

Spinning History for Effect...

Historians, authors and journalists – especially columnists – sometimes feel that they have license to change historical fact to support their theme, thesis, or political agenda. But twisting history is dishonest and destructive. And if it is for reasons of personal vendetta, it is most serious, especially if the author is in a position of public trust, such as a reputed historian or a national newspaper columnist.

One prime example of history-twisting is national columnist Tim Giago, who is of Lakota descent. He has, over the past two and a half decades, laid siege to the Catholic Indian boarding school he attended in the 1940s.

Let me say first that I attended that same boarding school every day of my elementary and high school years, including every single day that Tim was there, and the years he wasn't. We were in the same grade, and were the closest of friends.

It is not in defense of the school that I write this, but to address the use of gross and deliberate historical inaccuracies, such as Giago employs in his vengeful attacks.

Take, for instance, one of his May 2006 national columns, in which Giago wrote the following:

“My grandmother Sophie was a teenage student at Holy Rosary Mission, a school about ten miles from Wounded Knee, on the day of the bloody massacre.

She recounted how the soldiers rode to the grounds of the mission school, visibly excited by their actions, and talking loudly about their wonderful victory. The Jesuit priests at the mission school made the children bring water and hay to feed the horses of the troopers.

Grandma Sophie said she could still see blood on the uniforms of the soldiers.

But of course no one told the Indian children at the school of the events of that day even though some of them had relatives that were among the slaughtered.”

In an earlier column he wrote:

“The Seventh Cavalry, Custer's old command, spread out across the Pine Ridge Reservation hunting for survivors. They rode into the playgrounds of the Holy Rosary Indian Mission near Pine Ridge village. Prodded by the Jesuit priests, the children were forced to water and feed their horses. My grandmother, Sophie Abeita, was one of those children.”

The same account, slightly different each time, has appeared in several of his columns.

From his grandmother's account Giago gives the impression that the soldiers had come directly from the massacre. In fact, reports from people at the scene during the action – including newspaper reporters and massacre survivors – tell it differently: After the slaughter had ceased, according to their reports, the troopers recovered the bodies of their dead, struck camp, which included large tents, packed them in wagons and returned, late at night, directly to the agency in Pine Ridge. They did not “spread out across the reservation,” which would have been stupid and deadly, given the tension of the times over the Ghost Dance, and the state of rage among the Oglala warriors who were prepared to fight back.

Besides, spreading out over a hundred square miles of territory unfamiliar to them would have taken several days. And none of the troops returned to the agency by way of the mission, which would have taken them more than twenty five miles out of their way, over rugged terrain.

The troops did go by the mission school the day after the massacre, responding to a report that the school had been set afire by “hostiles.” However, the smoke they viewed from a distance was not the mission, but a small day school just north of the mission. The troops then went on to investigate gunfire from several miles northwest of the school, where another fight had started. All this left little time for feeding the cavalry horses.

(It is interesting to note that the gunfire they went to investigate was Lakota tactics to lead the soldiers into a canyon, where they were immediately surrounded and would have been annihilated, save for the appearance of the 9th Cavalry – the Buffalo Soldiers.)

Written accounts and maps of their stop at the mission placed the cavalry unit outside the fence that surrounding the school, a considerable distance for the children to carry hay and water for the horses.

Giago goes on to say, “But of course no one told the Indian children at the school of the events of that day even though some of them had relatives that were among the slaughtered.” According to journals of a priest and a nun, the children were present they were excitedly told by a Lakota man about the fighting. And it is highly unlikely that any of the children enrolled at the mission had relatives among the massacre victims. The mission children were Oglalas and the massacre victims were mostly Minneconjous from the Cheyenne River Reservation many miles from the Pine Ridge Reservation.

In another barb at the mission in an earlier column (April 1996), Giago explained why he had mixed feelings about the fire that destroyed the old historic church at the school, for although the church was resplendent with Indian designs, it was tainted by its history:

“The red bricks used to construct the church and the buildings attached to it were made, under the supervision of the brothers, by the Indian children attending the mission school. My grandmother Sophie Abeyta was one of the students used as child labor to make those red bricks.”

In my own research for historical and biographical writing, I recently visited the archives of the Catholic Indian missions, which is located at Marquette University in Milwaukee. In an old hardcover journal notebook with pre-numbered pages, there was a listing of all students who attended from the opening of the mission up to the early 1900s. The very first name in the record is that of Sophie Abeyta, Tim’s grandmother. She was one of the first students enrolled in the school. However, she is listed as having attended for one school year – 1888/89. If that is accurate, she was not even at the mission during the Wounded Knee massacre. I found her name later in the files of the National Archives in Kansas City; it was in the first semi-annual report (1888) required by the Indian agent in fulfillment of the mission’s contract with the government. I found her name in no other lists.

As for Sophie Abeyta’s age, those sources show her year of birth as 1871, which would have made her 19 years old in 1890 at the time of the massacre. And she would have been around 27 when the church was built in 1898 -- hardly a “child laborer,” even if child labor was used (which records show was not the case). Besides, at the time the school was being built, there were no students to use for child labor, and wouldn’t be any until the school opened several months after its completion.

These things are obviously written by Giago to hurt the mission school, which he might have reason to feel justified in doing. But in doing so, he is offending history. Once a lie or inaccuracy is published in periodicals and books, it is history and the damage is done; to try correcting it would be like trying to unring a bell.

We who have anything to do with the Indian Press, Indian history, or literature have a trust to our people, and we have a great responsibility to them and to all people for generations hence. We have a

responsibility to honor truth itself, which history must reflect. Truth and accuracy must be our standard; and we must not tolerate inaccuracies and lies that may haunt us in the future, whatever the reason they are used by the author in the first place.

We will not learn from History unless we have a real history, not one that is twisted to satisfy the author's agenda, or to exaggerate our victimhood for whatever reason.

What is needed, perhaps, is a national Native American Historical Society. Not an elite cadre of academic favorites that comprised Rupert Costo's Indian Historical Society in the 1970s. We need an organization for Indian scholars to do research and write true history; and, indeed, to debate it and hone its accuracy and truth.

The bright new era heralded by the National Museum of the American Indian might find it of value to their cause of preserving our history and culture to sanction the concept of a Native American Historical Society.

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