

RESISTANCE ON THE GREAT PLAINS: THE BISMARCK INDIAN SCHOOL,  
1916-1921

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To the Native students, and their parents, who resisted the Bismarck Indian School – I  
carry your stories with me.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a story of resistance, resistance by Native students, and their parents, to an institution that was founded in an attempt to eradicate Native culture and Americanize Native<sup>1</sup> people, specifically the children. The Bismarck Indian School was one of twenty-eight off-reservation boarding schools erected by the Bureau of Indian Affairs<sup>2</sup> to assimilate Native children into the dominant White society. When I decided to focus my thesis project around the Bismarck Indian School, I was confronted with a problem; no one had previously written about the school. No other scholars had offered their analysis, or interpretations, on the institution or its pupils. There have been brief mentions made in various monographs regarding the school, but nothing of serious note.

My search for information regarding the school led me to the Regional National Archives in Kansas City, Missouri. The National Archives at Kansas City is a regional facility of the National Archives and Records Administration. The holdings there include records from federal agencies in Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, and North and South Dakota. The files of the Bismarck Indian School were put under the Standing Rock Agency, which is a part of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and as it straddles

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<sup>1</sup> I will use terms interchangeably to identify American Indian people. American Indian, Native, Indigenous, and Indian are terms that I use to describe Native people as a whole. When possible, I use tribal affiliation.

<sup>2</sup> The name used for the Bureau of Indian Affairs throughout the rest of the thesis will be the Office of Indian Affairs or the Indian Service which is the appropriate title for the time period under discussion.

the North Dakota/South Dakota border, it fell within the regional archive's geographical area. The Standing Rock Agency records were transferred from the legal custody of the Standing Rock Agency office to the legal custody of the National Archives at Kansas City on January 27, 1972, as part of the regular process by which they receive permanent records. The records of the Bismarck Indian School had been maintained by the Standing Rock Agency office and were included in that transfer. It is here I was introduced to boxes, upon boxes, of files that told the story of the Bismarck Indian School.

The material presented will be the first scholarship offered on the institution as a whole. I have arranged my material thematically rather than chronologically as this allows me to tell a larger story of resistance at the school. The story of resistance became the overarching theme I saw emerging as I turned page after page of the government documents. These documents consisting of school memos and letters "cached away in dusty boxes filled with the residue of emptied file cabinets from old boarding schools..."<sup>3</sup> told the story of what the experience was like for the Native students at the Bismarck Indian School and their parents. The letters that parents and students sent to the school give us the Native voice that is so often missing from the boarding school story. Unfortunately, the voice of the students was rarer than that of their parents, so I had to rely on the stories of resistance as told through the writings of the government officials, but reading beyond their words<sup>4</sup> introduced me to a group of parents and students that were actors in their own play. Scholars Jenifer Brown and Emma LaRocque remind us that it is imperative that we critically re-examine the white-written documents

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<sup>3</sup> Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998], xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, eds., *Reading Beyond the Words: Contexts for Native History* [Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press], 2003.

that pertain to Native history and that is precisely the approach this thesis will take. The substantive portion of my thesis will focus on the reactions of the students and parents to the boarding school experience. Through the primary documents I will show the strategies that the parents developed in response to their children attending the Bismarck Indian School. I will also focus on the strategies that students employed and the resiliency they demonstrated while attending and yet still resisting the core values of the boarding schools. These strategies ranged from fleeing the school, defying school rules, all the way to physically fighting school employees.

Scholars have often examined the resistance strategies of Native students and their parents to off-reservation boarding schools. It would be impossible not to focus on the fact that many Native children resisted the dominant philosophy of assimilation through various methods. Even beginning with the very first off-reservation boarding school we see that resistance by Native children was always present. In 1879, the Carlisle Industrial Indian School was established and its founder, Captain Richard Henry Pratt, found resistance to be an issue. This “improper coming and going,”<sup>5</sup> as Pratt referred to it, of the students was handled with the implementation of student guards patrolling the school at night to prevent these resisters from escaping. The students’ “bid for freedom”<sup>6</sup> was the most drastic form of resistance that generally occurred at off-reservation boarding schools. The scholar Jacqueline Fear-Segal<sup>7</sup> explains, “At many different levels, individuals, as well as groups of children, challenged the proprieties of the school [Carlisle] and actively as well as passively resisted the program of

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<sup>5</sup> Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *The White Man’s Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007], 180.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> This work will be discussed to a fuller extent in the literature review.

civilization.”<sup>8</sup> Fleeing schools was the most direct manner in which children could demonstrate their frustrations with the schools. Aside from fleeing the school, resistance from the pupils came in many forms at off-reservation boarding schools; it could range from speaking their language to stealing food. Why did resistance by students occur? For historian David Adams<sup>9</sup>, both the reasons for resistance and the manifestations of this resistance were multifaceted. Regardless of the institutions’ control over students, it was never absolute and the students “...still possessed the intellectual and psychological resources to assess and respond to the institution that would transform them.”<sup>10</sup> Adams looks to three main reasons why students resisted: resentment of the institutions as a whole, the politics associated with students accepting the assault on their cultural identity, and the psychological effects that were associated with stark cultural conflicts. These theories of resistance will be applied to the reasons why students, and their parents, resisted the Bismarck Indian School.

The parents of pupils who attended off-reservation boarding schools also responded to the institution. David Adams proposes that parents’ resistance to the schools stemmed from the forced acculturation to which their children were being subjected. “If white teachings were taken to heart, almost every vestige of traditional life would be cast aside.”<sup>11</sup> While opposition to the dominant society’s culture was often a reason for resistance by parents, it was also heavily fueled by their concern for their children’s well-being at the schools. Chapter 1 of this thesis demonstrates that parents,

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

<sup>9</sup> This work will be discussed to a fuller extent in the literature review.

<sup>10</sup> David Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* [Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995], 222.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 212.

often products of boarding schools themselves, responded strongly, at times immediately, to the assimilationist policies and practices of the Bismarck Indian School. What has become clear in regard to the parents of the pupils who attended the Bismarck Indian School is that mistreatment of their children was never tolerated. Parents made the decision to send their children to Bismarck, in large part due to its closeness to their reservations, but if their children were mistreated in any manner, the parents responded. Whether it was by simply not allowing their children to attend the school or by going to the school to demand that their children return home with them, the parents were lead actors in the fight against the assimilation of their children. Often, the stereotype of Native parents whose children attended off-reservation boarding schools is one of passive victimhood. Certainly, parents lost some control over their children and there are the very real stories of complete loss, but the actions of the parents of the Bismarck Indian School reveal parents who held considerable influence over their children and were determined not to let it go. The involvement of these parents is quite revelatory in how we view Native people during the boarding school era, particularly during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

What is also prominent among the parents and their children who attended the Bismarck Indian School is the resiliency demonstrated by them. Resiliency theory is a concept developed by psychologists which has only recently been applied to Native people. Scholars such as Iris Pretty Paint and Angelica Lawson have applied this theory, also known as cultural resiliency, to Native issues. As Lawson explains, “Certainly, Native Americans have a history of trauma due to the colonization of this country. Yet, despite these hardships, Native Americans have adapted and continued, demonstrating

cultural resilience.”<sup>12</sup> The Native students, and their parents, of the Bismarck Indian School are clear examples of this cultural resilience. In Chapter 1 the story of Jim Eagle is introduced, a father who, upon hearing of mistreatment of his daughter, traveled to the school and removed his daughter from the institution only to return her six months later. The actions of Mr. Eagle show the resiliency of a Native parent who, while understanding the need for the dominant society’s brand of education, simply refused to have his daughter mistreated. Chapter 2 contains the story of a young girl, in this case a teenager, who suffered severe frostbite in one of her attempts to “find freedom” and who, only four months later, and still recovering from her wounds, made the decision to flee again. The resiliency demonstrated by the parents and students, casts a new light on how we view their response to the boarding schools. By taking them out of the margins of Native history, we are able to see these Indian students, and their parents, as individuals who did not passively accept assimilation. They were in control of their lives, despite the wishes of the federal government and its officials. It contradicts the pervading stereotype of Indian students and parents as victims and, instead, establishes them as actors in their own lives.

Opened in 1908, the school, located in Bismarck, North Dakota, was one of two off-reservation boarding schools located in North Dakota, the other being the Wahpeton Indian School. The school had the capacity to care for 110 children and the number of enrolled children ranged from 95-110.<sup>13</sup> There were always a larger number of girls than boys enrolled at the school; this is perhaps a partial explanation as to why the institute

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<sup>12</sup> Angelica Marie Lawson, *“Resistance and Resilience in the Work of Four Native American Authors”* (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2006), 20.

<sup>13</sup> RG75, Correspondence January 1917, Box 430.

eventually became an all-female school. The students who were enrolled at the school tended to come mainly from the Fort Berthold Reservation, but they also hailed from the other reservations in North Dakota, mainly the Turtle Mountain and Standing Rock Indian Reservations, as well as a few reservations in the surrounding states. The tribal affiliations of the students were generally Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Chippewa (Ojibwe), and Sioux (Lakota or Dakota). The school followed the half-day method that most off-reservation schools used, which was that half of the day was to be spent on academics while the other half was to be spent on vocational training. At the Bismarck Indian School boys took tests covering stock raising and carpentry, while the girls took tests that covered proper care of a home and sewing techniques.

The school was nestled between the bank of the Missouri River and the tracks of the Northern Pacific Railroad Company. The railway was the quickest way for the children of the Fort Berthold and Standing Rock agencies to get to school as those agencies had railway stations on site. It was harder for children of the Turtle Mountain agency to get to Bismarck via the train as the nearest railway station to them was sixteen miles away.<sup>14</sup> At the time of construction, the school was about two miles outside of the city limits of Bismarck. During the early years of the school the grounds consisted of four buildings, which were built for the school, and an old brewery which already existed on the grounds and was not functional. The main dormitory, which housed the female pupils and employees, was also where the classrooms and dining room were located. The male pupils used an old chapel as their dormitory, and there was also a barn and a laundry building. The school briefly closed in 1918, partly due to World War I, and started back

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<sup>14</sup> Department of the Interior: Office of Indian Affairs, *Routes to Indian Agencies and Schools* [United States: Bureau of Indian Affairs], 1912.



up in the same year and, eventually, became an all-female boarding school in 1922 until it finally closed down in 1937. This thesis focuses on a particularly crucial period in the history of the Bismarck Indian School, 1916-1921.<sup>15</sup> What is interesting about these years is that in a span of five years the school would see five superintendents come and go: Mr. John S. Spears (1915-1916), Mr. William E. Taylor (1916-1917), Mr. W.W. Coon (1917), Mr. J. Howard Caldwell (1918) and Mr. O. Padgett (1918-1922). Perhaps even more important though is this: in the beginning of the 1920s a movement of sorts emerged among students and parents in regard to strategies of resistance. When the school first opened in 1908, Superintendent W.R. Davis was assigned to the school and remained there for seven years, until he retired in 1914. A brief column in the *Indian School Journal* published by the Native students of the Chilocco Indian School described the scene when Superintendent Davis left the school:

The occasion for this incident, which deeply touched those who witnessed it and especially the recipient, was the going away of W.R. Davis, who for the past seven years has been the superintendent of the Indian School in this city [Bismarck, N.D.]. Mr. Davis was the first superintendent and has earned the respect and regard of every Indian in the school. They were all at the depot platform when No. 8 pulled in this afternoon; every pupil and every employee of the school was there, anxious to pay to their friend that final mark of respect and love. And it speaks much, both for the progress of the last 25 years, and for the administration of Mr. Davis, that they were there, and that a stoic old Indian so far gave way to his emotion as to weep on the shoulder of the once- hated white man.<sup>16</sup>

For a school that would seem to erupt in chaos after Superintendent Davis' departure, this is certainly an interesting scene to imagine. Rife with romantic images of Native-White

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<sup>15</sup> The records of the school reside in the Regional National Archives located in Kansas City, Missouri. The records begin in the year 1914, but there are no records from previous years. I have attempted to locate the earlier years in other archives but have not been successful. There is the very real possibility these records no longer exist.

<sup>16</sup> Chilocco Indian Agricultural School. *The Indian School Journal* [Oklahoma: Chilocco Indian Agricultural School, October 1914], 97.

relations, this description offers the idea that every Native person associated with the school was content with the Bismarck Indian School. Perhaps they were, as we do not have the documents from the earlier years to prove otherwise, but it raises the question of why a seemingly content institution would change into a place of such chaos and strong resistance in such a short period of time.

Off-reservation boarding schools were complex institutions that were under direct control of the federal government through the Office of Indian Affairs. The facilities were usually rather large and housed not only a large number of pupils but also a large number of staff. As Cathleen Cahill has observed, “In order to feed, clothe, and shelter large numbers of students, schools had a team of support staff - bakers, laundresses, cooks, seamstresses, farmers, mechanics, engineers, carpenters, blacksmiths, shoe-and-harness makers, stockmen, nurserymen, gardeners, and dairymen - who provided for the physical needs of the school.”<sup>17</sup> Omitted from this list are the students who tended to do a large amount of manual labor at off-reservation boarding schools. As will be discussed later, the employees, who came from the Indian Service, were to also serve another purpose at the schools. As Cahill explains, “In an insidious effort to disrupt the affective bonds between Native children and their parents, the boarding schools tried to substitute Indian Service employees as fictive kin for an entire generation of Indian children.”<sup>18</sup> The role that employees would play, particularly the superintendent and matron, was meant to replace the roles that the pupils’ mothers and fathers would have fulfilled.

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<sup>17</sup> Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011], 56.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

What is quite striking about the Bismarck Indian School is that, like other off-reservation boarding schools, it required a large number of employees to operate, but the required number of employees rarely, if ever, existed at the school. For example, an entry for the salaries doled out in August 1917 shows what positions were filled at the Bismarck Indian School; aside from the superintendent and matron, a teacher, a physician, an engineer, a carpenter, a laundress, a seamstress, a clerk and an assistant matron substitute were on the payroll.<sup>19</sup> However, four months later six of those had resigned from their position, mostly stemming from transfer requests.<sup>20</sup> This was part of the larger problem that existed at the school, instability of employees. Perhaps these transfers were in response to having to take on several roles at the school. A common practice at the school was to have employees fill several positions at once. For instance, the Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs, E.B. Meritt, wrote Superintendent Taylor a memo asking for clarification as to why certain employees were listed twice on the payrolls, under separate work categories. Mandy Dwight was listed as seamstress for \$500 a year and cook for the same amount; Charles Replogal and Frank Dwight were listed as both blacksmith and carpenter; and T.R. Farmer was listed as engineer while the office recorded a Walter J. Leigh as holding the position.<sup>21</sup> In a lengthy response, Superintendent Taylor informed the Assistant Commissioner that due to a number of resignations and employees simply not wanting to remain at the school, he had no other recourse but to utilize the employees that existed at the school. Superintendent Taylor

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<sup>19</sup> RG 75, folder 6 of 7, Box 427 *“Register of Salaries and Wages Earned for August 1917”*.

<sup>20</sup> RG75, folder 6 of 7, Box 427 *“Changes in Employees at Bismarck Indian School December 1917”*.

<sup>21</sup> RG75, Correspondence July 1917, Box 430 *“Letter from Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs E.B. Meritt to Superintendent Taylor on July 6, 1917”*.

ended with a cautionary note, “This letter presents in a strilling [sic] way the difficulty of running a school like this without employees.”<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, after Superintendent Davis’ departure the school had a hard time maintaining stable leadership and a stable work force. Superintendents’ responsibilities at boarding schools changed drastically over the course of the boarding school era. Originally, the position entitled the person to hire employees and spend funds as they saw fit, but this changed in 1889. Congress “specifically stripped the superintendent of the authority to make appointments, leaving the office no real authority other than to inspect Indian schools and to make recommendations for their improvement to his superiors.”<sup>23</sup> Superintendents of the boarding schools had the authority to rule over the school, but their power was limited in terms of finances and who was employed at the school. This became a major source of frustration for the superintendents who came and went at the Bismarck Indian School. The biggest problem with the school, aside from the obvious problem of trying to succeed at its mission of forced assimilation, was the lack of a stable workforce and run-down facilities. The records reveal that, at some point in the various superintendents’ time at the school, a memo was sent to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, or to other Indian Service officials, by each one of them either requesting funding to enhance the buildings, bringing attention to the problem that there were rarely enough employees to do an adequate job, or simply detailing the major problems that existed at

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<sup>22</sup> RG75, Correspondence July 1917, Box 430 “*Letter from Superintendent Taylor to Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs, E.B. Meritt on July 10, 1917*”.

<sup>23</sup> David Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 68-69.

the school.<sup>24</sup> This reflected greatly on how the students responded to the school; subsequently, this also shaped how the parents would respond to the school.

In this thesis *response* is the subject matter. The response of many Native parents, and their children, to the Bismarck Indian School was one of resistance. What follows is a study of the resistance strategies that were created and employed by the pupils and their parents at one off-reservation boarding school. Trailing in the footsteps of historian Brenda Child, it is the Native perspective that is offered here, for it is the Native peoples' perspective that matters the most. They are the ones who endured the forced assimilationist policies and it was they who refused to meekly surrender to those policies. By looking at actual letters from parents and students and by reading between the lines of government officials' memos, we are presented with a new view of Indian people during the boarding school era in the early twentieth century. Through the primary documents I show a story, not of victimhood, but of triumph and perseverance. Students rallied together and stood up to those individuals who were trying to remove their culture from them. Parents rallied together and responded strongly to any mistreatment that was shown to their children. By looking at their experiences through resistance and resilience theories, we understand that Indian people were adapting and

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<sup>24</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428 "*Letter from Superintendent Spears to the superintendent at the Chicago Warehouse on November 8, 1916*".

RG75, Correspondence 1917, Box 428 "*Letter from Superintendent Taylor to Cato Sells on August 15, 1917*".

RG75, November Correspondence 1917, Box 430 "*Letter from Superintendent Coon to Mr. Frank L. Crone on November 5, 1917*".

RG 75, Misc. Correspondence 1917-1918, folder 1 of 2, Box 430 "*Letter from Superintendent Caldwell to Mrs. H.H. Humphreys on April 16, 1918*".

RG 75, Decimal Correspondence 1915-1938, Box 427 "*Letter from Superintendent Padgett to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs on February 27, 1921*".

creating ways to exist during a period when the dominant society was determined to not only destroy their culture, but to place them on the lower rungs of a racialized society.

### **The road to the off-reservation boarding school**

It is rather rare to find a relationship as unique and complex as the one that exists between the United States and its first inhabitants, American Indians. The first encounters between the two cultures had a profound effect on Native peoples and changed the course of history for all Indigenous nations involved. The Indigenous people would come to realize that the Europeans' hunger for land and resources could come in many shapes and sizes. The tools that Europeans and Euro-Americans employed to gain Native land ranged from overt physical force and even attempted annihilation to the less violent, but equally genocidal ideologies of assimilation. As David Adams noted, the threat that White people posed to Natives and their cultures "...came in many forms: smallpox, missionaries, Conestoga wagons, barbed wire, and smoking locomotives. And in the end, it came in the form of schools."<sup>25</sup> While there were many types of schools - mission schools, day schools, on-reservation boarding schools - none of them would compare to the cultural threat inherent in the creation of the off-reservation boarding school. "There, the battle for the hearts and minds of Native America was fought, and Indigenous children were on the front lines as students in federal schools."<sup>26</sup>

The evolution of the off-reservation boarding school stemmed from centuries of European/Euro-American experimentation with different methods of assimilating Indian

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<sup>25</sup> David Wallace Adams. *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* [Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995], 5.

