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# American Indian Boarding School Experiences: Recent Studies from Native Perspectives

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In the past decade, the study of American Indian boarding schools has grown into one of the richest areas of American Indian history. The best of this scholarship has moved beyond an examination of the federal policies that drove boarding school education to consider the experiences of Indian children within the schools, and the responses of Native students and parents to school policies, programs, and curricula. Recent studies by David Wallace Adams, K. Tsianina Lomawaima, Brenda Child, Sally Hyer, and Esther Burnett Horne and Sally McBeth have used archival research, oral interviews, and photographs to consider the history of boarding schools from American Indian perspectives. In doing so, they have begun to uncover the *meaning* of boarding school education for Indian children, families, and communities, past and present.

Perhaps the most fundamental conclusion that emerges from boarding school histories is the profound complexity of their historical legacy for Indian people's lives. The diversity among boarding school students in terms of age, personality, family situation, and cultural background created a range of experiences, attitudes, and responses. Boarding schools embodied both victimization and agency for Native people, and they served as sites of both cultural loss and cultural persistence. These institutions, intended to assimilate Native people into mainstream society and eradicate Native cultures, became integral components of American Indian identities and eventually fueled the drive for political and cultural self-determination in the late twentieth century.

David Wallace Adams has provided the most useful general overview of Indian boarding schools in *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928*. The strength of Adams's book lies in its attention to several key aspects of boarding school history across a broad spectrum of schools. He begins by outlining the political and intellectual context that shaped the attitudes and assumptions of politicians, reformers, and educators and became translated into federal educational policy. Adams also discusses the implementation of that policy through a federal bureaucratic system and within individual institutions, and he explores the ways in which Indian students and parents experienced and responded to boarding school education.

Adams's story of Indian people's boarding school experiences is largely one of cultural struggle. He argues that through the boarding schools, reformers, educators, and federal agents waged cultural, psychological, and intellectual warfare on Native students as part of a concerted effort to turn Indians into "Americans." School administrators and teachers cut children's hair; changed their dress, their diets, and their names; introduced them to unfamiliar conceptions of space and time; and subjected them to militaristic regimentation and discipline. Educators suppressed tribal languages and cultural practices and sought to replace them with English, Christianity, athletic activities, and a ritual calendar intended to further patriotic citizenship. They instructed students in the industrial and domestic skills appropriate to European American gender roles and taught them manual labor. For many Indian children, this cultural assault led to confusion and alienation, homesickness and resentment.

Yet Adams insists that Indian students and parents were not passive victims of the government's assimilation campaign; rather, they helped define the terms of their educational experiences in unanticipated ways. Many students accommodated themselves to the process of cultural change, some wholeheartedly, most ambivalently and selectively. Others resisted institutional authority through covert strategies such as devising insulting nicknames for teachers, writing manipulative letters to school administrators, or perpetuating tribal traditions in secret through storytelling, dances, and games. Some students practiced overt resistance by running away, fighting, or setting fire to school buildings. Parental resistance to cultural assimilation also took several forms: refusing to send their children to school, sending orphaned or less desirable children, complaining to agents or educators about aspects of their children's educational experiences, or reinforcing tribal relationships and cultural values during visits home.

In addition to Adams's overview, other scholars have researched American Indian boarding school experiences within specific institutions. Even more so than Adams's work, studies by K. Tsianina Lomawaima, Brenda Child, and Sally Hyer have highlighted Indian people's own perspectives on their experiences in boarding schools. Both Lomawaima and Child have personal connections to the

histories they write, which gives an emotional resonance to their work. Lomawaima's Creek father attended Chilocco Indian School, the subject of her study, and she relies heavily on interviews with him and sixty other former students to privilege Native voices in her account. Child's focus on Minnesota Ojibwe people's experiences in boarding schools reflects her own identity as a member of the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe, and her analysis of letters between students and parents incorporates the histories of several family and community members. Sally Hyer's study of the Santa Fe Indian School relies almost exclusively on an oral history project conducted in New Mexico Indian communities, and it consciously foregrounds the perspectives of her narrators. The project became an exhibit as well as a book, and the accessibility of Hyer's prose, her frequent use of student quotations, and her inclusion of a wealth of photographs bring her historical subjects to life.

In *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School*, Lomawaima focuses on one off-reservation, multitribal boarding school in northeastern Oklahoma between its founding in 1882 and 1940. Like Adams, Lomawaima acknowledges the endless regimentation, harsh discipline, homesickness, and cultural loss that boarding schools inflicted on Indian children, and she discusses the ways in which these institutions sought total control over students' lives in order to assimilate them completely into the dominant society. Yet she also argues that despite their best efforts, administrators and teachers could not entirely control the children's thoughts and behavior. Students found ways to resist the institution and its assimilationist program, and through their creativity, adaptability, and resilience, they shaped social and cultural life at Chilocco in ways that made it truly an "Indian school." Their experiences at boarding school were not determined exclusively by institutional priorities; rather, they stemmed from the relationships forged with other students, their ties of friendship and loyalty, and the creation of a surrogate family that sustained them in an often hostile environment.

In *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940*, Child uses letters written by students and parents to explore the relationship between boarding schools and Ojibwe families in three off-reservation, federal institutions from 1900 to 1940: Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas; the Flandreau Indian School in South Dakota; and the Carlisle School in Pennsylvania. The physical

distance imposed by the schools caused great hardship on Ojibwe families. Administrators discouraged visits home, seeing them as threats to assimilation, and this sometimes led to three or four year separations. They also intercepted letters from children documenting homesickness and health problems to prevent parental requests for visits and refused many of the requests parents did make to send their children home.

