

Cheaper Than Bullets: American Indian Boarding Schools and Assimilation Policy, 1890-1930

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In 1885, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Hiram Price described the new federal Indian policy of assimilation by saying, “it is cheaper to give them education than to fight them,” a policy that began in the late nineteenth century and would continue into the twentieth. In the past few decades, historians have published many books on the Indian boarding schools usually arguing one of three basic views: in favor of the schools, revisionist and negative, or the rare author that portrays both sides. K. Tsianina Lomawaima’s work, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (1994), carries the message that although in the beginning boarding schools functioned less than desirably, the reforms of the 1920s made institutions, such as the Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma, serve as positive experiences for most students. Somewhat of a revisionist, David Wallace Adams in *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (1995) portrays the mostly negative aspects, but acknowledges some of the benefits, and he emphasizes the role of politics in the creation, operation, and practices of the schools. His book became the standard text on the subject, with his thesis that in the course of the federal government’s pursuit of assimilation, many students, parents, and communities faced hardship and personal and cultural trauma in another form of genocide waged on children. Also becoming a standard text, Clyde Ellis’ *To Change Them Forever: Indian Education at the Rainy Mountain Boarding School, 1893-1920* (1996) remained somewhat in the middle. He blamed the government for the failure and conditions of the schools as a result of a lack of funding and commitment to their policy. Believing all government policies racist, Ellis maintains that the Kiowa look favorably upon their school and experience, but the institution’s administration became a victim of bureaucracy and government negligence.¹

A historian that falls in the first category, Brenda J. Child’s *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families 1900-1940* (1999) states that although boarding schools represented for many a traumatic experience, most students gained friendships and skills through school. Although the author does acknowledge the darker side of government boarding schools including homesickness and punishment, the book overall paints a rather rosy picture of the schools, citing the positives of friendships made and fondness of alumni for their time. In Amelia V. Katanski’s *Learning to Write Indian: The Boarding School Experience and American Indian Literature* (2005) a very negative bias is apparent in her examples of the damage done by the institutions, such as stranding the

¹K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 3; David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 27; Clyde Ellis, *To Change Them Forever: Rainy Mountain Boarding School, 1893-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 5, 7, 9.

natives between cultures and after feeling no longer Indian and not enough white, many students became despondent and turned to alcohol or other unhealthy lifestyles. Through former students' writings, she stressed the importance of keeping one's culture and learning to express it. This paper will argue that Adams assessment is essentially right, as the boarding schools became a test of assimilation and new form of war, ideological and psychological, to be waged against children.²

By 1880, public opinion maintained that Native Americans should be saved from the "white man" and from themselves. The government used the boarding schools to evaluate the progress of assimilation and as a solution to "the Indian problem," by making them workers and part of mainstream society. Intended to "civilize" American Indian people, officials wanted to use the institutions to instruct them in the academics, hygiene, diet, and work habits of the Anglos. Assimilative education targeted small children, whom the government thought easier to change and least able to resist, and sought to destroy tribal nations, culture, language, religion, and community. After graduation, officials intended the students to be civilized, meaning speaking English, converting to Christianity, and turning away from traditional and communal living.³

Federal boarding schools proliferated in the 1880-90s, beginning with Carlisle Industrial School, which opened in 1879. With the movement beginning as missionary schools, they sought to counteract the bad influence of Native families. After educating native prisoners at Fort Marion in Florida, army officer Richard Pratt opened Carlisle because he believed he could save the people by teaching them how to live like Anglo-Americans. Officials in Washington D.C. allowed him to open the school because the children "would be hostages for the good behavior of their people."⁴ Pratt's success at Carlisle, which by 1881 held 286 children from twenty-three tribes, led the government to form more schools patterned after its military style. By 1899, twenty five more residential schools opened.⁵

After 1879 officials and agents recruited, forced, or coerced children into government schools. In 1898 a compulsory attendance law passed, further empowering federal officials to remove students from their home. Many parents had no choice but to send their kids, when Congress authorized the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to

² Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 13, 43; Amelia V. Katanski, *Learning to Write Indian: The Boarding School Experience and American Indian Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 2-3;

³ Adams, 8; K. Tsianina Lomawaima, "Domesticity in Federal Indian Schools: The Power of Authority Over Mind and Body," *American Ethnologist*, 20.2 (May, 1993): 236, 227-9; Ellis, xii-xvi, 3, 9; Katanski, 2-3; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 3; Child, 13, 43.

