For many Americans, particularly in the East, the term boarding school has special connotations. It implies an exclusive setting, a wealthy family, and an elite education. For the American Indian, however, boarding school has had quite another meaning. From the late nineteenth century to the present, most boarding schools for Indian children have been under the direction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Since 1882, when Congress funded the first federal off-reservation schools, the Indian Bureau has retained these controversial institutions as an integral part of its educational system.

In the early decades of the federal boarding schools, most Indian parents were opposed to the idea of sending their children, especially young ones, so far from home. Thus, the boarding school concept went against the strong family ties common among Indian people. The strongest support for the government’s policy, however, came from the camp of the assimilationists. The passage of the Dawes Act in 1889 was the most significant legislative victory for assimilation, but the boarding school was one of its most effective weapons. In 1900 only 5,000 Indian children attended federal day schools; 17,000 others were sent away for their education.¹

By the 1920s the policy of assimilation had resulted in disastrous conditions for the Indian people. Destruction of the

¹This article is a revised version of a paper presented by Szasz at the Western History Association Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1975.

Indian land base, a result of the Dawes Act, was compounded by disease, starvation, and a short life expectancy rate. Indian Bureau boarding schools had become notorious. Pressures for reform were so strong that Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work ordered a government investigation of federal Indian policy. The results of this study were published in 1928 under the title *The Problem of Indian Administration*, more commonly known as the Meriam Report. In the area of Indian education, the Meriam Report drew harsh conclusions. "The first and foremost need in Indian education is a change in point of view," it observed. Indian education should be "less concerned with a conventional school system and more with the understanding of human beings."

The Meriam Report made official what reformers had been publicizing throughout the decade. When the conditions in the Indian Bureau boarding schools were revealed, the nation was shocked. The system contained so many wrongs, reformers hardly knew which to attack first. Basic to all criticism, however, was the lack of federal monies. Dependent for support on a parsimonious Congress, the Bureau of the Budget, and the Indian Bureau itself, federal boarding schools frequently did not receive sufficient funds even to feed and clothe the children, let alone hire professionally trained teachers and staff. Most schools were unable to provide a balanced diet. Bread, potatoes, molasses, and black coffee sufficed at Rice Boarding School in Arizona. At another, a doctor reported the absence of fresh milk, butter, eggs, vegetables, and fruit. Among the clinical and hospital cases he found a number of children "with conditions very much like scurvy." Health was further weakened by overcrowded dormitories. Desperate for space, school administrators deleted names from official attendance lists so that a school reporting 275 children might have as many as 350. These

3. Ibid., p. 32.
conditions led to widespread illness, including both tuberculosis and trachoma, a disease of the eye that can lead to blindness.

Student labor kept the schools running. Almost every type of vocational training also doubled as a means of operating the institutions themselves. At Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, each hour of vocational training was matched by three hours of routine industrial work on campus. A pre-World War I student at the Santa Fe school recalled recently that “student training wasn’t just student art, like now; there was work, you learned work.” Girls learned to sew, cook, launder, and keep house, but in so doing they did most of the mending, sewing, cooking, and cleaning for the school. Boys learned farming methods, blacksmithing, plumbing, carpentry, stone masonry, and many other skills, but in the process they also raised crops for the school, cared for the livestock, made shoes for themselves, repaired the plumbing, kept the boilers going, constructed new buildings, and repaired old ones. “It is true the student labor is probably less efficient than paid help would be,” wrote Haskell’s superintendent in 1924, but in the process of maintaining the school “they acquire not only skill but
habits of industry and thrift." Here then was a practical compromise, born of necessity and vital to the boarding school system through its first half-century of existence.

With such a schedule it is not surprising that the problems of discipline frequently became major. The physical conditions of routine, hard labor, coupled with crowded facilities and inadequate food, might alone have caused unrest. Of equal weight, however, was the contrast between the institutional milieu and the homes from which the children had been taken. The greatest hardship for the students was probably that of being torn from an extended circle of close-knit relatives, but the physical features of the school itself—regulation clothing and shoes, strange food and surroundings, and the daily harassment of contending with a foreign language—added further discordant notes to the general fear of being so far from home.

