

## **Native American Boarding Schools Historiography from the 1980s to 2010s**

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The United States tried to solve the “Indian Problem” during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The solution was to establish off-reservation boarding schools that removed children from their families and native lands. Ultimately the goal was to assimilate Native American children into American life. Richard Henry Pratt and other assimilationists believed that off-reservation schools within white communities could accomplish this daunting task. However, Native Americans used their own experiences, maintaining family connections, developing new identities, strong camaraderie through painful and complex situation. Numerous historians and anthropologists, including David Adams, Brenda Child, Matthew Gilbert, Celia Haig-Brown, K. Lomawaima, Sally McBeth, and Robert Trewnert, have researched boarding schools and have concluded that boarding schools negatively impact Native Americans. Still, Native Americans maintained their familial connections, maintained their agency, resisted, and tried to use the boarding schools for their benefit throughout their experiences.

Sally McBeth’s *Ethnic Identity and the Boarding School Experience of West-Central Oklahoma Indians*, studies the western-central Oklahoma Native Americans attending the boarding schools. She claims that the boarding schools have symbolized three essential themes: separation and unification, acceptance and resistance, lastly government control and government obligations.<sup>1</sup> Assimilationists’ main goal was to separate Native Americans from their family and “white American” children and create long-term assimilation into American Society. However, McBeth argues that segregating Native Americans from “American” children established a new Native American identity. She emphasizes this by asserting pan-Indianism emerged due to the

“increased inter-tribal contacts and an accelerating alienation from white society.”<sup>2</sup> Matthew Gilbert observed similar findings at the Sherman Institute. Gilbert asserts that most Hopi Indians interacted with Navajo people, but students interacted with other Native Americans. One former student, Merle Polyestewa, explained how he realized the school had become more diverse while playing basketball, he would shout directions at his teammates, who were unable to understand him, realizing he was no longer on a Hopi reservation. Another former student, Merle Polyestewa, explained his experience of when he became truly aware that he was no longer on a Hopi reservation but instead at a diverse school; he attempted to communicate with his basketball teammates but no one understood his language.<sup>3</sup> McBeth suggests that learning English at the boarding schools helped advance a new Native American identity. Learning a common language helped Native Americans to communicate with different tribes and develop inter-tribal relationships. Typically boarding schools prevented students from speaking their native language; however, some resisted. On the contrary, Brenda Child reported how the Objibwe and Dakotas within Flandreau Institute differed because some Ojibwe members picked up Dakota words and phrases from Dakota-speaking students. Native Americans developed this Pan-Indianism through English but also other Native American languages.

Moreover, Native American parents and children had difficulty accepting or resisting boarding schools. McBeth suggests that initially, Native Americans resisted boarding schools, claiming that white “intrusion” and “coercion” caused the initial resistance to the boarding schools and parents refusing to send their children.<sup>4</sup> However, Trennert and Child argue that Native Americans could use the boarding schools to their advantage, and some parents had little choice but to send their children to boarding schools. Also, some students resisted because of fear of becoming social outcasts when they returned home. McBeth emphasizes that some

“children may feel the need to choose between being a good Indian or a good student.”<sup>5</sup> Some students resisted by lack of trying and poor academic performance, lashing out, or even running away. In contrast, other students accepted the boarding schools and created close connections with students. Removing children from their families, friends, and homes was an intensely emotional experience for many students. However, some students overcame this depressing emotional time by creating close friendships. McBeth points out that one of the most dominant feelings that the interviewees gave was that the boarding school was “one big happy family.”<sup>6</sup> Surprisingly, most of the Native Americans McBeth interviewed viewed the boarding schools as a positive experience. Like McBeth, Matthew Gilbert claims that many Hopi students mention that the Sherman Institute positively impacted their lives. Gilbert emphasizes that all students had different experiences but suggests that many learned new skills and had a different outlook on life.<sup>7</sup>

