had two children, Lawrence and Candice, before he married Mary Teslof. It's possible that John did marry an Indian woman and had two children before marrying Mary. Maybe it's Sheridan's half sister and brother who have the Lakota blood in the family.

Really, though, that's just speculation. I wasn't about to cold-call Candice or Lawrence and ask them if their mother was Indian.

Still, Sheridan did grow up in South Dakota and he did go to the University of South Dakota. I'm sure that he grew up watching the activism of AIM in the press and when we went to college he became involved in Indian issues. And I'm sure, when he started out, his intentions were for the best. But now, with all the pain he has caused so many good people, it's time for the charade to end.

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May 2003
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Post Script: Verifications from the Family

There are those who will, and have, make the argument that census records are faulty and can't be trusted. And I can by that - I mean, whose to say that someone seventy years ago actually recorded everything correctly. And whose to say that the Sheridans and Murphys that I found in the census records are the actual Sheridans and Murphys that Sheridan Murphy is descended from? Actually, Sheridan's brother - that's who.

A professor who checked out my work found verification of it from Sheridan's own family. He sent me a link to a series of bulletin board posts that Hans Murphy made relating to his family. In particular, on [October 17th 2001](#) he writes:

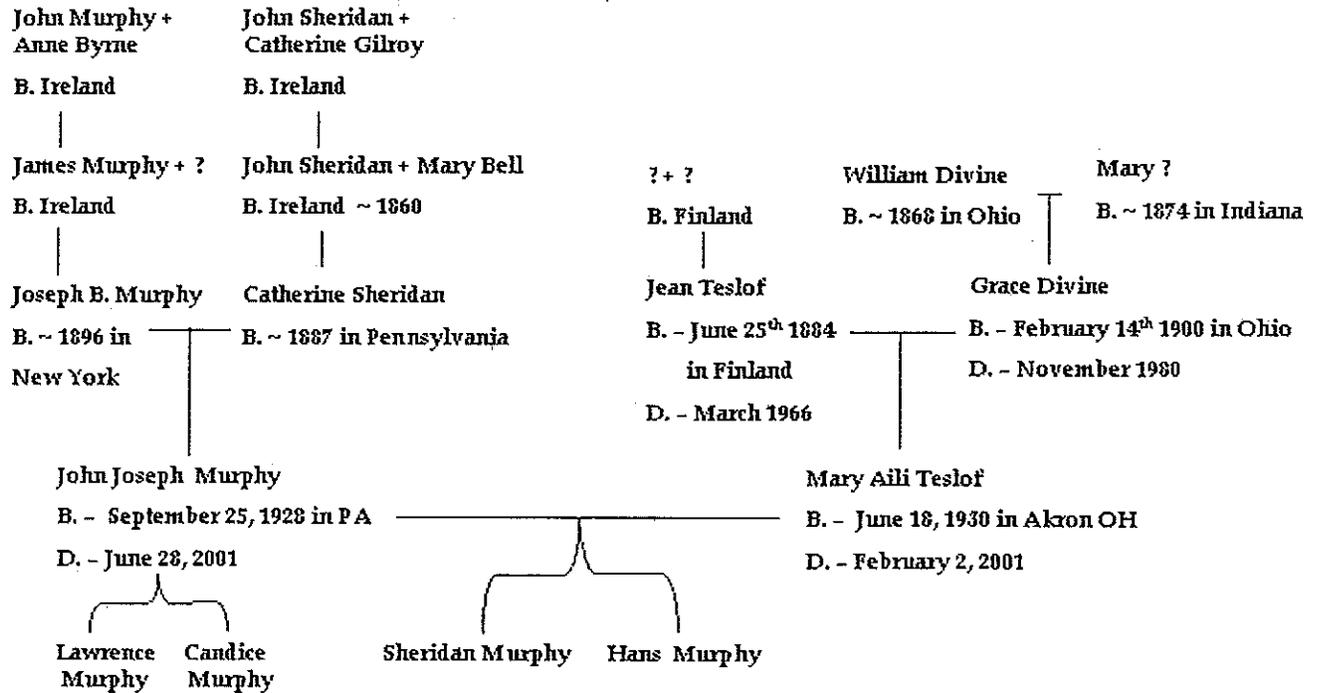
I am the great-great grandson of your John Sheridan who lived in Limerick, Pennsylvania. He married Catharine Gilroy in Ireland and had 8 children: Ann, John, Thomas, Edward, Patrick, Mary, Margaret and Richard. I am descended through his eldest son John, who married Mary Bell - their only daughter, Catherine Francis Sheridan, and her only son, my father, John Joseph Murphy.

As for the Murphy side of the family, on [January 12, 2002](#) he wrote:

I am related to a John Murphy who married Anne Byrne in County Carlow and had two children James and Anne (born ca. 1866-1868). I previously beleived that they were from Cork. James and Anne emigrated to Pennsylvania.

Now, from this, I'm implying that Joseph Murphy, who married Catherine Francis Sheridan, was the son of

James Murphy. The dates fit, and if Anne married, she undoubtedly changed her last name. With that, we now have the following family tree:



I can see why people might be hesitant to believe that someone who has worked on Indian issues for twenty years might not actually be the Indian that he claims to be. Who wants to admit that they've been taken like that? But here's the evidence – not just now from newspapers or census records but from the family itself. There's no Lakota blood there. Sheridan Murphy is a lot of things – Native American just isn't one of them.

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