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Stories From a Sacred Place: Defending the humanity, debunking the ghost of Lucy Pretty Eagle

Joseph Cress The Sentinel Aug 6, 2017

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The Carlisle Indian School cemetery is located off Claremont Road at the Carlisle Barracks.

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Michael Bupp, The Sentinel

Lucy Pretty Eagle occupies a prominent spot in the folklore of Carlisle Barracks and among the tombstones of the post cemetery.

Situated in the front row, at the far corner of the burial ground, her grave marker is among the first to catch the eye of many a motorist entering the installation.

She appears to be at rest, at least on the surface, but there have been rumors over the decades that her playful spirit haunts the Coren Apartments of the historic campus.

Legend has it her ghost is fond of slamming the door, rocking the bed, turning pictures toward the wall and tying the laces of tennis shoes.

Retreat inward

Barbara Landis is not a believer in Lucy the ghost. This Carlisle Indian School biographer would rather work to debunk the story and defend the humanity of a Lakota girl taken away from her homeland and the people of the Rosebud Agency in South Dakota.

Landis was so determined to set the record straight she researched and wrote the essay "Putting Lucy Pretty Eagle to Rest." In it, she described what conditions may have led to the untimely death of the girl on March 9, 1884.

Take the Tail was a sickly child when she stepped off the train in Carlisle on Nov. 14, 1883, Landis wrote. A short time after her arrival, the girl was transported from the railroad station downtown to the gates of nearby barracks and beyond to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.

Like any new female arrival, her long hair was cut short and her native clothes were replaced by a Victorian-style dress. Take the Tail was barred from speaking her native tongue and was caught up in a regimented life of constant drill and marching to and from class and the dining hall.

"She was assigned to a dormitory room with girls who did not speak Lakota," Landis wrote. "She was strictly confined to the fenced-in compound of Carlisle Barracks. Loneliness and sadness filled her days as she pined for her home and family, and she retreated inwardly."

The trauma of her time at the school made Take the Tail vulnerable to disease and to depression brought on by homesickness, Landis wrote. "Lucy's health declined in part because of the radical changes forced on her."

Look outward

Open from 1879 to 1918, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was the first nonreservation boarding school in the country. It was designed as a social experiment to remove native boys and girls from tribal influences, assimilate them to the white man's culture and teach them a trade.

But Landis described the typical Carlisle experience as a “five-year hole” in the bond with family that came at a critical point of nurturing for a native child.

“It's not just the fact these students were institutionalized in a foreign and hostile environment,” Landis said during a recent visit by an Indian school descendant. “Their moms and dads ... their extended family was cut off from that nurturing.”

It has been difficult to get a true picture of what went on at the school. “If you look at the written records associated with the school everything was very highly propagandized. ... Everything was geared towards putting a good face on the school.

“Over the years, Lucy Pretty Eagle has taken on a new life created by non-Indians who have concocted the legends surrounding her demise,” Landis wrote in her essay. For example, one story claims the girl was buried alive after a bout of epilepsy rendered her unconscious and gave the appearance of death.

But Landis is quick to point out that researchers have proved the Coren Apartment building was never used as a girls' dormitory but as a quarters for teachers. Many of the ghost stories related to Lucy hinge on her being a resident of that building during the Indian school years.

Dickinson College has an ongoing project where Indian school student records stored at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., are scanned into a digital resource center at carlisleindian.dickinson.edu.

The Sentinel conducted an extensive cross-check of all the names of known Indian school students buried in the post cemetery with the online student records accessible through the college. The vast majority of the corresponding records are sketchy at best with a student information card as the only document in the file.

Lucy Pretty Eagle was 16-years-old when she arrived at Carlisle from the Rosebud Agency on Nov. 14, 1883. She died less than four months later only to become a legend in the afterlife.

Email Joseph Cress at jcress@cumberlink.com.

In Focus

The Department of the Army has scheduled Tuesday, Aug. 8, as the start date to disinter the remains of three Northern Arapaho boys who died in the early 1880s while attending the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.

The notice of intended disinterment from the Carlisle Barracks Post Cemetery was published in the June 21 edition of the Federal Register. The Army National Military Cemeteries is honoring the requests of three families.

The remains of students Little Plume (a.k.a. Hayes Vanderbilt Friday), Little Chief (a.k.a. Dickens Nor) and Horse (a.k.a. Horace Washington) will be removed from the cemetery located along Claremont Road. ANMC will disinter, transfer custody, transport and reinter the remains in private cemeteries in Fremont County, Wyoming.

The Sentinel takes a closer look at the Carlisle Indian School graveyard and those buried in it:

Ran Saturday

- Who is buried at the cemetery

Today

- A look at the history of the cemetery

Tuesday

- Profiles of some of the students buried there



Stories From a Sacred Place Day 2: Disinterment at the Carlisle Barracks Post Cemetery



Stories from a Sacred Place

Joe Cress

News Reporter

History and education reporter for The Sentinel.