

Tribal Youth Need Your Support



Student body assembled on the Carlisle Indian School Grounds, circa 1885. Photo courtesy of Carlisle-www.army.mil

By Vi Waln

I was never an advocate for boarding schools. I've heard people talk about the terrible experiences they had at boarding school. I believe the boarding school experience caused unnecessary trauma to some of our people.

Carlisle Indian Industrial School was the very first boarding school established for our people. It was in operation from 1879 to 1918 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. This school was the model for all the boarding schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Spotted Tail was one of the first to send his children to Carlisle. Luther Standing Bear was also a student at Carlisle. Jim Thorpe is a famous athlete who attended Carlisle.

I doubt that many of us have given any thought to what this first boarding school was really like at the turn of the century. Carlisle, Pennsylvania is nearly 1,500 miles from Rosebud, South Dakota. Online sources, such as Wikipedia, paint

the school at Carlisle as a military type organization, where tribal students suffered corporal punishment for simply being themselves.

Wikipedia also states that 10,000 tribal children from across the country were sent to Carlisle to get an education. Yet, only 158 students actually received a diploma. The education they received was to prepare them for life in American society. Our people went there to be stripped of their culture, language and identity. In return, they would come home speaking, reading and writing English.

But some of them didn't come home. Richard Henry Pratt was a retired military officer put in charge of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. One of Pratt's rules required parents to sign a consent form stating students were to stay at the school for 5 years. There was no going home when it didn't work out for them. According to Charles Eastman, the only way Pratt allowed students to return home was if "they were ill, unsuitable mentally or a menace to others."

Some students died while attending Carlisle. Nearly 200 tribal students are buried in a cemetery on the current site. These are children who were removed from their families and sent far away in order to learn how to be like the white man. Reportedly, these children died from illnesses. But I believe some of these children died from homesickness and broken hearts. I also believe some were tortured to death.

I can't imagine riding a train nearly 1,500 miles from home in order to be educated. My guess is the staff at the school were instructed to beat the Indian out of these students. Again, we've all heard horror stories about the abuse suffered in boarding school. This is the institution all of the other boarding schools were modeled after. I would bet money that it was the most abusive of all.

Last summer, the Sicangu Lakota Youth Council visited the place where Carlisle Indian Industrial School was located. The place where the school was is now designated a National Historic Landmark. The United States Army War College is also located on the site.

The visit to Carlisle touched the hearts and spirits of our young people. Like me, they couldn't imagine being torn from their families to be placed in a boarding school 1,500 miles from home. Our young people spent time in the cemetery where nearly 200 children are buried. It was an emotional trip to Carlisle. They offered prayers and songs. They left sage and candy on the graves. But they wanted to do more.

Now, they have formed an alliance with the Northern Arapaho Tribal Historic Preservation Office to work on getting the remains of some of those children returned to the tribes they were removed from over 100 years ago. However, the Department of the Army has outlined conditions which seem impossible to meet.



Sicangu Youth Council members provided spiritual food to members of the Northern Arapaho Tribe in a recent visit to Wyoming. The tribes will work together to have the remains of several children who died while attending the Carlisle Indian Industrial School disinterred from a cemetery and returned to their homelands for a traditional reburial. Photo courtesy of Sicangu Youth Council.

There were 10,000 students from over 150 tribes who attended Carlisle. If each one of those 150 tribes would commit to writing a letter to both their state legislators and President Barack Obama, our young people might be able to get those human remains brought home to where they belong. Tribal people believe President Obama can be influential in this process. He could use his authority to remove the barriers put up by the Department of the Army.

Many of us believe the spirits of those children who want to have their remains returned to the land they were forcibly removed from, will help our young people find a way to do so. If you would like to help, please attend the meeting scheduled for Friday, January 22, 2016 at 4pm in the Rosebud Sioux Tribal Office. Our youth need your support.

This entry was posted in Uncategorized on January 24, 2016 [<https://beardog.org/2016/01/24/tribal-youth-need-your-support/>].

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