

## Indian Boarding Schools

Stephanie Hauf

HIS 350: The Frontier Era

November 18, 2019

Indian boarding schools, including both government-run schools and mission schools, are an integral part of the murky history surrounding the purposeful assimilation of Indians into white culture. These boarding schools began as a blatant attempt to systemically erase Indian culture, under the guise of education. Meaningful differences between outcomes of government boarding schools and mission schools are unclear. Because many Indian schools are still in operation today, a necessary part of examining the historical problems relating to these schools is determining how they have changed over time and why they have changed. Examining the initial purpose of the boarding schools, the student experience, and how the schools have changed over time will hopefully shed light on the lasting impacts as well as present-day issues related to Indian boarding schools.

Government funding of Indian boarding schools began in 1882.<sup>1</sup> Ten years later, Colonel Richard Pratt, founder of Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, gave a speech which summed up what he, and many Americans, believed should be the goal of Indian education in the United States. In his speech, Pratt contends that to save the Indian people from disappearing entirely, they should be assimilated into white culture. From this speech comes the infamous saying, “Kill the Indian, and save the man.”<sup>2</sup> The fundamental purpose of Indian boarding schools was the assimilation of the Indian into American society to make them more white. Pratt’s theory about the best way to educate Indians and the model by which the Carlisle Indian School functioned, was to remove the children from their ‘savage’ environment and place them into ‘civilization.’ This became the model for the creation of the majority of the Indian boarding schools throughout the United States in the late nineteenth century and remained the dominant model for years.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Connell Szasz, “Federal Boarding Schools and the Indian Child: 1920-1960,” 1977, 371.

<sup>2</sup> “‘Kill the Indian, and Save the Man’: Capt. Richard H. Pratt on the Education of Native Americans,” accessed November 2, 2019, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929/>.

<sup>3</sup> “‘Kill the Indian, and Save the Man’: Capt. Richard H. Pratt on the Education of Native Americans.”

The two main types of Indian schools were government schools and mission schools. As of 1886, there were two mission schools on Rosebud reservation in South Dakota: one Episcopal school (St. Mary's) and one Catholic school (St. Francis). Besides these two mission schools, there were three government boarding schools on the Rosebud reservation, and twelve day-schools. In addition to the schools on the reservation, some students were sent to off-reservation government boarding schools, such as Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup> One of the main differences in the running of the government schools versus the mission schools was the question of funding. The mission schools could not rely on government funding. Funding was intermittent and unpredictable, leaving mission schools dependent on the Catholic Church and wealthy donors such as Katherine Drexel, who provided much of the funding to build the Catholic mission schools in South Dakota.<sup>5</sup>

All of these schools served essentially the same function insofar as their goal was to civilize Indian students. However, besides the impulse to civilize Indian children, the Catholic mission schools also intended to convert and baptize students.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, Catholic missionaries were welcomed onto reservations. In 1877, a Lakota man named Spotted Tail made his request for Catholic teachers to come to Rosebud. It is made clear in his request that he wishes for his children to learn how to read and write English. However, it is unclear if he has any desire for his children to become Catholic or if he preferred Catholic missionaries for other

---

<sup>4</sup> "History: Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the Year 1886: Reports of Agents in Dakota," accessed November 2, 2019, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/History/History-idx?type=turn&entity=History.AnnRep86.p0218&id=History.AnnRep86&isize=M>.

<sup>5</sup> "ST. FRANCIS MISSION RECORDS Historical Note // Archives // Raynor Memorial Libraries // Marquette University," accessed November 2, 2019, <https://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/Mss/SFM/SFM-history.php>.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond A. Bucko, *Lakotas, Black Robes, and Holy Women: German Reports from the Indian Missions in South Dakota, 1886-1900*, ed. Karl Markus Kreis, trans. Corinna Dally-Starna (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 34-36.

reasons.<sup>7</sup> The German Catholic missionaries also mention the Sioux Indian's preference for Catholic presence, but again did not give a clear indication why.<sup>8</sup> This points to a possible good that occurred as a result of the mission schools; that some Indians welcomed and truly converted to Catholicism. However, despite good intentions behind these efforts, conversion was a part of the broader assimilation effort that destroyed native culture.

