

Hello,

I read you were looking for testimony from Indian Boarding School survivors or their descendants. My grandfather and four of his siblings attended the Mt. Pleasant Indian Boarding School in Mt. Pleasant, MI.

My grandfather was just six years old when he was sent there in 1894. He was actually Metis, French Canadian and one quarter Ojibwa. I believe he and his siblings were sent there because at that time, with the influx of English/Yankee, German and Irish settlers into Michigan, there was a real hatred for anyone with Indian ancestry. Prior to about 1837 when Michigan became a State, the French and the Michigan Indians enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship for almost 200 years during the fur trade and being Indian or part Indian/Metis, was common and no one thought anything of it.

My family came from a long line of distinguished Indian interpreters and guides. Even though my grandfather and his siblings were only a quarter Ojibwa through marriages with the French, they were well-known in mid-Michigan and couldn't hide their ancestry.

My grandfather and his one brother and three sisters never spoke of their years at the Indian boarding school. My grandfather stayed close to his brother for their entire lives. However, the rest of the family scattered. The brothers changed the French last name and Anglicized it and then for the rest of their lives, passed as White.

There was never any talk of their Indian ancestry. All my mother told me was there was someone in our family who was an interpreter between the French and the Indians. Imagine my surprise when after doing extensive research, I found out the interpreter was really my Indian ancestor!

The Indian boarding schools were designed to blow up Indian culture and families. This was successfully done to my family. Because the brothers and sisters were separated at the boarding school, normal family bonds were never created between the brothers and sisters. I think the reason my grandfather and his brother stayed so close was because the children were housed in separate dormitories for boys and girls. My great-uncle was just a year younger than my grandfather so he must have arrived when he was six and my grandfather was seven.

As a mother, I cannot imagine having my children taken from me and having them gone for seven years. My grandfather was there until he was 13 years old. He and all his siblings were completely robbed of a normal childhood and the love and nurturing they would have received from their parents.

So you might be wondering what are the residual effects on the descendants? Certainly my mother's upbringing was strongly shaped by her father's experience. I think his situation was so bad that he did everything in his power to make sure his child had as an ideal childhood as possible. That must have been a challenge during the Great Depression but he somehow pulled it off pretty well. But what was very abnormal, and which spilled into my immediate family was the insistence that nothing unpleasant ever be addressed.

It's very abnormal to grow up not learning how to deal with conflict, because none is allowed, and to live in a pretend world that everything is okay when it is not. I think those were survival skills that my grandfather learned in boarding school which he passed on to my mother. I also think his experience there was so bad and painful that he just wanted to create this existence that if there was pain and unhappiness, it just wasn't addressed or dealt with.

My mom had many cousins, some born the same year as she, that she never met. These were the children of the paternal aunts she never knew. In their own way, my grandfather and his siblings all abandoned the parents because I'm sure they felt abandoned when they were sent to Indian Boarding School. They didn't see them very much and my mother didn't know these grandparents very well.

Why did this happen? Because my grandfather's mom was half Indian. Never in the history of this country has there ever been an ethnic group so horribly treated. During the 1800s, the U.S. Army hunted and massacred innocent Indian men, women and children. When the boarding schools were opened, Indian children were taken from their families by force. When the children ran away from the schools, they were hunted down by police and forcibly taken back to the schools where it is reported they were beaten for speaking their Native language, and there are reports of sexual abuse.

I did not find out my grandfather and his siblings attended Indian boarding school until after my mother died at the age of 96 in 2015. If she knew, it was a secret she took to her grave. But by finding out, I have been able to track down some of my long-lost cousins, children and grandchildren of my maternal great-aunts.

These cousins have the same story as mine. Their grandmother or great-grandmother never spoke of her ancestry, other than saying she was French and never spoke of the boarding school. Interestingly, if one looks at the census records for all of these people, they all claim they can read and write and they all deny that they attended school.

As a descendant of a boarding school survivor, I carry the pain of my grandfather's experience. I mourn for the little boy who didn't have his mom when he was sick or who lost all his childhood in an institution just because of his ancestry. I wonder if my grandfather knew that his own grandfather was a celebrated Indian guide and translator, who knew all the Indian languages, plus English and French and who once saved an expedition of scientists on Lake Huron during a storm because of his excellent canoeing skills?

I am sorry our family ever had to be ashamed of who they were, just because others decided so. Yes, a lot of healing still needs to be done. My heart is broken for what my family went through. And I have only addressed the pain of my grandfather and his siblings. What about my great-grandmother, who lost five of her children to the school? Thankfully, her youngest did not attend. He was born in 1898. I have not been able to find the reason he was not taken. At least she had one child she could raise from babyhood to adulthood.

Thank you for this opportunity to share a bit of my family's story. Our country has treated Native Americans so shabbily, even not giving them citizenship until 1924. Ironically, I have an Indian cousin who served in Company K, Michigan Sharpshooters, during the Civil War. They were a special company made up entirely of Native Americans, who naturally, were great shots! They served honorably, even though they weren't even citizens, while during the same years, Indians out West were hunted like rabbits. Completely shameful.

Again, thank you for this opportunity. Much should be done to make amends as to the way Native Americans have been treated.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Bourne