



## BUILDING ON TAINTED SOIL



### STUDY GUIDE

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## **Building on Tainted Soil**

Augustine, Charmaine and Jim are some of the hundreds of thousands of Native American children placed in residential schools since the 1870s. The United States government funded over 360 boarding schools which systematically destroyed native cultures and communities. The philosophy of the US Indian Boarding School policy was brutal: “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” Discover how three generations of boarding school survivors and their families are dealing with the fallout of cultural erasure and how they are reclaiming their culture today.

## **Indian Boarding Schools**

According to a 2022 investigative report by the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), between 1819 and 1969 the United States established 408 federal Indian Boarding Schools in the United States, across 37 states or then-territories. Up to 1,000 students attended each of these schools. The beginning of the report states, “This report confirms that the United States directly targeted American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children in the pursuit of a policy of cultural assimilation that coincided with Indian territorial dispossession.”<sup>1</sup>

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania was the first major U.S. government-funded off-reservation boarding school. It opened in 1879, and became a model for the many schools that followed it. The well-known phrase, “kill the Indian, save the man,” has been attributed to army officer Henry Pratt, who founded this school. Canada was also influenced by the Carlisle School and the U.S. policy of trying to assimilate Native American children.

Chilocco Indian School was located in north-central Oklahoma. It opened in 1884 and closed in 1980. According to the Chilocco History Project, more than 18,000 students went through the school. The organization says, “Today, the school’s land is owned in trust by the Kaw, Ponca, Otoe-Missouria, Pawnee, and Cherokee Nations.”<sup>2</sup> As is the case at many boarding schools, the Chilocco Indian School houses a cemetery for children who perished at the school. Many of their identities, and causes of death remain unknown.

## **Forced Attendance**

In 1891, the U.S. government passed a law that made it compulsory for Native American children to attend these boarding schools. However, despite this law, many people resisted and a large percentage of the children who ended up in the schools got there due to force or coercion. According to National Geographic, “The Bureau of Indian Affairs—the federal agency tasked with distributing food, land, and other provisions included in treaties with Native tribes— withheld food and other goods from those who refused to send their children to the schools, and even sent officers to forcibly take children from the reservation.”<sup>3</sup> The 2022 DOI report includes one

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi\\_investigative\\_report\\_may\\_2022\\_508.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://chilocco.library.okstate.edu/history>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/a-century-of-trauma-at-boarding-schools-for-native-american-children-in-the-united-states?loggedin=true&rnd=1694806664740>

account of efforts to force children into school. It says, “When called upon for children, the chiefs, almost without exception, declared there were none suitable for school in their camps.

Everything in the way of persuasion and argument having failed, it became necessary to visit the camps unexpectedly with a detachment of Indian police seize such children as were proper and take them away to school, willing or unwilling. Some hurried their children off to the mountains or hid them away in camp, and the Indian police had to chase and capture them like so many wild rabbits.”<sup>4</sup>

According to the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, records have been scattered across the country, so nobody knows exactly how many children attended the boarding schools. However, the organization estimates that by 1900, there were 20,000 children in the schools, and by 1925, there were more than 60,000. By 1926, it says, almost 83 percent of school-age Indian children were in a boarding school, with 367 schools operating in 29 states.<sup>5</sup> The Coalition finds that Oklahoma had the most boarding schools—a total of 83—followed by Arizona, Alaska, New Mexico, and South Dakota.<sup>6</sup>

### **Treatment of Native American Children**

The 2022 report by the U.S. Department of the Interior describes the ways that Indian Boarding Schools attempted to assimilate Native American students. It says, “The Federal Indian boarding school system deployed systematic militarized and identity-alteration methodologies to attempt to assimilate American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children through education, including but not limited to the following: (1) renaming Indian children from Indian to English names; (2) cutting hair of Indian children; (3) discouraging or preventing the use of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian languages, religions, and cultural practices; and (4) organizing Indian and Native Hawaiian children into units to perform military drills.”<sup>7</sup>

The report also details a number of other ways in which Native American children were mistreated in these schools. For instance, “Corporal punishment such as solitary confinement; flogging; withholding food; whipping; slapping; and cuffing.” The author also finds that overall care was “grossly inadequate,” and says, “Rampant physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; disease; malnourishment; overcrowding; and lack of health care in Indian boarding schools are well-documented.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Boarding Schools Today**

Most schools were shut down by the mid-twentieth century. In 1975, the U.S. government passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. Under this act, Native American tribes gained control of programs that had been administered by the federal government up to

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi\\_investigative\\_report\\_may\\_2022\\_508.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education/us-indian-boarding-school-history/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NABS-Newsletter-2020-7-1-spreads.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi\\_investigative\\_report\\_may\\_2022\\_508.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi\\_investigative\\_report\\_may\\_2022\\_508.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf)

that point. This meant that they were now able to operate their own schools. Today, there are four off-reservation boarding schools operating in the United States, which are run by the Bureau of Indian Education. They are: Riverside Indian School in Anadarko, Oklahoma; Sherman Indian High School in Riverside, California; Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon; and Flandreau Indian School in Flandreau, South Dakota.