⁴ Sally Jenkins, *The Real All Americans: The Team that Changed a Game, a People, a Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 65; Child, 5-6; Lomawaima, "Domesticity," 229; Katanski, 4.

⁵ Adams, 58; Jenkins, 94; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 6; Jon Reyner and Jeanne Eder, *American Indian Education: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 149; Child, 6; U.S. Congress. House of Representatives. Interior Affairs. *Report of the Secretary of the Interior and Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*. 54th Congress, 2nd session, 1897; U.S. Congress. House of Representatives. Interior Affairs. *Report of the Secretary of the Interior and Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*. 57th Congress, session, 1900.

withhold rations, clothing, and annuities of those families that refused to send students. Some agents even used reservation police to virtually kidnap youngsters, but experienced difficulties when the Native police officers would resign out of disgust, or when parents taught their kids a special “hide and seek” game. Sometimes resistant fathers found themselves locked up for refusal. The Hopis in Arizona surrendered a group of men to the military to be imprisoned in Alcatraz, rather than voluntarily relinquishing their children.⁶

Early enrollment also involved agents sending the best students from the reservation. To recruit pupils, officials would travel to various locations to preach the benefits of education. Many children went simply to flee from hardship, especially during the Great Depression, when families could no longer provide for them. Rampant poverty on reservations forced many parents to reluctantly give in. The tradition in many tribes of taking in orphans became rare, when families could no longer support themselves, much less extended relatives, and had no choice but to send them to school, where at least they would receive adequate clothing, shelter, and food (they thought). Single women moved to the cities for work, but finding only low-paying menial work, they could no longer support their families, and many children went who would otherwise become homeless. Disease outbreaks and land fraud also left many Indians destitute with schools as the only option for survival.⁷

Not all Natives resisted, as some viewed boarding schools as an opportunity for their young to be educated, develop skills for future employment, and escape the destitution of reservation life. Students from rural areas enrolled specifically to learn to farm. Some children applied by themselves, seeking an education or a way out of their current situation, sometimes not even notifying their parents. Many wanted to go to escape the racism they faced in public schools that would not exist in an all-Indian school. Lastly, students attended because they had brothers or sisters already attending and looked forward to having the same experience.⁸

The separation of families exacted a harsh toll on both parents and students. Officials expected students to stay at school, even during the summer, until they had completely finished, often not seeing their parents for various years. Most students dealt with the emotional burden well before reaching developmental maturity. They were also subjected to an alien and sometimes hostile environment, often leading to sickness and depression. The most lonely students committed suicide, often by hanging. Visits from parents, if allowed at all, remained very rare, and impossible for the poor. Students in many instances could only return home with special permission from the agent, and sometimes not even a family sickness or death qualified as a valid reason. A mother of one student once wrote, “It seems it would be much easier to get her out of prison than out of your school.”⁹ Correspondence between students and parents occurred very frequently, although some schools censored the mail, deleting any less favorable news.

⁶ Child, 13, 56, 90-1; Adams, 63-4, 211; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 6, 10; Lomawaima, “Domesticity,” 227.

⁷ Child, 2, 9-13, 15-17, 20.

⁸ Adams, 240; Child, 16, 18-19, 23, 75; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 35, 38.

⁹ Child, 13, 27, 43-5, 50-2; Reyner and Eder, 190.

