

“LET THOSE
*Children's
Names*
BE KNOWN”





THE PARADOX OF INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOLS

Editor's note: This article contains explicit and potentially triggering content.



by
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IN CALIFORNIA INDIAN COUNTRY, A KNOCK AT THE FRONT DOOR WAS A HARBINGER OF SINISTER TIDINGS.

After two centuries of cultural erasures and eradication initiatives, who wouldn't hide or resist?

It began with the Spanish conquistadors and Franciscan priests in 1769; continued under President Andrew Jackson, an avid slave owner who signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which spurred many parallel Trails of Tears across the country; and under the first elected governor of California, Peter H. Burnett, a white supremacist slave owner who created the misleadingly named 1850 Act for the Government

and Protection of Indians, which lasted until 1865. Incentivized with a bounty, the 1850 Act gave free rein to anyone with a gun to kill California Natives. (*Gold Chains: The Hidden History of Slavery in California* is a public education campaign exposing hidden facts through public records and historical archives about Native slavery during the Gold Rush, facilitated by the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California.)

The Indian Civilization Act (ICA) of 1819 encouraged and funded the "civilized" education of Indian children, conducted by religious organizations and the federal government. The president who signed the law (and also the last "founding father"), James Monroe, a slave owner, sanctioned the ICA's assimilation policy, which would ulti-

mately lead to off-reservation Indian boarding schools, often built far from tribal communities. By the end of the nineteenth century, Native children as young as four years old found themselves suddenly living off-reservation without a loving family, under the constant threat of physical pain for speaking their languages and practicing their cultural traditions. A direct line can be drawn from the ICA not just to the boarding school system but also to the 1953 Termination Act and the federal policy of placing Native children with white adoptive families (which in turn led to the Indian Child Welfare Act becoming law in 1978 due to so many white families adopting Native babies and children).

Was this not white supremacy in action?

INSTRUCTORS, WARDENS, OR PREDATORS?

Teachers were scarce, so the government tapped a dominant pool of religious educators to fulfill its directive, including Catholic orders, Quakers, Methodists, Protestants, and other denominations. However, background checks were not in their lexicon.

In the summer of 2021, new attention to the American boarding school system was raised by the gruesome discovery of unmarked mass burials at several Canadian Indigenous residential schools: 215 students found in Kamloops, British Columbia; 182 in Cranbrook, British Columbia; 751 in Marieval, Saskatchewan; and more than 160 on Penelakut Island, British Columbia.

In response, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) launched an official federal boarding school initiative. Secretary Haaland intends to investigate and identify known possible student burial sites, including the number of children interred at these cemeteries. Considering that crimes against children were not internally recorded, the DOI will need to conduct oral interviews with boarding school survivors or their descendants to thoroughly investigate criminal negligence, an exacting task indeed.

THE ARCHITECT

Overseen by President Rutherford Hayes (an alleged abolitionist) and at the behest of Congress, in 1879 Civil War veteran and leader of Indian scouts Captain Richard Henry Pratt founded the first off-reservation Indian boarding school. He ran the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania like a military school, with a focus on vocational training. He saw Native people as needing to be saved from themselves, hence his famous (and repugnant) motto of “kill the Indian, save the man.”

Carlisle’s practices, including its focus on labor, became a model for boarding schools across the country. Many historical images depict California Native boarding school students in work mode. A photograph from the Sherman Indian Museum shows Pratt standing in front of a Mission Court motel with female Native students training as maids. (Additionally, female students’ training included doing the entire school’s dirty laundry.)

Pratt’s holiday and summer-long

“outing” model, where Indian boarding students lived with non-Native families, usually Christian families, in order to utilize their new skills in mainstream society, became standard. Sad to say, personal testimonies from a 1992 PBS documentary *In the White Man’s Image* attested that some of these outings became indentured servitude positions. Males became field or manual labor and females had domestic duties, with minuscule payments placed in a trust and then often disappeared.

Today, this would be considered human trafficking.

Carlisle operated for thirty-nine years with a student body drawn from over 140 tribes; facing declining enrollment, the campus closed with the advent of World War I in 1917. The campus was transferred back to the US Army and is now the US Army War College. According to the Carlisle Indian School Project, a nonprofit organization, about 186 children were buried on-site.

Native children began returning home from Carlisle in 2017 following a vigilant ten-year battle by tribal leaders.

