

Indian Boarding Schools

American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many

by Charla Bear

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For the government, it was a possible solution to the so-called Indian problem. For the tens of thousands of Indians who went to boarding schools, it's largely remembered as a time of abuse and *deseccration* of culture.

The government still operates a handful of off-reservation boarding schools, but funding is in decline. Now many American Indians are fighting to keep the schools open.

The late performer and Indian activist Floyd Red Crow Westerman was haunted by his memories of boarding school. As a child, he left his reservation in South Dakota for the Wahpeton Indian Boarding School in North Dakota. Sixty years later, he still remembers watching his mother through the window as he left.

At first, he thought he was on the bus because his mother didn't want him anymore. But then he noticed she was crying.

"It was hurting her, too. It was hurting me to see that," Westerman says. "I'll never forget. All the mothers were crying."

Westerman spent the rest of his childhood in boarding schools far from his family and his Dakota tribe.

He went on to become an actor, an activist with the American Indian Movement and a songwriter.

He sang about his experiences growing up: "You put me in your boarding school, made me learn your white man rule, be a fool."

The federal government began sending American Indians to off-reservation boarding schools in the 1870s, when the United States was still at war with Indians.

An Army officer, Richard Pratt, founded the first of these schools. He based it on an education program he had developed in an Indian prison. He described his philosophy in a speech he gave in 1892.



“A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one,” Pratt said. “In a sense, 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.”

Fifty years later, Pratt’s philosophy was still common.

In 1945, Bill Wright, a Pattwin Indian, was sent to the Stewart Indian School in Nevada. He was just 6 years old. Wright remembers matrons bathing him in kerosene and shaving his head. Students at federal boarding schools were forbidden to express their culture — everything from wearing long hair to speaking even a single Indian word. Wright said he lost not only his language, but also his American Indian name.



“I remember coming home and my grandma asked me to talk Indian to her and I said, ‘Grandma, I don’t understand you,’ “ Wright says. “She said, ‘Then who are you?’ “

Wright says he told her his name was Billy. “ ‘Your name’s not Billy. Your name’s ‘TAH-rruhm,’ “ she told him. “And I went, ‘That’s not what they told me.’ “

According to Tsianina Lomawaima, head of the American Indian Studies program at the University of Arizona, the intent was to completely transform people, inside and out.

“Language, religion, family structure, economics, the way you make a living, the way you express emotion, everything,” says Lomawaima.

Lomawaima says from the start, the government’s objective was to “erase and replace” Indian culture, part of a larger strategy to conquer Indians.

“They very specifically targeted Native nations that were the most

Children line up outside the Indian boarding school at Cantonment, Oklahoma (now Canton), in 1909. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Neg. no. LC-USZ62-126134)

recently hostile,” Lomawaima says. “There was a very conscious effort to recruit the children of leaders, and this was also explicit, essentially to hold those children hostage. The idea was it would be much easier to keep those communities pacified with their children held in a school somewhere far away.”

The government operated as many as 100 boarding schools for American Indians, both on and off reservations. Children were sometimes taken forcibly, by armed police. Lomawaima says that’s not the only reason families let their children go.

“For many communities, for a variety of reasons, federal school was the only option,” she says. “Public schools were closed to Indians because of racism.”

At boarding schools, the curriculum focused mostly on trades, such as carpentry for boys and housekeeping for girls.

“It wasn’t really about education,” says Lucy Toledo, a Navajo who went to Sherman Institute in the 1950s. Toledo says students didn’t learn basic concepts in math or English, such as parts of speech or grammar.

“Saturday night we had a movie,” says Toledo. “Do you know what the movie was about? Cowboys and Indians. Cowboys and Indians. Here we’re getting all our people killed, and that’s the kind of stuff they showed us.”

And for decades, there were reports that students in the boarding schools were abused. Children were beaten, malnourished and forced to do heavy labor. In the 1960s, a congressional report found that many teachers still saw their role as civilizing American Indian students, not educating them. The report said the schools still had a “major emphasis on discipline and punishment.”

“Busted his head open and blood got all over,” Wright recalls. “I had to take him to the hospital, and they told me to tell them he ran into the wall and I better not tell them what really happened.”

Wright says he still has nightmares from the severe discipline. He worries that he and other former students have inadvertently re-created that harsh environment within their own families.

“You grow up with discipline, but when you grow up and you have families, then what happens? If you’re my daughter and you leave your dress out, I’ll knock you through that wall. Why? Because I’m taught discipline,” Wright said.

Not all American Indians had negative experiences at boarding

schools. Some have fond memories of meeting spouses and making life-long friends. But scathing government reports led to the closure of most of the boarding schools.

One school that remains is Sherman Indian High School in Riverside, Calif. — the same boarding school Toledo attended.

Hershel Martinez, a Navajo student, gathers with a group of friends in a school hallway to form a drum circle. The school encourages cultural activities like this.

That's one reason Martinez feels more comfortable here than at his former public school in Los Angeles.

“Everyone was wondering what nationality, what race am I,” Martinez said when asked about being at a public school. “I’d tell them and they’re like, ‘Wow, you’re Indian. You’re like the only guy I know who’s Native.’ But here, at Sherman, they know how I feel about being Native. And they understand where we’re all coming from.”

But this year, the federal government made a budgeting change that reduces funding to the off-reservation boarding schools. And their future is in doubt.

These days, most American Indian children go to public schools. But remnants still exist of the boarding-school system the federal government set up for Indian children in the late 1800s.

Some people, such as U.S. officials at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, question whether the government should continue to be in the boarding-school business. Many students at these schools say they are a necessary escape from the poverty and addiction that plague many reservations.