Most boarding school administrators saw student unrest as a potential threat and adopted a military system of discipline. Early morning drill was a common sight on campuses; and from there students were marched to breakfast, to class, and to other events of the day. "We used to have a soldier's uniform, those blue uniforms," a former student recalled. At the famous Carlisle school, roll call was taken by company, while at Haskell Institute directors sponsored competition among companies. Administrators praised their military systems, but they continued to maintain school jails. The "lock-up" system was common, but other forms of punishment were applied according to the whim of each superintendent. At Albuquerque, anyone who missed roll call was forced to run between a line of students who struck the offender with belts. One boarding school visitor reported seeing children whipped with a hemp rope and, on another occasion, with a water hose. In these early decades discipline and military rules formed the structure of daily existence.

7. Narrative Report, Haskell Institute, 1919-1929 (1924), Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
9. Ibid.
The school day was divided into specific blocks of time, for the goal was to teach each pupil to use his time wisely in preparation for "useful citizenship." The message of the boarding school was: "Forget your former ways," but sometimes the message failed. Teachers discovered that it was often difficult to penetrate the outer reserve of their students. A sympathetic observer who visited Carson Indian School in Stewart, Nevada, in 1925 told of two brothers whose father had brought them a gun for rabbit hunting. After they had made the mistake of firing the gun near the school, they were taken to the disciplinarian who took away the weapon with no explanation. The boys responded to the decision without emotion, but the next morning both they and the gun were gone. Their home, the visitor added, was 100 miles from the school.11

Runaways symbolized the negative qualities of the boarding school, and despite persistent efforts to return these students, others followed their example. In their defense one former student explained, "they are home-loving kids; they want to go back home."12 Nonetheless, students who fled were often caught and punished on return. "The superintendent has found it expedient and desirable to use corporal punishment in a few cases, especially in connection with immature girls who habitually run away from the school," wrote Haskell Institute directors in 1924.13 In Oklahoma directors of Chilocco Indian School had a standing agreement with nearby police departments. If the police captured runaway children, they received a fee ranging from $1.50 to $5.00. Whenever possible, this fee was removed from funds that belonged to the children but were held for them by the school. One irate parent complained that almost all of her daughter's $35 in savings had been used to pay for the girl's recapture. In reply, an assistant commissioner suggested that desertion was the student's "own fault," and therefore the student, not the government, should bear the expense for her return.14

These were some of the conditions in the boarding schools when the Meriam Report appeared in 1928. Before 1930 the only significant change the government made was to increase the food allocation to bring the daily school diet up to the standard minimum requirement. In 1930, however, the Indian Bureau appointed Will Carson Ryan, the first professional educator to serve as director of Indian Education. In 1933 John Collier, the leader of the 1920s reformers, was appointed commissioner of Indian Affairs. Under Collier’s guidance and with the aid of emergency New Deal funding, federal Indian policy was subjected to the first serious reform in fifty years. In his initial years in office, Collier introduced changes in Indian policy through the Indian Reorganization Act and other measures, but a number of difficulties hampered his progress and by World War II Collier’s Indian New Deal had lost its strength. Between 1930 and the war, Education Director Ryan and his successor, Willard Walcott Beatty, had only a dozen years in which to perform sudden miracles with Indian Bureau schooling.

In the early thirties the depression served as a pervasive influence on the boarding schools. Many Indian families lost their crops; savings and jobs virtually disappeared. Food was scarce and clothing was hard to come by. Under these circumstances, boarding schools were under pressure to increase their enrollments. In 1934, for example, the Cheyenne River boarding school was filled beyond its capacity during the entire year.

Improved conditions within the boarding schools heightened their appeal. They had always provided some food and clothing; by 1931-32 most schools served a balanced diet. In addition, the Indian Service had hired a corps of doctors to provide preventive medicine and emergency care. The children’s weight was checked regularly and those who were underweight were fed between meals. Fulfilling these needs gave a new and more positive image to federal boarding schools.

