

by Lacey Shepard Nov 18, 2022

Remembering the Children Wool Blanket: A Boarding School History and Memorial

From the 1800s through the 1970s, untold numbers of Native children died or disappeared in and on the way to boarding schools across North America. These children were stolen from their families and communities by the US and Canadian governments and forcibly placed in “assimilation schools” where the goal was to remove any traces of Indigeneity.

Over the past few years, an international spotlight has been put on the true scope of the horrors of these boarding schools as thousands of children’s graves have been found. While this history is new knowledge to many non-Native people, Native communities have never forgotten these children: the culture and lives that were lost to the boarding school era are irreplaceable. To heal, honor, respect, and remember this collective Native trauma, many tribes and activist groups have worked hard to create memorials this history. Memorials like Remembering the Children (Wakǰáŋyeža Wičhákiksuyapi) are bringing peace to our communities by creating spaces that allow for prayer, gathering, and remembrance. Eighth Generation is honored to work with The Rapid City Children’s Memorial on a very special Signature Wool Blanket to bring awareness to the memorial and the boarding school era.

The Blanket

The Remembering the Children Wool Blanket honors the Native children—predominantly from the tribes of the Great Sioux Nation but who came from many places and tribes—who were brought to the Rapid City Indian Boarding School from 1898–1933. Led by volunteers, Remembering the Children is creating the Rapid City Children’s Memorial to honor the lives, memories, and spirits of the children and relatives who passed away at the Indian Boarding School and the Sioux Sanatorium TB Clinic.

“The government took our children – to force them to forget who they were This memorial is for them – so they know we never forgot who they are This memorial is for us – so we never forget what they did.”



Some of the names written and carved in buildings on the Rapid City Indian Boarding School's campus.

The Design

This authentic Native wool blanket is designed by Travis Harden (Oohenumpa Lakota and Winnebago Ho Chunk) in collaboration with the volunteers, family members, descendants, matriarchs, and elders of the Rapid City Indian Boarding School Project in South Dakota. It reflects the project's commitment to the Native community's children past and present, and to honoring the healing, strength, resiliency, hopes, and dreams of future generations impacted by the residential school system.

Rich with symbolism, this wool blanket features several notable design elements, including:

- A central cradleboard. Children are our center, and the placement of this board represents their sacredness. Just as a cradleboard protects and carries children, this blanket carries our call to protect our children as we carry them forward into a better future. The cradleboard seen on this wool blanket is a representation of a historic cradleboard that was repatriated by Madonna Thunder Hawk during the Wounded Knee occupation in 1973. Since then, the cradleboard has been passed down through generations of their family and is used to carry and protect their children to this day.

- Eight Lakota toy horses. A popular toy before and during the era of boarding schools, these eight toy horses reflect our hope for the seven generations after us, and the responsibility we as descendants have.
- Sacred colors. The central stripe of white and yellow represents the light and hope we carry for all our children and future generations. In the Lakota language, children are known as *Wakǰáŋyeža*, which translates to “Sacred Beings.” The four main colors of the blanket—black, red, yellow, and white—represent the sacred four direction colors for the Lakota people. Black (*Sápa*) is the color of the west, and of the *Wakinyan* (Thunder Beings). Red (*Šá*) is the color of the north and the northern winds, and represents perseverance and endurance over hardships. Yellow (*Zí*) is the color of the east and of the morning sun rising, signifying renewal and hope. White (*Ská*) is the color of the south and of the sun at its highest peak, representing our own growth and intellect.



Photographed by [Lonnie JeFries](#) (Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe);
modeled by *Bella Ganje* (Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe)

The Memorial

Through oral histories and years of research, Remembering the Children has verified that at least fifty children and infants died at the boarding school. Because the US Government did not keep records of deaths or burials at the schools, the number is likely much higher. Remembering the Children has been able to locate the unmarked graves of several of the children.

The land of the Rapid City Indian Boarding School and the final resting place of these children was placed into the trust of the Oglala, Cheyenne River, and Rosebud Sioux Tribes so these tribes may protect the graves of children forever. With these tribes' approval, the Rapid City Children's Memorial will be placed on this land to honor each of them. The memorial will include a walking path with interpretive signage sharing the horrors and history of this and other boarding schools, names of the children who passed, and four sculptures of traditional burial scaffolds. You can help by donating directly to the Memorial [here](#).

You can also support the Memorial by purchasing a Remembering the Children Wool Blanket from Eighth Generation or the Remembering the Children website. All proceeds from this blanket go to Remembering the Children so they can continue the important work of honoring our children and our culture.

We do not forget our children. We do not forget our culture or our traditions. The history of the boarding school era is one of tragedy, but the history of Native peoples is one of resilience and strength. Our future is beautiful, strong, and full of the traditions and values we have kept alive and thriving since time immemorial.



The Rapid City Children's Memorial team has gifted some of their blankets to founding members, the elder advisory team, and other honored supporters, including Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland.

Photo from left to right: Violet Catches (Lakota Elder), Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) US Secretary of the Interior, Faith Spotted Eagle (Yankton Sioux Nation) Activist and Politician, Amy Sazue (Lakota), Executive Director of the Rapid City Indian Boarding Schools Lands Memorial Project.