<sup>26</sup> Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011], 52.

people through education. The first notions of teaching Native peoples to become “civilized” emerged with mission schools of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and would continue on through the nineteenth century; in some areas mission schools exist today. These schools laid out many of the fundamental ideas which federally funded Indian boarding schools would later incorporate. The ideology of “civilization” was at the core of all educational schemas. In *Education for Extinction*, historian David Adams suggests that this ideology functioned at several levels. He explains:

On one level it operated as assumption; philanthropists simply assumed that because Indian ways differed from white ways, they must be less civilized. On another level, it served as a legitimizing rationale for the hegemonic relationship that had come to characterize Indian-white relations...it served as compelling justification for dispossessing Indians of their land. Finally, it was prescriptive. It told philanthropists what Indians must become...and to what end they should be educated.<sup>27</sup>

Missionaries invaded Indigenous societies to spread their religions to a people they believed to be uncivilized and lacking an “appropriate” belief system. The mission schools were meant to indoctrinate Native people with Christianity. Teachings ranged from how to cleanse one’s body to how to discipline one’s child, all according to European modes of conduct. The early mission schools focused on teaching adults and children. The strong emphasis on the education of Native children would only emerge later with the establishment of on- and off-reservation boarding schools.

A strong supporter of Indian education through religious training during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was Thomas J. McKenney, the man who would become the first superintendent of the United States Office of Indian Affairs in 1824. McKenney lobbied Congress for

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<sup>27</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 12-13.

government funding to be granted to missionaries in their pursuit of “civilizing” Indian peoples. In 1819, the United States Congress passed the Indian Civilization Fund Act to “provide financial support to religious groups and other interested individuals willing to live among and teach Indians. Ten thousand dollars a year was authorized...in addition to money for education provided to tribes by treaties ‘for the purpose of providing against the further decline and final extinction of Indian tribes....’”<sup>28</sup> The act was repealed in 1873 and by the close of the nineteenth century mission schools had fallen out of favor. A contributing factor to the demise of church-run schools was Congress’ strong resolve to maintain the constitutional separation between church and state.<sup>29</sup>

Policy makers now focused their attention on three institutions that would be the key to solving the “Indian problem”- day schools, on-reservation boarding schools, and off-reservation boarding schools. In part, day schools emerged from treaties that existed between the United States government and Indian people. In the Fort Laramie treaty of 1868, Article VII states:

In order to insure the civilization of the Indians entering into this treaty, the necessity of education is admitted, especially of such of them as are or may be settled on said agricultural reservations, and they, therefore, pledge themselves to compel their children, male and female, between the ages of six and sixteen years, to attend school, and it is hereby made the duty of the agent for said Indians to see that this stipulation is strictly complied with; and the United States agrees that for every thirty children between said ages, who can be induced or compelled to attend school, a house shall be provided, and a teacher competent to teach the elementary branches of an English education shall be furnished, who will reside among said Indians and faithfully discharge his or her duties as a teacher. The provisions of this article to continue for not less than twenty years.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder. *American Indian Education: A History* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004], 43.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 128-129.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/four/ftlaram.htm> (Retrieved 5/24/12).



Day schools were deemed to be the least effective in ridding Native people of their cultures and tribal life ways. These schools, typically located on the outskirts of Native villages, were supposed to serve as “educational outposts of civilization.”<sup>31</sup> The idea behind them was that during the day children would attend the schools to learn English and receive “proper” training in a “civilized” life. The hope was that at night the children would return to their parents and pass on all that they had learned in the schools. The reality was that children were returning to their homes without giving a second thought to what they had learned in school. Those in power came to believe that familial and cultural influences would have to be limited if they were ever to succeed in completely assimilating Indian children. The solution to this problem came in the form of on- and off-reservation boarding schools where children would spend several months out of the year away from their families.

By 1890, most American Indians were concentrated on reservations which were under direct control of the United States government. As reservation life was often hard due to extremely limited resources, economics frequently played a part in the parents’ decision to send their children to schools. In effect, many Native parents sent their children to a school that would feed and clothe them, while hopefully giving their children an education that would benefit them in the future.<sup>32</sup> On-reservation boarding schools, located directly on the reservation, had emerged in the 1870s and would be the most promising method, in the eyes of policy makers, for assimilating Natives into the dominant white society. The schools ran on half-day cycles - half of the day was spent teaching children the basic academic subjects while the other half was spent on industrial

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<sup>31</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 15.

training. On-reservation schools operated on the assumption that industrial training was an essential factor in the assimilation process. The prevailing belief of this era was that Native people were not individualistic enough and that many Native societies were too egalitarian and oriented to collective goals, an idea that was quite foreign to Euro-Americans. There was little room for individualism among Indian people, and individualism is what white policy makers stressed during the assimilation period. A goal of the Indian schools was to develop that individualistic mentality. Adams, summarizing the sentiments of the Superintendent of Indian Schools John Oberly in 1888, explains:

...a major objective of Indian schools was to wean the student from 'the degrading communism of tribal-reservation system' and to imbue him 'with the exalting egotism of American civilization, so that he will say 'I' instead of 'We,' and 'This is mine,' instead of 'This is ours.'<sup>33</sup>

However, it quickly became apparent that on-reservation schools would be affected by the same problem that mission schools and day schools had experienced - the close proximity to the children's family and other tribal members. What is noteworthy is that all these school types existed roughly at the same time; mission and day schools, on-reservation and off-reservation boarding schools were overlapping institutions that struggled to figure out the best way to fully assimilate Indian children. It was becoming clear to those in power that, in order to stop this "degrading communism of tribal-reservation system," they needed to move the children as far away as possible from their families. In effect, off-reservation boarding schools would be created and designed to be efficient tools in what was nothing less than an attempt at cultural genocide.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 22-23.

The success of the first off-reservation boarding school, Carlisle Industrial Indian School, led to a string of openings of other off-reservation boarding schools around the country; twenty-four schools were erected between 1879-1902.<sup>34</sup> Lt. Richard Henry Pratt, Carlisle's founder, used the school as an experiment to show government officials that removing Indian children as far as possible from their communities was the surest road to the complete assimilation of Indian people. Government officials became convinced that these schools would be the perfect vehicle for their assimilationist policies. Adams states that the prevailing belief was that, "Only by attending boarding school...could '*savage institutions*', outlooks, and sympathies be rendered extinct. Only by attending boarding schools could Indian youth, stripped bare of their tribal heritage, take to heart the '*inspiring lessons*' of white civilization."<sup>35</sup> A solution to the so-called "Indian problem" appeared to be on the horizon with the creation of many off-reservation boarding schools. One of these schools would be the Bismarck Indian School located in Bismarck, North Dakota.

The off-reservation Indian boarding schools were created by the United States government in an effort to assimilate Native children into the dominant White society. These schools attempted to indoctrinate Indian children with Christian values and beliefs while simultaneously training Native boys and girls on how to become laborers or domestics. Tens of thousands of American Indian children were subjected to the boarding school experience between the late nineteenth and mid- twentieth centuries. Due to the complexities and often the horrors associated with these schools, many off-reservation boarding schools have been the subject of research for scholars around the

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<sup>34</sup> David Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 57.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

country. For the purposes of this thesis the most important contributions to the literature consist of David Wallace Adams' extensive overview of federally funded institutions in *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (1995), Scott Riney's analysis of Native student resistance in *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933* (1999), Brenda J. Child's work on the voice of Indian people in *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (2000), Jaqueline Fear-Segal's analytical race assessment in *White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation* (2007) and Cathleen D. Cahill's intense examination of the history of the Indian Service in *Federal Fathers & Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* (2011). While each monograph varies in how the scholar has arranged the story of the Indian boarding schools and the policies that enforced them, they all acknowledge and demonstrate that the education of Indian children was predicated on the ethnocentric assumption that American Indians were inferior to Euro-Americans and needed to be "civilized."<sup>36</sup> Thus, this supposed inferiority justified the creation of off-reservation boarding schools as well as the need for Native children to become Americanized.

*Education for Extinction* was one of the first comprehensive examinations to explore all types of federally funded Indian boarding schools in the United States. David Adams took on this project with an understanding that there were no studies available

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<sup>36</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education or Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* [Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995], ix. Scott Riney, *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999], 9. Cathleen D. Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011], 6. Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007], xiv. Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998], 9.

that addressed the complex issues of boarding schools as a whole. While there had been individual accounts of off-reservation boarding schools such as Robert A. Trennert's *Phoenix Indian School*,<sup>37</sup> Sally Hyer's *One House, One Voice, One Heart: Native American Education at the Sante Fe Indian School*<sup>38</sup> and Donal F. Lindsay's *Indians at Hampton Institute, 1877-1923*,<sup>39</sup> there had not been any extensive work done on the entirety of the boarding school era. This would not be an easy task as Adams discovered for "the project turned out to be a much bigger undertaking than originally anticipated."<sup>40</sup> The author wished to examine the boarding school era as a whole, rather than focus on a particular institution and, therefore, was faced with the large amount of scholarship that existed that had some bearing on a particular aspect of his subject. Generalizations by the author also became a concern as he realized that at times he had to make assumptions about certain areas where little scholarship existed. For instance, at the time there was little written on the women who joined the Indian Service; indeed, Cathleen Cahill's intensive examination of the Indian Service, where the role of women in the Indian Service, was carefully examined, would not emerge until sixteen years later.

Adams framed his work around four central themes: Civilization, Education, Response and Causatum. In publications that followed Adams' work, specifically those that inform this thesis, these themes became the common template for historians seeking to tell the various stories of the boarding school era. *Civilization* is a central concept when one is examining the "instruments of acculturation" that were applied to Indian

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<sup>37</sup> Robert A. Trennert, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* [Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press], 1988.

<sup>38</sup> Sally Hyer, *One House, One Voice, One Heart: Native American Education at the Santé Fe Indian School* [Sante Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press], 1990.

<sup>39</sup> Donal F. Lindsay, *Indians at Hampton Institute, 1877-1923* [Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press], 1994.

<sup>40</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction*, ix.

children. Young Native boys and girls were forced to adopt White ways of thinking and living because their own tribal cultures were deemed inferior and primitive by the dominant society. The notion of “civilizing” Indian people is what drove Euro-Americans to erect building after building in their attempt to stamp out Native cultures. *Education* is a key theme when discussing boarding schools, because it was the primary vehicle employed by reformers in their assimilation efforts. The classrooms, the teachings, and the structure of the institutes were all designed with one goal in mind: the Americanization of Native children. Academic education was made available to the countless students, but it paled in comparison to the emphasis that was placed on vocational training. At best, the students would leave most boarding schools with a fourth or fifth grade education. The third category of analysis, the *response* of students and their families, is at the heart of most boarding school stories’ and it is the heart of this thesis, for it is here that one sees the reactions of Native people to these schools. The response of many students and parents to boarding schools came in the form of both active and passive resistance as they dealt with the institutions and their assimilationist policies. *Causatum*, or the consequences of the boarding schools, is a territory that is still under-examined for a variety of reasons. The United States has not approached the realities of Indian boarding schools in the same manner as our neighbor, Canada. Canadian historian John S. Milloy dubbed the residential school era in Canada a “national crime” in his work *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879-1986*.<sup>41</sup> Milloy shows that the system was severely underfunded and that often abuse and neglect was rampant in the schools. In 2008, the Prime Minister

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<sup>41</sup> John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879-1986* [Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press], 1999.

of Canada, the Right Honourable Stephen Harper, made an open apology to the former First Nation students who had attended Indian Residential Schools in Canada. What occurred within the walls of most boarding schools is a crucial part of the damaging phenomenon known as *intergenerational trauma*, or *soul wound*, a phenomenon which scholars such as Eduardo Duran have shown affected not only the survivors of boarding schools but also the generations that followed. As Duran has argued, part of this historical trauma is a direct consequence of the abuse and indoctrination that the young children endured during the boarding school era.<sup>42</sup> Currently, there are several scholars working to shed further light on intergenerational trauma as they feel it is a phenomenon that has been overlooked for too long.<sup>43</sup> Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart<sup>44</sup> is one such scholar currently examining the legacy of historical trauma and grief and is considered one of the prominent Native voices working with intergenerational trauma. Denise Lajimodiere tells of her personal experience with intergenerational trauma that stemmed from her father's experience with boarding schools.<sup>45</sup> David Adams' work is certainly the key text that many scholars working in the field of American Indians and the boarding school experience have utilized. His work on the resistance of students and parents changed the view that many had of the boarding school experience and prepared the way for forward thinking scholars such as Brave Heart.

Writing a few years after the publication of Adams' landmark study, Scott Riney attempted to focus on the interactions of the students and parents within one off-

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<sup>42</sup> Eduardo Duran, *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indians and Other Native Peoples* [New York: Teachers College Press], 2006.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.boardingschoolhealingproject.org/> [Retrieved on 5/15/2012].

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ssw/faculty/profiles/braveheart.html> [Retrieved on 5/31/2012].

<sup>45</sup> Denise Lajimodiere, [In Press] "My Healing Journey" in *Wicazo Sa Review*, 2012.

reservation boarding school in his work, *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933*.

Riney gives a historical overview of the school, highlighting the school's strengths and weaknesses. Utilizing the themes developed by Adams, Riney tells the story of this small off-reservation boarding school in South Dakota. Arranging his work topically, the author offers a data filled book which is, among other things, about how the school was started, who the teachers were, who the students were and how they, as well as their parents, responded to the boarding school experience. Riney proposes that scholars in the field of boarding schools often present the countless Native students that attended the schools as mere victims. While he understands that students often were the victims of the assimilationist policies, he also argues that these students were not passive victims; rather, they turned a largely negative situation to their advantage in a variety of ways. During an era when Native people were fighting for the preservation of their lands and customs, indeed for their very existence, Riney proposes that "Indians often sought out the school and initiated interactions with it in pursuit of their own goals."<sup>46</sup> It is clear that Riney is looking to demonstrate the human agency of the students, and rightly so. His approach helps one to understand that often students, and their parents, were very determined individuals who did not passively accept the dominant culture's often forced assimilation efforts. Unfortunately, while the author suggests that through students' voices we will get a better understanding of students initiating responses from the school, there are actually very few student and parent voices to be heard in the book.

Perhaps even more to the point, the voices that are heard deserve a deeper analysis than Riney has offered. In a chapter entitled "*Providing for the Children*," the

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<sup>46</sup> Scott Riney, *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999], 221.



author uses an interaction between a student, the parent and superintendents to showcase the importance of nutrition at the Rapid City Indian School.<sup>47</sup> If Riney had been willing to “read beyond the words,”<sup>48</sup> he might have seen that this situation indicated not only the importance of nutrition, but also the strong, virtually automatic dismissal of parents’ concerns by boarding school officials. The example also shows the strong role that Native parents sought to play in the lives of their children at the schools. One thing that was abundantly clear was the notion that parents would not stand for any mistreatment of their children. Historian Brenda Child explores this notion to a much fuller extent than Riney.

In *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940*, Child approaches the topic of the boarding schools from the perspective of the students. “Letters are at the heart of this story,”<sup>49</sup> she asserts and indeed they are. While the author covers necessary topics involved when discussing boarding schools, such as assimilation policies, the militaristic structure of schools, and the chronic underfunding, she also focuses heavily on the letters of Native students and their parents. Child’s focus is on schools of the upper Midwest - the Flandreau Indian School of South Dakota, the Haskell Institute in Kansas and a few others. The letters that Child uses are spread throughout the book to tell the story of both the students and parents. It is through the letters that we hear firsthand why the students ran away from these schools. Often it was due to homesickness, but Child uses the letters to document that student flight often stemmed from mistreatment at the hands of teachers or superintendents, the physical labor they

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, eds., *Reading Beyond the Words: Contexts for Native History* [Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press], 2003.

<sup>49</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, xii.

were forced to perform and even dissatisfaction with the quality, type and quantity of school food. What is more interesting, and quite new to the field in 2000, was Child's approach to the parents' response to their child's treatment. The letters that parents wrote to the superintendents speak volumes about the strategies that they were forming in response to the schools. This thesis will employ the same strategy of focusing on the response of parents and students as well, for it is their experiences that allow us to view the boarding school era through a new lens. Stereotypes of the students and parents often tend to portray them as victims; this thesis, however, will show that they were negotiating complex situations and were anything but passive participants.

Child's argument is that parents and students were linked together, even though separated by miles, through oral communications and through the various letters they wrote to each other, letters that were often widely circulated and whose contents were shared throughout entire communities and schools.<sup>50</sup> This "moccasin telegraph,"<sup>51</sup> as it is often referred to, became the main method of communication for the reservation community and the children. This informal communication technique, which stemmed from either visits to the schools or from letters going in and out of the schools, allowed parents to find out, often from other parents, what was going on with their child - were they sick, had they run away, were they being confined, were they excelling at something - these were all matters that should have been communicated directly to the parents, but typically were not. Thus, the moccasin telegraph became one of the most important sources of information for many parents and what was conveyed in the letters provides scholars with some evidence of what the experience was like for the students. It is

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*.

through the letters that parents sent to the schools, and also through the letters that students sent home, that we see how involved many parents chose to be in the school life of their child. The idea that parents were so disregarded by school officials in regard to what was happening with their children is unsettling, but it is also very revealing about the practices of most boarding school officials.

In *White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation*, published seven years after Child's study, Jacqueline Fear-Segal sheds even more new light on the scholarly discussion regarding the boarding school era. Like many scholars, the author uncovers the core agenda of complete cultural annihilation that lay behind the assimilation policies. The book begins with a discussion of the framework of Indian education. Utilizing both Native and non-Native theories regarding the education of Indian people, Fear-Segal engages the readers in a discussion of federal policy that was founded on racist ideologies. As the author argues, the creation of Indian boarding schools came at a time of intense racial-debate in the United States. Fear-Segal explains, "The United States was struggling to find a way to replace the brutal rules and laws of slavery, which had controlled political and social relations between two socially constructed and defined races since colonial time and become embedded in the institutions and psyche of the new nation."<sup>52</sup> As a result of this, the author reminds us that "Indian schools are integral not only to a story of land theft, ethnocide, and cultural erasure but also to a pattern of progressive racialization as yet unexplored in scholarship on Indian schools."<sup>53</sup> Focusing on the schools that laid the framework for all off-

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<sup>52</sup> Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007], xiii.

<sup>53</sup> Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club*, xiv.

reservation boarding schools that followed, Fear-Segal examines the Carlisle Institute and Hampton Agricultural School to highlight her argument.

