

http://www.record-eagle.com/news/local_news/native-american-culture-feels-effects-of-boarding-schools-decades-after/article_887258f9-d3d4-5033-a5e8-99fc50c05747.html

EDITOR'S PICK CENTERPIECE FEATURED

Native American culture feels effects of boarding schools decades after system closed

By MICHELLE MERLIN mmerlin@record-eagle.com Nov 15, 2015



Eva Petoskey, a member of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, poses for a portrait in her home. Pe boarding schools.

Record-Eagle/Tessa Lighty

[f](#) [t](#) [G+](#) [in](#) [p](#) @

Paul Raphael was just a kid in first grade when it happened.

He attended the Holy Childhood of Jesus School in Harbor Springs — a boarding school among hundreds nationwide that operated for more than a century — where Native American children were sent to become “civilized” by nuns.

The nuns were teaching table manners. One asked: What happens after you butter your bread and cut it into four pieces?

“I said, ‘you eat it,’” said Raphael, a member of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians. “I remember the nun coming over and smacking me. She smacked me hard and I fell out of my chair.”

Raphael was so upset he never did learn the answer; he’d never been hit before. But he did take one thing away from watching nuns abuse his classmates over the next several years: “I knew that if I had kids, I wouldn’t treat them the way they were treating us,” Raphael said.

Not just a relic

Memories of Holy Childhood and other Indian boarding schools are still fresh in the minds of Grand Traverse Band members. The three-story building in Harbor Springs operated until 1983, long after other Indian boarding schools run by non-natives closed down.

Some families, like Raphael’s, sent their children to the schools because they thought it was the only way to keep their family together. Some sent their children to the schools because they thought it was the best way to feed their families, and others sent their children so they would learn to read and write.

Tribal children from the region for the most part were not allowed to wear their own clothes or speak their language, Anishinabemowen. Many Indian schools like Holy Childhood started as church-run mission schools designed to teach children in their own language, but their objectives changed in the late 1880s. The federal government took control of Indian education in the U.S. and the facilities shifted from mission schools to boarding schools, said Eric Hemenway, the director of archives and records for the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians. He focused his studies on the school in Harbor Springs.

“As long as the family nucleus was kept intact, they’d keep speaking their language and keeping their traditions,” Hemenway said. “The government wanted to break this, essentially.”

The schools often used brutal tactics to impose mainstream culture on children and left a legacy of abuse from Pennsylvania to California. Nationwide the schools' student population didn't peak until the 1970s when more than 60,000 Native American children were enrolled, according to Amnesty International.

John Petoskey, general counsel for the Grand Traverse Band, said the schools weren't enough to whitewash the culture. The government then adopted the Dawes Act of 1887, which divided reservations into allotments for individuals. Excess land was given to outsiders, he said.

Now members of the community are focused on healing the wounds left by the schools and other abuses.

Tribal offices shut down for two days this month for a Gathering of Native Americans. The event allows native people to reclaim their histories, stories and ceremonies. It spotlights the community's resilience.

Raphael, who worked with tribal members battling addictions and became a peacemaker for youth in trouble, said he's seen many tribal members turn to alcohol or drugs to forget the trauma of boarding schools.

He said the abuse at the hands of nuns likely contributed to some former students' abusive behavior toward women.

"I think that spilled over into the community," he said.

He said boarding schools often are discussed at native gatherings, and it always bothered him and his classmates that sometimes they're talked about as institutions of the past, something that was only experienced by people who are now dead.

"There are people still alive who went to boarding school, who it had a negative impact on them," Raphael said. "There are those who went to boarding school who are living in fear."

Raphael recalls one encounter with a former classmate who'd often been called on by the nuns to dole out punishment. The man saw Raphael and immediately stood to fight.

“He said, ‘ever since I left boarding school, I’ve been afraid you guys were going to come back and get me at some point.’ He said, ‘I was so afraid I started drinking. I became an alcoholic out of fear,’” Raphael said.

He assured the man that was not the case. It’s the kind of long-lasting cultural ripple many tribal members have become accustomed to in the three decades since the school in Harbor Springs closed.

