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Virtual Vision Quest

led by Wanda Patterson, Chair

American Indians Committee

Fielding Lewis NSDAR

March, 2024

Also available on our website HERE

Carlisle Indian School

"Kill the Indian; save the man"

In 1887 the Dawes General Allotment Act was passed by Congress as a means for breaking up reservations and communal ownership of land by American Indian tribes in order to make more Western lands available for white settlement. The government banned traditional tribal religious ceremonies, such as the Sioux Sun Dance, in order to "civilize" the Native population and incorporate them into the general population of Americans. One of the major programs for assimilating Indians was the education of their children, teaching them to be "white."

Captain Richard H. Pratt had been in charge of the Apache prisoners in exile at Fort Marion, Florida, during the imprisonment of Geronimo at Ft. Pickens. Pratt unchained his Fort Marion prisoners and apprenticed them to local sawmills, farms, and railroads and was impressed with how the prisoners could be trusted and how easily the prisoners could be trained to work. Based on those experiences and at his request, Pratt was allowed to

open the government's first boarding school for Indian children in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1879. Housed in buildings which had previously been part of a military post, the Carlisle Indian School opened with 82 students from three tribes and taught 10,500 students during school's 39 years of operation. Carlisle was the model for 408 boarding schools which were operated by the government for many years.

The idea of educating Indian children sounds like a good one, but the reality of the situation was horrifying. An 1891 compulsory attendance law enabled federal officers to forcibly take Native children from their homes and reservations. The government believed they were rescuing children from a world of poverty and teaching them life skills. However, the reality of the schools was far from the government's objectives. Quite often the schools were located far away from the children's homes, and the children were not returned to their families for years on end. Many parents refused to give up their children willingly, sometimes hiding them. For example, 19 Hopi men were imprisoned at Alcatraz for refusing to surrender their children. Government agents frequently withheld rations, clothing, or annuities from parents who refused to give up their little ones. Thus, children as young as five years old were virtually kidnapped by reservation police. Pictured below are actual child-sized handcuffs used by the U.S. government to restrain captured American Indian children to drag them away from their families.

Captain Pratt's goal in dealing with an Indian child who had been shipped to his boarding school was "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man." That goal was adopted in boarding schools established throughout the country. In order to "kill the Indian," the schools ran a tight ship, forbidding their young charges from practicing any traditional ceremonies or prayers from their religion, as well as forbidding any practices which were related to their

Native culture. They were not allowed to speak their own language and were punished severely if they did so. A child caught whispering in his Native tongue to another student had his mouth washed out with lye soap. According to Lone Wolf, a Blackfoot student, "We were told never to talk Indian and if we were caught, we got a strapping with a leather belt." Since most of the children did not speak English, it was difficult for them to follow instructions or understand their lessons since the teachers only addressed them in English.

Upon arrival at school, students were stripped of any outward appearance of their Indian past. Their Native clothing was burned and they were dressed in school uniforms. Little girls were dressed in Victorian garb or calico dresses and high-buttoned shoes. Boys' outfits were actually uniforms to underline their school's military discipline and because part of the regimen for boys was marching as if they were in the military. Most painful of all for the boys was that their long hair was cut short. In many American Indian tribes, long hair was both a point of personal pride and a symbol of manhood. Thus, losing their hair was humiliating for the boys.

A trio of Sioux boys (pictured above) were photographed in their tribal attire in 1883 when they arrived at the Carlisle school. Six months later the same group was photographed in school uniforms and short hair.

Discipline was strict and harsh. Breaking rules led to corporal punishment, ranging from flogging to solitary confinement, slapping and cuffing. Withholding food was a frequent form of discipline, leading many students to suffer from malnutrition. Some students died

of starvation due either to disciplinary action or to extremely small portions of food in general. There was considerable evidence of both physical and sexual abuse, as well.

In addition to learning English and rudimentary math, students at the boarding schools were taught vocational skills. Boys worked on the school's farms and dairies, and they were trained in carpentry, masonry, and other blue-collar skills, as it was the theory of the school that Indians would never work in any higher occupations. Girls were trained to do household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, and sewing, since they could only hope to hold positions as domestics in white homes.

Native children were denied any knowledge of the actual history of their people. Any mention of Indians in history classes depicted them as vicious warriors who scalped men and killed women and children. Such depictions were intentional, the thinking of instructors being that children should be taught NOT to want to grow up to be Indian. Sun Elk, a Taos Pueblo boy, recalled, "They told us that Indian ways were bad; they said we must get civilized. I remember that word. It means 'Be like the white man.' I am willing to be like the white man, but I did not believe Indian ways were wrong. But they kept teaching. The books told how bad the Indians had been to the white man. We all wore white man's clothes and ate white man's food and went to white man's churches and spoke white man's talk. And so after a while we also began to say Indians were bad. We laughed at our own people and their blankets and cooking pots and sacred societies and dances."