It was ironic, therefore, that Indian Bureau educators chose

this precise moment to close several schools. Heeding the advice of the Meriam Report, Ryan and Beatty sought to cut back on the total number of boarding schools and to decrease the enrollment of preadolescent students. The closure policy continued in spite of the depression and was given a boost during World War II when limited budgets closed additional schools. In 1928, when the Meriam Report appeared, there were seventy-seven boarding schools with an enrollment of 21,000. By 1941 only forty-nine boarding schools remained with an enrollment of 14,000. Thus, between the introduction of the Meriam Report and the war, the number of children attending boarding schools declined by a third. A significant percentage of these students transferred to Indian Bureau day schools, which tripled in enrollment; the remainder went to public schools.

Closure was achieved through several means. Some schools, such as Genoa, Nebraska; Rapid City, South Dakota; and Tomah, Wisconsin, were closed outright. Despite vehement opposition by congressmen who represented the district concerned and local businessmen who feared the economic impact following closure, the Indian Service held firm. Other boarding schools became day schools, but there was still another group that remained in an indefinite status.

The life of Salem Indian School in Oregon hung in the balance for much of the decade. In June 1933, Commissioner Collier ordered it to close; in September this order was rescinded and Salem opened as a two-year vocational school with a reduced enrollment of 300 students. The subject of an intensive investigation during the 1933-1934 school year, the school’s future was still in doubt at the end of 1934. One educator was so discouraged with the school she concluded that unless it was strengthened, “it would be best to have the agony over with and have it closed.” Although Salem, or Chemawa, as it was beginning to be called, managed to stay open through the thirties, when the war began, the old problem returned. “I would suggest now is the time to close this school permanently,” wrote the superintendent of Education in December 1941. Perhaps the plant could “be offered to the War

16. Mary Stewart to Ryan, 21 Nov. 1934, Office File of Mary Stewart, National Archives.
Department for defense training or for military purposes,” he added. Chemawa did conduct classes for the National Defense Training Program, but it was not closed; it maintained its identity despite policy shuffling within the Indian Bureau.

A number of boarding schools survived the Collier administration by adapting their programs to the general thrust of the Indian New Deal. Between the 1880s and the 1930s, the schools had theoretically prepared students for life in urban, white America. When the students left school, however, they generally returned to their reservations, “fresh from contact with white customs as taught them in the boarding schools.” No longer able to speak their own language, they were also differentiated by their clothes, shoes, and hair style, and, most important, they had lost the values that separated their people from the others. The result was that former boarding school students did not belong anywhere: neither in the city nor on the reservation.

In the early 1930s Indian Bureau educators argued that there was little logic in training students for nonexistent urban jobs. On the Western Shoshone Reservation in Nevada, nine out of ten boys who went away to boarding school returned home. At Cheyenne River, boarding school directors wrote, “we are confronted by the fact that a majority of these students do return to the reservation.”

As educators pieced together these responses, it became clear that boarding schools should be preparing students for reservation life. “What they need is training for rural living,” wrote Alida Bowler of her students at Carson, and this was the goal adopted by New Deal educators. While their predecessors were convinced that Indian education meant a transformation of the young Indians, many New Deal education leaders were sold on the values of reservation life.

In neither period, from 1880 to 1930 or from 1930 to 1945, did Indian Service educators suggest that Indian parents or Indian leaders take a significant part in the decision making.

Bureau educators of the thirties, however, did return to the original treaty promises by attempting to reinvigorate agriculture. Many Indian treaties included provisions for farmers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, and others who would encourage reservation farming. Not until the late nineteenth century had farming yielded to the notion of industrial training. The Indian New Deal educators acknowledged that the agricultural idea was probably the better one.

