



Army general Richard Henry Pratt is seen here with an Indian boarding school student , circa 1880. Pratt was the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School and advocated the [Kill the Indian -- Save the Man](#) approach to the education of Indian children. Photo from [U.S. Military Institute, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania](#)

#### OPINION



## Tim Giago: Indian Country still suffering from boarding school era

Posted: Tuesday, August 30, 2016 📅

### Modern day activists call it 'Historic Trauma'

Notes from Indian Country

By Tim Giago (Nanwica Kciji - Stands Up For Them)

What has been the long-term impact of the Indian boarding school experiment?

I say experiment because over the past 125 years the Indian people have been used for many social, educational and welfare experiments. Indians were like the miner's canary. When tossed into the caverns if we perished the experiments were ended or altered. In many instances the experiments were carried out to their conclusion regardless of the circumstances.

The immediate impact upon the Indian children was that of being taken from their traditional homes and incarcerated in an institution where they were shorn of their long hair, dressed alike, bombarded with propaganda and separated from their traditional teachers.

Stomping out the language was also a top priority. Belittling and ridiculing the traditional spirituality became another goal of the people who acted with the best intentions. If they could make English the first language and convert the children to Christianity the road to acculturation would nearly be complete.

They also had to teach that there were no heroes or religious leaders amongst the ancestors of the children. We were never taught about the spiritual leadership of Black Elk or of the wartime heroics of Crazy Horse. It was only when the Catholic Church was convinced that Black Elk



had converted to Catholicism that they allowed his name to be mentioned in the classroom. They never taught us that while studying their ways Black Elk still retained his traditional Lakota beliefs.

Many of those who came out west to educate the Indian children were misfits. They were sent out here by the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the Catholic Church on a mission of killing the Indian while saving the child. Among the teachers finding their way to the Indian reservations were many that came here as a form of punishment. In the Catholic Church many came out to the reservations as a form of penance.

Among those teachers were many pedophiles. They found an easy place to prey on innocent children because we were so isolated that no one really cared what happened to us. The most prevalent form of punishment was the leather strap. After observing and receiving many severe beatings with the strap I cannot help but conclude that many of the teachers sent out west were also sadists.

Many traditional Lakota (and members of other Indian nations) came out of the boarding schools as broken children. They did not know who they were and what part they would or could play in society-at-large, or in their own reservation societies.

They returned to a world where their parents and grandparents spoke a language they could no longer understand or speak. They often felt like outcasts in their own tiospaye (camp or extended family). Shorn of hair and spirit, many turned to alcohol to dull their senses and to allow them to feel like warriors once more. Under the influence they often committed acts of violence. Many ended up in prison for crimes they could not remember committing.

Even worse, many of those who had been sexually assaulted by the teachers, priests, brothers and nuns often turned to committing the same revolting acts against their own children and family members. They became abusers themselves and the abuse took on the form of violence against spouses and children. They became a part of a society that was struggling to find itself. Those who had escaped the abuse or who rose above it became the foundation for creating a better society. They tried to find ways to save the abused and forgotten alcoholics.



*Tom Torlino, a Navajo student, is seen circa 1882 in before and after photos from the collection of Richard Henry Pratt, who was the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Image from [Yale University](http://yale.edu)*

Having been placed in institutions where parental ties were sliced, many of us grew up without a family peer to emulate. We were segregated by gender on the school ground and in the classrooms and so we learned little about dealing with members of the opposite sex. And beyond that, the nuns and priests who were our instructors preached to us about sex as a mortal sin.

Many of the boys and girls I grew up with came out of the Indian missions and boarding schools as victims. They entered relationships without the knowledge they should have learned from their traditional teachers, their parents and grand parents. They were surrounded by the guilt pounded into their minds by the Church and the government.

So many could not be saved. They could be seen walking the streets and alleys of the bordertowns and the reservations as lost people. Many were, and still are, dying from the effects of the cheap wine and drugs they took to find themselves. The jails and prisons of states with large Indian populations are overflowing with Indians. We have the shortest life expectancy of any minority in this nation.

The long-term impact of the boarding schools has not ended. There are thousands of Indian children with grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts and siblings who were victims of the boarding schools and who ended their lives as broken people. The historical and horrific suffering of these relatives has been passed on through the generations.

What can be done to bring this portion of the Indian's history to closure? First of all, the government and the Church groups must admit that what they did was wrong. They must admit that they severely damaged several generations of Indian children with a failed and oftentimes fatal policy.

The Church and state should even consider financial restitution to their victims. But I believe that as long as the United States and the different Church groups refuse to admit their collaboration in one of the most shameful chapters of American history, the pain and suffering of the victims will go on. It has come to be known by modern day activists as historic trauma.

(Tim Giago, an Oglala Lakota, can be reached at [unitysodak1@nswweekly.com](mailto:unitysodak1@nswweekly.com))

0 Comments

Sort by **Oldest**



Add a comment...

Facebook Comments Plugin

This story is tagged under:

[abuse](#) [boarding schools](#) [genocide](#) [historical trauma](#) [languages](#) [religion](#) [tim giago](#)

Search

Custom Search

MOST READ

- 1 ['Native women can't wait': Bill expands tribal jurisdiction over non-Indians](#)
- 2 ['I abuse myself every day': Lakota mother sentenced for death of son](#)
- 3 [Man dubbed 'tribal' activist by media arrested for sexual assault](#)
- 4 [Muscogee Creek Freedmen file lawsuit to restore citizenship](#)
- 5 [Six newly recognized tribes added to Bureau of Indian Affairs list](#)

MORE HEADLINES

[Jeffrey Whalen: Oglala Sioux leaders give themselves more money for travel](#)

['I've never seen anything like this': Native art abounds in the summer](#)

['Egregious' and 'reckless': Court rebukes immigration raid of business](#)

[Trump administration plans drilling on ancestral tribal territory](#)

[Man dubbed 'tribal' activist by media arrested for sexual assault](#)

['Native women can't wait': Bill expands tribal jurisdiction over non-Indians](#)

[Muscogee Creek Freedmen file lawsuit to restore citizenship](#)

[Editorial: It's time for the Native vote to count this November](#)