In her work on Captain Henry R. Pratt and the Carlisle Indian School she argues that Pratt was not a “friend of the Indians,” as his gravestone claimed, but rather a racist ideologue who used Native children to further his own intellectual and social agenda. Examining Pratt’s personal philosophies and pedagogies as they related to Indian education and comparing these to his carefully cultivated national persona, the author shows that, despite Pratt’s anti-racist claims, he kept his school racially segregated in all aspects. Like Adams, Riney and Child, Fear-Segal not only examines the complexities that existed within the boarding schools - separating children from their families, the attempted erasure of Native cultures, responses of students and parents -, but she brings a new and unique issue to the discussion by focusing solely on an area that has often been left unexamined by many historians, the intense racialization of American Indian people that occurred within boarding schools. It has remained largely unquestioned by scholars because the notion that assimilation policies were driven by ethnocentric ideologies and racism has been so widely accepted that it has been assumed that it needs no further examination. Fear-Segal begs to differ for she argues that this concept needs to be examined in depth, for it is the fundamental foundation that created the status and situation of Native people.

*Federal Fathers & Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933*<sup>54</sup> rounds out this brief literature review. While Cathleen D. Cahill’s work

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<sup>54</sup> Cathleen D. Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press], 2011.

does not focus solely on boarding schools, she provides useful and important information on the Indian Service, which oversaw all federally funded boarding schools. The book looks at the history of the Indian Service from the period of Reconstruction to the beginning of the New Deal. During this time period the policy objectives of the United States government regarding Natives was the assimilation of Indian people into the dominant society. Even though several scholars have examined many of the complex issues surrounding boarding schools, one subject that had not been touched on was the role played by Native employees who worked at these institutions. Their presence at these schools brings up a variety of issues. Why were there such large numbers of Indian employees at these schools? What was their response to the assimilationist mission of the schools? Did they have an effect on the students? What Cahill argues, among other things, is that, while these Native employees at the schools were supposed to enforce the White agenda, they often became allies of the students. For example, at the Bismarck Indian School, a Native employee, Walter J. Leith, "...worked with the students against other employees..."<sup>55</sup> and was not "...a success as disciplinarian..."<sup>56</sup> as stated in a letter from the superintendent to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Ironically enough, while the Native employees were supposed to represent the success of assimilation, they often proved that one's heritage could not be stamped out.

In *Federal Fathers & Mothers*, Cahill also examined the large number of women employed in the Indian Service and how the role of these women was to enforce Euro-American gender roles. The idea was that the employees of the Indian Service would

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<sup>55</sup> RG 75, July Correspondence 1917, Box 430 "Letter from Superintendent Taylor to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on July 10, 1917".

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

become the “fathers” and “mothers” to Indian people in showing them the road to assimilation. In the boarding schools, the employees were to be even more overt mother and father figures to the children. The superintendent was to be seen as the great father watching over the children, while other employees, particularly the matron and teachers, were to be seen as the mothers to all the young children who attended the schools. Government officials felt that Native children’s real parents were “inappropriate” and needed to be replaced with figures that would guide them to “appropriate” behavior in the White world. Cahill explains, “Policy makers argued that boarding schools would replace the negative influence of a child’s Indian parents with the positive influence of white parent figures.”<sup>57</sup> This largely explains why so many parents were rarely told news by the government officials of what was happening with their children at schools; the “real” parents were at the schools with the children.

The federal boarding schools, and particularly the off-reservation schools, have cast a dark shadow on the history of the United States. In looking at the works of the scholars discussed above, we are able to gather an understanding of the complex issues that are involved in discussing these schools. In Adams’ work one sees the central themes that should be included when researching boarding schools, while Riney’s intensive research into the Rapid City Indian School provides important insights into how these off-reservation schools operated. Child approaches the boarding schools from the Native perspective and her work focuses solely on the voices of Indian people. Indeed, her work deals most directly with matters that will be discussed in this thesis which, using the Native perspective, will provide a new view of the boarding school experience,

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<sup>57</sup> Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers*, 54.

that of the parents and the children who attended the Bismarck Indian School. Fear-Segal suggests that there needs to be a more in-depth discussion of the racist ideologies that spurred on these schools in order to fully understand them. In looking at the very service that oversaw all the schools, Cahill has brought to light new information regarding Indian employees in the Indian Service and the effects that those employees had on schools. While their approaches vary, these scholars all have contributed important information and insight on off-reservation boarding schools.

In my approach to the resistance strategies of the Bismarck Indian School I utilized not only the primary documents of the school but also secondary sources that examine off-reservation boarding schools. The discussion that follows will show a unique situation that occurred in the early twentieth century at a regional off-reservation boarding school in North Dakota; Native parents and their children responded dramatically to a severely underfunded and unstable institution. What follows is a story of resistance and resilience on the part of the parents and their children to an institution that was created to destroy their culture as Indian people. While determined to eradicate their culture, the school also simultaneously meant to create a generation of Native people that were to become laborers for White people. In the years under discussion, 1916-1921, it is important to also remember what was occurring in the United States. The Progressive Era affected Native people greatly in terms of how the dominant society would regard Indian people. During this era the assimilation policy changed from wanting to integrate Native people into White society into making sure that Native people were not equal, but rather the workers for the dominant society. Historians Fred E. Hoxie and Cathleen D. Cahill remind us of the damages that Progressive Era ideology brought

to Native people and how the assimilation policy changed. Hoxie states, “The key to assimilation was no longer the act of becoming a part of an undifferentiated, ‘civilized’ society; instead, assimilation had come to mean knowing one’s place and fulfilling one’s role.”<sup>58</sup> Cahill echoes Hoxie when she notes, “The first decades of the twentieth century saw policy makers pull back from a vision of full citizenship for Indians that included landholding and political participation; instead, they turned to a new goal of making Indians into a racially marked working class.”<sup>59</sup> During this time period the off-reservation boarding schools would adhere to this shift from at least the possibility of equality to permanent subordination, especially concerning how much emphasis was placed on vocational training and how much manual labor the students were doing at the schools.

What follows is a study of Native students, and their parents, who resisted an institution that was created to remove their identity as Indian people. This resistance emerged through community organization led by the parents, student collaboration, and student defiance. Their stories show that Indian people were not merely victims of the boarding schools, but were actively and consciously responding to mistreatment on all levels. It is also a study which shows that Native people never accepted the larger society’s characterization of their culture and lifeways as inferior.

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<sup>58</sup> Fred E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984], 242.

<sup>59</sup> Cathleen D. Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011], 234-235.



## CHAPTER II

### RESILIENT PARENTS

*“...just as good as any other school...”*

On May 21, 1916 Samuel Newman, of Elbowoods, ND, wrote to the superintendent of the Bismarck Indian School, John S. Spears, to clear up confusion regarding his daughter Ermel and a previous letter that Mr. Newman had written to the school.

I am in receipt of your letter and in reply will say that I did not mean to have Ermel transfer to some other school, I did not know that a pupil had to complete the sixth grade before they could leave the school...I was anxious to know if Ermel's time was up, However, I am satisfied now to learn that she must stay in school until she finishes the sixth grade. I know I must have her in some school and I know Bismarck is just as good as any other school. I did not mean to take her away from Bismarck Ind [sic] School in any way shape or form. I do not wish you to think for a minute that I am trying to create any trouble on your part or mine, I realize that I must have my children in some school. Thanking you for your information and all past favors I beg to remain, Yours Very Respectfully<sup>60</sup>

Mr. Newman, a member of the Three Affiliated Tribes on the Fort Berthold Reservation, like most Native parents who had children in off-reservation boarding schools, rarely knew exactly when, or if, their children would be returning home. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a difficult and confusing time for American Indian people. After being forced off their lands, compelled to give up preferred ways of living, forced onto inadequate reservations, and subjected to the indignities and cultural horrors

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<sup>60</sup> RG75, folder 3 of 7, Box 427 “Samuel Newman’s letter to Superintendent Spears on May 21, 1916”.

associated with the assimilation policy of the United States government, Indian people were entering a new era of assimilation with the off-reservation boarding schools. On top of all of this was the dominant society's desire, fueled by the prevailing thoughts during the Progressive Era, to place Indian people on a lower level of society. Hoxie explains, "...Indians found themselves defined and treated as peripheral people- partial members of the commonwealth - and a web of attitudes, beliefs, and practices soon appeared to bind them in a state of economic dependence and political powerlessness."<sup>61</sup> Off-reservation boarding schools would speed along this process and by the early twentieth century it had become an expectation for many Native parents to send their children to these institutions. Samuel Newman's letter is an example of just one of the many resistance strategies that parents created in regard to their children going to the Bismarck Indian School. Mr. Newman placates to the superintendent by stressing that he doesn't want to cause trouble while simultaneously indicating, indirectly, the problem of not knowing the Indian Service regulations regarding school attendance, and, more seriously, when his child is allowed to return home. For some parents, the strategy was embedded in the manner in which they spoke to administrators, be-it the reservation's agent or the boarding school's superintendent, and for other parents the strategies employed would involve a more hands on approach. The construction of this letter gives one an inkling of the uncertainties plaguing parents of children in off-reservation boarding schools, but it also allows us to get a sense of the strategies that parents created in response to the schools.

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<sup>61</sup> Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1800-1920* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984], xix.

If we focus on the response of parents as active participants in their child's lives at the schools, particularly at the Bismarck Indian School, we get a greater understanding of the boarding school experience for the children and the parents. Historian Brenda Child suggests that this is an area that is treaded on lightly by other historians, partly because it is logical to assume that the distance the schools put between the parent and child accomplished its goal of severing familial ties, but also, and most importantly, because many scholars do not fully understand the meaning of the American Indian family unit. "Distance," states Child, "caused hardship, distress, and unimagined miseries but failed to extinguish the very real influence parents and family continued to exert over the lives of students."<sup>62</sup> The records of the Bismarck Indian School help to illustrate the very profound influence that the parents maintained over their children's lives. Letters, as well as school memos, show us that the parents of the many children who attended the Bismarck Indian School were anything but passive individuals who accepted their child's fate at the school. As Child elucidates, "Schooling imposed a new and unwelcome distance on Indian family relationships, but letters reveal that parents and other relatives were uncompromising in their determination to be involved in many aspects of their children's lives."<sup>63</sup> The letters, as well as the actions, of the parents of most of the children who passed through the Bismarck Indian School would prove them to be strong-minded individuals who took an active role in the boarding school life of their children, particularly when it came to mistreatment at the hands of school officials. As this chapter will demonstrate, above all else it was the mistreatment of their children that parents would not tolerate. We will also see that the superintendents of the Bismarck Indian

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<sup>62</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 27.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

School felt themselves to be quite helpless in the face of the strong influence that many parents exercised over their children. This helplessness led one superintendent to actually recommend the school be closed completely.

Native parents' resistance to off-reservation boarding schools was expressed in both direct and indirect methods. Directly, they would often hide their children from the reservation agent, refuse to send their children to the schools, and speak quite honestly with the superintendents regarding their opinions of the schools. Indirectly, parents would show their resistance by not discouraging their children from running away from the school, by continuing to teach their language and culture at home, and by writing countless letters to the superintendents of the boarding schools to express their frustrations. Many parents created strategies of resistance that are best understood through a careful examination of their choice of words when writing to the schools inquiring about their children. Many letters that came through the Bismarck Indian School show how involved the parents wanted to remain with their children and their education. The letters often show the strong position the parents took in regard to their children's well-being. By the early twentieth century the parents of those children who were attending off-reservation boarding school most likely had gone through the boarding school process themselves. However, it is important to note that not every American Indian was a part of the off-reservation boarding school system. "At the turn of the twentieth century 7,430 of 26,451 students attended off-reservation boarding schools, a little more than one fourth of all students. The number of students in boarding schools remained fairly stable throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century.

In 1925 only 8,542 of 65,493 students attended.”<sup>64</sup> Regardless of the seemingly small number of students involved, the impact of the off-reservation schools would have a tremendous effect on Indian people and their communities. Whether they had knowledge from personal experience at off-reservation boarding schools or had heard stories from their community members, parents knew, for the most part, what their children could expect at the schools. This helps to explain why they became active participants in determining where their children went to school and what the school was like. Mrs. M. J. LaCounte of the Fort Peck Reservation in Froid, Montana, was a parent who was determined to ensure that her children went to a good school. She wrote the following to the superintendent of the Bismarck Indian School:

Sir-

I would like to know if theres a Rome [sic] Catholic church and prist [sic] also. And would like to find out how the children dress and what kind of food they have. I would like to find out for how many years you take them and who pays there fair for them to go down there. I’ve send my children to Ft. Totten N.D. and it don’t seem to be a very good school it’s a pretty rough school and they don’t have very good food. Please write us soon possibly.<sup>65</sup>

This letter is a striking example of a Native parent taking control of her child’s life at an off-reservation boarding school. Mrs. LaCounte wanted her children out of Ft. Totten Indian School, that is clear, but she also wanted to make sure that the children would go to a school that was better suited to their needs and wants. She actively explored the possibility of enrollment in another school with the expectations that her children would be fed and clothed properly, and would also be instilled with Roman Catholic values.

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<sup>64</sup> Birgit Hans, “The History of Education” in *Native Peoples of the Northern Plains: An Interdisciplinary Introduction to American Indian Studies* [Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 2009], 160.

<sup>65</sup> RG 75, Correspondence Oct. 1917, Box 430.

One of the interesting aspects of this letter is the mother's inquiry concerning the religious teaching affiliated with the school. Often when discussing off-reservation boarding schools, the different denominations to which the children adhered, do not come up, especially when discussing the active role that parents took. We usually think of Indian children as being forced to abandon tribal practices in favor of Christianity as was so often the case in the nineteenth century; however, there were Native families who, as a part of the assimilation process, had already released that part of their culture and accepted the dominant religion of white society - at least to a certain extent. Thus, it would seem natural for a parent to want to know if the priest or church at the Bismarck Indian School was Roman Catholic. By 1900, a majority of Native people, particularly on the Northern Plains, were at least nominally Christians. In 1917, among the female students at Bismarck, there were documented 40 Catholics, 11 Presbyterians, 5 Episcopalians and 1 who belonged to "no Church." The Catholic presence had been, and continues to be, particularly strong on the American Indian reservations in the Midwest; therefore, the Christian affiliations at Bismarck Indian School are not surprising.

Aside from inquiring about the religious status of the school, parents also wrote to get further information regarding Indian Service policies that affected off-reservation boarding schools. This was particularly noticeable in the late nineteen teens, for in 1917, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Cato Sells issued a new "Declaration of Policy" regarding Indian people. In this new policy, Sells declared that the time had come for Indian people to free themselves from the confinement of the United States government. Letters went out to all superintendents of off-reservation boarding schools underlining the new rules regarding Indian students under the umbrella of the Declaration of Policy,

whereby parents would pay, if possible, the per capita cost of any student enrolled in a government-run boarding school. Rule number 6, to be observed by all superintendents, agents, and other Indian Service officials, urged the

Elimination of ineligible pupils from the Government Indian schools.- In many of our boarding schools Indian children are being educated at Government expense whose parents are amply able to pay for their education and have public school facilities at or near their homes. Such children shall not hereafter be enrolled in Government Indian schools supported by gratuity appropriations, except on payment of actual per capita cost and transportation. These rules are hereby made effective, and all Indian Bureau administrative officers at Washington and in the field will be governed accordingly. This is a new and far-reaching declaration of policy. It means the dawn of a new era in Indian administration. It means that the competent Indian will no longer be treated as half ward and half citizen. It means reduced appropriations by the Government and more self-respect and independence for the Indian. It means the ultimate absorption of the Indian race into the body politic of the Nation. It means, in short, the beginning of the end of the Indian problem. In carrying out this policy, I cherish the hope that all real friends of the Indian race will lend their aid and hearty cooperation.<sup>66</sup>

Clearly, the government not only wanted to stop spending money on Native people, but they wanted the “absorption of the Indian race” into the dominant society so more land could be accessible to the United States government. The policy would speed this process along by deciding whether Indian people were “competent” enough to manage their own land, which in turn would actually remove land from their ownership. The notion of the “Indian Problem” has its ethnocentric roots in *the Cherokee Nation vs. Georgia* court case of 1831, a fundamental case in the canon of federal Indian law. This key court case determined that the various nations of American Indian people were

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<sup>66</sup> Report of the Commissioner to Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior, Fiscal year ending 1917 <http://images.library.wisc.edu/History/EFacs/CommRep/AnnRep1517/reference/history.annrep1517.i0003.pdf> (retrieved March 12, 2012).

“domestic dependent nations” and that the United States would be responsible for them. Thus, the government created their role of guardian and Indian people as their wards, a relationship similar to that of the parent and child. Arguably, one of the most devastating pieces of legislation that affected Native people in the nineteenth century was the General Allotment Act, also known as the Dawes Act, of 1887. This destructive piece of legislation removed 2/3 of Indian owned land from tribal control, tore families apart and created an increase of Native dependency on the United States government.<sup>67</sup> The goal behind allotment was to not only increase assimilation of Native people but to gain control of Native owned land for the benefit of white settlers. The “beginning to the end of the Indian problem” is in itself a problematic statement because it puts responsibility in the wrong place. The idea that Native people were “problems” for the United States government was a creation of the dominant society in order to justify the continual taking of Native land. The “white problem” for Natives were policies, such as the New Declaration, which were seemingly created on the spur of the moment in an attempt to ensure that the attitude towards Indian people always maintained them as inferior, thus justifying the taking of Native land. Three years later “turning the Indians loose,” as Cato Sells stated, did not have the desired effect that the United States government had hoped for and the policy was suspended.<sup>68</sup> The sudden shifts in policies and reforms by the United States government made life extremely confusing and frustrating for Indian people, especially when they often found out about new policies from other sources.

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<sup>67</sup> Gregory Gagnon, “Colonialism-Assimilation” in *Native Peoples of the Northern Plains: An Interdisciplinary Introduction to American Indian Studies* [Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 2009], 170.

<sup>68</sup> Report of the Department of the Interior 1921, Volume 2.



Mrs. Robert Goudreau of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in Selfridge, North Dakota, took matters into her own hands when news of the new regulations, particularly the new Declaration of Policy that had passed in the Office of Indian Affairs, had spread to her reservation. She wrote to the supervisor in charge of the Bismarck Indian School, Superintendent Coons, asking,

How is the school regulations this year? I have two boys here I want to send up there, one is my boy the other is the son of John Rosebush and wife, the wife is a member of the Santee tribe from Minneapolis, he is I think half blood from what his father tells, the Supt of the Fort Yates school told me there was some new regulations this year, tuition to pay, this is what I want to find out on account of the Rosebush boy, he lives alone with his father in rather harsh circumstances, but this father says there must be some fund in the Treasury for the boy, if so if they could use that for tuition Please write me at once if you can take the boy My boys name is Robert Goudreau, the other boy George Rosebush. Let me hear at once. Oblige.<sup>69</sup>

A particularly interesting aspect of Mrs. Goudreau's letter is her strongly worded demand for information regarding the school and new policies. This parent is making the decision to send her children to the Bismarck Indian School, but is not doing so mindlessly. While parents often wrote to the school in a passive tone, with underlying hints of frustration, this woman was using an assertive tone, wanted answers "at once," and was bold enough to intimate that there was money in the government treasury for such situations. This approach was becoming more common with the parents of children in off-reservation boarding schools by the early years of the twentieth century. The parents were seeking more control over their circumstances and were attempting to exert more control over the affairs of their families. Why this young boy lived alone with his father and what the harsh circumstances were we don't know. Reservation life was often

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<sup>69</sup> RG 75, October Correspondence 1917, Box 430 "Letter from Mrs. Robert Goudreau to Superintendent Coon on October 11, 1917".

unforgiving in the early twentieth century, so to hear that a father needed his child to be sent away to survive is not surprising. It does confirm the findings of scholars such as Child and Riney that economics often played a role in the decision to send children to schools and that they often became a place of economic security for children; some came from dire circumstances, some were orphans, or there were those whose parents wanted them to get an education in the white world.<sup>70</sup> The parents and community members were negotiating complex circumstances in regard to their children going to the Bismarck Indian School, circumstance which involved complex economic and social considerations.

