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Mary Annette Pember

Death by Civilization

Thousands of Native American children were forced to attend boarding schools created to strip them of their culture. My mother was one of them.

My mother died while surviving civilization. Although she outlived a traumatic childhood immersed in its teachings, she carried the pain of those lessons for her entire life. Like most Native American peoples, our family's story is touched by the legacy of boarding schools, institutions created to destroy and vilify Native culture, language, family, and spirituality. My mother, Bernice, was a survivor of Saint Mary's Catholic Indian Boarding School on the Ojibwe¹ reservation in Odanah, Wisconsin. She called it the "Sister School," a world ruled by nuns clad in long black robes.

Two hundred years ago, on March 3, 1819, the Civilization Fund Act² ushered in an era of assimilationist policies, leading to the Indian boarding-school era, which lasted from 1860 to 1978. The act directly spurred the creation of the schools by putting forward the notion that Native culture and language were to blame for what was deemed the country's "Indian problem."

Native families were coerced by the federal government and Catholic Church officials into sending their children to live and attend classes at boarding schools. (About one-third of the 357 known Indian boarding schools were managed by various Christian denominations.) According to the Act's text, Christian missionaries and other "persons of good moral character" were charged with introducing Native children to "the habits and arts of civilization" while encouraging them to abandon their traditional languages, cultures, and practices. [...]

Students were stripped of all things associated with Native life. Their long hair, a source of pride for many Native peoples, was cut short, usually into identical bowl haircuts. They exchanged traditional clothing for uniforms, and embarked on a life influenced by strict military-style regimentation. Students were physically punished for speaking their Native languages. Contact with family and community members was discouraged or forbidden altogether. Survivors have described a culture of pervasive physical and sexual abuse at the schools. Food and medical attention were often scarce; many students died. Their parents sometimes learned of their death only after they had been buried in school cemeteries, some of which were unmarked.

When my mother was alive, I would often interrogate her about her life at the Sister School. Annoyed, she would demand, "Why do you always have to go poking?" And so I've spent much of my personal life and professional work as a journalist trying to uncover and investigate all that happened to her and thousands of others at Indian boarding schools.

For reasons I still don't completely understand, I am consumed by the need to validate and prove, intellectually and emotionally, her experiences at the Sister School. I crave confirmation because I believe it will somehow reinforce my mother's stories in the face of generations of federal and Church denials of

¹ a Native American tribe

² *Civilization Fund Act*: a political act to provide education for Native Americans

35 their role in the boarding schools' brutality. It will say to me: *You're not making this up. This really did happen.*

As this country marks the bicentennial of the Civilization Fund Act, I think of the traumatic impact of my mother's time at Saint Mary's and, in turn, the effect that her dysfunctional survival strategies had on our family.

40 Although she died in 2011, I can still see her trying to outrun her invisible demons. She would walk across the floor of our house, sometimes for hours, desperately shaking her head from side to side to keep the persistent awful memories from entering. She would flap and wring her hands over and over again, as though to rid them of a clinging presence.

She was lost to our family during these times. We guarded her with our tensed stomach muscles, trying to help her battle the unknown demons. Eventually she would wind herself down. Sometimes, even laughing a bit in relief, she'd mutter, "Settle down, you crazy old chicken," before collapsing on her bed.

45 Hypervigilance³, defensiveness, resentment, and a hair-trigger temper had been her only allies against the Sister School messages of racial inferiority, daily reminders that Natives were primitive beings unlikely to rise above the role of servants in a white man's world. She raged against the nuns' label "dirty Indian," haunted by the fear that the nuns were right, even as she scrubbed miles of floors and performed hours of heavy manual labor.

All of those awful Sister School doings cut her mind. I think she believed that she would break into 1 million pieces if she recalled the traumatic events that held her hostage, forever burned into her amygdala.

55 I remember a summer day, one of many, when I made my mother toast and brought her aspirin in her dark bedroom, where she was bedridden with a migraine. I placed my offerings on the little table next to her bed, and retreated back to my hiding place under the kitchen table.

After a while, she called to me. I found her lying in the dark, with one arm thrown over her eyes; the other arm was open for me. Silently, I climbed onto the bed, fitting myself into her armpit and gazing at the tiny blue Virgin Mary medal pinned to her brassiere, a hidden remnant of her boarding-school days. I remember the bedspread, stiff from its time drying outside on the clothesline and fragrant with fresh air and my mother's scent. She would spend hours washing the laundry "white, white" like the Sisters had taught her, rushing up and down the cellar steps with baskets of heavy, wet sheets. "We may be Indian, but by God we ain't dirty," she'd say while hanging laundry on the line.

65 I remember her deep voice that wrapped a cocoon around us in the bedroom as she, like she had done hundreds of times before, told me her Sister School stories. There was the "evil" nun Sister Catherine, Mother Superior Sister Catherine of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, who was the principal of the boarding school she had attended.

