

## **Mission school remembered...**

It was back in 1971, and several of us were sitting around a bar table, trying to out-Indian each other. The competition was who had it roughest in boarding school. NCAI Director Leo Vocu and I held for the mission schools, a couple other guys for the BIA schools. I don't remember the outcome – it wasn't important; but the gist of my recalling the occasion is how we viewed our boarding school experience – as a challenge met and endured, and perhaps even to be boasted about. But the horrors we recalled, even as we exaggerated them, were not as horrible as some being described now in class action litigation against the schools.

News of the litigation has gotten many old boarding school chums to communicating -- via e-mail, telephone and through the mail, recalling our own experiences and comparing notes.

Several years ago I heard the venerable Sioux elder, Sid Bird, very movingly tell about his introduction to boarding school when he was a child. I have heard others tell a similar story of their first day, a story of betrayal in the earliest years of a boy's life. It's an experience vivid in my memory.

My father died in 1937, leaving my mother alone to raise five boys. Although the great depression was on the wane, there was little money. Two years later, with the threat of losing me to adoption as social workers were insisting, my mother decided instead to place me in a Catholic mission school, even though I was only four years old at the time.

It was to be the first time I would be away from home for an extended period and I dreaded it. My brother, slightly older, would be there with me, but that was little comfort to me. While my mother enrolled us, I stayed close to her side. But my brother lured me into the playroom to see a special toy or game. Being inside overly long – perhaps only a few minutes really, I sensed that something was terribly wrong and panic hit me. Tearing back outside, I saw that my mother was gone. My brother held me fast to keep me from running after the car that took her away, and he was crying too as he held me. Thus began my school days at Holy Rosary Mission in Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

I hated my brother for his betrayal, but later realized that he did it only to spare our mother further heartbreak, added to the terrible sadness she felt over what she had to do. I forgave him.

I spent the rest of my school years at the mission, graduating in 1952. Over those years I met good people – teachers, administrators, and fellow students. Some have become lifelong friends, and I hold most with good memories.

Life would have been better if I could have stayed in Wanblee with my mother and brothers in our home, which was very poor in material goods, but rich and warm with love and affection. Looking back now, I see Wanblee as always Christmas or summer time, for those were the only times I spent there during my growing-up years. They were wonderful times, with relatives, childhood friends, and the old people especially. If the mission meant to kill the Indian in me – and I don't believe that was their intent, it would have been futile anyway, given the fullness and richness of my cultural world at Wanblee, even in those few months I spent at home each year.

Life in the school was often very hard, especially for the little ones. There was debilitating homesickness. Discipline was strict, and spanking was not uncommon. The food was perhaps nutritious, but seldom appetizing. In the crowded dormitories, disease, such as measles and whooping cough, spread rapidly and laid up many students at any time. But, as with children everywhere, there was also warm friendship, joy and laughter, adventure, and much mischief.

I survived bullies, who were the bane of school life there. The hierarchy among the students was something akin to the Serengeti food chain, with the youngest at the very beginning. For protection, we little kids would pledge for a whole year our dessert or the single pat of butter we would get at each meal. But that only worked if one's hired bully was tougher than other bullies.

And life was frustrating for adolescents. The school had some 200 on the boys' side, and perhaps another 250 on the girls' side. Classes were coeducational through the fifth grade; from there on, the gender separation was complete. In junior high and high school years, of course, there was first love, albeit always from afar, for except on Sunday afternoons and at monthly Sodality dances, there was never a chance to even hold hands.

I was not a good student, nor a scholarly one by any measure. My transcript bears that out. I was a problem to most of the teachers, and was sent many times to the principal's office. A demerit system was in place, with the worst punishment being study hall instead of the movie on Saturday night. I missed many movies, and spent much time struggling to write the required 500-word compositions while listening to the laughter and clapping in the gymnasium above, where the movies were shown. On one occasion I was nearly expelled, saved only by my mother's intercession.

I learned to survive, however, and am proud of the fact that I finished school there; and other Indian boarding school graduates have told me of their pride.

But many traumatic experiences now being described in news stories, and presumably in depositions, are horrors the likes of which I had never witnessed or even heard rumors of during my twelve years in school; and some of them involve the same school I attended a quarter century earlier. Schoolmates I am in touch with say that they never witnessed such horrors either. I received and witnessed many spankings, but nothing that could be described as beatings.

I remember no prohibition, written or otherwise, on speaking the Lakota language. And if there was, signals were certainly confusing, for there were prayers and songs in Lakota. Student dancers performed in full regalia before basketball games, and there were cheers in Lakota during the games. To practice his newly acquired language, Jesuit scholastic John Bryde regaled young students with the Aeneid, much improvised and in Lakota.

This is not to deny the hardship that I experienced in the homesickness and strict discipline and the constant survival struggle in the school. But by the time I graduated, conditions were much improved over what they were when I first started. Daily Mass was no longer mandatory, for example, and children were allowed to go home on weekends. A decade after I graduated, Indian studies was incorporated into the curriculum, including Lakota language. And, later, much-

respected elders, Matt and Nellie Two Bulls, were retained to be on campus to mentor students and otherwise lend a traditional presence.

I do not mean to even try to discredit those who may rightly be seeking justice in lawsuits. The Courts will decide on their veracity. But perspective is needed, and we must look to various experiences among our people in order to achieve it. My story is intended to help provide that, and there are many others with whom I am in touch who tell much the same story that I do.

My greatest motivation for toughing it out was the fact that the person who placed me in the school and kept me there was the one who loved me the most, and cared the most about my future. That, of course, was my Lakota mother. Knowing that, I was able to endure.

I have no regrets. For any measure of success I have achieved, I owe much to my education at Holy Rosary Mission, which is now the Red Cloud Indian School.

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