K. Lomawaima found similar results in her book, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (1995). Lomawaima interviewed sixty-one students from the Chilocco Indian Schools in Oklahoma. An alumni named Nora, insisted that “she would not trade her education for all the public schools.”<sup>8</sup> Other fellow students claimed that their time at the Chilocco was one of the “happiest memories” and the school was “marvelous.”<sup>9</sup> Both McBeth and Lomawaima explain why former students represent their schools in such positive light; McBeth believes it is caused by “selective remembering” due to the time that has passed, and students remember the positive experiences and relationships they had at the school. However, Lomawaima argues that it “does not constitute a justification or an endorsement of the school’s success. However, it endorses the strengths and resources students brought to, discovered, and created within Chilocco.”<sup>10</sup> Both focus on the relationships and connections students created

while attending boarding schools. However, McBeth is a little more cautious than Lomawaima in the interpretations of positive experiences.

Robert Trewnert's *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935*, examines the history of the Phoenix Institution. Trewnert concentrates on the five superintendents that operated the school from its inauguration until 1935. Many of the superintendents' primary focus were to ensure the success of assimilation within the Phoenix Indian School. Trewnert emphasizes that one of the best ways for schools to show success was by showcasing students who were "fluent in English" and "well along in their studies."<sup>11</sup> Because of the recruiting and increasing enrollment, the school's tribal makeup diversified and enrolled students from all over the southwest. New students from different tribes came into the Phoenix School allowing Native American students to strengthen inter-tribal connections. However, Trewnert points out that new incoming tribes caused controversy and tension within the school. The Pima tribe was not happy about the "mixing" of other students, they believed the school was their own and resented new students. Trewnert claims that desertions and runaways were lower before but increased when outside students came to Phoenix.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, like McBeth's claim, Trewnert also suggests that many of the students had positive experiences at the school; a sense of camaraderie developed amongst the students at the Phoenix Institution.

Superintendents at the Phoenix Institutions promoted a more vocational education than an academic approach. One popular program that many boarding schools implemented was the "outing system." Richard Henry Pratt popularized the system at the Carlisle Institution. He believed that the system could promote rapid assimilation and teach children about money and the economy. The system placed Native American students in a white family home for an extended period, a large percentage of students participated in the outing system. Trewnert

emphasized that some students could use it to their advantage by obtaining a decent bankroll. Tony Youhongva, a student at Phoenix, saved six hundred dollars.<sup>13</sup> Brenda Child agreed with Trennert and argued that some parents wanted their children to work and “endorsed the program when the school found good positions for the students.”<sup>14</sup> However, other historians, like Matthew Gilbert, disagreed with the outing system because it “fulfilled the community’s growing labor needs.”<sup>15</sup> David Adams claims that the system provided a “supply a cheap source of labor for local farmers, ranchers, and businessmen.”<sup>16</sup> As Trennert and Child suggest, some students benefited from the outing system by making money and potentially helping their families. However, many students complained about overworking and lack of opportunities, the outing system proved to be a negative experience for many Native American students.

Comparing the two authors of the 1980s, McBeth and Trennert, we can see a historical emphasis towards camaraderie and Pan-Indianism developing. Both claim that the majority of their interviewees had positive experiences at boarding schools. As Mcbeth points out, students’ positive experiences use selective memories, refusing to bring up the negatives and focusing on the positives, and particularly friendships. However, both imply that the Native Americans used boarding schools to their advantage. Trennert points out the benefits students obtained through the outing system. Historians of the nineties, including Adams, Lomawaima, and Child, continue the discussion on how Native Americans continued their Pan-Indianness and used the boarding schools to their advantage.

