

# **Forever Changed: Boarding School Narratives of American Indian Identity in the U.S. and Canada**

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## *Abstract*

This essay examines personal narratives to identify experiences at boarding schools. These collective experiences forged new American Indian identities due to a white educational system forced upon these Indian students. While stories remain part of tradition, they convey that Indian youth had changed permanently.

An Ojibwa man, Ted Mato, who attended an Indian school, explained about the system established to educate American Indian students. He stated, "...the government set up an extensive system of boarding schools to bleach the red out of Indian children, to make us into white people. American Indians are forever changed."<sup>1</sup>

As this Native man so eloquently stated, the intent of the Western educational system was to purposefully eliminate the cultural identity of American Indian people. But as the narratives will show, the students were not passive recipients of the process. One purpose of this paper is to give voice to the American Indian people who survived the Western educational system. The Native perspective of this cultural assault and the ensuing opposition to this aggression, as well as the existence and tenacity of this people, as demonstrated by the narratives of the participants, form the significance of this paper.

These narratives tell many stories. Within this paper are stories about American Indian reactions to the educational system itself, the assault on their cultural anchors, and the extreme psychological trauma they endured. There are stories of the staunch resistance that enabled the Native students to survive within this devastating system. Furthermore, these voices demonstrate that despite the oppressive social and educational policies, American Indians resisted assimilation and allowed their ethnic identity to survive.

Utilizing Native responses to the Western educational system, this essay provides an analysis of the structures in the educational system that conflicted with traditional American Indian life. Indian children were aware that the goal of the schools was to make them as white as possible. "But they (the boarding schools) tried to make us white, to give us the white culture, to integrate us."<sup>2</sup> This essay further examines possible reasons why American Indian culture did not disappear despite the attendance at the schools; however, the paper concludes in agreement with Mato: American Indians and their communities were forever changed by the experience.

This essay arises from a study completed in 1993.<sup>3</sup> In that study, eighty-five interviews, memoirs, and autobiographies of both Canadian and American individuals, spanning the time frame from 1819 to 1934, were studied. Within this study there was a wide diversity of tribal affiliations, times in attendance, and continuance with tribal tradition. Clearly, American Indian people came from a wide diversity of tribal backgrounds, personal family situations, individual school policy and personnel, and varied degrees of cultural interruption within their communities. Thus, their responses to the system were conflicted due to all these variables, and Native people who attended the educational system had diverse responses to its effect upon their lives. It is clear that the experience thoroughly altered their lives. The educational system brought changes not only to individual American Indians, but also to whole tribal communities.

The United States government was very clear in its Indian policy. Historically, it was the express purpose of the United States government to eliminate all vestiges of tribal and cultural identity for American Indian people.<sup>4</sup> History has shown that policies attempted to relocate and terminate Indian people in an effort to eliminate the "Indian problem."<sup>5</sup> One of the main vehicles for this annihilation was education.

Charles Mix, who had a significant impact on Indian affairs throughout his tenure, perhaps best exemplifies the tone of many Commissioners of Indian Affairs of his day. Charles Mix began working for the Office of Indian Affairs in 1838. He became chief clerk and in that capacity, served under twelve different commissioners and either wrote most of the annual reports or supplied the information contained in them. Finally, in 1858, he was appointed commissioner. He believed Indians should be settled upon reservations and assimilated into white society.<sup>6</sup> In his 1860 annual report, Commissioner Mix expressed his feelings regarding the goals of American Indian education when he wrote:

Educate him in the rudiments of our language. Teach him to work. Send him to his home, and tell him he must practice what he has been taught or starve. It will in a generation regenerate the race. It will exterminate the Indian, but develop a man.<sup>7</sup>

Canada utilized an educational model very similar to that of the United States. In fact, the Canadian government looked to the U.S. for examples of how to deal with the issue of education stipulated in the treaties. To that end, the Canadian government supported missionaries in setting up a series of residential schools existing from the 1880s to the 1970s. These schools' philosophies and intents were similar to those of Commissioner Mix. Describing the intent of the educational system in Canada, A. G. Harper stated that "the extinction of the Indians as Indians is the ultimate end" of the Canadian Indian policy.<sup>8</sup>

Within the white educational setting, everything Indian was viewed as negative. The inherent problem of racial confusion for Indian students seemed almost unavoidable. A constant conflict occurred between what the white educators taught and what was taught in the home culture. School officials told Indian students that they and their lifestyle were a sin and an abomination to God, and that the only escape from this condition was to become like whites. Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Jones was optimistic about the benefits of education. "With education will come morality, cleanliness, self-respect, industry and above all, a Christianized humanity, the foundation stone of the world's progress and well-being."<sup>9</sup>

The school experience weathered by many Indian people was a bittersweet experience. For many, it impacted negatively upon them for their entire lives, and the impact continues today. Indian people contend that the educational experience led to the demise of many tribal languages. It has stolen the parenting skills away from many Indian people. It nearly caused the annihilation of the culture. Education has had a big part in creating generations of people ashamed of who they are. However, some Indian people responded that, in fact, the schools were a good, safe, and predictable place to be. Schools always provided food and clothing for the students, even if parents were unable to so provide. "Some of those Indian families are so poor that they can't afford the clothing or anything that it takes to send a kid to public school. They at least know that if their child is at a boarding school, they will get three meals a day."<sup>10</sup> "Old Uncle Sam, he was pretty good to us. I had three square meals a day," remembered another student.<sup>11</sup> A Sioux woman remarked:

Don't you think that was—for—for the kids' own good because I know in my time, we went hungry a lot of times. We didn't have no shoes to wear. And when my dad took me to the Indian school, we got three meals a day, we got a good education, and I'm glad that my dad took me there. Otherwise where would I be?<sup>12</sup>

Despite the wide time spans and diversity of geographical locations, the writings of people recalling their educational experience repeatedly demonstrate that certain aspects of American mainstream life, as exhibited by the schools, were problematic for the students. Thematically, these areas of concern were the physical structures and processes of the schools, the attack upon the cultural anchors of the students, the intellectual factors of mainstream culture and their tribal teachings, and the psychological factors.

