



Sexual Trauma: One Legacy of the Boarding School Era -Ruth Hopkins

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Sexual Trauma: One Legacy of the Boarding School Era

By Ruth Hopkins

Every American Indian alive today has been affected by the policy of assimilation implemented by the United States government in centuries past.

Under the guise of Manifest Destiny, European invaders swept through North America in ever increasing waves- displacing Natives from their ancestral homelands. They made treaties with Native nations only to break them, and resorted to outright theft when push came to shove. Ultimately, these greed-driven conquests led to the massacre of millions of innocent Indigenous peoples. Their weapons of mass destruction were disease, starvation, and war.

They underestimated the strength and resilience of North America's First Peoples. Despite their best efforts to terminate us, and even though Natives were vastly outnumbered, we persisted. The Oceti Sakowin (Great Sioux Nation), joined by allies, defeated U.S. forces on North American soil at the Battle of Little Big Horn. Even though they killed nearly all the buffalo, Natives held on. We survived. In the late 1800s, a new idea arose as to how to deal with the "Indian problem." The Powers that Be, backed by popular opinion, decided it was better to "kill the Indian and save the man." In other words, they desired to strip us our Tribal cultures and languages and make us over in their image. They wanted to "civilize" Natives, and they would use religion and education to do it.

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Pre-1900, 25 boarding schools were built off-reservation and at least 30,000 Native children, about 10% of the entire Native population at the time, were pushed through the system. These boarding schools were run by religious organizations, and funded by the Federal government. By the end of the boarding school era, over 100,000 Native children had passed through the boarding school system.

Many Native children were snatched from their mother's arms and stolen away to attend boarding schools. My grandmother Stella Pretty Sounding Flute was forced to go to boarding school, as were her brothers. She described the intense trauma children experienced when they were taken away from everything and everyone they know and placed in a strange, cold, impersonal environment cut off from nature. One of the first events upon arrival to the boarding school laid the groundwork for the years of psychological damage that would be inflicted on the children for years to come. Their hair would be cut. Traditionally, Native men wore long hair. Stella recalled seeing boys' spirits broken as their braids, literal ties to their Tribal identity and holding spiritual power, fell to the floor.

Children were forbidden to speak their Native tongue, and beaten for doing so. The implementation of this English-only policy at boarding schools is the primary reason so many Native languages are on the brink of extinction now. My father, also a boarding school survivor, told stories of his willful older brother, who would not stop speaking the Dakota language despite the abuse he received for refusing to give it up. Years later, that same brother went onto teach Dakota language to children at a Tribal high school.



Life at boarding school was punishing of its own accord. Children were not allowed to return home to visit their families for years at a time, if at all. Conditions were harsh. During particularly cold winters, some children froze to death in their beds. Days were long, and usually consisted of difficult, and occasionally dangerous, industrial work.

Despite all of these horrors, none of them compares to the shocking level of inhumane physical brutality, sexual abuse and child rape that took place at boarding schools. Child molestation was rampant.

Brave elders have come forward to share their heart wrenching tales of abuse and assault at the hands of priests, nuns, and other staff at boarding schools. As a parent, it's difficult to listen to stories of how innocent preschool age girls were digitally penetrated by perverted priests and little boys were forced to perform oral sex on nuns in the middle of the night under pain of death. Sexual abuse was frequent and continuous, utter

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torture. Most of us will never know the trauma our grandmothers and grandfathers were made to endure at boarding schools.

There are thousands of Native children in both the United States and Canada who never returned home from boarding and residential schools; their small, bruised, and broken bodies yet unaccounted for. There are even reports of children who were murdered while still newborns, that their families never knew existed. These babies, who died without names, were the product of rape, when priests assaulted girls and impregnated them. The souls of these murdered children cry out for justice.

Coupled with justice, we also need healing. Sexual abuse is a disease. Even today, when Native survivors of sexual trauma come forward, the abuse can nearly always be traced back through a line victims who became perpetrators, with the first act of sexual violence originating at a boarding school.

Boarding school has also affected Native communities' natural healing process, because it robbed us of not only our close familial bonds, but our cultural belief systems, as well as ceremonies meant to doctor us and cleanse us.



Shame is a wall that hides sexual trauma. It prevents sexual abuse survivors from speaking help. We cannot afford to be quiet any longer. If you've been the victim of sexual abuse or rape, you are not alone. You can find healing, and you can reach out and help others like yourself too.

Despite the devastation the Federal government's policy of assimilation and the boarding school system has caused, all is not lost. We still have our Native languages, our cultures, and our belief systems. Combined with new counseling techniques, we can heal ourselves and our communities.

Sexual trauma remains largely unaddressed, even though it is a root cause for much of what ails Native communities today. It contributes to mental health issues, suicide epidemics, and family dysfunction. Together, we will end this plague.

The 3rd Annual HOPE Conference will be held at The Billings Hotel & Convention Center in Billings, Montana April 4th & 5th, 2013. The HOPE Conference coincides with the 45th Annual MSU-Billings Powwow at the Alterowitz Gym on Friday April 5th and Saturday April 6th. The purpose of the conference is to address the issue of child sexual trauma within Native communities, and to bring to light this epidemic which has torn at the fabric of Indian Country communities for generations. The Conference will focus on the PAST, PRESENT, and FUTURE of this issue, highlighting healing and resilience. Go to <http://www.thehopeconference.com/> to find out more.