The Office of Army Cemeteries lists the deceased children exhumed and returned home in 2021: Sophia Tetoff, “from the Alaskan Aleut”; and from the Rosebud Sioux, Lucy Take the Tail (Pretty Eagle), Rose Long Face (Little Hawk), Ernest Knocks Off (White Thunder), Dennis Strikes First (Blue Tomahawk), Maud Little Girl (Swift Bear), Friend Hollow Horn Bear, Warren Painter (Bear Paints Dirt), Alvan (Kills Seven Horses), and Dora Her Pipe (Brave Bull).

After Carlisle, most of the boarding school system’s architectural footprint became a familiar replication (historical archival photographs and renderings bear witness to this footprint): usually, two or three stories of a box building resembling a penal institution, a basement, an interior central courtyard; later came high fences, sometimes with barbed wire—and a cemetery.

NATIVE INTERRUPTED

While the gentry enjoyed a hot summer day on their shaded veranda, perhaps with a glass of iced lemonade, some of these bastions of hell, like St. Boniface Indian Industrial School in Banning, were built brick by brick with the little hands of adolescent enrollees.

Banning Library historian and journalist Bill Bell and scholar Kelly Leah have confirmed that children completed the final phase of St. Boniface when funds ran out. Ms. Stewart’s UCLA thesis/autobiography, “(Re)writing and (Re)righting California Indian Histories: Legacies of Saint Boniface Indian Industrial School, 1890–1935,” substantiates numerous boarding school stories of daily life, including forced marriages, even within her own extended family.

The collection *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences*, edited by Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc, relates how students experienced assimilation. Especially interesting is Chapter Four, “Putting Lucy Pretty Eagle to Rest”: “Take the Tail’s [Lucy

Pretty Eagle] daily life at Carlisle began with the undignified removal of everything familiar. All new recruits were scrubbed down and deloused from head to toe. Their long hair was cut short, and their clothes and blankets replaced with uniforms.”

Many tribes have a custom of cutting their hair when mourning a death, so one can imagine how devastating this act must have felt for the children. Culturally, long hair denotes a Native connection and a distinct worldview grounded in the sacredness of relationships.

Andrew Windyboy (Chippewa Cree) was interviewed in *Our Spirits Don't Speak English*, a Rich-Heape documentary. He attended two Indian schools, one in North Dakota and the other in South Dakota (both currently operating). He described his assimilation with unchecked tears and profound emotion:

“***They cut off my hair and made me kneel in front of the door, and everybody would come by and make fun of me, rub my head and laugh. I got hit so hard I lost my Native tongue. That was a hard time in my life.” He now wears two long silver braids representing his cultural reunification.***

Furthering the erasure of tribal pride and self-respect, Native youth were renamed with Christian names in English. The shock of corporal punishment produced quite a few homesick and depressed runaways. Penalties for serial runaways and defiant behavior, such as speaking Native languages or practicing

spiritual traditions, included sensory-deprived isolation, starvation, and severe beatings.

Many weakened, fragile young souls succumbed to diseases never known in their twelve-thousand-year-old ancestry, such as tuberculosis, typhus, measles, smallpox, or influenza. Testimonies reported that getting sick meant death. Sadly, a hospital did not equate with wellness because the next place was the cemetery, to paraphrase *Viola Martinez, California Paiute: Living in Two Worlds* by Diana Meyers Bahr.

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS), a nonprofit founded in 2012 and dedicated to creating a national strategy for healing Indian boarding school traumas, lists ten Indian boarding schools in California:

- Fort Bidwell Indian School, originally a military outpost (Modoc Nation)
- Fort Yuma Indian School, originally a military outpost (Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe [Kwatsáan], Mexican)
- Greenville Indian Industrial School (Maidu Tribe)
- Hoopa Valley Indian School, formerly military headquarters for Fort Gaston (Hoopa Valley Tribe)
- Perris Indian School, the first California Indian boarding school, founded in 1892 (intertribal)
- Round Valley Indian School (Round Valley Indian Tribes)
- Sherman Indian Institute (intertribal)
- St. Anthony's Industrial School (Kumeyaay, Mexican)
- St. Boniface Indian Industrial School (intertribal, Black, Mexican)
- St. Turibius Industrial School (Yukian Wappo, Patwin, Pomo, Coast Miwok)

NABS also listed fifteen boarding schools that continue to operate in the US. The National Archives and local historical research facilities have reduced staff due to the ongoing pandemic, limiting access to public records for additional research.