Children wrote home about homesickness, regimens of work and study, and diseases, often worrying parents. Mothers and fathers also sent letters to school and government officials when they did not adjust well to the separation, or if they heard rumors of illnesses and deaths. Often, officials did not notify parents of sickness until their children had already died, alienating many and affecting all.¹⁰

Travel and arrival at the institutions also traumatized students deeply, with many remembering the events for the rest of their lives. Most of the children left for school at age twelve or above, but some as young as six attended. After tearful goodbyes, children rode on “iron horses,” many pulling blankets over their heads in fear. If the conductor made any stops, white mobs crowded to gawk and taunt the Indians, scaring them further. Because of the time period’s racist ideology of American Indian bodies as “uncivilized,” upon arrival at the school, officials immediately attacked and focused on their attire, posture, clothing, hairstyle, and names.¹¹

Almost immediately, staff sheared off the long hair of the new arrivals. Separated in a room to be called into another one by one, boys had their hair cut military style. Barbers even cut girls’ hair in short “bob” styles. Revolts sometimes occurred when students learned of the hair-cutting because its loss signified losing maturity and manhood in tribal culture, and people only cut their hair in the deepest mourning. The event caused deep resentment and resistance that often manifested in students running away. Officials saw haircutting as a way to control lice and viewed long hair as a sign of savagery, so removing it would make it easier for children to assimilate and learn. Robert American Horse (Sioux) stated that “if I am to learn the ways of the white people, I can do it just as well with my hair on.”¹²

The staff assaulted the next Native tradition by forcing students to abandon their names and choose an Anglo one. Officials wanted the names changed because they viewed them as pagan, impossible to pronounce, and embarrassing, often insulting students to make them ashamed of their name. The practice greatly affected the children, whose culture viewed names as a motivation for self improvement, a reward for achievement, or transferring the traits of a relative. Erasing a name meant they had no identity or personal history. Teachers would write many Anglo and biblical names on a board and give a child a pointer to choose a name. Unable to read or understand the markings, the students chose randomly.¹³

Also at arrival, school officials forbade students from speaking any of their native languages, even if they knew no English, the only communication allowed. To ensure children did not disobey among themselves, schools mixed them with tribes of different languages. As an unintended effect, the children learned the language of others. After learning English, many students completely forgot their native language. Some superintendents boasted their occupants could speak English in three years. Schools also

¹⁰ Child, 7, 27, 42; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 24.

¹¹ Adams, 97, 99; Child, 43; Lomawaima, “Domesticity,” 229; Jenkins, 71.

¹² Adams, 102-3; Jenkins, 74.

¹³ Lomawaima, *They Called It*, xiv; Jenkins, 75-6; Adams, 103, 107-9, 111.

forbade native religions and forced pupils to convert to Christianity by praying and attending mandatory church service. Though resourcefulness and ingenuity, students covertly spoke their Native languages and practiced their Native religion.¹⁴

In housing the students, boarding schools built dorms or used old army barracks with many children to a room and usually sharing beds, normally separated by age. Later in the 1920s schools were remodeled to have small rooms instead of the original large room with numerous beds. With almost no privacy, students had very little personal belongings, which staff locked in the basement with very little access being granted. Matrons inspected the rooms often for cleanliness and closely monitored the girls to ensure a separation of the sexes. In the dorms, students also learned Victorian manners, eating for the first time with silverware, tablecloths, and napkins, and learning to fold hands, sit in chairs, and walk in line. The Indians dressed in a common dressing room with long wooden benches and showered only once or twice a week. The 1928 Meriam Report found that although they had showers weekly, students often had no access to soap. And despite diseases, the kids washed their hands in communal troughs and dried their hands with the same dirty towels to discourage towel fights. Most schools lacked sanitary facilities, with toilets in cold basements, leaky faucets, and clogged drains, and only half of the institutions had toilet paper.¹⁵

