

Native American Boarding Schools

Before Reading the Summary

When you imagine a boarding school, what is it like? Is it fancy, with a pool and a gym? Does it have a cafeteria filled with cookies and brownies and everything else you want? This is not the type of boarding school we are discussing today for two distinct reasons:

1. Usually, boarding school is a choice made by the parents, but in boarding schools for Native Americans, children were taken away from their parents.
2. The goal of these boarding schools was not to educate students and nurture children, but to beat them until they obeyed.

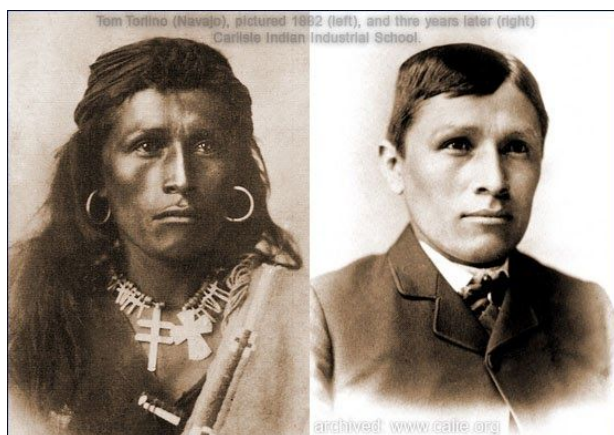
The First Boarding School

The first boarding schools began in 1860. The goal was to “civilize” Native Americans by teaching them colonial ways of life. In 1879, the most famous school was founded: The Carlisle School. The headmaster’s goal was for Native Americans to **assimilate**, where one culture adopts the culture of another, into colonial society and abandon their own culture.

Life at School

The boarding school system was flawed from the beginning; children arrived, traumatized, having been forcibly separated from their families. When parents resisted, the reservation would face consequences such as withheld rations. Government agents would come in and take the children, whether the parents consented or not, until the quota for the school was filled.

These children were entirely stripped of their culture. They were punished if they spoke their native language, even though many had not been taught English. They were dressed in uniforms and given Christian names. They were not allowed to practice their faith and traditions. Instead, they were forced to practice Christianity. Everything that could have reminded them of home was taken away. Punishment “generally consisted of confinement, deprivation of privileges, threat of corporal punishment or restriction of diet,” according to Northern Plains Reservation Aid. Denise Lajimodiere, a member of the Chippewa Tribe, shares a small anecdote of her parents’ experiences.



"Mama was made to kneel on a broomstick for not speaking English, locked in closets for not speaking English. They would pee their pants and then the nuns would take them out [of the closet] and beat them for peeing their pants. Papa was beaten with a belt. He saw one of his fellow students die from a beating at the school. Papa said, 'I just couldn't learn that language,' so they put lye soap in his mouth and the kids would get blisters."

Lajimodiere also wrote a book, called *Stringing Rosaries*, detailing the experiences of sixteen different Native Americans at these boarding schools. Nearly all of those she interviewed had experienced or witnessed sexual assault. Not to mention, rather than returning home during the summer, many students were "placed out" to jobs. Although the claim was that they were learning real life skills, the goal was to continue to separate them from their families and culture while white families benefited from their free labor.



Education At School

The history they were taught glorified the very history that killed many of these students' ancestors and families. For example, students celebrated Columbus Day and were taught to thank Columbus because he "helped them," despite Columbus' violent actions to hurt native people. Thanksgiving was taught as an instance of Native American excellence, as they had aided white Pilgrims.

Often, academics did not extend beyond learning English and American culture. Rather, the focus was on work skills and students did the majority of the physical work to run the schools. Boys learned industrial jobs such as blacksmithing, shoemaking, or farming. Girls were taught housework such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing.

The Last Boarding Schools

By the 1930s, many boarding schools had closed. But there was still the practice of forcibly taking children away from their families. It was not until 1978 with the Indian Child Welfare Act that parents were finally allowed to choose to keep their children with them. Today, there are 15 boarding schools open, and while the conditions are better, the goal of assimilation is the same. For over a century, generations of Native Americans were separated from their parents, suffered through inhumane treatment, and lost their culture. An extensive **cultural genocide** had occurred, so extensive that the complete impact is incalculable. It is unknown exactly how many children were in boarding schools, but it is estimated to be over 100,000.

Key Terms

1. Assimilate - to absorb into the cultural tradition of a population or group
 - a. Not all assimilation is the same - the boarding schools used forced assimilation. Forced assimilation means that the Native American had no choice in this assimilation.
2. Ethnic Cleansing - the mass expulsion or killing of members of an unwanted ethnic or religious group in society.
3. Cultural Genocide - acts and measures undertaken to destroy nations' or ethnic groups' culture through spiritual, national, and cultural destruction.
 - a. According to the United Nations, genocide is an act aimed to completely or partially exterminate a national, ethnic, or religious group.
 - b. It was a cultural genocide because the government did not recognize that although Native American culture is different from mainstream American culture, it is valuable and rich.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been separated from your parents? How did this feel?
2. Do you speak a second language?
 - a. How would it feel to be forbidden to speak this language?
3. Why is culture important?
4. Why do you think these continued until 1978?
5. How did racism impact the founding of boarding schools?
6. How is taking culture away from children a part of genocide?
7. How are stereotypes against Native Americans present and harmful today?

Images



Four Pueblo Children from Zuni, New Mexico, c. 1880 - Before and After



Three Lakota boys on their arrival at the Carlisle Indian School.
Source: Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives [Choate #125]. Source: Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives [#57,490].

What changes do you observe in these pictures? What is your reaction to these photos?

Teacher Suggestions

Documentary for Further Reference

- This documentary thoroughly covers Native American boarding schools with photos, interviews, and a clear narrator.
- If time allows, the whole 50 minutes is valuable information. If time permits for a shorter section, it is suggested to watch 9:05-33:25.
- [Native American Boarding Schools](#)

Further Research

- If students are interested in learning more about current events, you can direct them to [Boarding Schools Healing](#).
- They are an organization working on advocacy, education, and healing from boarding schools.

Sources:

http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_boardingschools
<https://healthandwelfare.idaho.gov/Children/IndianChildWelfareAct/HistoricalPerspective/tabid/1363/Default.aspx>
https://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/book-tells-of-american-indian-children-in-boarding-schools/article_6df39845-9d8e-507b-a7cb-93faffaa85b6.html
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