American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many

May 12, 2008 · 12:01 AM ET
Heard on Morning Edition

CHARLA BEAR

This is the first in a two-part report.

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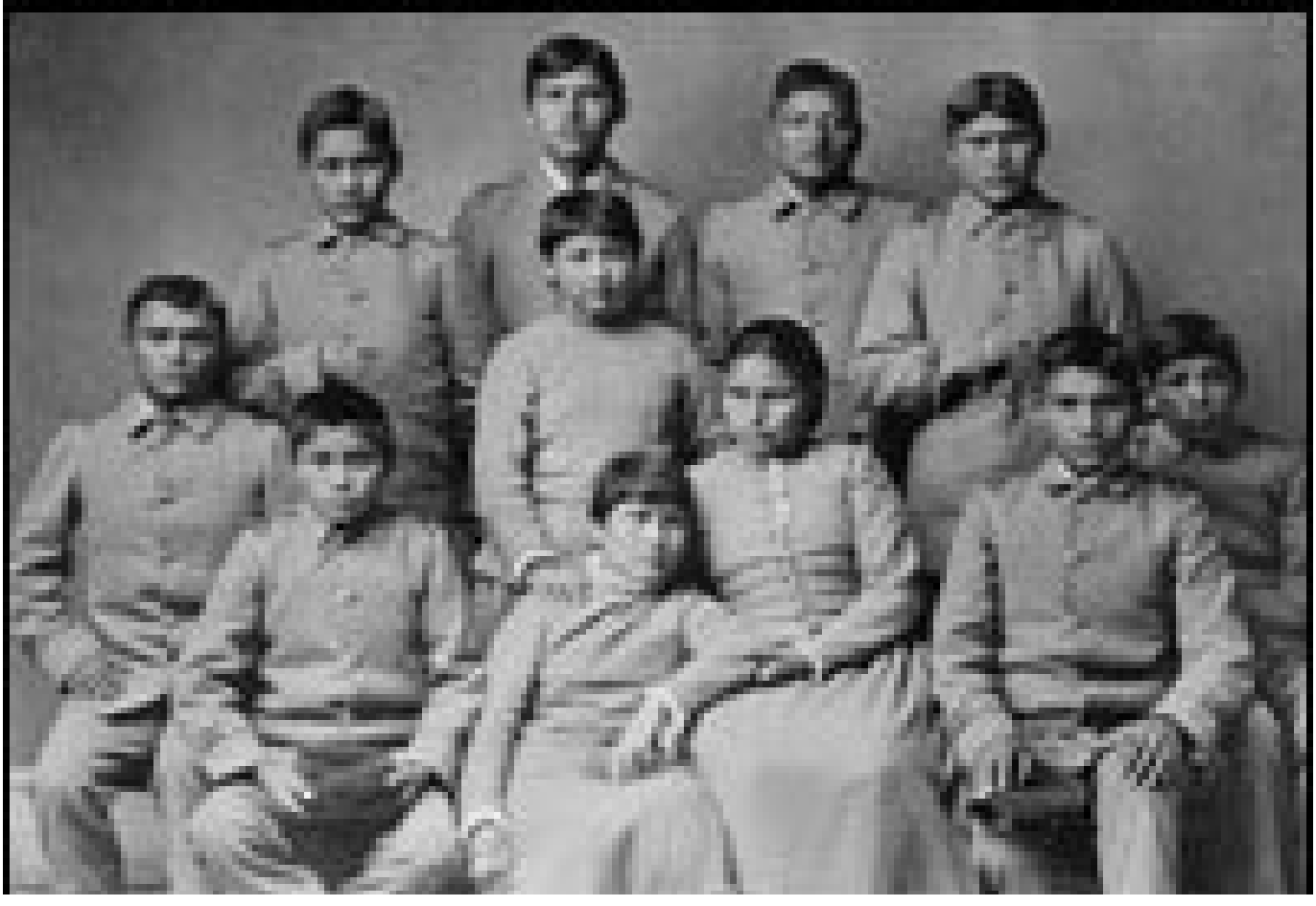
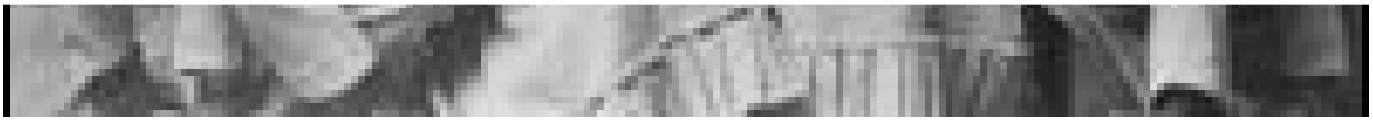
American Indian School a Far Cry from the Past May 13, 2008





Top: A group of Chiricahua Apache students on their first day at Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pa. Bottom: The same students four months later.

