

Assimilation Through Education: Indian Boarding Schools in the Pacific Northwest

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Introduction

The goal of Indian education from the 1880s through the 1920s was to assimilate Indian people into the melting pot of America by placing them in institutions where traditional ways could be replaced by those sanctioned by the government. Federal Indian policy called for the removal of children from their families and in many cases enrollment in a government run boarding school. In this way, the policy makers believed, young people would be immersed in the values and practical knowledge of the dominant American society while also being kept away from any influences imparted by their traditionally-minded relatives.

[Indian Training School girls activities](#)

Part 1: Indian Boarding School Movement

The Indian boarding school movement began in the post-Civil War era when idealistic reformers turned their attention to the plight of Indian people. Whereas before many Americans regarded the native people with either fear or loathing, the reformers believed that with the proper education and treatment Indians could become just like other citizens. They convinced the leaders of Congress that education could change at least some of the Indian population into patriotic and productive members of society. One of the first efforts to accomplish this goal was the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, founded by Captain Richard Henry Pratt in 1879. Pratt was a leading proponent of the assimilation through education policy. Believing that Indian ways were inferior to those of whites, he subscribed to the principle, "kill the Indian and save the

man." At Carlisle, young Indian boys and girls were subjected to a complete transformation. Photographs taken at the school illustrate how they looked "before" and "after". The dramatic contrast between traditional clothing and hairstyles and Victorian styles of dress helped convince the public that through boarding school education Indians could become completely "civilized". Following the model of Carlisle, additional off reservation boarding schools were established in other parts of the country, including Forest Grove, Oregon (later known as Chemawa). (1)

Seeking to educate increasing numbers of Indian children at lower cost, the federal government established two other types of schools: the reservation boarding school and day schools. Reservation boarding schools had the advantage of being closer to Indian communities and as a result had lower transportation costs. Contact between students and their families was somewhat restricted as students remained at the school for eight to nine months of the year. Relatives could visit briefly at prescribed times. School administrators worked constantly to keep the students at school and eradicate all vestiges of their tribal cultures. Day schools, which were the most economical, usually provided only a minimal education. They worked with the boarding schools by transferring students for more advanced studies.

In the Pacific Northwest, treaties negotiated with the Indians during the 1850s included promises of educational support for the tribes. For example, [Article 10 of the Medicine Creek Treaty](#) signed by members of the Nisqually, Squaxin, Puyallup and Steilacoom Tribes on December 26, 1854 called for the establishment of an agricultural and industrial school "to be free to the children of said tribes for a period of 20 years." The expenses of the school, its employees and medical personnel were to be defrayed by the federal government and not deducted from annuities. A similar clause appears in the Treaty of Point Elliott, signed by representatives of tribes living in the central and northern Puget Sound region.

The promised schools did not come into existence for several years. In the 1870s and 1880s a few small reservation boarding schools were established on the Chehalis, Skokomish and Makah Reservations. These institutions, which had fewer than 50 students, were all closed by 1896 and replaced by day schools. In Tacoma, a one-room shack served as a day school for young Puyallup Indians beginning in 1860. By 1873 students had begun boarding at the school and during the 1880s enrollment increased to 125 pupils. At the turn of the century, Cushman Indian School had become a large industrial boarding school, drawing over 350 students from around the Northwest and Alaska. The 1901 *Report of Superintendent of Indian Schools* praised Cushman for being well equipped for industrial training and photographs show a modern machine shop. Cushman remained one of the largest on reservation boarding schools in the region until it closed in 1920.



Indian Training School girls' activities

Part 2: Mission Schools

Indian Training School boys' activities



Indian Training School boys' activities

Meanwhile, on many reservations missionaries operated schools that combined religious with academic training. At Priest's Point near the Tulalip Reservation, Reverend E.C. Chirouse opened a school in 1857 for six boys and five girls. By 1860 he had 15 pupils and the school continued to grow under the auspices of the Sisters of Providence. At these missionary run schools, traditional religious and cultural practices were strongly discouraged while instruction in the Christian doctrines took place utilizing pictures, statues, hymns, prayers and storytelling.

