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Remembering Our Indian School Days: The Boarding School Experience  
Remembering Our Indian School Days: The Boarding School Experience; Away from Home:  
American Indian Boarding School Experiences by Margaret L. Archuleta; Brenda J. Child; K.  
Tsianina Lomawaima

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## **Remembering Our Indian School Days: The Boarding School Experience**

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**Away from Home: American Indian Boarding School Experiences.** Margaret L. Archuleta, Brenda J. Child, and K. Tsianina Lomawaima, eds. Phoenix: Heard Museum, 2000. 144 pp.

Attendance at boarding schools has been one of the most widely shared formative experiences for Native American children during the last 120 years. Beginning with the founding of the Carlisle Indian School in 1879 and continuing into the 21st century, federally funded and controlled boarding schools have housed and educated tens of thousands of Native American children. The experience of boarding school, especially during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was often brutal and occasionally fatal. Children were torn, sometimes literally, from their homes and families and transported hundreds or thousands of miles from everyone and everything they knew, often for years at a time. Food was often poor and housing cramped, which facilitated the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and trachoma. Life was reduced to a strictly regimented schedule, and punishment was swift and harsh for even minor failures to meet difficult standards set by teachers and administrators. Academic education generally fell a distant second to vocational training, with boys taught to be laborers and girls to be domestics.

The Indian boarding schools were created with the intention of assimilating Indian children into Euro-American culture by removing them from their home environment and immersing them in a closely controlled, Christian, English-only environment. In 1892 Captain Richard H.

Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian School, wrote: "A great general had said that the only good Indian is a dead one. . . . I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him and save the man" (1973:260–261). This attitude was pervasive among federal Indian policymakers and boarding school administrators well into the 20th century. The value of traditional Native American cultures was given more stock under the administration of Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier from 1933 to 1945 and with the passage of the "Indian New Deal" in 1934. However, reform was slow, and Indian boarding schools continued to receive insufficient funding and to provide inferior educational opportunities in comparison to many mainstream public schools.

Based on the dark history of the boarding schools, it might seem appropriate to create museum exhibits and write volumes condemning them, but an honest and balanced examination uncovers tremendous ambiguity. Although the earliest goal of the boarding school system was to eradicate Native American languages, cultures, and traditions, and Pratt's proclamation reflects the pure brutality that would be justified to meet those ends, the majority of administrators and teachers who participated in the system did so with good intentions. Although many children were forcibly taken from their homes, many others were sent to boarding schools by parents who saw the schools as opportunities for their children to learn, to succeed, or merely to have enough to eat. While many children lost or involuntarily suspended their ability to speak their native languages and returned to villages or reservations where they no longer fit in, many also used the boarding school experience as a platform from which to pursue further education, to build cross-tribal community and political activism, and to help their people. As the curators of *Remembering Our Indian School Days* note in the exhibit's label text, "The boarding schools were designed

to change the Indian into a 'White man.' Instead the students changed the schools into 'Indian' schools."

The ambiguity of the boarding schools is the first of several significant issues addressed by the exhibit and accompanying volume. When visitors enter, the antechamber of the exhibit features wall-size color photo murals of beautiful red rock mountains on one side and on the other a lush, green meadow accompanied by the sounds of indigenous language speech, whinnying horses, and other sounds suggestive of a rural, preindustrial life. Passing from the antechamber the visitor is assaulted in an entry hallway by harsh, historical, black-and-white photo murals of trains, depots, severe-looking institutional buildings, and regimented and uniformed children. Here the voices are in English as former boarding school students recall their experiences of being taken from their families and indoctrinated into boarding school life.

The exhibit curators appropriately place a barber's chair as the first material object included in the exhibit. Accompanied by incessant sounds of clipping and snipping scissors and surrounded by long dark locks of hair littering the floor of the exhibit case, the chair stands as the final threshold between home life and indigenous culture and the industrialized, Anglicized world of the boarding school. As is evidenced by former students' memories and by the infamous and ubiquitous "before and after" propaganda photos of Indian children, changing the students' appearance was the first step in usurping control of their bodies and minds and "killing the Indian."

The polarization of home life and school life is reiterated in the next exhibit case, which contrasts an assortment of highly decorated indigenous garments and mocasins with a small girl's pillow-ticking uniform dress and plain black boots. Serving as backdrop to the indigenous clothing is a photo of a sun-drenched mesa; behind the uniform is the image of a closely packed group of uniformed children standing at rapt attention. The brutality of the boarding school experience is also reinforced near the end of the exhibit in which a painting by Judith Lowry (Mountain Maidu/Hamowi-Pit River) commemorates her great-aunt Molly, who at age 11 died of exposure while trying to run away from the Greenville Indian School in December 1916. Nearby photos of Indian school cemeteries include text from a letter sent by Richard H. Pratt to a child's parents: "Your son died quietly, without suffering, like a man. We have dressed him in his good clothes and tomorrow we will bury him the way the white people do."