Occasionally, parents also wrote in a tone that conveyed how angry and frustrated they were with the actions, or inactions, of the school. Mr. Jerome Cotton Wood, from Cannonball, ND on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, wrote to the school after hearing about his son's enrollment in the United States Navy. He wrote:

I hear my son Asa has volunteered to enlist in the navy. If it is so I should have been notified and consent asked for as the boy is [a] minor. I signed contract for boy's enrollment in school their [sic] and I believe that he should be kept their [sic] until he finishes his schooling their [sic]. We will have money in a few days and we hope to visit the school shortly.<sup>71</sup>

Clearly upset about his son's decision, Mr. Cotton Wood also placed responsibility on the shoulders of the administrators who were supposed to be looking out for his son's best interests. Despite parents' efforts to stay informed about their child's life, often they were left wondering how their children were, and when, or even if, they were coming home. We see this in the story of Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation members Mr. and

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<sup>70</sup> Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press], 1998.

<sup>71</sup> RG75, Business Correspondence 1917, Box 432 "Letter from Jerome Cotton Wood to Superintendent Padgett on April 12, 1919".

Mrs. Fred Paul of St. John, North Dakota, and their children Mary and John. In 1916 a new reform out of the Indian Affairs Office required the Bismarck Indian School to only keep students up to the sixth grade; students who were above this grade were to be sent to other schools that enrolled higher grades. Mr. Paul wrote the school with questions and instructions.

Dear Sir:- We received your letter and the blank too for John Paul Well we want both of them to come home because I got another girl here that she wants to go over there to go to school and she is fifteen years old in the Eighth Grade and Mary Paul said that Clara and her couldn't go next year because there was no high school there and she said the highest grade in that school was the sixth grade and she will be in the first year high school next year. Clara will but if Mary pass she will be in the seventh grade. And we would like to know just how high that school is and so that she can't go if it is only as far as sixth grade she cannot go then. We will expect them to come home from 17<sup>th</sup> of June. Both of them John and Mary and if there is a high school the three next year we will be down there.<sup>72</sup>

Superintendent Spears, rather sympathetically, responded to Mr. Paul with regret that the children would not be able to enroll in the school.

I can say that the Commissioner has made a ruling that this school will not carry work beyond the sixth grade after this year, and as Mary will complete the sixth grade this year there will be no place for her here another year...I am sorry about this but I cannot help it. The rule was made since I took the children.<sup>73</sup>

What ensued over the next month was a series of back and forth correspondence between Superintendent Spears and the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation Indian agent, R.C. Craige. In his letter to Mr. Paul, Superintendent Spears inferred that Mary would "complete the sixth grade," but in his letter to the superintendent of Turtle Mountain he

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<sup>72</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428 "Letter from Fred Paul to Superintendent Spears on May 22, 1916".

<sup>73</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428 "Letter from Superintendent Spears to Fred Paul on May 26, 1916".

suggested that “her work in school is not what it should be to pass the sixth grade, and I doubt if she is ready for the seventh grade in a public school...”<sup>74</sup> This correspondence reveals a number of issues regarding the attitude of the schools towards the parents of the children.

The Indian Service felt that in order for complete “civilization” of Indian people those employed in the service would take on the new roles of “father” or “mother” to Native children at the boarding schools. As Cathleen Cahill put it, “Policy makers sought to transform Native peoples’ intimate, familial ties by creating a new set of relationships between the nation’s Indian ‘wards’ and government employees...who would guide them by offering examples of ‘civilized’ behavior.”<sup>75</sup> That Superintendent Spears did not discuss the larger problem of Mary and her education with the parents before Mr. Paul’s letter forced him to do so, reveals the lack of involvement they wanted the parents to have. The back and forth letters between the new “fathers” of these young children point out their sense of superiority; it was them, the Indian Service and the officials, and not the parents, who knew what was best for the children. The exchange also revolved around who should pay for Mary to come home. If Mary was to go home after the vacation months, which were from late May into early August, the fee would be paid by the Bismarck Indian School, but if she wished to leave during vacation, the superintendent felt it was the duty of the family to pay her way. As a continued goal of the boarding schools was to limit the communication that Native children had with their families, during vacation months they required parents to pay for the return of their children. Given the economic hardships facing many Native families on reservations in the early

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<sup>74</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428 “*Letter from Superintendent Spears to Superintendent Craig on June 5, 1916*”.

<sup>75</sup> Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers*, 6.

twentieth century this often was not a possibility, thus ensuring that many children had to remain at the school over the summer, which returns us to the story of the Pauls.

What is revealed is that Mr. Paul had already sent a registered letter containing money for Mary and John to return on the desired date, June 17<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Paul wrote to the school on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 6 days after they were to arrive, in a tone of desperation.

Dear sir, We are anxious to have both John and Mary to come home but we are tired of waiting every night for them to come home. Please send them home as soon as you can *we go to the depot every night* [emphasis added] they should been home all ready. We sent the money all ready We sent \$13 to Mary. We sent a register letter to her. she should got the letter long ago but there is no reason why they shouldn't come home. Wish they would start Monday and be home Tuesday. ans.soon. from Fred Paul.<sup>76</sup>

One can only imagine the heartache these parents felt every night as they made the journey to the train station, watched the train pull up and stretched their necks in an attempt to catch a glimpse of Mary and John exiting the train, an expectation which would end in disappointment. The Pauls clearly had reason to be upset; they had requested their children be sent home, they had sent the funds for their return and, yet, the children were still not with them. While Fred Paul was probably outraged about not knowing the whereabouts of his children, he could not convey that in his letter. Instead, Mr. Paul employed a conciliatory resistance approach, gently reminding the Superintendent that his children needed to be returned to him.

Uncertainty as to what was happening with the children in these boarding schools was not uncommon. Once the children left on their journey to the schools that would often be the last time parents saw them for several months, at times even years. One of the many purposes of the off-reservation boarding schools was to restrict the amount of

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<sup>76</sup> RG75,Correspondence 1916, Box 418 .

time that the children had around their families. The founder of the first federally funded off-reservation boarding school, Captain Richard Henry Pratt, viewed the separation of child and parent as the vital foundation of his experiment, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Historian Jacqueline Fear-Segal explains, “This was an educational experiment intended to demonstrate that separating members of the younger generation from their home environment and intensively schooling them in white ways offered a means of obliterating tribal cultures and acculturating a whole race.”<sup>77</sup> All off-reservation boarding schools that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries modeled themselves after the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. The goal of these schools was to strip Native people of their tribal identities and “Americanize” them. In an 1892 speech, Richard Henry Pratt overtly - even proudly - outlined these racist and inhumane methods of “assimilation” he favored when he noted, “A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. 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.”<sup>78</sup> This sentiment became a mantra for off-reservation boarding schools and became the intellectual fuel that led the drive to separate child and parent.

Scholars have often looked to the theory of “intimate colonialism” when discussing the United States government and Native people. This refers to the intrusion by the United States government into the Native family unit, the most intimate of relationships, in an attempt to further the imperialistic ideology of assimilation that was essential for policy makers. The “intimate colonialism” that was associated with the

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<sup>77</sup> Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *White Man’s Club*, 26.

<sup>78</sup> Captain Richard Henry Pratt <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929> (Retrieved March 14, 2012).

policymakers and their attitudes towards the reservation family unit was one of the most devastating attacks that the boarding school era launched against Native people. As Cahill explains, “This involved changing the fundamental nature of Native familial and social systems - the most intimate of relationships. Restructuring of Native families, administrators believed, held the key to the total conquest of Native nations.”<sup>79</sup> However, while the goal was to keep the parents of the children that attended Bismarck Indian School as far removed from the children as possible, these parents refused to accept the dominant policies of assimilation when it came to the well-being of their family.

The policy makers felt that, in order to complete the assimilation process, Native children needed to be completely removed from any tribal influence. Thus, trips home were strongly discouraged, often refused, and parents hardly ever heard from their children. Ed Good Bird wrote to the school on August 20, 1919 asking the superintendent to “send my boy Benjamin Good Bird home again for Fair Sept. 22, 23 24 25. When Fair is over I will send back again.”<sup>80</sup> Superintendent Padgett informed Mr. Good Bird that he could not allow Benjamin to return home. He explained, “I at first thought I could let some of the boys go home for the fair, but if one of the boys go than most of them want to and I cannot have the school broken up that way...”<sup>81</sup> Mrs. Mary Bradford wrote to the acting superintendent at Bismarck on August 9, 1917, expressing her disappointment at not hearing from her son. “Dear Sir,” Mary wrote, “Please write to me and let me know how my boy is getting along at school, and why don’t he write to me sometimes.

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<sup>79</sup> Cathleen D. Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011], 58.

<sup>80</sup> RG75, Business Correspondence, 1917 Box 432.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

Write soon and let me know how he is...I should think that I should get a letter from him once a month anyway. Please do write to me and let me know how my little George is getting along. And Oblige, Yours Truly.”<sup>82</sup> On October 9, two month later, the acting superintendent, W.W. Coon responded, “Dear Madam in looking over the unanswered mail at this school, I find a letter addressed to the Superintendent [sic] which does not seem to have been answered....The boy is doing finely, is healthy and having a very good time. He is making good progress in his work....Unless you get word, you may rest assured that your son is healthy, hearty and happy.”<sup>83</sup>

Coon’s response touches on a key issue that surrounded the Bismarck Indian School and off-reservation boarding schools in general. To begin with, since the school had such a high rate of turnover for both superintendents and employees, “unanswered mail” often became one of the side effects, particularly the letters from the parents. Superintendents and employees seemingly went out as fast as they came into Bismarck, and the various communications that came into the school went ignored, as a result of this constant influx and exodus, for long periods of time, as the case of Mrs. Bradford’s letter illustrates. Aside from the personal letters that arrived in Bismarck, there was also the large amount of mail that arrived from the Indian Office in Washington. The documents of the Bismarck Indian School reveal the high level of bureaucracy that existed between the school and the Office of Indian Affairs. The records reveal that when a new superintendent arrived at the school, not only were there letters from parents waiting to be opened, but also there were numerous memos from the Office which detailed various changes to school rules or discrepancies in past invoices. The Bureau of Indian Affairs,

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<sup>82</sup> RG75, Correspondence October 1917, Box 430.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*



as it is now known, has gone through considerable change since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century the Indian Office had accumulated such a large mass of Indian Service bureaucracy that “piles of records in the Department of the Interior, the Treasury Department, and the Post Office Department were reported to spill out into the hallways.”<sup>84</sup> In an attempt to trim the bureaucratic nonsense, President Roosevelt, citing the inefficiency of the Indian Service, created the Keep Commission. Those appointed to this new program “...offered proposals to encourage greater interbureau and interdepartmental exchanges, to investigate personnel administration, and to probe federal publication policies and programs.”<sup>85</sup> The Progressive Era brought in a new mode of thought and for the Indian Service employees this meant a shift to professionalism and increased efficiency. While the purpose was to increase the efficiency and cut down on the large number of memos that came in and went out daily in the Indian Office, ironically the new system actually created more paperwork. Employees in the field, wanting to engage fully in their position, often “felt overwhelmed by the pages of guidelines streaming out of Washington, and they also often found the information contradictory and confusing, leading...to less efficiency rather than more.”<sup>86</sup> Often, those that took field positions in the Indian Service, such as superintendents or school employees, were not prepared for the amount of paperwork that was required of them. On top of that they often found the large number of circulars, which outlined new rules or instructions, quite prohibiting in the effectiveness in their teachings.<sup>87</sup> While the employees would become frustrated with the Indian Service’s

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<sup>84</sup> Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Mother & Fathers*, 218.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 219.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 222.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*.

switch to “efficiency” it was the parents and their children who attended the schools that would suffer most.

As a result of all this, parents often had to rely on their community when it came to gathering information about their children at the Bismarck Indian School. Parents often heard word of the school, or their children, through the “moccasin telegraph,”<sup>88</sup> as it is often called, which was a communication system among Native people of the various reservations. The operation of this informal communication system led Peter Belongie of the Turtle Mountain Reservation to write and inquire about his son Fred. “Dear Sir,” he wrote, “I heard my son Fred Belongie he was put in the gelan<sup>89</sup> and let me know right away.”<sup>90</sup> From whom Mr. Belongie heard this information is not known; what is known is that no official from the school had deemed it necessary to tell Fred’s parent(s) that he had been placed in confinement, let alone what led to it. After Mr. Belongie wrote to the school, Superintendent Taylor responded with the details that had led to Fred’s “punishment,”

Fred is still with us but we were compelled to punish him or else turn him over to the United States officers for handling. He forged a note, forged the name on it and forged a name on the back of it and passed it on one of the local banks here. The bank officers caught on to it and were going to have him arrested if we did not punish him. Since that time he has spent one week in jail and the rest in jail part of the time....We thought we could manage his punishment more successfully....<sup>91</sup>

The crime was clearly serious, and we do not know the circumstances that led young Fred to commit this act. What is most striking is this: the superintendent felt that his actions

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<sup>88</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 27.

<sup>89</sup> *Gelan* appears to mean confinement or jail. I have not found an exact meaning for the word, but I am under the impression it could be a Metis word for a jailhouse as French influence is strong in that part of the country.

<sup>90</sup> Box 427, Correspondence 1916-1917, Folder 4 of 7.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

did not warrant involvement with federal law enforcement officials or, more importantly, with Fred's parents. Instead, as the "proper" father figure he chose the punishment to fit Fred's crime. While we do know that Fred was held in confinement, we do not know what other punishment, if any, the disciplinarian felt Fred should suffer.

An interesting possibility concerning the Belongie case is raised by a letter written by a United States attorney out of Fargo, North Dakota, and sent to Superintendent Taylor of the Bismarck Indian School on April 9, 1917, 6 days before Mr. Belongie sent his letter inquiring about the confinement of his son. The attorney was writing to inquire, on the behalf of Rev. George B. Newcomb of the *Society for the Friendless*, about a young boy who was suspected of being held in solitary confinement. As the U.S. attorney noted:

I am in receipt of a letter...from Rev. George B. Newcomb...in which he claims that an Indian boy about 18 years old is being held in solitary confinement at the Indian School, and that the punishment is too severe. You will understand, that I am not interfering with you at all, I am simply asking for information and wish you would give me a full statement of the facts. He says the boy has been confined for three weeks, and that he is held in solitary confinement.<sup>92</sup>

While we don't know if the boy that the letter was referring to was Fred Belongie, it is both an interesting coincidence and a reminder that solitary confinement for long periods was a possible punishment for children at off-reservation boarding schools and clearly one employed at the Bismarck Indian School. Children were often confined to the school's guardhouses or jails for punishment for a serious crime, such as running away or theft. Often these buildings were carefully hidden from plain view of those who visited

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<sup>92</sup> Box 427, Correspondence 1916-1917, Folder 4 of 7.

the school.<sup>93</sup> As with most cases of severe punishment the documents left behind do not tell us the whole story. We don't know what Fred endured during his confinement period, and the records show no further response from Fred's father. Three months later, on July 15, 1917, Fred himself penned a letter to the Bismarck Indian School. "Dear Friend," wrote Fred, "I will write to you today. I don't think it to go to school this fall because I am registered here on the June 5 this spring... Good Bye, From Fred D. Belongie."<sup>94</sup> Fred had returned home, and "here" refers to the Turtle Mountain day school. It is clear that Mr. Belongie had removed his son from the Bismarck Indian School and enrolled him at their reservation's day school. This illustrates another important resistance trend among Native parents. As the school records make clear, parents of the students at Bismarck Indian School often would not allow their children to return to the school when they knew their children had been treated poorly.

Punishments at off-reservation boarding schools varied in their scope and severity, but all were humiliating to children who rarely knew violence or reprimands in their home communities that even came close to the degree that was common at boarding schools. Poor treatment of their children, from the early missionary to off-reservation schools, had long been a concern of Native people. As early as 1772, Native people in had voiced their opinion regarding the ill treatment of their young ones. In the *Speech of the Onondaga Council*, the Iroquois express their resentment of the Reverend Wheelock's school when they stated:

Why, brother, if another hears my dog barking, or having hold of a creature, & bids him get out, & perhaps he don't obey him immediately, not understanding the voice; upon which the stranger catches up a club &

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<sup>93</sup> Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc. *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006], 21.

<sup>94</sup> Box 427, Correspondence 1916-1917, Folder 4 of 7.

malls my dog- I shall resent it because he is my dog. Brother, I love my dog. What do you think of children then in the like case?...Brother, you must learn of the French ministers if you would understand, & know how to treat Indians. They don't speak roughly; nor do they for every little mistake take up a club & flog them.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the objections, harsh punishments and treatment of Native children at boarding schools would continue. One manner of implementing discipline at off-reservation schools came in the adoption of the practice of military conduct and discipline in the structure of the institutions. Military drill, marching in line, strict rules, these all stemmed from the manner in which the United States government trained its soldiers. Captain Richard Henry Pratt formed his whole operation around this theory of discipline at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Scott Riney, in *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933*, argues that the drill system used spoke to the manner in which the government viewed their "Indian problem." "Drill," explains Riney, "had its roots in the practical necessities of the battlefields of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where success in battle depended on the ability of a relative handful of officers to control the movements of hundreds or thousands of soldiers."<sup>96</sup> The battle that the United States government was in was with Indian people and their cultures and, if they could control the movements and thoughts of Native children, in their eyes, they had won. A consequence of this battle could sometimes lead to a school earning a bad reputation among Native people and in their community.

The Bismarck Indian School had a reputation of ill treatment of the children who attended. Parents heard of the treatment of their children through the "moccasin

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<sup>95</sup> Colin G. Calloway, *The World Turned Upside Down: Indian Voices from Early America* [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994], 70.

<sup>96</sup> Scott Riney, *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999], 140-141.

telegraph,” whose information often stemmed from a visit a parent had made to the school, through letters, or through other community members, or directly from their children. Superintendent Craige of the Turtle Mountain Indian School in Belcourt, North Dakota, conveyed the thoughts of many Native parents on the Turtle Mountain Reservation regarding the Bismarck Indian School to its then superintendent, O. Padgett, in 1919. Between the years of 1915-1918, the Bismarck Indian School had seen five different Superintendents take charge of the school: Mr. John S. Spears (1915-1916), Mr. William E. Taylor (1916-1917), Mr. W.W. Coon (1917), Mr. J. Howard Caldwell (1918) and Mr. O. Padgett (1918-1922). Superintendent Padgett, aware of the instabilities of the school, tried to make improvements upon his appointment. Padgett reached out to fellow Superintendent Craige of the Turtle Mountain Agency in regard to any children that would be eligible for transfer to the Bismarck Indian School. Craige responded, rather truthfully, to Padgett stating the improbability of Turtle Mountain students attending Bismarck.

