INTRODUCTION TO "ALASKA AND THE AMERICAN BOARDING SCHOOL SYSTEM"

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> When the Indian wars began to go cold, the theft of land and tribal sovereignty bureaucratic, they came for Indian children, forcing them into boarding schools, where if they did not die of what they called consumption even while they regularly were starved; if they were not buried in duty, training for agricultural or industrial labor, or indentured servitude; were they not buried in children's cemeteries, or in unmarked graves, not lost somewhere between school, tribal homelands, reservation, and city; if they made it through routine beatings and rape, if they survived, made lives and families and homes, it was because of this and only this: Such Indian children were made to carry more than they were made to carry.
>
> —Tommy Orange (Cheyenne and Arapaho), *Wandering Stars* (p. xiii)

The history of America's Indigenous peoples is replete with topics so complex that it is not possible to adequately describe their scopes or accurately identify the myriad factors that contribute to their complexity. One such topic is the American boarding school system's impacts on the lifeways, languages, traditions, and cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples. It is now attracting serious attention due to United States Department of the Interior (DOI) actions spurred, in part, by the Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc First Nation's discovery in May 2021 of 215 unmarked children's graves at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in Canada (Dickson and Watson 2021; DOI 2021).

In June 2021, the DOI issued the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, which applies to the period from 1819 to 1969. It promised that the department would:

> undertake an investigation of the loss of human life and the lasting consequence of residential Indian boarding schools. The primary goal of the investigation shall be to identify boarding school facilities and sites; the location of known and possible student burial sites located at or near school facilities; and the identities and Tribal affiliations of children interred at such locations. (DOI 2021)

The investigative work would be nationwide in scope and conducted in several phases, each supervised by the assistant secretary-Indian affairs (AS-IA). The initial phase would focus on identifying and collecting "records and information related to the Department's oversight and implementation of the Indian boarding school program." It was anticipated that information compiled in the investigation could lead to proposals for onsite work and the "repatriation of human remains in compliance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act" (NAGPRA).

A follow-up report issued by the ASIA in May 2022 (DOI 2022a) was based on records located in federal repositories (e.g., the National Archives, American Indian Records Repository) and inconsistently reported the number of former boarding schools in Alaska as either 21 or 24. The DOI made no effort to locate relevant records held by nonfederal organizations that previously operated boarding schools in Alaska (such as ecclesial institutions). That was still the case as of July 2024, when the ASIA issued a second boarding school report (DOI 2024) that identified 22 former boarding schools in Alaska. One thing the variant counts of boarding schools between the two DOI reports reflected was limited research attention on Alaska; another is that designated "contacts" for boarding school matters on the DOI Office of the Secretary and ASIA staffs generally exhibited little interest in hearing from Alaskans actively engaged in boarding school research. Why? The staffs may have been overwhelmed by the large scope of the investigation and a heightened awareness of

how demanding it would be, and by significant emotional tolls associated with the work. But the simplest explanation is that both offices were relying heavily on the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS) for research assistance (see DOI 2022b). In any event, the DOI's lack of outreach to Alaska tribes and researchers led to far less substantive and reliable findings about Alaska boarding schools than would otherwise have been the case.

The papers in this issue of the *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* are directly relevant to the initiative's information-gathering phase and help fill gaps in the official DOI reports. The papers benefit from their authors' longtime residence in and knowledge of Alaska and its Indigenous peoples, and also from the incorporation of records from a broad range of sources (e.g., church and other archival collections, Indigenous oral accounts, published historical accounts [including Bureau of Education (BOE) reports], and miscellaneous federal records). Using primary source material, Benjamin Jacuk presents important new data that expands the historical context concerning the development of the American boarding school system while also explaining Alaska's central place and Sheldon Jackson's leading role in the enterprise (Fig. 1). In the next contribution, Emily Edenshaw and Benjamin Jacuk describe previously unrecognized connections between boarding schools and the genesis of Alaska tourism, which often portrayed Alaska's Indigenous peoples as exotic and—consistent with racist and ethnocentric perspectives and stereotypes of the period—less evolved "others" in the nation's cultural landscape. The closing paper by Kenneth Pratt assesses central objectives of the 2021 Federal Boarding School Initiative relative to standard research challenges and Alaska-specific obstacles and provides a more expansive (though still incomplete) list of former Alaska boarding schools.