The first area of consideration is the actual physical structures in which mainstream American schools operated. One student remarked about the difference between the traditional Indian home and village and the school building:

For Indian children at the turn of the century, boarding schools were often a scary new world. By sacred custom, many native people lived in communities based on the circle. Our wigwams and tepees were circular. Villages were pitched in circles. It all reflected the hoop of life. But federal schools were designed along rigid right angles. The rooms, hallways and windows were all rectangles...<sup>13</sup>

The whole idea of a school building and school schedules were totally foreign to the newly arriving Indian student. Francis LaFlesche, an Omaha who was educated at a Presbyterian boarding school in the mid-1860s, recalled his first experience at a boarding school:

The little boy watched him for a while, then laid his head on the hard bench, - the tones of the old man grew fainter and fainter until the boy lost all consciousness of them. Suddenly there burst upon him a noise like thunder. He arose to his feet with a start, and, bewildered, he looked around. Everything seemed to be in a whirl. He took fright, ran to the door that first caught his sight, and went with a thud down to a landing, but did not lose his balance; he took another step, then fell headlong into a dreadful dark place. He screamed at the top of his voice, frightened almost into a fit. A woman picked him up and carried him in her arms up a flight of stairs, speaking to him in a language that he could not understand.<sup>14</sup>

A strange phenomenon to the students was the fact they were constantly watched by the teachers, the administrators and the disciplinarians. "Immediately I dropped my eyes, wondering why I was so keenly watched by the strange woman."<sup>15</sup> "Perhaps more than anything else the boys resented the never-ending surveillance that began in the morning and ended only late at night, after they had all fallen asleep; a surveillance that went on day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year..."<sup>16</sup> It was apparent to the students that such dutiful watching was not for their own good, but because of the staff's fear that Indian students could never be trusted.

From the morning wake-up bell to the evening bedtime bell, all the activities of the school were done at specific times and announced by the gong of a bell. "There were schedules all over the place."<sup>17</sup> "6:15 A.M. Clang! Clang! Clang! I was nearly clanged out of my wits and out of bed at the same time. Never had anything- not wind, not thunder - awakened me with quite the same shock and fright."<sup>18</sup> This adherence to a tight time schedule flew in the face of American Indian custom. Many American Indian children had grown up understanding that time had a special reference to it. Things were done in the time allocated, not on some arbitrary schedule.

The American Indian students came to the schools with their cultural anchors, their identification of themselves as tribal members. These anchors served to assist them in their understanding of who they were and where they belonged in their world. It was especially important in the white educators' minds to eliminate these cultural anchors as they attempted to assimilate their Indian charges into "Americans." The foundations of tribal life that were immediately dispensed with were the Native languages, the styles of hair and dress, and their tribal names.

It is believed that Native culture resides in the Native language. The American educators seemed to fully understand its ultimate significance to American Indian identity because the use of traditional languages was expressly forbidden in most schools, particularly after the Commissioner of Indian Affairs so proclaimed it in 1886.

"Language is really the heart of any culture."<sup>19</sup> The children that realized without their language they were lost. "It is said that some Pimas who went to an eastern school for two months came home thinking they had forgotten their own language."<sup>20</sup> "We were never allowed to talk our own language."<sup>21</sup> "We didn't understand a word of English and didn't know what to say or do..."<sup>22</sup> Another former student recalls that "At the Indian residential school, we were not allowed to speak our language; we weren't allowed to dance, sing because they told us it was evil. It was evil for us to practice any of our cultural ways."<sup>23</sup>

Francis LaFlesche discussed the true burden of being unable to speak his native language while in school:

When we entered the Mission School, we experienced a greater hardship, for there we encountered a rule that prohibited the use of our own language, which rule was rigidly enforced with a hickory rod, so that the new-comer, however socially inclined, was obliged to go about like a little dummy until he had learned to express himself in English.<sup>24</sup>

Mary Barstow, an Ojibwa woman, remembers not only the difficulty of learning English, but also the confusion it caused upon her return home. Barstow describes, "I worked so hard at learning English, I almost forgot my Ojibwa. When I returned home in the summer, I could hardly talk to my grandpa and

grandma. I was embarrassed.”<sup>25</sup> John Rogers, a White Earth Ojibwa student who attended Flandreau Boarding School, reports that upon returning home his reunion with his mother was problematic. He wrote about this reunion that, “She started talking joyously, but we couldn’t understand very well what she said for we had forgotten much of the Indian language during our six years away from home...”<sup>26</sup>

Punishment for speaking native languages was common. “Hundreds of native languages and dialects were to be replaced by English. Children were whipped or had their mouth washed with soap for speaking Indian.”<sup>27</sup> One student recalls, “I was punished quite a bit because I spoke my language...I was put in a corner and punished and sometimes I was just given bread and water...Or they’d try to embarrass us and they’d put us in front of the whole class.”<sup>28</sup> A Native student discussed his father’s experiences at the Alburni Indian Residential School. His father was punished for speaking his tribal language by having sewing needles pushed through his tongue, “a routine punishment for language offenders.”<sup>29</sup>

Basil Johnston, an Ojibwa man who attended a boarding school in Canada, commented on his experience with the educational system and native languages:

But the disclaimer We don’t wish to un-Indianize them was soon forgotten. The line generally taken by the instructors was that Indian culture was inferior, and Wilson (a nineteenth-century commentator) boasted not a word of Indian is heard from our boys after six months. This was achieved through strict discipline and rigorous punishment. Punishment was given every night at seven to those who broke any of the rules.<sup>30</sup>

