

Background Readings

Waging War through Education

[Indian boarding school founder] Captain Pratt had been a frontier Indian fighter before becoming an educator. Yet even as the founder of the Carlisle Industrial School for Indians, he was still waging a kind of war.

Rather than killing Native Americans or confining them to reservations, he now wanted them to forget their traditions and begin living like white people. The sooner all tribal relations were broken up and the sooner the Indians lost all their old ways, even their language, Captain Pratt believed, the better their lives would be.

Young Indians would forget their past, the captain thought, if they were educated far from their “savage” environment. And Carlisle was a long way from the reservations in the western territories. The Pennsylvania town was nestled in the Cumberland Valley 200 miles southwest of America’s biggest city, New York, and 100 miles northwest of the nation’s capital, Washington, D.C.

From Michael L. Cooper, *Indian School: Teaching the White Man’s Way* (New York: Clarion Books, 1999), p.22.

Assimilation Through Education: Indian Boarding Schools

The goal of Indian education from the 1880s through the 1920s was to assimilate Indian people into the melting pot of America by placing them in institutions where traditional ways could be replaced by those sanctioned by the government. United States federal government policy called for the removal of children from their families and in many cases enrollment in a government run boarding school. In this way, the policymakers believed, young people would be immersed in the values and practical knowledge of the dominant American society while also being kept away from any influences imparted by their traditionally-minded relatives.

The Indian boarding school movement began in the post–Civil War era when idealistic reformers turned their attention to the plight of Indian people. Whereas before many Americans regarded the native people with either fear or loathing, the reformers believed that with the proper education and treatment Indians could become just like other citizens. They convinced the leaders of Congress that education could change at least some of the Indian population into patriotic and productive members of society. One of the first efforts to accomplish this goal was the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, founded by Captain Richard Henry Pratt in 1879. Pratt was a leading proponent of the assimilation through education policy. Believing that Indian ways were inferior to those of whites, he subscribed to the principle, “kill the Indian and save the man.” At Carlisle, young Indian boys and girls were subjected to a complete transformation. Photographs taken at the school illustrate how they looked “before” and “after.” The dramatic contrast between traditional clothing and hairstyles and Victorian styles of dress helped convince the public that through boarding school education Indians could become completely “civilized.” Following the model of Carlisle, additional off reservation boarding schools were established in other parts of the country, including Forest Grove, Oregon (later known as Chemawa).

All federal boarding schools shared certain characteristics. The Bureau of Indian Affairs issued directives that were followed by superintendents throughout the nation. Even the architecture and landscaping appeared similar from one institution to the next. Common features included a military style regimen, a strict adherence to English language only, an emphasis on farming, and a schedule that equally split academic and vocational training.

**Each School
Had a
GraveYard:
Native-
American
Boarding
Schools**

A typical daily schedule at a boarding school began with an early wake-up call followed by a series of tasks punctuated by the ringing of bells. Students were required to march from one activity to the next. The foremost requirement for assimilation into American society, authorities felt, was mastery of the English language. Commissioner of Indian Affairs T. J. Morgan described English as “*the language of the greatest, most powerful, and enterprising nationalities beneath the sun.*” Such chauvinism did not allow for bilingualism in the boarding schools, students were prohibited from speaking their native languages and those caught “speaking Indian” were severely punished. Later, many former students regretted that they lost the ability to speak their native language fluently because of the years they spent in boarding school.

Mandatory education for Indian children became law in 1893 and thereafter agents on the reservations received instructions on how to enforce the federal regulation. If parents refused to send their children to school the authorities could withhold annuities or rations or send them to jail. Some parents were uncomfortable having their children sent far away from home. The educators had quotas to fill, however, and considerable pressure was exerted on Indian families to send their youngsters to boarding schools beginning when the child was six-years-old. Fear and loneliness caused by this early separation from family is a common experience shared by all former students. Once their children were enrolled in a distant school, parents lost control over decisions that affected them. For example, requests for holiday leave could be denied by the superintendent for almost any reason.