Along with the goal of civilizing their 'heathen' students, the missionaries from St. Francis Mission School make it clear that they want their students to become self-sufficient heads of households when they return to the reservation.<sup>9</sup> This called for the students to participate in work at the school, including both trades and chores. The Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs stated in 1886 just after the founding of St. Francis Mission School: "These schools are designed to be industrial, the boys learn to work in shops and on the farm, and the girls housework."<sup>10</sup> Reports directly from the missionaries corroborate this narrative, stating, "Here an eye must be kept on the entire education and civilizing process... In the upper classes children receive about three hours of instruction daily, and each day an equal amount of time is devoted to working."<sup>11</sup> This quote reflects the problematic nature of the Indian boarding schools. It is questionable how much the schools were actually focused on the education the Indians wanted, including how to read and write in English, and how much time they spent teaching Indian children how to function in a traditional white household.

All of these reports reflect the sentiments of Pratt. The paternal attitude of white Americans towards American Indians, seeing them as a people in need of saving through being

---

<sup>7</sup> "ST. FRANCIS MISSION RECORDS Historical Note // Archives // Raynor Memorial Libraries // Marquette University."

<sup>8</sup> Bucko, *Lakotas, Black Robes, and Holy Women*, 22–23.

<sup>9</sup> Bucko, 78.

<sup>10</sup> "History: Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the Year 1886: Reports of Agents in Dakota," 81.

<sup>11</sup> Bucko, *Lakotas, Black Robes, and Holy Women*, 78.

civilized, was detrimental to the Indian children who attended the boarding schools for multiple generations. The conditions at boarding schools were not ideal. The testimonies of those who actually attended these schools depict life at the schools and reflect the effects of the boarding school experience on native culture. The operation of the schools impacted the students who lived there in a significant way.

While all boarding schools functioned somewhat differently on a day-to-day basis, they had many common characteristics. Foreign language, forced haircuts, an unfamiliar style of shoes, dresses for girls, and military style uniforms for boys, and even the assigning of a new, Christian name, were all a part of a standard boarding school experience. Every part of the student's day was dictated by a strict schedule which included very little time for recreation from the time students woke up to the time they went to bed at night.<sup>12</sup> Close living quarters increased incidents of mass illness at the schools, including tuberculosis, pink eye, chicken pox, and other diseases, primarily those that were contagious.<sup>13</sup> Food service varied from school to school, but the general consensus was that food was usually either not provided in sufficient quantities, or of sufficient quality. At the Rapid City Indian School, menus seemed to be of fair quality, and improved over time. However, although the menus look fine, it was reported in 1928 that three girls ran away from the school because they found worms in their food. Quality of preparation was not guaranteed just because the meals looked alright on paper.<sup>14</sup> This regimented lifestyle and risk of disease, along with the ability or inability of the schools to provide for student's basic needs were serious aspects of school life which left much to be wished for by students.

---

<sup>12</sup> "Section 5: Indian Boarding Schools | North Dakota Studies," accessed November 2, 2019, <https://www.ndstudies.gov/gr8/content/unit-iii-waves-development-1861-1920/lesson-3-building-communities/topic-2-schools/section-5-indian-boarding-schools>.

<sup>13</sup> "Section 5: Indian Boarding Schools | North Dakota Studies."

<sup>14</sup> Scott Riney, *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898–1933* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 47–52.

There are many oral histories relaying personal stories of time spent at both government and mission boarding schools. It is important to note that oral histories, including the ones cited in this paper, are generally recorded for a specific purpose, which may or may not skew the information chosen to be included in the record. We often hear the most drastic information from both sides and do not learn about the middle ground. In other words, those who may have truly had the ‘average’ experience may not be included. In the case of testimonies about Indian boarding school experiences, those that are generally recorded are those with the most negative experiences. These testimonies are not a wholistic representation of what occurred at all boarding schools, but rather are to show how boarding schools are remembered by those who attended, and how they will be remembered by society. These recorded stories become how we, the public, will eventually view this part of history.

