INTRODUCTION

In struggling to understand the frequency of violence against women in our communities, many Native American and Alaskan Native people believe that the prevalence of domestic violence and sexual assault in Native communities has its roots in the forced removal of Native children from their families to religious and government operated boarding schools. We believe that the problems affecting both rural and urban tribal communities today are a direct result of several generations of Indian children who were taken from their families and suffered abuse in over 300 boarding schools across this country beginning in 1879 and continuing well into the 1950s. Many children who were taken from their homes learned lessons of self-hatred, and domestic and sexual violence, and brought these ways back into their communities. The boarding school era of Native experience created one of the most tragic chapters of loss in Native identity, and left in its wake a legacy of domestic and sexual violence, alcoholism, displacement, and suicide that continues to affect tribal communities today.

To completely understand the impact of the boarding school era, one must not only look at the historical events of this period but also examine federal policy, religious influence, societal values, and western colonization.

FROM DAY SCHOOL TO BOARDING SCHOOL

The first boarding schools were started in the sixteenth century and were operated by Catholic missionaries whose goal was primarily to acculturate Native children. In the 1880s, however, the U.S. government began the “boarding school experiment”, another chapter of federal Indian policy that attempted to eradicate Native culture through the forced education and assimilation of Native children. Treaties signed between the federal government and tribes commonly included the “six to sixteen” clause, a provision...
that obligated the federal government to provide schools and teachers for Native children between the ages of six and sixteen.\(^3\)

Initially, the federal government funded day schools for Indian children that were operated by churches and missionaries. This allowed children to attend school during the day and be with their families at night. Day schools weren’t as effective an agent of change as the government had hoped because children were still connected to their culture: speaking their language and practicing their tribal ways at home. Day schools didn’t last long.

The federal government’s second attempt to move Native children into mainstream society was the creation of off reservation boarding schools that allowed children to visit their families only during the summer and on holidays, with the condition that family members be allowed to visit their children while they were at school. This condition was soon recognized as counterproductive to enculturation, as Native children were still influenced by family members during visits with them.

The final stage of the government plan was the creation of Indian boarding schools far away from home villages and reservations starting in 1879. Children at these boarding schools were not permitted to visit their families, and were expected to stay for a minimum of four years. Captain Richard Henry Pratt was a key figure in this era of the boarding school. Pratt had been a veteran of the Indian wars and his philosophy of “kill the Indian and save the man” was instrumental in the government’s approach to the assimilation of Native children. It is at this time that the government began to attempt the cultural cleansing of Indians by the forced removal of their children to schools where they would be isolated from their family, and where the government could effectively get rid of anything Indian remaining in the child, in effect, killing the Indian in the child. This philosophy was the goal of the boarding schools, with at least one founder and administrator proclaiming it in his commencement address.\(^4\) The commonly used term “savage” as a reference to Native people allowed the boarding school policy to prevail during this era. If the idea that the government was “helping” Native children to change their “savage” ways and become members of mainstream society was popularized, it justified what in any other context would amount to kidnapping and abusive treatment.

*It is admitted by most people that the adult savage is not susceptible to the influence of civilization, and we must therefore turn to his children, that they might be taught to abandon the pathway of barbarism and walk with a sure step along the pleasant highway of Christian civilization... They must be withdrawn, in tender years, entirely from the camp and taught to eat, to sleep, to dress, to play, to work, to think after the manner of white man.*

*Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1866*\(^5\)

Native children as young as six years old were taken from their families to these institutions, in many cases deliberately far away from their homes so that distance would strengthen the process of forced acculturation and education. There were also situations
where children as young as three and four years old were sent to boarding schools. As an elder Julia Barton recalls: “I was three and a half then. I couldn’t even reach the sink to turn on the water. The older girls took care of me. They lifted me up so I could wash my hands.”

