# Investigation into the Chilocco Indian Agricultural School

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*This paper focuses on telling the story of the Chilocco Indian Agricultural School (Chilocco School) from its establishment in Chilocco, Oklahoma in 1884 to its closure in 1980. A variety of government documents and resources were used to reconstruct this story, and it is the author's hope that this methodology might be applicable to research conducted on other Federal Indian Boarding Schools. The Chilocco School was a non-reservation boarding school with a long timeline (1884–1980). Its history of management is well documented through executive orders, federal reports from the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs and its predecessor, the Office of Indian Affairs, from the United States Department of the Interior, and United States Congressional budgetary documents. The school's history parallels changes in thought in the federal approach to indigenous populations, including the investigations into the abusive practices that led to its closing.*

In 2022, the Department of the Interior began an internal investigation into the history of the U.S. federal government's involvement with the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, under the direction of Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, with a report on the initial findings published in May.[1] The report details the history of U.S.–First Nations relations, highlighting the role education played as a "weapon" with which the government intended to "civilize" First Nations people.[2] Even after the identification of 53 burial sites—some of which were unmarked, several unknown—near these buildings, the report acknowledged that the Department of the Interior believes this to be only a small number of the actual toll of lives taken, estimating the final number when research concludes to be somewhere "in the thousands or tens of thousands."[3]

The Chilocco School was a non-reservation boarding school established by the Executive Order of July 12, 1884, by President Chester A. Arthur, and operated for the better part of 100 years until its closure in 1980.[4] An inspection of the school in 1969 commissioned by Senator Edward Kennedy in conjunction with a larger overall inspection of the condition of the Federal Indian Boarding Schools—a collection of documents collectively known as the Kennedy Report—revealed many of the inadequacies and abuses alluded to in the more recent report, including but not limited to physical abuse of the students, criminal actions, and institutionalized corruption.[5]

## Personal Narrative

My great-grandmother, Herlinda Portillo, was a student at the Chilocco School. Taken from the Comanche tribe at the age of 8 in 1910, the story was passed down that Herlinda suffered at the school regularly. When the students refused to speak English, they were beaten, or starved, or otherwise mistreated. Herlinda refused to stay and suffer and, like many Chiloccoans over the years, ran away from the school. She later married an older farmer she didn't love, who she divorced for the young farmboy from down the lane she did. She lived until 98 years of age.

Why is this story important to share? Because the numbers in this paper correspond directly to people like Herlinda—or Mama Stoneman, as we called her. The discussion of "the Indian" in the documents related to the investigation of these schools can be patronizing, demeaning, racist, and insensitive. The writing in these documents is reflective of the attitudes of the times, but also marks an effort to both hide and desensitize the reader to the atrocities of the past, and it is important to remember the lived experiences of the people behind the ink.

## Creation of the Chilocco Indian Agricultural School

When looking into the beginning of the Chilocco School, I found that there were two main documents that detailed its creation. The Executive Order of July 12, 1884 by President Chester A. Arthur calling for the withdrawal of land for the school states simply:

> Sections 13, 14, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, and the East half of Sections 17, 20, and 29, all in Township No. 29, North Range No. 2, East of the Indian Meridian, be and the same hereby are, reserved and set apart for the settlement of such friendly Indians belonging within the Indian Territory as have been or who may hereafter be educated at the Chilocco Indian Industrial School in said Territory.

With this one sentence, the foundations were laid for the school's opening. However, the circumstances around that opening were rather fraught. The first superintendent of the Chilocco School, W. J. Hadley detailed these hardships in the *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* (ARCIA) in 1884.

> Our school opened up... under very unfavorable circumstances, the weather being very cold and inclement, and the children having to be transported so far across the plains in wagons, and at considerable expense to the Government.[6]

Hadley further reported that the school began with 123 students from five major Indian agencies: Kiowa, Comanche, Wichita, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. Additionally, the school "lost only two by death" in their first year, one Cheyenne girl and a Caddo boy. The reasons for their deaths were not included in this report to the Commissioner, though Superintendent Hadley indicated his hope to "exercise more care and have them properly examined before admitting" future students.[7] Statements like this provide valuable insight into the views of the operators of the Chilocco School towards their wards, and can be found in ARCIA documents over the years.