From what I personally know of the school and from what I have heard, there is no doubt but that you have a great opportunity to make a record for yourself, and I assure you that you will have my hearty cooperation and best wishes for a successful administration. There is considerable adverse sentiment against the Bismarck School among the Indians of this reservation, whether they have had children there or not. Those that had children enrolled there, feel that they were never accorded proper treatment and, therefore, dislike, to have the children return. Then Bismarck is somewhat difficult to reach from here by rail, the expenses of the return of the children for the summer vacations are much higher than from any other school in the State, and they like to have their children at home through the summer. For these reasons, it is very difficult to get parents to consent to the enrollment of their children in the Bismarck Indian School; however, there are more than enough children on this reservation who are not now in school and have no place to attend school to more than fill your school if you received pupils from no other place. I

shall be glad to do what I can to send you some children for the present term, but am not at all optimistic [sic] that I shall be successful.<sup>97</sup>

Craige's letter, coupled with the story of the Belongies, helps to explain some of the reasons why Bismarck Indian School garnered such a bad reputation, and why parents from the Turtle Mountain Reservation did not want their children attending such an institution. This letter also gives some insight into the control that Native parents still exerted over the life of their children at boarding schools. As the Turtle Mountain community members demonstrated, a powerful resistance strategy that existed among parents was their conscious decision to not send their children to the Bismarck Indian School. Much to the dismay of the countless administrators who wished to sever the ties between parent and child, the Turtle Mountain parents were very much involved and determined to not accept the mistreatment of their children.

Aside from the negative opinions the school garnered from the parents of its pupils, it also earned a bad reputation among the various employees and superintendents who floated through the establishment. Bismarck was an undesirable location for many people due to its unpredictable and terrible climate, especially in the winter months. Aside from the weather, the school was located a mile outside of the town, making it rather inconvenient for any of the staff, or students, to make trips to town. In 1919 the *Annual Report of the Secretary of Interior Affairs* reported these concerns to the Board of Indian Commissioners. After surveying Bismarck Indian School, board member Samuel A. Elliot strongly suggested that the school close its doors permanently. Elliot asserted:

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<sup>97</sup>RG75, Business Correspondence, 1917 Box 432 "Letter from Superintendent R.C. Craige to Superintendent O. Padgett on January 9, 1919".

I unqualifiedly indorse [sic] the recommendation of the commissioner to promptly and permanently close the school at Bismarck, N. Dak...I can not escape the conviction that the school is not only superfluous but is undesirable. The buildings are located on the banks of the Missouri, between the railroad and the river, without almost no available land for farm or garden. The enrollment, has, for a long time been small, and the per capita cost of operating is the highest in the service. The plant is deplorably lacking in almost all the equipment needed by a good school. The location is cold, bleak, and wind swept. It is said that teachers and employees prefer to resign rather than accept assignment to such a place. Superintendents have followed each other in quick succession and now it is practically impossible to get any Superintendent to take the school at all.<sup>98</sup>

Clearly, Bismarck Indian School was an undesirable place for both students and employees, yet it remained open for another eighteen years. While the administrators and employees suffered the irritation of geography and climate, it was the students who would suffer the most from the instabilities that existed at Bismarck Indian School. The revolving door of superintendents, teachers, and employees created a situation of unpredictability and instability, and it also created a volatile environment for the parents and students. As such, it is no wonder that whole communities chose not to send their children there.

Parents withdrawing their children en masse at the off-reservation boarding schools was not an uncommon move.<sup>99</sup> If proper treatment was not going to be accorded to the children, the parents would put their proverbial foot down and either remove them from the school or not allow them to attend. Many parents of the Turtle Mountain Reservation expressed their concerns by not allowing their children to attend the Bismarck Indian School, but the parents of the Fort Berthold Reservation would employ

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<sup>98</sup> Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year, 1919. United States: Department of the Interior. Volume 2.

<sup>99</sup> David Wallace Adams, *American Indians and the Boarding School Experience*, 211.



one of the strongest strategies of resistance, the threat of community organization. One of the most notable responses by parents in their opposition to the schools was through the actions of those who organized resistance in their communities and persuaded other parents to not send their children away. Parents knew that the schools needed their students in order to survive. Financially, the schools needed the students for all the work they did on the school grounds, but they also needed the children if they were to “succeed” in their ethnocentric mission of attempting to assimilate Native people into the dominant white society. The decision to physically remove their children from the school was therefore the ultimate, and most extreme, response by parents. Jim Eagle, Chief of Police on the Fort Berthold Agency, was one of those parents.

When Mr. Eagle learned of the treatment of his daughter, Olive, by the school’s matron, Miss Ida M. Tobin, he became actively engaged in his child’s life at the Bismarck Indian School. Using his prominence as the Chief of Police, he worked together with parents of other children who attended the school and created a movement on the Fort Berthold Reservation which led to parents coming to the school and demanding the return of their children.

What happened was this: On March 2, 1921, Jim Eagle entered the grounds of the Bismarck Indian School and removed his daughter. Mr. Eagle’s arrival at the school was in response to a letter that he had received from Olive wherein she informed her father that the matron of the school had “...secured the services of the nurse...to hel[p] her punish Olive, and that the nurse had held Olive while Mrs. Tobin strapped her.”<sup>100</sup> Olive

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<sup>100</sup> RG75, Decimal Correspondence 1915-1938, Box 467 “Letter from Superintendent O. Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on March 6, 1921”.

expressed her intention to escape from the school if her father did not come and get her. Mr. Eagle's subsequent actions led Superintendent Padgett to write a lengthy and detailed memo to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in which he described the situation and informed the Commissioner that the school had "one of the rottenest reputations" he had ever encountered and suggested the school be closed as that would "eliminate wholesale desertion." Superintendent Padgett wrote:

Jim Eagle, Chief of Police, at the Fort Berthold Agency, arbitrarily took his daughter from this school without my permission. This girl took with her a uniform coat, overseas cap, and uniform dress which are part of the school uniform equipment and to which neither she nor her father had any right or claim.

Mr. Eagle came here to the School...and told me that he wanted to take his daughter home. He stated that he did not like school; that he did not relish the idea of his daughter running away; and that his daughter had been punished by the matron (Mrs. Tobin) to such an extent that he would not leave his daughter here any longer.

I had a talk with Mr. Eagle and advised him that he should make a formal complaint to the Indian Office and ask for the release of his daughter from the school. This he refused to do and declared that he would take his daughter away. Mr. Eagle was informed that I would not give my permission for his daughter leaving the school, and that if he took his daughter from the school without my permission it would be nothing short of stealing and that the effect on the rest of pupils and their parents would be very detrimental to the interests of the school.

Mr. Eagle informed me that I would not be able to get any pupils for this school next fall as all parents were going to take their children home and not send them back. I pointed out the fact to Jim Eagle that if he persisted in forcibly taking his daughter away from the school he would be setting an extremely bad example for every parent on the Fort Berthold Reservation to follow. It would be very evident to every parent on the Fort Berthold Reservation that if the Chief of Police on their reservation to [sic] did not abide by the obligations into which he entered that they, the other parents, surely would not have to and, therefore, would employ every subterfuge to get their children out of school. This I explained to Jim Eagle in an endeavor to get him to make formal application to your Office

for the release of his daughter. However, Jim Eagle had his plans all laid and carried them out.

As soon as I left the premises to go into town for the mail...Jim Eagle hustled his daughter into a taxi and took her away from the school together with the various pieces of school clothing to which she was not entitled to take home.

I have learned since that Jim Eagle is working up quite an agitation among the parents of the pupils in this school in an endeavor to get the parents of the pupils to come here and get their children and take them home.

This spirit of discontent among the children and parents has kept me working overtime ever since school opened. And now that the Chief of Police on the Fort Berthold reservation is openly advocating the desertion of children from this school is certainly an extremely serious matter and is not going to help the already very poor reputation of this school.

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Olive Eagle was punished for the benefit of herself and as a matter of discipline among the other pupils. If Jim Eagle did not like the treatment accorded to his daughter, which only hurt her for the time being, then he should have went through proper channels and secured the release of his daughter from this school.

This school has been struggling for years against resentment of pupils and parents over any restraint put upon themselves or children, respectively. Immediately that any restraint has been placed upon the pupils attending this school this year and in the past, the pupils and parents have risen up in indignation and wanted to fight- and fought they have until the Bismarck Indian School has one of the rottenest reputations that I have run up against.

The parents of the pupils at this school, particularly those from Fort Berthold, are coming in continually and demand that I permit them to take their children home. They say that Jim Eagle has taken his daughter home and we have as good a right to take our children as he. They are perfectly right and I only wish that I had authority to let them take their children home with them, because they are only coming here for the purpose of making their children discontented and dissatisfied which will result only in their running away at the first opportunity.

Jim Eagle, Chief of Police, at Fort Berthold Indian Agency, is a strong factor on that reservation and will undoubtedly not leave a stone unturned

to influence the minds of the parents of Fort Berthold children against this school.<sup>101</sup>

This memo reveals a variety of issues involved with the school: abuse of students, students' and parents' response to the school, the frustrations of the superintendent, and the reputation of the Bismarck Indian School. However, most importantly, it tells the story, if only through a government document, of a Native parent, a Chief of Police no less, who became an activist in defending the rights of his daughter. A unique view is presented in this document regarding how the parents of children who attended off-reservation boarding schools resisted the institutions. Jim Eagle, as Chief of Police, had power, not only on the reservation, but he carried that power with him to the Bismarck Indian School the day he removed his daughter, Olive. As employees of the Indian Service, Native policemen were chosen to represent not only the United States government but also to represent what assimilation was meant to be. Historian Cathleen Cahill reminds us of the claims of the Indian Affairs Commissioner regarding American Indian police on reservations, that federal employment "makes the Indian himself the representative of the power and majesty of the Government of the United States."<sup>102</sup> Jim Eagle used this power when he removed Olive and worked with other parents against the Bismarck Indian School. In effect, he used that power to craft yet another powerful tool of Native resistance. Mr. Eagle's status also tells us that he was not only financially able to remove Olive as he "hustled his daughter into a taxi," but that he held power that enabled him to respond immediately to the mistreatment of his daughter. What is most interesting is the complete sense of helplessness expressed by the superintendent. Jim

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<sup>101</sup> RG75, Decimal Correspondence 1915-1938, Box 467 "Letter from Superintendent O. Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on March 6, 1921".

<sup>102</sup> Cathleen D. Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers*, 52.

Eagle was a threat to the school, a very prominent one, and the fear of the superintendent seems to have been inspired by Mr. Eagle.

The documents recovered from the Bismarck Indian School do not provide us with the voice of Jim Eagle, or of Olive, but if we read between Superintendent Padgett's lines, we can see a story of a Native community(s) that came together and responded to the mistreatment of its children at the Bismarck Indian School. Native parents opposed off-reservation boarding schools for a variety of reasons, but none as compelling as the knowledge that sending their children to these schools was often an "invitation to cultural suicide."<sup>103</sup> One of the major aspects of the school system that parents opposed was the use of discipline, not only its use but the manner in which it was employed. In the case of Olive Eagle, it was the extreme discipline that was used that made her father come to the school and remove her from an environment where such treatment was normal. Superintendent Padgett explained the actions of the matron towards Olive as necessary and suggested that children in general opposed any consequence for a "misdemeanor."

On or about February 8, 1921, Olive Eagle, the daughter of Jim Eagle, was punished by the matron (Mrs. Tobin) because she (Olive) had been unruly [sic], fought and tore the clothes of the matron. Mrs. Tobin reported to me that Olive had refused to practice her music lesson at the time (hour) [sic] set for her to do so, and that when Mrs. Tobin directed her to begin her practice Olive shouted at her and told her she would not. Mrs. Tobin took her to task for being rude and impudent wheron [sic] Olive set upon Mrs. Tobin and tore her (Mrs. Tobin) clothes and roughed it up considerably with Mrs. Tobin, brook [sic] away from her and ran out into the yard. Shortly after this, I assume, I was out in the yard and Olive came to me and said she wanted to go home. She was crying. I asked her what for, and she said Mrs. Tobin was going to punish her because she would not practice her music. I asked Olive what she had done to Mrs. Tobin and she told me that she had fought Mrs. Tobin and that Mrs. Tobin was going to punish her. I told Olive to go right back to Mrs. Tobin

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<sup>103</sup> David Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 212.

because I could plainly see that she had been a bad girl and deserved a punishment. Olive went back to the girls building [girls dormitory], but I understood later that she did not go to Mrs. Tobin.

Mrs. Tobin came to me shortly after this and advised me of what Olive had done, and requested permission to discipline Olive. I advised Mrs. Tobin that Olive should be disciplined for what she had done, in order that the proper effect would be brought to bear on the rest of the student body.

I knew from Olive's manner later in the day that she had been punished, but Mrs. Tobin did not make a report to me and I did not think that any serious consequences had resulted other than the fact that Olive, like all the other children, resented any restraint of her movements or punishment for a misdemeanor.<sup>104</sup>

Olive, using resistance strategies of her own, did not want to practice her music which led to her "punishment" of a strapping. Five days later Olive, along with a fellow classmate Mabel Bear, ran away from the school, as she had indicated she might do in a letter to her father. The Superintendent "...pursued them on the west side of the river and caught them ten miles from the city of Mandan, N.D."<sup>105</sup> About three weeks later Mr. Eagle would arrive at the school and remove his daughter. One can imagine what it was like for Mr. Eagle to receive a letter from his young daughter detailing a story of physical abuse at the school and on top of that a threat from her to run away from the school. March in North Dakota on the plains is a cold and bleak time, especially in the early twentieth century. Worried about the physical dangers to his daughter if she did run away and outraged by her treatment, Mr. Eagle came to her rescue.

What happened to Jim and Olive Eagle? The documents reveal that six months later Mr. Eagle re-enrolled his daughter in the Bismarck Indian School. What we are shown is that a parent was willing to send his daughter back to an institution where, both,

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<sup>104</sup> RG75, Decimal Correspondence 1915-1938, Box 467 "Letter from Superintendent O. Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on March 6, 1921".

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

he and his daughter, knew that she had been mistreated. What does that tell us? It reveals the level of resilience that has always existed among Indian people. Adaptation has consistently been a part of the story of Native people, especially after the arrival of Euro/ Euro-Americans, and how they adapt is often by choice of their own. The resilience of Native families and of the pupils who attended the school is very clear in the Eagle story. Attending school was a necessity, but accepting mistreatment was never an option for many Native people. Unfortunately, it has not been discovered if Mr. Eagle suffered consequences for his bold move. Interestingly, several years later James Eagle would be a part of a group of Native leaders who still knew how to communicate with the use of Indian sign language. US Army Major General Hugh L. Scott, who also held a position on the Board of Indian Commissioners, organized a collection, and a demonstration, of the practice of Indian sign language by several tribes; included among the informants was James Eagle, an Arikara from the Fort Berthold area.<sup>106</sup> If nothing else, Mr. Eagle's involvement in this project reveals that he maintained a strong tie to certain traditional practices.

In looking at the responses - admittedly a limited number owing to the record keeping practices of school officials - of the parents of the children of the Bismarck Indian School we have opened up a world of engaged, thoughtful, and determined Native people who refused to let the bonds with their children become severed. Whether these parents were assuring the administrators they are not troublesome Indians, or whether they were ensuring that they caused as much trouble as possible in the defense of their children, the response of Indian parents to the Bismarck Indian School is unique and

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<sup>106</sup> [http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675069790\\_Indian-sign-language\\_Hugh-L-Scott\\_Sioux-tribe\\_Hidatsa-tribe\\_Piegan-tribe](http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675069790_Indian-sign-language_Hugh-L-Scott_Sioux-tribe_Hidatsa-tribe_Piegan-tribe) (Retrieved on 3/27/12).

complex. The resistance strategies employed by these parents challenge us to re-examine how we approach off-reservation boarding schools after the turn of the twentieth century, particularly in how we view the parents of the pupils. These parents, varying in tribal affiliation, were not passive victims when it came to the indoctrination of the dominant white society's values in their children. They made calculated decisions regarding where their children went to school and also whether they would allow their children to remain at that school and we see through the records these parents were concerned and assertive individuals. For those parents, the Bismarck Indian School was not "just as good as any other school" but rather it was not good enough for their children. We are also shown that sometimes the superintendents were helpless in the face of the parents' determination to protect their children and to ensure that they got the best education possible. Interestingly, the officials of the Bismarck Indian School would not only be taking direction from the Office of Indian Affairs but also from the parents of countless students who attended.



### CHAPTER III

#### RESILIENT STUDENTS

##### *“Ghosts along the Missouri”*<sup>107</sup>

The student experience at off-reservation boarding schools was a multi-faceted one and as such defies simple categorizations. “Some students liked the superintendents and teachers, and others hated them. Some American Indians liked their boarding school days, and others loathed that time of their lives. For some students, remembering their days in school brings on the blues.”<sup>108</sup> The emotions of these young Native students ranged from joy to pain. David Adams describes this spectrum well when he states, “Over the course of several years, a single year, or even a single day, a given student might experience a range of emotions and respond in a range of ways, running the gamut from active accommodations, to bewilderment, to ambivalence, to overt resistance.”<sup>109</sup> Scholars have approached the history of the students at various schools with care, for the pupils’ stories and involvements at the institutions are at the heart of the boarding school experience. In many regards it was their courage and persistence that kept boarding schools afloat for many years. The schools could not have existed without the pupils, for as Cato Sells, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, so calmly and arrogantly asserted in the

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<sup>107</sup> Title borrowed, with permission from Staff Sgt. Eric W. Jensen, from his article “*Ghosts Along the Missouri: The First of a Four-Part Historical Series*” in North Dakota Guardian [Volume 5, Issue 2, February 2012], 8.

<sup>108</sup> *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences* edited by Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006], 28.

<sup>109</sup> David Adams, “*Beyond Bleakness: The Brighter Side of Indian Boarding Schools, 1870-1940*” in *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences* edited by Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006], 37.

Office of Indian Affairs campaign “*Save the Babies*,” “We cannot solve the Indian problem without the Indians.”<sup>110</sup> In the years under discussion, 1916-1921, hundreds of students made the journey to the Bismarck Indian School which enabled the United States government to continue its “mission” of assimilation, but also, perhaps subconsciously, these students made their journey in order to continue the mission of Indian people themselves, a mission to persevere against seemingly insurmountable odds. As this chapter will demonstrate, the students of the school responded in several ways, which collectively constitute a strategy of resistance to assimilation. Fleeing the school, fighting with the school’s employees, and defying school rules were common themes at the Bismarck Indian School. A careful reading of the records of the school reveal many forms of resistance on the part of both the pupils and their parents, but what is rare to find in these records are examples of the students’ voices. While there were many letters from the parents that expressed their frustrations with the Bismarck Indian School, the letters that exist from the students do not delve deeply into their existence at the school. Thus, we are left to rely on the administrators’ perspective of the students and their experiences, which are quite revealing about this period of the school’s history. What is clear is the resiliency that the Bismarck Indian School pupils demonstrated. Their experiences offer a unique glimpse into life at this off-reservation boarding school.