HOME NOT SO SWEET HOME

In 1902, with Theodore Roosevelt president, Sherman Indian Institute was renamed Sherman Indian High School. Today, it continues operating in Riverside as a boarding school for at-risk Native students seeking a high school diploma and trade skills. Many Sherman graduates have attained university degrees; some alumni return and pay it forward by mentoring students.

While the original Sherman Institute was once on one hundred acres of productive farmland, the cemetery is off campus, several miles away. Approximately 124 gravesites have new unnamed headstones. By the entrance, a substantial granite slab memorial stands. A local women's club raised funds during the Vietnam era to pay for it and the inscription of sixty-five student names. Regrettably, having had limited access to historical records, their count is inaccurate.

Ten years ago, a fourteen-year-old Eagle Scout made it his project to clean the mile-high trash and fence the cemetery. Then, with his own money, he created new headstones and procured the aid of his high school industrial arts department to assist with casting.

Upon suggestion, he planted native elderberry trees and four types of sage to shade the four benches installed. As a result, the neighborhood has adopted the cemetery and keeps it free from debris and vandalism.

Dr. Jean A. Keller authored *Empty Beds: Student Health at Sherman Institute, 1902–1922*. A trained historian

and archaeologist, she co-chaired the restoration of Sherman Indian Cemetery with Lorene Sisquoc. Ms. Sisquoc (Fort Sill Apache/Cahuilla descendent) is a Sherman alumna and serves as curator of Sherman Indian Museum; as a master basketweaver, she teaches traditional Native arts.

Dr. Keller's pre-med undergraduate work contributed one sentence to her research: "a typhoid epidemic at Sherman Institute." It was the spark that led her to focus on children's health. Her dedication to the truth is compelling.

"Indian boarding schools are a nuanced shade of gray. Sherman and Perris Indian School accepted students *only* by application. Prior to acceptance they had to pass a rigorous medical exam at Perris and then again, if transferring to Sherman," Dr. Keller said. "Sometimes, their parents wanted them off the reservation for safety. There are about fifty different tribes attending from all over the country now. Some students have no family and at Sherman, the students and the teachers become their surrogate family. It has come full circle because students are reconnecting to Native arts that are taught there instead of at home."

In response to the mass burials in Canada, Dr. Keller said, "I think an important distinction about the mass burials in Canada is that they occurred at religious schools. I have looked at almost fifty thousand primary source school documents [for a new book about Perris Indian School], and the minutiae of record-keeping for the government is unbelievable."

Herein lies a universal systemic issue: religious schools maintained their administrations internally, and their oversight committees lacked accountability.

Were there any unnamed burials at Perris?

Dr. Keller answered, "In 2000, the Perris Historical Society called me about a planned development on Perris Indian

School grounds. So, Lorene and I went to the planning director's office and told them their Phase One Study needed to include ground-penetrating radar to determine if there were any children buried there in the cemetery because I had one verified burial. [So far, there was no conclusive evidence of human

remains, including the verified burial.] Now, I am following up with the nearby tribes to verify all the children went home. I'm hoping that relations of the children, especially the Perris children, come forward after reading your article and have information for me. That would be wonderful."

A BLESSING OR A CURSE?

Due to mass forced "Americanization," Native languages have faced a devastating cultural loss, although wisdom finally prevailed: it is no longer a punishable offense. Many tribal nations are making a concerted effort with their diminishing elders' community to educate their children as new speakers.

"The paradox of Indian boarding schools is a layered and complex issue," Professor Patricia Dixon (Pauma Band of Luiseño Mission Indians) said. She has chaired the department of American Indian Studies at Palomar College in San Marcos for nearly fifty years, has received multiple awards for tribal community contributions, and is a University of San Diego alumna.

Before her Palomar tenure, Professor Dixon taught at Sherman, served as president, and was a board member for ten years. She shared her perspective: "My grandparents went to an Indian boarding school [Sherman], as did some of my cousins while we were in high school. I went to a girls Catholic boarding school in high school, but it was not associated with the government nor were the girls Native.

"What I found quite amazing [at Sherman] was that there were third- and fourth-generation children whose parents had elected to send them there. Others who were sent there had a choice of either going to juvenile hall, military school, or a boarding school. It will always be a mixed response—either

a blessing or a curse," Professor Dixon said. "The generation before me in the seventies worked hard to make dramatic changes to Indian boarding schools. They really pushed for an Indian board, a relevant curriculum, and intertribalism to a certain degree. Some of the reservations were dramatically impoverished, so food, clothing, and an education [was the lesser evil]. It's not to say there [weren't] still a lot of challenges."

