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Tribal leaders implore Army: Bring our children home

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Members of the Sicangu Youth Council, including Iwoblu Big Crow, left, wipe away tears as Asia Gilbertson Black Bull makes an emotional presentation to representatives of the Army on May 10, 2016.

by **Jeff Gammage**, Staff Writer

ROSEBUD, S.D. - Her hands didn't shake when she took the microphone, nor did her voice tremble when she spoke.



Formal gov't-to-gov't consultations in Rosebud, S.D.
(http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20160511_Tribal_leaders_implore_Army_officials___Bring_our_children_home_.html viewGallery=y)

Yufna Soldier Wolf had waited a long time to speak to these people from the Army, these men and women from the federal government, come all the way to this Indian reservation on the far southern edge of South Dakota. It was their turn to listen.

Across the room stood a portrait of a boy, Soldier Wolf's great-uncle. He was 14 when he died at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, after being taken from his Northern Arapaho family and tribe. His body lies there still, surrounded by nearly 200 other native children on the grounds of what is now the Army War College.

Soldier Wolf told the government representatives on Tuesday that she wants him back - wants his remains returned to her, to his people, to his tribe, to his land, where he can be properly buried, mourned, and remembered.

Frustration tinged her voice as she spoke.

"I'm here imploring you, the Department of Defense, the Department of the Army, trying to negotiate something that should be inherited," she said. "It should be a basic human right, and a basic civil right, to have our children back."

In that call, Soldier Wolf was joined by dozens of others during formal government-to-government consultations that opened here between the Army, which governs the Carlisle Barracks, and three American Indian tribes that want their children's remains returned from a cemetery there. The children died in a painful turn-of-the-century experiment in forced assimilation, an effort to rid native children of their "savage nature" by erasing their names, languages, customs, religions, and family ties.

The Rosebud Sioux tribe - pressed to the effort by teenagers who visited the cemetery in summer - leads what has become a growing movement for repatriation, passing a resolution in January to seek the return of 10 tribal children.

Two other tribes have made formal requests, and representatives of a half-dozen more came to listen and learn Tuesday. Army lawyer Justin Buller drew applause when he said the government would work to return the children's remains, through the official process provided for disinterment. He offered an apology, and said the Army would pay the cost of repatriation.

"I'd like to have that in writing," responded one man in the crowd, Keith Horse Looking Sr.

Others were welcoming, but cautious, in hearing the Army's words.

More than a hundred people gathered here on the Rosebud Sioux reservation, at the only place that had a room large enough to hold them all, the tribal-run Rosebud Casino, just north of the Nebraska border. In a concert hall turned meeting room, Rosebud leaders alternately demanded and pleaded for the return of the remains of the children.

From photos hung on walls and set on tables, some of the dead children looked on, Dora Brave Bull and Maude Swift Bear and others, gazing at the people who might decide whether, a century after their deaths, they will return to the land of their birth.

The four Army representatives were 30 minutes late to the meeting. The Indians were not. Old men came in wheelchairs and leaning on canes, and children hung on the hands of their mothers, a steady stream of descendants, family members, researchers, students,

tribal leaders, counselors, and teachers coming to share their stories and, they hoped, reclaim their ancestors.

The day opened with a prayer from a Northern Arapaho elder and the singing of the national anthem in the Lakota language. Then it was on to discuss a tense and emotional issue.

A weeping Sydney Horse Looking, a 17-year-old Rosebud girl who visited Carlisle last summer, silenced the room with a plea for the children's return.

"I put myself in their shoes," she said, struggling to stay composed, "what it would be like to be ripped away from my mom, to lose my name, to lose my clothes. . . . I know they want to come home, that their mothers are waiting for them, that their families are waiting for them."

For some, Carlisle may be an old story, people here say, but for them, the pain remains fresh. Beginning in 1879, thousands of children were taken from native families in the West, spirited a thousand miles to the East, and settled in Carlisle. The first class of children came from this reservation and from nearby Pine Ridge, arriving at what was the first federally run Indian boarding school.

Today, many Indians view what took place at Carlisle as genocide. But Carlisle, its harsh methods, and its imperial director, former cavalry officer Richard Henry Pratt, were embraced at the time by white society and even by some Indians.

Initially, chiefs were cajoled and persuaded to surrender children, often their own. Later, children would simply be seized by white authorities. Carlisle spawned a fleet of successors that embraced the motto, "Kill the Indian, save the man."

Pratt boasted that he could solve "the Indian problem" by forcing youths to acculturate. Military-style discipline was the rule. Children who spoke their native language could be beaten, while overcrowding and malnourishment left children vulnerable to epidemics that swept the school. In the first decade alone, 96 children died, stricken by tuberculosis, flu, and loneliness.

Today, Indian researchers say that the suffering endured at the boarding schools resonates through tribal communities, contributing to alcoholism, suicide, and despair. All of those ills are present at Rosebud.

"A lot of people are still grieving those children," said Vikki Eagle Bear, a Sioux youth counselor here. "By bringing them back, it's a huge step forward for us."

Army officials had earlier said they were open to returning the children's remains from Carlisle, provided all regulations governing disinterment were met, and they reiterated that Tuesday.

"It is our desire to fulfill the request of the tribes," said spokesman Dave Foster, who traveled here with Buller and two other staffers. "What's happening right now is the single most important thing that could happen."

That more flexible stance marks a reversal for the Army, which earlier denied a Rosebud Sioux request to return the children.

The empty, rolling hills of southern South Dakota - the whole state has half the population of Philadelphia - can make Carlisle seem very far away. But to many here, the Carlisle school endures as a real and continuing horror that demands redress.

"In 2016, in this day and age, we should have the ability to make things right," said Russell Eagle Bear, the Rosebud Sioux historic-preservation officer.

He turned to the Army officials. "We're ready to bring our children home. We're ready to work with you, we want to work with you, and we're looking for some kind of an answer."

That answer, from Buller, sounded like a yes. But, he explained, a formal process still must be undertaken, and others cautioned that setbacks could always develop.

In demanding the return of their children, the Sioux and other tribes seek to open a discussion of an ugly episode in the American experience, one that has been largely ignored in white society's textbooks and schools. In Canada, a truth-and-reconciliation commission was impaneled to consider conditions and abuses in nearly 140 church-run, government-funded boarding schools - concluding in 2015 that what occurred there "can best be described as cultural genocide."

Australia conducted an inquiry into its state-run boarding schools, confirming that native children were routinely removed from their families as a result of government policy. In 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd formally apologized to the nation's native peoples.

No such apology has been offered by the U.S. government.

In fact, for years commanders at the Carlisle Barracks denied all requests to repatriate the children, saying the cemetery had become an integral part of the local community. In that response, tribes saw confirmation that even the bones of their children were subject to government control, that their own pain meant nothing.

"It's hard knowing little kids are there," said 15-year-old Josh Iron Shell, a Rosebud Sioux who visited the cemetery last summer. "After we left Carlisle, I didn't know how to feel about it, other than being angry and frustrated."

Nearly 200 children lie in the Carlisle cemetery, set near the front gate of the Army War College. The headstones show no birth dates or ages. Some misspell names. Thirteen are marked "Unknown."

Among the three Northern Arapaho there is Soldier Wolf's 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.

Soldier Wolf spoke to the Army officials about the death of her ancestor and his two close friends at Carlisle. But she concluded with words to the Indian peoples around her.

"I admonish you, don't forget," she said, "don't forget who our ancestors are."

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

215-854-4906@JeffGammage

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