

*The Dark Side of the Indian Boarding School System

For me this is the perfect imperfect topic. My grandmother and all of her siblings were taken to Chemawa Boarding School in Oregon at young ages. Three of them Ray, Wesley and Esther never returned. They were assimilated and moved to Washington where they lived the rest of their lives. And her youngest sister, Pearl, died as a very young child. So four of my grandmother's siblings were essentially removed from her life permanently when they were children. Her other three brothers were taken to Chemawa also, but ran away as soon as they could. So my grandmother was left at Chemawa alone. She was not allowed to return home in eight years, even though her mother wrote and asked for her to come home because she needed her.

Life at the boarding school is not something she ever talked about. But this one photo was one thing she did discuss with me. She told me these were her friends and that they were all from different states. Starting from the right are: Alma who was from Montana, Ruth from Oregon, Marie from Alaska, and my grandmother from California. As young children they were dressed sack dresses and their primary lessons were regarding picking strawberries. The most important lesson was to NEVER eat the strawberries or they would be punished.



A couple of photos in her boarding school collection are fascinating. One shows young girls with a basket of strawberries and the photographer is telling them to smile and eat one of the strawberries. The look in their eyes says everything. They are wondering if this is a joke, or is he trying to trick them and get them in trouble or what? There is also a photo probably from the same session of girls dressed in pure white dresses reserved for special occasions like photo session I would predict. They are in the fields kneeling carefully to not get their dresses dirty, without baskets, facing the camera.

One might wonder if perhaps the classroom education compensated for the hard labor? But it didn't; it was inferior. When she came home from Chemawa at age 16, Grandma went to school at home to finish the eighth grade. It may have been humiliating for her to go to school with children, but she did it. She wanted to learn that badly.

Reading the "The Dark Side of Sex" Marius P. Tungilik finally gave me the means to express and expose to the light of day my grandmother's experiences. She never spoke of this time in her life. My father and his brothers were never told or did not speak of her experiences if they knew about them. All they ever said was that her brothers ran away. I have only spoken around the edges of this experience. I have told people that my grandmother was taken to an Indian Boarding School in Oregon called Chemawa and she was kept there for 8 years and was never allowed to return home until she was 16. They usually look at me in disbelief and nothing more is said. But, Mr. Tungilik has given me a way voice to the abuse my grandmother endured, through writing. I can and will write about it because IT WAS ABUSE. MY GRANDMOTHER WAS ABUSED FOR EIGHT YEARS BY THE INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOL SYSTEM.

* Inspired by "The Dark Side if Sex" by Marius P. Tungilik in *Me Sexy* 2008.

This song fits perfectly with the writing in response to *Me Sexy* and the mood I find myself in these days. Hmmm.