Some missionary schools received federal support, particularly at times when Congress felt less inclined to provide the large sums of money needed to establish government schools. The Tulalip Mission School became the first contract Indian school, an

arrangement whereby the government provided annual funds to maintain the buildings while the

Church furnished books, clothing, housing and medical care. In 1896 Congress drastically reduced the funding for mission schools and eventually, in the winter of 1900-01, the Tulalip school became a federal facility. The old school buildings were destroyed by fire in 1902. On January 23, 1905, exactly fifty years after the signing of the Point Elliott Treaty, a new and larger school opened along the shores of Tulalip Bay.

The Tulalip Indian School began under the supervision of Charles Milton Buchanan, a physician who also served as Indian Agent for the reservation. The first year it had only one dormitory, but by 1907 both girls' and boys' buildings were completed and the school had a capacity enrollment of 200 students. The children ranged in age from 6 to 18 years and came from many different reservations as well as some off reservation communities. It was not uncommon for teachers at day schools to recommend certain students for the boarding school. Because Tulalip offered a maximum of eighth grade education, some students transferred to Chemawa for more advanced training.

Part 3: Boarding Schools

In eastern Washington, a U.S. military fort near Spokane was transformed into a boarding school for Indians of the Spokane and Colville reservations.

Fort Spokane Boarding School opened in 1900 with an enrollment of 83 pupils and grew to 200 by 1902. It operated only until 1914 after which time the children attended day schools closer to their homes. Similarly, the military facility at Fort Simcoe became a school for the Yakama and their neighbors.

The national system of Indian education, including both off reservation boarding schools, reservation boarding schools and day schools, continued to expand at the turn of the century. In the Pacific Northwest, Chemawa Indian School became the largest off reservation boarding school and drew pupils from throughout the region and Alaska. Chemawa had originally been located at Forest Grove, Oregon, but was moved to Salem in 1885 after officials determined that the original site lacked adequate agricultural land. By 1920 Chemawa enrolled 903 students from 90 different tribes, nearly a third coming from Alaska.

All federal boarding schools, whether on or off reservation, shared certain characteristics. The Bureau of Indian Affairs issued directives that were followed by superintendents throughout the nation. Even the architecture and landscaping appeared similar from one institution to the next. Common features included a military style regimen, a strict adherence to English language only, an emphasis on farming, and a schedule that equally split academic and vocational training. By reading the *Reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* and other documents you can compare the official reports submitted by various schools.

Part 4: A Typical Daily Schedule

A typical daily schedule at a boarding school began with an early wake-up call followed by a series of tasks punctuated by the ringing of bells. Students were required to march from one activity to the next. Regular inspections and drills took place outdoors with platoons organized according to age and rank. Competitions were held to see which group could achieve the finest marching formation.

Everything happened by bells, 'triangles' they were called. A triangle would ring in the morning and we would all run, line up, march in, get our little quota of tooth powder, wash our teeth, brush our hair, wash our hands and faces, and then we all lined up and marched outside. Whether it was raining, snowing or blowing, we all went outside and did what was called 'setting up exercises' for twenty minutes. (Joyce Simmons Cheeka, Tulalip Indian School, memoirs collected by Finley)

Conformity to rules and regulations was strongly encouraged:

We went from the tallest to the littlest, all the way down in companies. We had A, B, C, D companies. E Company was the Lazy Company, those that just couldn't get up and make it. They had all kinds of demerits for those people. They thought they'd shame them a little bit if they made an extra company and called it the Lazy Company. (Helma Ward, Makah, Tulalip Indian School, from interview with Carolyn Marr)

The foremost requirement for assimilation into American society, authorities felt, was mastery of the English language. Commissioner of Indian Affairs T.J. Morgan described English as "*the language of the greatest, most powerful and enterprising nationalities beneath the sun.*" Such chauvinism did not allow for bilingualism in the boarding schools. Students were prohibited from speaking their native languages and those caught "speaking Indian" were severely punished. Later, many former students regretted that they lost the ability to speak their native language fluently because of the years they spent in boarding school.