The ARCIA document is perhaps the most important in laying the foundation for research of a particular school and year. The University of Wisconsin at Madison maintains a digital archive of ARCIA documents from 1826 to 1932, which proved instrumental in finding information on the Chilocco School.[8] This archive is keyword searchable, and many sections (including the Chilocco School report) are selectable from a dropdown menu, making navigation within the document intuitive. ARCIA documents can otherwise be found in the *U.S. Congressional Serial Set*—available in print as well as archives like the HathiTrust Digital Library (https://www.hathitrust.org)—though the titles for the report can vary depending on the year of publication. The Catalog of U.S. Government Publications (CGP) lists the ARCIA from 1906 to 1927 under the title "Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs"; after the Office of Indian Affairs became the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1947, the report was known as the "Annual Report of Commissioner, Bureau of Indian Affairs, to Secretary of Interior," until 1951.[9] These can be located in the CGP either through keyword search, or through the SuDoc number "I 20.1."

## Operations and Management, 1884–1967

Beyond the documents that tell us what happened in the first days of the Chilocco School, budgetary documents, employment records, and miscellaneous ephemera provide a look into the day-to-day operations of the school. Thankfully, there are many digitized collections of documents that cover these areas, allowing us to recreate sections of the Chilocco School's history. Additional documents can be found in the archives of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), as well as state or special archives.

Thanks to the ARCIA archive at UW Madison, I was able to find the names of the Superintendents for each year after 1884, barring a gap in information between 1918 and 1920. I was able to search the Treasury Department's Annual Report for Superintendent Hadley's name, finding 4 separate instances.[10] The first was a claim of $500 for "Transportation of Indian Supplies," the second a claim of $450 from the United States' "Civilization Fund."[11] The two major claims by Hadley, however, were part of two sections related to "Indian Schools near Arkansas City," a town no more than 8 miles away from the Chilocco School. Looking at the total claims for "Support of Indian Schools near Arkansas City," we can establish that the budget for running the school was set at $20,000.[12] Additional funds for the construction of the "Indian School Building near Arkansas City" were listed at a total of $22,371.70.[13] This gives us a total expenditure of $42,371.70 in 1884 to jump start the Chilocco School, which is worth approximately $1,482,852.76 in 2024.[14]

Early budgetary outlines for the Chilocco School can be found this way without the physical copies of the documents in hand. In 1949, the Office of Indian Affairs became the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Congressional budget justifications of the Bureau from 1970 onwards are published on their website.[15] These Greenbooks do not explicitly list the direct budget of the Chilocco school, but they provide a look into the Bureau's developing view of the boarding schools, explicitly highlighting their lacking funds and staff.[16]

Other documents are stored with NARA, and the school itself is on the National Registry of Historic Places.[17] The Bureau of Indian Affairs has the National Archives Record Group number 75, and the Chilocco School has the more specific Records Group 75.20.8.[18] Most of the documents with a connection to the Chilocco School are physical documents located within the

Fort Worth branch of the National Archives—including 76 years of student records—but NARA has digitized a few collections of relevant materials.[19] One such collection is a series of Chilocco School Superintendents' Annual Narrative and Statistical reports from the years 1910 until 1937.[20] This collection is a digitized microform that contains the described reports, and provides a look into the messaging that various superintendents wished to convey about the school into the Great Depression Era.

Researchers who wish to track down the employment records of the Office of Indian Affairs would need to be able to access the physical records in one of the many National Archives locations. The National Archives has a document that provides a nice primer on this, *Indian Agents and Superintendents 1849-1907*, that explains that records for Indian Agents and other employees appointed before 1907 are generally located within Records Group 48.[21] Additional textual records can be found in Records Group 75.14.9, "Records of the Employee Section," including personnel organization lists from 1912 to 1940 among other relevant records.[22]

## Kennedy Report and Aftermath

In the late 1960s, the topic of Federal Indian Boarding Schools became relevant at the highest levels of U.S. Government. A Senate subcommittee was formed in 1967 to tackle the issue, and the results of their two-year report became what is known as the "Kennedy Report," after subcommittee chairman Sen. Edward Kennedy.[23] The report is composed of in-depth evaluations of 13 different Federal Indian Boarding Schools, including the Chilocco School, by experts in educational matters. The report overall provided significant evidence of a "deteriorating situation" at the boarding schools, citing problems with mental health of the students and "deplorable conditions."[24]

The section of the Kennedy Report that focuses on the Chilocco School is comprised of three major reports: one on the general state of affairs by Dr. Robert L. Leon, MD, professor and chairman of the Department of Psychiatry, the University of Texas Medical School at San Antonio, another on the state of instruction and curriculum as reported by Dr. Atilano Al Valencia, and a third on a review of the program by the BIA's Assistant Commissioner for Education Charles Zellers.[25] Dr. Leon's report is a scathing indictment of the state of the Chilocco school, primarily in the lack of mental healthcare being provided to its students, of whom up to 75 percent were at Chilocco due to serious social, emotional, or educational problems.[26] Students at Chilocco were no longer just from the five initial tribes that started at the school, but pulled from 93 different tribes around the U.S., and a significant portion—380 students of the school's 1050—were Inuit students from Alaska.

