

AMERICAN INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES: A BRIEF HISTORY AND THEIR CURRENT LEGACY

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Introduction

My interest in American Indian boarding school survivors' stories evolved from recording my father, and other family members, speaking of their experiences. Stories I never knew existed, because they had all maintained silence on their experiences until I began asking questions.

Historical Background

American Indian children were taken from reservation homes into off-reservation boarding schools beginning in 1879. Boarding schools physically separated children in the formative years of their lives from the influence of family and tribe.¹ The schools were closely tied to the purpose of assimilationist education. On March 3, 1819, the U.S. Congress passed an act to provide education “for the purpose of providing...for the teaching of their [American Indian] children in reading, writing and arithmetic...”² Government officials “believed if

1 David Adams, Education for extinction: American Indians and the boarding school Experience 1875–1928. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

Tsianina Lomawaima, They called it prairie light: The story of Chilocco Indian School. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

Brenda Child, Boarding school season: American Indian families, 1900–1940. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

Brenda Child, Margaret Archeletta & Tsianina Lomawaima, (eds.) Away from home: American Indian boarding school experiences 1879–2000. (Phoenix: Heard Museum, 2000)

Clifford Trafzer, Jean Keller & Lorene Sisquoc, (Eds.) Boarding school blues: Revisiting American Indian educational experiences. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

Michael Cooper, Indian school: Teaching the White Man's Way. (New York: Clarion Books, 1999).

Esther Horne & Sally McBeth, Essie's story: The life and legacy of a Shoshone teacher.

2 US Statues At Large, (4) 16 Stat. 40 (April 10, 1869).

they carried out their educational program on a sufficiently large scale it would transmogrify whole tribal cultures and eventually assimilate Indians into the lower strata of American society.”³ The Indian Boarding School policy has been a collaboration of the Christian churches and the federal government since its earliest inception, beginning with the Indian Civilization Act Fund of March 3, 1819. The Act’s purpose was the “civilization” of Native Americans; stripping them of their traditions and customs and teaching them the ways of the majority culture in missionary schools, i.e., transform them into Christian farmers or laborers.⁴

The federal government allowed school facilities, often run by churches and missionary societies to be situated close to the communities served.⁵ Assimilationists of the time viewed this as a disadvantage, as the students remained in their home communities under the influence of parents and tribal elders, and often went ‘back to the blanket,’ maintaining tribal traditions and language⁶.

They Came For the Children

Rations, annuities, and other goods were withheld from parents and guardians who refused to send children to school after a compulsory attendance law for American Indians was passed by Congress in 1891.⁷ The 1890s through the 1930s were the heyday of the off-reservation boarding schools. In 1931, 29% of Indian children in school were in boarding schools. Off reservation boarding schools housed 15 % of all Indian children in school. ⁸ By the late 1920s, nearly half of boarding school enrollments were in off-reservation schools.⁹ The total

3 J Hamley, Cultural genocide in the classroom: A history of the federal boarding school movement in American Indian education. 1875–1920, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994) [unpublished dissertation].

4 An Act Making Provision for the Civilization of the Indian Tribes Adjoining the Frontier Settlements, 3 Stat, 516 (March 3, 1819)]

5 Andrea Smith, Conquest: Sexual violence and American Indian genocide. (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005).

6 Adams 1995

7 Adams, 1995; Tsianina Lomawaima, 1994.

8 Indian Schools and Education. U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs

9 Laurence F. Schmeckebier, The Office of Indian Affairs. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1927)216.

number of off-reservation boarding schools by 1909 was 25, along with 157 on-reservation boarding schools and 307 Day Schools were in operation.¹⁰ An estimated 100,000 children passed through these schools between 1879 and the 1960s.

Indian Boarding schools or industrial schools prepared boys for manual labor or farming, and girls for domestic work. Schools also extensively utilized an Outing program where Smith (2005) states, “Children were involuntarily leased out to white homes as menial labor during the summers rather than sent back to their homes.”¹¹ Additionally, government expenditures for boarding schools were always small, and the schools exploited the free labor of Indian children in order to function.¹² Due to overcrowding in these schools, tuberculosis, trachoma and other contagious diseases flourished.¹³ Adams states “... epidemics of tuberculosis, trachoma, measles, pneumonia, mumps and influenza regularly swept through overcrowded dormitories, taking a terrible toll on the bodies and spirits of the stricken... Thus, disease and death were also aspects of the boarding school experience.”¹⁴

The boarding school, whether on or off the reservation, became the institutional manifestation of the government’s determination to completely restructure the Indians’ minds and personalities. Boarding schools were established for the sole purpose of severing the Indian child’s physical, cultural and spiritual connection to his or her tribe.¹⁵

My qualitative interview research study of twenty American Indian boarding school survivors “Stringing Rosaries: A Qualitative Study of Sixteen Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors,” revealed four major themes, including: a) The participants attending boarding school experienced loss in the form of: loss of identity, language, culture, ceremonies and traditions; loss of self-esteem; loneliness due to loss of parents and extended family; feeling of abandonment by parents; feeling lost and out of place when they returned home. b) The participants attending boarding

10 Adams 1995

11 *Supra* 5, p. 37

12 Child, 2000

13 Adams, 1995; Child, 2000; Smith, 2005).

14 *Ibid*, pp. 124–125

15 Adams, 1995; Lomawaima, 1994; Cooper, 1999; Hamley, 1994; Smith, 2005

school experienced abuse in the form of: corporal punishment; forced child labor; the Outing program; hunger/malnourished; and sexual and mental abuse. c) The participants experienced unresolved grief: maintaining silence; mental health issues, relationship issues and alcohol abuse. d) The participants expressed ways for healing in the form of: a return to Native spirituality and forgiveness.¹⁶

The boarding school survivors in the study experienced human rights abuses. Fundamental human rights of American Indian children were violated in boarding schools as documented by this study and oral stories. They were treated as less than human and undeserving of respect and dignity as children, as human beings and as members of an ethnic group. Their most basic rights and fundamental moral entitlements were violated.

