

# A Brief History of Assimilationist Education and Trauma

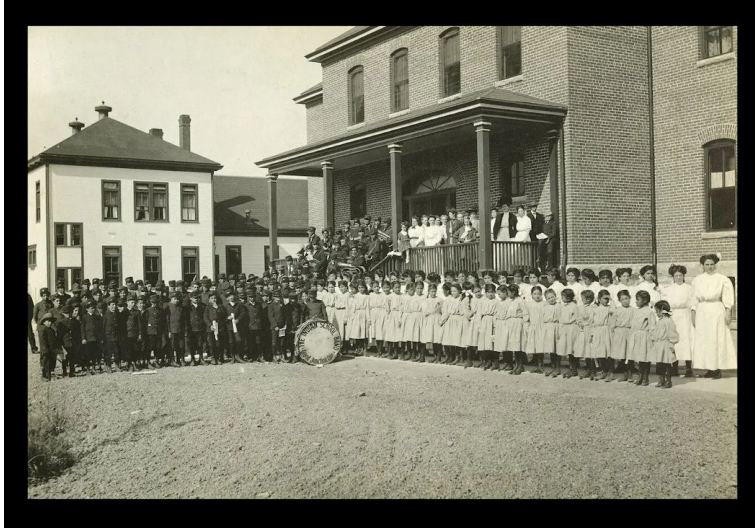
# Unmarked/Mass Graves

- More than 1,000 unmarked graves in Canada total (July 2021)
- Kids as young as three years old were found (July 2021)
- Led to efforts to locate graves in US
- And more importantly, to look at our own history of Native residential schools



*Students and staff at Fort Lewis Indian School circa 1900.  
Credit...via the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College*

# The history



*Students and staff at Grand Junction Indian School in western Colorado in an undated photograph.*

- In 1775, the Continental Congress appropriated \$500 for the education of Native American youth (Callimachi and Chischilly)
- US operated 60 schools for 6200 students by 1880 (Northern Plains Reservation Aid)
- “Carl Schurz, Interior Secy. in the late 1800s, argued that it cost close to \$1 million to kill a Native American in battle/war, versus just \$1,200 to give his child eight years of schooling (Callimachi and Chischilly)”.
- By the late 1800s, students in boarding schools went from a handful to 24,000, and the Congressional appropriation soared to \$2.6 million (Callimachi and Chischilly)
- US Govt ran at least 367 schools, 25 by the gov’t and supported hundreds run by the Catholic Church (Beaumont)

# Forced Assimilation/Settler Colonialism

- “Kill the Indian, save the man” coined by Col. Richard Henry Pratt
  - “The last day Dzabahe remembers praying in the way of her ancestors was on the morning in the 1950s when she was taken to the boarding school. At first light, she grabbed a small pouch and ran out into the desert to a spot facing the rising sun to sprinkle the taa dih’deen — or corn pollen — to the four directions, offering honor for the new day. Within hours of arriving at the school, she was told not to speak her own Navajo language. The leather skirt her mother had sewn for her and the beaded moccasins were taken away and bundled in plastic, like garbage. She was given a dress to wear and her long hair was cut — something that is taboo in Navajo culture. Before she was sent to the dormitory, one more thing was taken: her name.”
- Names were taken from us



*Dzabahe, “Bessie Smith,” on being reassigned a new name: . “It’s so casually taken away,” she said. “It’s like you are violated.”*

# Trauma



*Norman Lopez, 78, playing a flute outside of his home.*

Those who survived the schools described violence as routine. As punishment, Norman Lopez was made to sit in the corner for hours at the Ute Vocational School in southwestern Colorado where he was sent around age 6. When he tried to get up, a teacher picked him up and slammed him against the wall, he said. Then the teacher picked him up a second time and threw him headfirst to the ground, he said.

“I thought that it was part of school,” said Mr. Lopez, now 78. “I didn’t think of it as abusive.”

A less violent incident marked him more, he said.

His grandfather taught him how to carve a flute out of the branch of a cedar. When the boy brought the flute to school, his teacher smashed it and threw it in the trash.

He grasped even then how special the cedar flute and his native music were. “That’s what God is. God speaks through air,” he said, of the music his grandfather taught him.

(Callimachi and Chiscilly)

# More Trauma

Jacqueline Frost, 60, was raised by her Ute aunt, a matron at the boarding school who embraced the system and became its enforcer.

- Note: most who became “enforcers” were basically “brainwashed” or forced to buy in, “convniced” by the brutal punishments they themselves had

Ms. Frost said she remembered the beatings. “I don’t know if it was a broom or a mop, I just remember the stick part, and my aunt swung it at me,” she said, adding: “There was belts. There was hangers. There was shoes. There was sticks, branches, wire.”

