**Sorry For Not Being A Stereotype**  By Rita Pyrillis

 How many of you would know an American Indian if you saw one? My guess is not many. Certainly not the bank teller who called security when an Indian woman -- a visiting scholar -- tried to cash a check with a tribal identification card. When asked what the problem was, the teller replied: ''It must be a scam. Everyone knows real Indians are extinct.''

And not the woman who cut in front of me at the grocery checkout a few months ago. When I confronted her, she gave me the once over and said: ''Why don't you people just go back to your own country.''  OK, lady, after you, I said, when I thought of it the next morning.  Even though I was born and raised in Chicago, strangers sometimes assume I'm a foreigner. For the record, I'm Native American, or Indian -- take your pick. I prefer Lakota.

Sometimes strangers think I'm from another time. They wonder if I live in a teepee or make my own buckskin clothes or have ever hunted buffalo.

They are surprised when I tell them that most Indians live in cities, in houses, and some of us shop at the Gap. I've never hunted a buffalo, although I almost hit a cow once while driving through South Dakota.

Sometimes, people simply don't believe I'm Indian. ''You don't look Indian,'' a woman told me once. She seemed disappointed. I asked her what an Indian is supposed to look like. ''You know. Long black hair, braids, feathers, beads.''

Apparently, as Indians go, I'm a flop, an embarrassment to my racial stereotype. My hair is shoulder-length, and I don't feather it, unless  you count my unfortunate Farrah Fawcett period in junior high.  When you say you're Indian, you better look the part or be prepared to defend yourself. Those are fighting words. When my husband tells people he's German, do they expect him to wear lederhosen and a Tyrolean hat?  Of course not. But such are the risks when you dare to be Indian. You don't tug on Superman's cape, and you don't mess around with a man's stereotype.

Native American scholar Vine Deloria wrote that of all the problems facing Indian people, the most pressing one is our transparency. Never mind the staggering suicide rate among Native youth, or the fact that Indians are the victims of violent crimes at more than twice the rate of all U.S. residents -- our very existence seems to be in question.

''Because people can see right through us, it becomes impossible to tell truth from fiction or fact from mythology,'' he wrote. ''The American public feels most comfortable with the mythical Indians of stereotype - land who were always THERE.''  Sure. Stereotypes don't have feelings, or children who deserve to grow up with images that reflect who they are -- not perfect images, but realistic ones. While Little Black Sambo and the Frito Bandito have gone the way of minstrel shows, Indians are still battling a red-faced, big-nosed Chief Wahoo and other stereotypes. No wonder people are confused about who Indians really are.

When we're not hawking sticks of butter, or beer or chewing tobacco, we're scalping settlers.

When we're not passed out drunk, we're living large off casinos.

When we're not gyrating in Pocahoochie outfits at the Grammy Awards, we're leaping through the air at football games, represented by a white man in red face. One era's minstrel show is another's halftime entertainment. It's enough to make Tonto speak in multiple syllables.

And it's enough to make hard-working, decent Indian folks faced with more urgent problems take to the streets in protest. Personally, I'd rather take in my son's Little League game, but as long as other people insist on telling me when to be honored or offended, or how I should look or talk or dance, I will keep telling them otherwise. To do nothing would be less than honorable.