

# Death by Civilization

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**T**housands of Native American children were forced to attend boarding schools created to strip them of their culture. My mother was one of them.

*Mary Annette Pember*

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When my mother was alive, I would often interrogate her about her life at the Sister School. Annoyed, she would demand, “Why do you always have to go poking?” And so I’ve spent much of my personal life and [professional work](#) as a [journalist trying](#) to uncover and investigate all that happened to her and thousands of others at Indian boarding schools.

For reasons I still don’t completely understand, I am consumed by the need to validate and prove, intellectually and emotionally, her experiences at the Sister School. I crave confirmation because I believe it will somehow reinforce my mother’s stories in the face of generations of federal and Church denials of their role in the boarding schools’ brutality. It will say to me: *You’re not making this up. This really did happen.*

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As this country marks the bicentennial of the Civilization Fund Act, I think of the traumatic impact of my mother’s time at Saint Mary’s and, in turn, the effect that her dysfunctional survival strategies had on our family.

Although she died in 2011, I can still see her trying to outrun her invisible demons. She would walk across the floor of our house, sometimes for hours, desperately shaking her head from side to side to keep the persistent awful memories from entering. She would flap and wring her hands over and over again, as though to rid them of a clinging presence.

She was lost to our family during these times. We guarded her with our tensed stomach muscles, trying to help her battle the unknown demons. Eventually she would wind herself down. Sometimes, even laughing a bit in relief, she'd mutter, "Settle down, you crazy old chicken," before collapsing on her bed.

Hypervigilance, defensiveness, resentment, and a hair-trigger temper had been her only allies against the Sister School messages of racial inferiority, daily reminders that Natives were primitive beings unlikely to rise above the role of servants in a white man's world. She raged against the nuns' label "dirty Indian," haunted by the fear that the nuns were right, even as she scrubbed miles of floors and performed hours of heavy manual labor.

All of those awful Sister School doings cut her mind. I think she believed that she would break into 1 million pieces if she recalled the traumatic events that held her hostage, forever burned into her amygdala.

I remember a summer day, one of many, when I made my mother toast and brought her aspirin in her dark bedroom, where she was bedridden with a migraine. I placed my offerings on the little table next to her bed, and retreated back to my hiding place under the kitchen table.

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After a while, she called to me. I found her lying in the dark, with one arm thrown over her eyes; the other arm was open for me. Silently, I climbed onto the bed, fitting myself into her armpit and gazing at the tiny blue Virgin Mary medal pinned to her brassiere, a hidden

remnant of her boarding-school days. I remember the bedspread, stiff from its time drying outside on the clothesline and fragrant with fresh air and my mother's scent. She would spend hours washing the laundry "white, white" like the Sisters had taught her, rushing up and down the cellar steps with baskets of heavy, wet sheets. "We may be Indian, but by God we ain't dirty," she'd say while hanging laundry on the line.

Bernice Pember and her brother Donald Rabideaux in 1983,  
on the Bad River Reservation (Photo by Mary Annette  
Pember)

I remember her deep voice that wrapped a cocoon around us in the bedroom as she, like she had done hundreds of times before, told me her Sister School stories. There was the "evil" nun Sister Catherine, Mother Superior Sister Catherine of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, who was the principal of the boarding school she had attended.

As she described the nun's inexplicable cruelty—the beatings, the shaming, and the withholding of food—I snuggled closer to her in anticipation. Then the mood of her story lifted, and I remember how her voice took on the conspiratorial tone that I loved.

"One year during the Christmas season, Sister was marching down the cellar steps to check if we stole any food," she said. "She fell on the bottom step—*crash!* She hit her head bad! Not long after, she died."

"What a silent cheer us kids made!" she continued. "Maybe it was terrible, but it was the best Christmas present we ever got!" I remember how she clasped her hands together and how, for a few moments, we shared a little girl's wicked happiness.

I still marvel at her ability to reinvent and protect her sanity with what I now assume were fantasies in which good always triumphed over evil.

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In 2015, my questions led me to the special-collections library at Marquette University in Milwaukee, where a trove of records from the [Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions](#) is stored. Carefully preserved and tended, the documents lie in climate-controlled archival luxury. I made a special appointment with the archivist weeks in advance to examine them.

On the day I went, I was the sole visitor in the huge reading room. I sat at one of the enormous tables and opened the first of many boxes. To my great disappointment, it contained photocopies of lists of students' names at the various Catholic boarding schools that once dotted Indian country. I'd hoped to see the original documents, and to find my mother's report cards or documents describing her time at Saint Mary's.

Eventually I came across the names of my mother and her siblings, the ink faded, written in careful cursive. I sat back heavily in my chair and breathed an exasperated sigh; her life at the school and all that happened there was represented by only her name written on a long, nondescript list of other students.

When the archivist arrived, he explained that even the original collection, full of yellowing documents instead of photocopies, held very little personal information about any of the students who had attended the schools so long ago. He explained that the original documents were largely administrative, but that I could view them if I liked.

I'd come this far, so I said yes.

