

Assimilation's Role in the Treatment of Native Girls at Federal Indian Boarding Schools

A Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation Undergraduate History
Program of the University of Washington Tacoma

By

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December, 2021

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Acknowledgments

First, this paper is in honor of my Grandmother Mary Jane, whose experiences inspired the writing of this paper. I would like to thank my advisors Professor William Burghart and Professor Michael Kucher for their invaluable help and feedback in the process of writing this paper. I would also like to thank my writing tutors James Hannes and Cassie Bundrick for helping my writing be the best that it can be. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their endless patience and support as I would become a hermit. Lastly, to my cat Sunny, who I lost in the middle of this paper, but was always a listening ear when she was here.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore what role assimilation played in the education of Native girls, like my grandmother, who attended federal Indian boarding during the late 1800s through the early 1900s when federal boarding schools were most active. While Richard Henry Pratt sold the idea of federal boarding schools to the United States as a way to assimilate Natives into White culture, this paper will argue through the analysis of the Carlisle Indian School that the federal boarding schools' true purpose was to eliminate the tribes by turning Native girls against them and using that control to create a second-class domestic workforce. To do this, I will explore five facets of the girls' experiences in those schools: changing the external appearance of the girls, the outing system, how the students were pitted against each other, the financial burden the schools were under, religious indoctrination, and comparing and contrasting Native girls with White girls' expectations. The research used in this paper includes secondary sources accessed through online journal archives and primary sources from a digital archive on Carlisle Indian School that include newspapers, letters, and telegrams. I focused on the Carlisle Indian School the most because as the government created more of the boarding schools across the country, they used Pratt's as a base model. Thus, it explores what Native girls had to endure in the name of assimilation and brings light to a topic that has been shied away from in the national eye.

Introduction

Schools ran by White people in order to educate the Native populations have been around since the United States colonial period. They were smaller, less organized, and later on were located on the reservations where the children were allowed to return home at the end of the day. For the purposes of this paper, I am going to focus on the federal boarding schools that Richard Henry Pratt opened in 1879 because that was when they became most organized and uniform with the goal of assimilating Natives into White culture. They had a more standard form of education than the previous Native schools and were off reservation, meaning the students were not able to go home for years at a time. Pratt opened the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in order to solve the nation's "Indian problem." Killing the Native population of the United States was starting to become frowned upon in national opinion, so the new plan was to assimilate them into Anglo-American culture. The phrase that Pratt used to sell his idea was, "kill the Indian in him, and save the man."¹ The adults were considered too set in their ways, so Pratt pitched to the federal government to instead target their children since they were more malleable. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School was the first of many Indian boarding schools established around the United States where Native children were ripped from their families and forced to attend with the idea that children would be easier to assimilate. Despite pleas to visit their homes, children often spent years at the schools without being allowed to return. The use of the English language was strictly enforced by school administrators; boys were taught manual labor, and girls were taught domestic work. Conditions were horrible: children were physically, emotionally, and sexually abused, disease ran rampant, and students ran away or even attempt

¹ Richard Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," transcript of speech delivered at Denver, Colorado, June 23-29, 1892, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/teach/kill-indian-him-and-save-man-r-h-pratt-education-native-americans>.

suicide to try and escape their situation. Starting in 1890, starting with the Carlisle Indian school and then other boarding schools adopted a “half and half” model, meaning that students spent half the day studying traditional educational studies like reading, writing, and mathematics, and the other half of the day doing vocational studies that included working at the school’s laundry, kitchen, and various shops on the campus.²

My grandmother was forced to attend a Catholic Indian school when she was child, which were not officially affiliated with the federal boarding schools, but were similar. She never wished to speak about that time, and now her experiences are lost to time much like the nation’s memory of these schools. In writing this paper, I hope to give a voice to young girls who did not get the chance to speak about their experiences. I wanted to explore what role assimilation played in the education of Native girls. While Richard Henry Pratt sold the idea of federal boarding schools to the United States as a way to assimilate Natives into White culture, this paper will argue through the analysis of the Carlisle Indian School that the federal boarding schools’ true purpose was to eliminate the tribes by turning Native girls against them and using that control to create a second-class domestic workforce. To do this, I will explore five facets of the girls’ experiences in those schools: exerting control on the external appearance and behavior of the girls, the outing system, how the students were pitted against each other, the financial burden the schools were under, religious indoctrination, and comparing and contrasting the gender and education expectations for Native girls with those for White girls.

Methodology

² Amy Goodburn, “Girls’ literacy in the progressive era: female and American Indian identity at the Genoa Indian School,” in *Girls and literacy in America: historical perspectives to the present*, ed. J. Greer (California: Santa Barbara, 2003), 81.

In order to understand the experiences that young Native girls went through while attending federal boarding schools between the 1880s and the 1920s, I adopted a subaltern lens that focused on how the girls reacted to their education in the boarding schools. I looked at primary sources including photographs of students and letters written by Richard Henry Pratt, and the Carlisle Indian School newspaper the *Indian Helper*. It was difficult to find anything that the students themselves wrote, so I read between the lines on the documents written by the school officials and how they responded to requests from students. I focused on the Carlisle Indian School the most because as the government created more of the boarding schools across the country, they used Pratt's as a base model.