Living conditions on the reservations during this time were deplorable: poverty, starvation, disease and death were commonplace. These conditions were a significant influence on some Native families to relinquish their children to the boarding schools that promised them a better life. Some tribal leaders foresaw that the future survival of their tribe meant that their children would have to learn “white man ways” and so willingly placed their children in boarding schools. However, many times children were taken involuntarily, rounded up like cattle, and parents were forced to turn them over to the Indian agents. Should a family resist, food and rations were withheld, and threats of imprisonment and intimidation were used to coerce them to give up their children. The lengths to which some parents went to try to keep their children are tragic: for instance, in 1895 a group of Hopi men surrendered to the U.S. cavalry and chose imprisonment at Alcatraz rather than give up their children.

I would...use the Indian police if necessary. I would withhold from (the Indian adults) rations and supplies...and when every other means was exhausted...I would send a troop of United States soldiers, not to seize them, but simply to be present as an expression of the power of the government. Then I would say to these people, ‘Put your children in school,’ and they would do it.

-Thomas Jefferson Morgan
Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1866

EDUCATION: THE ACCULTURATION CURRICULUM
In order to integrate Native children into the dominant culture, a methodical approach of stripping away Native identity became a strong component in the federal educational curriculum. In true militaristic style, the first order of business for children arriving at boarding school was to cut their hair. Some children had never had their hair cut. Their hair was a source of pride and honor. Short or shingled hair to many Native children had specific cultural meanings. Short hair could signal that a person was in mourning, for example. In other traditions, it could be the sign of a coward. Cutting their hair was traumatic for Native children and many experienced it as an assault:

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward’s! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.
Children were stripped of their personal clothing and belongings when arriving at boarding school. Once stripped, they were scrubbed with lye soap that was harsh on the skin and left it dry and cracked. They were forced to wear school uniforms that were the required dress code, stripping them of their individuality and promoting uniformity. Schools were comprised of children from many different tribes each with distinctive characteristics of clothing relevant to their tribal custom. This clothing was also a strong link to their families. Older children often sewed many of the uniforms students were forced to wear. Medicine bags, jewelry, rattles and other personal items that provided comfort and connection to their families, and which had been given to them by their parents and grandparents were taken away. Some of these items would be returned to children when they left the school, however, many others were taken and burned upon a child’s arrival.

The cultural deprivation Native children experienced in boarding schools included changing their names to more “American” or “Christian” names. Reformers, for the most part, frowned upon using the true names of Native children as too impractical and reminiscent of their tribal identity. Educators believed that a good “American” sounding name would benefit them in their preparation for mainstream society. Some children’s names were chosen from the Bible, while others were inadequate English translations of a child’s Indian name by Indian agents for the purpose of recording them on government rolls. Initially, a child’s true name was changed, and then they were given both a first and a last name in the tradition of the dominant culture. This renaming was contrary to Native cultures in which individuals were not identified by a first name/last name system. Indian names were generally a unique description of the individual, and described them as a whole person. Quite commonly, as a child grew, or an individual made noteworthy accomplishments, a new name would be taken or given that signified this life change. In addition, the imposition of “American” last names upon children directly impacted Native culture, in which family lineage was connected to a clan system traced (in the main) through the mother, and did not denote ownership but belonging. This was in contrast to the dominant culture, where ancestry was traced through the father and very often was used to show ownership of offspring. Changing the names of Native children without any forethought by Indian agents and reformers was not only insulting; it was psychologically abusive, robbing the children of their sense of self, their identity. This practice also created problems for Native families in regards to ties and ancestral lineage. For example, Lillian Bull All the Time, the daughter of Bull All the Time, became Lilian Bomfort, a problem for her future children and a hindrance to proving lineage and entitlements that sprang from that lineage.11

