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VETERANS

Doug Meigs

Robert O'Brien, 85, was a guest of honor for the Jim Thorpe Sports Days at the U.S. Army War College – once known as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Upon his visit to the barracks and grounds, O'Brien used his time to trace his Native roots. O'Brien is seen during the closing ceremonies of the annual athletic event held in April.

Alone Without a Tribe; Native Vet Traces His Roots at Carlisle Indian School

Doug Meigs • May 16, 2016

The U.S. Army War College recently honored a Native American veteran at the Jim Thorpe Sports Days, an annual athletic event for students at the nation's elite war colleges on April 21-23.

Robert O'Brien was the guest of honor. The 85-year-old O'Brien was recognized for his military service, his career achievements, and his lineage – his father graduated from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.

O'Brien explored the history of his father's time at Carlisle while the Army, Air, Marine, National and Eisenhower War Colleges' students competed against in various sports: running, cycling, soccer, and more.

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School opened in 1879 at the Carlisle Barracks in central Pennsylvania. The school became the flagship campus for off-reservation, BIA-run boarding schools nationwide. More than 10,000 students attended Carlisle, until the Indian School closed in 1918. The Carlisle Barracks now belongs to the U.S. Army War College.

Estimates vary as to how many students died at the Carlisle Indian School. Native scholar Preston McBride estimates that roughly 500 students died or fell ill and were sent home to die. Gravestones memorialize 186 buried in a tidy cemetery on the edge of the military base.

The cemetery is now at the center of a repatriation controversy as the Northern Arapaho, Northern Cheyenne, and Rosebud Sioux tribes seek the return of children buried there. The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition launched an online petition calling for repatriation, and the Army has since expressed willingness to consult with the tribes.

O'Brien went to the cemetery to pay his respects before the opening ceremony. He walked quietly between the graves looking for mention of his tribal affiliation, the Three Affiliated Tribes of Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara.

Information about the cemetery appears on a plaque affixed to a large stone near the entrance to the cemetery. The plaque reads: "Buried here are the Indians who died while attending the Carlisle Indian School (1879-1918). The original Indian cemetery was located to the rear of the grandstand on Indian Field. In 1931, the graves were transferred to this site."

7/16/2018 Alone Without a Tribe: Native Vet Traces His Roots at Carlisle Indian School - Indian Country Media Network
Before the games began, O'Brien had the opportunity to walk upon Indian Field, where Jim Thorpe competed, he visited the bandstand where his father performed nightly with the acclaimed Carlisle Indian Band. He slept in the Jim Thorpe room of the recently renovated Washington Hall, the same room where Thorpe had stayed while playing for Pop Warner.

Col. Dominic Wibe escorted O'Brien around the barracks in a golf cart during his three-day stay. Generals and other high-ranking officers frequently approached to shake O'Brien's hand.

"Being invited here to Carlisle is a great honor," O'Brien said. "To have a full colonel taking care of my every need, the equivalent of a base commander in the Air Force or the skipper of a battleship in the Navy, wheeling around a tech sergeant like me is big stuff."

Discovering his tribe

Native Americans serve in the United States military in greater proportion compared to other ethnic segments of the U.S. population.

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O'Brien and his siblings embody the trend. Five out of nine brothers and sisters enlisted, but O'Brien was unaware of their existence until he was 62, because he grew up in an orphanage in St. Paul, Minnesota. His military career spanned the Navy (from 1948 to 1957) and Air Force (from 1957 to 1968), including deployment to Korea, Japan and France. Afterwards, he was employed by the City of Omaha and Douglas County in Nebraska.

O'Brien was the Director of Civil Defense for Douglas County from 1978-1993, and he was elected the president of the Nebraska Civil Defense Directors' Association for two terms.

While living in the Omaha area, O'Brien finally became acquainted with other Native people. He served in various capacities as president or board chairman of several urban Indian organizations. He was instrumental in establishing the Nebraska Urban Indian Health Coalition, but because he lacked tribal enrollment, O'Brien had to leave the board. After gaining enrollment, he returned as board chairman and held the position from 1993 until retiring from the board in 2005.

He never thought of searching for his tribe until a schoolteacher friend invited him to give a career talk at her school in Elkhorn, Nebraska. The children were shocked to learn that he had never tried to find his parents. "That got me thinking," he said.

Catholic Charities in Minnesota held documents that named his "alleged" father, Arthur Mandan. When O'Brien finally met his family in North Dakota, they welcomed him with open arms. He went from no known siblings to more relations than he had ever imagined. He and his children, Alex and Michele, all gained enrollment in the Three Affiliated Tribes.

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O'Brien contacted the National Archives in Washington D.C. to learn more about his deceased father. Documents confirmed that Arthur Mandan had graduated from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in April of 1907.

In the fall of 1907, Jim Thorpe began playing football for the "Carlisle Indians."

The namesake of Jim Thorpe Sports Days is one of the greatest athletes of all time. Thorpe (Sac and Fox) dominated the track of the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, winning gold in both pentathlon and decathlon. He competed professionally in baseball, football and basketball. He was also the first president of the American Professional Football Association, which would later become the NFL.

Meanwhile, Thorpe's classmate and O'Brien's father—Mandan—went on to become the first tribal chairman of the Three Affiliated Tribes of Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara during the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.

Mandan's surname refers back to another influential ancestor. Mandan's grandfather—Red Buffalo Cow—was the last hereditary chief of the Mandan and a signatory of the Ft. Laramie Treaty of 1851. Red Buffalo Cow's leadership prevented Mandan relocation to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).