Literature Review

Scholarship about the Native boarding schools was written primarily in the middle and late twentieth century. During this time, most of the authors had access to interviews with people that attended these schools while they were still running. These scholars focused on how boarding schools especially targeted Native girls, and how they held the girls to higher expectations than the boys. They examine how federal Indian boarding schools controlled what types of jobs they trained the girls for, how poor hygiene and working conditions led to outbreaks in diseases, how schools forced the girls' outward appearance to match with popular American aesthetics, the exploitation of labor in the name of vocational training, and the control of what religion they practiced. Some also mention the expectations put on young White girls during the same time period, the emphasis of female literacy and how White girls had better job prospects than Native girls.

In "Unless They Are Kept Alive," David H. Dejong writes about the long hours and poor working conditions of the boarding schools that were some of the leading factors in high

sickness rates. Dejong argues that a financial bottom line and education were considered more important than the students' health, reducing the children to cattle that were pushed through an assimilation machine.³ The US government funded the boarding schools based on the number of students enrolled, causing schools to accept students showing early signs of consumption, smallpox, measles, chicken pox, mumps, and more, despite federal enrollment regulations against this practice.⁴ If a student got too sick, the school would try to send them home in order to keep their death off the official record. Dejong describes in detail how the overcrowding, poor hygiene, and poor ventilation in the schools were also leading factors in the spread of disease. The overcrowding was so bad that many students would be forced to share beds, blankets, and pillows. Another factor brought up by Dejong was that many of the doctors working at the schools were underqualified. Superintendents often hired friends and family as favors over people with proper medical qualifications.⁵ Trennert connects the tight living conditions with the extreme workload as another reason that so many students fell ill and passed away.⁶

Robert A. Trennert's 1982 article "Educating Indian Girls" focuses on the heavy workload that the schools put on the girls. He argues that the domestic education that girls received at boarding schools did not apply in the real world because the skills they learned were only useful in the artificial environment created by the schools or very limited job avenues.⁷ This

³ David H. Dejong, "'Unless They Are Kept Alive': Federal Indian Schools and Student Health, 1878-1918," *American Indian Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2007).

⁴ Dejong, 262.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁷ Robert A. Trennert, "Educating Indian Girls at Nonreservation Boarding Schools, 1878-1920," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1982): 271.

meant that upon graduation, the only jobs available to the girls were jobs at the schools such as maids, cooks, or domestic science teachers.⁸ He also points out that many schools took advantage of the girls' work in laundry, sewing, and general housekeeping to save money. This source shows that the vocational education girls received was targeted in a way that made it impossible for Native girls to become professionally successful in White society and would instead be financially reliant on low paying jobs created by the government.

K. Tsianina Lomawaima ties together the vocational work with the forced appearance that girls had to keep in a 1993 article, "Domesticity in the Federal Indian Schools." Lomawaima argues that in the Indian boarding schools there was a greater emphasis on assimilating girls over the boys. It was believed that if the girls assimilated into White society, then they would keep an "orderly" home that would keep their future husbands and children in line and prevent them from slipping back into their old "savage ways."⁹ Lomawaima writes about the strict dress code and gender roles forced on girls. She argues that domestic training and appearance took precedence over education for girls. She states that, "Records and reminiscences attest that authority's gaze focused more intensely on the girls' appearance than the boys'" and "stressed the moral development inherent in manual development, but never as strongly for boys as for girls, the future uplifters of Indian home life."¹⁰ Controlling the girls' outward appearance was the first and easiest thing that the schools did in the name of assimilation. In contrast, Carr focuses on how White girls' education allowed them to reach for higher social statuses.

⁸ Trennert, 271.

⁹ K. Tsianina Lomawaima, "Domesticity in the Federal Indian Schools: The Power of Authority over Mind and Body," *American Ethnologist* 20, no. 2 (1993): 231.

¹⁰ Lomawaima, 232.

In the book *Girls and Literacy in America: Historical Perspectives to the Present*, Jean Ferguson Carr writes about the educational experience and expectations of young White girls during the same period that the Native boarding schools were active. Unlike the Native boarding schools' model of a half and half education, which focused on a mixture of traditional education including basic English and math skills, and vocational work, schools for White girls emphasized literacy skills. This was in preparation for a middle to upper-class life in which White women used literacy in order to run their homes, for example hiring and firing servants, and arranging deliveries to the house.¹¹ They also needed to be literate in order to read the bible, meaning that religious institutions lobbied for White women to be literate.

Carol Devens examines the role of religious indoctrination in the boarding schools at length in her 1992 article "If We Get the Girls, We Get the Race." Protestant missionaries enticed children to enroll in day and boarding schools to get them to give up their "savage" ways. Since missionaries were not allowed to force children to attend schools, they drew them in with the promise of food.¹² Devens explains that missionaries turned their attention to children, girls in particular, in the hopes that they would convert to Christianity, then bring the religion back to the reservation with them to convert their families.¹³ Mathes narrows in on the experiences of one particular missionary group called the Women's National Indian Association (WNIA).