While the visitor can easily forgive the slightly myopic nostalgia behind the suggestions of reservation life given by the traditional clothing display and the scenic photographs at the entrance to the exhibit, one also gets the feeling that the exhibit's curators did not go far *enough* in characterizing the prevailing horror of the boarding schools. This reflects back on the ambiguity of the boarding school experience. The boarding schools were not always horrible nor were all the experiences all students had



**FIGURE 1.** The central corridor of the exhibit reflects the institutional nature of the boarding schools.

always bad. The heart of the exhibit deals more with the varied experiences of students at the schools.

Visitors are led into an institutional corridor lined by doorways leading into four rooms representing different aspects of the Indian school experience: "Friends, Family and Fiancées"; "Plow, Pen and Prayer"; "Piano, Play and Practice"; and "Drawings, Paintings and Designs" (see Figure 1). In these rooms the visitor gains a sense of the bittersweet experiences of Indian school students. The first room, for example, illustrates dormitory life. A significant portion of the room is dedicated to discussion of the rampant spread of communicable diseases that was worsened by inadequate housing. But, across the room, by way of videotaped interviews, former students reminisce about friendships made and romances kindled at the schools. Although rife with difficulties, the students found ways to make their time at the boarding schools positive experiences.

The "Drawings, Paintings and Designs" room discusses the development of Indian art education at the boarding schools (see Figure 2). Central figures in the development of art education at the boarding schools were the Winnebago (now Ho-Chunk) artist Angel de Cora and the Anglo Dorothy Dunn. De Cora was a Hampton Institute



**FIGURE 2.** The "Drawings, Paintings and Designs" space, one of four "classrooms."

alumna who had continued her education to become a highly skilled and successful artist. In 1906 she was hired as art educator at Carlisle Indian School, where she reversed the policy of teaching Indian children strictly in Western artistic traditions. She firmly believed that Native Americans possessed innate artistic abilities, and she recognized the value and sophistication of indigenous design systems. During her nine-year tenure at Carlisle she encouraged students to use indigenous designs in the creation of marketable articles, and on trips to various Native communities she encouraged women artists to adapt their work to pieces that would be appealing to tourists. Although de Cora's program ended when she left Carlisle in 1915, her efforts set a precedent for indigenous-culture oriented art education in the following decades.

Dorothy Dunn was hired to direct the art program at Santa Fe Indian School in 1932. Emphasizing the use of students' memories and research into the artistic traditions of their home communities to the exclusion of European traditions, Dunn developed an art education program that would become the model for other boarding school art programs. Although criticized for its constraint of artists' work (Berlo and Phillips 1998:217–218), "The Studio" trained many artists such as Allan Houser (Haozous) and Pablita Velarde, who have, in turn, inspired gen-

erations of Native American artists. Through the efforts of teachers like de Cora and Dunn, many Indian students obtained training and gained opportunities that they would not have had outside of the Indian boarding school system.

A second significant concern for the exhibit curators is how to address a topic that is so experiential in nature: To understand the Indian boarding schools the visitor must understand the impact of the institutions on the children who attended them. Because museums have historically been centered on the collection, preservation, and interpretation of material objects, undertaking an exhibit in which material objects are of such limited importance is a special challenge. While science museums have long included interactive exhibits and children's museums are rooted in concepts of experiential education, museums of culture are just beginning to incorporate their patrons *into* exhibits. The uniforms and trophies, desks and bunk beds included in this exhibit help to create a physical frame for understanding the boarding school experience, but because those objects are common to the experience of most museum visitors, the objects alone are of a more limited interpretive value than more "exotic" artifacts. The well-placed and liberally used photographic, audio, and video features play the critical role of giving students

voices and faces. For an exhibit such as this to be truly successful, however, visitors must be encouraged not just to view the exhibit but to place themselves into an imagined experience.

Following the introductory galleries, visitors have the opportunity to immerse themselves in an imagined boarding school experience. Given a blue book, the visitor is invited to "Select your new name. Write your name on your booklet. Put any additional information on the first page of your booklet." From the six options for boys, I chose Benjamin Record. According to the brief personal history I was given, I was now five hundred miles from home, and it would be five years before I saw my family again.

This first, simple exercise helps to reinforce the absurdity of much of the boarding school philosophy. In order to remake Indian students into the image of Anglo America, boarding school administrators attempted to erase the identities of their students. Children were taken away from everything and everyone they knew. They lost their clothing, their language, their beliefs, and even their names. While the children did not get to choose whether they would become Norman Hillside, Anna Wallace, Lafayette Washington or Esther Mountain, giving exhibit visitors the opportunity to do so themselves illustrates the perversity of the boarding school policies.

In the "Plow, Pen and Prayer" exhibit room, visitors can sit at a number of school desks arranged in rows at the back of the room. Each desk presents a different "misbehavior" scenario:

You missed your grandmother's cooking. Write "Indian food is bad for me" in your booklet. Write your name in cursive. Use the samples on the wall as a guide.