Brenda Child’s *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (1998), researches the Ojibwe people of the upper Midwest. Child suggests that the General Allotment Act of 1887 put the Ojibwe tribe in dire straits. The act caused Native Americans to lose “high quality and valuable” land, causing increased poverty and landlessness to the Ojibwe people.<sup>17</sup>

Many diseases ran rampant through the reservations, including tuberculosis, syphilis, gonorrhea, and trachoma. The diseases caused parents and children to pass away before their time, bringing about greater stress on the nuclear family. As Child asserts, many Ojibwe parents began to use the boarding schools as a refuge for their children. Child points out a shift from McBeth instead of a forced or coercion to attend the boarding schools some saw it as an opportunity during a family or economic crisis. Like Child, Adams points out that Native Americans used the boarding schools “to rescue children from severe poverty or provide relief to an overburdened single parent needing assistance in childrearing.”<sup>18</sup> However, she emphasizes that the parents were reluctant to send their children and preferred to be with them and teach the children on the reservation.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, many Ojibwe children left for boarding schools due to difficult circumstances.

Furthermore, parents and students tried to maintain their familial connections through long-distance communication with one another. Some schools encouraged students to write letters, and as Child points out, many parents and students wrote to one another. However, Lomawaima claims that students turned to one another rather than to adults, “replace the close, supportive ties of family and community.”<sup>20</sup> Interacting with other students and establishing friendships and peer groups helped soften the impact of homesickness, in some cases students as young as six years old attended school. Many parents notified the schools and tried to bring their kids back home; however, as Child reports, parents “learned” how to make excuses which administrators would approve to send the children home.<sup>21</sup> Surprisingly, homesickness was not a valid reason for children to leave, the excuse that seemed to be the most effective was the children’s need to work or help with farming. However, some officials did not grant their students leave, instead parents visited the schools to see their children. Some students took

matters into their own hands and ran away. Brenda Child insists that “students continually ran away from school to visit friends and family,” rebelling against the boarding schools.<sup>22</sup>

Even after graduating or leaving, many students returned to the reservation. As Child observes, “graduates were too grounded in the life of a strong community to be a lost generation of Indians.”<sup>23</sup> Some students did find work and made a living outside of the reservations. However, many returned, and some assumed important roles as tribal leaders. Child points out that these leaders practiced and understood the American Government and Bureaucracy thanks to the boarding schools. Roger Jourdain became the chairman of the Red Lake Reservation and attended the Flandreau Institute. He was very critical of the boarding schools and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. His experience at the Flandreau Institute helped shape him as a leader of the Red Lake Reservation and better understand how the American government worked. Child emphasizes that the boarding schools could not separate Native American students’ family connections with their parents. Native Americans used the schools to their advantage, using them to improve their lives because of the hardships they faced on the . Many students maintained their Native American identity and developed a new Pan-Indianism through boarding schools.

David Adams’ *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (1995), tries to take a different approach to the Native American boarding schools. Rather than focus on one specific school, Adams incorporates all Native American boarding schools, unlike the other monographs. Adams presents a powerful argument that the Native American students were anything but “passive recipients” of the boarding school curriculum.<sup>24</sup> Students resisted in multiple ways by running away, burning school buildings, and schemes that undermined school programs. Adams emphasizes that students resisted for several reasons resentment toward the institution, separation from family, militarized daily life, and

punishments. Celia Haig-Brown's *Resistance and Renewal Surviving the Indian Residential School* (2006) studies the Kamloops Indian Residential School students in British Columbia. Haig-Brown mentions similar arguments like Adams, asserting that stealing was extremely common throughout the boarding schools. Students at the Kamloops Institute talked about how they stole food from the kitchen. One student claimed that the officials did not keep a close eye.<sup>25</sup> Haig-Brown emphasizes that the sharing of stolen goods created a "sub-culture." Once again, the boarding schools helped develop pan-Indianism, with different tribes and students working together. Some parents took power and wielded it forcefully. Haig-Brown explains that a student was on a special diet to prevent allergies. However, the school refused to follow her strict diet and forced her to eat the food that was available. Frustrated with the school, the student's father complained, claiming that administrators were "eating like Kings and Queens."<sup>26</sup> After the meeting, the school decided to follow the student's diet plan.