Valerie Sherer Mathes writes about a specific missionary group called the Women's National Indian Association (WNIA) in her 2015 book *Women's National Indian Association, A*

¹¹ Jean Ferguson Carr, "Nineteenth-Century girls and literacy," in *Girls and literacy in America: historical perspectives to the present*, ed. J. Greer (California: Santa Barbara, 2003), 75.

¹² Carol Devens, "If We Get the Girls, We Get the Race': Missionary Education of Native American Girls," *Journal of World History* 3, no. 2 (1992): 223.

¹³ Devens, 224-5.

History. Missionaries Mary Lucinda Bonney and Amelia Stone Quinton founded the WNIA,¹⁴ which promoted teaching young Native girls Victorian and Christian values. Mathes writes that the association had a strong influence on what was taught at missionary and boarding schools because they brought in money and only donated to schools that followed their guidelines. Similar to what Devens explains, Mathes shows how religion was traded for money. Missionary schools enticed children with food, while religious institutions gave money to the federal boarding schools to further their religious endeavors. Another way that the schools received money was by hiring out girls to work in White households through the western outing system.

Richard Henry Pratt believed the best way for girls to become assimilated into White society was to have them live in and be immersed in it. At the Carlisle Indian School, he created a program called an outing system with a nearby Quaker community.¹⁵ For a few weeks at a time, girls were sent to a family to live and work for no money. The purpose of this system was to have the students witness firsthand how White families run a home, with the added benefit of having the students separated from each other. This outing system was adopted by boarding schools across the country, but it became twisted as it traveled west. There was more pressure by surrounding communities to supply cheap labor, and more students in the schools, leading to less supervision of the children after they were placed in a home. Robert A. Trennert writes about the differences between the east coast and west coast Native boarding school programs in his 1983 article "From Carlisle to Phoenix." He argues that the outing system failed in the West because

¹⁴ Valerie Sherer Mathes, *Women's National Indian Association: A History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 26.

¹⁵ Robert A. Trennert, "From Carlisle to Phoenix: The Rise and Fall of the Indian Outing System, 1878-1930," *Pacific Historical Review* 52, no. 3 (1983): 273-4.

the original goal of assimilation was lost in favor of hiring out cheap labor.¹⁶ Trennert points out that the outing system in the West thus became a business that hired out labor rather than Pratt's original idea of students living with families to learn from them. Trennert explains how Pratt himself publicly criticized how the outing system was run out west.¹⁷

In his 2016 book *Native Students at Work*, Kevin Whalen argues that the outing system in Los Angeles was taken advantage of by upper-middle class White women looking for cheap domestic help to cook, clean, and watch their children because of the tighter immigration laws in the 1920s that led to a shortage of cheap labor.¹⁸ Whalen shows that the only reason that the outing system was adopted in the West was because White families needed the labor, not that they were interested in showing Native girls the right way to run a household.

Scholarship presents federal Indian boarding schools as being run like a business and as an excuse for the US government to exert control over the tribes by taking their children in the name of assimilation and turning them against the tribes. Girls were especially targeted since they were considered the moral center point of their future households. As the years go by, there are fewer and fewer people that can share their stories, so by these authors sharing their findings then they are setting up information for the next group of scholars. Yet previous scholarship has written about the schools as if they are in a vacuum, with no comparison to how all these different facets work together. Bringing all of these points together help paint a broader picture of what Native girls had to go through while attending federal boarding schools. This paper will

¹⁶ Trennert, 278.

¹⁷ Ibid., 288.

¹⁸ Kevin Whalen, *Native Students at Work: American Indian Labor and Sherman Institute's Outing Program, 1900-1945*, Indigenous Confluences (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 86.

look at the documents of school officials to show what the agents considered to be important and unimportant in terms of education and gender expectations for Native girls.

Analysis

The Roots of Assimilation

A way to analyze the federal boarding schools is to look closer at the first one. The Carlisle Indian Boarding School opened in 1879 and was the model that other boarding schools used to create more, but without Richard Henry Pratt running them, they branched off and became more business oriented. Pratt was one of the few agents who treated the boarding schools like a school first and a business second. He wanted to “help” future Natives by assimilating them into Anglo-American culture as a way to civilize them. This assimilation was thought to create a larger divide between the girls and their tribes, leading the tribes to be eliminated as all the future generations would no longer be a part of Native culture. He thought he was helping “prepare” young girls for the future, once writing,

It is very important that all the girls have an opportunity to learn plain, wholesome, economical cooking, canning, preserving, serving, care of the house, etc. This may do learn in country homes by actual practice, but with the proposed addition to our curriculum all will be instructed in these important household duties. It will also be the best means we can establish to prepare the girls for successful outing.¹⁹

He vetted homes before they took in girls for the outing program, in which children were sent to live and work in White homes. He openly criticized the outing system in boarding schools in western states for not keeping a closer eye on the girls when they were placed in a home. He wrote constantly to food suppliers to get the best deals and would return clothes that did not meet his standards. At a glance, it seemed as though Pratt was also an advocate of literacy in Native education. The Carlisle Indian School had its own school paper titled *The Indian Helper*, later

¹⁹ Richard Henry Pratt to the Honorable Commissioner of Indian Affairs, October 8, 1900. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

named *The Red Man*, that students ran and wrote themselves. Zitkala Ša, a former teacher at Carlisle, recalled that Pratt was controlling and used the school paper to push forward his assimilation agenda.²⁰ She remembered that students never got final say on edits, and had to write with Pratt hovering over their shoulders.