Another student discussed the punishment she, and her mother, received:

My mother went to Rainy Mountain and she said that back then they would make children hold quinine tablets in their mouths. At Riverside they would make you put lye soap on your toothbrush. Do you know that harsh soap is almost 99% lye? Well, they would make you put some on your toothbrush, and then would stand right there until you put it in your mouth and brushed your teeth with it. The kids would end up with the whole inside of their mouth raw.<sup>31</sup>

In many of the students’ memoirs, the trauma of hair cutting was lamented. Hair in many traditional American Indian societies was an important symbol; in some societies, cutting the hair was used as punishment. Upon arrival to the schools, the children’s hair was cut. “The first thing they did was cut our hair...And without it how would Ussen (the Great Spirit) recognize me when I went to the Happy Place?”<sup>32</sup> “She had seen grown Hopi men crying because white men had cut their hair.”<sup>33</sup>

Many of the students had been taught the importance of the length of one's hair. "Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!"<sup>34</sup> Parents resented the cutting of their children's hair. "Our families didn't like our hair being cut. Our traditional hairstyle was meaningful."<sup>35</sup> Another student remembers one of the most difficult aspects of the loss of her identity—"One of the first things they did was cut my braids off. I looked like everybody else. I felt really lost."<sup>36</sup>

Without their Indian hair or their Indian clothes, the students felt they had been stripped of their identity. "We'd lost our hair and we'd lost our clothes; with the two we'd lost our identity as Indians. Greater punishment could hardly have been devised."<sup>37</sup> Francis LaFlesche recalls a new student coming to the school he attended:

The first thing to be done was to cut his long hair. . He seemed to enjoy it, and laughed at the jokes made by the boys; but when by some chance he caught sight of his scalp-lock lying on the floor like a little black snake, he put his fists into his eyes and fell to sobbing as though his heart would break.<sup>38</sup>

In many tribes, the names given to individuals are viewed as sacred and given by the creator. However, upon entering the school system, Native names were systematically changed to English names. LaFlesche discussed the procedure of giving Indian students English names:

All the boys in our school were given English names, because their Indian names were difficult for the teachers to pronounce. Besides, the aboriginal names were considered by the missionaries as heathenish, and therefore should be obliterated. No less heathenish in their origin were the English substitutes, but the loss of their original meaning and significance through long usage had rendered them fit to continue as appellations for civilized folk.<sup>39</sup>

Apparently the task of naming of new pupils was approached with great levity. At one school the other students were allowed to pick the name of the new pupil. Names like Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant and Philip Sheridan were quite common.<sup>40</sup> In fact, according to LaFlesche, "The naming of a new pupil was usually an occasion for much merriment..."<sup>41</sup> Often the school officials would have the students stand in line and give them names according to the alphabet. "Asa, Benjamin, Charles, Daniel, Eli, Frank... We didn't know till later that they'd even imposed meaningless new names on us, along with the other degradations. I've always hated that name. It was forced on me as though I had been an animal."<sup>42</sup>

In some schools, the students received not only an English name, but also

a number. These numbers were sometimes written on the students' wrists in purple ink. For identification purposes, they could show the school officials their wrists.<sup>43</sup> Johnston recalled the priest telling him on his first day at school, "'You are number forty-three,' he informed me."<sup>44</sup> From then on the new name and the number were used synonymously. "Johnston! Number forty-three."<sup>45</sup>

Despite the educators' belief that children were blank slates, American Indian students came to the schools with very definite teachings about the world; therefore they had many challenging intellectual factors to contend with. The intellectual teachings they received from their white educators often directly challenged the teachings that they had received within their own communities. The students had to contend with the teachers' perceptions of what constituted "truth," and the notion that perfection in all things could be achieved through hard work and repeated effort.

The differences between appropriate behavior in traditional American Indian communities and in schools proved very disturbing to some Indian students. "When a student stood up to read, she made a mistake and all the kids laughed at her in class. I had been brought up not to laugh at a person who made a mistake," recalled Rose Mary Barstow.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, tolerance for other individuals was a fundamental belief of most Indian people. Such laughter was in direct opposition to the traditional tribal idea of lack of competition between people and intrinsic respect for other humans. Sarah Winnemucca, a Paiute who attended a convent school in California, described what her parents taught her about how to treat other people thusly: "My people teach their children never to make fun of anyone, no matter how they look. If you see your brother or sister doing something wrong, look away, or go away from them. If you make fun of bad persons, you make yourself beneath them."<sup>47</sup>

Once established in the school, students were faced with the dichotomy between their new white American teachings and the traditional teachings of their parents. It became readily apparent that the truth taught in school was not that taught at home. A student in the late 1870s remarked upon learning about geography:

My people believed that the world was flat and surrounded by seas. My people also thought that the sky was a thin covering like a blanket or a sheet of paper. In my geography I learned that the earth was round, and that the sky that we see surrounds it all, everywhere. There was a story, a myth, that is told in my tribe about Itsikamahidish climbing the sky; that he and the Sun sang a song that brought the sky down closed to the earth so that they could mount it. When now I learned that the earth was round, that the sky surrounded it, I knew that the story about the Sun and Itsikamahidish could not be true, so I began to have my faith shaken in my people's beliefs.<sup>48</sup>



Another student remarked, "but sometimes I do not like what the teacher says. Our old life is bad. We must heed only what we hear in school to make us better people. ...the Midewiwin people are bad and we must shun them."<sup>49</sup>

Educators had very strong preconceived notions of who and what Indian people were. These stereotypes were often reinforced in the curriculum and through other students. A student discussed the horror she felt when she saw the way Indians were represented in textbooks. She was incredulous that Indian people could be the way they were portrayed in one of her reading books at school.

