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TOP STORY

Remembering family history during Genoa Indian School Celebration

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Even after the Genoa Indian Industrial School closed its doors in 1934 during the Great Depression, former students of Genoa U.S. Indian School still returned to the area, resulting in a reunion celebration that began the annual Genoa U.S. Indian School Reunion/Celebration. The upcoming celebration will be held on Aug. 11.

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What began as a student reunion transformed into a community-wide celebration of Native American culture.

The annual Genoa U.S. Indian School Reunion/Celebration returns for its 29th year from 9:30 a.m. through 4:30 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 11, at the St. Rose of Lima Community Center, 120 E Willard St., in Genoa.

“There’s still a lot of people that don’t know about the school or even Native Americans,” said Nancy Carlson, a volunteer for the Genoa U.S. Indian School Foundation.

Even after the Genoa Indian Industrial School closed its doors in 1934 during the Great Depression, former students of Genoa U.S. Indian School still returned to the area, resulting in a reunion celebration.

The boarding school is currently operated as the Genoa U.S. Indian School Museum.

Carlson said the majority of students have passed away but the tradition lives on through their descendants, which led to the event evolving into a cultural celebration, honoring those who were involved with the school and their Native American backgrounds.

She said many Native American students were placed in the boarding school where their culture was suppressed. She added she wants people to know the hardships many of these students went through during their time at the school, while bringing back their culture and history.

“It’s a time of learning and healing for (the descendants),” Carlson said. “It’s important that people know, especially during the early years, they were separated from their families to be put (into the school).”

Winnebago Reservation native Pattie Valladolid’s mother and two aunts went to the school but knew very little of their experiences growing up.

It wasn’t something kids should be hearing,” said Valladolid, who served on the advisory board for the Genoa U.S. Indian School Foundation. “That was just the Indian way.”

Valladolid said her mother’s older sister enrolled into the school because the family was having a tough time. After spending one year at the school, she brought on two of her younger sisters, one of whom was Valladolid’s mother, who later spent one year at the school.

Valladolid said Native American students at the school were not allowed to speak their native tongue, adding a number of them would oftentimes sneak out of the compound just to speak their language. She said the school was like a military base because of how students had to march everywhere they needed to go.

“They never talked about any of that,” she said. “We didn’t know a lot about it until we were growing up.”

Valladolid said she learned the majority of her family history by attending the annual event as she spoke with other descendants and explored historical artifacts.

“It was interesting. You can look up family members and things like that... A lot of people do that,” she said. “There’s a lot of history there and a lot of people don’t know about it.”

Valladolid remembers the time she found her mother’s eighth-grade diploma during the event and saw that she'd written down a doughnut recipe on the back. Her mother was an avid baker and, Valladolid said, adding that making doughnuts was her favorite.

“That was probably where she learned it,” she said.

Event attendees will be given the opportunity to tour the school’s original building, sit through a film about Native American boarding schools and explore different Native American historical artifacts. They can also enjoy an array of food provided by Native American vendors.

Carlson said there are new cultural items brought in each year for display, such as jewelry, paintings and books.

“Generally the people that come back are very grateful,” she said. “I feel like I’m helping with the need, and every year, we learn more about the culture.”

Those interested in learning more about the Genoa U.S. Indian School Celebration are encouraged to call 402-993-6036.

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