

Date: May 24, 2022

To: House of Natural Resources Committee

From: Jill Perry Neumeister, Enrolled Pawnee Tribal Member, Gig Harbor, WA

RE: H.R. 5444 / S. 2907, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the US Act

Nawa. My name is Jill Perry Neumeister. I am an enrolled member of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma and my family had at least two generations of children attend Indian boarding schools.

My great-great grandmother Nora Pearson b. 1864 Nebraska attended the Genoa Indian School in Nebraska from around 1871 – 1875 just before she survived the Pawnee Tribe's Long Walk as they were removed from the Nebraska Pawnee Reservation to the Oklahoma Pawnee Reservation.

Her daughter, my great grandmother Gertrude Esau b. 1882 also attended an Indian boarding school, the Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma. The following excerpt confirming Gertrude's enrollment at the Chilocco Indian School is from a letter dated January 6, 1980 from the United States Department of the Interior, BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS, Anadarko Area Office.

Gertrude (Gertie) Esau: Our records show she entered Chilocco Indian School on September 5, 1895 at the age of 12 years. Both parents were recorded as not living at the time she entered school. No names on either parent were recorded, however, a guardian's name had been, Mr James Murie. Gertie entered school at the same time as a seven-year old boy named Joe Esau, presumably her brother. The kids' Indian name was listed as "Sta-ha-da-saw" This is all we could derive from the records in this office on Gertrude Esau.

As the Pawnee granddaughter of two grandmothers, mother and daughter, who were each rounded up as children and forced to attend boarding schools, I unequivocally support H.R. 5444 / S. 2907. It's painful and traumatic to contemplate of the terror, violation and abuse that my grandmothers endured and witnessed as young girls, a generation apart, inside these brutal schools that were really prisons. It's also tragic to my family who have suffered from a lost connection to culture as a result.

Before she passed on, my great grandmother Gertrude Esau shared a story with a family member that included a memory of a little boy who tried to climb the fence to get to his parents on the other side and was shot and killed by soldiers. Grandma said it was "so the kids stopped trying to climb over." The UN has declared that removing children from families and culture is considered genocide. It's also pure terrorism and has caused devastating generational trauma that still endures. Being connected to one's culture is a human right, however much of my family grew up very distant from the Tribe and our culture. Many of us have never learned our language or participated in culture practices and ceremony.

There is still so much to do to get to the bottom of the assimilation brutality that stole children from their families to be stripped of their cultures. The truth needs to be told about how many children attended these schools that were designed to destroy Indigenous society, communities, values, cultures and languages. But first we must bring the children home that never returned – those precious babies that were killed at these cruel schools and buried in unmarked graves.

Grandma Gertrude talked about her time at boarding school with my cousins. This is part of that conversation: In 1984, under orders, U.S. government soldiers were to remove all Pawnee Indian children three years of age and older from their homes on the Pawnee Indian Reservation located in Indian territory Oklahoma. Families were told their children would be transported back to their homes each Saturday and transported back to the Chilocco Indian School on Sunday. This promise was never kept.

Grandma Gertrude told her granddaughters that one Saturday many Indian families were in desperation to locate their children. They came by horse and buggy and gathered in large numbers along the school fences. Gertrude looked very hard for her mother and stepfather and only located them as they were traveling away from the school. She could see her mother crying. She called and called to them, but they never heard her and were soon out of sight. My great-grandmother Gertie recalled “Children started climbing the fences trying to escape and the soldiers would pull the children off.” Gertrude remembered, “One boy who made it to the top of the fence and was shot and killed by the soldiers, so the kids stopped trying to climb over.”

I ask you to pass H.R. 5444 so that the work can continue to bring out the truth about not only the scale and scope of Indian boarding schools but also the terror and atrocities of what happened at the boarding schools and our Nation’s responsibility for the policies that created it and supported it. Bringing this into the daylight with Tribal consultation and consent, in a culturally appropriate manner is the only way to begin a path of healing for our Native communities, our families and my family. We have a right to know the truth.

Thank you to the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States for the opportunity to speak.

Sincerely,

Jill Perry Neumeister
Enrolled Pawnee Tribal Member
Gig Harbor, Washington