

The North American Boarding School Experience

Objective:

The boarding school experiences of Native Americans started in the 1870's and is still a debated division of history today. This paper includes the following:

- Brief definition of Ethnocide
- The discussion of whether the boarding school tragedies are an attempt at Ethnocide.
- Describes the traditional boarding school procedures which includes but is not limited to: "Civilizing" the Indian, educational aims, punishment and abuse, and undernourishment and sickness of the Indian children.
- Provides a brief overview of the boarding school experience
- Shares some first-hand accounts on time spent in the schools from Native American Indians.

Ethnocide:

Ethnocide refers to the destruction of one's ethnic culture. The term was coined by Raphael Lemkin as an alternative to genocide. Lemkin's describes ethnocide in his book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe as* "(a concept) to refer to the physical, biological, and cultural dimensions of genocide."¹ Clastres Pierre, a French ethnographer, defines ethnocide as, "the systematic destruction of the thought and way of life of people different from those which carry out the destruction."² Webster defines ethnocide as the "intentional and systematic destruction of an ethnic culture." Although the terms may differentiate in miniscule details, the central theme is that Ethnocide refers to the intentional destruction of an ethnic culture.

One example of ethnocide would be the Indian Schools that began in the late 1870's. The attempted ethnocide of American Indian and Alaska Natives cultures was extremely detrimental to all Indians and Natives. Indian children of all ages were sent to schools where they were to be "civilized" like European Americans. Indian schools forbid any clothing, speech, or behavior that consisted of Indian lifestyle. Children were to speak English, wear school uniforms, and attend religious services every Sunday. The attempted ethnocide went on for over a hundred years, well into 1980's. What happened in the Indian Boarding Schools can also be referred to as *ethnic cleansing*, which is defined as "the systematic, purposeful elimination of one group of persons identified by heritage or race by another ethnic group living in geographical proximity."³

Beginning of Indian Schools-

The Indian child was "a prickly thorn that must be made to bear roses; he is a twig bent out of the perpendicular, and he must be straightened so that the tree will stand erect, inclining in no way; he is a vessel of bronze that must be made bright by constant rubbing."

-Superintendent of Indians Schools John Riley⁴

When the Europeans first arrived in America, they thought they were in the Indies, and referred to the people already living there as Indians. The Europeans thought of the Indians as savages and lacking any form of stable civilization. The interactions between the Native Americans and the Europeans grew steadily worse over time as the Europeans expanded westward and pushed Native Americans out of their traditional lands, in the process upsetting cultures, destroying families, and exposing them to diseases.

Eventually Europeans dominated the entire continent, and Native Americans had become an oppressed minority. In 1882, the Indian Rights Association was formed. The association would, “secure the civilization of the two hundred and ninety thousand Indians of the United States, and to prepare the way for their absorption into the common life of our own people.”⁵ One of the many ways that Americans were to “solve the Indian problem” was through education. The Americans believed that Indians must be taught the ways and habits of civilized people. When the Board of Indian Commissioners argued over the planning of education, Commissioner of the Lakota tribe stated, “It is a mere waste of time to attempt to teach the average adult Indian the ways of the white man. He can be tamed, and that is about all.” Commissioner of the Shoshone tribe agreed with stating the only hope was “in training the youth.”⁶

The Commissioners concluded that the best hope for subverting the Native American culture would be through indoctrination of the Native American youth. The first schools built were reservation day schools, which had the Native Americans remain on their reservation site. By the 1860’s, forty-eight schools were in existence.⁷ However, some people thought that having the schools on the reservation were not beneficial for the students. European Americans wanted the Indian and Native students to be taught by Americans, outside of the reservation and without the interference of other Indians and Natives especially family members. In the late 1870’s, the reservation boarding school had emerged and became the commonly used form of education for Indians. The students lived in the boarding school eight months out of the year. “Only during the summer vacation period, and in some instances the Christmas holidays, were students allowed to return to their homes.”⁸

