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Lost Lives, Lost Culture: The Forgotten History of Indigenous Boarding Schools

Thousands of Native American children attended U.S. boarding schools designed to “civilize the savage.” Many died. Many who lived are reclaiming their identity.



Children at Fort Lewis Indian School in Colorado circa 1900.

By Rukmini Callimachi
Photographs by Sharon Chischilly
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DURANGO, Colo. — 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.

“You have a belief system. You have a way of life you have already embraced,” said Bessie Smith, now 79, who continues to use the name given to her at the former boarding school in Arizona.

“And then it’s so casually taken away,” she said. “It’s like you are violated.”



Bessie Smith, 79, was forbidden from speaking her Navajo language once she began attending a federal boarding school and nearly forgot her native tongue. “It’s so casually taken away,” she said. “It’s like you are violated.”

The recent discoveries of unmarked graves at government-run schools for Indigenous children in Canada — 215 graves in British Columbia, 750 more in Saskatchewan — surfaced like a long-forgotten nightmare.

But for many Indigenous people in Canada and the United States, the nightmare was never forgotten. Instead the discoveries are a reminder of how many living Native Americans were products of an experiment in forcibly removing children from their families and culture.

Many of them are still struggling to make sense of who they were and who they are.

In the century and a half that the U.S. government ran boarding schools for Native Americans, hundreds of thousands of children were housed and educated in a network of institutions, created to “civilize the savage.” By the 1920s, one group estimates, nearly 83 percent of Native American school-age children were attending such schools.



Tolani Lake School children and staff in an undated photograph.

“When people do things to you when you’re growing up, it affects you spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally,” said Russell Box Sr., a member of the Southern Ute tribe who was 6 when he was sent to a boarding school in southwestern Colorado.

“We couldn’t speak our language, we couldn’t sing our prayer songs,” he said. “To this day, maybe that’s why I can’t sing.”

The discovery of the bodies in Canada led Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, the first Native American to head the department that once ran the boarding schools in the United States — and herself the granddaughter of people forced to attend them — to announce that the government would search the grounds of former facilities to identify the remains of children.

That many children died in the schools on this side of the border is not in question. Just last week, nine Lakota children who perished at the federal boarding school in Carlisle, Pa., were disinterred and buried in buffalo robes in a ceremony on a tribal reservation in South Dakota.

Many of the deaths of former students have been recorded in federal archives and newspaper death notices. Based on what those records indicate, the search for bodies of other students is already underway at two former schools in Colorado: Grand Junction Indian School in central Colorado, which closed in 1911, and the Fort Lewis Indian School, which closed in 1910 and reopened in Durango as Fort Lewis College.

“There were horrific things that happened at boarding schools,” said Tom Stritikus, the president of Fort Lewis College. “It’s important that we daylight that.”



A committee at Fort Lewis College in Colorado has begun investigating the institution's past and is studying how to search its former campus for the possibility of the remains of children who died there.



Fort Lewis Indian School, which closed 111 years ago, was dedicated to eradicating Native American culture. Now, on its former grounds, students are planting Native American crops.

The idea of assimilating Native Americans through education dates back to the earliest history of the colonies.

In 1775, the Continental Congress passed a bill appropriating \$500 for the education of Native American youth. By the late 1800s, the number of students in boarding schools had risen from a handful to 24,000, and the amount appropriated had soared to \$2.6 million.

Throughout the decades that they were in existence, the schools were seen as both a cheaper and a more expedient way of dealing with the “Indian problem.”

Carl Schurz, the secretary of the interior in the late 1800s, argued that it cost close to \$1 million to kill a Native American in warfare, versus just \$1,200 to give his child eight years of schooling, according to the account of the historian David Wallace Adams in “Education for Extinction.” “A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one,” Capt. Richard H. Pratt, the founder of one of the first boarding schools, wrote in 1892. “In a sense I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: That all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him and save the man.”



Students and staff at Fort Lewis Indian School circa 1900.

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.

