

Research into unmarked graves sparks exploration of west Rapid land ownership



Project to ID Native American children turns into land is...

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RAPID CITY, S.D. (KOTA TV) - A half decade long research project to identify children who died at the old Rapid City Indian Boarding school and were buried in an unmarked cemetery has achieved success beyond the researchers ambitions -- even as the scope of the project exploded into an exploration of the history of land ownership and racial inequities.

"We went through many years of microfiche in order to identify as many of the students who passed away as possible," said attorney Heather Dawn Thompson who along with Kibbe McGaa Conti has identified some 50 students buried near Rapid City's Sioux San Hospital.

In the early decades of the 20th century the facility was an Indian Boarding School.

"When this first started we made a promise to those children that we wouldn't forget them and that we would find out where they are buried and help reunite them with their families," said Thompson. "But to be honest, I didn't know we could actually ever do it."

But the researchers also discovered more.

They began unraveling the history of 1,200 acres of west Rapid City the Indian Boarding School once owned.

"This started as simply a project to identify the children in the graves but it has opened a Pandora's Box of a variety of historical, legal and equitable issues in the community," said Thompson. "So we're hoping that very positive conversations come out of the information and documents that we've been able to identify."

The school closed in the 1930's and in its place sprang up what is now Sioux San hospital.



But in 1948 most of the land was transferred by act of Congress to the city of Rapid City, area churches and the National Guard. Congress stipulated that much of the land benefit "needy Indians."

Thompson and Conti's research raises questions about whether that clause has been honored across the board.

Some community member are calling for a broad discussion and are sponsoring a public presentation of the researchers work this Thursday.

"We believe that bridging gaps in this community is one of the most important things that we can do together," said Karen Mortimer with the Mniluzahan Okolakiciyapi Ambassadors. "And to do that, and to have honest and good, clear discussions we really need to have a shared and deep understanding about history."

The presentation is called "An inconvenient Truth: The history behind Sioux San lands and West Rapid City." It starts at 6:30 p.m. this Thursday at the Journey Museum. The public is invited.