A community void

JoAnne Cook, a Grand Traverse Band Tribal Council member, was the first in her family not to go to boarding school. Her mother, grandmother and older siblings all attended the schools.

Cook, who graduated from Suttons Bay High School in 1985, said she didn’t know much about boarding schools until one of her friends was sent to one. They were 10 years old, and Cook thought the pair would have fun if they went together. She asked her mother if she could join her friend at boarding school.

“I just remember the look my mom had on her face. I knew immediately I just asked her something that I shouldn’t have,” Cook said.

Cook said she learned more about the schools as she grew older. Many families believed their children would be placed in foster care if they didn’t send them away to school.

The Indian Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978, after Congress reviewed policies and found that Native American children were being taken from their parents at what John Petoskey described as an “alarming rate.” The act gave tribes more opportunities to intervene in parental rights cases.

Both the boarding schools and foster care left behind a community devoid of children, and damaged a culture centered on family. Grandparents traditionally taught children values and language, but that system eroded while children were banned from speaking the language in school, Cook said.

“Then you get to my generation that has had to live through that. We are kind of picking that all back up,” Cook said.

She said the community has to remember its history but not get stuck in it.

“A lot of native people say you have to know who you are; you have to know your story,” Cook said.

Different experience

Not everyone had a negative experience at boarding school.

Elsie Dudley remembers her time at one as a needed escape from Suttons Bay when she was young. Other children and most of the teachers at the public school were prejudiced against natives, she said. She refused to go to class, and when the bus dropped her at school she wouldn't follow her classmates.

“I'd get off and walk back home, about three miles away,” she said.

Dudley's father decided to send her to Holy Childhood for the sixth grade in the late 1940s. She spent the next three years there.

At first she tried to pull the same stunts, but one day a nun pulled her aside and explained they could teach her, as long as she was open to it.

“I wanted to learn after that nun sat me down,” Dudley said. “They made it fun.”

Dudley said that unlike others' experiences, she was never discouraged from speaking her language. In fact, nuns taught her beading, leather work and other cultural crafts. Dudley never experienced abuse or saw any. She even wanted to be a nun when she left school, and later passed on what she learned to her children.

“I showed them structure and that's what I learned up there,” she said.

Later generations

Eva Petoskey said tribal members had a range of boarding school experiences. Some of her family members ran away, while others appreciated the food and structure.

She considers herself a survivor of boarding schools, even though she never attended one. She knows people her age who were sent to them. Her mother went to a school in Mount Pleasant, and her grandmother to another in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

“I think as a public policy, as a policy of the United States government, it was misguided and harmful,” she said. “It was, I think, a violation of our human rights.”

The Carlisle Indian Industrial Boarding School in Pennsylvania was established in 1879 by Richard Pratt, an army officer who is remembered for his philosophy: “Kill the Indian, save the man.”

Petoskey said her grandmother made the trip by boat and train when she was 8 years old. She expected to find comfortable beds “like the white people” had, but found uncomfortable army-style barracks instead. Many children got sick and died, Petoskey said.

Petoskey is a member of the Grand Traverse Band and the director of the Anishnaabek Healing Circle Access to Recovery Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan, a group that helps people struggling with substance abuse.

She experienced the inter-generational trauma left in the wake of the boarding schools that’s common in the region’s tribal community.

“You have this underlying feeling you’re always fighting, about being inferior or insignificant,” she said.

She said many women her age were raised in foster care, orphanages or boarding schools. Petoskey and her husband swore off drugs and alcohol, but not all tribal members were able to make such a commitment.

“I think that some of that internalized oppression that’s resulted from these violations of our human rights has resulted in those widespread problems,” she said.

Cook said there’s still hope the tribal community can get through the boarding school era and become a healthier community.

“We have things that our grandparents were trying to get for us and we were able to finally receive some of that,” Cook said. “Sometimes we’re kind of focused on what we don’t have, versus what we do.”

Now Native Americans have to balance the push and pull between preserving the past and protecting the future.

“Most of the time, society doesn’t set it up where you can really do both,” Petoskey said.