

**Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).**

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Native experiences in boarding schools have not been told by administrative school reports because they only describe the shape of Native policy. The success of the Federal Government's plan to place native in boarding schools to "civilize" them is a large part of the story of Indian-White relations. Brenda Childs brings the points of view of Native boarding school experiences at the center of this story. The assimilative policies of the progressive era attempted to "civilize" Natives through boarding schools in which tribal identity was to be eradicated. This took the form of the allotment act which destroyed tribal own land into individual ownership on reservations. The experiences that Natives endured has been captured by Native letters to each other's families as they document not only Natives firsthand experience within the schools, but how they also maintained the deep bonds of their families to maintain their cultural identity.

Drawing on other works on boarding school narratives with Natives' experiences at the center comes through the literature of K. Tsianina. Lomawaima, in her book *They call it prairie Light*. This work drew from the memories Chilocco alumni at a boarding school in Oklahoma. Another author by the name of David Wallace Adams, who wrote *Education for Extinction*, wrote about Natives experience of boarding schools at the center of the narrative and their effect and outcomes. Brenda Childs follows the trends of study on boarding schools experience through Native perspectives to explain how Natives dealt with and resisted Indian policy reforms. Child's also explains how Native's used the schools' intentions to survive during hard economic times while focusing on Native perspectives within the goal of the boarding schools. Childs focuses on

two boarding schools which are Flandreau boarding school and the Haskell Institute. The boarding school experience is told from the perspective of the Ojibwe, who mainly attended these schools. The very distinct aspect of her study is the use of letters among Native families while Native children were in boarding schools. Through these letters, Childs reveals the Native perspective of the Native boarding school experience. Childs argues that the schools were designed to separate Indian families, dilute the influences of home, and impose a new set of cultural values. Ironically these designs helped Ojibwe families survive hard times and economic depression. The promises that the school offered like food, shelter, and a useful trade provided the means for motivation. Due to the letters that Natives sent from boarding schools to their families, were not entirely cut off from the cultural support of Ojibwe society and is why generations of Ojibwe youth maintained their cultural identity. The other cultures that the Ojibwe people interacted with at the schools was a reason why they were able to maintain a sense of their Native culture.

The U.S reform policies to eliminate Native cultural identity during the late nineteenth century was a part of the attempt to “civilize” the Indian and enforce assimilation through breaking up tribal environments and their land. The boarding school and its policy came from an Indian prison and the template was created to eradicate a sense of identity within Natives so they could become new people. The Ojibwe people whose lands were being diminished could not afford the environmental destruction and their lives were changed in result of the policies and the educational programs designed to ensure allotment success. These assimilation practices dismantled Ojibwe economies and their cultural education. The boarding schools were a part of this process of assimilation which caused problems for Indians while also offering a solution to crucial dilemmas. Natives found the schools useful and turned to them for-help while being under economic hardship caused by the assimilative polices of this era. Through the letters that Childs examined, she

determined homesickness to be a common concern among Natives and their families. Superintendents did not acknowledge homesickness as a valid reason to send students home knowing they would not come back. Parents were not informed to when their children could visit. A valid reason for students to return home would be to help maintain the work needed for the family. These letters that were written to one another helped to maintain family connections and “parents strongly opposed having their children at school during vacations and often mourned the times they would not be home to partake in traditional seasonal activities.”<sup>vi</sup> The letters reveal that homesickness was common although through letters, families were able to maintain cultural identity as Natives used the schools for their children’s future. Disease among Native students was constant as administrators increased enrollment of sick students for salaries of the schools which endangered Native students greatly. Natives knew that boarding schools were associated with death as diseases flourished in classrooms, “Officials in the Indian office and in education made the connection between boarding schools and the spread of tuberculosis much more slowly than American Indians had.”<sup>vii</sup> The letters that parents sent to their children show the level of anxiety that was created because of the policies that brought sick students along with the healthy student body. Natives were able to maintain their cultural identity with ties to their families through letters. The vocational training that Natives received at the school was perceived as useful to Natives as “throughout the boarding school era, Indian parents and students hoped education would provide them with the skills to earn a living in order to cope with reservation conditions.”<sup>viii</sup> As schools tried to eliminate their tribal identity and influence of their parents, they were promised a trade in return. With girls receiving intense domestic science education and guys receiving different trades “Indian students in government boarding schools were constantly bombarded with the notion that they were best suited for menial labor.”<sup>iv</sup> Natives who participated in outing programs took

usefulness from the school which was an introduction into the labor market. Students also learned from the hours of labor put into the school. These changes were considered useful as older patterns of Native life were not permitted or irrelevant. The use of letters provides natives perspective to their experiences while enduring the school and maintaining the connection to their families to keep their cultural identity.

Childs is at her best when discussing Native perspectives to boarding schools and how they perceived policies aimed at eradicating their cultural identity. She is also at her best when describing how Natives maintained their cultural identity through connecting with family members through letters, the problems that were perceived by Natives due to assimilative policies in the boarding schools, and how Natives viewed the institutions to provide solutions to their most crucial dilemmas. The research would have been well-served with a deeper analysis of the amount of success that Natives achieved once they left the boarding schools. This analysis would have shown not only the direct impact that the schools had on Natives when they left, but also the effects it had on their tribal community when they returned home. This examination would show how Natives implemented what they learned to benefit their community as older ways of life disintegrated while tribal identity remained.

The book is great because it identifies Native perspectives of boarding schools since it portrays Natives with a three-dimensional human element rather than a focus on administrative policies and their goals for Natives. It is also great because it examines the effects that policies had on Natives through their perspective, and how it affected them from their own vision. The book is also great because it demonstrates how Natives found the schools useful due to the situation they were put in. I would recommend this book to undergraduate and graduate level students intending to study Native history and Native boarding schools. This book is also recommended to students

who intend on researching new trends on Native boarding schools and the effects it has on Native communities.

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<sup>i</sup> Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1998.), 53.

<sup>ii</sup> Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1998.), 62.

<sup>iii</sup> Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1998.), 24.

<sup>iv</sup> Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1998.), 81.