At the Carlisle campus, there was a statue of an unnamed man, dubbed the “Man-on-the-band-stand,” that looked similar to Pratt. In the *Indian Helper*, part of the paper mentioned the Man-on-the-band-stand, saying, “Obedience saves much time and energy. The Man-on-the-band-stand would have his boys and girls guard against INSOLENT. No young person can afford to use INSOLENT as a weapon of defense, especially when he knows that he is in the wrong.”²¹ While it was not directly said, the paper inferred that Pratt would edit and change things in the paper that he did not approve. Near the top of every paper, there would be a mention that “The INDIAN HELPER is PRINTED by Indian boys, but EDITED by The-man-on-the-band-stand, a person of another race and color.”²² The paper was not just read by students. The paper was also a way for Pratt to show the country how his school was doing, and in a way show off the assimilation process to the American public and justify the cost of its existence. He used the control he had on the school newspaper to get his messages out on what he considered to be “right” and “wrong” behavior and masked it as “helping” the students with reading and writing. The paper was also used to control how the students dressed and behaved, which is the first facet of breaking them away from the values of their tribes.

²⁰ Jessica Enoch, “Resisting the Script of Indian Education: Zitkala Ša and the Carlisle Indian School,” *College English* 65, no. 2 (2002): 121.

²¹ *Indian Helper*, October 8, 1897, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-helper-vol-12-no-52>.

²² *Indian Helper*, November 13, 1885, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-helper-vol-1-no-14>.

External Strategies of Assimilation in Relation to Education and Behavior

One of the first and easiest ways that federal boarding schools would start to assimilate girls into Anglo-American culture was to control the way they dressed and presented themselves externally. A dress code was strictly enforced, and even the way their hair was styled had specific expectations. In the *Indian Helper*, Pratt made multiple comments about the girls' hair, saying, "The girls who wear their hair combed back look so much better than the girls who have such long bangs. Bangs are not becoming to Indian girls, and they are not very stylish now, either,"²³ and "How much better and more intelligent the girls look with their bangs combed back."²⁴ Pratt put a lot of pressure on girls to look a certain way, and publicly shamed the children if they did not meet his physical expectations. He also linked the girls' self-worth and internal confidence with the comment about their intelligence. With the two previous quotes, he bridged the gap between external assimilation and internal confidence, which was a way to make the children associate White standards with being the correct way and Native standards the incorrect way.

Along with outward appearances, the schools forced the children to take on new English names. In the question-and-answer portion of the *Indian Helper*, someone wrote in asking how "Indian children receive their English names?" The answer was as follows:

Names are generally given them at the first English school they enter. The Indian names of some are long and very hard to pronounce. It is a rule at the Carlisle school to give their father's names for last names of all pupils arriving who have not English names, and for first names such are selected as are considered suitable. Very few of the first party of Sioux from Dakota who arrived at Carlisle, in 1879, had names. Hence a long list was written upon the board, such as Ralph, Luther, Edgar, Reuben, Sarah, Rose, etc., and each boy and girl was allowed to choose from the list. It was very amusing to see them looking up and down the column, trying to select the nicest looking word.

²³ *Indian Helper*, November 13, 1885.

²⁴ *Indian Helper*, October 16, 1885, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-helper-vol-1-no-10>.

They could not read or pronounce the written words, but each made a choice, and the names selected are what those boys and girls are called to this day.²⁵

Without knowing the language, the schools would force children to pick a name from a list, seemingly at random since they did not know English. By taking their name that was given to them by their parents, the schools stripped them of their identity, and forcibly took on a parental role in the children's lives by giving them a "new" name. The school administrators thus intruded deeply into the lives of the children and became their pseudo parents in the absence of their real parents. Pratt wanted this divide created between the parents and the children to eventually bring an end to the use of federal boarding schools. The tribes would be eliminated, and the Native girls would be working as domestic help. The point of the boarding schools was to create a domestic workforce in White culture, so the boarding schools would achieve that goal and would no longer be needed.

