

Part III: Indian Boarding School

Introduction. Now that we have a better understanding of the federal policies that governed the American Indian tribes during the nineteenth century, it will be interesting to examine one of the programs that came about during the allotment era - Indian boarding schools which became a tool for educating Indians to assimilate and become Americanized.

I. Educating the Indians

- A. Educating Indians was not a new idea in the nineteenth century. Indeed, as soon as white Europeans landed in North America, they wished to educate and **indoctrinate** American Indian children. For example:
1. In the 1560s, Spanish colonists living on the island of Cuba established a special school for Indian children.
 2. In the 1620s, English colonists in Virginia set aside money for white families to shelter and tutor young Indians.
 3. In 1636, Harvard College was dedicated to “the education of English and Indian youth...in knowledge and godliness.” (As quoted in Peter Nabakov, editor, *Native American Testimony*, New York, Penguin, 1991:214.)
 4. In the mid-1700s, some white families from Upper State New York tried to convince the *Iroquois* Indians to turn over their sons so they could be taught “in the best manner.” But the Iroquois declined, saying that this had been tried before but the young men had come home “absolutely good for nothing, being neither acquainted with the true methods of killing deer, catching beaver, or surprising an enemy.” (As quoted in Peter Nabakov, editor, *Native American Testimony*, New York, Penguin, 1991:214.)

Discussion:

- *Why do you think many Americans felt it was so important to educate the Indian children?* The colonists were afraid of the strange dress, languages, customs, and religions of the Indians they met. They felt it was their duty to civilize and Christianize the children of persons whom they considered to be heathens.
- *What do you think they wanted to teach them?* European dress, language, and customs, as well as how to become good Christians.
- *Why do you think that many Indian tribes did not want the white men to teach their children?* Most Indians were happy with their lives. They were content with their cultural customs and spiritual beliefs. What they saw of the white man’s ways did not encourage them to make changes in their own lives.

B. In short, educating Indians was always a high priority for white Americans. Within a few years after the Constitution was signed, the federal government began offering financial support to various people and groups willing to educate the Indians.

1. After 1819, Congress created a Civilization Fund to help church groups educate Indian children to “grow up in the habits of morality and industry.” (As quoted in Nabakov, 215.)
2. In 1837, a Colonel Johnson established a Choctaw Academy in Indian Territory. The school was dedicated to helping Indians learn mechanics, printing, and agriculture within a military setting.
3. In 1869, the federal government provided money and encouragement to Christian missionaries who might want to create and manage Indian schools on reservations.

II. **Creating the Boarding School.** By the late 1800s, many white Americans continued to be worried about what they felt was the “savage”, undisciplined, heathen nature of Indian children.

A. To solve this problem, in 1879 a former Indian fighter, Colonel Richard Pratt, created the first large Indian academy in the nation - the *Carlisle Indian Industrial School* in Pennsylvania. His plan was to create an educational facility that would totally **Americanize** Indian children - one which would, in Pratt’s words, “kill the Indian and save the man.”

1. At first, Pratt recruited students by visiting Indian parents and convincing them that their children would have a better chance to understand the white man if they were educated in his ways.
 - a. The first children came from the Red Bud and Lakota reservations in the Dakotas.
 - b. Eventually, as boarding school became a requirement on many reservations, students were not voluntarily sent to Carlisle by their parents, but rather were forced to attend by federal authorities. Carlisle, as well as few other schools (such as *Haskell* and Chilloco), were the exception because they were off-reservation boarding schools.
 - c. By the end of the 19th Century, most boarding schools were located on reservations - but were not easily accessible to the families of the children.
2. Over 12,000 children attended during the 39 years the Carlisle School operated.

