

May 25, 2022

**FOLLOW UP ANSWERS BY MATTHEW WAR BONNET RELATED TO HIS MAY 12, 2022 TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE UNITED STATES HEARING ON THE “TRUTH AND HEALING COMMISSION ON INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOL POLICY ACT” (H.R. 5444)**

Questions from Rep. Grijalva (questions in bold):

**1. How long did you attend the St. Francis Boarding School?**

**Answer:** I attended the St. Francis Boarding School from 1952 to 1959 or 1960. This was 8 years. I first went to the school when I was six years old and left the school ready for high school. Each year I was at the school I was there for 10 months out of the year.

**a. How often were you required to attend church services?**

**Answer:** I had to attend church services every day, 7 days a week. On Monday through Saturday we had “low mass,” which was services at the chapel every morning for 45 minutes to an hour. On Sunday, we had “high mass,” which was a longer service on Sunday morning. Many of us kids were altar boys during these services. In addition to these services, we also had religious classes during school.

**2. Your testimony mentions how generations of youth withstood abuse at Indian boarding schools, including the generations in your own family.**

**a. In your experience, what has helped you and your family the most in the healing process?**

**Answer:** My parents were instrumental in the healing process for me, my mother and father. The both went to boarding schools and you could see in my father’s eyes, what had happened to him, he had rage in his eyes. During my time at the school, I had this rage too. My father saw this and he helped. He gave me songs to sing, and these songs gave me spiritual strength. This strength helped me during my time at the school.

Talking about my experiences has also helped with the healing process. My siblings and I did not speak about our experience for so long, for me it has been 70 years. This long time of not speaking about our experiences allowed the hurt to just stay with us. By now speaking on it, we can hopefully help clear out our hurt.

Questions from Rep. Leger Fernandez (questions in bold):

**1. Based on your research, how did boarding schools begin? What was the purpose behind their creation?**

**Answer:** On the beginning of boarding schools, this happened in the 19th century. Back in this century, Tribes were under the War Department and certain government officials were assigned to handle the “Indian problem.” These officials noticed that religious groups were encountering Tribes and living besides Tribes. The officials decided to implement a policy that allowed these religious groups to work with Native people in their corresponding areas. The Government then allocated a certain number of Tribes to certain religious groups within the area. This is how everything was set up. For example, in the Dakota Territory, the Catholic Church was the main religious group and they worked with the Government in receiving Indian lands and setting up schools.

As far as the purpose behind their creation, it was about assimilating Indians. The Government viewed us as savages, and we needed to be Christians and civilized. This is why we were forbidden to speak our native languages or engage in any cultural activity. The Government also gave our lands away to the churches and gave money to the churches.

**2. Your testimony notes how the St. Francis Boarding School forced you to speak English and Latin as a student.**

**a. If you are able to, can you speak further on this experience and how important Native language preservation is to tribal communities?**

Both of my parents were fluent Lakota speakers. At the school however, we were forbidden to speak Lakota and were taught English, Latin, and Spanish instead. The time at the school made me forget my Lakota language and this greatly hurt me as a Lakota person. I felt inadequate. I remember in high school there was a ceremony in the gym and Old Man Red Cloud was speaking in Lakota. I could not understand all the things he was saying because I had lost some of the language. He sang his grandfather’s song and this made me want to study who the Lakota people were, and not who the Church and others said we were.

Language preservation is very important to tribal communities because language is a core component of our culture. It is who we are. Lakota people have always had our languages, our traditions, and ceremonies and these things have remained intact for several millennia. I sat on my Tribe’s Tribal Council for many years and we always supported the Lakota language.

\*\*\*\*Picture below was taken at the St. Francis Boarding school of Mathew War Bonnet and sent out for donations. Mr. War Bonnet did not receive any of these funds accepted on his behalf.



Matthew  
War Bonnet