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Little Chief, other native children to finally go home

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(http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania/little-chief-other-native-children-to-finally-go-home-20170703.html?viewGallery=y) (http://philly.reprintmint.com/006-default.html?src=http%3A%2F%2Fmedia.philly.com%2Fimages%2F250*250%2Fdixon-55820-f-wp-content-uploads-2017-06-713022_51471210f20eadc-1024x748.jpg&verification=http%3A%2F%2Fmedia.philly.com%2Fimages%2Fdixon-55820-f-wp-content-uploads-2017-06-713022_51471210f20eadc-1024x748.jpg&source=006&title=PDIG02-F&caption=Yufna Soldier Wolf (right), of the Northern Arapaho, stands with tribal elders Crawford White Sr. (left), and her father, Mark Soldier Wolf. Little Chief, her great uncle, is buried in Carlisle.) Buy Photo View Gallery

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Yufna Soldier Wolf (right), of the Northern Arapaho, stands with tribal elders Crawford White Sr. (left), and her father, Mark Soldier Wolf. Little Chief, her great uncle, is buried in Carlisle.

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Next month, if all goes as planned, Little Chief will finally be going home.

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Home to the rocky expanse of the Wyoming reservation he left as a boy of 14. Home to a family that, four generations later, still mourns his loss. Home from a cemetery on the grounds of what was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, now the Army War College, where he lies among nearly 200 native children who died in a misbegotten experiment in forced assimilation.

"Each child has a story," said Yufna Soldier Wolf, the great niece of Little Chief, who has worked to return him and two compatriots to their Northern Arapaho lands. "Let those stories be told through their sacrifices, which were their lives."

After more than a year of hearings, studies, and planning, the Army has set an Aug. 8 date to begin turning over the remains of Indian children to their families and tribes. A Northern Arapaho delegation will travel to Carlisle to formally accept the first three.

Little Chief, the eldest son of Chief Sharp Nose, arrived at the school on March 11, 1881, accompanied by two friends, Horse, age 11, and Little Plume, 9.

Within two years, all three were dead. They weren't the first or last to perish.

Yufna Soldier Wolf, with a photo of her great uncle,

Little Chief.

The aim of the nation's first federal off-reservation boarding school, founded by former Cavalry officer Richard Henry Pratt, was to cleanse natives of their "savage nature" by erasing their names, languages, customs, religions and family ties. Beatings were common punishments.

Even as children succumbed to tuberculosis and flu, Carlisle became the model for dozens of Indian schools (http://www.philly.com/philly/news/Those_kids_never_got_to_go_home.html) that spread across the United States and Canada.

Today, the trauma of the boarding-school system is largely absent from American school books, but fully present in the hearts and minds of the first Americans. Now they're working to locate and identify the remains of children who died in disastrous contacts with white authority:

• Scores of unmarked graves at the Chemawa Indian School in Oregon were discovered in 2015 after historian Marsha Small surveyed the campus cemetery with ground-penetrating radar.

• The Canadian Sto:lo tribe is searching for the graves of children who were stolen from their parents and taken to California by miners returning from the 1858 Fraser Canyon Gold Rush.

• South Dakota researchers checking an unmarked cemetery near the former Rapid City Indian School identified the remains of 10 students, and located an area where 40 others may be buried.

"It's a new idea that we want our children back, and that we are within our rights to actively seek this resolution," said Christine Diindiisi McCleave, executive officer of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. "It has taken generations for the majority of us to awaken to the full weight of what was done to us."

Last week, the coalition announced plans to file a United Nations petition seeking an accounting of all children who were "taken into government custody" at boarding schools and "whose fate and whereabouts remain unknown."

Native scholar Preston McBride estimates that figure could top 10,000. In Canada, a commission found, it was 6,000.