> The problems of Alaskans in this school are special ones.… It was reported that the Eskimo students have greater problems with feelings of home sickness than do other students. Some of the Alaskans we talked with stated that they would like to be taught skills that were more applicable to Alaska and the villages from which they came, but this kind of instruction was not available at the school.[27]

Dr. Leon went on to evaluate that there was "no valid reason" to be sending students from Alaska all the way to Chilocco, OK. Dr. Al Valencia's review of the school was more gentle, indicating that although the instruction was not up to par at the moment, there were many ways to reach that outcome.[28] Zellers' report was perhaps the most damning, indicating the lack of willingness on the part of staff to provide guidance—"Well, what can you expect, these are Indian kids"—criminal negligence, physical punishment and handcuffing of students who misbehave, including the perception that the purpose of the counseling room was a "place to work [students] over when they wise off."[29]

Use of the Kennedy Report is helpful when looking at one of the thirteen schools examined in depth by the Senate subcommittee, but scholars may find it useful beyond its contents. Its publication is a watershed moment in Indian rights, and it brought the examination of Federal Indian Boarding Schools before the public. With this visibility and many ongoing issues in the maintenance and operation of the boarding schools, support for the program declined as the 1970s went on. The closure of the Chilocco school is given short shrift in the 1981 BIA Greenbook, referred to in passing as a justification for the availability of funds for other issues.[30]

I found that the Internet Archive is a great collection of primary sources and government documents around the time of the Kennedy Report. Specifically, there are a number of supplementary materials that provide institutional context to the changing attitude towards indigenous peoples' mental health and the impact of the Federal Indian Boarding Schools located in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) Archive within the Internet Archive.[31] Another great resource is MetaLib (https://metalib.gpo.gov/), which indexes the CGP, GovInfo, usa.gov, and many other resources including periodicals. It can help users locate Library of Congress digital collections with biographies of Chilocco School alumni.

## Access Issues and Modern Efforts

The investigative report by Assistant Secretary Bryan Newland into the Federal Indian Boarding Schools is not necessarily

the same watershed moment that the Kennedy Report was—almost all of the schools have been closed for nearly 40 years at this point—but it is nonetheless critical. Admissions of fault are necessary to begin making amends of any kind, and the Bureau has made a clear and extensive acknowledgement of the Boarding School program's faults. The Bureau is not alone in this effort to uncover the past, as there are a variety of reports and documents available at little effort for public viewing in relation to the Chilocco School and other Federal Indian Boarding Schools. However, the vast majority of information relating to these schools is only available physically in national archives around the country.

There have been efforts to digitize this material, as seen in the National Archives' digital collections of Chilocco gradebooks and Superintendents' Reports. These collections are hardly comprehensive, though, meaning that the serious scholar would need to prepare to travel before finding the most important documents on file. This is the major hurdle in tracking down any of the prior Indian Agents or Bureau employees that worked at schools like Chilocco while the abuses described were occurring. The steps provided in the National Archives indicate a willingness to identify agents before 1907, but more recent agents' names are still obscured because the sensitive nature of the information provides some hurdles when digitizing.

Other modern efforts to digitize this material can be found by graduates and associates of the Chilocco school: the Chilocco National Alumni Association (CNAA) runs a website that briefly covers the topics of the school from the perspective of its students, and in conjunction with Oklahoma State University Library, worked on the creation of a digital database with oral history interviews of Chilocco alumni who served in the U.S. military—the Chilocco History Project.[32] The project also contains an image gallery as well as an index with the names of more than 17,000 students that attended the school throughout the years, though even that does not encompass the full number of students who passed through Chilocco's gates.[33]

## Conclusion

Through this project, I found that the usage of primary documents was key to conducting research on the Federal Boarding School program. The context provided by primary sources is an indispensable tool for researchers examining history, and the availability of government documents provides key insights into United States official points of view. The importance of the efforts of archives like NARA and the University of Wisconsin–Madison to provide free, online access to these documents cannot be understated. As research into these schools continues at both the federal and academic levels, I would urge the future researcher to maintain a lookout for the personal stories of the persons who attended the Federal Indian Boarding Schools. There are many more stories left to be told, and many that will never be told.

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