Carolyn J. Marr content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/marr/marr.html#intro

Lesson No. 1: Shed Your Indian Identity

Whether toddlers or teens, they were taken from home and shipped thousands of miles to dreary barracks. Their hair was cut, they were given new names, and each was assigned a number.

The United States government began this brutal attempt at social engineering in 1879. Breaking rebellious Indians by indoctrinating their children in Anglo ways was considered a cost-effective alternative to war. But the personal cost to Native Americans was incalculable...

[One woman said, “Children] were literally kidnapped, loaded on wagons or trains, and all of them thought at any moment they were going to die. When the children arrived at the schools, it was the first time they’d been away from home.” Many former boarding-school students, she says, including her own aunts and a grandmother, found their memories too painful to discuss.

“When they first took us in school, they gave us government lace-up shoes,” one woman says. “Then they gave us a number. My number was always 23.”

When you first started school,” says another female voice, “they looked at you, guessed how old you were, set your birthdate and gave you an age. Then they assigned you a Christian name. Mine turned out to be ... Fred.”

Richard Pratt’s oppressive plan

Hundreds of Indian boarding schools dotted the United States from the 1880s through the 1960s. The program was spearheaded by a zealous Army officer named Richard H. Pratt, who embraced the idea after working with Apache prisoners in St. Augustine, Florida. Pratt believed that removing Indian children from their culture and subjecting them to strict discipline and hard work would force their assimilation into mainstream society.

Congress agreed, and in 1897 it gave Pratt roughly 18 students and the drafty barracks at a deserted Army college in Carlisle. Cynical politics—and simple math—played into Pratt’s plan. The government hoped to save millions of dollars, “because it cost anywhere

from 6,000 to 10,000 [dollars] for the Army to kill an Indian,” Bates says. “But if Indian children were put in schools and forced to change into ‘Americans,’ it would only cost a couple of hundred dollars per child.”

Pratt’s famous dictum was straightforward: “Kill the Indian and save the man.” School officials prohibited children from speaking native languages, and punished transgressors. “Every school had a disciplinary jail cell,” Bates says. Some even offered bounties for returned children.

Contagious diseases often swept through the schools, and exposure to the elements took the lives of many runaways. Photographs show vast cemeteries of plain white headstones inscribed with children’s names.

For decades, there was little criticism of this abusive program from a nation steeped in dime novels about “the savage Indian.” Instead, magazines such as *Harper’s Weekly* praised the schools. In a glowing article dated April 26, 1890, *Harper’s* glorifies the Haskell Institute with pictures of young men in contrasting settings: “Indian boys at home” shows them in traditional buckskin clothing, whereas “a finished pupil” looks like a young clerk with a high collar.

Vocational training was also central to the boarding-school mission. Indian teens worked at various tasks—girls setting tables and cooking meals, boys repairing shoes or pushing wheelbarrows.

Pratt’s misguided vision was never fully realized, as most children eventually returned to their families and old ways of life. By the 1960s, tribes wrested control of the schools away from the federal government “and began to make them their own,” Bates says. Today, only four boarding schools remain, and attendance is voluntary.

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Student Readings: Each School Had a Graveyard: Native-American Boarding Schools

Student Reading 1

Ota Kte (Luther Standing Bear, a Lakota Sioux), who became well known as an author and spokesperson for his people in the early 1900s, was one of the first of his generation to be sent to a boarding school. Here is his description of his arrival in 1879 at the Carlisle Industrial School for Indians, when he was 11-years-old.

At that time I thought nothing of it, but now I realize that I was the first Indian boy to step inside the Carlisle Indian School grounds.

Here the girls were all called to one side by Louise McCoz, the girls' interpreter. She took them into one of the big buildings, which was very brilliantly lighted, and it looked good to us from the outside...