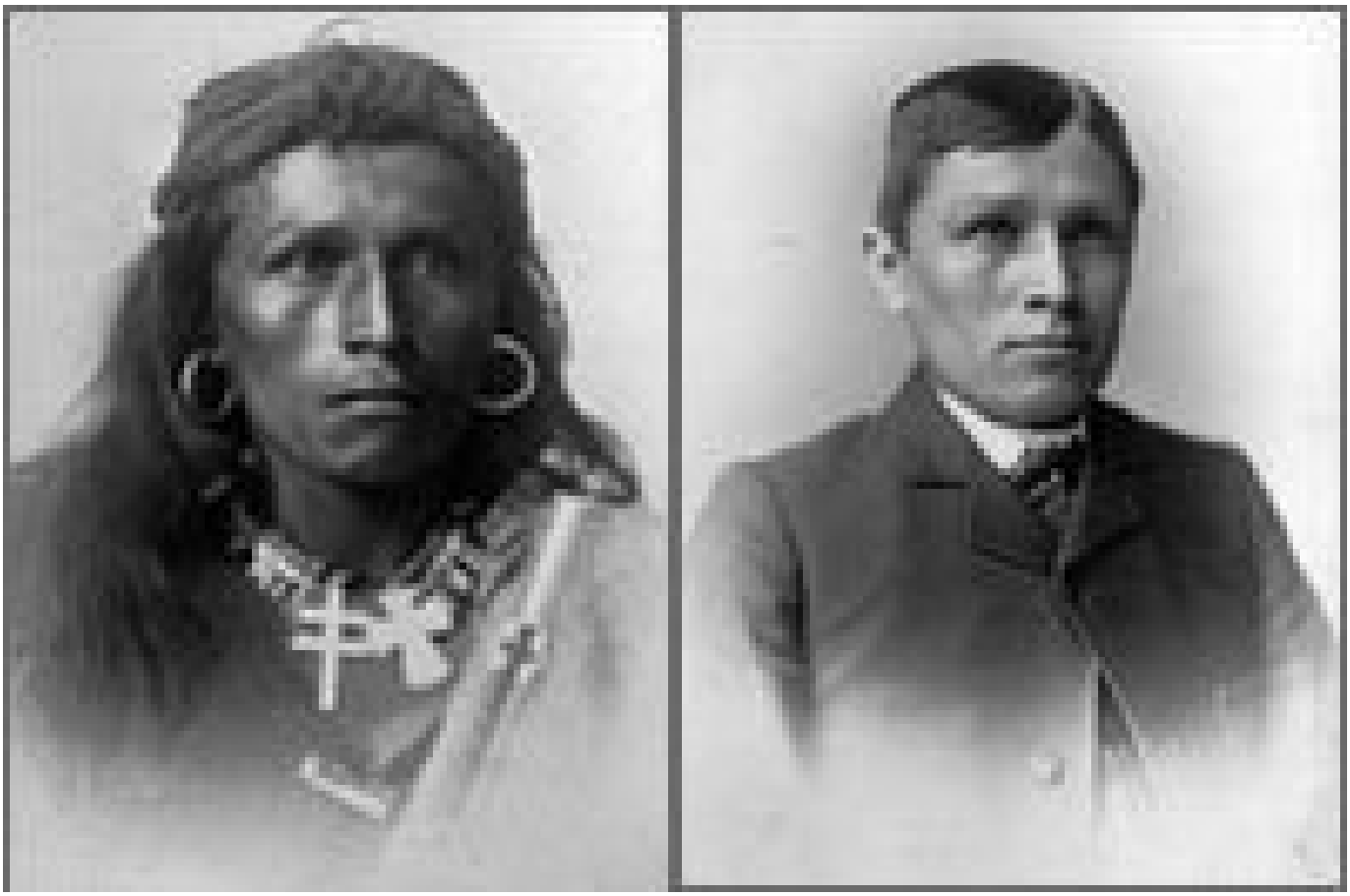
John N. Choate/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

The late songwriter, performer and Indian activist Floyd Red Crow Westerman wrote about his time at the Wahpeton Indian Boarding School in North Dakota: "You put me in your boarding school, made me learn your white man rule, be a fool."