He brought out another cartload of cardboard file boxes. Beyond the lists of student names with check marks in columns indicating whether they'd graduated, run away, or died, the boxes contained mostly bureaucratic reports and correspondence between generations of boarding-school principals and the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions in Washington, D.C, the agency that oversaw the boarding schools.

There was nothing in the dry letters and reports concerning the people I wanted to learn about, such as Sister Catherine or my mother. I thought about calling it a day. But for a moment there in the silent room, I distinctly heard my mother whisper my name, *Mary!* Her tone had a familiar ring, like when she'd demand me to "get down on those prayer bones, girl!" when I scrubbed the floor.

So I continued my search, and I found documents relating to Saint Mary's, including a yellowed, typewritten letter dated January 3, 1934. It was addressed to the Right Reverend Monsignor William Ketcham, the director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, from Sister Mary Macaria, the Sister secretary of Saint Mary's.

It read in part:

*By the time these lines reach you, our dear Mother Superior Sister Catherine will, no doubt, have been called to her eternal reward. On December 19, she fell off the second last step leading down to the kitchen entry.*

*She must have pitched forward with great force, for in striking her head against a windowsill; a gash was cut in her forehead by the temple of her glasses. On Friday Dec. 29, the Sister nurse noticed a change in Sister's condition and told us she feared a stroke.*

*Our dear sister had convulsions, was anointed and has been speechless since. The doctor says it can hardly be*

*but a matter of a day or so at most if she does linger  
even that long.*

*We know you will pray earnestly for her eternal  
repose and for a speedy relief from her sufferings.  
Sorrowfully yours in the agonizing Heart of Jesus.*

### *Sister Macaria*

Sister Mary Catherine, date unknown (Courtesy of Bad  
River Tribal Historic Preservation Office)

When I got to the end of the letter, I stood straight up out of my chair. I recovered myself and sat back down; I concentrated on the contents of the box again. To my amazement, I found an original photo of Sister Catherine. Covered from head to toe in her black-and-white nun's habit, she gazed sternly into the distance through her thick, wire-rimmed glasses.

The room was air-conditioned, but I was sweating as I read the remaining documents in the Saint Mary's file. At last, I held tangible proof that her stories were true.

Corroborating even part of her story vindicated her wounded life. It gave me authority over our family's mysterious, shameful secret, in which the punishment for being Native was a humiliation we could never overcome. How many other Native families could find some comfort in the information in these obscure archives?

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As the United States marks the anniversary of the Civilization Fund Act and all the devastation it set into motion, the federal government and Christian churches have an opportunity to begin a new chapter in their relationship with Native peoples.

[Read more: How America's past shapes Native Americans' present](#)

Healing is possible. Canada, which operated hundreds of Indian residential schools with similar assimilationist agendas, implemented the [Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement](#) in 2007, in which the government formally [apologized](#) to former boarding-school students and paid reparations to survivors. And in 2009, Canada created the (now-defunct) [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), which began a multiyear process of collecting and listening to survivors' stories, opening up residential-school records to survivors and families, and ensuring that the history and legacy of the schools are never forgotten.

According to residential-school survivors I interviewed in [Canada](#), the public admission of wrongdoing from churches and the government, as well as the opportunity to meet other survivors, meant far more to them than reparations or public displays of reconciliation. Two sisters from the Lac Seul band of Ojibwe shrugged their shoulders in response to my questions about what the future holds for government promises to improve indigenous relations. "I buried my anger for 20 years; I blocked it out," said one sister, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation from her non-Native neighbors. "But listening to others talk about their experience helped me make a new start and get over my bad feelings."

[Senator Murray Sinclair](#), Canada's second-ever indigenous judge, who chaired Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and presented its official findings in 2015, described the impact of allowing survivors to tell their stories to me this way: "They were not subject to cross-examination as if on trial. They were invited to share what they had to share, no more, no less. Their stories were recorded into history, and at the end of each day, they were acknowledged."

As of now, apologies in the United States have been few and far between. Although President Barack Obama [signed](#) the Native American Apology Resolution on December 19, 2009, apologizing for past "ill-conceived policies toward the Native peoples of this land,"

the resolution had no impact on federal policy toward Native Americans. With its [disclaimer](#) against any legal claims, the resolution faded into the woodwork of legislative paperwork.

Statutes of limitations for civil or criminal cases make any legal action impossible in the United States, according to the Native American Rights Fund attorney Donald Wharton. Lawsuits against Christian denominations would need to take place in individual state courts, and would likely be costly and burdensome. Attempts at gaining reparations at the state-legislature level have failed, too; in February, the South Dakota legislature [killed](#) a bill that would have extended the window for childhood survivors of boarding-school abuse to file suits against organizations such as the Catholic Church.

In addition to an admission of its role in the boarding-school programs, the government could make records from the time more easily available to survivors and their families. Telling the truth won't change the facts of all that happened or the damage that was done. It would, however, offer thousands of Native peoples the solace of physical evidence and validation like the kind I got, which could guide a path toward healing.

We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to [letters@theatlantic.com](mailto:letters@theatlantic.com).