We read a history book about the savages. The pictures were in color. There was one of a group of warriors attacking white people- a woman held a baby in her arms. I saw hatchets, blood dripping, feathers flying. I showed the picture to the sister. She said, "Rose Mary, don't you know you're Indian?" I said "No" and I ran behind a clump of juniper trees and cried and cried."<sup>50</sup>

Another student remarked about the way White Americans categorized Indian speech. "I don't like the way you white people have Indians talk. Did you ever hear one grunt or say 'heap plenty'? No! ...And in the books all Indians are lazy."<sup>51</sup>

The depiction of the Indians in the books they read and the removal from them of anything Indian began to imprint negative thoughts about Indian people in the minds of the students. "And the books told how bad the Indians had been to white men—burning their towns and killing their women and children..And so after a while we also began to say Indians were bad."<sup>52</sup> Another student mentioned how his negative feelings towards his own people were fostered by the negative images of Indians:

The great fear I entertained of my brethren was occasioned by the many stories I had heard of their cruelty toward the whites - how they were in the habit of killing and scalping men, women, and children. But the whites did not tell me that they were in a great majority of instances the aggressors. If the whites had told me how cruel they had been to the "poor Indian," I should have apprehended as much harm from them."<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps most distressing for the American Indian students in the educational systems were the psychological factors that impacted so significantly upon them and affected them throughout their lives. The incredible loneliness, the inherent discrimination based upon their race, the denial of their existence as Indians, the reaction they often faced upon returning home, and the humiliation, abuse and punishment suffered at the hands of the educators warrant attention.

It is not surprising that American Indian students attending schools suffered terrible loneliness. They were often taken far from their traditional homes and placed in foreign institutions that were cold, impersonal, and strange. Contrasted with the close-knit communities they left, the institutions were barren, sterile places.

For most of the students, the worst terror and loneliness came at night. Once in bed, the memories of home filled the children with sadness and remorse. Johnston recalls:

But thoughts of family and home did not yield much comfort and strength; instead such memories as one had served to inflame the feelings of alienation and abandonment and to fan the flames of resentment. Soon the silence was broken by the sobs and whimpers of boys who gave way to misery and sadness, dejection and melancholy, heart-ache and gloom.<sup>54</sup>

The terror of the loneliness was often too much to bear. "If we thought the days were bad, the nights were much worse. This was the time when real loneliness set in, for it was then we knew we were all alone."<sup>55</sup> Another student recalls her first night at the school:

My long travel and the bewildering sights had exhausted me. I fell asleep, heaving deep, tired sobs. My tears were left to dry themselves in streaks, because neither my aunt nor my mother was near to wipe them away.<sup>56</sup>

Even in terror and despair, the fear of punishment also had to be kept in mind. A former boarding school student recalled, "Evenings we would gather in a corner and cry softly so the matron would not hear and scold or spank us. I would try to be a comforter, but in a little while I would be crying too."<sup>57</sup> Despite the fear of being in a place with her people's enemies and the fear of the matron's corporal punishment, unknown in Indian culture, this little girl attempted to comfort the other crying children.

The loneliness often followed the students wherever they went. However, pride would not allow some to share their tears with anyone else. "Often I wept in secret, wishing I had gone West, to be nourished by my mother's love, instead of remaining among a cold race whose hearts were frozen hard with prejudice."<sup>58</sup> "Then he began to cry. It was the first time that I'd seen one of the Apache children do that. I felt sorry for him....It was because he was the youngest child at Carlisle, and lonely."<sup>59</sup>

While it was extremely painful for the older students to be away from their families and friends, it was especially difficult for the younger children. Johnston recalls:

They were a sad lot, this little crowd of babies; they seldom laughed or smiled and often cried and whimpered during the day and at night. ...these little waifs were even more wretched than we were...they were hunched in their wretchedness and misery in a corner.<sup>60</sup>

As one of the former students recalls, the first day back at school from a vacation was the worst.

..But the time that really, really gets to the bottom of my soul; the first day back... You're feeling pretty lonesome, suddenly go to bed and in the morning, you wake up and you see this white ceiling. You may as well have a knife and stab me through my heart. You know where you are and you got to survive and you just cover it over, seal it up for ten months.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, students recognized that the school held them captive. "They didn't have family to rely on. They were so far away from home they couldn't run away. And so they were really prisoners."<sup>62</sup>

Along with white customs, many of the students learned about corporal punishment firsthand.

Probably my mother and her—her brothers and sisters were the first in our family to go to boarding school...And the stories she told were—were horrendous. There were beatings. There were—a very young classmate—I don't know how old they were, probably preschool or grade school—who lost a hand in having to clean this machine that baked bread or cut dough or something, and having to kneel for hours on cold basement floors as punishment... My mother lived with a rage all her life, and I think the fact that they were taken away so young was part of this rage and how it—the fallout was on us as a family.<sup>63</sup>

As Hopi educator and author, Polingaysi Quayawayma, reflected upon her first school experiences, it was readily apparent how painful those experiences were: "...the stupid, brutal whippings and humiliations. She and her companions had been treated like little dumb animals because they did not speak the language of the school authorities."<sup>64</sup>

Another aspect of punishment, which proved so detrimental to Indian children, was the shame it brought upon the individual. Pride was a very strong part of Indian culture, and shame, without physical punishment, was the norm in Indian homes. Because the educators wanted all the students to learn from the bad example of those requiring punishment, corporal punishment was often combined with public humiliation. As LaFlesche painfully recalls, "Such punishment had not happened to me before. It had frequently come to other

scholars, and I had felt sorry for them; but now the disgrace had fallen on me, and I felt it keenly.”<sup>65</sup> A student remembers there were a “...lot of strappings going on...They took your pants down and they lean you over a bench in front of everybody.”<sup>66</sup>