Courtesy of Eyapaha

Bill Wright, shown here as a fifth grader at the Stewart Indian School in Nevada, still has nightmares from the severe discipline endured at boarding school.

Courtesy State of Nevada Indian Commission



Tom Torlino, a Carlisle School student, before and after spending time at the school.

Courtesy Denver Public Library, X-32984, X-32985

Students in a math class at Carlisle Indian School in 1903.

Frances Benjamin Johnston

Col. Richard H. Pratt founded the first of the off-reservation Native American boarding schools based on the philosophy that, according to a speech he made in 1892, "all the Indian there is in the race should be dead."

Frances Benjamin Johnston/CORBIS

'Kill the Indian...Save the Man'

According to Col. Richard Pratt's speech in 1892:

"A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

Read Pratt's Whole Speech

From Need to 'National Tragedy'

Early in the history of American Indian boarding schools, the U.S. government argued that Indians were savages who should be compelled to send their children to schools by whatever means necessary. Later the government recommended increased Indian control over education at the schools.

A report in the late 1880s defended the early days of the schools. In the 1920s, a report concluded that children at federal boarding schools were malnourished, overworked, harshly punished and poorly educated. And in 1969, a report declared Indian education to be a national tragedy.

For the government, it was a possible solution to the so-called Indian problem. For the tens of thousands of Indians who went to boarding schools, it's largely remembered as a time of abuse and desecration of culture.

The government still operates a handful of off-reservation boarding schools, but funding is in decline. Now many American Indians are fighting to keep the schools open.

'Kill the Indian ... Save the Man'

The late performer and Indian activist Floyd Red Crow Westerman was haunted by his memories of boarding school. As a child, he left his reservation in South Dakota for the Wahpeton Indian Boarding School in North Dakota. Sixty years later, he still remembers watching his mother through the window as he left.

At first, he thought he was on the bus because his mother didn't want him anymore. But then he noticed she was crying.

"It was hurting her, too. It was hurting me to see that," Westerman says. "I'll never forget. All the mothers were crying."

Westerman spent the rest of his childhood in boarding schools far from his family and his Dakota tribe.

He went on to become an actor, an activist with the American Indian Movement and a songwriter.

He sang about his experiences growing up: "You put me in your boarding school, made me learn your white man rule, be a fool."

The federal government began sending American Indians to off-reservation boarding schools in the 1870s, when the United States was still at war with Indians.

An Army officer, Richard Pratt, founded the first of these schools. He based it on an education program he had developed in an Indian prison. He described his philosophy in a speech he gave in 1892.

"A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one," Pratt said. "In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

Transforming People, Inside and Out

Fifty years later, Pratt's philosophy was still common.

In 1945, Bill Wright, a Pattwin Indian, was sent to the Stewart Indian School in Nevada. He was just 6 years old. Wright remembers matrons bathing him in kerosene and shaving his head. Students at federal boarding schools were forbidden to express their culture — everything from wearing long hair to speaking even a single Indian word. Wright said he lost not only his language, but also his American Indian name.

"I remember coming home and my grandma asked me to talk Indian to her and I said, 'Grandma, I don't understand you,' " Wright says. "She said, 'Then who are you?' "

Wright says he told her his name was Billy. " 'Your name's not Billy. Your name's 'TAH-rruhm,' " she told him. "And I went, 'That's not what they told me.' "

According to Tsianina Lomawaima, head of the American Indian Studies program at the University of Arizona, the intent was to completely transform people, inside and out.

"Language, religion, family structure, economics, the way you make a living, the way you express emotion, everything," says Lomawaima.

Lomawaima says from the start, the government's objective was to "erase and replace" Indian culture, part of a larger strategy to conquer Indians.

"They very specifically targeted Native nations that were the most recently hostile," Lomawaima says. "There was a very conscious effort to recruit the children of leaders, and this was also explicit, essentially to hold those children hostage. The idea was it would be much easier to keep those communities pacified with their children held in a school somewhere far away."

Discipline and Punishment

The government operated as many as 100 boarding schools for American Indians, both on and off reservations. Children were sometimes taken forcibly, by armed police. Lomawaima says that's not the only reason families let their children go.

"For many communities, for a variety of reasons, federal school was the only option," she says. "Public schools were closed to Indians because of racism."

At boarding schools, the curriculum focused mostly on trades, such as carpentry for boys and housekeeping for girls.

"It wasn't really about education," says Lucy Toledo, a Navajo who went to Sherman Institute in the 1950s. Toledo says students didn't learn basic concepts in math or English, such as parts of speech or grammar.