Most boarding schools of the thirties stressed preparation for reservation life. In the Great Basin, home of Carson Indian School, training was geared to the multiple demands of small ranching: dairy cows, beef cattle, swine, poultry, farming, gardening, farm carpentry, painting, and wiring. At Cheyenne River students raised beef cattle on tribal lands. At Chilocco girls were trained in practical home economics: “how to cook nice, plain foods, and how to can food properly.” Chilocco directed its program toward land-based Indians and, like a growing number of schools, encouraged students to develop individual farming projects. Even Haskell Institute, traditionally the business training center for the network of Indian schools, felt the pressure of rural vocational education. Some Haskell women instructors insisted that all their students would be “ladies of leisure” upon graduation, but the superintendent lamented to Beatty that the girls were badly in need of some “down-to-earth training.” The girls must return home, he

explained to Beatty. “In fact, there is no other place for them to go.”

Since these students would probably return to their own cultures, the educators of the thirties attempted to obviate potential alienation. To this end they introduced courses in Indian history and Indian art. Chemawa instituted an even more dramatic change. Concentrating on tribal identity, it divided all of its students into home rooms according to reservation. Each of these twenty-one home rooms was governed by a student-elected tribal council and tackled problems similar to those they might encounter on their reservations. At other schools students prepared for tribal responsibilities through study of the Indian Reorganization Act.

The students responded favorably to this new approach. Indian history classes were filled and the art work completed at the Santa Fe Indian School was praised throughout the nation. Traditional strictures against Indian religions were relaxed and where students lived near their homes, they were allowed to return for religious holidays. After urging by Collier and others, most schools moved away from a military routine and the atmosphere “was a little bit more free,” as one student of the mid-thirties remembered.

Despite these changes, the boarding schools remained basically Anglo-oriented. L. E. Correll, Chilocco’s superintendent from 1926 to 1952, exemplified the administrative carry-over of Anglo values. Firmly convinced that education was a process of individual character building, he gave his students large doses of the Puritan ethic. A typical memo from Correll suggested, “[M] any girls are forgetting to be business-like about their education or intelligent about their affairs. There is a great waste of time, yours and someone else’s... [T]he tendency to get into shiftless habits will certainly bring failure upon you.”

Even in those schools without a Correll, students were separated from teachers and staff by a cultural dichotomy. Despite courses in Indian history and art, Anglo-American culture prevailed during the Indian New Deal.


23. Annual Report, Chilocco, 1936-37, National Archives.
World War II brought an abrupt halt to these programs of the thirties. Wartime demands meant less funds for Indian Bureau education; at the same time the war itself served as a dynamic influence on the Indian people. An estimated twenty-four thousand Indians served in the armed forces and some forty thousand others were employed in war-related jobs. In the post-war years, many of these were drawn to urban centers. Cities offered jobs and the comforts of affluence that had not yet penetrated the rural reservations. But cities also meant loneliness, job instability, and access to alcohol. An Acoma Indian described it,

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i seem walking in sleep
  down streets down streets grey with cement
  and glaring glass and oily wind
  armed with a pint of wine
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But in the postwar stage of Indian urbanization, these drawbacks were not recognized, and most bureau educators were eager to implement the change. Plans for teaching Indian pupils how to adapt to an urban world were in the discussion stage as the war drew to a close. In the summer of 1944, a special teacher-training course on “Education for Life Outside the Reservation” was planned. Indian veterans were the first recipients of the new approach. In 1944 boarding schools instituted vocational training for veterans. Eventually, these included Haskell, Chilocco, Albuquerque, Flandreau, and others. While agriculture was offered to the veterans, other courses in welding, printing, machine trades, and building trades suggested an urban orientation.

The most dynamic effort of this postwar shift was the Navajo Special Program. Initiated in 1946, this project sought to overcome some of the deficiencies in Navajo education. Indian New Deal educators had tackled Navajo schooling in the thirties, but the war years had eroded their efforts and in 1946, there were at least ten thousand young Navajos who had received little or no schooling. At the same time, overpopulation of the Navajos’ land led to the growing conviction that


some of the tribe would have to work off of the reservation. These overwhelming problems led the Navajo Tribe to take its case to Washington, D.C. There, tribal interest was supported by bureau educators and led to one of the most unusual programs ever developed within the bureau school system. The goal of the Navajo Special Program was to equip overage Navajo youth with a vocational skill, plus sufficient English, to guarantee an off-reservation job.