Yet this painful separation proved unable to break the emotional bonds between parents and children, or bonds between children and their tribal communities and traditions. Parents loved their children deeply; they worried about their health and safety; and they found ways to influence their educational experiences. They learned which arguments would convince administrators to send their children home for the summer, and they visited them at school whenever possible. Furthermore, they kept their children informed of local births, deaths, and ceremonies, thus anchoring them in community life and tribal culture. Through letters, parents questioned the schools' regimentation, discipline, excessive physical labor, poor nutrition and sanitation, overcrowding, and rampant disease. They sometimes harbored runaways and refused to send their own children to boarding school when they remained unconvinced it was in their best interests.

By highlighting Native people's resistance to cultural assimilation and institutional control, these studies of Indian boarding schools illuminate the gulf between the intentions of federal assimilation policy and its ultimate results. In fact, far from eradicating traditional cultures, boarding school experiences actually facilitated cultural persistence in a number of unintended ways. In *Education for Extinction*, Adams argues that the friendships students forged across tribal lines contributed to a pan-Indian identity that encouraged Native people to work together for political and cultural self-determination in the twentieth century. In *They Called It Prairie Light*, Lomawaima adds that interacting with children from other cultural traditions also worked to reinforce students' own unique tribal identities and encouraged them to maintain distinct cultural practices.

Brenda Child also argues for a direct connection between boarding school experiences and cultural persistence. In *Boarding School Seasons*, she notes that when some students returned to their reservations, they felt distanced from tribal traditions and alienated from community members. Yet other former students successfully



Female students playing basketball at the Phoenix Indian School, 1903. (Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Foundation, GI-38, N-1108.)

reincorporated themselves into community life. And in Child's home community on the Red Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota, some boarding school graduates used their education to become prominent tribal leaders who worked to reinvigorate Indian political sovereignty and strengthen traditional cultures, on both a local and a national level.

Sally Hyer's history of the Santa Fe Indian School reveals another way in which Indian people have used boarding schools to subvert the federal government's goal of cultural assimilation. In *One House, One Voice, One Heart: Native American Education at the Santa Fe Indian School*, she presents the results of an oral history project documenting the place of the Santa Fe Indian School within New Mexico Indian communities from 1890 to 1990. The chronological scope of Hyer's study allows her to trace the school's evolution over time and its shifting meaning for Indian people. From its founding in 1890 to 1930, the school advanced federal assimilation policy and repressed traditional culture; as in other boarding schools, however, Native students resisted cultural annihilation and institutional control. From 1930 to World War II, facilitated by the educational reforms of Indian Commissioner John Collier's administration, the school created programs that supported cultural distinctiveness and pride. The school was closed in 1962, but in 1981, the All-Pueblo Council of New Mexico reopened it as a truly Indian, community-controlled school. Through years of cultural adaptation and persistence, and their eventual exertion of administrative authority, Indian people transformed Santa Fe Indian School from a tool of assimilation into an institutional embodiment of political and cultural self-determination.

In *Essie's Story: The Life and Legacy of a Shoshone Teacher*, we find an individual perspective on the complex meaning of boarding school education for Indian people's lives and cultural identities. Through this collaborative project, anthropologist Sally McBeth and Shoshone educator Esther Burnett Horne tell Horne's life story as both a student at Haskell Institute and an instructor in several Indian boarding schools. Despite Haskell's regimentation and discipline and its goal of Americanization, Horne remembers her time there as a largely positive period in which she gained leadership skills, experienced a sense of community, met her husband, and discovered role models in Native teachers Ruth Muskrat Bronson and Ella Deloria, women who supported the retention of tribal identities. Horne devoted her own career to nurturing Indian cultural identity within the boarding school system, as a teacher at Eufala Creek Girls' Boarding School and the Wahpeton Indian School in North Dakota. Thus Horne's life reveals, on an individual level, how Native people perpetuated cultural traditions within institutions originally intended to effect cultural assimilation.

The boarding schools' ironic legacy of cultural persistence also finds clear expression in Esther Horne's life story. While at Wahpeton, she worked with Ralph and Rita Erdrich, whose daughter Louise would become a major figure in American Indian literature in the 1980s, and her students included Dennis Banks, George Mitchell, and Leonard Peltier. These men became leaders of the American Indian Movement, through which they worked for Indian people's

political self-determination, advocated a return to traditional spirituality, and cultivated cultural pride.

Horne's life story vividly illustrates a fact also recognized by Adams, Lomawaima, Child, and Hyer: boarding school experiences, both positive and negative, became fundamental components of twentieth-century Indian people's identities, as individuals and as communities. Adams notes boarding schools' profound and lasting psychological impact on Native students, and characterizes returning students as agents of cultural change within their home communities. Lomawaima and Hyer emphasize Indian people's positive memories of their boarding school years and their emotional connections to the institutions that they called home over several generations of community life. And Child introduces her book with the observation that "the government boarding school has become part of our collective, pan-Indian identity...for better or worse, the schools became part of our histories" (1). Child's study, along with the work of Adams, Lomawaima, Hyer, and Horne and McBeth, effectively uses Native perspectives on boarding school experiences to illuminate the schools' multilayered legacy for Indian people's historical and contemporary identities. □

#### Endnote

1. Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 4.

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