Also, Native American students tried to maintain their native identity by resisting the boarding schools. Adams suggests that one of the "safest" ways to fight back was labeling a school official by a Native American name. Adams provides an example of girls at the Phoenix Institute renaming the dormitory matron and calling her "Ho'ok, the name of a legendary Tohono O'odham witch."<sup>27</sup> Students also went to great lengths to tell stories and folktales taught by their elders. Adams asserts that Native American students regularly told stories about their people and their ways. Haig Brown reveals that some students saw the importance of maintaining their language. One of the students she interviewed declared, "she felt a strong need to keep the words...the time for a reunion with other Chilcotin speakers was inevitable."<sup>28</sup> Native American students tried to maintain their native identity while attending boarding schools.

Students resisted by manipulating the Native American boarding school's bureaucracy. Adams claims students changed between boarding schools until they found the one they liked. The superintendent of Haskell, Charles Meserve, was one of the first officials to notice it, he wrote to the Indian Office reporting that a student tried to transfer to Haskell but had previously attended two other boarding schools. Multiple superintendents noticed the same problem, and by 1915, students had to be approved by the former school and the commissioner of Indian Affairs.<sup>29</sup> Tom Holm's *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs: Native Americans and Whites in the Progressive Era*, argued that the "Indian Problem" would not vanish, and policymakers were confused about how to solve it. Lawmakers struggled to find an alternative and consensus on how to solve the problem. A significant shift happened at the Carlisle school with the dismissal of Superintendent Richard Pratt. Moses Friedman hired Native American artists Angel DeCora and William Dietz as the new head of the school.<sup>30</sup> DeCora pushed her students to make their way in the world and even encouraged students to use their art for commercial ventures. Moses Stranger Horse, became a famous Native American artist, as a result of the teachings by both Decora and Dietz.<sup>31</sup> Due to the confusion of solving the Native American assimilation, school officials became more relaxed than traditional assimilationists allowing teachers to teach Native American crafts and art at the boarding schools.

Many students at the boarding schools resisted; however, as Adam observes, some students reached an accommodation. Adam reminds us that accommodation can take many different forms, but accommodation did not mean "wholesale abandonment of one's indigenous self or synonymous with surrender."<sup>32</sup> Adam argues that some students took a more pessimistic approach, and the white Americans would refuse to allow Native Americans to live on their terms. Adam claims certain examples like the continuing expansion west, the almost extinct

bison, and the removal of their lands forced Native Americans into a difficult decision. Some Native Americans viewed the boarding schools not as a way to “climb the ladder of civilization” but as a way to “survive.”<sup>33</sup> Adams emphasized that some Native Americans started to believe that education was important for their survival moving forward; a possible reason for accommodation. The schools were becoming “their institution.”<sup>34</sup> Previous historians have mentioned multiple students who had positive experiences at the boarding schools and a sense of pride.

Matthew Gilbert’s *Education Beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929* (2010), studies the Hopi tribe and the Sherman Institute. Gilbert argues that the Native Americans at the Sherman Institute could maintain their agency will at the boarding school and protect their tribal culture. Like Adams, Gilbert reports that some Hopi’s were resisters and accommodators of the boarding schools. Gilbert argues that it is important to use resisters and accommodators, because these two terms allow both groups agency in their decisions. Both considered the benefits of resisting and accommodating boarding schools and the United States government. By accommodating the Hopi’s “strategically learned to adopt components of the so-called white man’s way to suit their agendas on the reservation.”<sup>35</sup> Two important men of the Hopi tribe differ on how the tribe should handle boarding schools. Kikmongwi Tawaquaptewa believed that the Hopi should accommodate the United States government and use it to suit their needs and agenda on the reservation.<sup>36</sup> Youkeoma advocated resistance and encouraged the Hopi to join his cause and ignore Tawaquaptewa. Ultimately one hundred and two families left with Youkeoma and resisted against the United States government. Shortly after the split, the United States government arrested Youkeoma and sixteen other men. Officials did not treat Tawaquaptewa much better, trying to strip him of his chieftainship and

forcing him to the Sherman Institute.<sup>37</sup> While at the Sherman Institute, Tawaquaptewa taught native songs, dances, and language to Hopi and other Native American students. Tawaquaptewa wanted to maintain the Hopi identity and share it with other Native Americans.

