

The Boarding School Era

There is a time in recent history, more than one hundred years long, that began in the late 19th century and persisted for most of the next. It has been called the Boarding School Era. The era was a time when many indigenous (Indian) youth on both sides of the American-Canadian boundary were removed from the safety of their reservations and the love and care possible only from their immediate families, either by cajolery or force, parents' objections notwithstanding, and placed in Boarding Schools. The schools were sanctioned and/or operated by the respective national governments; many were operated under the aegis of various religious denominations, contractors to the governments, and were staffed by members of their respective clergies. The school facilities, often located far from students' tribal homes, were designed to physically separate the children from their culture, religion, and family member influences. Children as young as five-years-of-age, perhaps even younger, were occupants of the schools although at some point in school program development in the U.s., children under 14-years-of-age were exempt from being moved to schools far removed from their reservations.

The goal of the school program was deculturization that some have characterized as cultural genocide. The anticipated product of the deculturizing process was assimilation of the Indian into the civilized white society. The policy of the American schools was chillingly stated by the motto- Kill the Indian, Save the Man. In furtherance of the goal, regimentation at the schools was strict with any manifestations of the native culture or lifeways prohibited. English was the language of choice. Speaking a native language was a serious infraction of the rules and often invoked harsh disciplinary measures including confinement and/or dietary limitations. Underlying health issues among the students, overcrowding in the dormitories, and shortage of medical services at many of the schools facilitated outbreaks of communicable diseases, tuberculosis, measles, influenza, and trachoma, for example. Cemeteries at school campuses reflect relatively high rates of mortality in the student population resulting, in no small part, from devastating localized disease epidemics. The worldwide Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 ravaged boarding schools nationwide. Cemeteries at Boarding Schools attest to the fact that many of the children who passed away while at a Boarding School were never returned to their parents or to their reservation of birth.

While there is an abundance of personal disturbing stories of abuse and trauma coming out of the Boarding School Era, there are others that tell of overwhelming successes in various fields of endeavor. A prominent example is that of Jim Thorpe, Sac and Fox of Oklahoma, who attended the Carlisle Indian School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania from 1907-1909, returning for the 1911-1912 years. Thorpe left his footprints on the football gridiron, the baseball field, and the cinder track. He was proclaimed All-American for his success on the gridiron at Carlisle during the 1911-1912 seasons. After Carlisle, Thorpe played professional football, and baseball and competed in the Olympic Games in 1912. He was named "The Greatest Male Athlete of the First Half-Century" by the Associated Press in 1950. Quite an accomplishment for an Indian who some considered to be biologically inferior to whites. Jim Thorpe and other inherently talented Boarding School residents were able to navigate success while accommodating the abuses and inequities of school life. Others tell about their mind-numbing recollections of pain and loneliness while Boarding School residents. The latter are no less successful as they can speak and write about their tragic experiences while still retaining a measure of stability and mental balance. And that, in any language, is no small success.

The story of the residential schools in Canada and the long list of "the children who never came home" has long been part of the national dialogue in Canada. Recognizing the harm inflicted on the residents of those schools, the Canadian government instituted the "Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement" in 2007 as a vehicle to compensate monetarily First Nations members who, as children, had

been placed in the schools. As a complement to the Agreement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was established to facilitate reconciliation among former students and the broad Canadian community. In recent months, the magnitude of the missing children problem has been brought into clearer focus. Using ground penetrating radar, leaders of tribes negatively impacted by the school system and dedicated to determining the full extent of the human tragedy caused by it, have located more than 1,000 unmarked graves on the grounds of former residential schools in the Provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan. Remains of children as young as three-years-old have been identified. Investigations at other schools continue because, as one person has noted, the earlier discoveries may be just the tip of the iceberg.

The story of the Boarding School experiment in the United States has received relatively little attention over the years following cessation of the program. Except for the continuing push on the government by various tribes and some activist members for the names of school students, living and deceased, the story remains clouded and obscure. In a feeble attempt to placate Native Americans, President Barack Obama signed the Native American Apology Resolution in 2009. While the Resolution offered apologies for past “ill-conceived policies toward the Native peoples of this land”, it disavowed the possibility of any legal claims and had no noticeable effect on Native American governance. Speaking to the National Congress of American Indians in June 2021 newly confirmed Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, Native American of the Laguna Pueblo, announced a Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative to review the legacy of federal boarding school policies. The Interior Department is preparing a report on the availability of historical records, emphasizing cemeteries or potential burial sites, relating to the federal boarding school program in preparation for future site work to be supervised by the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs. “The Interior Department will address the inter-generational impact of Indian boarding schools to shed light on the unspoken traumas of the past, no matter how hard it will be,” said Secretary Haaland.

The initiative put forth by Secretary Haaland is one that is long overdue. It offers the opportunity to shed some light on the dimly lit Federal Boarding School Program. It may even bring some relief to the pain and sorrow felt by so many for so long. And it may permit those children who have died and were buried far from their home and family to be returned to their home reservations where they will find the welcome company of their tribal brothers and sisters.

A revision of the book *Assault on a Culture* to be published soon will explore the Boarding School issue in greater detail.

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