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Review of *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900 – 1940*, by Brenda J. Child

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Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940. By Brenda J. Child. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. xvi + 143 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

The appearance in recent years of several books on Indian boarding schools attests to historians' growing realization that the efforts of the federal government to solve the so-called Indian problem through education is one of the significant chapters in the history of Indian-white relations. Determined to strip Indian youth of all vestiges of Native outlook, while simultaneously inculcating the knowledge and attitudes of their white colonizers, policy-makers by the end of the nineteenth century had constructed a network of reservation and off-reservation boarding schools devoted to accomplishing the "civilization" process. In this smoothly written and often penetrating book, Brenda Child tells the story of the boarding school experience from the point of view of the Ojibwe in the upper Midwest. Because the Ojibwe principally attended Flandreau Indian School, opened in 1893 in eastern South Dakota, and the much larger Haskell Institute, opened in 1884 in Lawrence, Kansas, Child's focus is on these two institutions.

The most distinctive aspect of this study, however, is its heavy reliance on the letters of students and parents that Child unearthed in federal archival collections. It is this trove that enables her to provide the Indian students' perspective on the boarding school experience.

Child offers one of the most interesting and moving accounts of Indian schooling in print.

In a chapter on "Homesickness" she describes the terrible emotional and physical toll that months and years of separation from parents wrought, especially on younger children. Letters from parents pleading for the release of their children, either because they missed them or feared for their welfare, usually fell on deaf ears. Even when students were granted permission to return home for the summer, parents were often unable to post the round-trip transportation costs required for release.

In "Illness and Death" Child discusses how overcrowded dormitories, poor sanitation, and undernourishment contributed to the spread of trachoma, tuberculosis, influenza, and other afflictions. Between 1885 and 1913 some one hundred students were buried on the Haskell grounds, and the reader—in one of the book's appendices—is invited to scan the name, tribal affiliation, and age of each. But as the author points out, the Haskell cemetery gives only a partial picture of the death rate since many students stricken with disease were quietly sent home to die, thereby lowering the official school death toll.

In "Working for the School" Child focuses on the role industrial education and domestic science played in the overall education of boys and girls respectively. Here she reinforces a point made by others that most of what passed for vocational education actually amounted to little more than institutional chore work. Particularly frustrating for boarding school graduates was their realization that many of the trades learned at school—harness making, blacksmithing, tinsmithing—were antiquated skills and therefore poor preparation for self-sustaining employment. In "Runaway Boys, Resistant Girls," one of the volume's most intriguing chapters, Child describes the multiple ways in which students resisted the institution, including escape, arson, petitioning authorities, and full-fledged rebellion. Again, wherever possible, Child relies on letters to document this story.

By the end of the book several generalizations emerge. One of the author's major points is that Indian communities, while resisting

boarding schools' assimilative designs, still looked upon these institutions as "useful" in the struggle to survive in a world where older patterns of life were either not permitted or irrelevant. Child cites numerous instances of parents enrolling children or orphaned youth enrolling themselves as a means of escaping the killing poverty of the reservation. The promise of food, shelter, and the hope of learning a useful trade provided the needed motivation. Another essential point of Child's study relates to the extent and nature of student communication with relatives back home. She argues that through several means—letters, parent visitations, and the so-called "moccasin telegraph"—students were rarely cut off entirely from either the cultural or psychological support of Ojibwe society; and it is partly for this reason, she contends, that generations of boarding school youth were able to maintain their Ojibwe identity. At the same time, students emerged from the boarding school experience with an enhanced sense of "Indianness" as well. At Flandreau, Ojibwe youth rubbed cultural shoulders with Sioux students; at Haskell the intertribal mix included Cheyenne, Osage, Pawnee, and several other groups. Indeed, among the many long-term influences (and unintentional consequences) of boarding schools on Indian America was their contribution to the formation of twentieth-century pan-Indianism. Child is not the first to make these points, but her thoughtful study lends considerable weight to their credence.

There is little to criticize about this very fine book. It should be noted, however, that *Boarding School Seasons* is not a comprehensive account of Indian boarding schools. Perhaps because Child relies so heavily on letters, such subjects as students' religious, academic, and extracurricular experiences receive little or no attention. Also, this reviewer would have liked to see some discussion of Ojibwe cultural and educational traditions against which to juxtapose the boarding school experience. In this connection, Child is terribly vague about the precise ways in which government

education influenced Ojibwe lifeways and outlook. That aside, this perceptive, often poignant book is a genuine contribution to our understanding of a crucial moment in Indian history. Child's study not only deserves to be read by scholars in the field, but ought to be considered seriously as a collateral text in courses on Native American history and ethnic studies.

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