When the boarding school system was initiated, students often were recommended to attend. Some parents wanted their children to go to school to receive a better education, while some didn’t want their children to go, but couldn’t afford to feed them on the reservations. Then, on March 3, 1891, Congress authorized the Commissioner of Indian Affairs “to make and enforce by proper means such rules and regulations as well the secure the Indian children of suitable age and health at schools established and maintained for their benefit.”⁹ Two years later they added a punishment to Indian families who refused; they would withhold rations of food, clothing’s and other necessities from Indian parents or guardians who refused or neglected to send and keep their children of proper school age to a boarding school.¹⁰ “In persuading Indian parents to send their children to these schools, authorities were assisted by a growing famine in Indian villages in western Canada. In this environment of hunger, and amid recurring outbreaks of smallpox and influenza, the government withheld food rations from parents

who resisted the removal of their children.”¹¹ Parents were then forced to send their children to boarding schools, which forced a “civilization” onto their precious ones; a transformation that stripped them of their Indian culture.

“Civilizing” the Indians-

Upon entrance to the schools, the Indians would be stripped of any Indian and Native culture they had internalized and expressed through early socialization. The policymakers’ point of view was that the school needed to strip away all outward signs of the children’s identification with tribal life, that is to say, their savage ways.¹² The process began with the shaving of their hair. The boys’ hair was shaved and the girls’ hair was cut to a bob. They did this for two different reasons; to control the problem of lice within the school, and for the removal of “savageness.” The second step in “civilizing” the students was changing the outfits. Students were required to wear a standard school uniform, and not allowed to keep their old clothing. Ernie Crey remembers his entrance into the Indian School Brannan Lake:

“On my arrival at Brannan Lake I was ‘processed’ in an office and then taken to an area of the institution where new inmates were showered, shorn, and locked up. Each kid was given a pig-shave. My clothes were taken away to be replaced by a steel-blue institutional shirt and pants.”¹³

Changing the names of Native American students to more European-sounding names was another attempt to “civilize the savage.” Names often were changed for several different reasons; School teachers complained they couldn’t pronounce the tribal and familial names and some students had names that did not translate easily into English. Also, renaming students was part of a conscious government policy to give Indians surnames.¹⁴ Luther Standing Bear recalls getting his name changed when entering the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania.

“When my turn came, I took the pointer and acted as if I were about to touch an enemy. Soon we all had the names of white men sewed on our backs. When we went to school, we knew enough to take our proper places in the class, but that was all. When the teacher called the roll, no one answered his name. Then she would walk around and look at the back of the boys’ shirts. When she had the right name located, she made the boy stand up and say, ‘present.’ She kept this up for about a week before we knew what the sound of our new names was.”¹⁵

Students were also no longer allowed to participate in their religious traditions and rituals. The majority of Indian schools required that students attend a Christian church service on Sundays and celebrate traditional Christian holidays. Anything revolving around Indian spiritual traditions was forbidden. Although the school administrators stated the school was designed for educational purposes, it seemed their main interest was to “kill the Indian, save the man.”

Educational Aims-

The aim of the boarding school was to get the Native Americans accustomed to a civilized life. The superintendent of Indian Schools stated that “Indian schools should introduce the child to the civilized branches of knowledge – arithmetic, science, history, and the arts – not with the idea that he would master these areas, but that he might ‘catch at least a glimpse of the civilized world through books.’”¹⁶ English was taught to the students through the methods of Richard Pratt. An American Army officer, Pratt was one of the leaders in the Indian school movement. He believed that children on the Indian Reservations should be taken far away from their homes, to receive an education from European Americans. In 1870, Pratt opened the Carlisle Indian Industrial School south central Pennsylvania, which stood as a model for Indian schools. “At the recommendation of the Indian Office, most teachers employed the so-called objective method of instruction as practiced at Carlisle and Hampton. Under this method students were shown objects such as books, pencils, and shoes; second, given the English word for the object; and finally, drilled in the proper pronunciation.”¹⁷

Students spent half of the day with their education, and the other half being taught work skills. “This aim involved a twofold objective; teaching work skills and inculcating the values and beliefs of possessive individualism.”¹⁸ Indian schools trained boys on wagon building, shoemaking, tinsmithing, carpentry, painting, tailoring, and harness making. Girls learned sewing, cooking, canning, ironing, child care, and cleaning.¹⁹ In 1895 Superintendent Hailmann declared, “The stress of work on the part of the schools should be placed upon industrial and manual training rather than upon literacy advancement.”²⁰ As if the stress of school and work wasn’t enough to make these children suffer, multitudes of students received severe punishment for simple mistakes and errors. The abuse in the boarding schools was appalling, and there was no escaping the abuse the students had to endure.