Punishment was often inflicted upon Indian children simply for being “too Indian.” Some “poor full blood girl” was more likely to get severely punished than a half-breed for a similar crime, according to a former student at the Riverside Boarding School in Oklahoma. Many students felt the crime they had allegedly committed was, in the teacher’s eyes, being a dumb savage in need of taming.<sup>67</sup> “...I thought about how the school had taught us racism long before we even knew the word. The nuns left us no doubt about our place in the world by the different ways we saw them treat light-complexioned or white children.”<sup>68</sup> “Three things stand out in my mind from my years at school; hunger, speaking English and being called a heathen because of my grandfather.”<sup>69</sup>

Running away from school evoked severe punishment. Francis LaFlesche recalls the punishment he and a friend received for running away from school:

It was thought best to punish us; so Warren was taken to the top of the house and locked up in the attic, where he was to reflect upon the wrong he had committed in running away. But I am quite sure he thought more about the devils and the ghosts in that horrid place than of anything else. As for me, I was marched to the dining-room, placed with my back to one of the posts, and my arms brought around it and tied; then I was left alone in this uncomfortable position, to repent.<sup>70</sup>

The idea of corporal punishment, so foreign to traditional Indian cultures, became a way of life for those students returning from their educational experience.

Yet you find by the 30s and 40s in most Native communities, where large numbers of young people had, in the previous years, attended boarding schools, an increasing number of parents who utilized corporal punishment in the raising of their children, so that although you can prove a direct connection, I think you can certainly see that boarding school experiences where corporal punishment was the name of the game had its impact on the next generations of native people.<sup>71</sup>

Indian children, generally, were taught to be self-sufficient at home. They were required to take on a great number of responsibilities at an early age. However, upon entering school, these children’s skills were useless. “Before I left (home), I was full of confidence; I could do everything that was needed to be done at home....But when I arrived here all that left me. I felt so helpless.”<sup>72</sup> Ignorance led to feelings of inferiority for some students. One student laments her ignorance and shame:

And this little girl takes my hand, smaller than me,..she takes me and I'm dying of shame that this little girl knows what this big word is and she knows where she is going to. Holy man, I mean, what's the matter with me? Oh, I'm so ashamed..I go in there. I guess there are some more of us big dummies....<sup>73</sup>

To need to be assisted by someone smaller, especially in front of others, is a form of public humiliation. To many Indian people, losing face is one of the most terrible insults one can endure.

American Indian children had long been warned about white people. For many years, whites and Indians had been at war with one another. Suddenly, children found themselves in the total care of these former enemies. The psychological damage cannot be underestimated. As a young student recalled on her first encounter at school, "And after being told to be afraid of white people, you can imagine the feeling we had."<sup>74</sup> A Hopi woman remembers her mother's warning:

...her mother snapped, "Bahana (whiteman) is catching children this morning for school... The Bahana does not care how we feel toward our children. They think they know everything and we know nothing. They think only of themselves and what they want. I don't know what they are going to do to our children, down there in that big house. It is not the Hopi way of caring for children, this tearing them from their homes and their mothers."<sup>75</sup>

Additionally, the horrors of the school were often passed on from parent to child. "...and strict Victorian discipline at the schools also shocked many Indian children. Virtually every Indian family passed along stories to tell about the boarding schools."<sup>76</sup> The parents would not necessarily indicate the particular abhorrence to the school but they intimated about it. Basil Johnston writes in his book:

The word or name "Spanish" (the name of the school) might seem to be no more filled with menace than any other word; but it inspired dread from the very first time we Indian boys heard it. From the tone in which statements like, "You should go to Spanish!" or "You're going to Spanish! Mark my words!" were delivered, we knew that "Spanish" was a place of woe for miscreants, just as hell and purgatory were for sinners...Spanish! It was a word synonymous with residential school, penitentiary, reformatory, exile, dungeon, whippings, kicks, slaps, all rolled into one. None of us wanted to go to Spanish any more than we wanted to go to hell or a concentration camp.<sup>77</sup>

In addition to physical and psychological abuse, sexual abuse was also

rampant in the schools. "We had many different teachers during those years; some got the girls pregnant and had to leave..."<sup>78</sup> Many young children were raped by other children or the administration.<sup>79</sup> "He (a teacher) would put his arms around and fondle this girl, sometimes taking her on his lap...When I got there, Mr. M put his arm around me and rubbed my arm all the way down. He rubbed his face against mine."<sup>80</sup> In one school, a lay worker was reported to have fathered a number of children to the girls in attendance at that school. At the same school, a priest was known for his sexual advances. "Anyway, I ended up beside him (the priest)...and all of a sudden he started to feel my legs...I was getting really uncomfortable and he started trying to put his hands in my pants..."<sup>81</sup>

It was not only the priests who sexually abused children; in some schools, nuns did so as well. Failure to submit to the demands of the sisters might also result in physical punishment. "A nun was sponge bathing me and proceeded to go a little too far with her sponge bathing. So I pushed her hand away. She held my legs apart while she strapped the insides of my thighs. I never stopped her again."<sup>82</sup>

The psychological ramifications of returning home were often exacerbated by the reaction of those at the student's home community. A Pueblo student discussed the rejection he found upon returning from school.

The chiefs said to my father, "Your son who calls himself Rafael has lived with the white men. He has been far away from the pueblo. He has not lived in the kiva nor learned the things that Indian boys should learn. He has no hair. He has no blankets. He cannot even speak our language and he has a strange smell. He is not one of us."<sup>83</sup>

Luther Standing Bear, an educated Sioux spokesperson and a product of the boarding schools, considered a "success" by the whites, commented on the impact of the educational system on the relationship between elder and youth. Standing Bear explained:

Many of the grievances of the old Indian, and his disagreements with the young, find root in the far-removed boarding-school which sometimes takes the little ones at a very tender age. More than one tragedy has resulted when a young boy or girl has returned home again almost an utter stranger. I have seen these happenings with my own eyes and I know they can cause naught but suffering. The old Indian cannot, even if he wished, reconcile himself to an institution that alienates his young. And there is something evil in a system that brings about an unnatural reaction to life; when it makes young hearts callous and unheeding of the needs and joys of the old.<sup>84</sup>

For many returning students, the differences in expectations were shaming.