As for those who taught the Native children, in the beginning some schools lacked a single qualified teacher. The Indian Service did not require teachers to have a four-year degree until the 1930s. The average boarding school employed females in their late twenties. Most institutions had a high rate of teacher turnover because of transfers for higher pay, employee factionalism, and primitive living conditions. Many instructors left in the middle of the year because of seeing so many “sick, hungry, and overworked children” and feeling helpless because they could not do anything about it.¹⁶ Besides responsibilities in the classroom, teachers also watched study hours, supervised chores, chaperoned social events, and conducted Sunday school classes. In the case of a small staff, they also cooked, cleaned, mended, and made uniforms. Students and staff structured daily life more than the directives from Washington, with different schools varying.¹⁷

In the schools, students spent a half day in classes and the other half in some form of vocational training, with the boys learning a trade or farming and the girls being trained domestically. Academically, the school strove first to teach Native Americans to read, write, and speak English, and to acculturate to American life and institutions. Often, teachers used no textbooks with new children who could not speak English, and instead utilized the blackboard and slates and pointed to objects, so they could understand what a

¹⁴ Lomawaima, “Domesticity,” 227; Reyner and Eder, 140; Katanski, 4, 42; Adams, 140, 142, 168; Child, 2, 73, 78; Jenkins, 78; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, xiv, 5, 140.

¹⁵ Adams, 113, 116; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 60-2; Child, 38-9; Jenkins, 79; Lewis Meriam, “The Problem of Indian Administration,” *The Institute for Government Research: Studies in Administration*, <http://www.alaskool.org/native_ed/research_reports/IndianAdmin/Indian_Admin_Problms.html > (accessed January-May, 2009).

¹⁶ Adams, 82, 87-8, 93; Ellis, 58; Reyner and Eder, 157.

¹⁷ U.S. Congress, *Report*, 1897, p. 346; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 9; Adams, 88.

word meant instead of reciting a meaningless alphabet. The academic curriculum mostly consisted of elementary school subjects, and after learning the white language, students moved on to geography, arithmetic, nature study, and physiology, with officials believing this knowledge would prepare the children for citizenship. In 1890, government officials standardized the curriculum and spread six years of white education over eight years for the Indian because they also learned an industrial trade. Most students never received more than a primary education at boarding schools.¹⁸

Many reformers believed vocational training necessary for citizenship because the Native needed to learn respect and gain a love of work. Modern educational historians see the vocations as an upper-class strategy for social control and order because it prepared the students for menial jobs and service to the elite. For boys, many schools focused only on agricultural training and the students had to maintain dairies, gardens, and herds. Later, other trades became available to boys, such as blacksmithing, shoe-making, tailoring, carpentry, and mechanics. For many students, these trades proved useless once they returned to the reservation because Native Americans wore moccasins and had no need for a shoe maker. Training for males did not prepare them for urban work in factories but farming or menial wage labor.¹⁹

Officials viewed the training of girls especially important because of their ability to become mothers and being central to cultural transformation, and Anglos automatically assumed the stereotype of native women as the degraded and drudge wives. Schools pushed moral development on girls harder than on boys and taught them the Victorian ideology of subservience and submission. Teachers instructed females to be a good wife and create a “white life for two.”²⁰ Their vocation consisted of domestic skills like sewing, cooking, cleaning, nursing, and childcare. In later years, schools offered normal school courses to certify them as teachers. Most of the training taught them not to care for their own households, but to work in the homes of white women or serve as matrons to boarding schools, furthering the idea that Indians could do only menial labor.²¹

The labor learned in the second half of the day kept the schools functioning. Students worked in laundries, made uniforms, cooked meals for thousands of students, grew the food supply, and built campus buildings. Pupils also worked during the summer to maintain and harvest the farms. The institutions greatly depended on the labor and the money earned from the sale of surplus production because Congressional appropriations did not meet financial needs. Later, the Meriam Report accused officials of forcing child labor.²²

As another part of vocational training, the outing system served to give students experience in their work and to totally immerse them in white culture. Mostly occurring

¹⁸ Adams, 21, 62-3, 137; Child, 71-3; Reyner and Eder, 132, 137-8; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 12.

