

May 25, 2022

Chairwoman Teresa Leger Fernandez
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Fernandez and Members of the Committee:

My name is David McCoy. I am 69 years old and an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. My grandmother was Christine Josephine Villeneuve Nicholas. My grandfather was Gideon Alcide Nicholas. My mother was one of their twelve children, all of whom were enrolled members of the tribe. Both my grandmother and grandfather were sent to federal boarding schools. Gideon attended the Wahpeton Indian School starting when he was 16, where he stayed for three years (1912-1915); Grandmother Christine started at Fort Totten in 1909 when she was 9 years old. When she was 13, her health deteriorated too much to stay and she was sent home. Christine's brother, Alfred Villeneuve, and sister, Mary Agnes Villeneuve St. Claire, also attended Fort Totten.

I am writing to share a part of their history and the impact that this federal policy had and continues to have on our family. It is my belief that the negative experiences my grandparents lived through at the boarding schools shook our family tree and have had lasting negative impacts on the generations that followed. I support and believe that H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act is essential for the children who suffered under this abusive policy as well as for their tribes and descendants.

The need for this legislation became apparent to me when visiting the boarding school at Fort Totten, which is now a state historical site in North Dakota. When I asked the interpreter where the graves of the children who died while attending the school were located, her reply left me dumbfounded. She stated that she was unaware of any graves or of any children having died while attending the school. I find it beyond reason to believe that no child passed away at this institution, and I believe it is essential that the federal government establish protocols in alignment with the wishes of tribes to identify and care for the remains of any children in unknown graves at Fort Totten, as well as at any of the other Indian boarding schools.

To manage boarding school enrollment of Indian children, Federal policy authorized agents to withhold rations from Indian families who refused to send their children to boarding schools. This policy forced Indian parents into a binary choice with negative implications regardless of which decision they made. Either they could send their children away or they would have less

food for their family, including children who were so young as to be ineligible for boarding school enrollment and elders who also depended on them for support.

It is well known that the boarding schools punished students for speaking their language or practicing their traditional religious beliefs or cultural traditions. Like many others who attended the boarding schools, the staff and faculty at the federal boarding schools made my grandparents ashamed of being Indian. Consequently, in the years after leaving the schools, they only spoke their language when they thought their children couldn't hear or when they wanted to speak privately. As a result, while my mother could understand some words, she didn't learn the language, thus denying her children and her grandchildren an opportunity to learn their original language. It is fair to say that in a very significant way, we were cut off from the teachings and knowledge of our tribal language and cultural practices because of the actions of the staff and faculty at the boarding schools.

The boarding schools also usurped the authority of my great-grandparents over their children. When my great-grandfather, Antoine, tried to bring my grandfather home to help with the harvest on the family farm, the school administrator refused to let him come home. Part of the federal mission was to industrialize and "civilize" Native children through agricultural educational activities, and yet they refused to let my grandfather go home to support his father in making the crop harvest successful. Our family no longer has the land that my great-grandfather farmed, and while I cannot say that the boarding school was directly or indirectly related to the failure of the farm and the loss of the land, I have stood on that land and have seen that it could be farmed successfully with appropriate resources. The failure of the school to let my grandfather help his father on the farm is another indicator that a primary purpose of the school was control, not learning.

In my view, there is nothing redeemable about the experiences my grandparents had at the boarding schools. These schools took children from their homes by force or coercion and kept them away from their families for long periods of time. The education they offered was substandard vocational training masquerading as school. Neither my grandfather nor my grandmother left the schools with skills for upward economic mobility. My grandparents were sent away for an education that was supposed to enable them to participate in the economic workforce in a meaningful way, and yet it appears that they did not develop any trade skills that enabled them to be better prepared for the workforce. When they left their home and community looking for work (the training they received at the boarding schools did not lead to economic opportunity on the reservation), my grandparents became entirely disconnected from their siblings as well as their extended family. It has taken years for my daughters and me to reconnect with our extended tribal family in a significant way.

The violence and isolation of the schools kept my grandparents from learning how to build healthy, loving relationships with their children, family members and extended family. Because of the boarding schools, my grandparents had limited opportunities to learn how to parent their children or build the skills to contribute to their community economically. The boarding schools kept them away from much of their culture, including ceremony and language, and they struggled for the rest of their lives with negative coping strategies and emotional distress. While my grandparents were at the schools, they missed out on critical years and experiences where they would have learned how to care for their children and grow as part of their community. Their lack of parenting skills was passed on to my mother, as well as my aunts and uncles, a dysfunction that rippled across generations: my grandparents didn't teach my mother how to be a nurturing parent, and she did not provide a wholesome supportive home environment for her children. My grandparents internalized and passed along the abuses from school staff that stood in for parenting at the schools, along with adopting the negative coping mechanisms of alcohol that so often accompany traumatic life experiences. As we all know, at the schools, punishments included whippings and beatings, isolation, and other forms of punishment that became part of our lives. These abuses didn't start with us; the boarding schools delivered them into our homes.

Native families have known these histories, but they have gone unknown by the general public for too long. I thank the members of the Committee for their support of the tribes through the enactment of H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act, and I thank the National Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States for the opportunity to share my testimony.

With regards, I am

Sincerely,

David T. McCoy