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Native American Boarding Schools

With the introduction of the Indian boarding school in 1860 came a cultural genocide of enormous magnitude. Children as young as four years old were stolen out of their homes and sent to boarding schools far away from their families. These students were stripped of their Indian identities: their hair cut, names replaced, and native language prohibited. Boarding schools were widespread across the country with hundreds of thousands of students attending them, being taught forced assimilation. The following schools discussed are Chemawa, St. Paul’s, and Phoenix.

The first boarding school that caught my attention was Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon, previously called Salem Indian Training School.[[1]](#footnote-1) Chemawa is the longest continuously running Native American boarding school operating from 1880 to today, over 140 years. The peak enrollment of the school was in 1926, with the school having almost one thousand students. The following school year, Chemawa switched from being a K-12 school, to a 7-12 high school.[[2]](#footnote-2) Chemawa taught over 30,000 students in the first 100 years of its establishment.[[3]](#footnote-3) The school mainly boarded students from tribes in the Pacific Northwest part of the United States, but also had a large Alaskan Native population, up to 30% of the student body at one point. On the Chemawa campus, lies a cemetery with over 200 documented burials.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the 1960s, maintenance workers leveled the cemetery because of plant overgrowth, destroying what records they had on the gravestones. Currently there are 13 gravestones marked “Unknown.” This makes it extremely difficult to find lost family members. Lillian Medina tells USA Today the story of the search for her great-aunt Tillie Franklin, whom she discovered was buried at the Chemawa Cemetery. "I think burying Tillie there was probably cheaper than sending her home," Medina said. "Chemawa is so far to send a little girl from California. To think that, in almost 100 years, I was the first family to visit where she is buried.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Tillie’s body will be exhumed and returned to her family. This type of disrespect was commonplace at Chemawa, which followed the ideas of Pratt’s “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” speech, trying to ‘christianize’ the students of the school.

The second boarding school is St. Paul’s Indian Mission Boarding School in Marty, South Dakota, on the Yankton Sioux Reservation.[[6]](#footnote-6) Because it was on the reservation, 95% of students who attended were Western Dakota. Even though the students generally didn’t live far from the school, they were still required to board. When the school was established in 1922, there were 39 students enrolled, and by 1948, there were 421 enrolled.[[7]](#footnote-7) Many students were physically and sexually abused while at the school, and there have been multiple lawsuits against the diocese of Sioux Falls for their negligence.[[8]](#footnote-8) One plaintiff recalls a scarring moment from their time at St. Paul’s: "When I was in first grade, I came upon a kind of museum in the basement of the building, where they kept lots of our people's things -- pipe bags, war bonnets and a pile of buffalo robes, like a bed. I'd sneak in to look at the things, until one day I discovered that the pile of robes was where they brought boys to rape them. I was so shocked by what I saw and still am to this day.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The school is still functioning after control of the school was transferred to the Yankton Tribe in 1975. With the transition, the school was renamed Marty Indian School.

Next, is Phoenix Indian School in Phoenix, Arizona.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thousands of students attended the school during its 99-year establishment. These students came from over 23 tribes in the Southwest but were primarily Pima and Papago. In 1928 enrollment was at 950 students, and in 1936, enrollment was halved. The school opened in 1891, shifted from a K-12 school to a 7-12 school in 1931, and closed in 1990 due to low enrollment. In December 1899, there was a large outbreak of measles at the school, infecting over 300 students, and nine students dying as a result.[[11]](#footnote-11) There is currently an investigation in progress about an empty corner lot that once was part of the Phoenix Indian School. It is hypothesized to be an unmarked mass grave from the school, containing many students from the school.[[12]](#footnote-12) This grave would be similar to one found at a boarding school in British Columbia, Canada.

From doing this research, I read so many personal stories about what happened to students at these boarding schools, and it was just an atrocity that any person would have to endure the conditions, physically and mentally, that these young people were exposed to. Indigenous families were ripped apart and stripped of their heritage and identity. Researching the treatment of these children left me with a pit in my stomach just imagining how hard it would be to go on without family, without culture, without identity, all while being abused by the people who were supposed to be protecting students, not hurting them. It is easy to hear about the treatment of students at these boarding schools and think it was an isolated incident, but it was not. Students at all 367 schools have the same experiences of hair cutting, beatings, cultural genocide, sexual abuse, hard labor, and exploitation. “Kill the Indian” wasn’t just killing culture and traditions, it was killing hope and humanity. Nobody should feel shame for their identity, and people in power should not take advantage of people who carry the shame they have imparted them with. Patty Talahongva, a Hopi woman who attended the Phoenix Indian School, sums up my views with my new knowledge pretty well:

"We're not taught in any decent fashion about the history of boarding schools. And yet you look at the trauma, our families have survived ... the trauma that these kids went through. It's not that it's like, ancient history. … Take a minute and consider what we've gone through. … It's a miracle. I'm here, it's a miracle any of us are here. We're still standing, you know. Indians are so damn tough. … You know, every time we talk about this history, we're being re-traumatized in some fashion. So what's being done to take care of us? What's being done to take care of, you know, the survivors?”[[13]](#footnote-13)

There need to be more resources available to indigenous peoples who have endured the cultural genocide that happens at boarding schools, as well as for their family members. It should be made a priority to give native peoples an outlet to cope with their generational trauma, as well as reassurance that atrocities like these will never happen again. People should be able to feel safe expressing their identities as well as just living their everyday lives. As a future social studies teacher, I will make sure that these stories are not forgotten so the future generations can become more empathetic and move toward reconciliation and reparation. I will make sure that what happened at these boarding schools will not happen in my classroom. I will not let anyone make another person feel less than for their identities. I want my students to feel safe and cared for in their classrooms.

In conclusion, more resources need to be allocated to native communities so people can rebuild their culture, find their lost family, and begin to heal from the systemic oppression of indigenous peoples. We have seen the widespread problems caused and agitated by the institution of Native American boarding schools, and have only scratched the surface of the experience though the study of Chemawa, St. Paul’s, and Phoenix.

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