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School spirit

The Stewart Indian School is poised to rewrite some long-overlooked parts of local history.

By [Kris Vagner](#)

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When Buck Sampson was in high school in the late 1960s, he and his history teacher did not see eye to eye on a history textbook. Sampson, who is Paiute, had grown up hearing stories from his grandfather. Some were about everyday things like living off of the land. Others had to do with scenarios more like this: "People were moved or forced into a lot of the stuff they didn't like," Sampson said in a phone interview. "We were forced into assimilation."

Beginning in 1879 with the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, over 100 facilities known as Indian boarding schools were opened across the country. Their purpose was to Christianize Native American children and assimilate them into Euro-American culture. In the early days of the boarding schools, children were required to have their hair cut short, made to adopt Euro-American names and dress, and forbidden from speaking their own languages.

"They kidnapped Harry," Sampson said. "They tied him up to a buckboard."

Harry was Sampson's grandfather's brother. A buckboard is an open, horse-drawn carriage, and "they" were taking Harry, without his family's knowledge, to the Stewart Indian School, which was originally called the Carson Indian School.

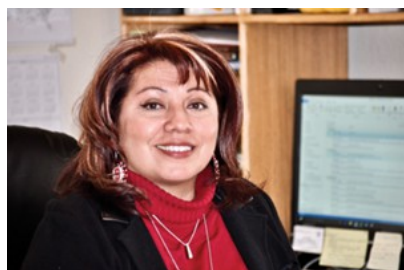
The school opened in 1890 at the south end of Carson City, between Clear Creek and what is now the most recently completed section of Interstate 580. That year, there were 37 students from nearby Washoe, Paiute and Shoshone tribes and three teachers. Students learned academics and vocational skills, and they built many of the campus's stone buildings under the tutelage of Hopi stone masons. In the early decades, the school had a militaristic organization, and punishments were often harsh. There are accounts of children being whipped or beaten, and at least one alum recalled students themselves having to administer punishments to their peers.

Families were not allowed to visit, but sometimes they'd camp across the creek, just to be nearer to their children.

In 1924, Native Americans were first offered U.S. citizenship, and in 1934, the federal government passed the Indian Reorganization Act—also called the Indian New Deal—intended to reverse the assimilation efforts. Both of those led to the militaristic nature of the school easing up—though alumni interviewed in recent years still remembered waking to reveille and standing in inspection lines early each morning. Students began to attend the school voluntarily, often finding less discrimination there than at public schools. New policies allowed students to practice some of their own culture. Traditional arts and crafts became part of the curriculum, for example.

Over 30,000 students attended Stewart altogether, including members of about 200 tribes, many from Arizona and Southern Nevada.

Buck Sampson arrived in 1968, after attending Vaughn Middle School and Wooster High in Reno. By then, a lot of students expressed a strong school spirit and pride. Many reported later that learning trades paved the way for a life of financial stability. The boxing team and band were well known, and in 1966, Stewart's basketball team won the state championship. By 1970, there was a waiting list to enroll.



Nevada Indian Commission Director Sherry Rupert is among those leading the efforts to bring Stewart Indian School's history to light. PHOTO/KRIS VAGNER

ganged up on him."

Sampson said he left Stewart with three scholarships—in English, boxing and American Indian history. He would have pursued that last one, he said—maybe in an effort to recast the history lessons himself—but the University of Nevada, Reno did not have a Native American studies program. He attended a junior college in Oakland, then worked as an equipment operator for the City of Reno, from which he is now retired.

While Sampson never did get to rewrite the textbook, today, his vision of a more accurate approach to Native American history is becoming a reality, and his alma mater is front and center in setting a precedent for how to do that.

Story time

The Stewart Indian School is a quiet, 110-acre campus on a flat swatch of land dotted with mature Cottonwoods, Chinese Elms and other trees. Birds chirp, squirrels dart across grassy lawns, and there are clear views of snowy peaks to the east and the west.

The large auditorium, small post office, dormitories and most of the other buildings—72 altogether—are boarded up, and visitors can stroll among them on a self-guided audio tour. At 20 clearly marked stops, there are small plaques with descriptions of each location, a phone number and an extension



The old gym at Stewart Indian School is among the buildings slated for renovations. The state has approved \$4.6 million for renovations and new facilities.

