

Ms. Lisa Marie Drotts
Enrolled Member: Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians



Mr. Henry Travis Drotts Koehler
Direct Descendant of an Enrolled Member: Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians



Mr. Grant Benjamin Drotts Koehler
Direct Descendant of an Enrolled Member: Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians



Rita Marie Dumont Drotts (1935-1982) was an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians in North Dakota. She attended Marty Indian School in Marty, South Dakota, from 1939 to 1948. Afterward, she attended Immaculate Conception School in Stefan, South Dakota, where she received her high school diploma in 1956.

We thank the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States for this opportunity to have our voices heard. In honor of Rita Marie Dumont Drotts, we, her surviving descendants, respectfully submit the following testimony in support of H.R.5444 and S.2907:

The following is the testimony of Ms. Lisa Marie Drotts—an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and proud daughter of Rita Marie Dumont Drotts:

Mom spoke little of her heritage. I imagine she learned early on to keep her mouth shut. Spending her formative years away from home, she gathered little to speak of anyway.

She did tell me about her first day of school. Her parents had spent precious cash to buy a few personal items they could afford for the girls. Each girl was given a box filled with things that no one else in the family would receive. But the gifts wouldn't last. And by the end of the first day they returned to their rooms with nothing. There was no one there to comfort them. Their parents were five hundred miles away and Rita was only five. But the memory of her family had already been stripped away.

The years I knew her, Mom struggled. It is hard to believe she was ever in an environment where adults were there to help the children they watched. In the 1960s and 70s trauma had yet to become such a universally accepted cause of psychological difficulty. Mom carried significant personal and historical trauma that no one, least of all herself, thought to acknowledge, even those who loved her. There were few remedies for these problems in those days. There were even fewer for an Indian that never learned to speak up. She was prescribed Valium when she was in her mid thirties, and she took them for more than ten years. When she decided to stop, she was given little support. She was completely traumatized by her long withdrawal and eventually became psychotic. She was sent to a hospital to calm down. Upon release, she attended a psychotherapy group where she was prescribed a "newer" medication to treat her anxiety. One evening she had a glass or two of wine (something she rarely did). The

next morning, she was found alone and unresponsive in her apartment. She was only 47 years-old.

Mom maintained that she was more sensitive than most to the medication she took over the years. The cause of death was ruled as heart failure. I've always considered the combination of not just the alcohol and the medication, but her sensitivity to it that was the real cause of her death. Even today, I don't often hear of medical trials focused on the effects of medication on Indian peoples. I doubt there were any in 1982. I assume the doctor thought the medication's effect would be the same for Mom, as it would be for any white person. But I also believe she never told him her background. She had learned to keep her mouth shut about that sort of thing.

I don't remember when I learned I was Indian. I remember hating the corrective shoes Mom made us wear when I was 8. She had driven my brother and I to a specialist in a neighboring town a few hours away. Mom was worried about our flat feet, and wanted to fix us before they became a problem. They might betray us as Indian.

Native Cultural activities were not something we attended while I was growing up. Even after working in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, mom never talked about it. Once, when I was twelve, we visited her relatives in North Dakota. Being Indian was not a topic of conversation there. Once we visited some cousins who lived on the reservation. One thing that really amazed me was that they didn't have a bathroom in their house. This was around 1969.

I still struggle with my anxiety. I am mistrustful of most and I never feel *completely* safe. I rarely believe that things will turn out okay or that others will be there when I need them. This is my inheritance. Today I am 65, but only now am I beginning to see that I was ashamed of my flat feet. But I decided to change that. I am learning to relax my arches. I am learning to walk tall on my flat feet. I wish Mom was here to see it. In her memory, I support the passage of H.R.5444 and S.2907.

The following is the testimony of Mr. Henry Travis Drotts Koehler—proud grandson of Rita Marie Dumont Drotts:

We can consider ourselves members of the lucky group as far as boarding schools are concerned. Our grandmother not only survived her time there, but seems to have avoided those terrible acts of violence and abuse which many were not so lucky to escape. She was able to graduate from high school and marry a man she loved and bear my mother and her brother. These are things we can be thankful for as my brother and I would not otherwise be here. So no, we cannot speak to the matter as far as violence and abuse is concerned. We have only an outsider's perspective.

But it is this outsider's perspective which we can speak from. And it is this status, though unrecognized, that gives us voice to speak to the deterioration of our culture, but not to that of we its people. We walk with Rita's feet. We speak with her mouth and see through her eyes. And if we pass on telling our story we pass on telling her story too. We risk becoming another success of divide and conquer.