Because of the parental role that Native schools assigned themselves over the Native children, they would not be allowed to go home and see their families for years at a time. Going home would be seen as "slipping backwards" because they would be exposed to what the federal government saw as the wrong or uncivilized ways of living. There was also a fear that the students would not return to the schools if they were permitted to go home for a visit. Students running away was a problem that would involve the police. Pratt sent a telegram to a police officer in reference to a student that they caught, saying, "No reward for arresting runaway Indians, but I will pay all expenses of arrest, keeping and returning them to Carlisle. Can you send police officer here with them?"²⁶ Pratt would request a police escort when the children were

²⁵ *Indian Helper*, February 11, 1887, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-helper-vol-2-no-27>.

²⁶ Richard Henry Pratt to S. H. Russell, September 26, 1890. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

sent back to make sure they would return. The parents of Native students would write, requesting the return of their children, with little success. A vast majority of the time they were told that the children had to wait until the end of their “term.”

These terms would be years at a time, as mentioned in one letter by Edgar A. Allen about the request of a student named Juan Pedro. “Juan Pedro was enrolled at Carlisle for a term of five years, three of which have expired. He is now in the junior class. I know of no reason existing why he should go home and he has made no request of that kind at this office. I therefore respectfully recommend that he remain at the school until his term expires.”²⁷ Another reason the school officials would not allow students to return home in the event of a family sickness was addressed in the following letter: “it was distinctly understood by parents and guardians that they must not expect their children to go home on such occasions as the one presented in this case.” The case being a family member at home being sick. Unlike what the letter said, the parents and guardians could not distinctly understand that the children had to stay at the school as most of them did not speak English. The children were forced to go to the schools against their own and the parents’ will, as seen in the telegram above where the children had a police escort back to the school. It was also mentioned later in the letter that “It will easily be seen that with so large a number as are in attendance at this school [Carlisle] there must be continual sickness and death in the home circle of one or another of the families represented, and that to comply with any considerable number of such requests would be impracticable.”²⁸ The school was so worried about making a point about not sending home students that they almost never allowed a student

²⁷ Edgar A. Allen to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, March 22, 1902. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

²⁸ Alfred John Standing to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, August 11, 1899. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

to go see a dying family member one last time. Everything that the children's parents had taught them before was to be forgotten, and the ties to their families cut by great distances and long stretches of time without seeing them.

The Use and Effect of the Outing System

Another way to separate the students from their tribes was through Pratt's outing system. During the summer, instead of going home, Native children were sent out to live with White families through the outing program. During this time, the children were only exposed to English and White values. The outing system was where students lived and worked in White homes for weeks to months at a time. It was embraced by other administrators in its efficiency in assimilating girls into White culture quickly. The selected children spent from weeks to months at a time immersed in White homes, only able to speak English, and being secluded from their friends. Pratt wrote that "their understandings are quickened; their tongues are loosened, and they respond to the multitudes of examples and incentives which surround them. They hear English constantly until they become used to it, and strive to speak English until they do it,"²⁹ while, "even in Carlisle, they hear more that is patois than English because they are necessarily associated mostly with one another."³⁰ By separating them, they were not able to speak to one another, and in turn not able to use their native language. The only socialization they received was with the White families that they were placed with. This was an important step in cutting the children off from their culture and values.

The treatment of the girls in the outing system in the western US was even worse because the families were not as well monitored as they were in the East. Pratt's Carlisle school had

²⁹ Richard Henry Pratt to L. O. C. Lamar, July 16, 1887. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

³⁰ Pratt to Lamar.

fewer students, so when the larger schools in the West started adopting the outing program, the program became more industrialized as more children were sent to live with White families. This meant that boarding schools in western states were less able to vet the families included in the program or monitor the children in the outing system. The less monitoring and vetting of the families caused the western outing program to focus more on placing them in White homes that paid more over other considerations. The schools were still completing the core goal that the girls were around more English than any other language, but they did not account for the homes treating the girls more like employees rather than students. As a result, sometimes the girls had periods of time where they were allowed to roam the city unsupervised, so many of them met up with one another.³¹ The girls being able to meet up defeated the original purpose of the outing system of keeping them separated, and could get them hurt or killed due to the lack of supervision in large cities like Los Angeles that they were not used to.³²

The Power of Pitting the Students Against Each Other

In the boarding schools, there were more students than there were administrators. In order to keep control of all the students, officials pitted students against each other by pointing out differences like gender. Pitting the students against each other also instilled White gender expectations in the Native children. These White gender expectations were brought back to the tribes, alienating the children from their families that did not have these same expectations. In Carlisle, Pratt used his control over the school's paper to pit the girls and boys against each other. In the *Indian Helper* under the section "WHAT I SEE AND HEAR," he would compare the two groups and pointed out when one group was better than the other. One example of this

³¹ Whalen, *Native Students at Work*, 87.