Juana Majel-Dixon, PhD (Pauma Band of Luiseño Mission Indians), who has served as a tribal legislative analyst for twenty-eight years, was vociferous: "There is no forgiveness for genocide. The truth needs to be told and should be a standard in the school curriculum. We are at a time where we can

effect change legislatively. There is a whole generation that is distanced from what happened. Our generation needs to prepare the next generation, our descendants, to be able to respond. We have been academically invisible. There is a lot of work to do.” Dr. Majel-Dixon also serves on the NABS board of directors and chairs the Tribal Nations Leadership Council under the auspices of the US Department of Justice.

A boarding school mentioned earlier that still casts a haunting specter on the tribal population is the St. Boniface Indian Industrial School in Banning, a location chosen for its proximity to a number of tribes. The San Manuel Band (Serrano or Maara’yam), Soboba Band (Luiseño), Agua Caliente Band (Cahuilla), Cabazon Band (Cahuilla), Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla, Twenty-Nine Palms Band (Chemehuevi), San Gabriel Band (Gabrieliño-Tongva), Juaneño Band (Acjachemem), and Kumeyaay (Tipai-Ipai) have all been touched by St. Boniface’s tentacles.

Operated by the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, it opened its doors in 1890—about three months before the Wounded Knee massacre on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The school, run by Franciscans, carried on the views and traditions that California Natives had encountered under the mission system designed by fellow Franciscan Junipero Serra; all Indians were pagans and needed subjugating. As at most Indian board schools, the girls dormitory was separated from the boys, and their gender-biased chores (laundry, kitchen, lavatory, etc.) separated them further. This separation severed Native connections between siblings, cousins (often attending together), parents, and extended family units.

Boarding School Blues contains an autobiographical account by Tanya Rathbun Sorrell that children worked like slaves at St. Boniface in school maintenance—janitorial, kitchen, and field labor. Student labor served as a

disciplinary practice as well. Nuns were generous with demeaning and heartless punishments.

The school subsisted on donations mainly; it struggled for years and later received minimal federal aid by accepting Black and Mexican students. Finally, in 1952, the Franciscan priests left the property to the San Diego Diocese. They, in turn, lent it to Boys Town of the Desert (a Catholic-run correctional home for juvenile delinquents) until 1969. After that, it stayed vacant until the diocese sold it to real estate developers in 1973.

Eight thousand students purportedly passed through its doors, with only twenty-one children buried in its cemetery. However, after seventy-nine years and several religious administrations, those numbers are more than likely inaccurate. Developers of the Arrowhead Estates venture ceded the graveyard to the Morongo Band in 2003.

TURNING THE POWER

Some of the Native children who succeeded or survived assimilation without a positive experience lived an adult life of grim silence as self-preservation. However, this silence weighs heavy on the family, an affliction referred to as intergenerational trauma.

Mental health professionals have identified these traumas as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). Healing from trauma requires guidance and exposure to sharing with either a therapist or, even better, returning to Native therapies. Symposia to assist with recovery, such as the Viejas Healing Symposium in 2018, address these specific issues with holistic, curative, and restorative practices facilitated by Natives and non-Natives.

One should, as Professor Dixon advised, “Go home.” In other words, go home to the people that love you unconditionally.

But what if a safe space isn’t available? She then advised seeking a Native alliance like your local American Indian

Health Center. They have volunteer elders who can hoist you onto their shoulders to help find the cloud’s silver lining. Elders serve as human touchstones to Native ancestry as well.

Case in point: the San Diego Indian Health Center offers medical services for the body and mind, and spiritual facilitations to reconnect with tribal identity and strengthen healthy Native practices, such as a Spiritual Solutions Talking Circle, Wisdom Keepers, and elders; these pursuits value the individual and tribal communities.

Dr. Art Martinez (Chumash), a clinical psychologist for thirty-five years and co-director of the Center for Native Child and Family Resilience in Carson City, shared sage words:

“*Native children deserve to be raised in a family and community of wellness. The Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 gave Native parents the right to keep their children, but still today Child Protective Services, driven by complaints, will often remove Native children and place them in non-Native families that are religiously focused. California is a 280 state so the lines are blurred, and this can occur on sovereign land.*” (Public Law 280 gives California criminal jurisdiction over tribal law and tribal communities.)

