

HISTORY

U.S. Boarding Schools Were The Blueprint For Indigenous Family Separation In Canada

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Heard on All Things Considered

NPR's Mary Louise Kelly talks with Mary Annette Pember, correspondent for *Indian Country Today*, about the roots of indigenous boarding schools in the U.S., which were models for the Canadian system.

TRANSCRIPT:

MARY LOUISE KELLY, HOST:

Canadians are demanding government action after a mass grave of 215 Indigenous children was discovered on the grounds of a former boarding school. The school was more than 150 such institutions in Canada that existed for more than a century. They separated families and forcibly assimilated Indigenous children. People are leaving candles and stuffed animals, rows of empty shoes to remember and honor those lost children.

Now, the controversy in Canada actually has roots in the United States. The Indigenous boarding school system originated in U.S. policy towards Native Americans, and that's what we're going to talk about with our next guest. Mary Annette Pember is national correspondent for *Indian Country Today* and a citizen of the Red Cliff Band of Wisconsin Ojibwe. Thank you for joining us.

MARY ANNETTE PEMBER: Oh, thank you for having me, Mary Louise.

KELLY: Give us just a little bit of the history here. When and why and how did these schools start in the U.S.?

PEMBER: Well, it began as a sort of a means to deal with the, quote, unquote, "Indian problem" and open up the West for settlement. In the late 1860s, after the Civil War, America didn't have that much money, and, you know, killing Indians was pretty expensive. So they came up with this idea that the real problem with Indians is they're just too Indian. If we could separate them from their traditions and their ways and their language, turn them into, quote, unquote, "Americans," they could participate in capitalism, mostly, of course, as servants or farmhands.

Out of that process grew these boarding schools in which a lot of children were forcibly or coerced into attending without any contact with their families and often as young as age 5. The notion and the philosophy of the boarding schools of that era were established by this Army Lieutenant Richard Pratt, who coined the infamous phrase that we need to kill the Indian to save the man - so, in other words, the systematic destruction of Native culture, language and family as a way to save Native people.

KELLY: And where were they?

PEMBER: Well, that's a really good question. We don't actually know the entire number of the schools here in the United States because there really has been no documentation and much of it has been lost to history, but certainly more than twice as many schools than were in Canada.

KELLY: Your mom went to one of these schools. You wrote about it for *The Atlantic*. Where, and what was her experience?

PEMBER: My mother went to a Catholic Indian boarding school in Wisconsin on the Bad River Reservation, St. Mary's. And she called it the sister school. She attended, like, in the '20s, '30s. It was not a good experience for my mother or her siblings. Not a week passed in my life that she didn't make

reference to the sister school and all that she survived there. I think it was just this sort of ongoing trauma that she was really never able to escape. A lot of the messaging was really about Native people just being in need of a correction, and that message was really damaging.

KELLY: This question I'm about to ask is a tough one, and the answer may be unknowable. But I'm wondering, based on your research, based on your family's background, is there any way to know whether anything like what they are finding what has happened in Canada - has anything like that happened here? Do we know?

PEMBER: There actually was one woman, Marsha Small, who did some ground-penetrating radar work on the grounds of Chemawa School, and she found quite a number of graves that were not documented. And many of the children died at the schools. The children slept in close proximity, and so they often would share disease. The food was not good. And also, there was the expense of shipping, you know, the remains home. So often, children would die. They would be buried, and then maybe the parents would be notified later. So the child was just lost to the family.

KELLY: What's been on your mind as you've watched the news these last few days out in Canada?

PEMBER: Well, just hoping that this might be the time that people in the United States will listen. I mean, I've been writing about this for 30 years. I was speaking to the executive director of the Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, Christine McCleave, who's Ojibwe. And she estimates that maybe 10% of U.S. citizens have even heard about the boarding school era.

KELLY: In Canada, as they're reckoning with this, is your hope that that will increase calls here in the U.S. for us to do the same?

PEMBER: Yes, definitely. Of course, Canada has had a very long and fully funded Indian residential school settlement agreement. And they actually did offer financial reparations to people, to survivors and descendants of survivors. And the Canadian government also apologized. In the United States, we really haven't had any of that. But, you know, acknowledgement, I think, by the federal government that this did actually happen to us would mean a great deal.

KELLY: Mary Annette Pember, thank you.

PEMBER: Thank you for having me.

KELLY: She is national correspondent for Indian Country Today and a citizen of the Red Cliff Band of Wisconsin Ojibwe.

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