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FEATURED

A Dakota family remembers: Three generations of boarding school

By Lance Nixon Lance.Nixon@capjournal.com Dec 3, 2015



Flandreau Indian School in Flandreau, South Dakota, where Vernon Ashley attended in the 1930s
(Courtesy of South Dakota State Historical Society)

In the photograph from the South Dakota State Historical Society Archive, two Sioux women of an earlier era are swirling around in their long dresses to face the photographer in the South Dakota wind and each carries a child in a shawl on her back.

That's the way Dakota and Lakota people traditionally held their children – closer, physically, than mainstream Americans of the same era held their children.

But things were about to change.

Though the notes about this undated glass plate photograph taken by Edna Marian Bishop suggest that the two-story building with a covered porch and dormers in the background is possibly an Indian school, it was rare in Indian country at the end of the 19th century and on through the 20th for families to have access to the same sort of schools that most American families used – schools in nearby locations that children could attend in the day before returning home to their parents at night.

Instead, many families among the Dakota and Lakota people, as with families from other tribes in other states, chose the only option that was available to give their children an education – they sent them to boarding schools.

A system marked by good and bad

That system continues to this day, and so do the criticisms of it. Only this week, a group called the Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition announced that it had recently held its annual membership meeting “to discuss pressing the United States government to acknowledge responsibility for the creation and implementation of the culturally genocidal policy of American Indian Boarding School System.”

In a news release the group said the policy “had the purpose of separating young children from their tribes and families in order to minimize and weaken family ties and destroy cultural traditions. Under this policy, hundreds of thousands of children were displaced and treated barbarously.”

Schools were sometimes started on reservations by churches, and boarding schools were a logical strategy to serve large rural areas. But as the 19th century drew near its close, more and more Indian families found themselves sending their children to boarding schools many states away. Sioux families from the Great Plains and Apaches from the Southwest alike sent their children to schools such as Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, founded in 1879, or Hampton, a Virginia college that owed its start to an effort to teach freed slaves in 1861. Hampton began accepting American Indian students in 1878.

In South Dakota, some large Indian boarding schools that continue to this day are Pierre Indian Learning Center, which began in 1891; Flandreau Indian School, founded in 1892; and St. Joseph's Indian School in Chamberlain, founded in 1927.

It was a mix of good and bad for American Indians. They learned to read and write and learned some skills that could help them find jobs. Yet many were forced to abandon their Indian names and forbidden to use their native languages. Some were abused physically, even sexually. They were exposed to diseases such as tuberculosis.

But ironically, the same schools that may indeed have been intended to promote assimilation also promoted something else – a kind of “pan-Indianism” as members of one tribe learned to feel respect and solidarity with members of other tribes, historians say.

Enrollment in Indian boarding schools peaked in the 1970s. Estimates put the number of Indians attending boarding schools at 60,000 in 1973.

First generation: ‘You will have to change your name’

For some South Dakota families, the history of Indian boarding schools is simply a part of family history.

The late Vernon Ashley, a chief of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe who died last month, Nov. 10, 2015, at age 99, attended boarding schools.

But the family's experience with boarding schools really started one generation earlier. Ashley wrote about it in a family memoir he compiled for his children some years ago.

“Grandfather Sinkpe, who died March 11, 1914, at the age of about 92, was married to Woman Who Feeds (Wowicakusa Win) and she died January 21, 1912, at the age of 73. Sinkpe had two brothers, Bowed Head (Pa Hukudya) and Black Eagle (Wambdi Sapa).

“Sinkpe raised two sons, the eldest being Paca Husansan, who later changed his name to Edward P.H. Ashley; and my father, Tasunke Hinto (His Grey Horses), who was born in October 1872 and later became known as Wallace Ashley. These name changes came about at the time when the government was taking grown Indian youth, men and women, to either Hampton, Virginia, or Carlisle, Pennsylvania ... My uncle, Paca Husansan, in applying to go to Hampton, came to the Indian Agent's Office to inform him of his interest. The Agent's response

was, 'You will have to change your name because you are going among the white people, and you should have a shorter name that is easier to pronounce.' My uncle said he would go home and discuss it with his parents, which he did. It took several weeks because they could not see the reason for the name change but finally my grandparents agreed. So my uncle went back to the Indian Agent's office and told him that the family agreed to the name change. The Agent's response was, 'What name do you want?' Of course my uncle had no idea, so as they sat thinking about different names, who should walk in but the Reverend Edward Ashley, D.D., LL.D., Archdeacon of the Episcopal Church in South Dakota, and gave my uncle his name."