Why are we outsiders? Our ancestors made choices. All of them, choices—as we do today. Each one a step along a path, leading us to and from the present moment. In one way, our grandmother's story is typically American. She left home, went to school, found someone outside the family, and integrated herself and her children into the beautifully diverse fabric of this nation. And there again, we can be grateful, as it is this commingling between peoples which

is the foundation and strength of this nation. I believe in the importance of all my ancestors, white and native alike. It is not only through my voice, but through their actions and their stories that I am who I am. And these are stories that are not passed down in some great noble way as with kings or aristocrats, but through family dinners and reunions and picture books and ums and ahs and oh I can't quite remember how that went. And yes, much of it is lost to time. Much of it lost to lack of interest or the speeding wheels of the present. But there are differences between the stories of my white ancestors and those of my native ancestors.

The whites chose to come here, to escape persecution or to follow opportunity. And in many ways, it is true, they lost grip on their culture too. But there is a difference between the choice made for freedom and the choice made to lose it. False options are the fool's reward in this American paradise. Freedom or death is what the choice so often comes down to. And it is a noble choice when made defiantly in the face of a king, but when that choice is dictated by the oppressor, it is one of blackmail and not of a reaching for freedom.

Why are we outsiders? Are we ashamed of our tribal heritage? Is it boring? Unimportant? Did our mother and grandmother fail in their duties as teachers? Or was our history suppressed in them and hidden from us? Can children ever be blamed for the flames of heritage that have been stamped out inside of us. Or is it the stamping boots that must be addressed? And maybe even better to be addressed, the head that directs the stamping. Why was there stamping? Why were the flames put out? Why were the ashes scattered? We know the answers to these questions. And we can hold to our status as outsiders from our own tribe as evidence that that mission was accomplished. But the time has come to hear the stories. The time has come for those who cling to the threads of their cultural heritage to hear it. The time has come for those who shake hands with Native people to hear it. The time has come to tell the story to those who have never walked on Native land, or at least for those who think they haven't. And it is this sharing of the story that is the true triumph of this project. I want to ask my mother and my brother more questions. I want to tell them everything I feel and listen to every word they say. Even the few testimonies I've heard have empowered me. But I want to hear them all. They will enrich the lives of all who walk this land. And even if nothing comes of these statements—this opportunity to share our story with others has become an opportunity to share our story with each other—something which our tribe of three had yet to do.

Only this past month had I told my father I was struggling. Like my grandmother and mother and brother I tend to keep my mouth shut about things that are troubling me. I keep my family in the dark because I don't want to be a burden. Sure, I would tell my mom things occasionally, but never my brother. And the stories my mother has shared with you today are stories that I had not seen until they were written on this page. I know she wanted to protect us.

It is this protection which leads to the current state of affairs. Protection of a short history. Protection of a timid American culture. An insecurity of a people who, despite their victories, have done so much wrong in so little time. But I think every American deserves more than that. I think we all have the right to know our history—good and bad. It is the only way we can move forward with any real strength. And selfishly, I declare it as *my* right to know my Grandmother's history too.

The following is the testimony of Mr. Grant Benjamin Drotts Koehler—proud grandson of Rita Marie Dumont Drotts:

In his 1892 speech to the National Conference of Charities and Correction, Captain Richard Henry Pratt laid out a key idea for the formation of the Carlisle Indian School and other boarding schools across the nation:

A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.

I had always known that my grandmother was removed from the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation when she was very young and sent to a Catholic boarding school. However, I have only recently understood what that meant in terms of cultural erasure. In piecing together my grandmother's experience—through family photos and my mother's stories of her—I began to understand the psychological trauma she endured. In her formative years, she was severed from Indian culture and sent to boarding schools that told her to suppress it. To be Indian was to be an anathema, and this sentiment was reinforced not only by American society and Catholic boarding schools but also by her family as a means of survival. To her, being Indian became something that should never be talked about or acknowledged—something that must remain hidden at all costs. An apt example of Pratt's destructive idea at work, killing any semblance of what it meant to be Indian. However, after all of this, my grandmother still decided to enroll my mother and uncle in the tribe—a radical act of Native agency in a world that had tried everything to erase it.

Nevertheless, because of my grandmother's reticence, I remain the penultimate goal of Pratt's idea: a U.S. citizen, wholly separated from Turtle Mountain Chippewa culture, with a blood quantum fraction too small to be eligible for tribal membership. My Native cultural inheritance sits next to a precipitous cliff, poised to fall into a vast pit of nothingness—forever forgotten—completing Pratt's goal to “kill the Indian” in me. To this day, the legacy of Indian boarding schools, the Dawes Act, and blood quantum are still working to strip my family of our Turtle Mountain Chippewa heritage. Although I continue to struggle with what it means to be a Turtle Mountain Chippewa, my grandmother's strength drives me to keep our Indian heritage alive. I believe that H.R.5444 and S.2907 will help accomplish this goal.