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Army open to returning remains of Rosebud Sioux

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Stavely walks through the Carlisle cemetery with smoldering sage to cleanse the area.)

CHARLES FOX / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

JT Stavely walks through the Carlisle cemetery with smoldering sage to cleanse the area.

by **Jeff Gammage**, Staff Writer

The children died far from their families, stricken by tuberculosis, flu, and loneliness, buried on the grounds of what was then the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, today the Army War College.



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Now there's a chance that some will be sent home to their tribes.

The head of Army cemeteries said in an interview that he's open to meeting American Indian demands to repatriate children's remains, provided talks on the matter prove fruitful and all regulations are met.

"Just like if I was dealing with an individual family member that wanted to conduct a disinterment. What are the family's wishes?" said Patrick Hallinan, executive director of Army National Military Cemeteries.

"We look for a cogent reason to authorize a disinterment, and I believe there's definitely a cogent reason. . . . I think it's incumbent on us to work with them and assist them to carry that out."

That stance marks a reversal for the Army, which in winter denied a Rosebud Sioux request to return 10 tribal children to South Dakota.

Now the Army confirms it will send two officials to Rosebud on May 10, to begin formal government-to-government consultations with the Sioux, the Northern Arapaho of Wyoming, and a third tribe that now seeks the return of its people, the Northern Cheyenne of Montana.

"I think things are going to happen," said Russell Eagle Bear, the Rosebud historic-preservation officer. "I'm hoping they're going to tell us they're ready to work with us and let our relatives go."

If that occurs, he said, an intended summer tribal pilgrimage to Carlisle could become an advance party to plan the return of Sioux remains.

The Army's use of the phrase "government-to-government consultations" is not jargon. It's a policy term that recognizes the sovereignty of native tribes and commits the federal government to fairness and flexibility.

It springs from an executive order issued by President Bill Clinton in 2000, and reinforced by President Obama in 2009, to require federal-agency heads to collaborate with tribal leaders.

Nearly 200 children lie in the Carlisle cemetery. They were among thousands taken from native families in the West, spirited a thousand miles to the East, and forced through a wrenching experiment in assimilation. The school sought to cleanse their "savage nature" by erasing their names, language, customs, religions, and family ties.

Today many Indians view what took place at Carlisle as genocide.

Hallinan's responsibilities include supervision of the nation's on-base graveyards. The decision to return remains from Carlisle to Rosebud or elsewhere, he said, rests with him.

"If the tribes are interested and this is something they want to do, we would be supportive to see that accomplished," Hallinan said. "We look forward to working with the tribes, and we think that once we sit down and consult with them, there should be a positive outcome for all involved."

He plans to send staff to two big American Indian conferences this year, to see if other tribes wish to discuss the status of their ancestors' remains.

While the Army plans to send two people on May 10, dozens could attend from Indian nations.

At least six tribes intend to have people there, and the Rosebud Sioux will bring lawyers, political leaders, and tribal staff. South Dakota's senators and congresswoman will send representatives.

"I'm trying to be as positive as I can," said Yufna Soldier Wolf, head of the Northern Arapaho historic-preservation office, who will travel to Rosebud.

For years, Soldier Wolf has sought the return of a family member from Carlisle, condemning the Army for using the Indian cemetery as "a tourist attraction."

The three Northern Arapaho buried there include her great uncle, Dickens Nor. He arrived at Carlisle in 1881, at age 14, and died less than two years later of pneumonia.

His headstone is incomplete, inscribed, "Dickens," though that wasn't his real name - it was Little Chief, eldest son of Chief Sharp Nose.

"My whole life I heard the stories he was there," said Soldier Wolf. "My grandpa would say, 'Don't forget he's there. Never forget. When I'm gone, we still need to bring him home.' "

This month's meeting in Rosebud could portend a major step forward on an issue that torments many native peoples. It comes amid an outpouring of interest and awareness that followed a March 20 story in the Inquirer.

Carlisle opened in 1879 as the first federal Indian boarding school, spawning a fleet of successors that embraced the motto, "Kill the Indian, save the man."

Founder Richard Henry Pratt sought to solve "the Indian problem" by forcing youths to acculturate. He and his Quaker and Christian-missionary allies saw no harm - they thought they were helping to save a vanishing race, and some Indians agreed.

Pratt traveled to Dakota Territory, to Rosebud, where he persuaded Chief Spotted Tail to send several dozen children, and on to Pine Ridge. He promised that the youths would be taught ways to prosper in the white man's world.

The two tribes sent 82 children, many the relatives of chiefs. Later, in the drive to fill Indian boarding schools, children were seized from their families. Some parents on poor reservations were offered a choice: Give up their children, or give up their food rations.

At Carlisle, children who spoke their native language could be beaten, while overcrowding and malnourishment weakened students, making them vulnerable to epidemics that swept the school.

Today many Indian researchers and activists refer to those who attended Carlisle and similar institutions as "boarding school survivors." They say collective trauma and grief contributes to the devastating social ills that plague tribal communities.

Soldier Wolf's demand gained wider support in January, when the Rosebud Tribal Council passed a resolution to seek the return of their members' remains.

Since then, the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, based in Boulder, Colo., launched an online petition to demand repatriation. So far more than 1,200 people have signed.

"It is about healing and supporting these tribes," said executive director Christine McCleave.

A charity is planning a June motorcycle run to Carlisle to raise money and awareness. Filmmaker John Sayles announced plans for a movie about Carlisle, *To Save the Man*. The fall will see publication of a new, 440-page collection of essays, *Carlisle Indian Industrial School: Indigenous Histories, Memories, and Reclamations*.

"All roads are pointing to Carlisle," said Indian-studies scholar Louellyn White, leader of a group that stopped the demolition of a school-era farmhouse on the post.

The 1850s home once served as overnight quarters for students learning to raise crops.

"It was part of the attempt to eradicate and assimilate native people," said White, who teaches at Concordia University in Montreal. "That's why we feel strongly about it."

Officially the Carlisle cemetery contains 186 graves. Thirteen are marked "Unknown."

Eagle Bear, the Rosebud official, hopes the government-to-government consultations result in quick repatriation.

"We've ID'd our kids," Eagle Bear said. "We're ready to move on it."

jgammage@phillynews.com (<mailto:jgammage@phillynews.com>)

215-854-4906

@JeffGammage

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