Native children entered the boarding schools with poetic names given to them in solemn ceremonies by their parents or tribal elders. Upon reaching his school, each child was immediately given a "white" name to replace his "savage" name, and it was quite difficult for children to respond to their new names, since they hardly spoke English. The change of name frequently led to punishment for the child who did not immediately follow instructions when his name was called.

“Mertha Bercier, a Chippewa girl, expressed the alienation and loneliness she experienced, being away from her tribe. “Did I want to be an Indian? No! Indians are mean people – I’m glad I’m not an Indian, I thought. Each day stretched into another endless day, each night for tears to fall.....Gone were the vivid picture of my parents, sisters and brothers. Only a blurred vision of what used to be. Desperately, I tried to cling to the faded past which was slowly being erased from my mind.”

The Carlisle school was not completely without merit, and its students were not treated as poorly as children in smaller, less supervised schools. Some Native boarding schools in America and many in Canada were operated by missionaries. One would think that spiritual persons would be gentle caregivers and teachers; but the missionaries were as exacting or even more strict than their civilian counterparts, expecting their young charges to be as dedicated to religious practices and education as the adults were.

The most painful part of Indian boarding school life for the children was their separation from their parents and siblings. An American Indian whose parent was housed in a boarding school operated by missionaries shared her mother’s painful memories in a book entitled NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE. Her mother recollected, “In the darkness of a boarding school night, my mother said she could hear the other kids weeping for their parents. The children were forbidden to speak their Native language Lakota by the missionaries. So they spoke their language in their prayers. A thousand prayers from a thousand lonely hearts.”

In 1918 Congress passed new Indian education legislation which forbade expenditure for separate schools if the children were less than one-quarter Indian and lived in areas where free schools were available. It was not until 1978 that Congress passed the Indian Civil Welfare Act, giving American Indian parents the legal right to refuse to place their child in a boarding school. The boarding schools were finally closed in the 1980’s or taken over by the tribes. From 1879 until closing, hundreds of thousands of Indian students attended boarding schools, although no concrete number is recorded. During the entirety of the boarding school system, only 158 diplomas were granted.

In May, 2022, the U.S. Department of the Interior released an over 100-page report on federal Indigenous boarding schools. The study was initiated by Deb Haaland, U.S. Interior Secretary. As the first Native American cabinet secretary, Ms. Haaland’s interest in the subject of the boarding schools is obvious. Further, her interest derives from family ties to the subject. “I come from ancestors who endured the horrors of the federal boarding schools, carried out by the department that I now lead.”

According to the report, students endured “rampant physical, sexual, and emotional

abuse," and the report documented more than 500 deaths of Native children. Marked and unmarked burial sites have been located at 53 different schools in 37 states. Secretary Haaland stated in regard to the report, "Many of the Indigenous children who were taken to boarding schools never made it back home. There is not a single American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian in this country whose life has not been affected by the schools." As the investigation continues, the Department expects the number of identified burial sites to increase, according to the report.

Goals of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative resulting from the report include "identifying boarding school facilities and sites; identifying the names and tribal identities of Indigenous children who were placed in boarding schools; and identifying locations of marked and unmarked burial sites of remains of Indigenous children."

Secretary Haaland will conduct a year-long "The Road to Healing" tour, traveling across the country "to allow survivors of the federal Indian boarding school system the opportunity to share their stories.....and facilitate the collection of a permanent oral history. "