¹⁹ Reyner and Eder, 148, 152; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 19-20, 65-6, 68, 71-2; Adams, 153, 281; Jenkins, 79; Lomawaima, “Domesticity,” 229; Child, 35, 75-6.

²⁰ Child, 77, 79; Adams, 11, Lomawaima, “Domesticity,” 233; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 81.

²¹ Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 18, 81, 84, 88; Lomawaima, “Domesticity,” 229-31; Child, 77, 80-1, Reyner and Eder, 138, 152; U.S. Congress, *Report*, 1897, p. 346.

²² Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 4-5, 13, 55-6, 68, 77, 84; U.S. Congress, *Report*, 1897, 346; Reyner and Eder, 132; Child, 36; Meriam, “Problem.”

during the summer, children would be sent to nearby farms and households to work and live with an Anglo family for three months to three years. Often the students earned a small amount of money, most of which the schools kept in savings for them. Government officials also thought the system would promote more English speaking and break down prejudice against Indians. Sometimes the students would attend public school in the area along with the farmer's children. Outing programs in the east worked well because sympathetic Quakers welcomed student workers. Schools in the west had to discontinue the system because people overworked the children and greatly exploited them. Occasionally, the pupils would become attached to their assigned family, almost becoming one of them.²³

In school many students turned to each other to replace the close ties of family. Friendship and peer control became a part of daily life. The children often bonded as good friends though their similar experience and formed their own families with support and respect. Interactions strengthened their own sense of tribal identity but also created a larger pan-Indian character as tribes learned about others and interchanged traditions. The pupils also had their own code of honor that valued discretion, bravery, and loyalty, often beating others for lying and "snitching."²⁴

Although not a common occurrence or priority, a few evenings a month became social entertainments, during which boys could interact with girls, where staff would teach Victorian manners of charity, chastity, monogamy, temperance, and pure thoughts, with focus on respect for the males and grace for the girls. Otherwise separated during most of the time, many students formed special relationships and sent secret love notes, with some later marrying.²⁵

Sports, especially football, became a large part of school life, beginning with Carlisle in the 1890s. Many American Indians viewed the games a way to express resistance and take pride in their heritage. Later in almost all institutions boys played football and baseball, with basketball and tennis available for girls. Other activities included vocal and instrumental music, drama, and school newspapers but none earned as much attention as football.²⁶

A problem in almost every school, overcrowding surfaced by 1896, and many superintendents wrote numerous letters to the government for more buildings. After 1900, average enrollment exceeded capacity by forty percent. The Meriam Report found that in many schools students slept two to a bed, often pushing them together. Sometimes institutions built sleeping porches to accommodate pupils further, but while they worked well in warm states, officials also built them in Minnesota and South Dakota. Some children slept in unfinished buildings or condemned buildings without fire exits. Along

²³ Child, 1, 75, 82-3, 85; Adams, 156-8, 162, Reyner and Eder, 139; Ellis, 24; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 5; Jenkins, 100.

²⁴ Lisa K. Neuman, "Indian Play," *American Indian Quarterly*. 32.2 (Spring 2008): 198; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, xiv, 44, 113, 130.

²⁵ U.S. Congress, *Report*, 1897; Adams, 168, 175-7, 178-9.

²⁶ Adams, 182-3; Child, 76-7; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 15-6.

with dorms, classrooms also often had poor lighting and ventilation, and the majority of buildings lacked sanitary facilities. Despite this issue, the institutions felt compelled to take in more because of the need and mass amount of applications.²⁷