As she described the nun's inexplicable cruelty – the beatings, the shaming, and the withholding of food – I snuggled closer to her in anticipation. Then the mood of her story lifted, and I remember how her voice took on the conspiratorial tone that I loved.

70 "One year during the Christmas season, Sister was marching down the cellar steps to check if we stole any food," she said. "She fell on the bottom step – *crash!* She hit her head bad! Not long after, she died."

³ a state of extreme sensitivity to your surroundings

“What a silent cheer us kids made!” she continued. “Maybe it was terrible, but it was the best Christmas present we ever got!” I remember how she clasped her hands together and how, for a few moments, we shared a little girl’s wicked happiness.

75 I still marvel at her ability to reinvent and protect her sanity with what I now assume were fantasies in which good always triumphed over evil.

In 2015, my questions led me to the special-collections library at Marquette University in Milwaukee, where a trove of records from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions is stored. Carefully preserved and tended, the documents lie in climate-controlled archival luxury. I made a special appointment with the
80 archivist weeks in advance to examine them. [...]

Eventually I came across the names of my mother and her siblings, the ink faded, written in careful cursive. [...]

Beyond the lists of student names with check marks in columns indicating whether they’d graduated, run away, or died, the boxes contained mostly bureaucratic reports and correspondence between generations
85 of boarding-school principals and the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions in Washington, D.C, the agency that oversaw the boarding schools.

There was nothing in the dry letters and reports concerning the people I wanted to learn about, such as Sister Catherine or my mother. I thought about calling it a day. But for a moment there in the silent room, I distinctly heard my mother whisper my name, *Mary!* Her tone had a familiar ring, like when she’d demand
90 me to “get down on those prayer bones, girl!” when I scrubbed the floor.

So I continued my search, and I found documents relating to Saint Mary’s, including a yellowed, typewritten letter dated January 3, 1934. It was addressed to the Right Reverend Monsignor⁴ William Ketcham, the director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, from Sister Mary Macaria, the Sister secretary of Saint Mary’s.

95 It read in part:

By the time these lines reach you, our dear Mother Superior Sister Catherine will, no doubt, have been called to her eternal reward. On December 19, she fell off the second last step leading down to the kitchen entry.

100 She must have pitched forward with great force, for in striking her head against a windowsill, a gash was cut in her forehead by the temple of her glasses. On Friday Dec. 29, the Sister nurse noticed a change in Sister’s condition and told us she feared a stroke.

Our dear sister had convulsions, was anointed and has been speechless since. The doctor says it can hardly be but a matter of a day or so at most if she does linger even that long.

105 We know you will pray earnestly for her eternal repose and for a speedy relief from her sufferings. Sorrowfully yours in the agonizing Heart of Jesus.

Sister Macaria

When I got to the end of the letter, I stood straight up out of my chair. I recovered myself and sat back down; I concentrated on the contents of the box again. To my amazement, I found an original photo of

⁴ *Right Reverend Monsignor*: a title in the Catholic Church

110 Sister Catherine. Covered from head to toe in her black-and-white nun's habit, she gazed sternly into the distance through her thick, wire-rimmed glasses.

The room was air-conditioned, but I was sweating as I read the remaining documents in the Saint Mary's file. At last, I held tangible proof that her stories were true.

115 Corroborating even part of her story vindicated her wounded life. It gave me authority over our family's mysterious, shameful secret, in which the punishment for being Native was a humiliation we could never overcome. How many other Native families could find some comfort in the information in these obscure archives?

As the United States marks the anniversary of the Civilization Fund Act and all the devastation it set into motion, the federal government and Christian churches have an opportunity to begin a new chapter in their relationship with Native peoples.

120 Healing is possible. Canada, which operated hundreds of Indian residential schools with similar assimilationist agendas, implemented the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement in 2007, in which the government formally apologized to former boarding-school students and paid reparations to survivors. And in 2009, Canada created the (now-defunct) Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which began a multiyear process of collecting and listening to survivors' stories, opening up residential-school records to survivors and families, and ensuring that the history and legacy of the schools are never forgotten. [...]

130 As of now, apologies in the United States have been few and far between. Although President Barack Obama signed the Native American Apology Resolution on December 19, 2009, apologizing for past "ill-conceived policies toward the Native peoples of this land," the resolution had no impact on federal policy toward Native Americans. With its disclaimer against any legal claims, the resolution faded into the woodwork of legislative paperwork. [...]

135 In addition to an admission of its role in the boarding-school programs, the government could make records from the time more easily available to survivors and their families. Telling the truth won't change the facts of all that happened or the damage that was done. It would, however, offer thousands of Native peoples the solace of physical evidence and validation like the kind I got, which could guide a path toward healing.

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