

Early Schooling and Oklahoma Tribal Character

The education of our Kiowa people has always been one of my favorite subjects for visitations, discussions, and debates. I have been reminiscing over the past few days, probably because of Easter Sunday, about our family gatherings and the discussions I heard about my elders' lives, including their educational experiences. Regardless of what the non-Indian research says not all Indians who went to federal schools had bad experiences. My research and experiences with Indian schooling suggest Oklahoma-born Indians do not always fit into the stereotype Indian boarding school characterization we read about in today's Indian affairs areas. Sure, there is evidence of mistreatment (mental and physical) but I question to what extreme was this condition a contributor to the current mental and identity state of our Oklahoma Indian people today. Personally speaking, I do not fit the non-Indian imagery of "Indian" (still stoic, introverted, unsure of self, non-verbal, limited in schooling, broken English, etc,) and I resent being patronized because of someone's ignorance about our people and ancestry. The early "Indian" schools' ultimate goal was to eliminate the Indian/Tribal cultural base as a means of assimilating Indian/Tribal children, thus eliminating the "Indian problem" for the expansion of the United States. This approach was effective to a certain extent. I maintain that Oklahoma Indian people are made from different backgrounds. However, they are all still viewed by the non-Indian segment as all the same even to this day.

Today (2024) many of our American Indian tribes maintain a high level of tribal cultural identity while others have a high level of

assimilation factors and conditions. As a teacher, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather I maintain that if you keep hearing the same misinformation all the time you will eventually think that what you hear is true. The same outcome with what you read. If all you read is not in your best interest, your interest will be questionable. Indian people have been victimized by what the non-Indians have said and written about Indians for so long, and most of it is not good. Generations of Indian people believe what they heard and read about their ancestors/people/and their lives. Many of our Kiowa people received their early education in schools that intended to convert them to a religious value set in, and for life. Early Indian schools in Oklahoma were governed by various religious denominations, supplemented with federal funding, until the public outcry about the separation of government and religion found its way into these classrooms. My grandpa went to Rainy Mt. School (Baptist). My grandmother went to St. Patrick's Mission (Catholic). Mom went to Ft. Sill Indian School, on to Chilocco, and finally to Bacone College. Dad went to Sequoyah Indian School in Tahlequah. Many of our Oklahoma pre-baby boomers and baby boomers went to Haskell and other post-secondary schools throughout the Midwest region. A vast majority who attended these schools turned out to be great examples, positive role models, and leaders for later generations of Oklahoma Indian citizens. My parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents were all successful individuals who raised some fine families, many who formulated, and continue to formulate, the spirit and leadership of all Oklahomans today. I believe there is another side of the boarding school story that needs to be told and recorded in the context of the positive contributions

generated in the lives of our Oklahoma Indian people. The "one Indian image" needs to be contexted to understand the full history of the Indian boarding school from a broader representation of tribal people, especially our Oklahoma tribal people.

Why am I carrying on about the education of Indian people? Because I want things to change in the context and content of Indian education for the sake of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren and as long as the content remains unchanged they will not be afforded a healthy opportunity to know who they are and what they can be. Certain currently elected Kiowa officials have been advocating and lobbying for a vehicle to take our tribal education to a destination. My position is that before we can go somewhere we need to know where we are at and where we want to go. All too long the non-Indians have been telling us who we are and where we should go, not allowing us to exert our tribal education sovereignty. The education destiny of our Kiowa citizens should rest in the purview of Kiowa parents not according to one individual. A large segment of our Kiowa people wants to see our children excel in the basics of life and insist on certain content as the focus of their education. Experience fits well with knowledge and vice versa. We must have a solid education foundation in philosophy and theory as part of a long-range educational plan. One person deciding the *what's, why's, and how's*, of our tribal education programs and service thrusts is not conducive to the achievement of tribal education. Our tribe needs to engage tribal parents and identify needs and take advantage of its current tribal resources/sources to develop a long-range plan for tribal education rather than always depending on the federal government to dictate our education future. Our legislators need

to address our tribal education in the form of “legislative resolutions” to be approved by the KIC for any tangible movement in our tribal education plan along with funding strategies. As I have said before, the "one Indian one way" strategy is old and outdated. We have been educationally victimized by this approach for too long and must exert our educational sovereignty today, for tomorrow and future attainment.