A student recalled his confusion about the wishes of his parents as opposed to the desires of the school:

At school, if we brought in a nest or a pretty leaf, we were given much credit, and we thought we would also please mother by bringing some to her. But she did not like our doing this. She would scold and correct us and tell us we were destroying something - that the nests were the homes of the birds, and the leaves were the beauty of the forest."<sup>85</sup>

Another Chippewa elder recalls, "Then culture shock set in when I went home. I would say, 'Excuse me' or 'Beg your pardon.' Grandfather would say, 'We do not beg.'"<sup>86</sup>

The clash of white American culture with Native culture was, indeed, significant. Quyawayma discusses the pain she felt in trying to fit into two worlds and often not fitting into either.

As a Hopi, she was misunderstood by the white man; as a convert of the missionaries, she was looked upon with suspicion by the Hopi people. Her restlessness, her moments of depression, were the inevitable result of her desire to be different, to make a new place for herself in a world that sometimes seemed determined not to allow her a place in it.<sup>87</sup>

A Dakota woman remarked on a similar note:

Learn to be the white people way. We're not supposed to be Indians all the time. And I — as I got older, you know, 14, 15, 16, right around there, I was all mixed up. I was puzzled. Why can't I be an Indian? Why can't I do things I want to do? Why can't I talk the way I want to? And —and yet, I was always a little bit shy and afraid of the white people...I had that feeling, they were—they looked down on us.<sup>88</sup>

"When a Hopi becomes a white man, the conservatives said, meaning, of course, when the Indian is willing to take on an overlay of white culture, "he no longer has a face."<sup>89</sup> "He (the child's uncle) said, why did I want to go and try to learn to be a white man? He said I'd forget how to talk Indian, and I'd come back and marry one of them half-breed girls. And 'look at the ones that's come back,' he said, 'Can they earn any more money than us fellows here? They ain't white and they ain't Indian. You'd better stay here.'"<sup>90</sup> Once a child had attended school, the parents felt he or she had moved away from the tribe. "You have taken a step in the wrong direction. A step away from your Hopi people."<sup>91</sup> "Many people felt that the Government was trying to obliterate our culture by making the children attend school."<sup>92</sup>

Despite the students' best attempts at retaining their Indian upbringing, a student later lamented, "But I was learning internally...My aunt didn't understand

what was wrong with me. She accused me of having foolish pride in myself - bishigwadis- that's a terrible insult to our people, because we're taught that you're never an entity by yourself."<sup>93</sup> For a number of students, it was just too hard to adjust "in this strange and unpleasant life of another race."<sup>94</sup>

Perhaps one of the best descriptions of the pain and suffering of many of these students can be found in a poem written by one of the most prominent Indian writers to come out of the early educational system:

#### The Indian's Awakening

I've lost my long hair; my eagle plumes too.  
From you my own people, I've gone astray.  
A wanderer now, with no where to stay.  
The will-o-wisp learning, it brought me rue.  
It brings no admittance. Where I have knocked  
Some evil imps, hearts, have bolted and locked.  
Alone with the night and fearful abyss  
I stand isolated, life gone amiss.<sup>95</sup>

Rosemary Christianson, the director of Indian education for Minneapolis public schools, offered an excellent summation of the educational experience suffered by many Indian students:

I don't believe that —that we can talk too harshly about what we have suffered—we Indian people have suffered from that particular point in our history. I've — I call it the Nagasaki and the Hiroshima of Indian education, because it basically destroyed the fiber of our family life.<sup>96</sup>

American Indian people, however changed, have survived. Somehow the United States educational institutions could not reach Mix's goal to "exterminate the Indian, but develop a man."<sup>97</sup> The question remains: how did American Indians survive the assault perpetrated by the American educational system? The resistance demonstrated by many students may hold a key to understanding. By resisting what was being done to them, American Indians may have been able to hold on to their identity. In fact, such an identity may have become stronger. The resistance demonstrated by the American Indian students took on many forms, including petty larceny, symbolism, gangs, traditional language use, traditional teachings, humor, passive resistance, and running away.

Food and its acquisition took on a very important aspect at the school. "I think the reason we stole food was that we wanted to cook it our own way, roasted in the ashes."<sup>98</sup> For many students, the food supplied was bland and in short supply. A favorite saying by many students when out of earshot from the teachers was "Too much government gravy, makes me lazy."<sup>99</sup> Nonetheless, the students took to savoring each morsel and eating was done in an almost ritualistic



manner. Additionally, as Johnston recalls, "Food, or the lack of it, was something that the boys could point to as a cause of their suffering; the other (causes for misery) was far too abstract and therefore much too elusive to grasp."<sup>100</sup>

Another form of survival was the students' ability to form strong fast camaraderie. As a Standing Rock Sioux who attended Haskell Indian School recalled, "I remember the camaraderie. We met Indians from all over the country."<sup>101</sup> The importance of a family at the schools was often expressed in the formation of "gangs". Within the gangs, students were able to rebel against the authority figures by forming their own little family. Like any family, parental figures emerged. For Francis LaFlesche and his gang, the Middle Five, this "parental" figure was an older boy by the name of Brush. Brush took it upon himself to teach the newly arriving gang members the things they needed to know to succeed in the school, how to understand and speak English and what the numerous rules and regulations were. LaFlesche recalls the sad passing of Brush and the dissolution of the Middle Five:

But he (Brush) went on, "you mustn't be troubled; I'm all right.... tell the boys I want them to learn...I want them to learn and to think.... I wish I had something to give to each one of the boys before I go. I have nothing in the world but his knife. I love all of you, but you understand me, so I give it to you"... We did not know how fondly we were attached to Brush, how truly he had been our leader, until we four, left alone, lingered around his grave in the shadowy darkness of night...no longer "The Middle Five."<sup>102</sup>

Not all the students needed the gangs, however, the friendship with other people going through the same pain helped these young people to survive. The older students often risked punishment to assist the younger, newer students in adjusting. One student recalls the kindness of another.