Vernon Ashley wrote that for his father, things took the same direction.

"Tasunke Hinto encountered the same problem his older brother did about ten years before, and that was to change his name. The name change was easier because the Indian Agent suggested that he make the change to Ashley and with help of church people he completed the name change to Wallace Ashley. Wallace Ashley enrolled at Hampton in October 1889 at the age of eighteen and stayed two years, returning to the Crow Creek reservation in July of 1891."

Hampton records part of a talk given by Wallace in February 1891, clearly indicating that Wallace Ashley was embracing a life much like the mainstream culture that he saw modeled at Hampton: "I tell you one thing: Going after rations three days and come back stay four days, one did not work much. If one wants to work he has no horses, no ploughs, no wagons. That is why I want to stop that rations and have work shops, blacksmith shops, carpenter shops, harness shops and wheelright shops. Only animals we give food, but Indians can work with hands."

Wallace Ashley died in 1938 after impressing on his own children the need to get an education.

Vernon Ashley wrote: "In spite of limited education, Wallace counseled his children on what to expect in the future. I quote two sayings that are too fitting. He said, 'Son, get all the education you can because the time will come when you will be living among white people,' and it is true today. Wallace also said that if the Indian fails to get the education or train themselves for some job, you will see them walking along the roads with packs on their backs. We also see this happening."

Second generation: And this is a football ...

Vernon Ashley, born Sinkpe, or Muskrat, in 1916, grew up with those words in his ears. He attended Indian boarding schools at Pierre and later at Stephan Mission, then finished his eighth-grade education at a one-room country school from Wilson School District No. 7 near his parent's home at Wolf Creek.

"I had a favorite teacher," Vernon Ashley told the Capital Journal in an interview about two years before his death. "She's buried at Crow Creek – Peg Peterson. She thought I had potential. She encouraged me. But then when I got through grade school, there was no high school – there was no high school on the reservation. So my father got me into Flandreau Indian School."

Though Ashley remembered being homesick for the Missouri River country, he said attending the school was a positive experience for him. It exposed him to sports, for example. A natural athlete, he had no idea of the games the rest of America was playing while growing up in the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe.

"In my stories I tell I never knew what basketball was, or football, I never heard of it. When I went to Flandreau, I made the teams – both. And I was a runner, of course. Long distance – the mile and half a mile.

"We played everyone. We played all the big schools, Brookings, Sioux Falls. And traveled."

Vernon Ashley graduated from Flandreau Indian School in 1935, the heart of the Great Depression. But that time at the school had already started him thinking about what he might do in life.

"When I was in Flandreau, my junior or senior year, you had to write a little essay: What do you plan to do when you finish high school? And I said, Well, what could I say? I'm going home to the reservation. I'm going to try to find a job to take care of my older parents.

"If the story was, What are you going to be doing 20 or 30 years from now, if they said, You're going to be working for governors in 30 years – that would have been a pipe dream. But that's exactly what happened. Thirty years later I worked for three governors in South Dakota, 1965 to 1972. I worked for three governors – Nils Boe, Frank Farrar and Dick Kneip. I'm a Republican; Dick Kneip was a Democrat, so he eased me out of that job."

But Ashley's Republican friends, Karl Mundt, E. Y. Berry and others, helped arrange a job as a state director of Action, the federal agency for volunteer service.

Looking back on it later, Vernon Ashley – a World War II veteran, a former tribal chairman of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe and a non-traditional student who had attended Dakota Wesleyan in Mitchell and earned his degree in his 30s – attributed some of the success to what he learned in boarding school.