Thus, these papers explore the early history of the boarding school system in Alaska and issues related to implementation of the 2021 Federal Boarding School Initiative. They do not examine the impacts of boarding schools on specific Alaska Native groups or communities, or conflicts between different religious missions in Alaska.[2]

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

The history of schools in Alaska is a complicated topic. The earliest schools in what is now Alaska were tied to religious missions: Russian Orthodox, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Moravian, Catholic, and so on (see e.g., Haycox 1982). In 1905 the U.S. Congress placed the BOE in charge of all schools outside of incorporated towns; later, in 1931, responsibility for the operation of rural schools was transferred from the BOE to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). As a result, BIA once "operated some 140 different schools in Alaska," but when Alaska was granted statehood in 1959 the BIA began transferring school sites to the state.[3] One noteworthy result is that most, if not all, of those school sites are no longer in public ownership or under any type of federal jurisdiction.

Figure 1. Cloth and beaded figure honoring boarding school survivors, made by Tlingit artist Mary Soots for the 2023 Orange Shirt Day event at the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, Alaska. Orange Shirt Day is the colloquial name for Canada's National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, annually celebrated as a holiday on September 30. Its purpose is to promote awareness about the residential/boarding school system and its continuing impacts on Indigenous peoples and communities in Canada and the United States.

Determining which institutions served as boarding schools can be difficult, and the task was not made easier by the 2021 Federal Boarding School Initiative, which did not define the term "boarding school." The ASIA's first report (DOI 2022a) partially resolved that problem by providing extensive background information about the American boarding school system and making it clear that primary source documentation was necessary to prove to the DOI that a given institution met its definition of a boarding school. Such documentation must demonstrate that:

> the institution: (1) provided on-site housing or overnight lodging; (2) was described in records as providing formal academic or vocational training and instruction; (3) was described in records as receiving Federal Government funds or other support; and (4) was operational before 1969. (DOI 2022a:6)

Unfortunately, the report then qualified the definition in a way contrary to Alaska history by stating:

> Outside the scope of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, the Department identified over 1,000 other Federal and non-Federal institutions, including Indian day schools, sanitariums, orphanages, and stand-alone dormitories that may have involved education of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian people, mainly Indian children. (DOI 2022a:6)

This statement is inconsistent with the report's listing of the Seward Sanitarium as an Alaska boarding school. It is appropriate that the Seward Sanitarium was listed as a boarding school, but other Alaska institutions of the types DOI is omitting as "outside the scope" of the initiative should also be recognized as boarding schools (e.g., Skagway Sanitarium, Tanana Orphanage, Teller Reindeer Station, Tyonek Orphanage).[4] The fact that they have not been recognized as such reflects an absence of informed knowledge about Alaska's past among government officials responsible for making boarding school determinations; it also underscores the failure of those same officials to actively solicit information from Alaska tribes or consider input from engaged Alaska researchers.

The second ASIA boarding school initiative report (DOI 2024) added little new information specific to Alaska and repeated some related errors contained in the first report, but it did elaborate on the matter of "other institutions" considered to be outside the scope of the boarding school initiative (DOI 2024:35–38). Collectively, the two reports only scratch the surface of Alaska's boarding school history, from the number of such schools formerly located in Alaska to the number of cemeteries and possible student graves associated with them. The DOI decision not to review relevant records held by ecclesial institutions was the main cause for this shortcoming; however, its reliance on NABS for much of the boarding school research was an important secondary cause, because the organization's staff lacked any Alaska expertise.

Experienced Alaska researchers are essential for evaluating primary source documentation not only to uncover evidence about boarding schools but also to accurately identify former Alaska students whose names were changed upon entry to a boarding school or who may have been referred to in some records only by assigned student numbers (Fig. 2). Finding a student's original personal name—the name they had upon entering a boarding school—is the starting point for genealogical research that often will be necessary to confidently determine a student's family and tribal affiliations. Those determinations will also require ethnohistorical and geographical research to accurately connect a student's reported home village to a physical site on Alaska's landscape and subsequently to a corresponding modern-day tribe or tribal community.

Obviously, knowing the location(s) where primary source documentation for a given boarding school can be found is extremely important. It can save lots of time, frustration, and money for tribes and researchers; ideally, it should also simplify the process of gaining access to existing records about the schools. Anyone who must search for these records without solid leads as to where they are located will face a daunting task. For instance, knowing that there used to be a boarding school at a particular place in Alaska and that it was run by the BIA does not guarantee that any or all records about the school are held by that agency. They could be scattered among multiple archives or repositories around the country. Also, when an Alaska boarding school closed, its students were sometimes transferred to another boarding school—occasionally one outside of Alaska (such as the Chemawa Indian Training School in Oregon, or the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania). Thus, primary source records about a given student might exist in the collections of several different boarding schools and/or in the records of multiple federal agencies (e.g., the BOE and BIA). The fact that specific boarding schools often were identified by more than one name further complicates the matter.