PHOTO/KRIS VAGNER

The grounds of Stewart Indian School, 5500 Snyder Ave., Carson City, are open to the public. Admission is free. Sherry Rupert is scheduled to give a lecture on the school's history, present and future at 10 a.m., Jan. 20, at the Nevada State Museum. A blessing ceremony to kick off construction on a welcome center is scheduled for 10 a.m., May 3. To learn more, visit stewartindianschool.com.

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But still, there were those arguments with the history teacher, Mr. Tyler.

"He was a big, tall black man," Sampson remembers. "He was the coach."

As for the history textbook, "Everything is written from a white man's point of view," Sampson said. "It doesn't have a history of Nevada and how it was here."

"I was just the first one that started sticking up," he said. "He'd look at me, and I'd look at him. And I'd think, 'Shoot, I know what's going to happen next.' He would whack you on the shoulder, whack you on the head, hit you with his finger or his knuckle."

Sampson endured the whacks and kept speaking up in class.

"I just stood my ground, and I'd get kicked out of his class," he said. "I was sent to the office—I was put out in the hallway. This went on for a long time. Finally, one day, I started getting the other Indians from Arizona. They talked about their Navajo Trail of Tears and how it was back there, how it affected the Navajo people or the Pimas or the Hopis, everything that happened."

None of that was in the books, Sampson said. "So, at the end, we just kind of

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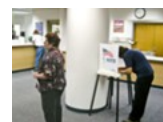
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to dial that connects visitors to a recording. Most of the recordings are excerpts from interviews with Stewart alumni, from 2008, that tell firsthand accounts of the joys and tumults of life in a boarding school.

One story is told by Florence Millett, who was sent to Stewart from the Duckwater Shoshone reservation in 1950 at age 12. She was assigned a job as a nurse's assistant in the infirmary. She said she liked the nursing staff but missed her family and described herself as "always lonely and depressed. I tried running away three times but was always caught and returned to Stewart." The consequences included having her long hair cut short and having to scrub toilets with a toothbrush for a week.

Some of the storytellers of these audio accounts—even when they're not purely fond memories—also express a sense of school spirit or fondness for their experiences.

As part of a newer round of recordings of Stewart alumni made in 2017, interviewer Terry McBride asked Roger Sam, "Did you enjoy being a student there?" Sam, who grew up in Nixon and attended Stewart as a teen in the 1930s, said, "I loved it! I enjoyed livin' after I got used to the routine."

Millett's recording concludes with her saying, "Looking back, I think if I was older and surer, I would have liked it here, because they had so much more to offer than the reservation where I came from. I was just too young."

The stories recalled in these audio tracks go back as far as the 1920s. Stories about early years are harder to come by, and first-hand accounts by teachers or staff members are rare.

Samantha Williams is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She's working on a dissertation on the history of Stewart Indian School, which she aims to finish in 2019 and eventually publish as a book. One source she's found is a typed letter, dated June 30, 1934, written by a social worker named Lucille Hamler, who questioned the impacts of removing children from families and advocated for funding to support visitation.

Hamler's letter read, in part, "Many of the children who have gone home this summer had not been at home for years, and there have arisen some rather acute problems of adjustment which could have been avoided if the children and their parents had kept in touch with each other through the years. It has been noticed in a number of cases that the parents seemed very happy to see the children, while the children felt themselves entire strangers and showed no pleasure in meeting their parents."

Williams has searched through around 600 documents so far. She said this is the only example she's come across of a faculty member expressing anything akin to regret over the treatment of children at the boarding schools. That's not to say that she won't possibly unearth more, but she was quick to clarify that, to a large extent, people running boarding schools "thought they were doing God's work." That line of thinking goes back to pre-Civil War times.



This 2012 photo of Stewart Indian School alumni includes, in the front row, Flora Greene, class of 1936, who turned 100 in 2017, and Hilman Tobey, who passed away at the age of 100 in 2015.

PHOTO COURTESY/NEVADA INDIAN COMMISSION

Many of the children who have gone home this summer had not been at home for years, and there have arisen some rather acute problems of adjustment which could have been avoided if the children and their parents had kept in touch with each other through the years. It has been noticed in a number of cases that the parents seemed very happy to see the children, while the children felt themselves entire strangers and showed no pleasure in meeting their parents. One girl who was taken home had no idea where to find her own home and was within a hundred yards of the house declared she lived nowhere in the vicinity. She stood around embarrassed and unhappy when she got home, while her mother was overjoyed with joy to see her again, and stated that she had been trying for a long time to get her daughter home and she wanted to place her in the public school. The family situation is such as to make this plan entirely feasible.