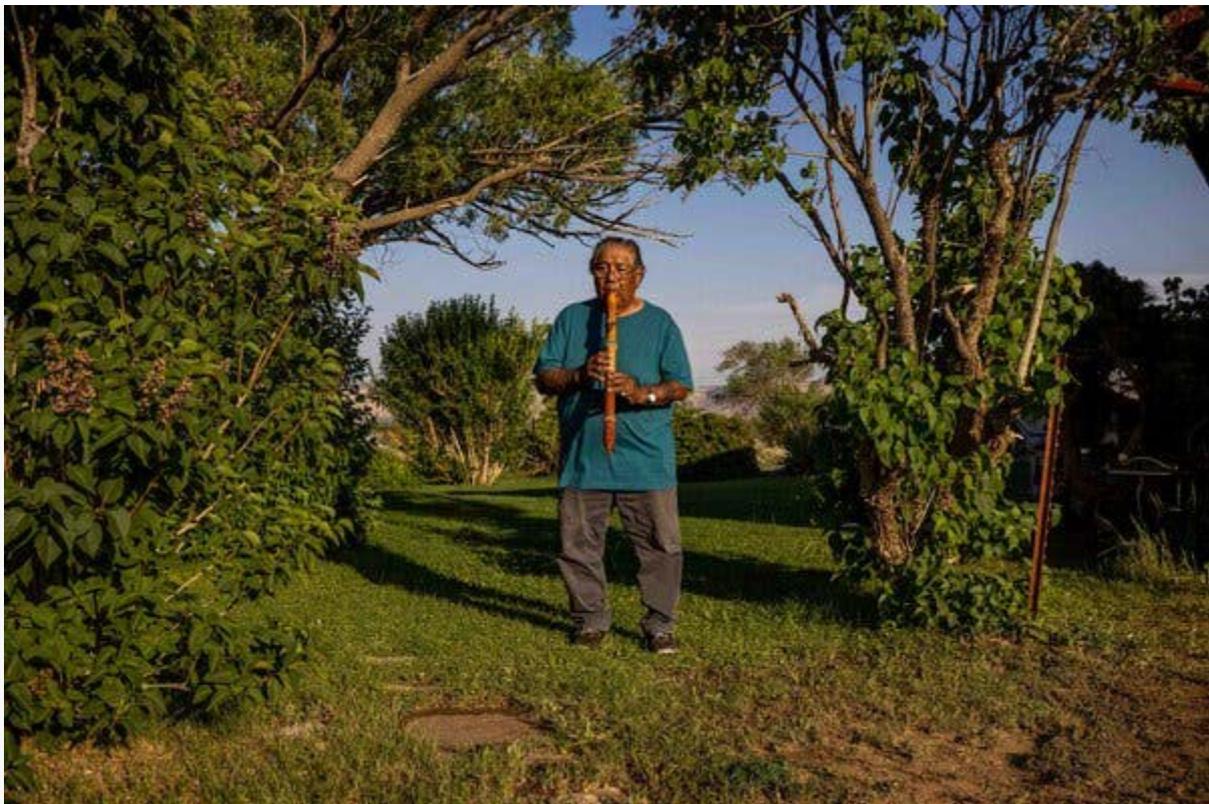
His grandfather taught him how to carve a flute out of the branch of a cedar. When the boy brought the flute to school, his teacher smashed it and threw it in the trash.

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.

He said the lesson was clear, both in the need to comply and the need to resist.

“I had to keep quiet. There’s plenty where it came from. Tree’s not going to give up,” he said of the cedar. “I’m not going to give up.”

Decades later, Mr. Lopez has returned to the flute. He carves them and records in a homemade studio, set up in his home on the Ute Mountain Ute reservation in Towaoc, Colo.



Norman Lopez, 78, playing a flute outside of his home. He said a boarding school teacher in Colorado smashed his hand-carved flute and threw it in the trash.

In the same boarding school, Mr. Box was punished so severely for speaking Ute that he refused to teach his children the language, in an effort to shield them the pain he endured, his ex-wife, Pearl E. Casias, said.

Years of alcoholism followed, he said. His marriage fell apart. It was not until middle age that he reached a fork in the road.



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.

“I had been yearning in here,” he said, pointing to his heart. “My spirit had been yearning in here to stand in the lodge,” he said, referring to the medicine lodge that dancers enter during the annual Sundance, one of the most important ceremonies of the Ute people. “Then one day I said to myself, ‘Now I’m going to stand.’ And when I said that inside of me, there was a little flame.”

He went to the Sundance for the first time. He stopped drinking. This year, one of his daughters reached out to her mother, asking if she could teach her how to make beaded moccasins.

But for many, the wounds just do not heal.