But the room we entered was empty. A cast-iron stove stood in the middle of the room, on which was placed a coal-oil lamp. There was no fire in the stove. We ran through all the rooms, but they were all the same—no fire, no beds. This was a two-story building, but we were all herded into two rooms on the upper floor.

Well, we had to make the best of the situation, so we took off our leggings and rolled them up for a pillow. All the covering we had was the blanket we each had brought. We went to sleep on the hard floor, and it was cold. We had been used to sleeping on the ground, but the floor was so much colder.

Next morning we were called downstairs for breakfast. All we were given was bread and water. How disappointed we were. At noon we had some meat, bread, and coffee, so we felt a little better. But how lonesome the big boys and girls were for their faraway Dakota homes where there was plenty to eat! The big boys seemed to take it worse than we smaller chaps did. I guess we little fellows did not know any better. The big boys would sing brave songs, and that would start the girls to crying. They did this for several nights. The girls' quarters were about 150 yards from ours, so we could hear them crying. After some time the food began to get better, but it was far from being what we had been used to receiving back home.

* * *

I was thrust into an alien world, into an environment as different from the one into which I was born as it is possible to imagine, to remake myself as if I could into the likeness of the invader.

Copyright © University of Nebraska Press. Reprinted with permission from Luther Standing Bear, *My Indian Boyhood* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

Student Reading 2

An anonymous Santa Clara Pueblo woman recalls, in 1915, the day she was taken to the Santa Fe Indian School, as a five-year-old.

I remember it was in October and we had a pile of red chile and we were tying chiles into fours. And then my grandfather was putting them on a longer string. We were doing that when they came to get me. Then right away my grandma and my mother started to cry. "Her? She's just a little girl! She's just a little girl, you can't take her."

"But we have to take somebody. We can't take your grandson, so we have to take your granddaughter...."

The next day my mother sent me...to the relatives' houses to be blessed, where they are always sending us when we are leaving our village. They used to send us to relatives to be blessed so that the Creator can take care of us when we are away from our families....

My mother put her best shawl on me. It was getting a little chilly. It was late. Pretty soon the train whistled around the bend near the Rio Grande and it came. I was already five-years-old, but my grandpa was holding me on his knee. So when the train came, I got in. I saw the tears coming out of that brave man, my grandpa who was so brave and strong.

I can still picture my folks to this day, just standing there crying, and I was missing them....

From Joseph Bruchac, *Lasting Echoes: An Oral History of Native American People* (New York: Avon Books, Inc., 1997), p. 90.

Student Reading 3

The first days of school are confusing for any child, but they were worse for Native Americans in the 19th century, who were thrust into a foreign world and stripped of their hair, their clothes, and even their names.

Soon after arriving at Carlisle in October 1879, the young Sioux had their first haircuts. Pratt allowed the older girls to keep their hair in braids, as they had done at home. But he trimmed the small girls' hair and cut the boys' hair short.

The haircuts were traumatic for many of the students. An older Carlisle boy who refused at first to have his haircut walked outside his dormitory one night, took out a knife, and sliced off his long braids himself. He then began to wail, because the Sioux cut their hair only as a sign of sadness or shame. The students in nearby dormitories heard the wailing and joined in, as they would have done at home.

It is hard to imagine dying of homesickness. Yet it was a very serious problem for Indian students. "Homesickness with them became a disease," wrote an official at Hampton Institute. "Boys and girls actually suffered in the flesh as well as the spirit; could not eat, would not sleep, and so prepared the way for serious trouble. When people do not take care of their bodies, it becomes easier for them to become sick."

The profound sadness caused by homesickness weakened the students and made them susceptible to deadly diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza. These contagious diseases easily spread because of unsanitary conditions at the boarding schools. It was not unusual for dozens of students to sleep in one big room lined with rows of beds or for two children to sleep together in a single bed. This enabled germs to spread easily from child to child.

