

Boarding Schools | STRUGGLING WITH CULTURAL REPRESSION

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, many American Indian children attended government- or church-operated boarding schools. Families were often forced to send their children to these schools, where they were forbidden to speak their Native languages. Many Code Talkers attended boarding schools. As adults, they found it puzzling that the same government that had tried to take away their languages in schools later gave them a critical role speaking their languages in military service.



Students at Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in March 1892. 1

THE BOARDING SCHOOL TRAGEDY

In Indian civilization I am a Baptist, because I believe in immersing the Indian in our civilization and when we get them under, holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked. —Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (Battlefield and Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian, 1867-1904 by Richard Henry Pratt, 1964)



Navajo student, Tom Torino, when he entered the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, (left) and then three years later. 2

Indian boarding schools were founded to eliminate traditional American Indian ways of life and replace them with mainstream American culture. The first boarding schools were set up either by the government or Christian missionaries. Initially, the government forced many Indian families to send their children to boarding schools. Later, Indian families chose to send their children because there were no other schools available.

At boarding schools, Indian children were separated from their families and cultural ways for long periods, sometimes four or more years. The children were forced to cut their hair and give up their traditional clothing. They had to give up their meaningful Native names and take English ones. They were not only taught to speak English, but were punished for speaking their own languages. Their own traditional religious practices were forcibly replaced with Christianity. They were taught that their cultures were inferior. Some teachers ridiculed and made fun of the students' traditions. These lessons humiliated the students and taught them to be ashamed of being American Indian. The boarding schools

had a bad effect on the self-esteem of Indian students and on the well being of Native languages and cultures.

However, not all boarding school experiences were negative. Many of the Indian students had some good memories of their school days and made friends for life. They also acquired knowledge and learned useful skills that helped them later in life.

BOARDING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Indian boarding schools usually imitated military life. Children were forced to cut their hair, wear uniforms, and march in formations. Rules were very strict and discipline was often harsh when rules were broken. The students learned math, science, and other academic subjects. They also learned trades and practical skills, such as agriculture, carpentry, printing, and cooking. Athletics were encouraged and children also took arts classes, such as music and drawing.



Dress parade at the Carlisle Indian School. 3

CODE TALKERS AND BOARDING SCHOOLS

Many of the American Indian Code Talkers attended boarding schools—and many have memories of being punished for speaking their languages. They also remembered how the schools were run like military organizations and how this later made it easier for them to adapt

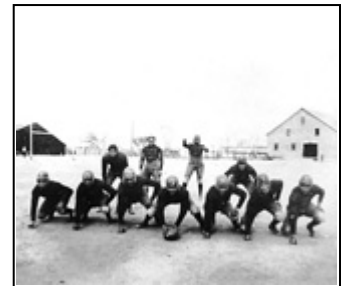
to life in the American military.

They tell us not to speak in Navajo language. You're going to school. You're supposed to only speak English. And it was true. They did practice that and we got punished if you was caught speaking Navajo.—John Brown, Jr., Navajo Code Talker, National Museum of the American Indian interview, 2004

We even had to march to school, march to chow, march everywhere, to church. It was still kind of military basis. So when we were in the service everything just came natural, physically and morally and everything. —Merrill Sandoval, Navajo Code Talker, National Museum of the American Indian interview, 2004

CARL GORMAN – BOARDING SCHOOLS

As a child, Carl Gorman attended the Rehoboth Mission school in New Mexico. Carl did not like the harsh rules or the way he and other children were treated, so he ran away. His father understood how he felt and did not make him return to Rehoboth. Later, Carl's family sent him to the Albuquerque Indian School, where he thrived.



Albuquerque Indian School football team in 1928. Carl Gorman, front row, third from the right. 4

CHARLES CHIBITTY – BOARDING SCHOOLS

Charles Chibitty began his schooling at the Ft. Sill Indian School in Oklahoma. There, he and the other Indian children were punished if they spoke their tribal languages.

When we got talking, 'cause we're not allowed to talk our tribal language and then me and my cousin, we get together and we talk in Indian we always hush up when we see a teacher or faculty coming. And then we always laughed and said, "I think they're trying to make little white boys out of us." —Charles Chibitty, Comanche Code Talker, National Museum of the American Indian interview, 2004



Students marching at Haskell Institute, an American Indian boarding school in Lawrence, Kansas, May 1908. 5

For high school he attended the Haskell Indian School in Lawrence, Kansas. Tribal languages were allowed there, but the education was still very strict and militaristic.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How is your school alike or different from the American Indian boarding schools that the Code Talkers attended?
- What do you think life was like for American Indian children at the early boarding schools?
- How would it feel to be separated from your family for four or more years without seeing them?
- Why do you think the government and boarding schools wanted to eliminate American Indian languages and cultures?
- Why do you think they ultimately failed in that effort?

1. Photograph by J.N. Choate. Courtesy of Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, CH2-041

2. Courtesy of Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle, Pennsylvania

3. Photograph by J. N. Choate. Courtesy of Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, PA-CH3-001

4. Courtesy of Carl Gorman Collection

5. Photograph by J. L. Morris. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, pan 6a25496