She also remembers some unsettling free-time activities.

"Saturday night we had a movie," says Toledo. "Do you know what the movie was about? Cowboys and Indians. Cowboys and Indians. Here we're getting all our people killed, and that's the kind of stuff they showed us."

And for decades, there were reports that students in the boarding schools were abused. Children were beaten, malnourished and forced to do heavy labor. In the 1960s, a congressional report found that many teachers still saw their role as civilizing American Indian students, not educating them. The report said the schools still had a "major emphasis on discipline and punishment."

Wright remembers an adviser hitting a student.

"Busted his head open and blood got all over," Wright recalls. "I had to take him to the hospital, and they told me to tell them he ran into the wall and I better not tell them what really happened."

Wright says he still has nightmares from the severe discipline. He worries that he and other former students have inadvertently re-created that harsh environment within their own families.

"You grow up with discipline, but when you grow up and you have families, then what happens? If you're my daughter and you leave your dress out, I'll knock you through that wall. Why? Because I'm taught discipline," Wright said.

Sherman Indian High School

Not all American Indians had negative experiences at boarding schools. Some have fond memories of meeting spouses and making lifelong friends. But scathing government reports led to the closure of most of the boarding schools.

One school that remains is Sherman Indian High School in Riverside, Calif. — the same boarding school Toledo attended.

Hershel Martinez, a Navajo student, gathers with a group of friends in a school hallway to form a drum circle. The school encourages cultural activities like this. That's one reason Martinez feels more comfortable here than at his former public school in Los Angeles.

"Everyone was wondering what nationality, what race am I," Martinez said when asked about being at a public school. "I'd tell them and they're like, 'Wow, you're Indian. You're like the only guy I know who's Native.' But here, at Sherman, they know how I feel about being Native. And they understand where we're all coming from."

But this year, the federal government made a budgeting change that reduces funding to the off-reservation boarding schools. And their future is in doubt.

History of Indian Schools Traced Through Reports

Throughout the history of the Native American boarding schools, the U.S. government has weighed in on the them — from arguing that Indians were savages who should be compelled to send their children to the schools by whatever means necessary to later, recommending increased Indian control over education.

The Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior

In 1886, the government published the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior. It established the attitudes of Indian Affairs Agents in the early days of federal boarding schools. The report was a compilation of agent reports; the agents largely saw Indians as savages who should be compelled using whatever means necessary to send their children to schools.

EXCERPTS: "If it be admitted that education affords the true solution to the Indian problem, then it must be admitted that the boarding school is the very key to the situation.

"However excellent the day school may be, whatever the qualifications of the teacher, or however superior the facilities for instruction of the few short hours spent in the day school is, to a great extent, offset by the habits, scenes and surroundings at home — if a mere place to eat and live in can be called a home. Only by complete isolation of the Indian child from his savage antecedents can he be satisfactorily educated, and the extra expense attendant thereon is more than compensated by the thoroughness of the work. "

-- John B. Riley, Indian School Superintendent

"It was deemed necessary to establish during the year a stricter system of discupline than heretofore prevailed. A cadet battalion organization of five companies broke up

the tribal associations."

-- Arthur Grabowski, Superintendent, Haskell Institute.

"The parents of these Indian children are ignorant, and know nothing of the value of education, and there are no elevating circumstances in the home circle to arouse the ambition of the children. Parental authority is hardly known or exercised among the Indians in this agency. The agent should be endowed with some kind of authority to enforce attendance. The agent here has found that a threat to depose a captain if he does not make the children attend school has had a good effect."

-- John S. Ward, United States Indian Agent, Mission Agency, California.

"Compulsion through the police is often necessary, and should this be required during the coming year, it will be heroically resorted to, regardless of results. The treaty with the Indians gives the children to the Government, for school purposes, nine months in the year, but the punishment therein provided in case they fail to comply is hardly humane or just. If taking ration tickets only metered out merited punishment to the heads of families, who are alone guilty, it would be a wise provision, but the children have togo hungry and suffer the disobedience of the parents. It is better, in my opinion, to compel attendance through the police than taking up ration tickets for non-attendance."

-- John P Williamson, Dakota Agency

The Problem of Indian Administration

In the 1920s, the federal government commissioned a groundbreaking investigation into the outcome of government policies toward American Indians, including boarding schools. The report that followed in 1928, The Problem of Indian Administration (also called the Meriam Report after Lewis Meriam, who supervised the study), found that children at federal boarding schools were malnourished, overworked, harshly punished and poorly educated.