³² *Ibid.*, 87.

was written in the newspaper: “One thing the girls can do better than the boys they march out of chapel, school mornings, in better order. How about that, boys, when you have so much more drill in marching than the girls?”³³ All of the schools had some form of dividing the girls from the boys. A photograph from the Tulalip Indian School in Tulalip, Washington, shows children eating lunch in a cafeteria with the boys on one side of the room and the girls on the other.³⁴

Natives that went on to work at Native schools continued this tradition too. An unnamed man that recently became the head of a school wrote to Pratt, which later got printed in the *Indian Helper*, complaining about how a school was run before he got there. He wrote, “[The previous head of the school] used to make the girls pull weeds in the field with the boys, causing much excitement among the Indians. Of course it is a good thing for the girls to learn to be farmers but they are much better at the house-work.”³⁵ The idea was to make the social expectations clear between the two genders and have them match the social expectations for White children during the same time. The boys were expected to work outside the house and the girls inside doing household chores. The *Indian Helper* also had an article about the neatness expected of girls over boys:

NEATNESS IN GIRLS

Neatness is a good thing for a girl, and if she does not learn it when she is young, she never will. It takes a great deal more neatness to make a girl look well than it does to make a boy look passable. Not because a boy, to start with, is better looking than a girl, but his clothes are of a different sort, not so many colors in them; and people don't expect a boy to look as pretty as a girl. A girl that is not neatly dressed is called slattern, and no one likes to look at her. Her face may be pretty, and her eyes bright, but if there is a spot of dirt on her cheek, and her fingers' ends are black with ink, and her shoes are not laced or buttoned up, and her apron is dirty, and her collar not buttoned, and her skirt is torn, she cannot be liked. I went into a little girl's room once, and all her clothes were on the floor, and her bureau drawers, oh! Oh! You should have seen them--strings, and papers, and

³³ *Indian Helper*. November 13, 1885, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-helper-vol-1-no-14>.

³⁴ Everett Public Library, “An Index of Everett Photographers: 1890-1935,” 13; Anacortes Museum exhibition files.

³⁵ *Indian Helper*, January 21, 1887, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-helper-vol-2-no-24>.

handkerchiefs, and ribbons, and bits of cloth all mixed up together like a rat's nest. The wash-stand was dirty, and the wash bowl and pitcher and towels were a sight to behold, and there was dust all around on everything. Girls, learn to be neat.³⁶

Once again, a girls' inner self worth was tied in with her outward appearance, especially in the line that she "cannot be liked." The article also criticized the messy state of the bedroom. It is implied that if the girl could not keep a neat room, then she could not keep a neat and organized house later when she was older. While criticizing a set of rules, Pratt added specifically that "More careful separation of the sexes out of school hours should be provided for."³⁷

School officials were stricter on the treatment of girls over the boys. In a report from 1915 about discipline, one of the Carlisle school officials H. B. Peairs wrote,

It is impossible for any Disciplinarian to control two or three hundred boys without having the assistance and hearty cooperation of the student officers. Upon inquiry I learned that it had been the custom in the past to allow the boys to choose their own officers. Considering the fact that the standards among the pupils have been so low, allowing them to choose their own officers has been a great mistake, and has resulted in the selection of individuals who have not been trustworthy.³⁸

His silence on how the girls chose their student officers, and the emphasis on allowing the boys to choose, could imply that the girls already had their student officers chosen by an administrator. Since there was a more critical eye on the girls, they had to get creative in the ways that they acted out. One of these ways was through giving each other tattoos.³⁹ They would sneak out of their dorms at night and give each other tattoos with sewing needles that were dipped in stolen bottles of ink. It was a way to take back control of their outward appearance and

³⁶ *Indian Helper*, January 8, 1886, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-helper-vol-1-no-21-no-22>.

³⁷ Richard Henry Pratt to T.J. Morgan, July 8, 1890. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

³⁸ H. B. Peairs to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, May 20, 1915. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

³⁹ Martina Michelle Dawley, "Indian Boarding School Tattooing Experiences: Resistance, Power, and Control Through Personal Narratives," *American Indian Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2020): 279–301. <https://doi.org/10.5250/amerindiquar.44.3.0279>.

do something that was on their own terms. My own Grandmother had a tattoo on her hand that she got at school that was a heart between her thumb and pointer finger.⁴⁰ This was a subtle way to fight back against the White standards at the time, which frowned upon tattoos.

The Financial Burden of Education

Due to Pratt not wanting to comply with the idea of running the boarding schools as a business first, he was fired from his position at the Carlisle Indian School. A consequence of the boarding schools being considered a business first and a school second was overcrowding, which led to the rampant spread of disease. Pratt wrote that, “Many Indian children have been injured and some lives lost by over-crowding.”⁴¹ While visiting other boarding schools, Pratt also had personally witnessed “74 Indian boys in 23 double wooden beds in one room close up under the roof.”⁴² This is because the way that the federal government funded the schools was 167 dollars per student per month. Indian affairs agents would receive money if they referred students to the off-reservation boarding schools, which led to agents trying to send as many students as they could, regardless of the children’s racial background. This shows how many of the school officials did not care about the education of students and were just out to make money. Pratt tried to prevent this, at one point writing a letter to O.C. Applegate, a U.S. Indian Agent from Klamath Fall, Oregon, which said, “If these girls are at least half-Indian and look like Indians, it will not matter so much to me, but if less than half and white with light or red hair don’t send them.”⁴³ Parents of low-income families tried to pass off their children as Native was because then the

⁴⁰ Sheree Maxwell (family member) in discussion with the author, April 2021

⁴¹ Richard Henry Pratt to T. J. Morgan, July 8, 1890. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

⁴² Richard Henry Pratt to L. O. C. Lamar, July 16, 1887. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

⁴³ Richard Henry Pratt to O. C. Applegate, September 23, 1900. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

children would have free housing, food, and education. This overcrowding led to epidemics spreading through the schools very easily. Since the schools were funded by a head count, the schools would accept students even if they were showing early signs of sickness.⁴⁴ As a passive way to eliminate the tribes, the schools sent the students back home sometimes, which led to epidemics to break out at reservations as well, killing large numbers of Natives.