By 1916, boarding schools had become a common fixture, not only on the reservations, but spread throughout the country on the outskirts of various cities. Except for the Carlisle Indian School, the federally funded off-reservation boarding schools were located in the western states. The notion of sending children to off-reservation schools

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<sup>110</sup> RG75, folder 6 of 7, Box 427.

did not necessarily sit well with Native parents, but it became an expectation of the reservations' agents and the United States government, and, as a result, it also became an expectation of Native parents. At this time many parents of the children had already gone through the process of being educated at the boarding schools themselves. As products of the off-reservation schools the parents knew what their children could expect and they also knew what their children might do to get away from the schools; they themselves, conceivably, had employed some of the same methods of escape. One factor that would change drastically from the parents' time at the off-reservation schools to the time period under examination would be the change in the level of parents' involvement with off-reservation boarding schools. As the previous chapter suggested, by the early twentieth century the parents were becoming far more active participants in their children's lives at the off-reservation boarding schools. When the Bismarck Indian School opened in 1907, it catered to three of the four reservations that were located in North Dakota - the Fort Berthold Reservation (a majority of the students hailed from the Three Affiliated Tribes), the Turtle Mountain Reservation, and the Standing Rock Reservation. The school did have children from surrounding states, but the bulk of the students were from North Dakota's Native population. Annually the school would routinely enroll anywhere from 95 to 110 students. As Bismarck increasingly became a regional school, its relative closeness to the surrounding tribes would play a considerable role in the actions of the students.

Fleeing the schools to return home was an intense resistance strategy for many Native students, and this form of resistance was the quickest, and often the most dangerous, manner in which they could express their frustrations. Administrators

referred to them as “deserters” or “runaways,” and scholars in the field continue to employ the term “runaway.” While calling them “runaways” describes their actions, it does not do justice either to the courage they had or to the strength, emotionally and physically, it took to make the journey home. The young students are in need of a more dignified word that places the emphasis on why they left and where they often were returning to, *home*. *Resistor* is a term that allows us to understand the actions of these students a bit more fully and one that will be employed in this discussion. If we look to a relatively new theory emerging in Indian Country known as the “*soul wound*,” or a more technical term “intergenerational trauma,” we see, among other historical atrocities, the effects that the boarding schools have had on the generations of all those who survived their experiences. The “soul wound” refers to the historic trauma that Indigenous people have incurred in the *soul* or *spirit*.<sup>111</sup> The experiences those students in the early twentieth century had would be carried with them throughout their lives, and they would, unknowingly, pass down the trauma they sustained for generations. Replacing the term “runaway” with the term “resistor” gives the students agency and it allows us to recognize the spirit of resistance that was among the children.

Thrust into an environment that was created to annihilate Native children’s culture led many students to flee often. Resistance is an area that many scholars have offered their analysis. David Adams explains:

The forced separation of parents and children was traumatic for the children, and following that they were thrown into a completely alien environment where strangers (white ones at that) stripped away all exterior of tribal identity, even to the point of changing their names. And then there were other adjustments: the constant marching, the regulation of every aspect of daily existence, the humiliating punishments. It is hardly

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<sup>111</sup> Eduardo Duran, *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indians and Other Native Peoples* [New York: Teachers College Press, 2006], 7.

surprising that in the first few days and weeks the tortured sound of grieving children crying themselves to sleep was a regular feature of institutional life. And also the genesis of resistance.<sup>112</sup>

In *White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation*, Jacqueline Fear-Segal examines boarding schools in the framework of race relations within the United States. For Fear-Segal, those who ran away were engaged in a direct challenge to assimilation. She states, "At many different levels, individuals, as well as groups of children, challenged the proprieties of the school and actively as well as passively resisted the program of civilization."<sup>113</sup> Strict rules, corporal punishments, and strenuous physical work were often the immediate causes for fleeing the school; coupled with loneliness for their family, their school experiences led them to take off without money, food or water. The records of the early years of the Bismarck Indian School rarely offer the voices of those children who fled the school, nor do they offer many insights on the thoughts or attitudes of the children towards the school. Thus, we are left to call upon other students in other off-reservation boarding schools for some insight into what the experience was like.<sup>114</sup> Esther Burnett Horne gives us at least some inkling of that voice in *Essie's Story: The Life and Legacy of a Shoshone Teacher*. Essie recalled her state of mind upon her arrival at the Haskell Indian Institute and conjured up the following memory: "I was grief-stricken and frightened, and I can still visualize myself standing there, feeling lost and alone...and I thought, 'I hate this place; I will never be

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

<sup>113</sup> Jacqueline Fear-Segal. *White Man's Club: School, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007], 224.

<sup>114</sup> K. Tsianina Lomawaima provides countless voices of students' experience at an off-reservation boarding school in *They called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press], 1994.

happy here.’ I wondered which direction my home was.”<sup>115</sup> Indeed, it is plausible to assume that the children who arrived at Bismarck Indian School were also wondering which direction home was, especially those who made those many attempts to return home.

Brenda Child offers her analysis on resisters during the boarding school era in her work *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940*. Child explains, “Administrators from the government schools, acting in cooperation with Indian agents back on the reservations, spent much of their time trying to track down these runaways, or ‘deserters’, as officials called the recalcitrant students.”<sup>116</sup> The superintendents often went out to search for these young resisters who were trying to return home but also relied on help from local people and law enforcement officials. Local farmers, railroad officials, and ferry boat proprietors were often contacted when children ran away from the school in an attempt to detain them. A local ferry boat in Bismarck, known as BULLDOG, was often used by the students and staff of the school as a way of crossing the Missouri River. As the ferry boat helped along some of the students’ hurried journey home, Superintendent Spear of the Bismarck Indian School wrote a strongly worded letter to the manager of the ferry. “You are hereby notified and requested not to allow any Indian pupil of this school, large or small, boy or girl, to ride on , or be on, your boat at any time....Besides the danger of accident there are other reasons why I do not want our children crossing the river at their own pleasure at all time.”<sup>117</sup> As the school was

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<sup>115</sup> Esther Burnett Horne and Sally McBeth, *Essie’s Story: The Life and Legacy of a Shoshone Teacher* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998], 31.

<sup>116</sup> Brenda J. Child. *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998], 87.

<sup>117</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428.

located right near the bank of the Missouri River, those who had to cross the river to get home were helped by their access to the ferry boat. If the superintendent could get the owner of the ferry boat to eliminate student use of this means of transportation, it would limit the amount of time he had to spend searching for those students who fled the school.

Dick White Eagle, a student from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, certainly occupied a lot of the time of the superintendents in charge of the Bismarck Indian School as he was a repeat resistor. Over the course of eighteen months, young Dick would make three attempts to return to his home in Cannonball, ND. The first attempt was made in collaboration with another student, also from the Standing Rock Reservation, Edward Two Bear. Relying on the help of others, Superintendent Spears sent a letter to the reservation farmer on Standing Rock, an official of the Office of Indian Affairs, in Cannonball.

This is to inform you that Dick Whiteagle [sic] and Edward Twobear [sic] have run away from this school. I hope you will have them arrested soon and returned to the school. I would much rather you would send them up by a policeman, but if you will arrest and hold them I will send for them.<sup>118</sup>

Although apprehended, two months later, Dick White Eagle fled the school again. Often, repeated attempts to escape were a common resistance strategy of many students. Even if they were returned to the school, where punishment was expected, the desire to return home outshone this fear of corporal punishment or confinement. David Adams explains that what occurred within the walls of the schools was enough for any student to attempt multiple “escapes.” As he put it, “In the context of severe cultural conflict, students were experiencing education in terms of what anthropologists have come to call ‘acculturation

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<sup>118</sup> RG75,Box 428, Correspondance 1916 “*Letter from Superintendent Spears to Mr. A.C. Wells (reservation farmer) on May 2, 1916*”.

stress,' 'cultural discontinuity,' and 'cognitive dissonance.'"<sup>119</sup> This "stress" and "discontinuity" led students to resort to any means necessary to survive, and it appears that survival, in many students' eyes, involved leaving the boarding schools. A problem associated with having only government documents with which to analyze a situation like Dick White Eagle's is that we do not have Dick's voice. We have his actions documented, but his thoughts or feelings regarding the school and his attempts at fleeing the school do not exist. One is left with assumptions that young Mr. White Eagle was in survival mode as he made repeated attempts to return home. It appeared that, no matter what it took, Dick was not going to conform within the walls of the Bismarck Indian School.

After Dick's second attempt to flee from the school, Superintendent Spears turned to the superintendent of the Standing Rock Reservation, C.C. Covey, not only for help in re-capturing Dick but perhaps for a sympathetic ear as well:

I have to report that Dick Whiteagle [sic] again ran away from this school on the night of July 4. If you can locate him please notify me. If I get him again I shall make an extra effort to hold him- or would you care to undertake to keep him in the agency jail until school begins in September? or until he is ready to return at his own expense and promise you that he will stay. I should be very glad to be entirely rid of him, and would have excused him from further attendance here if he had asked for it, for he is doing no good for himself or the school here, but I cannot afford to let him go in this manner. Thanking you for any help that you may be able to render.<sup>120</sup>

The frustration clearly expressed by Superintendent Spears stems not only from the amount of time and money that it took to retrieve the children who fled the school, but also from the impact that resisters had on the pupils who remained at school. Reactions

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<sup>119</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 223.

<sup>120</sup> RG 75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428 "Letter from Superintendent Spears to Superintendent Covey on July 7, 1916".



by superintendents towards resisters varied; some sought to remove them from the school or confine them in the jail. Scott Riney offers one set of reasons for why superintendents would take such different approaches in his work *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933*.

Their responsibility for the safety of students and the perceived need to maintain discipline in the school inclined superintendents to seek the return and punishment of runaways. Yet, at some point, runaways became liabilities. They distracted school personnel and consumed time and energies that might better be spent educating the children who stayed in school.<sup>121</sup>

Superintendent Spear suggested that he would “make an extra effort to hold him” if Dick White Eagle was returned to the school. Often, the extra effort that administrators put into restraining the resisters was to lock them up in one of the school’s buildings, forcing them to march the amount of miles they had run away, cleaning the school or confining them in the Agency’s jailhouse. A one-page document from the Bismarck Indian School records reveals that a student from the school, Philip White Twin, ran away in May 1917. A letter from the superintendent of the Standing Rock Reservation, Philip’s home, to the acting superintendent of the Bismarck Indian School reveals that Philip “ran away from your school last fall, has been in our guard house here for some time and did not seem disposed to return to your school....”<sup>122</sup> What is rather telling is Philip’s preference for the agency jail rather than returning to Bismarck. This letter also indicated that the length of time that students were held in confinement could run to months.

The punishments were severe and they varied from school to school. The records reveal that “strappings” and confinement were some typical methods of discipline at the

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<sup>121</sup> Scott Riney, *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933*, 155.

<sup>122</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916-1917, folder 4 of 7, “Letter from Superintendent Corvey to Superintendent Taylor on May 8, 1917”.

Bismarck Indian School. Whatever his punishments though, they did not stop Dick White Eagle from making a third attempt to return home. In the fall of 1917, when Superintendent Coon was in charge of the school, Dick fled the school in the middle of the night. A letter was sent to Mr. Wells stating, "This morning the disciplinarian states that Dick White Eagle left sometime during the night, and it is supposed that he has returned to Cannon Ball. Since he is a runaway and belongs, here, and should he return to Cannon Ball, please send him back to the Bismarck School."<sup>123</sup> One of the notable aspects of Dick White Eagle's multiple attempts to return home is the close proximity of Dick's home to the Bismarck Indian School. Cannon Ball is roughly 30 miles from Bismarck. One has to wonder if the fact that his home was so close fueled Dick as he made repeated efforts to escape the school. It is also fair to speculate regarding the reception Dick received from his family when he made it home. It is clear Dick did not fear what his family would do or say when he arrived home, for he fled for home not once, not twice, but three times. Often parents were very happy to see their children arrive; it was only then they really knew they were safe. These students were resisting the notion of "civilization," and their resistance to assimilation into the dominant society spoke volumes. But their resistance also spoke to the profound problems within the Bismarck Indian School.

The manner in which these children were treated after fleeing the school reflected the strong position of superiority that administrators felt they had over Native people. The children at these boarding schools were the children of all the Native nations which the government had fought so hard to destroy. "Little wonder then," Riney suggests, "that

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<sup>123</sup> RG75, November correspondence, 1917 "Letter from Superintendent Coon to Mr. A.C. Wells on Octobet 1, 1917".

the school treated runaways harshly and meted out punishments consistent with a disciplinary model that equated running away with desertion.”<sup>124</sup> That these schools were employing the same methods that “might have come from an army post of the late nineteenth century”<sup>125</sup> for the young children speaks to the attitude with which administrators viewed the Native students. Similarly, Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder recount stories of punishment at an off-reservation boarding school, Phoenix Indian School, in their work *American Indian Education: A History*. Confinement in the school’s guardhouse, whippings, gender humiliation, and running through a gauntlet of whip wielding staff, and sometimes students, were punishments of choice.<sup>126</sup> Often the harsh punishments were enough to make the children not want to attempt to run away again.

Expulsion was also one of the responses of superintendents dealing with those students who repeatedly sought to return home. While many students accepted that they must be confined to boarding schools, there were some who refused to accept that their destiny lay in these schools and refused to conform to the institution. Daniel Hopkins, a 16-year-old boy from the Fort Berthold Reservation, appeared to have been one of those students who would not conform to the assimilationist program. On December 7, 1915 Superintendent Spear wrote to the Office of Indian Affairs requesting permission to expel Daniel for repeated desertion and also on the grounds that he was “morally defective and

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<sup>124</sup> Scott Riney. *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999], 150.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder, *American Indian Education: A History* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004], 185-189.

his presence a detriment to the school.”<sup>127</sup> E.B. Meritt, the Assistant Commissioner, responded on January 18, 1916.

The Office is of opinion that if this boy is released from restraint and returned to his reservation home the results to himself may be disastrous and his influence there may be very harmful to other young persons with whom he associates. It is therefore desired that you take such steps as may be necessary to secure his commitment to a state reform institution.<sup>128</sup>

The state reform institution was located in Mandan, North Dakota. Unfortunately, when students would not cooperate with the boarding school rules, often a solution for the superintendents was to commit them to a reform institute. On January 22, Spears utilized this solution when he responded to the assistant commissioner explaining that he “found it impossible to keep the boy in jail longer, and not hearing from the Office, I wrote Superintendent Jermark [Superintendent for Fort Berthold Reservation] and the boy’s father, and it was determined to allow the father to come and get the boy. I had instituted proceedings in the Juvenile [sic] Court to have him sent to the reform school, but was not sure the Office would approve. I dropped same.”<sup>129</sup> It is important to pay attention to the time span between these letters. The first correspondence suggests that around December 7 young Daniel has been confined for his attempt at running away. The response to that letter is dated forty-two days later, January 18; we have to assume that Daniel had spent the past forty plus days in jail. On January 28 Superintendent Spears released a letter to all superintendents of off-reservation boarding schools.

You are hereby informed that Daniel Hopkins, 16 years old, an Arickara boy from Fort Berthold Reservation, son of Ernest Hopkins, has been expelled from this school for repeated desertion, insubordination and

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<sup>127</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428 “Letter from E.B. Merritt to Superintendent Spear on January 18, 1916”.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428 “Letter from Superintendent Spear to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on January 22, 1916”.

general unmanly conduct. The expulsion has been approved by the Indian Office.<sup>130</sup>

What else Daniel did, aside from fleeing the school, to warrant the claims of “insubordination and general unmanly conduct” is not discussed in the documents. Whatever the reasons, Daniel was discarded by the school and left to return to his home. One would think at this point that Daniel got what he wanted, he was on his way home, but the documents show us that the administrators were still intent on placing Daniel in a reform institute. In the eyes of the Indian Office, students who were expelled from school remained a threat to the assimilation mission because of what they might say or symbolize to others on their reservations regarding boarding schools. Returned students were also a walking advertisement that the schools were sometimes forced to bend to the students’ will and that assimilation was not a sure thing. Over a month later, on March 4, Assistant Commissioner E.B. Meritt wrote to Superintendent Spears to discuss the possibility of placing the young boy in the reformatory and asked Spear to re-open the case of Daniel.

The case was brought before the Juvenile Courts, and Judge W. L. Nuessle expressed his concern regarding how strong the evidence was that required Daniel to be sent to the reform school. Judge Nuessle subsequently wrote to the reform school inquiring about placing Daniel within its walls. J.W. Devine, superintendent of the reform school, responded with apprehension and with some thought-provoking sentiments of his own concerning Native children.

We find it quite difficult to hold Indian boys at this institution and especially so if it is necessary to punish them to any degree frequently.

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<sup>130</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428 “*Letter from Superintendent to Spear to all superintendents of off-reservation boarding schools on January 28, 1916*”.

Sooner or later he would escape from the large, extensive grounds and which affords every facility of this purpose. Once here, of course, we would use every effort to hold him but sooner or later the opportunity would present itself and he would take advantage of it...I apprehend one of the difficulties so far as Indian boys leaving is concerned is the fact that they grow exceedingly lonely and for the reason that while we have our games, hours of play each day, still the fact remains that they are alone and do not adjust themselves to the boy life of the institution. Of course if he were sent here we would be obliged to accept him but I doubt either the wisdom or remedial result and for the reasons stated above.<sup>131</sup>

In the end, it is unlikely that Daniel Hopkins was sent to the reformatory. The documents regarding this young boy end with a brief letter by Superintendent Spears to the Indian Affairs Office saying it would be a waste of money to pursue matters in the juvenile court system as the case was not strong enough to warrant admission to a reform school.<sup>132</sup> His story reminds us that there was a very real concern on the part of the administrators that those who defied the school policies had the ability to affect the attitudes of both their fellow students and the larger Native communities towards the boarding schools. In the previous chapter, James Eagle provided a strong example of such concerns. An intriguing response emerged from Superintendent Devine's analysis of the Native boys who attended the reformatory, and it sheds light on the reason why children fled the school. In his very perceptive, and non-judgmental, observation of the Native boys Devine touched on fundamental aspects that fueled the drive for many young children to want to return home. They had a strong desire, and need, to be with their family and this was often the catalyst for their attempts to return home.

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<sup>131</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428 "Letter from Superintendent Devine to Judge Nuessle on March 23, 1916".

<sup>132</sup> RG75, Correspondence 1916, Box 428 "Letter from Superintendent Spears to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs on March 27, 1916".

We are reminded in Superintendent Devine's letter that there are essential factors that are involved when children made the decision to flee the institutions. One is the severe homesickness that many children faced at schools or reformatories, and the other is the fact that young Indian children found it hard to fully engage in the strict regimen of the boarding school. Children often became ill when they were separated from their families for long periods at the schools. In the following letter we hear from a father, Jerome Cotton Wood from Cannonball, ND, who wanted his youngest daughter to return home to heal both his daughter and his wife's heart.