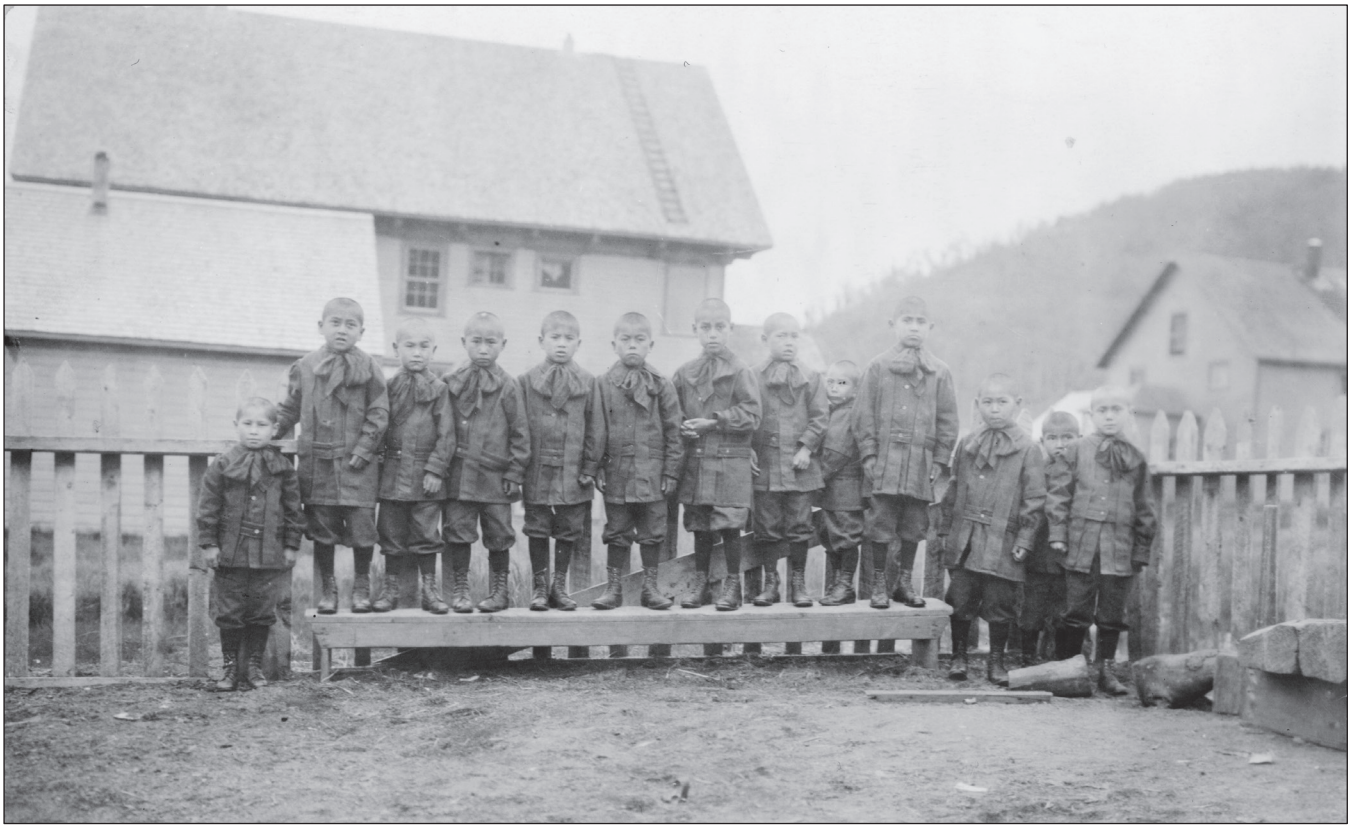

Figure 2. "Children from Holy Cross Mission." Date ca. 1900–1916; photographer unknown. Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, Reproduction Number LC-USZ62-133501; Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

Verifying whether a cemetery was present at a specific boarding school can also be problematic; the answer may only exist in primary source records produced by the organization that operated the school. Occasionally those records include maps or plots of an associated cemetery indicating its extent and the number of burials it contained (at a certain point in time) and identifying by name the individuals buried there. But that likely will not be the norm, so connecting the dots between different record sets will be crucial for families or tribes hoping to repatriate the remains of relatives/ancestors who died and were buried at boarding school sites. Potential new record sets might be produced by ground-penetrating radar surveys of boarding school cemeteries; however, while such surveys can reveal the probable locations and number of burials that may be present at a site, they cannot identify *which* burial is that of a particular person. That will nearly always require primary source documentation. The point is that gathering the information necessary to support potential NAGPRA claims requires extensive research, which equates to a lot of time.