I remember my first night at Riverside. I was scared of the dark, and I was laying in my bunk and crying because of the dark and being away from home, and one of the older girls was worried that the matron might come in and hear me, so she came over and said to me in Wichita, "What's the matter?" and I told her that I was scared of the dark...and she told me to come over and lay down with her. I was so glad. And so I slept with her for a couple of days until I was more used to being in those beds by myself.<sup>103</sup>

Another form of resistance for the students was to retain and secretly use their native language. "On the school grounds the children were forbidden to speak the Hopi language or to call each other by their Hopi names, but on the way home, to show their contempt for the rules, they delighted in calling out names in the Hopi way."<sup>104</sup> Students often would speak their language when

they were together far away from the ears of the educators. "When we were way out there, we'd talk together in our language."<sup>105</sup> Even through students would be punished for speaking their language, many students hid in groups and struggled to retain their ability to speak the language. Even at a young age, these students knew the critical importance of retaining the language. As a former student later explained, "Those languages are needed to truly understand the Indian relationship to one another and to Mother Earth."<sup>106</sup>

The Indian students were able to endure much pain and suffering because part of their traditional teaching was learning to laugh at themselves. This ability helped them to sustain themselves throughout the ordeal of education.

You will probably notice that a Pima can laugh at himself. It is one way of seeing the other fellow's point of view. To us that is an important part of religion. The old people were well trained in this long ago. They could see the point of view even of their enemies, of all living things, even of their enemies.<sup>107</sup>

"But Indian people are durable people. We have survived incredible onslaughts...(education) being only one factor."<sup>108</sup> Heartaches and hard times were nothing new. The traditional Indian culture allowed Native Americans the ability to deal with the difficult. "Fatalism was ingrained...in all Hopis. (They) accepted the ill fortune that had overtaken (them) as something that could not be averted. It was to be, therefore, (one) must endure it."<sup>109</sup>

When there is an oppressive system in operation, there exists an opportunity to develop a resistance to that structure. According to a former student, "Opposition to the school is principally manifested in the struggle to win symbolic and physical space from the institution and its rules."<sup>110</sup> Such opposition developed in the school settings, especially through passive resistance. Each small step out of line was an important one in self-definition.

Students, through a perceived failure to do as directed, manifested passive resistance. As Johnston recalls:

But as I was to learn later, the boys were not really waiting in the commonly understood sense of the word "wait". Though they may have appeared to be waiting, the boys were in reality exercising a form of quiet disobedience, directed against bell, priests, school and, in the abstract, all authority, civil and religious. Since the boys could not openly defy authority ...they turned to the only means available to them: passive resistance, which took the form of dawdling.<sup>111</sup>

Another means of defying the authorities at school was to purposefully sabotage the chores one was required to do. A student recalls her joy at destroying the hated turnips she was preparing for the meal: "As I sat eating my dinner, and saw that no turnips were served, I whooped in my heart for having once

asserted the rebellion within me.”<sup>112</sup>

An additional form of resistance was to resist inside the students’ heads without any outward manifestation of it.

Once when Wikew (the head nun) told us, “Don’t you dare move a muscle.” I was wiggling my toes under the blanket thinking, “You ain’t my boss and I’ll wiggle all I want.” At the same time, I was looking straight at her wearing the Indian mask which I had discovered over the years she couldn’t read.<sup>113</sup>

A powerful form of resistance was to hide the display of emotions, especially when they were being punished.

And the thing I remembered when she used to strap me...I knew I was going to get five or ten straps on each hand and I knew it was going to draw blood - but I would remind myself, “It’s not going to hurt. Just so I can make you angry, I’m not going to let you know it hurts...” and I would just stare at her in the face...and I wouldn’t even let a drop, a tear come down.<sup>114</sup>

Resistance was seen in the constant numbers of run-aways from the school setting. “Kids ran way almost every day—almost every day.”<sup>115</sup> Once found, punishment was very swift and severe. Running away was one way students showed their displeasure with their environment. “Many boys ran away from the school because the treatment was so bad but most of them were caught and brought back by the police.”<sup>116</sup>

Not all the students who chose to defy the system survived. Those who ran away often found life at the school so painful, they would rather risk facing the harsh natural environment than the painful psychological environment of the schools.

The Anko calendar records the death of three schoolboys, indicated by the picture of a boy in civilized dress holding a book...They were attending the government Kiowa school, and one of them had been whipped by a teacher, in consequence of which the little fellow, with the two others, ran away from school and attempted to reach their homes, some 30 miles out in the mountains. The same night a terrible blizzard came on, and after they had struggled painfully along nearly the entire distance they sank in the snow, exhausted by fatigue, cold and hunger, and were found a few days later lying together, frozen stiff, on the bleak slope of a mountain, by a search party of Indians.<sup>117</sup>

Rebellion in the schools was not an isolated incident. One woman recalls the atmosphere at her school:

And within the school itself, the missionaries and the nuns had to deal with one hundred and eighty Native children who were always hungry, always homesick. The boys were openly rebellious, many of them stealing or running away or getting the girls off in some corner alone with them. Unlike the boys, the female students were seldom openly rebellious. Instead, they were sullen and depressed.<sup>118</sup>