Punishment and Abuse-

The role of discipline in the Indian schools was extreme and severe. The punishment shown in the boarding schools was not one that was directed from administrative but rather carried out at the whim of the teachers and dorm counselors. The Indian Office Policy states, “Corporal punishment should be resorted to ‘only in cases of grave violation of rules.’ ‘No unusual or cruel or degrading punishment’ was to be exercised.”²¹ In 1898 the *Rules for the Indian School Service* wrote, “In no case shall the school employees resort to abusive language, ridicule, corporal punishment, or any other cruel or degrading measures.”²² Although this may be what was written in the documents, this certainly was not what the teachers or superintendents of the schools followed. Stories from students record severe beatings with sticks, harness straps, belts, and buggy whips. Boys might be required to march back and forth for long periods of time in girls’ clothing. Girls were given more chores, or cutting the grass with scissors. For minor infractions, punishments such as palm slapping, standing in the corner, or loss of a meal were given. Administration “reserved their most harsh punishments for aboriginal children who dared to express their cultural or spiritual identity. ‘Talking Indian’ or ‘making Indian dances’ was punished by public whippings, lashes, and forcible confinement for days.”²³ Although these

punishments were severe and extreme, nothing was as bad as the sexual abuse these students received while at the Indian Schools.

Sexual abuse was unfortunately extremely common in the Indian Schools. Reports of sexual abuse began stacking up in the early 1990's, after the closure of most Indian Schools. "The burden of evidence indicates that more forcible sexual assault has been perpetrated on aboriginal children than on the young people of almost any other nation..."²⁴ In a trial against Arthur Plint, a dorm supervisor in an Indian school in Canada, B.C. Supreme Court Justice Douglas Hogarth stated, "As far as the victims are concerned, the Indian residential school system was nothing more than institutionalized pedophilia. Generations of children were wrenched from their families and were brought up to be ashamed to be Indians."²⁵ Willie Blackwater, at a trial facing Arthur Plint to sexual abuse, recalls his sexual abuse from his dorm supervisor:

"[Plint said]... 'Now when I wake you up I want you to come quietly or I'll hurt you pretty bad in front of everybody, and then everyone will know what I'm doing to you.' The next time he got me in the night, about a month later, it was the same thing, fondling and everything, only this time he turned me over on my stomach and he penetrated me. It was so painful I tried to scream, but he grabbed a pillow and told me to bite on it. He said if anybody heard me cry out I'd be pretty sorry. After that Plint raped me anally about once a month for the next three years."²⁶

"Another victim, Emily Rice, left the Indian school Kuper Island in 1959, at the age of eleven. She had been repeatedly assaulted and sexually abused by Father Jackson and three other priests, one of whom plied her with alcohol before raping her."²⁷

The Indian Affairs promised to make improvements in their schools once hearing of such instances, but did nothing. "...Over the next half-century, any thoroughgoing examination discovered the same scandals locked with their walls."²⁸ Along with the punishment and abuse students frequently received, their biggest threat was the undernourishment and sickness they faced while in the boarding schools.

Undernourishment and Sickness-

Undernourishment was a constant theme in the Indian boarding schools. Estelle Brown, a teacher at Santa Fe Indian School, recalls the children's hunger. "I knew these girls were consistently overworked, knew that they were always hungry. Simply, they did not get enough to eat. We all knew it; most of us resented it, were powerless- or too cowardly- to try to do anything about it."²⁹ Helen Sekaquaptewa, who attended Keams Canyon Boarding School, recalls "I was always hungry and wanted to cry because I didn't get enough food. They didn't give second helpings, and I thought I would just starve. You can't go to sleep when you are hungry."³⁰ Hunger was constantly an issue in the boarding schools, as well as sickness.