The Native Americans adjusted to the seemingly bland Anglo food in the schools and the constant lack of it, a considerable challenge. Meals were often repeated and depended on the staff, which often lacked any real qualifications. The process of serving the food military style meant cold fare by the time staff allowed pupils to sit. According to the Meriam Report, many children became underweight during their time and suffered from malnutrition. Many former students reported they left meal times feeling half starved and remembered that most of the time the best sustenance went to the employees. Many stole food or received small portions as gifts sent by parents. Some schools gave the underfed extra milk breaks for extra nourishment. Students ate mostly starch and meat and rarely received fresh vegetables, fruit, or milk, even from those with gardens and dairies. The officials blamed the pupils for inadequate food because they supposedly did not eat because they did not like the food. Most supplies produced at the institutions went to the market to keep the school operating. The Indian Office often gave poor food allowances and in 1921 the government cut all food and clothing appropriations twenty five percent. Lewis Meriam reported in 1928 an ideal food allowance for each student per day to be thirty five percent, but almost all schools only at eleven percent.²⁸

Because of overcrowding, poor sanitation, malnutrition, stress, and emotional trauma, a great number of children succumbed to disease, resulting in an early death for many. Infected hand towels, shared drinking cups, books, and musical instruments spread illness rapidly. Officials rarely segregated sick pupils, who mingled and infected the healthy. With high mortality rates, almost every school had its own graveyard with student carpenters constructing the coffins. Of the seventy three Shoshone and Arapaho students sent to Carlisle, Santee, or Genoa schools from 1881-94, only twenty six survived. Common killers included tuberculosis, influenza, whooping cough, measles, and smallpox. Trachoma, a painful eye disease, remained the most common affliction, with over half of the student population infected. The ailment thrived in the communal dorm environment where children shared soap, towels, washbasins, beds, and bathwater, with the sick even occasionally preparing food. When unwell, pupils requested to return home to visit tribal healers, and mistrusting the white doctors often failed to follow their prescriptions. Administrators rarely informed parents of their children's illness and confiscated letters written by them, so that eventually the worried parents would receive news of the child's death.²⁹ In 1910 a campaign began to improve native health, including the avoidance of overcrowding, isolating the ill, fresh towels, fumigating school supplies, and building separate hospitals and sanatoriums. Boarding school health greatly improved until 1917 when Congress used funds for the war, and the programs suffered until 1928.

²⁷ Meriam, "Problem"; Child, 36-8; U.S. Congress. *Report*, 1897, pp. 170, 256.

²⁸ Meriam, "Problem"; Child, 32-5; Adams, 114-5; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 31, 56, 58-9; Reyner and Eder, 137, 189-90.

²⁹ Child, 12, 55-8, 60, 62-4, 66-7; Adams, 125, 133, 135; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 12; Katanski, 13; Reyner and Eder, 154, 192; Jenkins, 85.

Although a subject of serious debate among historians, punishment varied throughout the institutions, usually depending on the superintendent. Some officials believed punishments such as corporal punishment, confinement, deprivation of privileges, and restriction necessary for learning. Early schools used military-style reprimands, student court martials, stints in a jail, punishing work details, and physical abuse. At the Phoenix Indian School, the staff placed pupils in prison for weeks, feeding them only bread and water, and then put them to hard labor, with many dying in the process. Other forms of castigation revolved around embarrassment, such as forcing boys to march in girls' clothing, cutting grass with scissors, standing in the corner, or wearing a dunce cap.³⁰

Later becoming a tool to discredit boarding schools, corporal punishment remains a controversial issue to this day. Although prevalent in the white schools at the time, Indian students and parents found the abuse especially harsh because their culture never used physical punishment because natives believed it would break the child's soul. Many school officials believed it essential to promote the discipline necessary for assimilation. In some schools students could be whipped for the tiniest infraction, being held by one staff member and strapped by another. Several employees refused to use corporal punishment, but the issue was left to the superintendent, even though the Indian Office declared the method to be used for extreme cases only. In 1929 the government banned all physical castigation, but allowed it again the next year for special circumstances. In 1930 Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier pushed the United States Senate to investigate Native punishment and charges of flogging, brutality, and death.³¹

