



How does our boarding school experience affect us today?

By *Staff* | on November 04, 2015

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This article began the moment I overheard some young people, perhaps in their late teens, asking each other about Boarding School then very quickly shifted their conversation to “more important” topics like Facebook and some gossip. I thought about all the problems here on the home land and realized or saw the disconnection between that appalling boarding school era and life today for many reservations.

It is obvious this small group had very little knowledge regarding these schools but they do see the negative impact (s) today. However, they don't see the connection between that tragic experience and Lakota life today. I see a huge void in our history from our ancestors' experiences to our lives today. I believe our younger generations are totally oblivious to it.

Now I question my generation's disposition on this. Our ancestors, those that attended boarding schools, did not talk openly about their experiences. Of course, this historic episode was not included in any elementary or high school curriculum. Sometimes, I think we have been “herded” into “forgetting” this experience. Reality points to the fact that we are largely unaware.

My advice to our youth is to do some research on your own. There are historic documents available regarding the boarding school era. Google it! Open your application and type in “Boarding School” and it will present you with all the information in existence. Ask your



I suggest reading Newspaper publisher, Tim Giago's book, "Children Left Behind," on his experiences at the very parochial residential school I attended as a child and teenager. Many others have attended this mission school located about four miles north of the government boarding school, Oglala Community School.

At the time I was not aware of what was happening. My immediate concern was to survive the negativities. For example, I was punished often for speaking Lakota, lost contact with my family and relatives, was made to attend church every day and twice on Sunday, and was bullied in the most demoralizing manner possible by my peers.

I became an "outsider" of sorts as a result. If there was a caste system operating at the time, then I would have been at the lowest rung. Sometimes, I think the situation was more like the proverbial "survival of the fittest" paradigm that is so often applied to the animal kingdom.

We endured a military like regimen so when I enlisted years later, I did not have a problem there. In school, we were lined up by grade and made to march to and from nearly every event in school. We marched to lunch, church, and to classes. Essentially, it was a harsh environment and I did not enjoy student rights of any kind.

I did not see my parents from late August to Christmas when we were actually allowed to go home for a short vacation. My parents were absent from my schooling so parental involvement did not exist. The fact that I spoke Lakota and looked very much "Indian" did not help matters. The only plus I can recall from my school experience was the fact that I rated well in academics.

This resulted in many problems later in my life. I did not know the Lakota ceremonies like the Inikagapi (Purification), wiwanyang wacipi (Sundance), as well as the rest of the sacred ceremonies. I did not know who my relatives were and also did not know how to live in that ancient manner within a tiospaye and I had no knowledge of my family and tiospaye history. I was a white boy on the inside.

Consequently, I spent most if not all of my adult life actually relearning "how to be Lakota." Next, I realized that I am not the only person to have been negatively affected. There are all those Lakota language-speaking students that attended that old parochial boarding school during the first half of the 20th century who are now elders. Things have changed but the experience and its negative impact remains.

Anyway, I encourage our youth to learn about the boarding school experience. It is not a distant event that happened more than two hundred years ago, it was happening as recently as the late 1960s right here on the home land. I realize that learning about this devastating era in our lives as native people is completely at your discretion. However, I give you a brief look into that history.





government boarding school experience began in 1860 when the Bureau of Indian Affairs opened its first school on the Yakima Reservation in the state of Washington. A retired military officer, Colonel Richard Henry Pratt, opened the first off-reservation boarding school, the Carlisle Indian School, in 1879 and was located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. His ill-famed motto was “Kill the Indian, save the man.”

The purpose of these boarding schools was to use education as a tool to assimilate natives into the mainstream of the “American way of life.” By removing children from the “corrupting influences” of their families and everyday reservation life for years at a time, these institutions usurped Indian parenting responsibilities, tore apart tribal kinship networks, and destroyed the fabric of Indian communities.

In effect these schools effectively eliminated their connections to Native American society and culture. Parents who refused to send their children to school ultimately faced harsh repercussions from the federal government.

By the Early 1900s, Indian” policy had shifted towards the idea that tribes should have more sovereignty over their children’s educations. In 1944, the House Select Committee on Indian Education was of the mind to make the Indian child a better American rather than to equip him simply to be a better Indian. However, enthusiasm for this policy shift was not unanimous.

Anyway, this boarding school experience has definitely created some real situations for Native Americans across the continent. I encourage Lakota youth to look around your homeland. More than likely, you will see negative things like alcoholism, drugging, elders actually supporting and raising their grandchildren, broken families, violence, and suicide.

I encourage our youth not to ignore this situation because it is real. Try to determine what is causing all this turmoil. This includes the bullying and resulting suicides that now plague the Lakota Oyate (people). The causes of our situation are not just coincidence nor did they happen by themselves. Our problems are the result of something traumatic in our past.

We have professional educators that are spending a big portion of their time providing tender loving care while trying to educate. This situation originated from the boarding school era. Unfortunately, there is no immediate “fix.” Above all else, keep in mind that awareness is the first step to pulling yourselves out of this quagmire.

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