A month or so ago I went there to the school about my children attending there. I had a talk with you regarding them and left the matters as it was and now I have decided for one to come home. Margaret I mean. You know I did not sign their enrollment on the two little ones. So it would be wise for the little one to come home with mother as [she] is failing in health...I want the little one to come home. They went there on their own accord so I believe that it would be no more than right for the little one to come home. I was mighty glad when the children select to go there...but since one is likely to get sick from homesick it is best for her to come home. As the mother is the same I think both would do well if they stay together. I can come after her when you answer.<sup>133</sup>

This letter reveals the major strain that the separation of child and parent placed on Native families. The early years of a child's life are the most important in regard to social development and to be removed from their parents and home life and to be placed in a boarding school, an institution, can cause damage. The 1928 *Meriam Report* addressed this issue regarding the non-reservation schools:

Whatever the necessity may once have been, the philosophy underlying the establishment of Indian boarding schools, that the way to "civilize" the Indian is to take Indian children, even very young children, as completely as possible away from their home and family life, is at variance with modern views of education and social work, which regard home and

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<sup>133</sup>RG75, Business Correspondence 1917, Box 432.

family as essential social institutions from which it is generally undesirable to uproot children.<sup>134</sup>

Compared to the dominant society's notion of the family unit, Native cultures' notion of the family unit tended to be far more encompassing; this means the community as a whole is essential in the rearing of children. The absence of children from the reservation created "social vacuums."<sup>135</sup> Jacqueline Fear-Segal explains, "Without children, adult Indians suffered not just loneliness but cultural disruption, as everyday activities were robbed of their pedagogical role."<sup>136</sup> We are also, again, shown a resistance strategy of the parents. The notion is presented that Mr. Cotton Wood had to follow normal protocol of asking for permission to have his daughter return home while he knew that he had every right to reclaim his daughter. Mr. Cotton Wood's young son, Asa, would express his strong desire to return home several months later when he ran away from the school. "My friend," wrote Superintendent Padgett, "Your boy, Asa, ran away from school this morning and I want him sent back as soon as he reaches home. I am trying to head him off at Cannonball, but if I am unable to do so, I will expect you to send him back at once."<sup>137</sup> Whether it was from homesickness, rejection of assimilationist practices, or the treatment that the students received at Bismarck Indian School, returning home was a mission for many of the bold, young students. One is also aware that the nearness of young Asa's home, Cannonball, made the decision to return home easier for him.

While the discussion so far seems to suggest it was only the boys at the Bismarck Indian School who resisted the institution, the school records indicate that girls were just

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<sup>134</sup> *The Problem of Indian Administration*, 403.

<sup>135</sup> Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club*, 64.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> RG75, Business Correspondence, Box 432.



as willing as boys to resist the methods of assimilation employed at the school. While loneliness for their family was often the reason cited for many children attempting to return home, mistreatment by the employees was often a more immediate reason. In a five-page document sent to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Superintendent Padgett detailed an incident that led three girls, Blanche Young Bear, Alice Standish, and Gladys Bassett, to flee the school, an incident that aroused the compassion of area farmers (non-Native) towards the young women, as they were clearly appalled at the treatment of children at the Bismarck Indian School. The girls responded to the treatment they received from the matron of the school, Mrs. Ida M. Tobin, after they were punished for “loud laughing and talking” in their room after the silence bell. Superintendent Padgett stated:

The matron claims to have knocked on the wall between the room she occupies and the dormitory occupied by the girls as a means of silencing the girls talk and laughter, but this had little effect upon the girls, and she consequently took her strap with her into the dormitory and gave (as she states) the offending girls a strapping. One of the girls- Blanche Youngbear- resenting the punishment attempted to fight the matron whereupon the matron gave her a double dose to bring her under discipline.<sup>138</sup>

The following morning the matron again punished the girls for not arriving to breakfast on time by sending them without breakfast to the “play room” in the basement. The girls fled the school on a January morning despite the cold climate of North Dakota and headed for their home on the Fort Berthold Reservation. Superintendent Padgett revealed in his memo to the Commissioner that he had suspected the girls might run away as “in some of their letters home they stated that they were going to runaway [sic] before Christmas and then Gladys Bassett wrote that if they did not go before Christmas they

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<sup>138</sup> RG 75, Decimal Correspondence, 1915-1938, Box 467 “*Letter from Superintendent Spears to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on January 9, 1921*”.

would go soon after.”<sup>139</sup> Students were rarely afforded privacy, especially concerning the mail they sent home. Four days later Superintendent Padgett received word that the girls were found by a Stanton, ND, resident, Roy Stevens, and “that Gladys Bassett’s feet were frozen, and that the other two girls had had their feet and hands frost bitten and all were in an exhausted condition.”<sup>140</sup> Upon arrival at the Stevens residence to claim the girls, Superintendent Padgett encountered an angry couple who had “listened in on the farmers line” and took it upon themselves to come to the aid of the children. The Shaffers were at the Stevens’ house ready to berate the superintendent regarding the treatment of the girls. Padgett states:

These Shaffer people immediately took me [to] task about the condition of the girls; demanded the immediate discharge of all employees who the girls had complained about; demanded to know how and why the school was run; outlined the proper way in which it should be run; and generally gave the girls (who were present in the room) the exaggerated impression that they had been terribly wronged and no other redress than to runaway from such an institution as they were forced to attend and which in accordance with the impression the wished to convey was nothing more than a jail.<sup>141</sup>

What is noteworthy about the desire of the Shaffers to become advocates for the children is it gives us a different perspective on the school. Outsiders, who had no connection to the school, responded to the human issue involved when one sees children hurt or abused. While nothing resulted from the Shaffers’ outrage, its inclusion is important as it provides another perspective on the school. The girls informed the superintendent that they would not stand for any more whippings by Mrs. Tobin and that they “would fight her if she ever tried it again.” Superintendent Padgett claimed, “I advised the girls that this was the

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

wrong spirit and they or any other pupil would have to be punished if they persisted in breaking the school rules...and that apparently they had done something wrong which justified their being punished....”<sup>142</sup> Ultimately, the girls returned with Superintendent Padgett to the Bismarck Indian School, with the exception of Gladys who was admitted to the hospital for severe frostbite to her feet. The story of these girls is a glaring example of the extremes to which students at the Bismarck Indian School would go to resist the treatment they received. It also reveals that students, particularly the older ones, were beginning to respond, in some cases physically, to the treatment they felt was unjust. Gladys attempted to “fight back” against Mrs. Tobin after she received an unwarranted, and harmful, whipping with a strap. Two months later, Gladys would be expelled from the school for “repeated desertion.” What led this girl, who was still recovering from frost bite, to make the decision to opt for the dangers of the journey home again rather than stay at the school? It is important to note the physical dangers associated with the cold and bleak climate of North Dakota in the winter months. Riney explains, “Blizzards lasting three days or more, combining blinding snow, disorienting wind, and subzero temperatures, often descended with little warning, killing people caught on the treeless prairie far from shelter.”<sup>143</sup> While Riney is discussing South Dakota winters, his description can be applied to North Dakota winters as well. What does this say about the resiliency and the spirit of resistance that developed among those who attended off-reservation boarding schools, particularly those who attended the Bismarck Indian School?

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Scott Riney, *The Rapid City Indian School*, 151.

What gave some of the children at the Bismarck Indian School the confidence they had when it came to defying the rules and when it came to standing up to the discipline doled out by the employees? By the 1920s the documents of the school show a shift in how some students were resisting the employees and the structure of the school. The records suggest that there was more collaboration among the students in regard to their resistance. Increasingly, students were fleeing, not individually, but rather in packs. At this time, the students were no longer accepting the punishments utilized by the employees, but instead, they were retaliating. Mabel Bear (13 years old), Olive Sherwood (16 years old), Gladys Bassett (18 years old), and Blanche Wolf (19 years old), all from the Fort Berthold Reservation, were expelled from the school on March 3, 1921. Their crime was “repeated desertion,” with the exception of Blanche who was expelled for violence inflicted on an employee of the school. On March 1, 1921 the cook informed the superintendent that Blanche had refused to wash the dishes “properly” and, when the cook, Mrs. Johnson, approached her, Blanche “...pushed and slapped her and forced her against the kitchen stove where she (Mrs. Johnson) was considerably burned on the arm.”<sup>144</sup> Blanche’s immediate punishment was to be “locked up alone” in a room in the girls’ building. Hearing the news regarding Blanche’s solitary confinement, the other girls “...became in their usual way quite excited and angry and I [Superintendent Padgett] was looking for a demonstration of some kind in their part.”<sup>145</sup> The response by the other girls would come later that night when they chose to flee the school. Two days after this incident all four girls were expelled from the Bismarck Indian School. Blanche Wolf was nineteen years old and in fourth grade at the time of this incident. One reason

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<sup>144</sup> RG 75, Decimal Correspondence, 1915-1938, Box 467 “*Letter from Superintendent Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on May 3, 1921*”.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

for her retaliation against the cook might have stemmed from the frustration Blanche must have felt as an over-age student in such a low grade. Indeed, one of the problems cited in the 1928 Merriam Report was the large number of over-age pupils at the off-reservation boarding schools. “The heavy ‘over-ageness’ among present Indian school children reflects the failure to get children into school during the past dozen years. Of 16, 257 Indian pupils studied in detail in the present investigation, only 1043 were at the normal grade for their age...”<sup>146</sup> Blanche’s knowledge that she was older than other students in the fourth grade, compared to Mabel Bear who was 13 years old and in the fourth grade as well, might well have added to her frustration with the whole institution. Also, as an older student, perhaps Blanche had accumulated, not only the physical ability to resist the cook but also confidence in the years she spent at Bismarck Indian School. The superintendent, however, would offer another explanation for the retaliation of Blanche and the actions of the other students.

In his letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Superintendent Padgett, yet again, informed the Commissioner that more pupils from the school, specifically those from Fort Berthold, were being expelled for “desertion” and that a continued resentment on the part of the children, or a “mean fighting spirit” as he described it, was evident among many of those who attended the Bismarck Indian School.

This spirit of a group of large boys and girls attacking an employee has existed to an alarming extent among the boys and girls attending this school in previous years. Since the opening of class room work last November groups of boys or girls have attacked various employees- the farmer, the carpenter, the former disciplinarian, the matron, the laundress, the cook, and the teacher have been attacked or threatened with attack on various occasions without any apparent reason other than the fact that they wanted to show their strength. I have never experienced in all my years in

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<sup>146</sup> *The Problem of Indian Administration*, 356-357.

the Indian Service the mean fighting spirit that exists in the boys and girls enrolled at this school, particularly these boys and girls enrolled from the Fort Berthold Agency. They are bound and determined to have their own way and will go to any extreme to get it. It is not a mischievous [sic] spirit, it is a spirit of destructiveness and a determination to have their own way no matter what the consequences. When these large boys and girls were punished for any misbehavior on their part they immediately plan on running away from the school and taking some of the other disgruntled children along with them. They will endure silently all kinds of hardships on these trips, but will not submit to restraint at the school in any particular without becoming sullen, angry and ready to fight the various employees.<sup>147</sup>

What Superintendent Padgett's narrative tells us is that students at the school were reacting, often in a very physical manner, to the treatment they received. Scholar K. Tsianina Lomawaima analyzes, among other things, violence among students of the Chilocco Indian School in her work *They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School*. "Violence begets violence," begins Lomawaima when discussing the issue of violent acts students perpetuated against their fellow classmates at the Chilocco Indian School. While the author is discussing the students' individual acts towards each other, her analysis can also be applied to the issue at the Bismarck Indian School.

Lomawaima explains:

Physical violence against the bodies of children was the exception, not the rule, but it was the exception that proved the rule....Federal educators envisioned the boarding school as a training ground, a controlled environment where behavior and belief would be shaped by example and instruction. Perhaps that vision came to fruition in unexpected ways, as students learned to use violence among themselves.<sup>148</sup>

Students were taught that, if they broke school rules, they would be punished. At the Bismarck Indian School we know those punishments consisted of strappings, solitary

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<sup>147</sup>RG 75, Decimal Correspondence, 1915-1938, Box 467 "Letter from Superintendent Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on May 3, 1921".

<sup>148</sup> K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994], 112.

confinement, and the withholding of meals. One could argue that these students learned violence at the Bismarck Indian School and what they were doing was simply responding in a manner that they were taught at the school. Students were in a position now, particularly the older students, to collaborate and stand up to the institution, at times even formenting a “rebellion.” Rebellions were not a foreign concept at off-reservation schools; successful or not, they were important responses to the institutions. Students would group together and make conscious decisions to, among other things, either stand up to an employee or band together to flee the school.

In his flurry of memos to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, in which Superintendent Padgett detailed the various incidents affecting the Bismarck Indian School, there is an underlying tone of helplessness. It is clear that there was a movement of sorts afoot at the Bismarck Indian School during the first few years of the 1920s, and the pattern would suggest that the majority of students who resisted the school overtly were from the Fort Berthold Reservation. Three boys would add to this pattern when they were expelled on November 13, 1920. The boys in question were all eighteen years of age, in the fifth grade, and from Fort Berthold - Edward Hale (Hidatsa), Robert Bear (Arikara), and Arthur Smith (Hidatsa). In his letter to the Commissioner outlining the events leading up to their expulsion, Superintendent Padgett argued that these boys were the “prime movers in the rebellion of boys” that led to the disciplinarian almost getting “beat up.” According to the superintendent, “...most of the big boys, have been spreading around advice to the effect that the boys did not have to do the work outlined by the employees in charge of the various details, and that if such employees attempted to make them do such work they (the boys) would jump on such employee and beat him

up.”<sup>149</sup> When the disciplinarian at the time, Roy Conklin, instructed a young pupil to do his work, the young boy at first refused, but then, after Mr. Conklin threatened the young boy with a spanking, the boy complied but told Mr. Conklin he would be calling on Arthur Smith, also known as “Spike”, to return and fight Mr. Conklin. “Spike” did return and did indeed threaten Mr. Conklin with violence when “Mr. Conklin caught ‘Spike’ by the nape of the neck, tripped him to the ground and sit [sic] upon him, which action proved to ‘Spike’ that Mr. Conklin evidently was the better man.”<sup>150</sup> These boys resisted, among other things, the amount of work that the school demanded of them.

One of the main reasons off-reservation boarding schools were able to stay afloat stemmed from the large amount of menial labor the pupils did at the schools. Bismarck Indian School had specific jobs that the boys and girls did to maintain the school. What was emerging was that the older pupils were resisting their roles at the school and resisting an institution that not only placed labor before education but stressed the removal of their Native identity. During the 1920s Progressive Era thinking would have a profound effect on how the dominant society began viewing Indian people. As discussed in the previous pages, the switch from wanting to assimilate Native people into the American society to encouraging the strong racialization of Indian people was the dominant philosophy during this time period. Thus, the off-reservation boarding schools would adhere to this shift from the possibility of equality to subordination, especially concerning how much emphasis was placed on vocational training and how much manual labor the students were doing at the schools. For instance, in a letter to the Commissioner

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<sup>149</sup> RG 75, Decimal Correspondence, 1915-1938, Box 467 “*Letter from Superintendent Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on November 13, 1920*”.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*



of Indian Affairs Superintendent Padgett expressed how hard it was to exist at the school with the outdated heating system that was in place. The heating units required the continuous removal of ashes and would keep "...the engineer and his small detail of small boys working continually and overtime to keep the fires going and ashes removed."<sup>151</sup> This casual reference to small boys working "overtime" - and, presumably, through the night - by a superintendent who seemed more committed to student welfare than most of his predecessors sends a chill down one's spine. It is not hard to understand why many of these student-workers chose to resist the institution.

Superintendent Padgett claimed this resistance also stemmed from the influence the boys received at their homes. As he put it, "...these boys from Fort Berthold have had their way for a long time and do not care to give it up. They are urged on by their friends and relatives at Fort Berthold..."<sup>152</sup> Clearly, the families of these students were not going to accept the role the school was meant to play; in fact, they were going to resist it so strongly that their children would go to extremes to either leave the school or stand up to the methods employed there. Strong influence from family members was often part of the reasons why many pupils at off-reservation boarding schools resisted; indeed, this was part of a larger political response. David Adams explains:

For older students especially, it took little imagination to discern that the entire school program constituted an uncompromising hegemonic assault on their cultural identity. As already observed, many Indian parents were quick to see boarding schools as yet another attempt to destroy Indian lifeways. Before leaving their homes, children were surely reminded of this fact. Moreover, once at school the day-to-day message only served to

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<sup>151</sup> RG 75, Subject Correspondence File, 1914-1921 Box 433, "*Letter from Superintendent Padgett to Commissioner of India Affairs on February 27, 1921*".

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

reaffirm parental fears: whether on the drill field or in the classroom, Indian children were expected to look and act like white people.<sup>153</sup>

The confidence these pupils exhibited in responding to the institution was spurred on by their knowledge that the overall theme of the schools was inherently wrong, a knowledge that often came directly from their parents. Was expulsion the ultimate goal? The children clearly had no reason to worry that their parents would disapprove of them leaving the school. Perhaps these acts of resistance were celebrated by the family and community. Above all else, the parents, as the records indicate, would not tolerate mistreatment of their children.

In a desperate plea for ideas on how to solve the problems that beset the school, Superintendent Padgett revealed a suggestion to increase the level of discipline that was already in existence at the school, but he also commented on the effect employees had on the structure of Bismarck Indian School. He stated, "...I had in mind some strict disciplinarian measures which if carried out might not be for the best interests of the school unless they could be consistently carried which I doubted on account of the temper of the employees that I had under my supervision."<sup>154</sup> A couple of issues arise from his statement. To begin with, the good reputation of an off-reservation boarding school was a necessity. If parents, and other groups, knew that a school mistreated the children, they simply were not sent there. As discussed in the previous chapter, both the Forth Berthold and Turtle Mountain communities responded in a very dramatic manner to the mistreatment of their children at the Bismarck Indian School. The resistance of the parents also served as a model of resistance for the students. Superintendent Padgett felt

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<sup>153</sup> David Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 223.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

he needed to resort to harsher punishments in order to restore order at his institution. What constituted “strict disciplinarian measures” in his mind is unknown, but that the superintendent thought them severe enough to further affect the school’s image in a negative fashion allows one to imagine the severity of them. The other is the dichotomy that existed among the employees at the schools.

By the early twentieth century off-reservation boarding schools had employees that fell into two categories: “old” employees and “new” employees. The “old” employees referred to the men and women that had been with the Indian Service for many years, but lacked the proper training, and the “new” employees referred to the workers who had been “expertly” trained in their fields. Cathleen Cahill explains, “The split often occurred along generational lines and affected older employees, who were viewed as ‘nonprogressive’ because they were not expertly trained or were physically less capable than they had been.”<sup>155</sup> Superintendent Padgett complained that the “...lack of loyalty and support on the part of old employees and experience on the part of the new employees at the school”<sup>156</sup> greatly encouraged the students’ ability to act in the manner they were. An environment where mixed messages were being sent, coupled with the instability of the superintendents, made it easier for these young boys and girls to resist.

Often the students who fled the school were “intercepted,” as the superintendents referred to it, but many times the young resisters returned voluntarily. It has been demonstrated that students were responding to the school in a dramatic fashion by responding defiantly to the employees and making repeated attempts to return to their

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<sup>155</sup> Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers*, 236.