RELATED OBSERVATIONS

The boarding school system is another ugly example of America's highly checkered history with its Indigenous peoples. When the Federal Boarding School Initiative was announced, it created hope among those peoples that the generational pain and trauma the system had imposed on them would finally be addressed head-on and, possibly, bring about spiritual and emotional healing (Fig. 3). That clearly was the initiative's intent, but three years on, the results are mixed. There certainly have been positive impacts, particularly in terms of (1) elevating public awareness of the boarding school system and its dramatic impacts on Indigenous peoples and communities; (2) providing legal background that justifies the need for continuing attention to the subject and extensive future work on efforts to promote healing; and (3) creating an oral history project designed to document the personal experiences of former boarding school students (DOI 2024:89–90). Also, a cumulative total of 102,999,974 sheets of paper (federal records) have reportedly now been searched for information related to boarding schools (DOI 2024:28).[5]

Figure 3. "Class photograph, Sitka Industrial Training School." Alaska State Library, Historical Collections, Eldridge W. Merrill Photographs, ca. 1887–1929, ASL-PCA-57. Alaska State Archives, Juneau.

But the initiative has been hampered from the start by three things, the first being that **it is not law**—so it does not mandate *anyone* to do *anything*. That situation will not change unless the initiative can be transformed and passed into federal law, sooner rather than later. Unfortunately, the U.S. Congress has become so dysfunctional that it has not even passed federal budgets (the most basic of its responsibilities) in timely manners, so there is cause to doubt that it could work collectively and efficiently to craft and pass legislation acknowledging and designed to address federal wrongs of the past.[6]

Second, the DOI has badly underperformed with respect to communicating with tribes and other interested parties (inside and outside of the DOI) about what was happening with the boarding school initiative after its release. That has certainly been the case in Alaska. Communications instead were effectively stovepiped between the DOI secretary's and ASIA's offices and NABS: other parties have regularly struggled to find any current information. Press releases by the DOI and/or NABS are not in themselves an effective way to disseminate information on such an important topic of high interest to the 229-plus tribes and tribal communities scattered across Alaska.

Third, the Boarding School Initiative did not include dedicated funding for tribes to conduct the types of projects they consider necessary for healing from boarding school traumas. Most of the funding that has since been allocated for boarding-school-related work has gone to the ASIA's office, which has evidently used it to support staffing needs and research on US boarding schools—much of which was contracted out to NABS. Any additional boarding school related funding directed to the ASIA's office in the 2024 federal budget presumably was expended in similar ways.

In April 2023, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) announced it had entered into an interagency agreement with the DOI and:

> committed 4 million dollars to support the digitization of records from the United States' system of 408 federal Indian boarding schools and the creation of a permanent oral history collection, documenting the experiences of Indigenous students who passed through the federal boarding school system. (NEH 2023a)

It was later announced that the same NEH-DOI partnership would make grants up to $30,000 available to tribal communities to fund activities such as:

> culture and language revitalization programming, community conversations on the impact of federal Indian boarding schools, research related to unmarked graves and burial sites associated with federal Indian boarding schools, repatriation efforts, oral history projects, and the creation of educational materials, websites, books, and exhibitions on tribal history and the federal Indian boarding school system. (NEH 2023b)

Applications for such grants were to be accepted through December 1, 2023, suggesting that the 2024 federal budget might include additional funding support for the partnership. The NEH's entry into the boarding school research arena is a positive development, and not just for the funding it can contribute to the effort. In contrast to the ASIA's office, encouraging and supporting large numbers of research projects is central to the NEH mission. Thus, NEH has the expertise to effectively oversee multiple and diverse projects at any given time: this could potentially expand opportunities for tribes to develop and carry out boarding school projects of their own choosing—which is what tribes want. But it is unclear what, if any, direct involvement the NEH might have with the research, since $3.7 million of its $4 million contribution to the DOI was passed on to NABS (DOI 2023). Perhaps the bigger question is how much influence tribes, as opposed to NABS, will have in determining the types of projects that are carried out under the grant program and what options may exist for funding projects that cannot reasonably be accomplished with $30,000 or less. This would probably include many potential repatriation efforts across the country (e.g., see Duffy 2024), and the majority of boarding-school-related projects that might be proposed in Alaska.

