

The Boarding School Experience in American Indian Literature

by Joseph Bruchac & John Smelcer

One of the most recurrent themes in American Indian literature is the lasting impact of the boarding school experience. From 1879 until the early 1960s, the federal government tried to assimilate American Indians by sending school-aged Indian children to distant boarding schools where, it was believed, the Indian in them would be slowly and forever replaced by Western traditions, language, education, and religion (conversion to Christianity was part of the indoctrination). By law, Indian children were literally abducted by the government and sent off to institutions designed to destroy their cultural identity. They were the stolen generations. Most of the schools were structured on an Army training model, requiring the boys to cut their long hair, wear uniforms, and engage in military drills.



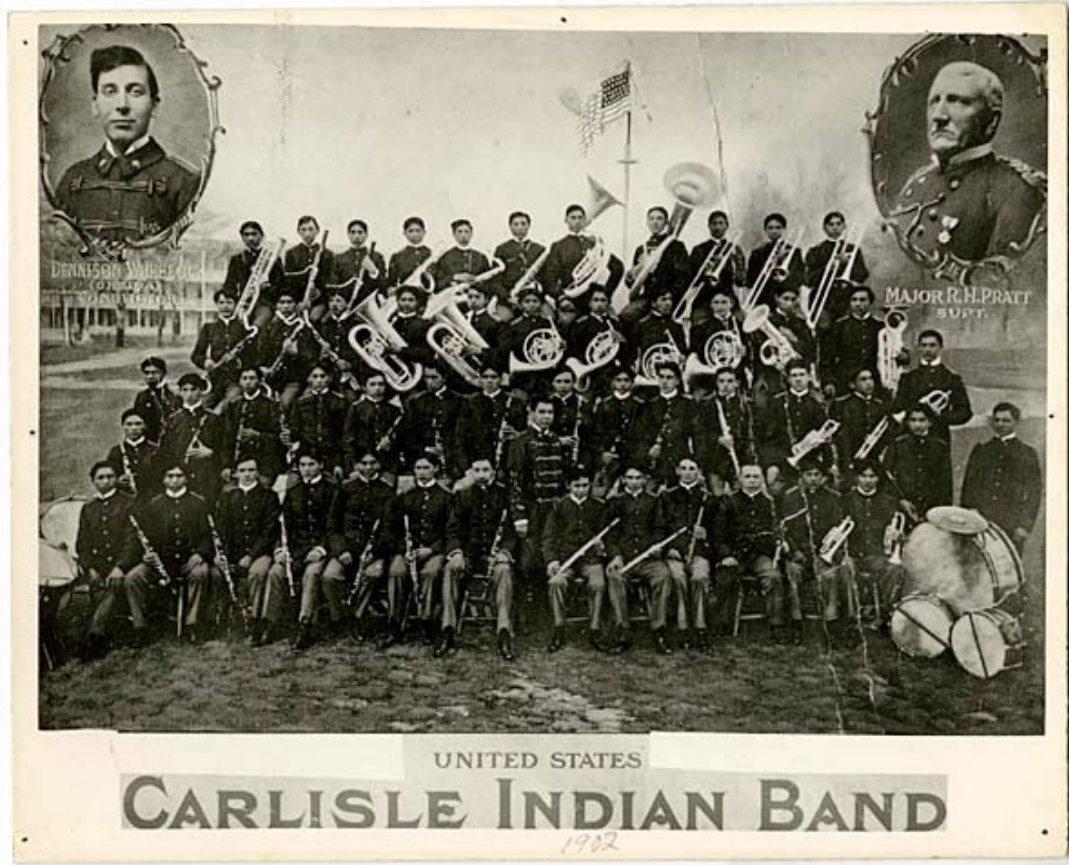
Photograph of Navajo youth, Tom Torlino, on his arrival at Carlisle in 1882 and shortly thereafter (photo by John N. Choate, a professional photographer who was hired by Pratt to take such pictures to be used to publicize the “civilizing effect” of Carlisle and insure its continued support by the United States government and influential white patrons)