A common feature in all boarding schools regardless of student accommodation, resistance occurred on different levels. Students resisted because of deep resentment of the institution itself, being stripped of tribal identity, separation from home, the military atmosphere, and humiliating punishments. Many responded to the conditions and homesickness by running away, which was very common throughout the period. Often, the miscreants could not be caught until they reached the tribal agency, which would send them back. Parents and other sympathetic Native communities repeatedly sheltered runaways and many escaped. Even schools that had walls, barred windows, and padlocked doors could not keep the most determined in. In one instance, kindergarteners put in jail for running away broke down the door and escaped. Surprisingly often, teachers considered most runways to have been the most hardworking and well behaved students. Other outward forms of confrontation included arson and insulting school employees.³²

The most common rebellion, passive resistance served to undermine the schools' goals with willful acts of defiance, disruptive pranks, slow work, refusal to participate, and a general attitude of non-responsiveness. Many teachers noticed that students could

³⁰ Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 23, 63, 106, 117; Reyner and Eder, 185, 187; Child, 40; Adams, 27, 123-4, 225; Robert A. Trennert, "Corporal Punishment and the Politics of Indian Reform," *History of Education Quarterly*, 29.4 (Winter, 1989): 598-600; Jenkins, 83.

³¹ U.S. Congress, *Report*, 1897; Adams, 121-4; Trennert, 595-610.

³² Jenkins, 82-3; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 101, 115-8; Adams, 223-4, 229-32; Child, 51, 87-93.

go through the motions of compliance, while inwardly resisting. Also used as a method to retain their culture, students would meet in secret to carry out religious ceremonies, pray, tell traditional stories, or communicate in their native language, as many were forewarned by their parents that the institutions would try to make them white and forget how to be Indian.³³

A common difficulty for American Indians occurred after graduation. Many feared their parents and community would not accept them because their education made them no longer Natives. In some cases, the parents would be so disgusted with their offspring's transformation they would leave them at the train station. Students found themselves outcasts or teased for how much they had changed and believed themselves no longer loved. Life became very tense because of cultural clash between pupils and parents and the tribal leaders that frequently pressured them to return to traditional ways. Often, students forgot their own language and could no longer communicate with their families.³⁴ Many who accommodated to the school experience felt appalled with their homes and conditions and left to find employment and modern life elsewhere. Those intending to live like they had in school found themselves unable to apply their learned skills to reservation life. Girls could not apply their domestic knowledge to dirt-floored *tipis* and boys lacked the necessary resources to farm an allotment.³⁵

After boarding school, students left to further their education, get married, or seek employment. Many found jobs in the Indian service as interpreters and mediators, or used their knowledge of English to write about their experience. Often former pupils, especially women, found very few employment opportunities because of racial barriers and economic depression and settled for seasonal and menial work for low pay. Some of the men tried farming their allotments but failed in various regions because of lack of irrigation, poor climate, and lack of beginning resources, while others joined the military. Females worked for boarding schools or private homes as domestic help and assistant matrons, and those who received specialized training worked at local hospitals. Marriage to older men and a return to traditional life became more typical for girls after graduation.³⁶

The overall effect of the boarding school experience varied with each institution and student. Many children resisted the school, while others became fascinated and reached an accommodation with it. Those who actively embraced their situation responded with cooperation and converted or adapted white culture. The choice of resistance or accommodation usually depended on the pupil's age when enrolled and the stability of their previous home life.³⁷ Many reformers became disappointed with the results of the institution because it did not completely remove native culture from the students, who saw themselves as neither white nor Indian. Some alumni saw the effort to

³³ Adams, 231-4; Child, 28; Lomawaima, 115; Reyner and Eder, 161.

³⁴ Reyner and Eder, 197; Child, 28, 97; Adams, 265, 277-80; Lisa K. Neuman, "Indian Play," *American Indian Quarterly*, 32.2 (Spring 2008): 194-5.

³⁵ Adams, 285, 283, 299-300.

³⁶ Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 85-6; Adams, 280-1, 301-3; Child, 2, 39, 80, 96-9; Katanski, 95.