Another important component of the government policy for "civilizing" the Indians was to teach farming techniques. Although few reservations in the Pacific Northwest had

either fertile land or a climate conducive to agriculture, nonetheless it was felt that farming was the proper occupation for American citizens. So boys learned how to milk cows, grow vegetables, repair tools, etc. and even had lessons on the various types of plows. (2)



Tulalip Indian School, ca. 1912

The boarding schools had what came to be called the "half and half" system where students spent half of the day in the classroom and half at a work assignment or "detail" on the school grounds. The academic curriculum included courses in U.S. history, geography, language, arithmetic, reading, writing and spelling. Music and drama were offered at most

schools. Young women spent either

the morning or the afternoon doing laundry, sewing, cooking, cleaning and other household tasks. Older girls might study nursing or office work. The young men acquired skills in carpentry, blacksmithing, animal husbandry, baking and shop. They chopped firewood to keep the steam boilers operating. The work performed by students was essential to the operation of the institution. The meat, vegetables and milk served in the dining room came from livestock and gardens kept by the students. The girls made and repaired uniforms, sheets, and curtains and helped to prepare the meals.

A standardized curriculum for Indian schools emphasized vocational training. Estelle Reel, who served as Superintendent of Indian Education from 1898 to 1910, was a strong advocate of this curriculum which gave primary importance to learning manual skills. No amount of book learning, she felt, could result in economic independence for Indian people. Others would claim that by limiting education to manual training the educators were condemning Indian people to permanent inequality. A former student at the Fort Spokane boarding school described typical work done by the boys:

Some of the boys were detailed to the garden...others were detailed to milk and care for the cows, feed the pigs and chickens and look after the horses, besides doing other chores. There was a large barn on the place, and the boys learned a lot about farming on a small scale. But for boys who had ambitions for becoming something else, Fort Spokane was far from being adequate. (Frances LeBret, as quoted in exhibit They Sacrificed for Our Survival: The Indian Boarding School Experience, at Eastern Washington Historical Museum)

Mandatory education for Indian children became law in 1893 and thereafter agents on the reservations received instructions on how to enforce the federal regulation. If parents refused to send their children to school the authorities could withhold annuities or rations or send them to jail. Some parents were uncomfortable having their children sent far away from home. The educators had quotas to fill, however, and considerable pressure was exerted on Indian families to send their youngsters to boarding schools beginning when the child was six years old. Fear and loneliness caused by this early separation from family is a common experience shared by all former students. Once their children were enrolled in a distant school, parents lost control over decisions that

affected them. For example, requests for holiday leave could be denied by the superintendent for almost any reason. (3)

Part 5: Negatives and Positives

For some students, the desire for freedom and the pull of their family combined with strong discontent caused them to run away. At Chemawa, for example, there were 46 "desertions" recorded in 1921, followed by 70 in 1922. Punishment of runaways was usually harsh, as the offenders became examples held up before their fellow students:

Two of our girls ran away...but they got caught. They tied their legs up, tied their hands behind their backs, put them in the middle of the hallway so that if they fell, fell asleep or something, the matron would hear them and she'd get out there and whip them and make them stand up again. (Helma Ward, Makah, interview with Carolyn Marr)

Illness was another serious problem at the boarding schools. Crowded conditions and only the basic medical care no doubt contributed to the spread of diseases such as measles, influenza and tuberculosis. Tuberculosis was especially feared and at the Tulalip Indian School the dormitories were kept cold by leaving the windows open at night. Several students were sent to sanitariums in Idaho or Nevada. In a letter issued to superintendents in 1913, the Indian Office advised disinfecting all textbooks at the end of each school year to reduce the chance of spreading disease. Hospital reports for Tulalip indicate that boys spent a total of 110 days in the hospital during one month and girls 125 days. Death was not an unknown occurrence either. At Chemawa, a cemetery contains headstones of 189 students who died at the school, and these represent only the ones whose bodies were not returned home for burial.