Native children attending boarding schools were forbidden to speak their own language. English was the only language a child was allowed to speak. This policy was strictly enforced by school personnel with punishments of varying degrees. Among the punishments children endured when caught speaking their own language were having their mouths washed out with soap, being forced to kneel for hours on a hard cement floor or on a broomstick, being stripped and immersed in ice-cold water, having their hair pulled, and having their hands, legs, and/or heads slapped with a leather belt, a rubber hose, wooden paddle, or other instrument.12 A survivor recalled witnessing a boy being thrown across the room with such force that his collarbone was broken for speaking to
another boy in his own language. Another survivor recalls a relative who had difficulty pronouncing the required words of the required English language. Each time the child mispronounced a word, a nun would hit the child across the face with a switch causing her to bleed profusely. The child was repeatedly struck, until she was bleeding and unable to speak out of pain, fear and humiliation, and the frustrated nun locked her in the closet. This child eventually stopped speaking Lakota forever, and developed a nervous habit of pulling her hair out.

Shaming by ridicule also became way in which children were discouraged from speaking their own language—those who did, were singled out and referred to as a “buck Indian”. Some children would speak their language in secret. Others kept it alive by quietly saying their Christian prayers in their own language. Some children kept their language alive (in the face of violent repercussions) by occasionally tormenting their educators: speaking to them in their Native tongue and feeling a sense of pride that their captors did not know what they were saying. This was an extremely dangerous act, the more strongly children resisted assimilation, the more severe the punishment and ridicule that would be inflicted upon them.

While the brutality of the physical violence that Native children endured in boarding schools can be seen as a conscious effort by school authorities to compel children to conform to the expectations of the dominant culture, the sexual abuse many children experienced at these institutions can only be described as unconscionable, it was a violation not only of a child’s body, but an assault on their spirit. Sexual abuse, especially the sexual abuse of children, creates silent victims: the abuse varies in experience; it can be disguised by the perpetrator to appear to the child as an act of affection, especially to children separated from their parents and desperate for love and attention. The sexual abuse Native boarding school survivors suffered at the hands of the adults to whom they were entrusted was varied. Some children were sexually fondled and touched, while some suffered extreme sexual violence and penetration. An Ojibwe elder who attended the Pipestone Indian School recalls his fifth grade teacher who admired his beautiful singing voice. So much so, that on Fridays he was expected to return to her class at the end of the day, and sing for her while she fondled him. Another child at the St. Francis Indian Mission School recalls witnessing young girls being taken in the night by priests and nuns alike and returning to their beds crying and refusing to speak to anyone about what had occurred. At a boarding school in Winnebago, Nebraska, it was considered an initiation for thirteen-year-old boys to be sexual abused by the priest on their thirteenth birthday. There are no accurate estimates of how many children were sexually abused at boarding schools during this era, child sexual abuse wasn’t an issue that would be addressed by psychologists until many decades later. Most of the stories come to us from survivor interviews or interviews with the relatives of survivors who struggle to understand their victimization. However, given the current publicity of child sexual abuse by clergy, we can conclude the magnitude of Indian children sexually abused at boarding school must have been great.

Many boarding schools, whether operated by military regulations or missionary rules were authoritarian and regimented. Children were housed in sparsely furnished dormitories, and forced to adjust to a strictly controlled environment. The sound of a
steam whistle, a bell, or a bugle regulated movement and time; such sounds would tell a child when to get up, stand, walk, eat, work, play, and sleep. The absence of family left Native children without traditional role models. Boys, for instance, were left without the positive men’s roles their culture provided: respect for the Earth, and for women as creators of life. The healthy familial relationships that Native children would have been exposed to at home were replaced by the regimented, institutionalized gender roles of the boarding schools, where women and children were subordinate to the male authorities.