³⁷ Adams, 240; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, xiv.

abolish traditional ways as making American Indians more aware and proud of their heritage. The forced interaction between tribes also unintentionally began the Pan-Indian movement, where tribes adapted the others' culture like language, intermarriage, and political alliances.³⁸

Although in the late nineteenth century the Indian Office strove to build hundreds of schools, policy changed in the early twentieth century to closing as many as possible and sending American Indian children to public schools. Enrollment rose again in the 1930s as a result of the Great Depression, only to drop sharply after the economic need disappeared. The earliest and most prominent schools closed first, Carlisle in 1918 and Hampton in 1923. Institutional goals changed as well in 1901 from a system of assimilation to gradualism, focusing on industrial training and incorporating native arts and crafts. From 1900-20 officials deemed the institutions ineffective because they believed American Indians incapable of rapid assimilation, the process was cruel to students and parents, the work encouraged people to remain dependent on the government, and native lifeways might serve as a good foundation for educational growth.³⁹

Near the end of the boarding school period in the 1920s, a thorough investigation produced the most important document in the boarding schools' history, the Meriam Report of 1928, officially called "The Problem of Indian Administration." Lewis Meriam and other government officials visited sixty-four of seventy-eight boarding schools to scrutinize allegations of horrid conditions and abuse, which ultimately led to the change of policy and closings. The report judged the institutions harshly, finding great evidence of malnutrition, poor healthcare, low sanitation, overcrowding, appalling teaching staff, and dependence on child labor in almost every school. The report led to greater appropriations from Congress for basic needs, the abolition of half day labor, and a greater academic focus. Many schools closed as a result, but a few remained open as day schools or accredited high schools.⁴⁰

In reality, boarding schools never received the support necessary to accomplish their ambitious goals and never produced the degree of change policy-makers hoped for. The government supported the policy but hindered its success by its unwillingness to build enough schools or provide adequate funds. Apart from the failures of government policy, the boarding schools caused thousands of natives to lose themselves, by forcing them to abandon their culture, language, religion, and families and that they had to learn the Anglo-American way of life to survive. The United States moved from a goal of killing an entire race to elimination through cultural genocide, a war waged on children.⁴¹

³⁸ Child, 4; Adams, 301; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 129; Katanski, 42; Reyner and Eder, 5, 195.

³⁹ Ellis, 27, Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 6; Adams, 315-6, 308, 328.

⁴⁰ Child, 32, 40, 86; Lomawaima, *They Called It*, 7, 66; Adams, 308; Meriam, "Problem."

⁴¹ Ellis, xiii; Child, 80.

assimilation of Native Americans into mainstream society, expressing faith that Indians who were properly educated could adopt the norms and values of the dominant white culture. American leaders of the post-Reconstruction era were so sure of the supremacy of their ideals and dreams that they dismissed any other cultural values as inferior. Armed with nearly evangelistic fervor for reforming Indians, federally funded educators set to work. Off-Reservation Boarding Schools. Reservation Day Schools. Indian students educated at the boarding schools faced significant problems upon returning to the reservations. They were often ridiculed by their peers who had not left home, and more important, their industrial training was of little use on reservations in remote rural locations. Gere tracks Native American teachers from early boarding schools organized by Native groups to unsuccessful attempts to educate Native children within friendly tribal settings. These early schools and teachers posited that race-based identification would enhance learning, notes Gere, and that a common heritage would make education more palatable to students. Indian school educators were painted as turncoats by Native families and seen as inferior by white people. And Indian schools prized assimilation into white culture above Native traditions. As a result, writes Gere, it was more difficult for Native teachers to influence their students, especially given most schools' English-only policy. In addition, Native teachers were paid less and given less authority than their Anglo counterparts.

@article{Gram2016ActingOA, title={Acting Out Assimilation: Playing Indian and Becoming American in the Federal Indian Boarding Schools}, author={John R. Gram}, journal={The American Indian Quarterly}, year={2016}, volume={40}, pages={251 - 273} }. John R. Gram. Published 2016. David Wallace. Readers should also consult K. Tsianina Lomawaima, They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1928).