Experts say the drive for resolution took root 30 years ago, with the passage and codification of laws that gave Indians greater say over their dead. Each victory — including this year's return of the 9,000-year-old skeleton that scientists call Kennewick Man and Indians know as the Ancient One — builds toward the next.

"American Indians are very attuned to legal decisions that cement sovereign rights," said Villanova University history professor Paul Rosier, a specialist in native studies.

The percentage of natives with college degrees has nearly doubled in the last 35 years, and many have used law and archaeology degrees to advocate.

More tribes have hired historic-preservation officers, who see the search for lost relatives as crucial. Those efforts can extend across the sea, where Indians who died while performing with turn-of-the-century Wild West shows lie in European graveyards.

Chief Sharp Nose (Ta-qua-wi), a Northern Arapaho chief, wearing U.S. Army captain's bars, 1884.

"People want the remains of their ancestors resting in their homelands," said David Beck, professor of Native American studies at the University of Montana, "even if their spirits have already made a journey to another world."

The Rosebud Sioux of South Dakota seek 10 children from Carlisle, Alaska natives also say they want their relatives (http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20160907_At_Carlisle_Indian_school_cemetery__a_battle_over_a_lost_Alaskan_child.html), and other tribes are considering action.

Only recently has the Army agreed to surrender remains — a pivot in a tortuous, 140-year deliberation.

Early, internal Army discussions documented in 60 pages of correspondence at the National Archives show the cemetery was seen as an impediment to growth. Nowhere in the letters do Army officials suggest returning the children to their families.

In 1923, five years after the school closed and the military reclaimed the campus, memos began to ricochet among Army officers in Carlisle, Washington, and Baltimore. By fall 1926, Army Surgeon General Merritte Ireland had heard enough. He wanted the cemetery "gotten out of the way," preferably off the base, his aide wrote.

Carlisle Commandant Charles Reynolds, later to become surgeon general himself, saw the perfect solution: Move the children's remains to a government plot in Ashland Cemetery, south of the military base.

"I do not see how there can be any objection on the part of anyone to this arrangement," Reynolds wrote to Ireland.

In fact, there had already been plenty of objection to precisely that arrangement:

Amos LaFromboise, a 13-year-old Sioux, was among the first group of students to arrive at Carlisle in October 1879. Seven weeks later he became the first to die.

After a Christian funeral service — Carlisle compelled religious conversion — his body was borne to Ashland and buried near the graves of 500 unknown Civil War soldiers.

Pratt knew that more students would die at Carlisle. The day after Amos' funeral, he wrote to the War Department and asked whether more plots were available at Ashland.

His query prompted a judge advocate general to rule that, according to Ashland Cemetery bylaws, Indians could not be buried beside white people.

The remains of young Amos were dug up, carried back to the school, and reburied in a field — beside those of a 13-year-old Cheyenne boy, the renamed Abe Lincoln, who had died in the meantime.

Those two graves formed the core of what would become an expanding school cemetery, as nearly 100 students died in the first decade alone.

The grave of Little Chief, renamed Dickens Nor at the Carlisle school.

An aggressive push to move the graveyard took hold in January 1927, when Gen. Ireland told the Army Quartermaster that its location was simply unsuitable. The post needed the land, he wrote.

By August 1927, workers were digging, the job dirty, sweaty, and grim. Coffins tended to crumble when handled, exposing remains.

The cemetery was relocated to a distant spot on the base, by the rear gate near what was then Poor House Road. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, security upgrades at the Carlisle Barracks turned the back gate into the front entrance.

Today most base visitors pass the well-kept lawn of the cemetery. But they don't see the name Little Chief on a headstone.

Like other students, a new, English name was imposed on him. Little Chief became Dickens Nor. Horse was renamed Horace Washington, and Little Plume was called Hayes Vanderbilt Friday.

Nearly 2,000 miles away, on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, Soldier Wolf has picked a burial place for her great uncle, a plot in the family cemetery. It's high on a hill thick with sagebrush.

The view, she said, is spectacular.

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