EXCERPTS:

"The survey staff finds itself obliged to say frankly and unequivocally that the provisions for the care of the Indian children in boarding schools are grossly inadequate.

"The diet is deficient in quantity, quality, and variety.

"At a few, very few, schools, the farm and the dairy are sufficiently productive to be a highly important factor in raising the standard of the diet, but even at the best schools these sources do not fully meet the requirements for the health and development of the children. At the worst schools, the situation is serious in the extreme.

"The boarding schools are crowded materially beyond their capacities.

"The toilet facilities have in many cases not been increased proportionately to the increase in pupils, and they are fairly frequently not properly maintained or conveniently located. The supply of soap and towels has been inadequate.

"In nearly every boarding school one will find children of 10, 11, and 12 spending four hours a day in more or less heavy industrial work—dairy, kitchen work, laundry, shop. The work is bad for children of this age, especially children not physically well-nourished; most of it is in no sense educational since the operations are large-scale and bear little relation to either home or industrial life outside; and it is admittedly unsatisfactory even from the point of view of getting the work done. At present the half-day plan is felt to be necessary, not because it can be defended on health or educational grounds, for it cannot, but because the small amount of money allowed for food and clothes makes it necessary to use child labor.

"The term "child labor" is used advisedly. The labor of children as carried on in Indian boarding schools would, it is believed, constitute a violation of child labor laws in most states.

"The discipline in the boarding schools is restrictive rather than developmental. Routine institutionalism is almost the invariable characteristic of the Indian boarding school.

"Nearly every boarding school visited furnished disquieting illustrations of failure to understand the underlying principles of human behavior. Punishments of the most harmful sort are bestowed in sheer ignorance, often in a sincere attempt to be of help. Routinization is the one method used for everything; though all that we know indicates its weakness as a method in education. If there were any real knowledge of how human beings are developed through their behavior, we should not have in the Indian boarding schools the mass movements from dormitory to dining room, from dining room to classroom, from classroom back again, all completely controlled by external authority; we should hardly have children from the smallest to the largest of both sexes lined up in military formation; and we would certainly find a better way of handling boys and girls than to lock the door to the fire-escape of the girls' dormitory.

"The result is that Indian schools for the most part have as the only system of physical training applicable to all pupils a scheme of military drilling that is largely obsolete even in Army training camps. Whatever the advantages of military drill for boys of high school age (and this is a controverted matter even among military experts), few advocates of military training would find any value for girls and little children in the formal type of drill insisted upon in most Indian boarding schools.

"Almost without exception Indian boarding schools are "institutional" to an extreme degree. This is especially true of those non-reservation boarding schools that have upwards of a thousand students, where the numbers and general stiffness of the organization create problems that would be bad in any school but are especially serious in Indian schools."

Indian Education: A National Tragedy — A National Challenge

More than 40 years after the Meriam Report criticized government boarding schools, a report known as the Kennedy Report declared Indian education a national tragedy.

EXCERPTS:

"The BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] education budget was found to be greatly inadequate: Since most Indian children begin school with the environmental handicaps of rural poverty, cultural isolation, low level of parent education, and in many cases a non-English native language, equality of educational inputs requires greatly superior inschool resources of teachers, curriculum, facilities, and equipment to balance the inadequate preschool preparation of most Indian children. Such superior education has not been and cannot be supplied by the BIA on its current budget of some $1,000 per student year, which must also pay for the boarding expense of nealy half its students. It has been pointed out that the Job Corps spent from $7,000 to $9,000 per student year for its resident high-school level education program.

"When asked to name the most important things the schools should do for their students, only about one-tenth of the teachers mentioned academic achievement as an important goal. Apparently, many of the teachers still see their role as that of "civilizing the native." BIA administrators believe that Indians can choose only between total "Indianness" --whatever that is — and complete assimilation into the dominant society. Thus, the goal of BIA education appears to direct students toward migration into a city while at the same time it fails to "prepare students academically, socially, physchologically, or vocationally for urban life. As a result, many return to the reservation disillusioned, to spend the rest of their lives in economic and intellectual stagnation."

"School environment was sterile, impersonal and rigid, with a major emphasis on discipline and punishment, which is deeply resented by the students.

"Dormitory discipline is often unnecessarily strict and confining.

"Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that even as custodial institutions, the Bureau's off-reservation boarding schools are not satisfactory. Several reports point to examples of overcrowding in dormitories or classrooms, of lack of privacy for the students, of inadequate areas for study and recreation, of unappealing meals, of rules which irritate older students by their rigid enforcement and inappropriateness to the student's age, and of punitive discipline."