He told the Capital Journal that he knew the boarding schools were difficult for some students; but that his own experience was positive.

Third generation: 'Get a good one in ...'

Maybe it's because of his own experience that Vernon Ashley sent his own oldest son down the same path. John Ashley, known as Tom or Tommy while growing up, also attended boarding schools.

"My dad, he stressed education. He wanted it for all Native Americans, not just to fit in, but to succeed," John Ashley told the Capital Journal in an interview in November.

"Most of my upbringing growing up, I was in boarding school. I didn't stay at home. Maybe back then I was mad because I didn't get to wake up and see my parents and see my brothers and play. It was different. It was very different.

"My mom told me, when I was 25 years old – I was here for my birthday – and we were sitting out on the porch and she just told me, she says, 'Tommy, I've always felt bad that you went to boarding school.'

"I told her, 'Don't ever feel that way.' I said, 'Everything, for whatever reason, it happened.' That just actually, I want to say, groomed me, to be on my own."

John Ashley attended boarding schools from the time he was small in different locations.

"I believe it was the first through the eighth grade in Wakpala, and then my freshman and sophomore year in Mission, South Dakota."

And even when he got in fights or went hungry, he had the feeling that his father, a firm but gentle man, had been through the same sort of thing and got through it.

“I swear today there wasn’t one time that I could complain to him about anything that I went through, whether it was boarding schools or whatever. I didn’t have anything to complain about because I knew he had it way more challenging than I did. Maybe I looked at that as motivation.”

But he still recalls vividly the day he had to go to boarding school.

“They took me down to the bus depot, I can’t remember what street it was on, but they took me and when I was getting on, I looked back at them and I know I can’t come home. Not that I couldn’t, but I knew what the expectations were: You’d do the best you could; you go do your thing and see how it works out.

“Yeah, there was times when I wanted to come home, oh, my goodness.

“And there were times you didn’t have enough to eat for a couple days. You just stayed put. I learned how to boil and cook macaroni real fast.”

And there were even tougher lessons to learn.

“I’ll tell you what, in boarding school, a lot of times you had to defend yourself. You had to fight. There were little cliques. They always thought I was from Standing Rock. That’s just where we lived. They’d say, ‘Oh, he’s from Standing Rock.’ Well, the Cheyenne Rivers or the Rosebuds, they’d have their little cliques, maybe they’d have a couple brothers or cousins. I didn’t have anybody. I was an easy target.”

But that was where you picked up the kind of learning that didn’t come from a classroom teacher.

“I always remember this guy, his name was Philip Bearface. He taught me, he says, ‘You know what? I’m really tired of seeing you get your butt kicked.’ Just like I said, I didn’t have a big brother, I was the big brother. And he taught me, he says, ‘Look, I can help you. I’m not going to fight your battles.’ He was a bigger boy, he had some meat on him. He says, ‘That’s up to you to

stand up – because if you don't, this is going to continue. And I will tell you this,' he says. 'You know you're going to get your butt kicked. But what I'm going to tell you is, Get one good one in. Get a good one in! And if you get beat down, you get beat down, but you better get back up.'

I never had anybody tell me that. And the next time – well, there were these cousins from Wisconsin, I remember. So they came and they started their thing. They were pushing me. I looked at Philip. He was just standing there at the side, looking at me. I said, OK.

And I just remember the guy, he was about to say something and I just popped him as hard as I could. I wasn't aiming. He said get a good one in and that was it. Of course, yeah, I got my butt kicked. But those boys never bothered me again. And I think from that time I just despised bullies."

That was one of the good things about boarding school – how much you could learn about life from your own classmates like Philip Bearface. You learned how to get along.

"Those times I wouldn't trade for anything," John Ashley said.

Years later, in boot camp, preparing to be sent over to Vietnam, John Ashley saw a young soldier weeping. And there his growing up in boarding school helped him again.

"I never saw a grown man cry before and I was wondering why – that was his first time away from home, in boot camp. He almost collapsed on account of that. I thought, Really? To me that was like normal."