

Indian Boarding Schools

From the time that Europeans arrived in North America, they clashed with the Native Americans who had been living here for hundreds of years. With superior weapons and a growing population, the Europeans subdued the Natives, took their land, and forcibly moved them to reservations. In the mid-nineteenth century the federal government and Christian missionaries forced many Native American families to send their children to segregated boarding schools.

The purpose of these schools was assimilation into the mainstream of American life. It was expressed by Richard Henry Pratt of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School:

In Indian civilization I am a Baptist because I believe in immersing the Indian in our civilization and when we get them under, holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked.

He also coined the phrase, “Kill the Indian ... and save the man.”

The United States ran or supported 523 boarding schools where the students endured “rampant physical, sexual, and emotional abuse,” resulting in more than 500 deaths of Native children.¹ Approximately

50% of the schools received support or involvement with religious organizations.²

The boarding schools were run like the military with uniforms, standard short haircuts, religious education, and strict regulations including communication in English only. The students were punished for using their own language. Daily tasks predominantly included manual labor and vocational skills.

The boarding schools were often located far from the tribal home, thus making family contact with the children difficult.³ Parents rarely visited their children because of the distant schools and poverty. Families that refused to send their children to boarding schools could be penalized by imprisonment or withholding rations and other goods. Some students were forcibly removed from their homes.⁴

Many religious organizations supported the boarding schools believing that the children would become Christians. Policy makers believed that conversion to Christianity was essential for assimilation.⁵ As one educator said, “The Indian race will in another generation be lifted into civilization and Christianity through the home, with its educated, Christian motherhood.”⁶

The federal government shutdown many of the Indian boarding schools during the depression as Native American children moved to public schools. However, some schools remained open during the 1930’s. Today there are still approximately 9,500 Native American children in boarding schools, but the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 dramatically changed the way that the federal government interacted with Native Americans.

Along with the decline of Indian boarding schools came an apology from the well-respected Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). On April 24, 2001, the organization apologized for its role in placing thousands of American Indian and Alaska Native children in non-Native households during the 1950s and 1960s. The apology included a promise to help the “mainstream child protection field to honor, endorse, and legitimate tribal efforts in the eyes of funders and policy makers.”⁷

ENDNOTES:

¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report, May 2022. The Department of the Interior has an ongoing project to locate the graves of the children who died while attending the boarding schools.

² Id.

³ Child, B., Boarding School Seasons, American Indian Families, 1900-1940, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2012.

⁴ Id. at p.13.

⁵ Adams, D.W., Education for Extinction, 2d. Ed. University of Kansas Press, 2020, at pp 184-194.

⁶ Op,Cit., footnote 3 at p, 79.



Judge Leonard Edwards is retired from the Santa Clara Superior Court. His e-mail is judgeleonardedwards@gmail.com.