Integrated into the reading, writing, arithmetic, and labor curriculum of the boarding schools were mandatory prayers and church attendance. Turning Native children, away from their tribal spiritual ways, had long been considered a powerful tool in acculturation. This enforced Christianity drilled the foreign concepts of corporal punishment, sin, and evil into the minds of Native children (concepts that were in striking contrast to their own spiritual beliefs), creating a strong sense of fear and confusion, and introducing children to a basic precept of domestic violence, power and control and the imposition of one’s will on another through the use of violence. An Indian child’s perception of spirituality did not include a God that punished one with beatings for living in the natural world the Creator had provided. Nor was the concept of physical punishment as a method of discipline culturally understood:

*If my child does wrong, tell him how he must behave; but do not strike him... Physical pain...makes our children timid, and cowards, like the pale-faced men; but let them be kept ignorance of pain, and when the young brave will take the war path, there will be nothing to daunt his courage and he will fight like a mountain lion.*

-Letter from an Indian parent

Christianity had been used as a tool to change Native societies since the arrival of the Spanish. At boarding schools, Christianity was used as a shaming device to portray tribal spirituality as pagan and uncivilized. After years of this forced indoctrination both in the schools and outside of them, many Native children and adults abandoned their traditional ways and converted to Christianity in some form as a matter of survival.

The loss and worry parents felt for their children in boarding schools was profound. The separation from their children caused great anxiety and sorrow, with parents imploring administrators to be allowed to visit, many writing letters that asked for permission to see their children. These letters were, for the most part, ignored and discarded. One elder recalls that his parents hid in the bushes outside the grounds of the Holy Family Mission School, just to get a glimpse of him, because visits from relatives were not allowed. The worries of Native parents were well justified: while some children were sent home when they became ill, many other children died while at boarding school and never returned home again, leaving parents to struggle with the loss and guilt of sending their children to school. There are no accurate numbers reflecting how many children may have died at while at school, however, almost every boarding school had a cemetery on the premises.
In trying to get back to their families, some children ran away. When these children were caught (and not all were) they were treated as escaping prisoners: they were locked up in the stockade, basement or makeshift building in order to isolate and punish them. Some children were shackled to their bed at night and forced to wear a ball and chain during the day. Runaways were also put on display: tied to a tree or made to wear a yoke and forced to parade in front of other children as an example, sometimes dressed up in ill fitting clothes with clownishly painted faces to further humiliate them. Some children successfully made it home, while other’s died in their attempt to be reunited with their families, some children’s despair at their forced separation was so overwhelming that they committed suicide.

In addition to the cultural and familial deprivation Native children experienced at the boarding schools, they also endured their caretakers’ often blatant indifference to their physical well being. This indifference amounted to institutional racism; it sprang from society’s perceptions of Indians as less than human, and was supported by federal policies created to address the “Indian Problem”. Native children were mistreated because the federal policy of the period allowed it.

As the treatment of Indians and Indian Education became public knowledge, the federal government commissioned a survey to evaluate the administration and effectiveness of federal Indian policy. The Institute for Government Research, in its report to Congress, entitled The Problem Of Indian Administration, (also referred to as the Merriam Report) stated, “the survey staff finds itself obliged to say frankly and unequivocally that the provisions for the care of the Indian children in boarding school are grossly inadequate.”

The Merriam report found that medical attention was inferior and irresponsible, leaving healthy children exposed to children with communicable diseases and infections, some of which could have been treated by an adequate diet. This pattern of substandard treatment in the area of addressing the medical needs of children was detected in most schools, and was the norm rather than the exception. The report also lists insufficient attention to dietary needs as a cause of concern: many children were found to be below normal health status, as much as 17 pounds underweight in some children. Another concern was the industrial and labor training children underwent, in particular the use of Indian children as labor to support the maintenance of the boarding schools during their time there, as well as the practice of “outing” in which Indian children spent some of the school year living with white families as laborers for the family. Children became a cheap source of labor for farms and merchants in the area. The report found it questionable whether this training was a beneficial preparation for mainstream society, or an issue of involuntary servitude and the exploitation of a ready and vulnerable work force, stating:

