

William Dietz (1884-1964) Following the Light of Lone Star

BY FRANCINE M. SCOBORIA

Who was William "Lone Star" Dietz?

Great football player, famous football coach, acclaimed artist, actor, art teacher and advocate for Native Americans, Dietz (1884-1964) was a flamboyant character who liked to wear silk suits, complete with top hat and cane, or Indian regalia. For fun he played bridge, sang, smoked cigars and raised championship show dogs.

This American character entered Berks County history in 1937, when he arrived as the new Albright College football coach and athletic director. That year, he led the Lions into the Albright record books as the first undefeated football team, a record that held until 1960.

Norm Jowitt, a member of that team, remembers Dietz. "He was nationally known when he came to Albright," says Jowitt, 90, of Naples, FL. "He had played football for the Carlisle Indians with Jim Thorpe, and he had won the first Rose Bowl. He was an accomplished painter. Youngsters would stop at his door for his autograph and he would draw a sketch of an Indian chief wearing a headdress. He was a lot of fun."

Sam Codi, 88, of Fleetwood, played football for Dietz, and they remained close friends. Codi recalls how Jim Thorpe, known as the "World's Greatest Athlete" for his Olympic victories, visited the Lions at Albright. Dietz had played tackle on the famous Carlisle Indian Industrial School team, clearing the way for Thorpe to score.

Dietz and Thorpe were coached at Carlisle by the legendary Glenn "Pop" Warner. Warner taught Dietz the single wing formation, which he used with great success. That Carlisle football program was the unlikely birthplace of modern football, according to Tom Benjey, author of the first biography of Dietz, *Keep A-goin': The Life of Lone Star Dietz*.

Later, Dietz worked at the Carlisle school as an assistant football coach and art instructor. He married Angel DeCora, director of the art department, and the couple earned national attention as artists. "Lone Star and Angel were like rock stars at Carlisle," says Benjey.

After that, as head football coach for Washington State College, Dietz rose to national fame on New Year's Day 1916 when his team won the first modern Rose Bowl. Washington managed to shut out a much-favored Brown.

Dietz also negotiated a deal for his players to appear as extras in the football movie, *Tom Brown*

at *Harvard*, in which he played a small role.

"He was bigger than life," says Benjey. "In the first half of the 20th century, he was a household name."

Six of Dietz's paintings grace Albright's campus, including a portrait of Dick Riffle, the star of Dietz's 1937 team, who later played for the Philadelphia Eagles and the Pittsburgh Steelers.

At the height of his coaching career, Dietz suffered some tough times. Dietz and DeCora divorced in 1918; she died in the influenza epidemic in 1919.

Next a controversy threatened his reputation. During the nationalistic frenzy surrounding WWI, Dietz registered as a non-citizen Indian. Some doubted that his mother was an American Indian. Dietz swore that his father, a German American, told him that his mother was a Sioux.

Dietz was tried for draft evasion in 1919. The woman who raised him, Leanna Deitz Lewis, testified that she was pregnant in 1884, and the child was stillborn. She testified, "The father... said that he had a secret and told me of the existence of another child of his which he asked permission to bring home to replace the one that died."

The trial resulted in a hung jury. Reindicted on similar charges, his resources exhausted, Dietz pleaded no contest and was sentenced to one month in jail.

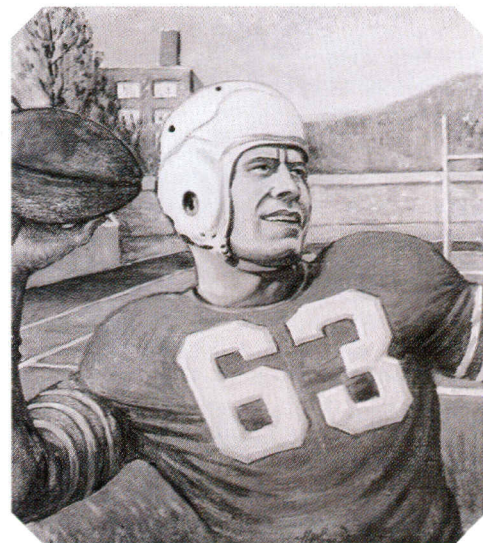
Despite this blemish on his resume, Dietz rebounded. In 1922, he married newspaper editor Doris Ohm Pottlitzer, who he met while coaching at Purdue University.

Dietz's record of 170-71-11 over 31 years makes him one of the greatest American football coaches, says Benjey. Dietz is a member of the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame. Fans lobby for his induction into the College Football Hall of Fame.

Dietz later founded an art school in Pittsburgh which initially prospered but then failed. The Dietzs returned to Reading in poverty. He painted, selling and giving away his art. He remained positive all his life, Codi recalls.

"Lone Star Dietz is a fascinating figure in American history," says Albright President Lex McMullan. "He lived his life to the fullest, and he never gave up."

(Printed with permission of Albright College; excerpts from The Albright Reporter, Spring 2006, www.albright.edu/reporter/spring2006.)



(photos from top to bottom)
Portrait of William "Lone Star" Dietz in 1911.
Albright football star Dick Riffle, painted by Dietz.
"Indian Farmers" 1910 illustration by Dietz.

PHOTOS COURTESY ALBRIGHT COLLEGE