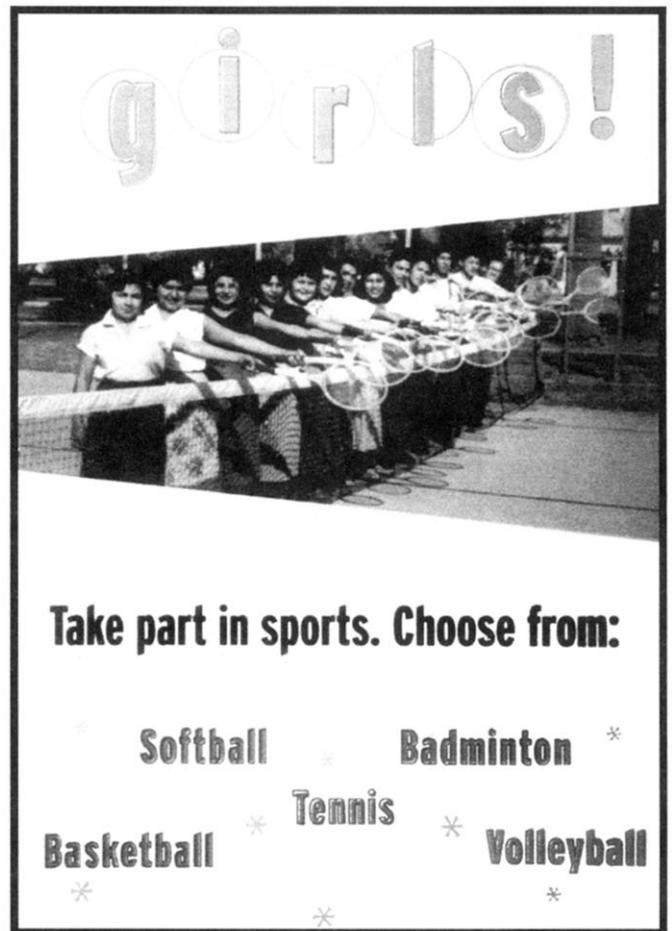
You did not obey your teacher. Write "I must be good."

You were homesick today. Write "I must not run away. It is dangerous."

You spoke in your own language today. Write "I must only speak English."

By re-enacting some of the most minor punishments experienced by students, and by engaging, as they had to, in the propaganda of the boarding school doctrines, visitors can gain another personal insight into the boarding school experience.

A third significant issue explored by the exhibit is the similarities of experience between Indian children at the boarding schools and other non-English speaking children at mainstream public schools (see Figure 3). The exhibit curators note in the introductory text the similar use of public schools as a tool of assimilation for immigrant children to the United States.<sup>1</sup> Taking an even broader perspective, visitors have the opportunity to use *Remembering Our Indian School Days* to consider how educational systems work toward the control and ideological indoctrination of all children. The familiarity to visitors of the exhibit's trophies, plaques, banners, athletic uniforms, and diplomas is important because that familiarity clearly illustrates how all children, Native American, immigrant,



**FIGURE 3.** Native American children were encouraged to partake in non-Native musical, artistic, and athletic activities to replace traditional ones.

and Anglo alike, learn to be the kind of citizens that the dominant society expects.

A significant value of the exhibit is that it is meant not just to be for non-Indian visitors, but also to reach out to former students. Space at the end of the exhibit is provided to invite former students to share their own memories. To my disappointment, none were posted at the time of my visit.<sup>2</sup> While I was there, however, a visitor commented to her companions that she had not expected the exhibit to be so contemporary, and she laughed about looking for her father's photograph in one of the school yearbooks available in the last room of the exhibit. Undoubtedly, visits to the exhibit hold significance for former students and their families, whether or not they choose to share their reactions with other visitors.

Because this is an exhibit and book about the experiences of Indian children at boarding schools and of the educators who taught them, the underlying federal policies that informed the creation and administration of the boarding schools are given only limited consideration. The effect of the boarding school experience on the development of a pan-Indian identity and on the founding of pan-Indian organizations and the development of cross-tribal

political activism by former students is also given only minor notice.

Nevertheless, this exhibit and the accompanying volume are important contributions to the interpretation and understanding of the Indian boarding school experience. The book, *Away from Home*, draws closely from the works of two of the curators and editors (Child 1998; Lomawaima 1994) and, like those works, gains much of its significance from the writings and recollections of former students. Like Sally Hyer's (1990) book on the Santa Fe Indian School that includes many images, one of this volume's greatest contributions is the reproduction of over 100 historic photographs that add significant visual material to the boarding school literature.

Although plans are not yet firm, *Remembering Our Indian School Days* is expected to travel after 2005, which will make this important exhibit available to many more visitors in the future. *Away from Home* easily stands on its own as a testament to the boarding school experiences of

Indian children and likewise will make an important contribution to the popular understanding of Indian boarding schools.

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