These boarding school survivors in the study experienced severe beatings or they witnessed the beatings of fellow students by staff; were caused mental harm; were sexually abused or witnessed sexual abuse; were often located hundreds of miles from their homes; were forced to do manual labor; were hungry; and experienced the forced loss of language, culture, tribal traditions and spirituality. These boarding school survivors are experiencing continued emotional trauma from beatings, hunger, physical and sexual abuse. The survivors have expressed a way for healing these soul wounds both personally and as tribes: a return to American Indian spirituality, including languages and ceremonies.

Even though asked about positive experiences, favorite teachers or mentors and friendships, these interviewees had a majority of negative experiences. What is most poignant to me is the resounding silence the interviewees have maintained throughout their lives regarding their experiences at boarding schools, whether positive or abusive, refusing to, or unable to, talk to siblings or their children. The stories told here are filled with sorrow, pain and lasting trauma. Yet they are stories told with a look to the future, a future filled with American Indian traditions, languages, cultures, and most importantly, forgiveness.

16 Denise Lajimodiere, *Stringing Rosaries: A Qualitative Study of Sixteen Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors* (2012) 8 Journal of Multiculturalism in Education.

Important to me is that this study provided a vehicle to fifteen boarding school survivors to tell their story.

Historical Trauma

In researching boarding schools I came across terms I had not heard of before, terms such as historical trauma, generational trauma, collective trauma, multigenerational trauma and unresolved grieving. Historical trauma, the term used most often by scholars of American Indian trauma, is conceptualized as a collective complex trauma inflicted on a group of people who have a specific group identity or affiliation—ethnicity, nationality, and religious affiliation. It is the legacy of numerous traumatic events, a community's experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events. Scholars have suggested that the effects of these historically traumatic events are transmitted intergenerationally as descendants continue to identify emotionally with ancestral suffering. This collective trauma has been characterized by scholars as the soul wound, knowledge of which has been present in Indian country for many generations.¹⁷

Increasingly, the damage from boarding school abuse—loneliness, lack of love and lack of parenting—is being seen as a major factor in ills that plague tribes today, passing from one generation to the next and manifesting in high rates of poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, depression and suicide. There have been a variety of terms used to describe the multigenerational nature of distress in communities, including collective trauma, intergenerational trauma, multigenerational trauma, and historical trauma.

Responses to such trauma have an impact at the individual, familial and community level. Research suggests that responses at the individual level fall within the context of individual mental and physical health and may include symptoms of post traumatic syndrome

17 E Duran et al, *Healing the American soul wound*, International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma. Ed. by Yael Danieli. (New York: Plenum Press, 1998). Smith 2005.

Andrea Smith, Soul Wound: the legacy of Native American schools. (Amnesty Now, 2003) pp. 14–17.

disorder (PTSD), guilt, anxiety, grief and depressive symptomology. Responses at the familial level have received much less research attention: however, emerging work suggests that impacts may include impaired family communication and stress around parenting.¹⁸ High numbers of parents growing up in boarding schools were deprived of traditional parental role models, suggesting that boarding school experiences may have not only interrupted the intergenerational transmission of healthy child-rearing practices but also instilled new, negative behaviors instead.

At the community level, responses may include the breakdown of traditional culture and values, the loss of traditional rites of passage, high rates of alcoholism, high rates of physical illness (e.g., obesity), and internalized racism.¹⁹ Unresolved trauma has been found to be intergenerationally cumulative, compounding the subsequent health problems of the community. Further, mourning that has not been completed and the ensuing depression are absorbed by children from birth on.

The Legacy of the Boarding Schools

The children victimized in the schools, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, have become the legacy of the boarding schools and the federal policy that established and sustained them. Many of those that returned to their communities returned as wounded human beings. Denied the security and safety necessary for healthy growth and development, they retained only fractured cultural skills to connect them with their families and communities. For many of the girls and boys, the only touch they received from the small population of adults stationed at the schools, were the beatings or, perhaps worse, forced sexual contact with adults, or older students who themselves had been victims. Kept at the boarding school year round, many grew up solely in the company of other children, under the control of a few adults, who shared the perception that their wards were savages

18 Brave Heart & Debryun, *The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief*. (1998) 8 American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research. pp. 56–78.

19 *Supra* 17.

and heathens to be managed, tamed and “civilized.” The survivors of boarding schools were left with varying degrees of scars and skills, but most profoundly, psychological subordination. Many report feeling self-hatred for being Indian. Others report feeling bereft of spirit, knowledge, language and social tools to reenter their own societies, or have suffered negative attitudes from non-Natives. With only limited labor skills, exacerbated by the subordinated spirit trained into them, too many carried undefined and unremitting anxieties that drove them to alcoholism, drug abuse, violence against their own families and communities, and suicide.

The United States has yet to issue a formal apology regarding the boarding school era. A Congressional inquiry into boarding school abuses will be requested by the National Native American Boarding School Coalition (N-NABS-HC) members. A goal is to obtain monies for community-based healing. The Coalition is working closely with members of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission in determining what ‘healing’ would look like and how to proceed as we move toward approaching the US Congress about this important issue.