Not all experiences at the boarding schools were negative for all students. In hindsight, former students acknowledge benefits they gained from their education, and there were happy moments for some. Sports, games and friendships are examples of experiences remembered in a positive light.

The boys played baseball, broad jumping and ran foot races, played Mumbley Peg and marbles, spin the top and a lot of other things for entertainment. (Frances LeBret, Fort Spokane Indian School)

We played baseball, football and a game we call "Shinney." They get two sticks and tie them together. You got a stick that was curved and you'd hit this and throw it. To score you had to hit a little pole. (Alfred Sam, Snohomish, interview with Carolyn Marr)

As the years went by and most students persevered, strong friendships developed. Occasionally a friendship might end up in marriage, although this certainly was not encouraged by the school. Young people from one culture group met boys and girls from other areas. Reflecting on her years spent in boarding schools, one elder stated:

I think that the sharing in the government boarding school was an important part of that period. Just having the time to share with other Indian students a life that was completely different from your own was something that created a bond. (Vi Hilbert, Upper Skagit, interview with Carolyn Marr)

Another former student recognized the practical advantages offered by the schools but perceived deeper implications:

On the reservations there was no electricity or running water. When kids came to the boarding school they had these things--showers and clean clothes--and they ate decent food. My mom died when I was 13 months old. I stayed with my grandmother who wasn't well...My main criticism of the boarding school is that it didn't allow you to do your own thinking. You marched everywhere, you were governed by the bell and bugle, you were told when to go to bed and when to get up, your whole life was governed. As a result, you didn't learn how to become an independent thinker. (Arnold McKay, Lummi, interviewed by Carolyn Marr)

By the 1920s the Bureau of Indian Affairs had changed its opinion about boarding schools, responding to complaints that the schools were too expensive and that they encouraged dependency more than self-sufficiency. By 1923, the majority of Indian children nationwide attended public schools. A report on Indian education issued in 1928 revealed glaring deficiencies in the boarding schools, including poor diet, overcrowding, below-standard medical service, excessive labor by the students and substandard teaching. The 1930s witnessed many changes in federal Indian policy, among which was a shift in educational philosophy. Classroom lessons could now reflect the diversity of Indian cultures. States assumed more control over Indian education as more children enrolled in public schools. Most of the boarding schools were closed by this time, Tulalip in 1932 and Cushman in 1920, leaving Chemawa as the sole government boarding school remaining in the Pacific Northwest.

Sample Daily Routine

Cushman Indian School, Tacoma, Wash.

February 1, 1912

Monday

5:45 A.M.	Reveille.
5:55 to 6:10	Setting Up Exercise & Drill.
6:12	Air Beds.
6:12 to 6:45	Recreation.
6:45	First Call for Breakfast.
6:55	Assembly. Roll Call.
7:00	Breakfast.
7:30 to 7:35	Care of teeth.
7:35 to 7:40	Make beds.
7:40 to 7:55	Police Quarters.
7:55	Industrial Call.
8:00	Industrial work begins. School detail at liberty. The use of this period is at pupils' discretion. The more studious at books; those inclined to athletics make use of this time for practice. Some pupils practice music lessons, etc.
8:50	First School Call. Roll Call and Inspection.
9:00	School.

11:30	Recall. Pupils at liberty.
11:55	Assembly and Roll Call.
12:00	Dinner.
12:30	Recreation.
12:50	School and Industrial Call. Inspection.
1:00 P.M.	Industrial work and School.
3:30	School dismissed. School detail at liberty. Time spent in same general manner as morning detail utilizes period from 8:00 to 8:50.
4:30	Industrial recall. Drill and Gymnasium classes.
5:15	First Call.
5:25	Assembly. Roll Call.
5:30	Supper.
6:00	Care of teeth.
6:10	Recreation.
7:15	First Call.
7:25	Roll Call. Inspection.
7:30	Lecture. This period varies in length. Men prominent in education or civic affairs address the pupils.
8:15	Call to Quarters. Older pupils prepare lessons; intermediate children play.
8:45	Tattoo. Pupils retire.
8:55	Check.
9:00	Taps.