(Callimachi and Chischilly)



*Jacqueline Frost, 60, holds a photo showing how she was forced to adopt the look and attire of a white girl. She said she was beaten by a Ute aunt who served as a matron at a federal boarding school designed to assimilate Native children.*



# Impacts of Settler Colonialism/Forced Assimilation



*Russell Box Sr. spends his days at his home in Ignacio, Colo., painting images of Native American symbols and ceremonies he was told to forget at the boarding school he attended as a child*

- In the 1800s, federal agents complained that there were almost no Ute adults who spoke English.
- Today, about 30 people out of a tribe of fewer than 1,500 people — only 2 percent — speak the Ute language fluently

(Callimachi and Chischilly)

# The Legacy of Assimilation in Alaska

- Comity Agreement
  - Sheldon Jackson - General Agent for Education
  - Different times and degrees of “contact” across Alaska
  - Varying degrees of forced assimilation
    - Western schools
    - Religious prohibitions of language and culture





# Wrangell Institute

“The first thing they had us do was to strip completely naked on this receiving room concrete floor. A lot of children did not understand the commands that the directions and oftentimes in frustration a lot of matrons ran over to these little guys and just kind of ripped their clothing off.”

“We were given clothing. The government issued clothing with our numbers. Our number was on our clothing and on our bedding. Children who had difficult names were often referred to only by their number by many matrons. And I can still remember years later as children who were much older, saying, ‘I thought my name was my number.’”

(Staff, AKPM)



*Sitka Training School (later Sheldon Jackson School)*

# Wrangell Institute, cont'd



*In 1938 the three central buildings – the boys dormitory at left, the school building right of center, and the girls dormitory at right – were surrounded by a wide clearing. Photo National Archives Pacific Alaska Region RG75 (BIA) Box 14 4/8/8(3)*

“We heard about sexual and physical abuse in many of the educational settings, but the most consistent descriptions of systemic abuse emerged from our conversations with students who attended the Wrangell Institute. It was a violent place. Seven different respondents described the physical abuse or beatings they either witnessed or experienced firsthand. Others who did not attend Wrangell told us they heard horror stories from their siblings and friends who had attended the institute. Three respondents talked about the regular beatings of boys who spoke their indigenous language.”

(Hershberg 17)

# Wrangell Institute, cont'd

“One described it as follows:  
And the thing that I remember most about Wrangell, to this day, is they used to pull everybody from the boy’s dorm ...whenever they caught somebody, they’d bring the whole dorm down there, and they’d have the two biggest boys in the dorm, and they would give them razor straps, you know the kind you sharpen razors with, and if a Native boy, now that’s all that was in Wrangell Institute at the time, if they spoke their own language, they got swatted 10 times by two of the biggest boys in school. The reason they used the big boys is because after they got whipped, they couldn’t go and jump on top of the guy that whipped them because they were usually the biggest and toughest guys in school. So they would use the biggest boys in school for speaking one word in their language. Even to this day, I can’t maintain or hold my own language.”

(Hershberg 17)



*Students stroll the sidewalk behind the Wrangell Institute school and dorms, looking south, probably in the early 1960s. The boys dormitory is at right, the school (with bell-tower) is left of center, and the girls dormitory is at the far left. (NPS Photo)*

# Wrangell Institute, cont'd



*Photo of girls and teacher from Sitka Training School (later Sheldon Jackson School)*

“But at home I remember on Christmas we’d sing our songs and our dances and then my cousin was telling me this he said, this one kid from (a village), on Christmas they went into the shower room to sing and they were caught and beaten and whipped for singing their songs—our Athabascan songs. So that was really hard, you know? Not only did I feel like they were taking away our identity, they were taking away our language and our culture and they were trying to make us into another culture that we were not familiar with or at least I wasn’t.”

(Hershberg 17)

# Historical Trauma/Generational Trauma

- According to Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, historical trauma is the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over one’s lifetime and from generation to generation following loss of lives, land and vital aspects of culture.”
- The stories of Wrangell Institute are not only stories of that institution, but they are the ones that are documented.
- There are many such stories from across Alaska, places where language, dance, and ceremony were forbidden by schools and/or churches

# Phyllis (Jack) Webstad



“I went to the Mission for one school year in 1973/1974. I had just turned 6 years old. I lived with my grandmother on the Dog Creek reserve. We never had very much money, but somehow my granny managed to buy me a new outfit to go to the Mission school. I remember going to Robinson’s store and picking out a shiny orange shirt. It had string laced up in front, and was so bright and exciting – just like I felt to be going to school!

When I got to the Mission, they stripped me, and took away my clothes, including the orange shirt! I never wore it again. I didn’t understand why they wouldn’t give it back to me, it was mine! The color orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn’t matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing. All of us little children were crying and no one cared.”



# Orange Shirt Day

**What is Orange Shirt Day?** Orange Shirt Day (September 30th) is a day when we honor the Indigenous children who were sent away to residential schools. It's also a day to learn more about the history of those schools.

**Why September 30th?** September 30th falls during the time of year when Indigenous children were taken away to residential school.

**Why an orange shirt?** The “orange shirt” in Orange Shirt Day refers to the new shirt that Phyllis Webstad was given to her by her grandmother for her first day of school at St. Joseph’s Mission residential school in British Columbia. When Phyllis got to school, they took away her clothes, including her new shirt. It was never returned. It is also symbolic of all that was taken away.

**Why Orange Shirt Day?** This is a history that impacted indigenous people on our continent. Not nearly enough people even know about this history. We wear orange shirts in recognition of the children who never came home, but also in recognition of the traumas visited at residential schools upon those who did return home.



“If you want to control the destiny of a people, take over the education of their children.”



Yéi áwé

Gunalchéesh!

Quyana!

Qagaasakux!

Taikuu

Ana basee!

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