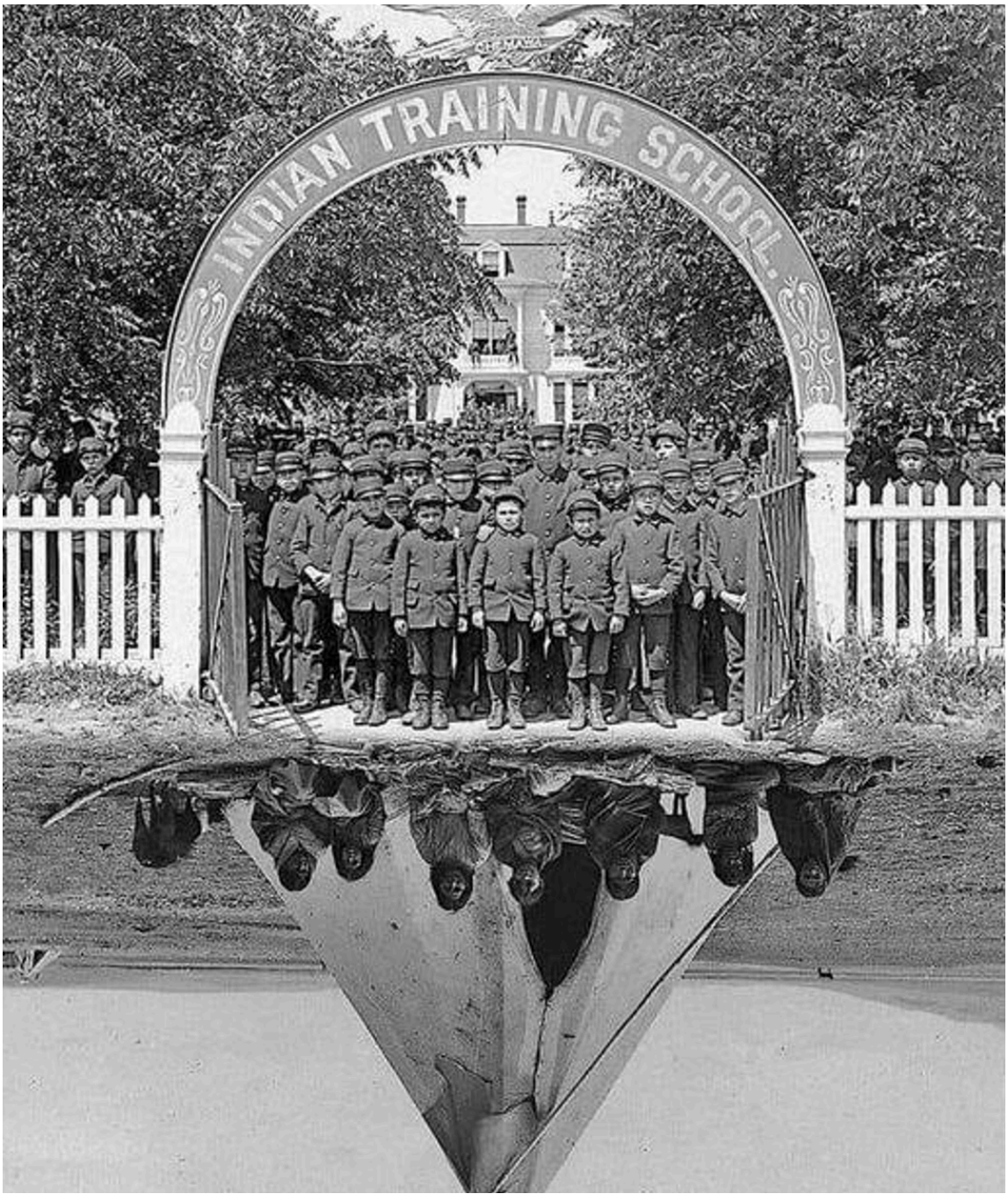
Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has estimated that over 6,000 First Nations (their name for Indigenous Canadians) children died in residential schools after the government adopted the Carlisle model for establishing boarding schools for the children of their Native population. Since the 1970's, ground-penetrating radar has located bodies, unmarked graves, and potential burial sites near residential school sites across Canada. For example, 215 – 200 bodies have been located around the Kamloops Residential School in British Columbia. The school operated from 1890 and was finally closed in 1978. The mortality rate of boarding school children in Canada may include students who died of TB, malnourishment, and unsanitary, crowded conditions. However, examination of the many tiny bodies by forensic archeologists may lead to the conclusion that physical abuse caused the deaths of many First Nations children in Canada during the boarding school period.

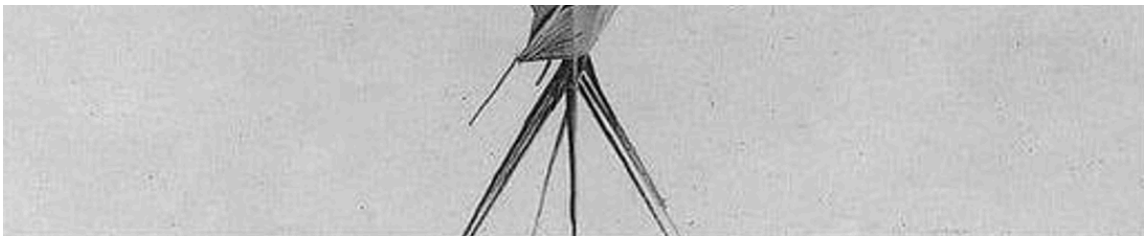
A bright light in the Carlisle Indian School story is the heroic life of Carlisle student Jim Thorpe. The Sauk and Fox youth entered Carlisle in 1908 and distinguished himself as a football star, scoring an unequalled 198 points in his final season at the school and was named to several All-American teams. At the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Thorpe won gold medals in the decathlon and pentathlon. Unfortunately, the medals were taken from him when it was discovered that he had played minor-league baseball one summer. Thorpe went on to play professional baseball and football, and he was elected to the college and professional football halls of fame. At the 1984 Olympics he was posthumously re-awarded his 1912 gold medals. His daughter accepted on her famous father's behalf. In 1950 400 sportswriters were asked to pick the greatest all-around male athlete of the past 50

years. Their overwhelming choice was Jim Thorpe, an American Indian and a student at the Carlisle Indian School.

Two novels which present touching pictures of two very different, but tragic experiences of American Indian boarding school residents, are the following:

BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY by Amanda Skenandore
INDIAN SCHOOL DAYS by Mark Sublette.





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