<sup>156</sup> RG 75, Decimal Correspondence, 1915-1938, Box 467 “Letter from Superintendent Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on November 13, 1920”.

homes. Out of desperation, it seems, Superintendent Padgett appeared to be using trips to the city of Bismarck to appease these restless and unhappy children. As Bismarck was roughly 2 miles from the location of the Bismarck Indian School, students were allowed to make trips to the city for entertainment purposes, such as attending the movies, but if a student misbehaved, a punishment was to not allow the child to make the trip to town. Two pupils, Albert White Calf and Roy Lock Wood, would join the list of other Fort Berthold students who had been expelled when they, in response to not being allowed to go to town, made the decision to leave the school with two other boys. Superintendent Padgett's communication to the Commissioner detailed the story of four boys: Albert White Calf, Roy Lock Wood, James Foote, and Thomas Iron Shield. On Christmas Day 1920, the boys left for Thomas's home on the Standing Rock Reservation. Perhaps stemming from the high rate of students who were fleeing the school, the superintendent expressed a profound sense of defeat when he stated, "I made no effort to bring the boys back from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation..."<sup>157</sup> Twelve days later, on January 6, 1921 the boys, with the exception of Thomas Iron Shield, returned voluntarily to the school. The superintendent expressed the sentiments of the boys in his letter.

I advised them that the continual breaking of school rules and running away could not be tolerated and that I would like to have them stick to their school duties and finish the year which would pass very quickly, but that when they did break the school rules and misbehave that they would be punished. I asked them if they would not agree to be good boys and stick to their school duties. James Foote said that he wanted to be a good boy and finish the school year. Albert Whitecalf [sic] and Roy Lockwood [sic] frankly informed me that they would not be good and did not intend to be good, and did not care to stay at this school. This is the spirit that has run rife among the large boys, and some of the large girls. It has done the

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<sup>157</sup>RG 75, Decimal Correspondence, 1915-1938, Box 467 "Letter from Superintendent Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on January 11, 1921".

school no good what [so] ever; made the pupils in general discontented and sullen.<sup>158</sup>

The boys most likely returned to the school at the direction of their parents. While the parents were certainly sympathetic to their children's unhappiness at the school, many still insisted their children return. The parents understood the emotions their young ones were going through; most of the parents had most likely experienced the same feelings during their boarding school days, but by this time the parents also had made the conscious decision to send their children to the Bismarck Indian School. It had become an expectation for Native people on the reservations during the early twentieth century that boarding schools were the norm. Regardless of their opposition to the inherent ethnocentrism that was evident at the schools, parents still sent their children. For them, sending their children to the Bismarck Indian School allowed these parents to still maintain some supervision of their children due to the relative closeness of the school to their homes. How close their homes were was another possible reason that many students chose to flee. However, the decision to flee the school often came with an uncertainty of the outcome. Brenda Child explains,

When students deserted school or were defiant in other ways, they often found sympathy from parents and other tribal adults, who believed that boarding school pupils were justified in their resistance. At the same time, running away was rarely easy for children, who often expressed ambivalence and regret about their behavior. For most runaways the decision to desert was a last resort; it was a way of coping with the many inadequacies of the boarding school institution.<sup>159</sup>

As there are many documented cases of resistors and students who defied the school, it really speaks to the state of affairs at the Bismarck Indian School. James Foote told the superintendent he wanted to be a "good boy," but the other two boys, while making the

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 95.

decision to return to the school, had no intentions of complying with school rules or conforming. The superintendent ended his correspondence with a brief description of another defiant act by the boys that led to their expulsion. He stated,

I came upon Albert Whitecalf beating upon a tin pan and singing an Indian song with a bunch of boys around him dancing and singing to his accompaniment. When Albert espied me he shamefacedly put the tin pan down and the singing and dancing stopped. However, after I had gotten into the building the singing started again.<sup>160</sup>

A clear expression of cultural preservation, Albert and other boys virtually screamed to the institution, “We are not changing!” That was the last straw for the superintendent. The next day the two boys were expelled and sent back to their homes on the Fort Berthold Reservation.

In a final effort to get the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to take seriously the state of affairs at the Bismarck Indian School, Superintendent Padgett penned a rather grave letter to the Commissioner that detailed the many profound problems that existed at the school. “Your attention,” he stated, “is respectfully called to the extremely serious conditions in existence at this school. The Bismarck Indian School has now in attendance ninety-three pupils with very inadequate facilities for caring for such pupils.”<sup>161</sup> Beginning with the overall dangers of utilizing run-down buildings, Superintendent Padgett wrote of the abominable state of the school and ended with the suggestion that the school needed to be closed until the facilities could be fixed. Overcrowded and poor housing conditions to “an alarming extent,” especially in severely cold weather that “exists from October to May,” left no place for the pupils to go but indoors. Aside from

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<sup>160</sup> RG 75, Decimal Correspondence, 1915-1938, Box 467 “Letter from Superintendent Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on January 11, 1921”.

<sup>161</sup> RG 75, Decimal Correspondence, 1915-1938, Box 467 “Letter from Superintendent Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on February 27, 1921”.

the overcrowding, the superintendent referred to the out-dated nature of the facilities, “The plumbing, toilets, bath fixtures and lavatories are out of date, out of repair, and should be out of existence.”<sup>162</sup> The poor condition of the school, the superintendent felt, was in large part the reason why so many students, and employees, resented the school. “Such conditions are abominable and are the breeding places for discontent and dissatisfaction among both pupils and employees.”<sup>163</sup> As discussed in this chapter, the school suffered severe resistance from the students. Aside from the methods of assimilation that the school employed, it was also the poor state of the school the students despised. As the buildings were so overcrowded and there was so little room for employees, many of the larger rooms in the main dormitory were used by one employee, leaving the pupils cramped in even smaller rooms. Superintendent Padgett wrote, “No wonder the girls become discontented and runaway [sic]. Any half way intelligent boy or girl would do the same when they are compelled to loaf around in an overcrowded playroom or go to their beds in the dormitory while an employee has one of the large rooms together with easy furniture to rest in.”<sup>164</sup> One can certainly imagine what that scene must have looked like. The main point that the superintendent stressed was the effect that such dismal conditions had on the students.

The result of such conditions is quite apparent- the children become irritable, discontented and a desire to be somewhere else- no matter where- becomes an obsession with them. They commit breeches of discipline and conduct for which they are punished, and resent the punishment. They cannot understand, like an adult, that they are traveling through a stage of their life which demands that they be taught the proper path to follow, but resent any form of punishment, which if proper conditions existed at this school such punishment would be decreased to a very substantial extent. One punishment leads to another until some pupil and his or her

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, page 1 of 8.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, page 3 of 8.

immediate companions get it firmly fixed in their minds that they are being abused and mistreated and that the school is really a jail, and that the only way that they can get their freedom is to run away, go home, and tell their parents and neighbors of the abusive treatment they and their fellow pupils receive at the school. This they tell in order that the parents will not send them back, and the children are not sent back by the parents although the children need the schooling very badly. The Superintendent of this school must then get busy and secure enrollment of another bunch of children to take the places of those that became discontented and runaway. Neither the newly enrolled pupils nor their parents know the real conditions that confront their children or they would be quite loathe in sending them to such a place. But the Superintendent must have pupils to keep up his average attendance, although his sympathy is largely with the pupils that runaway from his school on a pretense of abusive treatment, but in reality because their [sic] was nothing to attract or hold them or their interest while at the school<sup>165</sup>

Superintendent Padgett certainly revealed a variety of issues regarding the school, but most important was not only his sympathy for those young resistors but the knowledge that pupils were essentially coming to a desolate institution. We are shown a superintendent who, despite his role in the assimilation process, felt there was something inherently wrong with allowing children to be exposed to such a place. The sympathy and understanding he expressed regarding the students is remarkable. What is even more remarkable is the resilience demonstrated by those students who attended this “jail” which was supposed to serve as an educational institution.

By the 1920s it had become abundantly clear that the Bismarck Indian School was inadequate on several levels. The students at the Bismarck Indian School clearly had a range of experiences and their stories remind us of the complexities of off-reservation boarding schools, but they also, more importantly, remind us that the American Indian students were active participants in their experiences. The resiliency they had and the spirit of resistance that existed within them speaks volumes to how they responded to the

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<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, page 2.



school. While the documents that tell the stories of the school are from the administrators' perspective, we are introduced to confident and strong students that resisted the methods of assimilation in astounding ways if we read between the lines. While we do not have these brave students' voices, we do have their actions. If we approach their methods of resistance, and their resiliency, with a new lens, we can begin to insure that they do not remain "ghosts along the Missouri."

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

In 1921 Superintendent Padgett wrote these brutally honest sentiments to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, "It [the Bismarck Indian School] is virtually a jail for the pupils and they soon consider that they are merely doing time until the end of the school year when perhaps they will be let out and go to their homes."<sup>166</sup> Superintendent Padgett's bold letter to the Commissioner seemed to have been enough to trigger a response from the Office of Indian Affairs. In 1922, a thorough inspection was made of the school, and in the fifty-third annual report made by the *Board of Indian Commissioners to the Secretary of the Interior* the commissioners directed that immediate attention be paid to the school. They found the buildings to be in need of serious repair, and a recommendation was made that the school be given "additional facilities to help meet the unsatisfactory Indian educational situation in North Dakota."<sup>167</sup>

The Indian Commissioners stated:

The school at Bismarck is a nonreservation prevocational boarding school. It draws its pupils from Fort Berthold, Turtle Mountain, and Standing Rock Reservations. It is listed as an 80-pupil school but now has a dormitory capacity of 100. One hundred and three boys and girls, ranging in age from 6 to 18 years, were enrolled, and 17 applications for admission were in the hands of the superintendent when Commissioner McDowell was there.

This school has had a checkered career. A few years ago it was closed by the Indian Office, but it reopened the following year. It has been the

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<sup>166</sup> RG75, Decimal Correspondence, 1915-1938, Box 467 "Letter from Superintendent Padgett to Commissioner of Indian Affairs on February 27, 1921".

<sup>167</sup> 53<sup>rd</sup> Annual Report of the Indian Board of Commissioners to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1922 [Washington: Government Printing], 9.

subject of debate in Congress; the question of its location and usefulness is still an open one. Whatever may have been the cause of its being built in Bismarck, and whatever may have been its history, it is needed to-day by the Indian children of North Dakota and will be needed for some years to come.<sup>168</sup>

Did the Native children of North Dakota need such a place? It would appear that an institution that was rife with instability of employees and mistreatment of students, which subsequently led to their strong resistance, was not needed; yet, many parents continued to send their children to the Bismarck Indian School. What this shows, is that while Indian people were adapting to the dominant society, they were never fully accepting what that society wanted of them. The school did indeed have a “checkered career,” but what was even more disconcerting was the situation at the school that led the students, and their parents, to resist the institution.

What remained consistent throughout the years was the mantra that Captain Richard Henry Pratt coined on opening the first off-reservation boarding school, the Carlisle Indian School - “kill the Indian and save the man.” Off-reservation boarding schools were created with the mission of erasing Native cultures and “Americanizing” Indian people. In the beginning of the off-reservation boarding school era academic education of Indian people was a prominent theme at the schools but that slowly shifted to the enforcement of education of manual labor. “The greatest need of the Indian young people is not academic knowledge but how to live as the white man lives,”<sup>169</sup> reported the board of Indian Commissioners in 1928. As scholars have argued, this stemmed largely from the dominant society’s attitude towards Indian people, particularly during the Progressive Movement. Cahill argues, “These shifts had a much darker side as well.

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<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 20-21.

<sup>169</sup> *Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners to the Secretary of the Interior* in 1928, 22.

Even as officials were calling for greater efficiency in the agency that served the nation's wards, they began to argue that these wards were incapable of full citizenship. The Indian Office shifted its emphasis to manual labor and began to downgrade educational expectations for Native students."<sup>170</sup> Native people were systematically placed into the lower rungs of a racialized society through their instructions in manual labor and the off-reservation boarding schools were one of the vehicles that drove that ideology. What is clear at the Bismarck Indian School is that parents and students were responding to not only the inadequacies that plagued the school, but also to the dominant policy of assimilation that was the foundation on which the school was built.

In the years under discussion, 1916-1921, the school went through a series of superintendents. The students lived in deplorable conditions which, as Superintendent Padgett stated, were "the breeding places for discontent and dissatisfaction," and in response to this many students, and their parents, chose resistance as a manner of dealing with the school administrators. While it may seem like a very brief time period to discuss for an institution that existed for close to thirty years, it is what occurred during those five years that is rather significant. It is abundantly clear that the parents were active participants in their children's lives when they were away from home attending the Bismarck Indian School. Whether it was through word of mouth, "the moccasin telegraph," visits to the school, or through the letters children sent home, the parents responded immediately to any mistreatment rendered their children. Whole communities, such as the ones on the Turtle Mountain and Fort Berthold Reservations, came together and either refused to send children to the institution or came to the school directly and demanded that their children be released to their care. The story of Jim Eagle who came

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<sup>170</sup> Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers*, 211.

to the school and demanded that his daughter be allowed to leave with him reveals a powerful story of resistance by parents and how they responded to any negligence on the school's part towards their children. Mr. Eagle's actions seemed to have spear-headed a movement which led to the emergence of Fort Berthold as a major center of resistance. It is quite clear that mistreatment of the students at the Bismarck Indian School was rarely tolerated or accepted by their parents. Mr. Eagle, as a chief of police, was supposed to represent what assimilation should have meant to other Native people during the early twentieth century. What his actions show is that Indian people were adapting to the dominant society's views, but never fully. Imagine what the message was to the rest of the community at Fort Berthold when the Native Chief of Police returned home with his daughter whom he had rescued from the school? Imagine the message of resistance and non-conformity it sent! Regardless of his position, he was not going to tolerate any harm coming to his daughter, which led him to simply taking his daughter out of the school. The close proximity of the school to Mr. Eagle also explained his bold move.

Bismarck Indian School became a regional school and catered to North Dakota's Native reservation populations; the relative closeness of the parents to the school allowed them to maintain a bit more control of what happened with their children. Recalling the story of young Dick White Eagle who was a repeat resistor at the school helps us to understand the power of nearness and the influence of parents had. The majority of the pupils came from Fort Berthold and the remaining fraction largely came from the other reservations in North Dakota. What is revealed is that the parents were choosing the Bismarck Indian School over other schools for a reason; a possible assumption is how close the school was to their homes. If the parents, and the students, knew "which

direction their home was” from the school, one would imagine this might fill them with a sense of security.

The strategies of resistance that developed among the students and the resiliency they demonstrated are equally as revealing. Clearly, fleeing the school was the most immediate way in which children could challenge the dominant goals of the institution. The young resistors opted for the physical dangers, even more extreme and severe during the winter months, of making the journey to their homes rather than continuing their existence at the school. The story of Gladys Bassett who, while still recovering from frostbite from a previous attempt to return home, chose to flee again during the winter months speaks volumes about not only the length to which students were willing to go to leave the Bismarck Indian School, but also says much about the resiliency that it took for students to exist at the school. Many factors contributed to the resistance that existed on the school grounds, such as the miserable conditions, the instability of the employees, the mistreatment, and the nearness of their homes, but the resiliency that these students, and their parents, had reveals so much about Native people during the off-reservation boarding school era. It helps to deconstruct the existing stereotype of Indian people as perpetually passive victims and replaces it with a more accurate description of a self-aware people who were making conscious decisions about their fate. What is clear at the Bismarck Indian School is that the parents and their children were active participants in their own lives; they refused to let their destiny be determined by the assimilationists. The fact that they were collaborating together and responding to an institution that was created to destroy their cultures as Indian people is fascinating.

We are also shown a unique side of the administrators and the complete helplessness that the superintendents suffered during their brief stretches at the school. During each superintendent's stay at the school, not only were they trying to find a way to be transferred away from the Bismarck Indian School, they were also writing to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs either requesting funds to improve the school or making suggestions on how to better the school. Superintendent Padgett's complete sense of helplessness in regard to controlling the students' actions and his frustrations with the miserable state of the school also allow us to recognize that, despite the purpose of the school, some of those who were employed there were, in their own ways, advocates for the pupils. Superintendent Padgett referred to the school as a "jail" for the pupils, he noted they were "forced" to attend; as a result, he didn't blame them for wanting to leave such a dismal place. When Superintendent Davis, the first superintendent of the school, retired and left the school in 1914, four superintendents would come and go between then and 1919 when Superintendent Padgett would assume charge of the school. While this superintendent lasted longer than the others at the Bismarck Indian School, he entered into an environment that was not conducive for any child to learn. He noted:

It was apparent to me upon assuming charge at this school, that thousands of dollars and a tremendous amount of hard work was necessary to put the building, equipment and supplies at this school on a proper footing where an efficient school would result, and a child enrolled here could have an even break for an education and decent living and housing conditions.<sup>171</sup>

Superintendent Padgett came to a school where both the buildings and the students were in distress and he had a desire to change that.

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<sup>171</sup> RG 75, Subject Correspondence File, 1914-1921 Box 433, "Letter from Superintendent Padgett to Commissioner of India Affairs on February 27, 1921".

What emerged from the documents was a picture of a situation that became increasingly worse from 1916 to 1921 at the Bismarck Indian School. As the 1920s were emerging, the students, and their parents, were taking drastic measures to resist the school. Clearly, Superintendent Padgett's drastic letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs helps us to understand the dismal conditions at the school, which subsequently contributed to the spirit of resistance that existed. Not only were parents, and their children, aware of what the school was attempting to accomplish, they were also confronted with the idea that those in charge felt that a poorly run and underfunded school was what they were worth. If the superintendent was aware that the Bismarck Indian School was unfit for any person, it is not hard to imagine what the students and their parents thought.

I would be remiss in not mentioning that resistance was not the experience of all students at the Bismarck Indian School, much like the experience was not the same for all students who attended off-reservation boarding schools. However, it was the experience of many students and that can't be ignored. Resistance was an ongoing, and perhaps the dominant theme at the school, particularly in the early 1920s. The experience for the students, and their parents, was quite complex and often-times historians are only dealing with government documents to re-tell the story of these experiences. David Adams reminds us in his essay "Beyond Bleakness: The Brighter Side of Indian Boarding Schools, 1870-1940" that, while students "...endured heartbreaking loneliness, substandard diets, humiliating punishments, life-threatening diseases, and an unrelenting



assault on their cultural and psychological selves,”<sup>172</sup> there was also another side to the experience which allowed students to, at times, “...find solace, promise, and even pleasure in an institutional setting constructed on cultural and political premises of more than dubious standing.”<sup>173</sup> At the Bismarck Indian School the young boys often found solace in joy rides, away from the watchful eye of the employees, on the nearby train. The girls visited and giggled with one another in their dormitory at night. We have to remember that they were also creating an environment where they could exist. With that said, the focus on this discussion has been on the resistance strategies that occurred at the school and the resiliency displayed by the parents and students, for it is their stories that matter the most.

This was a story of resistance on the Great Plains by both, Native parents and their children, to an institution that was built with the specific purpose of destroying their cultures and placing them in a position of inferiority to the dominant White society. What was shown were Indian people who were not passive victims, but strong actors who maintained some control over their lives at the Bismarck Indian School. If we wipe the stereotypes off the lens, we are able to view those Native people involved with one off-reservation boarding school as determined, self-aware, courageous, strong, thoughtful, and resilient people who refused to be controlled.

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<sup>172</sup> David Wallace Adams, “*Beyond Bleakness: The Brighter Side of Indian Boarding Schools, 1890-1940*” in *Boarding School Blues: Revising American Indian Educational Experiences* edited by C. Trafzer, J. Keller, and L. Sisquoc [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006], 36.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

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