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The sad legacy of American Indian boarding schools in Minnesota and the U.S.

By [Dr. Denise K. Lajimodiere](#) | 06/14/2016



Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

"Intermediate" students inside a classroom at an American Indian boarding school in Beaulieu, Minnesota, c.1900.

American Indian boarding schools, which operated in Minnesota and across the United States beginning in the late nineteenth century, represent a dark chapter in U.S. history. Also called

industrial schools, these institutions prepared boys for manual labor and farming and girls for domestic work. The boarding school, whether on or off a reservation, carried out the government's mission to restructure Indians' minds and personalities by severing children's physical, cultural, and spiritual connections to their tribes.

On March 3, 1891, Congress authorized the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to create legal rules that required Indian children to attend boarding schools. It also authorized the Indian Office to withhold rations, clothing, and other annuities from Indian parents or guardians who would not send and keep their children in school. Indian Agents forcibly abducted children as young as four from their homes and enrolled them in Christian- and government-run boarding schools beginning in the mid-1800s and continuing into the 1970s.

Captain Richard H. Pratt's boarding school experiment began in the late nineteenth century. A staunch nineteenth-century assimilationist, Pratt advocated a position that diverged slightly from the white majority's. Convinced of the U.S. government's duty to "Americanize" Indians, he offered a variation of the slogan—popular in the American West—that stated the only good Indian was a dead one. The proper goal, Pratt claimed, was to "kill the Indian...and save the man."

Pratt founded a school in 1879 at the site of an unused cavalry barracks at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, organizing the institution along rigid military lines. Pratt's program of half days in the classroom and half days spent at some form of manual labor soon became standard boarding school curriculum. Government expenditures for boarding schools were always small, and the schools exploited the free labor of Indian children in order to function.

Minnesota had sixteen boarding schools that drew students from all eleven of the state's reservations. The earliest was White Earth Indian School, begun in 1871. In 1902, St. Mary's Mission boarded an average of sixty-two students, Red Lake School seventy seven, and Cross Lake forty two. At Morris, more than two thousand children attended the school during its history. White Earth had room for 110 students. Clontarf housed an average of 130 children from reservations in Dakota Territory. By 1910, Vermilion Lake held 120 students. Cass/Leech Lake opened with a capacity of fifty students. Pipestone housed children from Dakota, Oneida, Pottawatomie (Bodéwadmi), Arikara, and Sac and Fox (Sauk and Meskwakwi) tribes.

A typical daily schedule began with an early wake-up call at 5:45 am, most often announced by a bugler or bells. Students marched from one activity to the next. Every minute of the day was scheduled; mornings began with making beds, brushing teeth, breakfast, and industrial call ("detail"). School began around 9 am. Afternoons were spent in school and industrial work, which were followed by supper, up to thirty minutes of recreation, a call to quarters, and "tattoo." Pupils retired to the sounds of taps at 9 pm.

Methods of discipline at Minnesota boarding schools were harsh. Some schools had cells or dungeons where students were confined for days and given only bread and water. One forced a young boy to dress like a girl for a month as a punishment; another cut a rebellious girl's hair as short as a boy's.

Minnesota boarding schools recorded epidemics of measles, influenza, blood poisoning, diphtheria, typhoid, scarlet fever, tuberculosis, pneumonia, trachoma, and mumps, which swept through overcrowded dormitories. Students also died from accidents such as drowning and falls.

Boarding school staff assigned students to “details”: working in the kitchen, barns, and gardens; washing dishes, tables, and floors; ironing; sewing; darning; and carpentry. The schools also extensively utilized an “outing” program that retained students for the summer and involuntarily leased them out to white homes as menial laborers.

One of Minnesota’s most famous boarding school survivors is American Indian activist Dennis Banks. When he was only four years old, Banks was sent three hundred miles from his home on the Leech Lake Reservation of Ojibwe, in Cass County, to the Pipestone Indian School. Lonesome, he kept running away but was caught and severely beaten each time. Another student, at St. Benedict’s, recalled being punished by being made to chew lye soap and blow bubbles that burned the inside of her mouth. This was a common punishment for students if they spoke their tribal language.

Many students’ parents and relatives resisted the boarding school system. In letters sent to absent children, they delivered news from home and tried to maintain family ties. In messages sent to school administrators, they arranged visits, advocated for improved living conditions, and reported cases of malnourishment and illness.