This was due, in large part to the person who founded and ran one of the first, and surely the most influential, of the Indian Boarding Schools. That man, Captain Richard Henry Pratt, had served as an officer in the 10th Cavalry during the Red River War. When the war ended, Pratt was given charge of a group of 72 Indian prisoners of war taken in 1875 to Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida. His success in “transforming” them led to the development of the Carlisle Residential School Model. The first of such institutions, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, was established in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Pratt’s philosophy was best described in a speech that he himself gave in 1892: “A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one.* In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”



Carlisle Indian Industrial School circa 1895 (photos are from the Richard M. Pratt Archives held by the Beinecke Library at Yale University)

*General Philip Sheridan’s actual quote (c. 1868) is “The only good Indian I ever saw was dead.”



Carlisle Indian Industrial School, 1902 (note date penciled at bottom of photo)

Indian boarding schools were built to be places that would utterly transform Indian people, obliterating tribal identity, destroying Native languages, and eradicating Native religions, customs, and traditions. Students were punished—often drastically—when caught speaking their Native languages. There exist numerous accounts of students locked in basements or boiler rooms for days without food or water. At its height, there were 153 of these schools across America. Parallel histories exist in Canada’s treatment of First Nations people and in Australia’s dealings with Aborigines.

In the early years, thousands of children died from diseases to which they had no previous immunity, especially from trachoma, influenza, and tuberculosis. The government blamed the epidemic on the Indians’ physical inferiority, insisting they had brought it upon themselves. Worse, yet, students weren’t always young. Sometimes, as was the case with the Chiricahua Apaches (Geronimo was Apache), after they were taken as prisoners of war (the entire tribe) to Florida and then to Arkansas, young men and women, some of whom were already married and

had children of their own, were selected for Carlisle personally by none other than Pratt. Most of them died there of tuberculosis (and are buried in the Carlisle graveyard) or were shipped infected back to their families who then contracted the deadly disease.



Carlisle Indian School graveyard (c. 1885)

Child abuse and pedophilia was rampant in residential schools. Victims sometimes became abusers themselves. Students were so mistreated, so isolated, lonely, and dehumanized that many who attended such schools would rarely speak of their experiences, even as adults. It is only in recent decades that accounts of pedophilia at Indian boarding schools have become public, as elders have found the courage to share their heartfelt stories.

While it is easy to catalogue the detrimental effects of the residential Indian school system, there were mixed blessings. Ironically, though they were meant to obliterate American Indian identity, the boarding schools sometimes did the opposite, quite unintentionally. By bringing together young people from different tribes across the nation, lifelong intertribal friendships were forged. But also intertribal marriages helped build a new spirit of Pan-Indianism in the 20th century (many of the most established Native American writers are of mixed tribal heritage).

Rather than seeking out careers as house-keepers and menial workers—as those schools often intended—many Native people who endured the boarding school experience continued to pursue their education for their people. Rather than rejecting traditional ways, they demonstrated the resilience of American Indian cultures as they went on to advocate for Native rights and identity in many professions, including law, the arts, and as community leaders—testimony to the enduring spirit of the American Indian.

The lives of Indian children sent to boarding schools were forever changed. And though it was not their choice to leave their homes, many were ostracized when they returned. Unable to reconcile the old and the new, many returning students lived socially detached and abusive lives as outcasts and alcoholics. The experience left an indelible mark on Native America. For instance, much of the loss of Native languages can be traced to this period in American history. Contemporary American Indian literature—with its canon of poems, short stories, essays, novels, and plays—frequently makes reference to the boarding school experience, even when the writers themselves are too young to have attended such institutions. Nonetheless, in one way or another, their lives have been impacted by the experience of their parents and grandparents. You can see the influence in the first poem and story in the *Native American Classics** (2013) graphic anthology, “After a Sermon at the Church of Infinite Confusion” (as part of their assimilation, boarding school students attended Sunday School) and “The Soft-Hearted Sioux.”

* *Native American Classics: Graphic Classics Volume 24* (978-0-9825630-6-9). Eureka Productions, 2013. Edited by Joseph Bruchac, John Smelcer & Tom Pomplun (series editor).

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