Sickness was the most common cause for death in the boarding schools; with undernourished children living in traumatic and unhealthy environments, it encouraged the deaths of thousands of Indian children. Diseases such as influenza, tuberculosis, measles and the eye disease trachoma were common in the boarding schools, and there were not enough nurses to assist all the Indian students. If the Indian parents lived close enough, the school would send the children home to be taken care of by their parents; but for most, it was already too late.

“Though the school was responsible for many if not all of these deaths, the priests appear to have blamed the children for being malingerers and their parents poor caregivers. ‘Considerable difficulty is experienced in keeping the sick pupils at the school, their parents living close to the school insist to nurse their own children. If opposition is made and the patient kept here, it happen frequently that they will cry-lament, refuse to take medicine and really try to get worse so as to carry their point and be allowed to go home.’”³¹

Closure of the Indian Schools, and the lives that remained-

Beginning in the 1900’s, officials started discussing the cases of Indian and Native schools and its negative impact on Indians and Americans. There were four claims against the boarding school movement:

“Between 1900 and 1920 the case against off-reservation school was made along four lines: the belief that Indians, either because of inborn racial traits or sheer obstinacy, were incapable of rapid assimilation; the belief that boarding schools, however effective, were unjustifiably cruel to both parents and children; the belief that such institutions encouraged long-term governmental dependency; and finally, the belief that Native American life ways, rather than being condemned as universally worthless and thereby deserving of extinction, might serve instead as a fruitful foundation for educational growth.”³²

Instead of off-reservation boarding schools, new ideas and thoughts spurred on a change to other opportunities for the Indian students. Vocational training schools started in reservations, then a movement to incorporating Indian culture into the school program, as well as Indian arts and crafts. The finished product was having on-site reservation schools, or day schools, or sending the Indian students to public school where Indian culture was somewhat accepted. Carlisle Indian Industrial School was closed in 1918, having been the model school since the beginning. A representative of the Carlisle school responded with:

“Carlisle is not dead. Carlisle will never die. The thousands of Carlisle students will transmit its history and its glories to their children and their children’s children, and generations hence it will be a matter of pride, not exceeded by that of the descendant of a *Mayflower* passenger, to say that an ancestor was a graduate of the Carlisle Indian School.”³³

What remained after the boarding schools were thousands of Indian children dead, tortured, or brainwashed to believe their own culture was filth. Although some students were welcomed back into their community, some felt alone and distant once back in their reservation. Irene Stewart recalls “When I left the Navajo country years before, I felt heartbreak. Now [after coming back] I was disappointed in it.”³⁴ Some students after leaving the boarding schools became teachers, cooks, or caregivers in other boarding schools. Although they survived their boarding school experience, many students are scarred and suffer emotional pain still. Hundreds of Indian students have filed lawsuits and claims against the teachers and caregivers in the boarding schools for sexual and physical abuse. In 2003, newspapers and articles filtered through indicating that 5 former students of an Indian boarding school have filed for over \$25 million dollars for treatment while in boarding schools.³⁵ “In Canada, former students at Indian boarding schools have made similar allegations of physical and sexual abuse. Lawsuits against the government and churches that ran the schools have resulted in millions of dollars' worth of settlements and a \$240 million government ‘healing fund.’”³⁶ In an interview with Willie Blackwater, he shares his feelings with the closure of the boarding schools and feelings of survivors of boarding schools:

“I feel we’ll get the justice in the end. It’s been healing for me to speak out, I’m not the only one who was abused so bad, but I am the voice for those men who have the strength to join the lawsuit but not to talk about it publicly yet... We have the full support of the majority of our leaders, and hopefully in the near future we’ll also have the support of mainstream society, once they realize the impact the residential schools have had on First Nations people. I believe we’re only getting stronger.”³⁷

*Note to Reader: The majority of these sources describe the Canadian boarding school experience which is considered analogous but may not be identical to the US boarding school experience that Native Americans endured.

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