Religious Indoctrination

Converting Natives, girls especially, to Christianity was a high priority in the process of assimilation and a way for the federal government to exert control over the tribes. This emphasis on Christianity in Native girls was another way to turn the girls against their family members that were not Christian. The government believed that if the students were converted, then the families would either have to convert too or risk the children turning their backs on the non-converted tribes. For both White and Native girls, literacy meant that they could read a bible, which was one of the main reasons for White girls to become literate in the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Because the people running the boarding schools expected Native girls to be the center of the household and mothers, they also expected that inculcating a strong faith in Christianity in the girls would later transfer to their future husbands, children, and descendants. Christianity in the next generation was supposed to ensure a deep divide between them and the previous generations still part of the tribes. When that previous generation died out, then as a consequence the tribes would be eliminated. Pratt preferred that the girls learn religious studies at places like Carlisle rather than missionary schools because the missionary schools did not follow any guidelines when it came to basic education. He wrote that “Contracts for schools are entered into with

⁴⁴ Dejong, “Unless They Are Kept Alive”, 262.

⁴⁵ Carr, “Nineteenth-Century Girls and Literacy,” 62-63.

religious and other organizations and children by the hundreds placed in such schools; and then from years end to years end, the schools go on in their own lines without any looking after by the Government Officials.”⁴⁶ Another fear that the government had of missionary schools gaining popularity was that it would blur the lines between the separation of church and state if the federal government officially funded missionary schools.⁴⁷ On the other side of the argument, missionary schools were against the federal boarding schools because they felt that boarding schools did not put enough emphasis on religious studies.

Gender and Education Expectations Between Native and White Girls

At a glance, it appeared that the federal boarding schools were setting the same expectations as they did for White girls at traditionally White schools. Both put a large emphasis on literacy and expected the girls to be future mothers and the center of their households. While there were some differences between the gender and career expectations between White and Native girls, there was also some overlap. Native girls were taught the same expectations and values as the White girls were, those being Christianity, that women were the center of the household, literacy skills, and to be mothers-in-training, but the future careers they were directed into were different. While the boarding schools were being used to assimilate Natives into Anglo-American culture, the end purpose of assimilation seemed to be to create a second-class domestic workforce and to exert subtle control over the tribes through their girls. Due to the system’s reliance on Native girls for keeping the Native schools and the outing system running, the only careers they qualified for after graduation were at the boarding schools as maids and

⁴⁶ Richard Henry Pratt to T. J. Morgan, July 8, 1890. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

⁴⁷ Mark G. Thiel, “Catholic Ladders and Native American Evangelization,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 27, no. 1 (2009): 68.

teachers, or as maids in White households. Administrators were aware of this. Robert A. Trennert writes that “Josephine Mayo, the girls’ matron at Genoa, reported in 1886 that the work program was too ‘wholesale’ to produce effective housewives.”⁴⁸ The schools saved money by hiring past students over anyone else. Pratt himself once wrote a letter to the Department of the Interior Indian School Service recommending one of his past students, saying, “Let this matter rest a short time until I see Miss Nellie V. Robertson, a graduate of this school who is just ending her third year at the West Chester Normal, and who wishes to work the ensuing year. I may think well to ask her appointment at one of the lowest salaries, and this would fill our complement of teachers.”⁴⁹ Pratt wanted to hire her at the lowest salary in order to stay on budget, and he knew that he could get away with it because there were not many other job openings. According to Carr, on the other hand, White girls had the career prospects to write at women’s magazines.⁵⁰ Even though both groups were expected to be mothers and the center of the household, White mothers were also expected to hire servants, while the outing system (mostly in the West) enforced the idea that Native girls should raise both their own children and the children of White mothers for low wages. The Native girls were being trained to be the domestic workforce that the White women hired.

The difference in career directives even though Native girls were supposed to be assimilated into Anglo-American culture shows that the goal was to create a domestic workforce in the name of assimilation. Literacy in White women had “become a valuable mechanism for conducting household business, hiring and firing servants, or arranging for the delivery of

⁴⁸ Trennert, “Educating Indian Girls”, 279.