An alarming number of young people died at the boarding schools. The Spokanes, a tribe from the region that is now Washington State, sent 21 children away to school; 16 of them died there. At the Fort Hall School in Idaho, 68 students caught scarlet fever. Eight of them died quickly, and another 30 became so ill they were sent home to die. Officials usually returned the sickest children to their parents so their deaths would not reflect badly on the schools. Nonetheless, so many students died that each institution had its own cemetery. This high death rate was one reason that parents refused to send their children away to school.

From Michael L. Cooper, *Indian School: Teaching the White Man's Way* (New York: Clarion Books, 1999), pp. 34, 46.

Student Reading 4

Zitkala-Sa, in her widely read series of magazine articles, described the sad experience of being separated from her home and tribe. “Like a slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God,” she wrote. “I was shorn of my branches, which had waved in sympathy and love for home and friends.”

From Michael L. Cooper, *Indian School: Teaching the White Man’s Way* (New York: Clarion Books, 1999), p. 93.

Student Reading 5

Ohiyesa, whose name had been changed to Charles Eastman, described his frustration in learning English: “...we youthful warriors were held up and harassed with words of those letters. Like raspberry bushes in the path, they tore, bled and sweated us—those little words like *rat*, *eat*, and so forth—until not a semblance of our native dignity and self-respect was left.”

From Michael L. Cooper, *Indian School: Teaching the White Man’s Way* (New York: Clarion Books, 1999), pp. 52, 54.

Student Reading 6

Many Native Americans fiercely opposed sending their children to any of the government schools. White authorities responded to their resistance with force and trickery. “Everything in the way of persuasion and argument having failed,” reported one BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] agent, “it became necessary to visit the camp unexpectedly with a detachment of police, and seize such children as were proper and take them away to school, willing or unwilling.”

...Indian school officials disciplined students in many different ways. Teachers often used shame or embarrassment as punishment. A boy caught sneaking food out of the dining room had to stand on a chair in the middle of the room during dinner. A girl who wet her bed had to carry a mattress for a day.... Another punishment was hard labor. “If you had done something extremely out of line, you worked on the rock pile on Saturday,” one boy said of the dreaded sentence.... “That was brutal work—it was like being in prison.”

From Michael L. Cooper, *Indian School: Teaching the White Man’s Way* (New York: Clarion Books, 1999), pp. 28, 48, 49.

Student Reading 7

One of the main lessons taught in every class was that the white man’s way of life was superior to all others. One student expressed what he had learned in an essay:

“The white people, they are civilized.... The yellow people they half civilized, some of them know how to read and write, and some know how to half take care of themselves.... The red people they big savages; they don’t know nothing.”

From Michael L. Cooper, *Indian School: Teaching the White Man’s Way* (New York: Clarion Books, 1999), p. 55.

Resistance Readings: Each School Had a Graveyard: Native-American Boarding Schools

[At Fort Mojave School in Arizona, students as young as seven- and eight-years-old were locked up as punishment for running away.] After locking up several runaways, one teacher recalled, she heard the loud sound of smashing wood. She went to investigate. “At the sturdy jail, there lay the sturdy door, broken from its hinges. There lay the log, a big one, and the many pieces of rope. We were amazed.” The children had made handles from the rope and used the log as a battering ram to break down the jail door and free those inside.

* * * *

Two Carlisle girls tried to burn down their dormitory. They set newspapers on fire in the reading room and then hurried to join the other pupils at dinner. The blaze was quickly discovered and extinguished. Later that day, the two [students] tried again. They filled a pillowcase with paper, lit it, and tossed the flaming bundle into a closet. The blaze was also quickly discovered and put out.... The pair were arrested, tried, and sentenced to 18 months in the Pennsylvania women’s penitentiary.

From Michael L. Cooper, *Indian School: Teaching the White Man’s Way* (New York: Clarion Books, 1999), p. 48.

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