Dr. Martinez said, “Reparation is no good unless you stop doing [forced removal] first. Ninety-six victims came forward as adults with [charges of] sexual abuse against one teacher at an Indian boarding school in Arizona. Congress heard some of the hearings. The victims weren’t interested in money; they wanted to [make sure it didn’t continue]. I had one patient who graduated from an Indian boarding school and returned to work there to protect the children. She became the room mom. The legacy of federal employees was that they couldn’t get fired, so the tactic was to relocate them to another school where they continued their abuse.” (The Roman Catholic Church used the same tactic for outed pedophile priests.)

“The issues that came out of the Indian boarding school have been trauma, [a need for] belonging and feeling safe,” Dr. Martinez said. “Because I attended a mission school, I have a shared appreciation of their experience.”

Historical trauma symptoms, intergenerational trauma, or adverse childhood experiences are as individual as the responses to treatment. Therefore, there are many types of therapies to choose from: group based or family based, cognitive behavioral therapy or physical therapy. Reversing ACE’s effects on the body is critical because trauma can manifest as a form of mental or physical illness over time. Reversing ACE’s effects is like “turning the power”—a Native aphorism, as borrowed from Dr. Trafzer, for using the same ability to achieve a positive outcome.

SPEAK THE TRUTH

Five hundred generations of injustices against California’s Natives require notable authentic reparations with a supervising committee to prevent future violations of fundamental human rights, especially for children. Regard-

ing Native American child adoptions, the International Christian Adoptions website reports, “Out of one thousand kids who enter into California’s foster system, 7.8 percent are Native American/Alaskan Native. The question which still remains is how many unreported or undeclared cases of Native American Indian children are in the state’s social service systems. We estimate those numbers to be much greater. Per national averages, well over 80 percent of Native American Indian children are placed in non-native homes.”

But what seems to have emerged from a history of catastrophic racism is an empowered California Native. Traditionally, the tribe assisted with parenting and teaching. But, with young people leaving the reservation and learning the language of US law, higher education has helped them assume leadership roles, tribal and otherwise. As a result, most return to their ancestral grounds with a deepened desire to actively safeguard culture—and strengthen Native resiliency.

Boarding School Blues observed a positive outcome produced by Indian boarding schools: many students gained a new understanding of Native cultural diversity and intertribal cooperation and formed “new circles of friends who work together through alumni associations, the National Congress of American Indians, the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Indian Gaming Association, and a host of other Native American associations.”

A powerful example of strength in numbers is the National Congress of American Indians—they recently approved a resolution calling for a commission to build on the DOI’s investigative initiative.

Governor Gavin Newsom created the California Truth and Healing Council in 2018 to acknowledge wrongdoing with a formal apology and “clarify the historical record of such relationship in the spirit of truth and healing.”

Yet there was no response to queries for a statement. Of further interest, a recent webinar by the Office of the Tribal Advisor explaining its structure on their Facebook page raised a thought-provoking question: “Will the council examine reparations?” But, yet again, there was no response to several queries. In today’s political climate, continued funding for this council is tenuous.

HEALING THE BROKEN CIRCLE

So, who should be accountable for reparations to the children of survivors? The state of California? Their past state-mandated genocide is the reason quite a few tribes are now extinct.

So YES.

Religious organizations who headed up each school? HELL YES!

Federal government? YES.

Land ownership, water, and oil have been behind every Congressional initiative and promise broken with Native Americans. This action would heal the broken circle.

Of course, reparations won’t bring back the children who died unnamed, with gravesites unmarked. Nevertheless, it can assist the new generation in reclaiming their family members with dignified closure—honoring the vanished and the survivors by investigating the truth and printing names in state records.

To quote the eloquent Chief Joseph (Nimi’ipuu), may he rest in power, “It does not require many words to speak the truth.”

The Sherman Indian Museum website celebrates the ancestry of and honors past students from A to Z with a dedicated page listing names, ages, tribal affiliations, and the year enrolled—a few entries are over one hundred years old. An obvious labor of love and a work in progress.

As Dr. Keller said, “Let those children’s names be known. They deserve to be named.”

TRAUMA SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

Your local Indian Health Center

Offers Native support groups and therapies.

California Tribal Families Coalition

A nonprofit organization of tribes and tribal leaders from across the state whose mission is to promote and protect the health, safety, and welfare of tribal children and families.

Delia M. Sharpe, executive director; (916) 583-8289

California Indian Legal Services

A nonprofit Indian law firm dedicated to protecting Indian rights, fostering Indian self-determination, and facilitating tribal nation-building.

Jedd Parr, directing attorney for Sacramento; (800) 829-0284

Native Dads Network

Provides culturally relevant services to rural and urban tribal communities across California.

(916) 544-1085