The atmosphere and treatment of children at boarding schools was a stark contrast from what the children experienced at home. Indian children were raised by nurturing parents who valued them, saw them as in need of continuous, patient formation, and would have never thought of punishing them physically. Life at the boarding schools was different, and students experienced physical punishment and humiliation for their infractions, no matter how small. Some remember being hit with rulers or being beaten for not doing what they were told.<sup>15</sup> Walter Littlemoon, a Lakota man who attended multiple boarding schools throughout his childhood, describes Pine Ridge as a ‘re-education camp’ for the uncivilized, with memories of harsh punishment and multiple attempts at running away.<sup>16</sup> Children trying to run away from both government and mission schools was fairly common, no matter how far away their home was

---

<sup>15</sup> Carole Barrett and Marcia Wolter Britton, “‘You Didn’t Dare Try to Be Indian:’ Oral Histories of Former Indian Boarding School Students,” *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 64, no. No. 2 (Spring 1997): 19.

<sup>16</sup> Jim Kent, “Boarding School Memories Haunt Lakota Man,” accessed November 2, 2019, <https://listen.sdpb.org/post/boarding-school-memories-haunt-lakota-man>.

from the school. Phyllis Young, who attended two different mission boarding schools as a child, has some positive memories of her experience at school, but even she attempted to run away and was punished.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the emphasis on civilizing students, measures were taken to ensure that students did not revert to their former ‘savage’ way of life. According to Phyllis Young, “you didn’t dare try to be Indian” at school.<sup>18</sup> Phyllis and others describe how the schools, both government and mission, discouraged them from identifying themselves as Indian in any way. One of the most profound losses mentioned is the loss of their native language, because of the lack of exposure to it and punishment for trying to maintain it. Their native identity was stripped from them in this and also in the removal of their Indian name.<sup>19</sup> This loss of identity was inherently harmful to students and to the Indian community as a whole. When students went home, some were unable to communicate with their families because they had only been allowed to speak English at school, even in the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Both government and mission schools harmed the identity of the American Indian through their participation in the larger civilizing process.

Many of those interviewed spoke about why they attended boarding school or continued attending the schools after they had been exposed to their negative effects. Some say their parents did not want to send them away, but felt they had no choice because of the situation they were in.<sup>21</sup> This situation could include anything from inability to feed children, poor economic

---

<sup>17</sup> Barrett and Britton, “‘You Didn’t Dare Try to Be Indian:’ Oral Histories of Former Indian Boarding School Students,” 14–15.

<sup>18</sup> Barrett and Britton, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Barrett and Britton, 24.

<sup>20</sup> “American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many,” NPR.org, accessed October 28, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16516865>.

<sup>21</sup> Barrett and Britton, “‘You Didn’t Dare Try to Be Indian:’ Oral Histories of Former Indian Boarding School Students,” 21.

conditions on the reservation, or overall lack of opportunity available at home. Riney explains, “By the 1920s, boarding schools had become welfare providers of last resort for Indian families. The Rapid City Indian School remained overcrowded not because its superintendent wanted to put every last Indian child on the road to assimilation, but because Indian parents and reservation officials enrolled children who could not be fed, clothed, and housed anywhere else.”<sup>22</sup> The children at the schools, though the conditions were not great, may have received a better quality of life as far as basic needs than they could have received on the reservation. The Indian parent’s perception of a school’s reputation for providing for student needs was crucial to the survival of the schools, leading to gradual improvement over time.<sup>23</sup> Indian schools changed significantly throughout the twentieth century.

While government reports may seem like an impersonal approach to the history of Indian boarding schools compared to oral histories, they offer perspectives of the schools different than firsthand accounts from students, teachers, and missionaries. Distance from the topic allows the view of the bigger picture to appear. Government documents allow for the examination of the change in the national attitude and conversation regarding Indian schools over time.

By 1928, questions regarding the legitimacy of the boarding school system were already starting to arise. The Meriam Report, released in 1928, was a government report that described the many injustices against native peoples in the United States. An entire chapter was devoted to the multitude of issues relating to Indian education. The opening sentences of this chapter essentially condemn the system’s approach, in a way that is directly contrary to the theories Pratt idealized in 1892. The report states,

---

<sup>22</sup> Riney, *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898–1933*, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Riney, 55.



