

11/5/2010 8:53:00 AM

The untold story of the Ldf Government Boarding School

Restoration of school continues



Joyce Laabs
Features Editor

Editor's Note: I still remember vividly a conversation I had with a young Hopi woman when I was living in Arizona. I don't remember why the conversation turned this way, but she said to me:

"You know we Indians live in a gray world. We are not accepted by your culture and we are not familiar with our culture. That was taken from us. So we have nowhere to really belong."

After talking with Melinda Young, tribal historic preservation officer in Lac du Flambeau, I have an even greater sensitivity to her remarks.

In the late 1800s the government's Bureau of Indian Affairs had a plan - a plan that would turn into the single most devastating event in Native American history - and, to this day, few have heard of it.

The government decided to force Native communities to adopt the American culture - and this would be done through their children - at a government-run boarding school.

In 1895, the boarding school in Lac du Flambeau opened. Boys and girls from the ages of five to 15 were required to attend - Ojibwe children from Lac du Flambeau, Red Cliff and Bad River reservations were enrolled, as well as children from Potawatomi and Menominee communities.

There were no holds barred to enroll the children. At first, they tried to recruit children through friendly home visits. When that didn't work, government agents threatened to withhold annuity payments to parents. Agents, with the help of the police, patrolled the reservations looking for children of school age. Many times they removed children as young as three years old from their homes and took them to the boarding school

They knew that at the boarding school, the children could be removed from the influence of their parents and community.

How?



Melinda Young

Boarding school rules forbade the use of their native language, ceremonies, traditional food and clothing within the school grounds.

Clothes and toys from home were confiscated and discarded. Hair was cut, uniforms issued, and each child was given an English name. Brothers and sisters were separated, and many times years passed before they saw each other.

No one could leave the grounds without the agent's permission, even for holidays or summer vacation. Parents were not encouraged to visit.

"It was not an easy life for these children," Young said. "Their days were filled with lessons and duties. All activities were timed - beginning and ending with a bell. Plus there were chores for the upkeep of the school: cleaning, sewing, cooking, and caring for the crops and farm animals. Even building maintenance and care of the furnace and boilers were tasks assigned to the older children.

"The most common memories of the school among the elders who were there were homesickness and the severe punishments.

"Many of the older children ran away, heading for the Twin Cities, Milwaukee or Chicago. They felt they were being educated by the book - not the culture. There are large Native American populations in those cities today."

The boarding school was a means to break the passage of Native traditions and language by removing several generations of children from instruction.

Native accounts of the school are few - children were taught to be silent, fearful and ashamed of who they were.

"It is a bad memory that isn't talked about in school," Young said. "I always felt that NiiJii needed to make others aware of what happened to the people inside the reservation boundaries.

The flip side

"However, there was also a flip side. The school saved the lives of some who were taken. We need to tell those stories, too.

"It was in 2000 that the Historic Preservation Committee decided to restore some of the 25 school and farm buildings that were originally part of the boarding school in Lac du Flambeau."

They found that only two buildings retained the appearance of their original use - the boy's dormitory and the warehouse.

The exterior of the boy's dormitory is now completed. You can't miss it. It is located on Hwy. 47, a short distance beyond the Lake of the Torches Resort Casino. It is painted a pale orange. When asked her why they painted it such a strange color, Young said the following:

"We went through many layers of paint before we discovered the original color. We also had the paint analyzed and I have seen the order that was placed for the paint. The building also has vanilla trim and black windows, like the original."

Leading the restoration effort is "Restoration Craftsman" from Atlanta, Ga., as is the architect, Mary Catherine Martin - who has been involved with the project since the beginning. According to Young, all have years of experience.

"I think the restoration of these two buildings will begin the healing process," Young said. "

We need to acknowledge that this boarding school era existed.

"Now we need to obtain funding to complete the interior of the building, for it is inside these buildings that the story will be told.

"We are submitting grant proposals to the state as well as private donations. We are a 501c-3 and it is our hope that many will help in our restoration effort. It is so important.

"In the boy's dormitory will be a replica dorm room, we will have exhibits, photos of the children in their uniforms and photos of old classrooms.

"The building will also house the Historic Preservation office, an archives center, a community room, a research facility and exhibits.

"When the demolition took place we found shoes, a toy gun, fragrance powder and a doll. All items the children had hidden in the ceiling.

"Once the building interior is completed, school children from around the region will be invited to tour the building and learn about the boarding school era."

While the tribal elders were aware of the effects the boarding school was having on the community, they knew they were helpless to stop it. So, they went underground and continued their ceremonies, plus they taught community values and language - all in secret.

It remained a boarding school from 1895 until 1932, when it became a day school. It remained a day school until 1940 when the campus went under tribal control. It closed entirely about 15 years ago.

Melinda has been involved in historic preservation for many years.

"I was born on the reservation and have lived here all my life. I attended the Lac du Flambeau Grade School, LUHS, Nicolet, and graduated from UW-Eau Claire with a Bachelor's Degree in American Indian studies.

"After graduating I did accounting work for the tribe, but eventually I decided I wanted something different," Young said. "When the position of assistant in the Tribal Preservation Office was posted, I applied and was hired. I originally worked on the the Native American Graves and Protection Act to carry out a grant.

"I worked for Kelly Jackson, she was my mentor and heading up the boarding school restoration project. I shadowed her and learned so much from her.

"The effects of the boarding school era still linger in Lac du Flambeau, with high rates of alcoholism, suicide and violence and consequences."

It wasn't until 2000 that the government apologized for their actions.

Kevin Gover, then head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, apologized on behalf of the agency for its "past legacy of racism and inhumanity."

He said, "never again will we seize your children, nor teach them to be ashamed of who they are."

Those interested in more information or making a contribution can contact the Lac du Flambeau Tribal Historic Preservation Office at P.O. Box 67, Lac du Flambeau, WI 54538.

They can be reached by phone at 715-588-2139 or email at ldfthpo@nnex.net.

Joyce may be reached at features@lakelandtimes.com.