Of the 600 or so boarding school documents that University of California, Santa Cruz researcher Samantha Williams has reviewed, this 1934 letter from a social worker is the only one to express hesitation over forcibly separating children from their families.

PHOTO/NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Williams explained: "You have rapid expansion. In 1850s, 1860s, you have state governments, local governments openly talking about exterminating people in order to take their lands."

In some cases, separating Native American children from their land was seen as the only alternative to death.

"What they didn't think about or understand or care about was—this led to severe trauma for generations in families," said Williams. This was especially true during the early years of Stewart Indian School—eventually, after the rules were relaxed a bit, summer visitation was allowed.

Sherry Rupert, executive director of the Nevada Indian Commission, is among those working on making Stewart's history better known to the public. During a November lecture at the Nevada State Museum, she talked about those generational effects. She said she's heard stories from people in Northern Nevada of Washoe and Paiute descent whose grandparents—boarding school alumni—never hugged them or expressed affection.

The future

Stewart Indian School closed in 1980, citing budget issues and earthquake safety concerns.

"There were calls from native communities who had members who attended the school to have some sort of commemorative center there," according to Williams. "They were fought on that, pretty consistently."

This year, however, Nevada Legislature approved Gov. Brian Sandoval's request for \$4.6 million in capital improvement funds to begin renovating several of Stewart Indian School's buildings.

Rupert said that there is a master plan for Stewart in the works, which she expects to see completed in March 2018. The plan will include a wide range of improvements and projects intended to make the campus more a multiuse facility and educational resource, to include a cultural center and a welcome center.

"The old gym will get a new roof on it, Rupert said. "We're really excited about that because that was one of the buildings that everybody remembers."

She said that some of the now-boarded-up buildings could eventually be used as event centers for meetings. Dorms and faculty cottages could be renovated to provide lodging for retreats. Structures where industrial arts were taught could become residences and studios for artisans.

"We're looking at maker spaces, where maybe in some of those old shops, we're bringing back those types of vocations here, where people are learning how to make things and honing their vocational skills," Rupert said. "Maybe we can bring tours through, a meet-the-artists type thing. Maybe they can actually purchase from the artist."

She also foresees restaurants and a commercial kitchen.

"It's a beautiful campus—we could have weddings here," she said.

Rupert said there will be a blessing in May—in lieu of a groundbreaking and in advance of the annual Fathers Day Powwow in June.

There is also a documentary film in the works. The Stewart Indian School Preservation Alliance is in the process of deciding how to distribute and market it.

Rupert, whose office is in one of the few habited buildings on the campus, the old superintendent's home, said that this level of budgeting for this type of project is rare.

"You don't see state governments funding projects like this, and Native American projects at that."

The practice of transforming Indian boarding schools into highly accessible cultural centers is also rare. The Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, the first of these schools in the nation, is now an Army college, where Rupert said there are few traces of the facility's past—though, she added, "There's a group in the area that's working on an interpretive center, purchasing a parcel of land that's adjacent to the school to tell the story of the Carlisle Indian School."

The Phoenix Indian School, the second largest in the nation, is now a three-acre city park in Phoenix with three of its buildings intact.

And a few boarding schools are still in operation as day schools, including Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon and Sherman Indian High School in Riverside, California.



A cell phone tour of the Stewart Indian School consists of 20 plaques, each with an extension to dial, most of which lead to recordings of first-hand recollections by alumni.

PHOTO/KRIS VAGNER

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Rupert pointed out that even today, her 16-year-old son still has experiences in high school that are redolent of the arguments that Buck Sampson used to have with Mr. Tyler back in the '60s.

"I know there's some cultural competency training that new teachers have to go through, but not a lot of teachers know a lot about tribes," she said. "So, sometimes, even in today's classrooms, there is misinformation or misconceptions about native people. My son, he's always like, 'Excuse me. I'm Washoe, and that's not correct.' And sometimes teachers will take that and use that and run with that, and sometimes teachers don't like to be corrected."

As Rupert and her colleagues prepare to bring to light some of the overlooked parts of the school's history, one thing this is different this time. She summed it up during her November talk at the state museum.

"We had never had a say before," she said. "Now we have a say."

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