The most fundamental need in Indian education is a change in point of view. Whatever may have been the official governmental attitude, education for the Indian in the past has proceeded largely on the theory that it is necessary to remove the Indian child as far as possible from his home environment; whereas the modern point of view in education and social work lays stress on upbringing in the natural setting of home and family life. The Indian educational enterprise is peculiarly in need of the kind of approach that recognizes this principle: that is, less concerned with a conventional school system and more with the understanding of human beings.<sup>24</sup>

The report marks an important change in the language used to discuss Indian education and calls for reevaluation of the current system of schools meant to civilize. However, it is questionable whether the civilizing impulse of the schools was truly affected by the Meriam Report. An indication that the report did affect government boarding schools is that it was finally acknowledged that most students educated at boarding schools would return to the reservations when they finished school instead of moving to a city, and therefore the skills taught at schools should reflect skills that would be necessary for life on the reservation and not for life in a city or work in a factory. There was an increased attempt to make the transition back to the reservation as seamless as possible, so those who attended school would become competent members of the reservation community. This made it relevant to include courses that helped to maintain the tribal identity of the students.<sup>25</sup> At least some of the schools became less strict, which ultimately benefited the students at these particular schools.

---

<sup>24</sup> “Meriam Report: The Problem of Indian Administration; National Indian Law Library, Native American Rights Fund (NARF),” 347, accessed November 2, 2019, <https://narf.org/nill/resources/meriam.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Szasz, “Federal Boarding Schools and the Indian Child: 1920-1960,” 379–80.

Despite any changes that occurred as a result of the Meriam report, the Indian boarding schools that stayed open remained under scrutiny. The Kennedy Report, released in 1969, was created to address the state of Indian education in the United States. The report called for an increase in the resources spent on educating Indian children, for more fundamental changes to take place in the structure of the schools, and for native voices to be included in the conversation regarding the education of their children. Perhaps the most significant change was the call for boarding and other Indian schools to include within their curriculum classes covering the history and culture of the people groups being served within the school.<sup>26</sup> These changes, while positive, were not called for until 1969 which seems far too late, and they were stated as part of a comprehensive recommendation, not as a law.

The government officially acknowledged the detrimental effects of government run Indian schools with the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Reform Act of 1975, almost 100 years after the beginning of government funding of Indian boarding schools in the United States. Section two of the act outlines the findings of Congress regarding Indian education. One of the first points in section two of the act is the following statement: “The prolonged Federal domination of Indian service programs has served to retard rather than enhance the progress of Indian people and their communities.”<sup>27</sup> This is an official recognition in a law that a wrong has been committed by the US government against native people; that the government’s role in Indian education had been, up to that point, a negative one. The act goes on to explain that the government deprived Indians of the opportunity to become leaders in their own communities and self-govern, as well as excluding them from the decisions that were being made about their

---

<sup>26</sup> “Kennedy Report; Education Resources, National Indian Law Library (NILL),” accessed November 3, 2019, <https://narf.org/nill/resources/education/reports/kennedy/toc.html>.

<sup>27</sup> “Text of S. 1017 (93rd): Indian Self-Determination and Educational Reform Act (Passed Congress Version),” GovTrack.us, accessed November 2, 2019, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/93/s1017/text>.

children's education. As stated in the act: "true self-determination in any society of people is dependent upon an educational process which will insure [sic] the development of qualified people to fulfill meaningful leadership roles."<sup>28</sup> In other words, access to an effective education system is necessary for a community to lead itself. If the government wanted Indians to become self-sufficient, they should have allowed them to be at least in partial control of their educational system. The act goes on to say that the government failed to provide a sufficient level of education and number of opportunities which should have been available to the students.<sup>29</sup> This was intended to point out the disparity of opportunity provided to Indian students at boarding schools versus white children in public schools.

Finally, the end of section two of the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Reform Act of 1975 reiterates the Kennedy report's statement for the need to include native voices in decision-making, by emphasizing the importance of "parental and community control of the educational process."<sup>30</sup> This involvement would increase local autonomy in order to better serve Indian children throughout the country, allowing for native people to make decisions about their children's education. This new approach was meant to help children grow into flourishing members of the community with intact identities and the ability to lead in the future. Although the need for children to be prepared to go back to reservation life after school had been accommodated through some curriculum changes after the Meriam report in 1928 and Kennedy report in 1969, it was not until 1975 that native people officially got the right to decide what should be included to prepare students to return to their communities more seamlessly.