B. And what awaited the Indian children upon their arrival? The teachers spent the first few days forcing the children to discard their Indian ways and adopt American

ways. For example:

1. Children were forbidden to speak their native language, often under threat of physical punishment.
 2. Their long hair was clipped to the skull, sometimes as part of a public ritual in which the child was forced to **renounce** his or her Indian origins.
 3. Their loose-fitting clothing and moccasins were taken away and burned. **Boys** were then given military uniforms and *girls* were forced to wear tight-fitting, Victorian-style dresses.
 4. They sometimes were told never to use their Indian names and were given an American name instead. One young man who was named Tae-noo-ga-wa-zhe became Philip Sheridan.
 5. They were forbidden to practice any cultural or religious rituals, usually under threat of punishment, and were instead told that they would be expected to become devoted Christians.
- C. Once the rules were clear, then children became involved in the daily routine which was defined by military drill and structure.
1. Children marched to and from all classes and meals.
 2. Children attended school one half of each day, and the other half was spent in training for several skills - mechanics, printing, agriculture.

D. Discussion:

1. *How were these new rules and lifestyles different for the Indian children?*
2. *How do you think the Indian children adjusted to these new rules and lifestyles?* Some children did quite well and became well-known persons within both American Indian and non-Indian society. One example is *Jim Thorpe*. *Does anyone know who he was?* This could be a great topic for research. Others, however, could not adjust and tried to run away - but were usually captured. Still others become only half-indoctrinated. Others became so well indoctrinated that they were *unable to adjust to life on the reservation* once out of school.
3. What do you think this Iroquois elder meant when he greeted the children who had come back from school, "What have we here? You are neither a white man nor an Indian. For heaven's sake, tell us, what are you?" (As quoted in Nabakov, 216.)

III. **Boarding School Experiences.** Some Indian children have written about the way

they felt about life in boarding schools. Let's examine some of these primary documents. **[ASSIGNMENT #8 - INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOL]**

IV. Unit III Summary

- A. As soon as white Europeans landed in North America, many were compelled to educate Indian children. Many colonists felt it was their duty to civilize and Christianize the children of persons whom they considered to be heathens.
- B. After the Constitution was signed, the newly-created US government offered financial support to various people and groups willing to educate the Indians. For almost 100 years, haphazard programs for Indian education were directed and handled by several private organizations.
- C. Indian boarding schools introduced a more formalized method of Indian education with the opening of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879. Within a few years, federal authorities forced Indian parents to either send their children to an off-reservation boarding school such as Carlisle, or to boarding schools established in remote areas of Indian reservations.
- D. Since the primary purpose of the boarding schools was Americanization, Indian children were forbidden to speak their native language, wear traditional clothing, and practice any religious or cultural rituals - often under the threat of punishment.
- E. For many Indian children, the results were tragic. In shedding their "Indianness," they were neither accepted into American society, nor were they able to comfortably resettle into traditional Indian society.
- F. While most Indian boarding schools had closed by the 1960s, currently, about 8-10 off-reservation schools are still operating. Additionally, boarding schools still operate on some reservations.

V. For More Information. You may wish to introduce the topic of Indian boarding schools with a movie. At least three such films might be useful.

- *In the White Man's Image* (an American Experience production of Public Broadcasting Service). Available for rent through many video stores and may be ordered from PBS at _____. This 50 minute documentary discusses the history of boarding schools, how they operated, and how they affected American Indian culture. While it will most likely be quite informative for the teacher, it may be too dry for the students.
- *Kill the Indian, Save the Man* (an episode from the *How the West Was Lost* series, a production of _____). Available for rent through many video stores and may be ordered from _____ at _____. This 50-minute documentary, which primarily de-

scribes the efforts of the Northern Cheyenne and Lakota peoples to escape reservations in Oklahoma and return to their ancestral lands, also explains how reservation life and boarding schools were used to assimilate American Indians. This video very useful for teachers and also for students, despite the detailed descriptions of violence. Teachers may want to show parts of this one.

- *Where the Spirit Lives* (a production of _____). Available for rent through many video stores but may no longer be ordered as it is out of print. This _____ made-for-television movie describes the experiences of several Indian children who are forced to attend Indian boarding school. This is a powerful movie, and one that may be difficult for some students to watch. Teachers should definitely view this video prior to showing it to students to judge appropriateness.