*The question may very properly be raised whether much of the work of Indian children in boarding schools would not be prohibited in many states by the child labor laws, notably the work in the machine laundries.*
LESSONS LEARNED
There were many things Indian children learned at school besides English. The most debilitating message was one of self-hatred. This lesson was repeated over and over again through the use of violence and racism. Native children who came to the boarding schools with a distinct cultural base of different values, customs and social norms that had been practiced from generation to generation were confronted with a life altering cultural conflict detrimental to their very existence. In their home cultures, Native children were considered gifts within the tribe and were treated with admiration. A child was nurtured in their development; grandparents (elders) were a significant part of a child’s upbringing, instructing them in life-ways such as hunting, gathering, preparing food, cooking and other activities. There were teachings that guided a child in their growth and relationships with other people and the world around them; respect and care for elders instilled appreciation and responsibility as a family member. Customs such as putting out a tobacco offering before the taking of any animal or plant fostered a reverence for Mother Earth and the gifts of the Creator, and reflected a spiritual and ecological understanding. These teaching defined a child’s place in the world and secured their identity. Instruction for a child included learning from the natural world around them: watching the seasons and life-cycles and knowing how these elements intersected with their life was all part of a child’s educational growth. A child’s development included ceremonies, separate for girls and boys, which marked in time rights of passage from one age to another. These cultural ways instilled confidence and courage and a personal sense of self worth that was vital to the child and tribe: in sharp contrast to the dominant culture of the time, Native children were not taught that they were less important than adults and elders. However, all this and more changed upon their entrance to boarding schools where Indian children learned to modify their behavior to conform to the ways of the dominant society. All too often, however, this was still not enough for the reformers. No matter how well a child conformed to dominant culture beliefs and behaviors in an attempt to survive, in appearance they were still Indian.

Esther Nahaganab, an Ojibwe elder, recalls that when a teacher at her boarding school visited her home, she demanded that Esther’s parents wash her more often because her skin was dirty (it was brown). Esther’s father, in an attempt to make her life easier at school, tried to bleach Esther’s skin with lemon juice in an attempt to lighten it.27

The guardians of children at Indian boarding schools who were entrusted with their care and development failed. They failed to recognize that these were children, children who were still learning about the world around them, Native children who were powerless and alienated from their cultural base, who had to deny their own existence as indigenous people, and were forced to re-invent themselves in order to survive.

After the Merriam Report was publicized in 1928, the era of the boarding school finally began to come to an end, with the last of the government-operated boarding schools closing in the 1950s. Many children returned home to their communities and families as strangers, as prisoners of war,28 a war on Native culture, beliefs and way of life.29 For some children returning home, the years of separation and deculturation had been too great. Many events had transpired in their absence; parents, siblings, and relatives had
passed away. The returning children’s primary language was English, they even arrived home called by a different name than when they had left for school. Their physical appearance was different and alienated them from others. As Helen Sekaquapatewa (Hopi) recalls:

*I didn’t feel at ease in the home of my parents now. My father and my mother, my sister and my older brother told me to take off those clothes and wear Hopi attire…I didn’t wear them…My mother said she was glad I was home. If I would stay there, she would not urge me to change my ways. I could wear any clothes that I wanted to wear if I would just stay at home with her.*

The cultural transformation created life long divisions between these children and others in the communities they returned to. The shame and internalized oppression that the boarding schools had ingrained in children followed them home; they looked at their relatives as poor would be years before the full damage of the boarding school era would be known.

**THE LEGACY**

When Indian children passed through the boarding school doors, they arrived in the hundreds, and eventually thousands. In the 39-year history of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School over 12,000 children passed through their doors alone. These children came to the boarding schools as distinct individuals who had mothers, and fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers, aunts, and uncles. They were members of Nations that had a direct lineage to centuries of traditions and customs handed down from generation to generation.