---

<sup>28</sup> "Text of S. 1017 (93rd)."

<sup>29</sup> "Text of S. 1017 (93rd)."

<sup>30</sup> "Text of S. 1017 (93rd)."

Some government and mission Indian schools are still in operation. These schools have changed dramatically since their founding in the late nineteenth century. Some, such as St. Francis Mission School, have transitioned into day schools while others remain boarding schools.<sup>31</sup> Today, the schools generally provide a safe place for native students to maintain their cultural identities, encouraging students to learn native languages and customs. The schools foster and preserve tradition. However, now American Indians have to fight to maintain funding and keep the government schools open.<sup>32</sup>

Although it is possible to learn about Indian boarding schools, it is more complicated to know how to feel about them from a white, Catholic perspective. Though the schools began as an attempt to “Kill the Indian, save the man”<sup>33</sup> and are known for their problematic histories, it seems that the schools which survived the tumultuous transition are now valued by native communities for their role in preserving Indian identity. It seems as though an apology is in order, but it is unclear who it should come from. One way to approach the issue is to first acknowledge the historically negative effects of both government and mission schools on Indian communities, and based on what we know about the founding of the schools, the experience of the students, and the progression of the schools over time, assess what the place of Indian boarding schools should be in the twenty-first century. Perhaps most importantly, so as to not repeat the mistakes of the past, native American voices should be given precedence in the conversation.

---

<sup>31</sup> “ST. FRANCIS MISSION RECORDS Historical Note // Archives // Raynor Memorial Libraries // Marquette University.”

<sup>32</sup> “American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many.”

<sup>33</sup> “‘Kill the Indian, and Save the Man’: Capt. Richard H. Pratt on the Education of Native Americans.”

## Bibliography

- NPR.org. "American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many." Accessed October 28, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16516865>.
- Barrett, Carole, and Marcia Wolter Britton. "'You Didn't Dare Try to Be Indian:' Oral Histories of Former Indian Boarding School Students." *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 64, no. No. 2 (Spring 1997): 4–25.
- Bucko, Raymond A. *Lakotas, Black Robes, and Holy Women: German Reports from the Indian Missions in South Dakota, 1886-1900*. Edited by Karl Markus Kreis. Translated by Corinna Dally-Starna. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.
- "History: Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the Year 1886: Reports of Agents in Dakota." Accessed November 2, 2019. <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/History/History-idx?type=turn&entity=History.AnnRep86.p0218&id=History.AnnRep86&isize=M>.
- "Kennedy Report; Education Resources, National Indian Law Library (NILL)." Accessed November 3, 2019. <https://narf.org/nill/resources/education/reports/kennedy/toc.html>.
- Kent, Jim. "Boarding School Memories Haunt Lakota Man." Accessed November 2, 2019. <https://listen.sdpb.org/post/boarding-school-memories-haunt-lakota-man>.
- "'Kill the Indian, and Save the Man': Capt. Richard H. Pratt on the Education of Native Americans." Accessed November 2, 2019. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929/>.
- "Meriam Report: The Problem of Indian Administration; National Indian Law Library, Native American Rights Fund (NARF)." Accessed November 2, 2019. <https://narf.org/nill/resources/meriam.html>.
- Riney, Scott. *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898–1933*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014.
- "Section 5: Indian Boarding Schools | North Dakota Studies." Accessed November 2, 2019. <https://www.ndstudies.gov/gr8/content/unit-iii-waves-development-1861-1920/lesson-3-building-communities/topic-2-schools/section-5-indian-boarding-schools>.
- "ST. FRANCIS MISSION RECORDS Historical Note // Archives // Raynor Memorial Libraries // Marquette University." Accessed November 2, 2019. <https://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/Mss/SFM/SFM-history.php>.
- Szasz, Margaret Connell. "Federal Boarding Schools and the Indian Child: 1920-1960," 1977, 15.
- GovTrack.us. "Text of S. 1017 (93rd): Indian Self-Determination and Educational Reform Act (Passed Congress Version)." Accessed November 2, 2019. <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/93/s1017/text>.