Another student recalls the pervasiveness of the resistance. “Those kids are gonna find some way to rebel and, and do what they want to do, and we did!”<sup>119</sup> Because the students were so segregated from other groups and because of the extremely oppressive nature of the schools, students formed a them versus us mentality. An Indian ethnic identity emerged and survived. As a former boarding school student remarked, “There was no tribalism... We knew that kids were of different tribes, but we never thought too much about it. We identified as Indians...”<sup>120</sup> A Carlisle graduate proudly proclaimed in 1911, “...we do not wish to be designated as Cherokees, Sioux or Pawnees, but we wish to be known as Carlisle Indians, belonging to that great universal tribe of North American Indians, speaking the same language and having the same chief - the great White Father at Washington.”<sup>121</sup>

English served as both a colonizer and a liberator. Arguably, the forced use of a foreign language on an individual could be a powerful tool in colonizing the minds of people, but those educated young people also had certain qualities that made them powerful. Indians began to be able to speak back and to define their own identity. Many Indian students fought to combine the ancient world of their tribes with the contemporary world surrounding them. Educated Indians became politicians able to understand and define federal, state and local control. They could begin to define their own rights. Such force allowed political mobilization and political pressure groups to develop.<sup>122</sup> As Clara Sue Kidwell of the University of Oklahoma says:

Because if you look at the networks of people who made their initial contacts with each other during boarding schools, who then went on, like my parents, to work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, to carve out professional careers, you see that they're —they're using the mechanisms of the boarding schools as ways of—really, furthering their own ends and the ends of their communities.<sup>123</sup>

Through the narratives, American Indians have shown that the human spirit is indomitable and resilient. Despite severe, cruel and inhuman punishment, many students carried out resistance in a very effective manner. Luther Standing Bear attempted to explain the outcome of his educational experience and the love he still held for his tribal ways:

Regarding the “civilization” that has been thrust upon me since the

days of reservation, it has not added one whit to my sense of justice, to my reverence for the rights of life, to my love for truth, honesty, and generosity; more to my faith in Wakan Tanka -God of the Lakotas...So if today I had a young mind to direct, to start on the journey of life, and I was faced with the duty of choosing between the natural way of my forefathers and that of the white man's present way of civilization, I would, for its welfare, unhesitatingly set that child's feet in the path of my forefathers. *I would raise him to be an Indian* [Italics added]! <sup>124</sup>

Yet another success in the white world is Charles Eastman, a Sioux physician who was born in 1858. While Dr. Eastman believed strongly in education for young Indian children, yet he remarked:

*I am an Indian* [italics added]; and while I have learned much from civilization, for which I am grateful, I have never lost my Indian sense of right and justice. I am for development and progress along social and spiritual lines, rather than those of commerce, nationalism, or material efficiency.<sup>125</sup>

It is a tribute to the indomitable spirit of the human being that one can survive such challenges and remain resolved to maintain one's sense of culture. The survivors of that cultural holocaust demonstrate the critical importance culture plays in an individual's life. Above all, this fact needs to be remembered. Indeed, this is a story of survival.

While Indian people have survived, the effects of the policies of the United States and Canada, including those aimed at education, cannot be minimized. As noted Mohawk scholar, Taiaiake Alfred, notes:

"..What is the legacy of colonialism? Dispossession, disempowerment, and disease inflicted by the white man, to be sure. ...Yet the enemy is in plain view: residential schools, racism, expropriation, extinguishment, wardship, welfare."<sup>126</sup>

Although the effects of the white school experience had a profound and significant impact on Indian people, Indian people have not disappeared. Another woman, forever changed, talks about how the educational experience with all its horror strengthened who she is:

All in all my life hasn't really been that bad. It is just knowing I went through that humiliation and that hurt, that low self-esteem and having come out of it. And never letting that hate leave a scar on me...I have this place and the people that put me through it to thank for the strength I got...a lot of strength to fight back and that strength I got is what's made me into the woman I am today."<sup>127</sup>

As the Shuswap leader George Manuel says, "At this point in our struggle for survival, the Indian peoples of North America are entitled to declare a victory. We have survived."<sup>128</sup> The combined message of survival and the impacts of the long shadow of education can best be summed up by poet, Rita Joe, Mi'maq, who attended a residential school at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia:

I Lost My Talk  
I lost my talk  
The talk you took away  
When I was a little girl  
At Shubenacadie school

You snatched it away:  
I speak like you  
I think like you  
I create like you  
The scrambled ballad, about my world.

Two ways I talk  
Both ways I say,  
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask  
Let me find my talk  
So I can teach you about me.<sup>129</sup>

Perhaps, following Rita Joe's words, all people can be forever changed by education: education to empower, not to exterminate.

As this paper shows, those students who survived the onslaught of education aimed at cultural annihilation suffered much at the hands of their oppressors. It is extremely painful to hear the stories these former students recalled from their days at the schools. The students suffered greatly, both physically and psychologically. It is difficult to imagine that kind of pain and confusion, day after day. The voices of resistance document the strength and courage of American Indian students dedicated to the persistence of American Indian culture.

These narratives are a useful tool to give voice to those who are traditionally voiceless, namely the invaded and oppressed. The use of narratives by individuals who are deeply embedded in the culture enables those narratives to be used as tools of human science research. "Understanding human experience is the central task of the educational researcher. For it is in the stories of everyday lives, the drama, the meanings, the metaphors others live by, that the human science researcher must practice his or her craft of telling."<sup>130</sup> For the purposes of this paper, special emphasis was placed on the means of adaptation these individuals

utilized in coping with the brutal educational system.

Despite the extreme clash of cultures between the red and the white world and the severe, catastrophic anguish, many students remained steadfast in their resistance. Subtly and sometimes overtly, these students stood up to their oppressors. These students were able to maintain and nurture that core in them that was and always will be Indian, however changed.

### Notes

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