Native American boarding school history has become more complex over time. All the historians and anthropologists agree that it was traumatic to Native Americans and outright abhorrent by the United States government. Historians examined how Native Americans tried to use the boarding schools to their advantage and developed a new identity and Pan-Indianism. Students connected with other Native American students and learned new Native American languages. Some students, however, used the English language to communicate with other students. Initially, parents and students resisted the schools but soon realized that the schools could serve as an opportunity. Native American reservations dealt with high levels of poverty and diseases. The financial burden and high death rates caused the breakup of the nuclear family. Some parents considered boarding schools an opportunity for their children to receive food and care. Others saw it as a chance for their children to earn an education, while many other parents and students resisted. When separated from their families and reservations, students tried to maintain their native culture. Students could write letters back home to friends and family, keeping connections. Others looked to their peers and developed strong friendships that lasted their entire lives. While attending the boarding schools, some students accepted the schools while others resisted. Resistance took on many different forms, including running away, arson, stealing, and other forms of disobedience. Even parents resisted the boarding schools. Parents refused to send their children to boarding schools, and others refused to send them back. Parents wrote letters and complained to school officials about poor diets, malnutrition, harsh treatment, and homesickness. The students who accepted the schools still maintained their native identity.

Few students could find work outside the boarding schools, and many returned to their tribes. However, students returning to their tribes tried to use what they had learned throughout their lives. . Few students returned and became leaders of their tribes and better understood the United States government and bureaucracy by attending boarding schools. It is important to note that Brenda Child, Matthew Gilbert, Tom Holm, and K. Lomawaima, are all Native American authors Native Americans survived the boarding schools by using them to maintain Native Americans, develop new Native American identities, and preserve their agency.

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<sup>1</sup> Sally McBeth, *Ethnic Identity and the Boarding School Experience of West-Central Oklahoma Indians* (Washington: University Press of America, 1983), 116-117.

<sup>2</sup> McBeth, *Ethnic Identity and the Boarding School Experience of West-Central Oklahoma Indians* (Washington: University Press of America, 1983), 122.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 165-166.

<sup>4</sup> Sally McBeth, *Ethnic Identity and the Boarding School Experience of West-Central Oklahoma Indians* (Washington: University Press of America, 1983), 128.

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- <sup>5</sup> McBeth, *Ethnic Identity and the Boarding School Experience of West-Central Oklahoma Indians* (Washington: University Press of America, 1983), 130.
- <sup>6</sup> McBeth, *Ethnic Identity and the Boarding School Experience of West-Central Oklahoma Indians* (Washington: University Press of America, 1983), 120.
- <sup>7</sup> Matthew Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 164.
- <sup>8</sup> K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 163.
- <sup>9</sup> K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 163-164.
- <sup>10</sup> K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 164.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Trennert, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 36.
- <sup>12</sup> Robert Trennert, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 62.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Trennert, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 136.
- <sup>14</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 70.
- <sup>15</sup> Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 47.
- <sup>16</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 63.
- <sup>17</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 9-10.
- <sup>18</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 286.
- <sup>19</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 15.
- <sup>20</sup> K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 131.
- <sup>21</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 44.
- <sup>22</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 51.
- <sup>23</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 99.
- <sup>24</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 366.
- <sup>25</sup> Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2006) 113-114.
- <sup>26</sup> Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2006) 113-114.
- <sup>27</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 259.
- <sup>28</sup> Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2006) 104.
- <sup>29</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 262.
- <sup>30</sup> Tom Holm, *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs Native Americans and Whites in the Progressive Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 97.
- <sup>31</sup> Tom Holm, *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs Native Americans and Whites in the Progressive Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 99.

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<sup>32</sup> Tom Holm, *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs Native Americans and Whites in the Progressive Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 266-267.

<sup>33</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 282-283.

<sup>34</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 288.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), xxii.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 56.

<sup>37</sup> Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 68.