At first, it was not difficult to find space for this program, as a number of off-reservation boarding schools had declined in enrollment during the war. Chilocco had spaces for 100 additional students in 1946, and Chemawa’s enrollment had dropped to a dangerous low. The Navajo Special Program brought new life to these boarding schools. In the fall of 1946 the first Navajo students boarded the train for Sherman Institute in California. Most of them did not speak English; few had been to school. In about five years they would possess vocational skills and a grasp of the English language and would be employable in urban areas. By 1961 about forty-three hundred Navajo youth had graduated from this schooling.

The Navajo Special Program was unique, but its successes depended on several features not available to regular boarding school programs. First, it was a short-range project with definite goals. Second, it received adequate funds, a feature never enjoyed by the regular programs. Finally, its directors and teachers were among the best in the Indian Service. The contrast between the Navajo program and the regular boarding school system soon became apparent. During its fifteen-year life span, the favored treatment it received led to resentment among regular staff and teachers. Its record-breaking successes in job placement and English-speaking skills were envied by those struggling under the traditionally inadequate system.

It also fostered a growing resentment from other tribes. Chemawa was a case in point. Between 1948 and 1957 the Indian Bureau made a radical change in Chemawa’s student population. When the Navajo Special Program began, the maximum Navajo enrollment was 200, balanced against 400 northwest students. Soon friction developed between the two

groups, and by 1957 northwest Indians were protesting that they no longer had a school for their young people—all northwest Chemawa students had been sent elsewhere. Similar conditions prevailed at Stewart (formerly known as Carson), where all of the Great Basin students were phased out in order to accommodate the Navajos. Thus, in less than a decade these schools lost their regional character. Others, like Chilocco, juggled dual programs of both Navajo and regular pupils.

Another issue was involved in the changing status of these boarding schools. In the late forties and fifties, Indian Bureau personnel labeled most of Chemawa’s northwest students “welfare cases” and urged that they be placed under state agency care. Stewart reported that at least two-thirds of its Nevada pupils were “orphans, pre-delinquents, or the products of broken homes.” Chilocco was classified in the same category. Its personnel were accused of failing to recognize that most boarding school pupils “have serious enough deficiencies that they cannot, as yet achieve successfully in normal, public school situations.”

By 1969, when the Kennedy Report was published, it was widely recognized that the unstable nature of these students had become the most challenging problem of Indian Bureau boarding schools. The Kennedy Report pointed out that up to 75 percent of the Chilocco students were there because of “severe social or emotional problems.” Stewart was described as “a school exclusively with problem children.” The Kennedy Report failed to mention, however, that Indian Bureau educators had been trying to cope with this dilemma for over thirty years. Their requests to Congress for social workers,

27. Anonymous, interview by author with a member of the Yakima tribe, 6 Aug. 1975, Yakima Indian Reservation.
31. Ibid., p. 420.
psychiatrists, and other additions to regular staff went unfulfilled year after year. During World War II and the postwar decades Indian children reflected the increasing instability of a partially urbanized people, and the problems they brought with them to boarding schools only contributed to greater unrest in the schools themselves.

By the 1960s many tribes were calling for increased Indian control over Indian Bureau boarding schools. The virtual autonomy granted to the Navajo Special Program was declining and, in spite of increased Alaska Native enrollment, some schools, such as Chemawa, responded to Indian pressure and once again began to serve local Indian educational needs. Indian school boards also gained a small measure of control, as witnessed in the 1969 uproar over the proposed contracting of Chilocco to a private firm. In some areas Indian tribes achieved sole responsibility for boarding schools. One of the earliest of these was the pioneering and controversial Rough Rock Demonstration School, opened in 1966. Since then the number of tribal-controlled schools contracted to the federal government has gradually increased. One of the most recent examples is the Pierre Indian Learning Center in South Dakota, formerly Pierre Indian School, now under the control of the Pierre Indian Board of Education.

Between the 1920s and the 1960s Indian students in bureau boarding schools were subjected to a bewildering variety of educational theories. Perhaps further solutions to the unique problems of these students will depend on the growing assistance of their own people, who are now beginning to determine the directions of their children's education.