⁴⁹ Richard Henry Pratt to W. N. Hailman, June 24, 1895. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

⁵⁰ Carr, “Nineteenth-Century Girls and Literacy,” 51.

household goods.”⁵¹ The *Indian Helper* wrote out the expectations that the girls were expected to learn while at the Carlisle Indian School:

A GIRL SHOULD LEARN;

To sew. To cook. To mend. To be gentle. To value time. To dress neatly. To keep a secret. To be self-reliant. To avoid idleness. To darn stockings. To respect old age. To make good bread. To keep a house tidy. To make home happy. To control her temper. To be above gossiping. To take care of the sick. To sweep down cob-webs. To take plenty of active exercise. To see a mouse without screaming. To wear shoes that won't cramp her feet. To be a womanly woman under all circumstances.⁵²

These instructions emphasized housekeeping over anything else, and this is expressed again in a later issue where Pratt wrote, “A number of the girls under Miss Campbell’s instructions are busy making Christmas presents--mittens, hoods, pulse-warmers and what not? It does look so womanly to see them spending a part of their leisure hours knitting. What looks worse than to see a great, big, well girl sitting holding her hands, reading nothing, and doing nothing?”⁵³

Idleness was forbidden with both Native and White girls. If they weren't doing housework or reading, they were at least expected to keep a journal of their daily thoughts and actions. Writing home was expected of both groups and privacy was non-existent. In White schools, “women’s documents were never fully private, since such materials were read, sometimes edited, and often expressly sent to parents or teachers.”⁵⁴ Children at the Native boarding schools had the same experience but magnified. In the *Indian Helper*, there was a guide written out on how the students were expected to write home:

HOW TO WRITE TO YOUR MOTHER

Sometimes a young man’s mother writes to him, “come home, my son. I am so lonely without you. My heart is sorrowful, I am mourning. Oh! Please come home.” How should the young man reply

⁵¹ Ibid., 75.

⁵² *Indian Helper*, March 12, 1886, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-helper-vol-1-no-31>.

⁵³ *Indian Helper*, November 26, 1886, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-helper-vol-2-no-16>.

⁵⁴ Carr, “Nineteenth-Century Girls and Literacy,” 53.

to such a letter? Do you think something like this? “My dear mother, I am trying to get some knowledge in my head so I can help you after a while. You are well and strong now. A few more years you will be old. Then you will need my help more than you do now. I must stay away from you until I learn more. I cannot help you if I come home now. I don’t even know how to take care of myself. I know more than when I came here. Sometimes I feel strong, but there are so many sharp, business people in this world, who are just waiting to get the best of an ignorant and inexperienced boy like me, and I know I am not able yet to protect myself from such people. I must stay long enough to learn good strong business ways myself. Then I will not be afraid to push out and work with business people anywhere, and I can save my money. THEN I can help you, dear Mother. It is very hard for a young man to take care of himself well, that is, buy his own clothing, and pay for what he eats. I am not able to do this yet. But if I get some more knowledge, I mean to try to take care of myself and you, too. It would be very foolish for me to give up this good chance I now have, just to go out there to BE WITH YOU, if I could not help you. I cannot help you if I stay at home. I cannot help you ANYwhere if I don’t know how FIRST to help myself.”⁵⁵

This guide on how to write home shows how the schools expected the children to bring White values back to the reservations after they graduated. A line that sticks out in particular is at the end, where it says that “I cannot help you ANYwhere if I don’t know how FIRST to help myself.” Children were expected to become the adults once they “learned” White social standards in the relationship with their parents, and the parents to become the children that had to be looked after. The federal boarding schools hoped to create a divide between the Native adults and children, and that once the adults died out, the next generation would be assimilated into White culture, with their children following in their footsteps. Despite being the person responsible for creating Indian boarding schools, Pratt was against them as a long-term solution. He wrote that “Public school with our own children, and personal association with our own people, not with a solitary teacher here and there, or with an Agent or farmer, but with the great mass of our own people, presents to me the only promise of success.”⁵⁶ He blamed purely Indian schools on their “segregating character” and, despite that meaning he and others would be out of

⁵⁵ *Indian Helper*, November 27, 1885, <https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/publications/indian-helper-vol-1-no-16>.

⁵⁶ Richard Henry Pratt to T. J. Morgan, July 8, 1890. Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

a job, estimated that within one generation, Natives would be assimilated into White culture and Indian boarding schools would no longer be needed in America.

Conclusion

Understanding how federal boarding schools assimilated Native children through external means, vocational training, gender expectations, religious indoctrination, and the expectations compared to White children explains how they were able to alienate Native children from their parents and tribes, and create a second-class domestic workforce all in one shot. The girls had the most focus put on them since they were to be the center of the Native households. They were expected to forget their previous lives and to become different people that fit into the American mold.

What people like Pratt did not see coming was that by trying to take away these girls' cultures, they had inadvertently caused them to hold onto their culture even tighter and pass it on to the next generation. As the federal boarding schools began to close, Tribal schools took their place and have begun teaching Natives past cultures, making sure that their customs are not forgotten. Yes, girls have become the center points in some households, but they are center points that are teaching their families about their past ancestors and their ways of life, the exact opposite of what Pratt wanted.

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