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# Northern Arapaho Seek Healing For Historic Boarding School Traumas

By [MELODIE EDWARDS \(/PEOPLE/MELODIE-EDWARDS\)](/PEOPLE/MELODIE-EDWARDS/) • FEB 26, 2016

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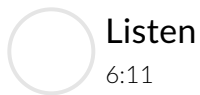
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Northern Arapaho tribal liaison Sergio Maldonado addresses the Northern Arapaho elder council. The meeting opened with an elder's prayer. A Rosebud Sioux youth group handed out samples of pemmican, a traditional meat and fruit snack.

CREDIT MELODIE EDWARDS



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6:11

It's standing room only in a large conference room in Riverton, Wyoming. Up front, people mill around a display of old photographs of Arapaho children sent to Carlisle Boarding School in the late 1880's. One is a before-and-after photo of a boy in braids wearing feathers and jewelry; a second, same boy, now in a starched suit and short Ivy League haircut.

Yufna Soldier Wolf is the director of the Northern Arapaho Tribal Historic Preservation Office. The boy in the photo is one of her relatives. She says two years ago, the tribe wrote to the U.S. Army, which now runs a college on the old Carlisle land, asking them to release their ancestor's remains. She shows a letter to the audience that they sent back telling her, no, they weren't willing to dig up their ancestor's remains.

"The conditions of the graves are fragile and movement would be extremely difficult to move," she reads aloud.



For more than a century, the remains of hundreds of kids from the nation's tribes have been buried in a grave at Carlisle the country's first Indian Boarding School in Pennsylvania. Many likely died of disease but for others, the causes are still unknown. Tens of thousands of Native kids were sent to Carlisle and other boarding schools, often against their will. Physical and mental abuse inflicted on them there has had lasting impacts on tribal communities. But the Northern Arapaho tribe is now calling on the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act

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*Soldier Wolf says rather than putting all the photos into a power point, she preferred to display original old photos to bring history to life.*

CREDIT MELODIE EDWARDS

their ancestors' remains in hopes that a reburial of the children who died there could offer some healing.

The Arapaho and Sioux have good reason for leading the charge on this. Their children were some of the first to be sent to Carlisle in 1879. That's when U.S. Army captain, Richard Henry Pratt, first started the school in hopes of assimilating the tribes into white culture.

"We were still being hunted down at that time," says Russell Eagle Bear, the Rosebud Sioux Historical Preservation director. "Timeline? 1878, 1879? That's only three years after the Battle of Little Bighorn."

He says, at that time, the U.S. government was working hard to subdue the Plains tribes and that those first boarding school children weren't just students.

"They were basically hostages taken from all the leadership: Spotted Tail, White Thunder and Red Cloud. And once you take their kids, you have control over the parents."

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**That's one thing we're working on is to get the U.S. government to acknowledge their role and the policy and the damage that was done. But tribes can also work toward healing their communities by participating in this process.**

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Carlisle Historian Barbara Landis agrees that boarding schools were used to control tribes the government considered hostile. She says Pratt's philosophy was to "kill the Indian, save the man."

“The cutting of the hair is a sign of mourning,” she says. “So when the barber came in, there was this collective wail that came out from the barracks of the children who were suddenly mourning because there was the loss of...something. And it was the loss of their culture!”

Landis says, soon, 24 off-reservation boarding schools sprang up in hopes of wiping out Native culture. No traditional religion, clothes or language was allowed in the schools. Hundreds more boarding schools on the reservations-- some run by the government, others by churches-- opened too. Many continued to practice this forced assimilation into the 1980's.

Arapaho and Shoshone member Betty Friday remembers it well. She went to an Episcopal Indian boarding school in remote South Dakota called St. Elizabeth's in the 50's. There, nuns hit her with sticks, and she saw a priest sexually assault one of her dorm mates.

“I remember for some reason I woke in the middle of the night and I could hear her crying and then I saw.” Friday says, and puts a hand to her mouth. The memory obviously still hurts. “And I couldn't figure out why he was there. That's all right, go back to sleep, he told me. When I think about it now I think, oh my god, how many, how many other girls? And boys?”

Friday says she believes her older brother was abused there, too.

“All through his life, he was troubled,” she says. “Up to the end, he was very angry. It finally dawned on me. This is what happened to him. He was probably molested at the boarding school.”

“Some offenses committed by church officials in boarding schools included pretty horrific things,” says Christine Diindiisi McCleave with the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. “Murder by beating, poisoning, hangings, starvation, strangulation and medical experimentation. The Canadian Truth Commission on Genocide report from 2001 included incidents of torture, involuntary sterilization, pedophile rings. And we have evidence of unmarked graves of children who were murdered, particularly those born due to the rape of Native American girls by priests and other church officials at the schools.”

She says there's now evidence that those traumas have reverberated through generations and disrupted tribal family structures.

“There's a recent scientific discovery of epigenetic transfer, which explains how our ancestors' life experiences can give us predispositions towards anxiety or resilience based on their experiences by altering our own DNA.”

She says her organization is working to heal such historical trauma. She says the first step in healing any trauma is truth telling.

“That's one thing we're working on is to get the U.S. government to acknowledge their role and the policy and the damage that was done,” she says. “But tribes can also work toward healing their communities by participating in this process.”

Yufna Soldier Wolf says for the U.S. Army to go through the effort of exhuming the tribe's ancestors would definitely be healing.

"[To] actually getting an apology or someone acknowledging what had happened then wasn't right. And we're sorry, here's your kids back, we're so sorry. But it's always fighting for that apology and it should be like that. It shouldn't be so hard."

After the meeting, Soldier Wolf mailed off another request to the army and says, this time she won't take no for an answer. She says it's time for the tribe to receive some closure by putting their ancestors to rest. She says the tribe recently developed a new ceremony specifically to be used in the reburial of lost ancestors.

To hear the second part of this series on the experience of Native kids at present day boarding schools, click here. (<http://wyomingpublicmedia.org/post/todays-remaining-native-american-boarding-schools-are-far-cry-their-history>)

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