In 1928, the U.S. government released the Meriam Report, an evaluation of conditions on American Indian reservations and in boarding schools. The critical study called the schools grossly inadequate. It presented evidence of malnourishment, overcrowding, insufficient medical services, a reliance on student labor, and low standards for teachers. As a result, the government built day schools on reservations. The original boarding schools began closing their doors as parents increasingly kept their children at home. By the end of the 1970s, most of them had shut down. In 2016, though tribes and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) continue to run fifty schools nationwide, no Indian boarding schools remain open in Minnesota.

There has been scant recognition of the boarding school era by the U.S federal government and church denominations that initiated and carried out the schools’ policies. Neither has acknowledged, as the Canadian government did for its own boarding school program in 2008, that those policies’ purpose was cultural genocide or accepted responsibility for their effects. Pratt’s contemporaries viewed him and other enforcers of assimilationist policies as heroes.

The logo for MNOPEdia, featuring the letters 'MNOPEdia' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The 'M' and 'N' are significantly larger and bolder than the other letters.

Few textbooks discussed Indian boarding schools before the twenty-first century. In the 2000s, however, many historians study them as the tools of ethnic cleansing. The genocidal policies the schools’ staffs carried out aimed to destroy the essential foundations of the lives of American Indian students. Their objective was the disintegration and destruction of the culture, language, and spirituality of the American Indian kids under their care. The policies they implemented led to the

deaths of thousands of students through disease, hunger, and malnutrition, and have left a legacy of intergenerational trauma and unresolved grieving in many boarding school survivors and their families across Indian country.

For more information on this topic, check out [the original entry on MNopedia](#).

COMMENTS (3)

SUBMITTED BY DENNIS TESTER ON 06/14/2016 - 01:41 PM.

One family's experience

I am a member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux in South Dakota. My mother and my uncle (her younger brother) attended the Indian boarding school in Pipestone from about 1924 to 1932.

She told me that the people from the boarding school visited her family on their farm near Veblen and asked her parents if they would like to send their children to the boarding school. Their alternative was a one-room school house where about a dozen kids of all ages and grades were taught the three Rs by the local school marm.

After explaining to my grandparents, as well as the kids, what to expect, my uncle begged his parents to be allowed to go. My mother wasn't so sure, but my grandparents made her go along to look after her little brother who was two years her junior.

It was a strictly disciplined environment and they were both homesick to be sure. They grew their own food on several acres, they milked their own cows and butchered the pigs and chickens they raised. The school was totally self-sufficient, which was the Sioux way.

My mother learned to cook, bake, and sew, three skills she found helpful later in life when she raised 7 kids on a limited budget. My uncle learned carpentry, which he used to support his family throughout his life. She also played on the girl's basketball team which went around the state, challenging white high schools and usually winning over the taller, older white girls.

I played point guard in high school, using the dribbling skills she taught me as a youngster.

She and her brother had nothing but fond memories of those days and the friends they made with kids from other tribes around Minnesota, South Dakota and Iowa.

I noticed the author of this piece didn't share any experiences from her family members who attended the boarding schools. I would have liked to hear what their experiences were as well as reading the academic references she relied on for the story.

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SUBMITTED BY DENISE LAJIMODIERE ON 11/30/2016 - 10:14 PM.

References

Dennis, this article has a link to the original entry which has my references listed.

Both of my parents, my aunts and uncles and all of my grandparents were sent to boarding schools. Their stories are of loss of tribal language, culture, traditions, forced Christianity, child labor, corporal punishment and witnessing kids die from beatings, loneliness and hunger. The survivors I interviewed that said they had a good experience witnessed the brutal punishments, behaved and thus stayed under the radar of matrons and

headmaster's. My father and mother have similar stories to your parents – homemaker and carpenter. What is sad is that they were forced into vocations and not given an opportunity to attend college. What we must always remember is that the schools were meant for absolute, total forced assimilation in White culture. Kill the Indian, Save the Man.

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SUBMITTED BY BONNIE STEELE ON 02/22/2019 - 06:23 PM.

My mother attended Pipestone around 1940 or so. She was taken to boarding school along with four of her brothers in 1938. They initially went to Whapeton. The baby spoke no English. He was five years old. He died ten days after they arrived. He was allowed to speak to her until the day before he died. The matrons that he was crying for their mother. He was sick. He may have died anyway, but he was kept from everyone he knew and had no one that spoke his language with him as he languished in pain. Absolutely horrific. The children never lived together again as family.

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