This lineage, this direct line back through the centuries was broken by the boarding school experience and the resulting losses can only be measured by the problems that affect tribal members today. We are Nations struggling with restoring our way back to tradition, handicapped by our relatives who are the survivors of abuse. Some of us are so traumatized that we deny the residual affects and grieve through alcohol. Some of us are still not able to identify as “Indian”
because we were removed for too long and never made our way back. We live on the fringes of two worlds, we want to belong in both, but we may not be fully accepted by either. Too often, we use the rage and anger of our common experience against one another. Today, the disparaging slang term “apple” is a used amongst Native people to define someone who left the reservation or who has taken on dominant culture ways; red on the outside and white on the inside. This can be traced back to the children that survived the boarding school experience in the only way they could, by adopting the ways of the dominant culture, only to have their forced assimilation used against them. We use internalized oppression against each other to cover our fears. There are many people who struggle with their Indian identity today and deny that the ravages that affect tribal communities today have their birthplace in the era of acculturation. The right to parent our own children in traditional ways was replaced by the violence many of us encountered in the boarding school, and now that violence has become a part of our lives, traveling from generation to generation traced back to the original traumatic events.

There is a name for the trauma we have experienced, according to Dr. Maria YellowHorse BraveHeart; it is called Historical Trauma Response (HTR). A notable element of this theory is that the manifestations of HTR, such as depression, suicide, domestic violence, alcohol abuse and other social problems are passed on from generation to generation. Included in this theory is research that explains our connection to our ancestors in the past and how we as descendants experience their suffering in the present time. The destructive behavior adapted from boarding school plays out in ways that perpetuate the cycle of suffering. Children learn by example. If the parenting lessons children receive center on the use of extreme violence to discipline, having their basic needs neglected by their caretakers, and the violation of their bodies and spirits by sexual abuse, these children are often incapable of parenting well, and pass these lessons down in varying degrees to their own children and communities.

The cumulative years of the boarding school era can be categorized as cataclysmic. Though this education experiment transitioned many Indian children into mainstream society, many other children and families were devastated. There were some children who adapted and benefited from their educational experiences. They went on to become authors, teachers, athletes, and other leading figures in America and their respective tribes. However, for those tribes whose children never came home, or died, or whose broken spirits never recovered, the loss cannot be calculated in terms that today’s mainstream society can understand—there are no words.

**MENDING THE SACRED HOOP**
The complexity of the boarding school experience and the issues it raises are too numerous to address in a brief overview such as this article. Many people, including our own relatives, say to let the past go and move toward the future. However, there are some of us who cannot move toward the future unless we face the historical events that shaped our lives today.

In the PBS documentary *Nokomis: Voices of Anishinabe Grandmothers*, Bea Swanson, a White Earth elder, travels to the old St. Benedict’s Mission School. She walks through...
the door of the abandoned school building and is overwhelmed by memory. Bea walks into one room and sees the old school sign on the floor. Trying to keep control over her voice and her emotions, she remarks that she believed that enough time had passed for her to be able to face this place. However, after standing in the place where she spent her childhood, the memories that come back are still too real. She says that in her mind, she cannot go back there. She is afraid of remembering; the pain is still there, many years after she left St. Benedict’s.

As a society we must take responsibility to acknowledge past wrongs. We can honor our ancestors by helping to heal the generations of broken spirits who are the descendents of this removal era. We need to address these issues by working on restoring a sense of tribal sovereignty that strengthens our identity as American Indian and Alaskan Native people, recognizing that violence against women is not a part of our culture, it is a learned behavior forced upon generations of Native children. It is only by telling the stories and acknowledging the pain that we can trace the paths of domestic violence and sexual assault to their beginnings and start to heal our communities.

2 Policy created by Thomas Jefferson Morgan, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1889.
9 Supra 7, page 222.
11 Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, memo sent to Indian Agents and Superintendents of Schools: Washington, D.C., March 19, 1890.
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Interview with Eileen Hudson (Anishinabe), 2003.
20 Ibid.
21 Kelley. Supra 12.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.

29 *Supra 7.*


32 “Historical Trauma Response.” *The Circle* Archives: Vol. 22.