



News

Army begins unearthing remains of children who died at Carlisle Indian school

Jeff Gammage, Staff Writer

Updated: Tuesday, August 8, 2017, 9:09 AM



Native Americans, Mark Soldier Wolf and Nelson White Eagle at right are part of the visiting Northern Arapaho delegation at the former Carlisle Indian Industrial School.

CARLISLE, Pa. — Nelson White Eagle, gray and stiff at 78, needed time to make his way across the wet grass to the graves of the children, but when he got there, he didn't hesitate:





Photo Gallery: GALLERY: U.S Army returns remains of Northern Arapaho children.

The Northern Arapaho elder sang — a song of gratitude and honor, of thanks and remembrance and healing.

No answer came from the rows of white headstones in the cemetery on the grounds of the former Carlisle Indian Industrial School, now the campus of the Army War College. And none was expected.

“I felt better after I sang the song,” White Eagle said. “We need to hang on to one another, love one another.”

He arrived on the grounds Monday, joined by about 15 other tribe members, come from Wyoming on a mission both sacred and sorrowful: to reclaim the remains of three Northern Arapaho children who died at the school, and who lie among nearly 200 native students [lost in a brutal, turn-of-the-century experiment in forced assimilation.](#)





Infant shoes decorate the back of Yufna Soldier Wolf's traditional Northern Arapaho clothing. A delegation of Northern Arapaho are at the former Carlisle Indian Industrial School to retrieve the remains of three children that died at the school and to return them to their home in Wyoming.

Shortly after 8:45 a.m. Tuesday, after private native prayers and ceremonies, an Army team put the first shovel to the earth, beginning what's expected to be a five-day process of exhuming the three boys. They're to be reburied next week in their rugged mountain home, the Wind River Reservation.

The aim of the nation's first federal off-reservation boarding school, founded in 1879 by former cavalry officer Richard Henry Pratt, was to rid natives of their "savage nature" by erasing their names, languages, customs, religions, and family ties. Braids were cut off, and boys were put into military-style uniforms.

Beatings were common punishments, and epidemics proved deadly. Even as children succumbed to tuberculosis and flu, Carlisle became the model for dozens of Indian schools that spread across the United States and Canada.

Little Chief, the eldest son of Chief Sharp Nose, [arrived at Carlisle on March 11, 1881](#), a boy of 14 accompanied by two young friends, Horse, 11, and Little Plume, 9.

Within two years, all three were dead.

“It’s going to be very emotional for us,” said Yufna Soldier Wolf, a great-niece of Little Chief’s and leader in the push to return him and his compatriots to their tribe. Family members of Horse and Little Plume were there, too, some stunned to silence by the enormity of a cemetery full of native children.

Three Northern Arapaho children will be disinterred from the Carlisle Barracks Indian Cemetery and returned to their homes in Wyoming. The U.S. Army’s archeological team will begin on Aug. 8, 2017, starting with Little Plume/Hayes Vanderbilt Friday. Millie Friday, a descendent, is comforted by Barbara Andrews-Christy of Circle Legacy Center. Ailice Hall is right.

To them, and to many native peoples, Carlisle is not simply a small town in central Pennsylvania — it’s the place where the federal government set out

to destroy their way of life, and where their children died in the process.

By mid-afternoon on Tuesday, the day had turned hot and steamy as sweating Army staff pressed on with their digging – under the watchful gaze of the Northern Arapaho, who rarely strayed far from the cemetery.

The first child had yet to be exhumed, but Army officials said plans remained on schedule. Several tribal elders, some on canes, returned to their hotel for rest, while young people embarked on a tour of the grounds, learning about a place they knew from tribal lore but had never seen in person.

“This is paving the way for everyone else,” Loveeda White Eagle, 20, said of the repatriation. “The other tribes can learn from it.”

The Rosebud Sioux in South Dakota say they want children returned from Carlisle, and so have native families in Alaska.

The day was historic for all those across Indian Country who want the tragedy of the boarding-school era to at last be aired fully and publicly. Some researchers say the collective damage inflicted on children at boarding schools has contributed to the addictions and dysfunctions that plague many tribes today.

This week, the neat, roadside cemetery has been cut off from public view, hidden behind tall chain-link fences draped with black cloth. Lighted signs on the military base warn, “Cemetery closed, please respect Native American privacy.”

Like other students at Carlisle, the three Northern Arapaho boys were forced to accept new English names. Little Chief became Dickens Nor. Horse was renamed Horace Washington, and Little Plume was called Hayes Vanderbilt Friday.

Little Plume, buried under a headstone marked “Hayes, Son of Friday,” was to be exhumed first, from his resting place near the center of the cemetery.

Army officials outlined the process for each grave: The 240-pound headstone would be removed. Then the grave would be opened, a job undertaken with shovels, trowels, and hands — no machinery. The dirt from

the grave was to be sifted through a series of mesh screens, to capture cloth, shirt buttons, jewelry, coffin pieces, and small bits of bone.

Bones and teeth will be examined by Elizabeth DiGangi, a forensic anthropologist at Binghamton University and an Army consultant, to determine whether the remains are the correct gender and age. DNA testing will not be undertaken.

The remains will be kept in an on-site vault until the disinterment is complete. At that point, control of the children will be transferred to the tribe.

“It’s a special mission,” said Art Smith, chief of Army National Military Cemeteries. “We’re in the process of disinterring children.”

On Monday evening, members of a native group called Circle Legacy, who for decades have washed and cleaned the headstones here, put on a potluck dinner for the Northern Arapaho. Elders leaned on the arms of helpers, while children — young, native children — once again roamed the grounds of Carlisle, laughing and chasing one another.

“When you see the graves, it’s a heavy heart,” said Crawford White Sr., 76, brother of Nelson White Eagle, both of whom were sent to boarding school as children. “Healing, it’s a process. I need it to begin, not just for me, but for the families. ... There’s a lot of healing to be done.”

Jeff Gammage, Staff Writer

Read full story: [Army begins unearthing remains of children who died at Carlisle Indian school](#)



More Coverage:

['Justice delayed' worth the wait to bury Native American children](#)

[At last, the Indian children have come home](#)

[Indian tribes to meet on retrieving more children's remains from Carlisle](#)

[Remains of Little Chief, other native children to leave Pa., finally go home](#)

[About Philly.com](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[The Newsroom](#)

[Licensing & Permissions](#)

[Newspapers In Education](#)

[Career Opportunities](#)

[Internships](#)

[Acel Moore Workshop](#)

[Mobile Apps](#)

© Copyright 2018 Philadelphia Media Network (Digital) LLC [Terms of Use](#) & [Privacy Policy](#)