

Foundation of a Nation: A History of Education at Lac Courte Oreilles Indian Reservation, 1940-1959

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Abstract

This project looks at the changes in education during the 1940's and the 1950's on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation in Northern Wisconsin. The project focuses on four schools: St. Francis Solanus Indian Mission, Kinnamon, New Post School, and White Fish School. The project examines the schools' origins, reactions to the schools, and how the progression of the schools fit in with national education plans of Bureau of Indian Affairs. Eight students of the schools were interviewed on reflection of their experiences in those schools. The project proves that the value of education by the Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO) peoples has been a predominant factor in the tribe's successes. As part of the research for this project, St. Francis and Kinnamon school records were attained, general correspondences to the State Superintendent of Wisconsin Schools were reviewed, and from the Bureau of Indian Affairs archives in Chicago several correspondences pertaining to education on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation were studied.



Original Design for U.S. Non-Reservation Indian Boarding School Hayward, Wisconsin from 1901. The School was built in 1902 and closed in 1934. It housed up 200 Students at a time, the school focused primarily on agricultural training.

Picture courtesy of R.L. McCormick, Hayward, 1901

Introduction

Many reforms in boarding school education took place in the 1930's and 1940's in response to the 1928 Merriam report. The report urged the closing of boarding schools so that children could be at home with their parents. Progressive reformers in the 1930's attempted to reform boarding schools because of the horrific conditions in which the students had to endure. Reformers like John Collier and Willard Beatty worked hard and had great ideas, but were always shackled by an unsympathetic Congress and a lack of funding. In the years from 1930 to 1965 improvement in education for Native American children was vast but slow moving. The effects of these reforms resulted in major changes for Native American students on the LCO Reservation.

Day Schools

The boarding school in Hayward was the main education option for LCO children for thirty-two years. Beginning in 1925 with Kinnamon School, day schools began to return to the reservation. Four day schools operated on the reservation between 1940 – 1959. An identical school to Kinnamon was built at the same time nearby in Reserve. In 1933 the Whitefish community had their own two room schoolhouse that educated children for many years. In 1948 New Post built a new school, prior to this school children living in New Post had to be bused 60 miles round trip to attend school in Hayward. The day schools marked a return to local schooling for LCO children. They got to experience education without the abuses of the boarding school, and got to go home at night. It should be noted that some LCO children, for a myriad of reasons, were still sent away to the few boarding schools that remained open after 1940.



1944 Fifth Grade Graduation, Whitefish School, Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation, Wisconsin. Photograph courtesy of Bertena Wolfe



Kinnamon School 1928, Reserve, Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation, Wisconsin. Photograph courtesy of LCO's Living Memories team



Sister Sirella La Rush.
Photo courtesy of St. Francis Solanus Mission Church, 1957.

Mission School

In 1927 the St. Francis Solanus Indian Mission School was reopened with Sister Sirella La Rush as principal, a position she held until the 1960's. Sister Sirella was from LCO and one of the first Native American Nuns. She often spoke in Ojibwe and allowed students to speak in Ojibwe. St. Francis Solanus Catholic School was unique. From 1940-1959 no other Indian Mission School in the country had a Native American as a principal and educator. The culture of change on the LCO reservation started with the shift of education in a post boarding school era. That change was first experienced at St. Francis Solanus Indian Mission School.

Conclusion

The significance of the day schools and the mission school were profound. The value of LCO children going home every night cannot be underestimated. Equally valuable was the empowerment gained by the children from being around their peers in a non-hostile environment. For the first time in school it was safe for LCO children to think for themselves. The results from the improvement of education on the LCO reservation in the post boarding school era was tremendous. This generation occupied the Winter Dam in 1971 that led to tribal ownership of that dam. It is also this generation that fought to restore hunting and fishing rights in the ceded territories, resulting in the Voight Decision. It was this generation that built LCO's tribal schools, a Head Start, a K-12 school and a community college. And it was this generation that continues to fight today to improve Native American children's education on the reservation and in the public schools. The years of education in the day schools and at the mission school were so important to LCO children after the boarding school closed. A buffer had been created protecting LCO children from absorbing negative stereotypical images and attitudes from the outside dominant culture, while creating a nurturing environment that embraced academic achievement as an additional cultural value. The schools changed the culture of subjugation and assimilation, to pride and confidence.