In November 2021, the DOI hosted three tribal consultations regarding the boarding school initiative. I listened in on all three consultations and heard tribal members ask DOI moderators (more than once) if funding would be available to support tribal boarding school projects. The moderators consistently sidestepped those questions, as if they had not been asked. Tribal members also emphasized that boarding school projects should be done *by the tribes*, not by the government.[7] Several tribal members also expressed doubt that the government would really accomplish what the Boarding School Initiative claimed it would. In response, DOI moderators emphasized their commitment to the initiative and assured listeners that it would be followed.

Prior to the tribal consultations, many Alaskans had already decided not to wait and hope for help from the DOI, so they forged ahead and began developing projects on their own. Since then, Alaska tribes, tribal organizations, and other interested parties have independently undertaken a variety of projects, mostly focused on documenting Alaska boarding schools and associated cemeteries, gathering records concerning school operations, collecting oral testimony from former students about their school experiences, honoring past Alaska Native boarding school students, and holding related meetings and community events. From start to finish, every project has been driven by tribes and tribal members.[8] Similar projects are planned or being discussed and will no doubt be implemented in the future, with or without DOI assistance.

This leads to a final observation: the DOI Boarding School Initiative faces an uncertain future after 2024. A change of administration in January 2025 could erode support for and divert attention from the initiative, potentially transforming it into the equivalent of another broken promise to America's Indigenous peoples.

NOTES

1. The information and views presented are the personal opinions of the author.
2. For readers interested in those topics, following are some recommended sources: Branson 2012:93–122; Burch 1994; Fienup-Riordan 1988; Flanders 1984, 1991; Hirshberg 2008; Hirshberg and Sharp 2005; Hudson 2007; Leuhrmann 2008:113–132; Kan 1999; MacLean 2013; Oswalt 1963; Patterson 1986; Simeone 2007; and Urvina and Urvina 2016. See also Cep 2024.
3. Opinion dated 22 September 1993 (BIA.AK.0459/BIA.AK.0499/BIA.AK.0301) issued to the BIA Alaska Area director by the Department of the Interior [DOI] Office of the Solicitor, Alaska Region.

4. A non-Alaska example worth noting here is Morningside Hospital, in Portland, Oregon, that housed many Alaskans over many years at federal expense between 1904 and 1968 (e.g., see Thiessen 2024). Although it clearly satisfies the requisite DOI definition, Morningside was not identified as an Oregon boarding school in the 2022 or 2024 DOI reports.
5. Staff of the DOI Bureau of Trust Funds Administration (BTFA) performed a significant portion of these federal records reviews (see DOI 2024:28–30).
6. That said, however, a bill intended to establish a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies (S. 1723/H.R. 7227) is presently being discussed in Congress (NABS 2024). If the bill is passed, the Truth and Healing Commission could play a major role in helping to achieve the 2021 Federal Boarding School Initiative's objectives, including securing future funding to support research work concerning its detailed practical aspects. President Biden's formal apology to Native Americans for the nation's history of Indian boarding schools (Pember et al. 2024) may increase the bill's chances of passage.
7. Ironically, there is a tone-deaf aspect to the DOI's decision to effectively hand the reins for the Boarding School Initiative's implementation to NABS—which is *not* a tribe. It also does not possess in-depth knowledge about Indigenous groups and their respective histories across the United States, particularly regarding Alaska. If NABS fails to (1) acknowledge its knowledge limitations, (2) show tribes proper deference, and/or (3) work in full and open partnership with them, the organization will likely be accused of being concerned primarily with its own interests and intent on exerting control over a process the tribes believe they should be directing. More succinctly, to many tribes NABS could become "the government," in a highly negative sense.
8. Acting on its own, the BIA Alaska Region contributed funding to most of those projects. Many of them were proposed and completed thanks to a close partnership between the Alaska Native Heritage Center (ANHC) and Kawerak, Inc. The ANHC can rightfully be credited with taking the lead in encouraging and carrying out Alaska boarding school research and projects.

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