For 24 years, O'Brien has been enrolled in the tribe of his paternal ancestry.

Native tourism in Carlisle

Like O'Brien, Sandra Cianciulli (Lakota) is descended from Carlisle students. Her great-aunt and great-uncle were in the first class at the Indian School. As president of the Carlisle Indian School Project, Cianciulli coordinated O'Brien's trip to Carlisle, and she also brought Carlisle descendants with military experience: Jefferson Keel (Chickasaw), a former Army Ranger, 2013; and Bill Gollnick (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin), a former Marine Green Beret, 2015.

The Carlisle Indian School Project is a fairly recent initiative that grew out of the Circle Legacy Center's grassroots effort to prevent the 2010 demolition of an old farmhouse on the Carlisle Barracks.

The Project joins a number of other historic initiatives working to preserve the legacy of the school. Other key local institutions include the Cumberland County Historical Society (a crucial repository of archival materials relating to the Carlisle Indian School) and Dickinson College's Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, which is in the process of digitizing and uploading relevant documents from the National Archives.

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"We all want to work together to make it a destination that is welcoming and informative," said Cianciulli. "The Carlisle Indian School is part of an era that was experienced by a generation. It is local history here, and it is our nation's history."

Cianciulli was joined by BIA tourism coordinator Ed Hall (MHA), vice president of the Carlisle Indian School Project.

Hall happened to be related to O'Brien. He had heard stories about O'Brien's reconnection with family on Ft. Berthold, but the two hadn't met before the Jim Thorpe Sports Days.

"We have a lot of relatives who came to the Carlisle Indian School. I think it's an honor to be alive and see someone who is my elder, a relative, honored in this way," Hall said. "Our challenge today is to say that we understand how this happened; now what do we do? We're still here. How do we honor what happened? And those people who didn't survive? How do we move beyond? I don't think people can truly move beyond until they know where they've come from."

Hall said that Jim Thorpe's role in the Army War College's sporting event seems to have begun with Thorpe's iconic All-American status. Hall praised how the Army's approach to Jim Thorpe Days has broadened through efforts to recognize tribes and descendants of Carlisle Indian School students.

“[The Carlisle Indian School] is not just an Indian story; it’s not just an Army story; it’s not just a Carlisle story,” Hall said. “It’s a complex story among many. And when you talk about the families, and the children, and the people who were impacted, that’s a whole other story. I think we are at the beginning of being able to weave all of that together.”

During the second day of the Jim Thorpe Sports Days, Cianciulli took O’Brien to visit Dickinson College’s archivist James Gerencser, the individual responsible for the Digital Resource Center.

Cianciulli also took O’Brien to meet 92-year-old George Yuda (Oneida Indian Nation), a fellow veteran and descendant of a Carlisle graduate. His father’s diploma from Carlisle hangs with family photographs on the wall of his Carlisle residence

“Father was weaving baskets when someone told him, ‘You should go to school at Carlisle.’ He thought that sounded like a good idea, so he did,” Yuda said. “After he graduated, he hired many of his classmates from the Indian School to work with him in Philadelphia’s shipyards.”

Yuda shared mementos of his father’s time at the Indian School: a book of quotes from classmates, old photos, and he told O’Brien about the time Jim Thorpe dropped by the house to see his father.

A resident of Carlisle, Yuda was recognized at several previous Jim Thorpe Sports Days alongside Thorpe’s grandson (John Thorpe) to add “heritage and dignity” to the event prior to the involvement of the Carlisle Indian School Project.

A model of assimilation?

Richard Henry Pratt established the Carlisle Indian School in 1879 with supposedly good intentions. He believed in the inherent equality of indigenous and white people. But Pratt—and mainstream American society at the time—also viewed Native social and political organization as fundamentally “uncivilized.”

On a boulder outside Washington Hall where O’Brien was lodging on the Carlisle Barracks, a plaque articulates the Brigadier General’s philosophy of well-intended ethnocentrism. The plaque quotes Pratt: “The way to civilize an Indian is to get him into civilization. The way to keep him civilized is to let him stay.”

The sort of ethnocentrism that Pratt advocated remains a stain on the federal government’s boarding school policy, a legacy of forced cultural assimilation, children forbidden to practice their religion, stripped of their Native tongues.

O’Brien did not attend Indian boarding schools, but his childhood in the strict Catholic orphanage bore striking resemblance to the lifestyle in them. He didn’t know any other Native people. He was alone without a tribe.

Since his 1992 reunion with family on the Ft. Berthold reservation, he has strived to learn what it means to belong to the Three Affiliated Tribes. From his family, he has learned about Mandan and Hidatsa matrilineal clanship, etiquette, and spirituality. Every visit to Ft. Berthold is a joyous educational experience.

On the final night of his visit to Carlisle, after the closing ceremony, after the Army War College won the Commandants Cup, Robert O’Brien reflected on the legacy of the Carlisle Indian School from his plush lodgings in the Jim Thorpe room.

He pondered aloud: “I would probably be the model for the sort of Indian Pratt had in mind, don’t you think? ‘Kill the Indian, save the man,’ Pratt had said. I didn’t know one Indian growing up. Would there have been anything better that Pratt would be looking for?”

O'Brien has no regrets in his life, no bitterness. Only gratitude. Upon returning to his home in Omaha, he sent a letter thanking the Army War College for his reception as the guest-of-honor.

"I see this as recognition of not only myself," he wrote, "It's an honor to all my relations and the legacy of my father, Arthur Mandan."



Comments

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