Mark Cruz, a member of the Klamath Tribes in Oregon and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Economic Development for Indian Affairs at the Department of the Interior explains the vision behind existing boarding schools. He says, “Today, the mission of our off-reservation boarding schools is to provide Indian children with a high-quality, culturally-relevant education and, to build within our students the knowledge, skills, and character needed to address and overcome the challenges of adulthood, while giving them the educational foundation to pursue their dreams.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Lasting Negative Effects**

It is widely recognized that the boarding school policy has had many lasting negative effects on Native American communities. The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition lists numerous effects including a loss of identity, low self-esteem, difficulty forming relationships, near destruction of the extended family system, loss of language, loss of tribal traditions and ceremonies, loss of sense of community, and a weakened structure of tribal nations.<sup>10</sup> In a study published in September 2012 in the *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, researchers compared former boarding school attendees with non-attendees and found: “Former boarding school attendees reported higher rates of current illicit drug use and living with alcohol use disorder, and were significantly more likely to have attempted suicide and experienced suicidal thoughts in their lifetime compared to non-attendees.” In addition, they report, “People raised by boarding school attendees were significantly more likely to have a general anxiety disorder, experience posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, and have suicidal thoughts in their lifetime compared to others.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Calls for Recognition**

There are widespread calls for the United States to do more in investigating and recognizing what happened at Indian Boarding schools in the past. In 2009, the federal government passed a resolution called the Native American Apology Resolution. National Geographic explains that this includes, “Reference to ‘the forcible removal of Native children from their families to faraway boarding schools where their Native practices and languages were degraded and forbidden.’”<sup>12</sup> However, the resolution has been widely criticized as inadequate. The National Native American Boarding School Healing School Coalition states, “The truth about the US Indian boarding school

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.doi.gov/ocl/indian-boarding-schools#:~:text=The%20Bureau%20of%20Indian%20Education,School%20in%20Flandreau%2C%20South%20Dakota>

<sup>10</sup> <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education/impact-of-historical-trauma/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5446670/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/a-century-of-trauma-at-boarding-schools-for-native-american-children-in-the-united-states?loggedin=true&rnd=1694806664740>

policy has largely been written out of the history books.”<sup>13</sup> The coalition is just one of many groups advocating a deeper investigation and discussion of what happened.

### Discussion Questions

1. As shown in the film, what strategies did the boarding schools use in their attempt to erase Native American culture?
2. What are some of the lasting negative effects of the boarding schools on Native Americans living in the United States?
3. One of the people interviewed in the film says that it is hard to switch between being in a native environment and a non-native environment. Why do you think it is so hard?
4. What kinds of things do you think Native American children missed out on by not being able to talk about their culture or participate in it?
5. In the film, a number of Native Americans discuss the boarding school experience. What do you think are some of the benefits of talking about what happened in the boarding schools?
6. How do you see the younger generation taking back control of their culture, as shown in the film?

### Additional Resources

#### Books

- David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995.
- Margaret L. Archuleta, Brenda J. Child, and K. Tsianina Lomawaima, eds., *Away from Home: American Indian Boarding School Experiences, 1879-2000*. Phoenix, AZ: Heard Museum, 2000.
- Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *White Man’s Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.
- Margaret Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.
- Denise K. Lajimodiere, *Stringing Rosaries: The History, the Unforgivable, and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors*. Fargo, ND: North Dakota University Press, 2019.
- Andrew Woolford, *The Benevolent Experiment: Indigenous Boarding Schools, Genocide, and Redress in Canada and the United States*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education/>

## Online Sources

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- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/a-century-of-trauma-at-boarding-schools-for-native-american-children-in-the-united-states?loggedin=true&rnd=1694806664740>
- Sequoia Carrillo and Allison Herrera, “Federal Indian Boarding Schools Still Exist, But What’s Inside May Be Surprising,” *NPR*, June 6, 2023.  
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- Bryan Newland, “Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report,” U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs, May 2022.  
[https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi\\_investigative\\_report\\_may\\_2022\\_508.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf)
- U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs, “Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative,” no date.
- <https://www.bia.gov/service/federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative>

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