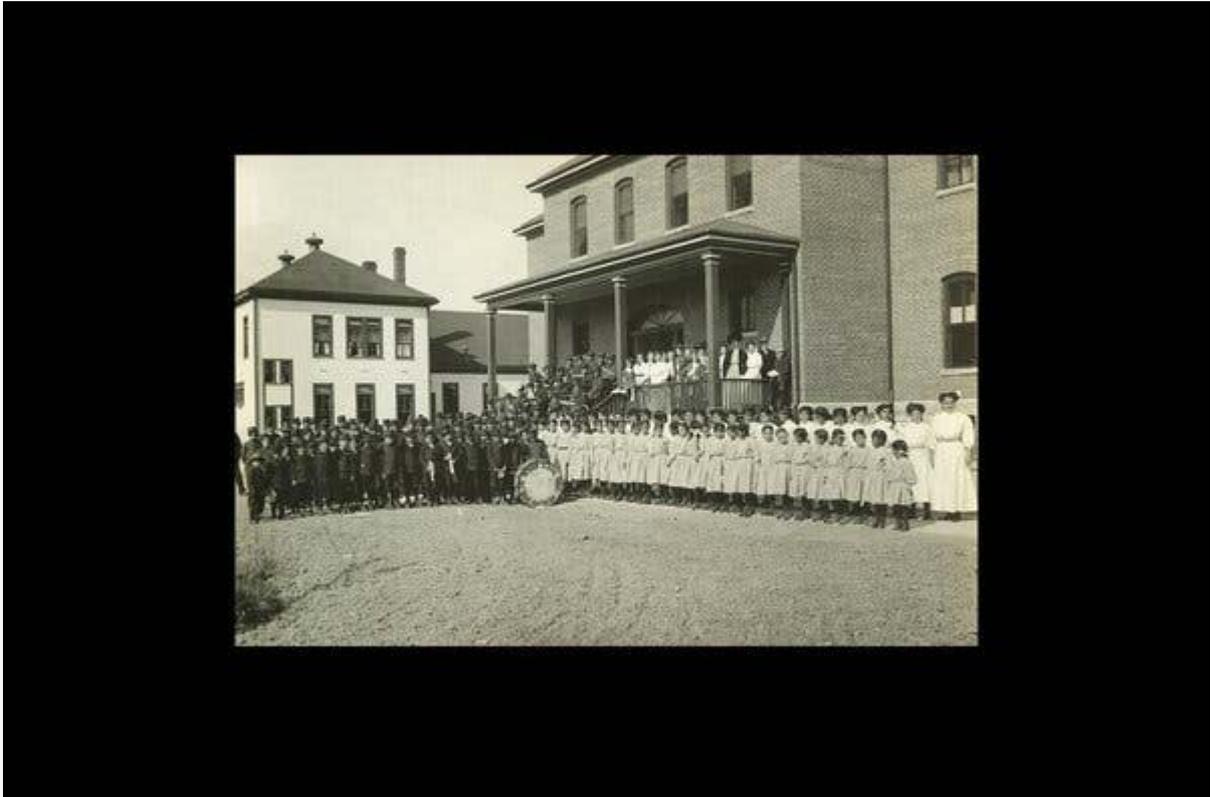
Jacqueline Frost, 60, was raised by her Ute aunt, a matron at the boarding school who embraced the system and became its enforcer.

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.”

She, too, turned to alcohol. “Even though I’ve gone to so much counseling,” she said, “I still would always say, ‘Why am I like this? Why do I have this ugly feeling inside me?’”

By the turn of the century, a debate had erupted on whether it was better to “carry civilization to the Indian” by building schools on tribal land. In 1902, the government

completed the construction of a boarding school on the Southern Ute reservation in Ignacio, Colo. — the school that Mr. Box and Mr. Lopez both attended.



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

The impact of the school, which was shuttered decades ago, can be summed up in two statistics: In the 1800s, when federal agents were trawling the reservation for children, they complained that there were almost no 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, said Lindsay J. Box, a tribal spokeswoman. (Mr. Box is her uncle.)

For decades, Ms. Smith barely spoke Navajo. She thought she had forgotten it, until years later at the hospital in Denver where she worked as director of patient admissions, a Navajo couple came in with their dying baby and the language came tumbling back, she said.

It marked a turn for her. She realized that the vocabulary she thought had been beaten out of her was still there. As she looked back, she recognized the small but meaningful ways in which she had resisted.

From her first day in the dormitory, she never again practiced the morning prayer to the four directions.

Unable to do it in physical form, she learned instead to do it internally: “I did it in my heart,” she said.



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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.

In her old age, she now makes jewelry using traditional elements, like “ghost beads” made from the dried berries of the juniper tree. When she started selling online, she chose the domain: www.dzabahe.com.

It is her birth name, the one that was taken from her at the boarding school, the one whose Navajo meaning endured: “woman who fights back.”