At Sherman Indian High School in Riverside, Calif., dormitory supervisors wake up students before the sun rises. Students have to clean



Tom Torlino, Navajo, before and after, 1882, Carlisle Indian School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Photo by J. N. Choate.

Image courtesy of the Richard Henry Pratt Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University

their aging dorm buildings before class, and supervisor Teresa Iyotte says if they don't get up in time to clean the bathrooms, they'll suffer the consequences.

"They get demerits if they're not up by 6," Iyotte says. Students get more demerits if they are not up by 6:15 a.m. and even more if they are not up by 6:30.

A lot is expected of students at Sherman, one of seven federally funded off-reservation boarding schools for elementary or secondary education. Some of the most at-risk American Indian youth leave home to attend the schools, coming from more than 85 tribes from big cities and reservations across the country.

Sheila Patterson came to Sherman from the San Carlos Apache

Reservation in southeast Arizona. She says she is proud of her traditional ways, and she shows off the moccasins she wears with her ceremonial dress. Patterson misses the reservation but says she needed to leave. Back there, she says, a lot of people drink and also commit suicide.

"That's why I had to get away and come here," she says.

Most students come to Sherman because they see it as a way to do better. Some students, however, are ordered to attend by judges who see it as an alternative to jail.

The national graduation rate for American Indians is about 50 percent. Charlotte Longenecker, a counselor at Sherman, says the low rate is not surprising.

"When you work with a population that has the highest suicide rate, the highest alcoholism and drug usage rate — I've never met so many people in my life who had lost family members, and so many in such rapid succession — that's going to happen," Longenecker says.

Administrators at Sherman say they maintain a tightly controlled environment. There is zero tolerance for drugs and alcohol. Students can leave campus only if they have earned a group activity, such as a trip to Wal-Mart.

Steve Yankton, a student from the Pine Ridge Reservation in southwest South Dakota, says life at the boarding school can be tough.

"We're always confined in a fence," Yankton said. "We really can't live high-school life like regular teenagers would. We can't just go shop



**Chiloco Indian
School boys
raising chickens,
1955.
Oklahoma Historical
Society**

at the mall whenever we want for how long we want. We can't go eat at a restaurant with our friends whenever we feel like we want. Staff always has to be around us."

Every day at Sherman is rigorously structured. But students who stick it out say Sherman offers them opportunities, too, like the chance to learn about other tribes.

In Tara Charley-Baugus' classroom, students learn the language of the Dine — also known as Navajo — by taking tests and reciting vocabulary. They also sing traditional songs.

Baugus tells her students that the songs are a way to teach more than just language skills.

"You learn something about your culture and history because of the sheep, from way back in the 1500s, when the Spaniards brought them in," she instructs students. "And you can teach these songs to your brothers and sisters. That's how you pass on the language."

Until the 1960s, the government schools tried to expel Indian culture among students. They were severely punished if they practiced Indian ways.

That isn't the case anymore. Teachers such as Baugus and Lorene Sisquoc are working to revive American Indian customs. At Sherman, Sisquoc teaches such traditional skills as basket weaving. But she says she is conflicted about why she is teaching these skills at a boarding school.

"Why isn't it taught in our families, all our families?" she asks.

The reason, she says, is the boarding schools themselves, because generations of students who didn't learn the old ways didn't pass them along to children of their own.

"Kids were taken from their homes, and those traditional things weren't always taught," Sisquoc said.

These days, off-reservation boarding schools have more applications than they can handle, according to Don Sims, Sherman's recently retired principal. But a recent federal budget change is cutting each school's funding by hundreds of thousands of dollars. Sims says this could put Sherman in dire straits.

"We won't have enough money to start the school, to have enough staff to have the services needed for the kids," Sims said. "It's an impossible situation."

Officials at the Bureau of Indian Affairs say they know these schools are in trouble. But they disagree over whether the federal government

should even be running Indian schools in the 21st century.

“You can talk to 20 people in our organization, and 10 people will say we shouldn’t have off-reservation boarding schools, and 10 other people will say there’s a need for these kinds of schools because of the at-risk students,” said Angelita Felix of the BIA education office.

In the past few decades, tribes have begun taking over boarding schools. They now control about half of them. Most are on the country’s largest reservation, the Navajo Nation. The Navajos discourage students from attending boarding schools off the reservation.

Eddie Biakeddy, deputy director of the tribe’s Department of Education, says educating kids on the reservation has become almost a matter of survival.

“A lot of other Indian tribes in the United States have lost use of their language and therefore their culture,” Biakeddy said. “And there is a goal of the Navajo Nation to establish its own educational system, where the Navajo Nation would have control over all the schools and there should be no need for any on-reservation students to go to an off-reservation boarding school.”

But many smaller tribes don’t have the money or political organization to run their own schools, let alone facilities for at-risk youth.

At Sherman, many students and recent alumni say the off-reservation boarding school system has helped them.

“Sherman pretty much did save me, I guess, in a way,” said Seana Edwards, a Prairie Band Potawatomi. She nearly failed freshman year at her public high school in New Hampshire and says she would have ended up working a dead-end job. But she transferred to Sherman, graduated and now attends the University of California, Berkeley.

She goes back to Sherman often to convince students that they, too, can go to college. And she says she appreciates how far the school has come since the time when students wore uniforms and marched in lines.

“You feel part of that history and you get sad, but at the same time, you realize that it’s so much better today and you get the opportunity to change it. You get the opportunity to make it better. Not just for you but for other people, for younger generations.”

Edwards’ own younger brother and sister are in elementary school in New Hampshire. But if they do need Sherman’s tight structure, morning wake-ups and nightly check-ins someday, she wonders if Sherman Indian High School will still be there for them.