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Heard on Morning Edition

May 12, 2008 - RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

American Indians and the American government have lived with a harsh legacy for 130 years. The government took tens of thousands of Indian children far away from their reservations to schools where they were required to dress, pray, work and speak as mainstream Americans. Many Indians remember those boarding schools as places where they were abused and where their culture was desecrated.

After years of reforms, the government still operates a handful of off-reservation boarding schools, but funding is in decline, and now some Native Americans are fighting to keep the schools open. NPR's Charla Bear has the first of two reports.

CHARLA BEAR: The late performer and Indian activist Floyd Red Crow Westerman was haunted by his memories of boarding school. As a child, he left his reservation in South Dakota for the Wahpeton Indian Boarding School in North Dakota. Sixty years later, he still remembered watching his mother through the window of the government bus.

Mr. FLOYD RED CROW WESTERMAN (Performer and Indian Activist): My first impression, I thought my mother didn't want me. And it hit me hard like that. But when I got on the bus and I sat down and I looked, and she was just crying. It was hurting her, too. It was hurting me to see that. I'll never forget. All the mothers were crying.

BEAR: Westerman's music summed up the feelings of generations of former boarding school students.

(Soundbite of music)

Mr. WESTERMAN: (Singing) You put me in your a boarding school, made me learn your white man rule, be a fool...

BEAR: The federal government began sending American Indians to boarding schools in the late 1870s, when the United States was still at war with Indians. An Army officer, Richard Pratt, founded the first school that took children far from their reservations. He based it on an education program he had developed in an Indian prison. He described his philosophy in this speech, read by an actor.

Unidentified Man: A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.

In the 1940s, this philosophy was still common. Bill Wright, a Butwin Indian, left his reservation in California for the Stewart Indian School in Nevada when he was six. Wright says matrons bathed him in kerosene and shaved his head. Students at federal boarding schools were forbidden to express their culture - everything from wearing long hair to speaking even a single Indian word. Wright says he lost not only his language, but his native name.

Mr. BILL Wright: And I remember coming home, and, you know, my grandma asked me to talk Indian to me and I told Grandma, I don't understand you. She says, then who are you? I went, my name's Billy. She said, your name's not Billy. She says, your name is Tutum. That's who you are. That's your name. And I went, not what they told me.

Professor TSIANINA LOMAWAIMA (American Indian Studies, University of Arizona): The intent of the school was to completely transform people, I mean, inside out - language, religion, family structure, economics, the way you make a living, the way you express emotion, everything.

BEAR: Tsianina Lomawaima heads the American Indian Studies program at the University of Arizona. She says from the start, the government's objective to erase and replace Indian culture was part of a larger strategy to conquer Indians.

Ms. LOMAWAIMA: They very specifically targeted Native nations that were the most recently hostile. There was very a conscious effort to recruit the children of leaders, and this was also explicit, essentially to hold those children hostage. The idea was it going to be much easier to keep those communities pacified with their children held in a school somewhere far away.

BEAR: The government operated more than 100 boarding schools for American Indians, both on and off reservations. Children were sometimes taken forcibly, by armed police. Lomawaima says other families were willing let their children go.

Ms. LOMAWAIMA: For many communities, for a whole variety of reasons, federal school was the only option. Public schools in many places in the country were closed to Indians because of racism.

BEAR: At boarding schools, most students learned trades - carpentry for boys and housekeeping for girls.

Ms. LUCY TOLEDO (Navajo Indian, Attended Boarding School): It wasn't really about education. We didn't really learn English basic, English or math.

BEAR: Lucy Toledo, who's Navajo, went to Sherman Institute in California in the 1950s. She also remembers some unsettling free-time activities.

Ms. TOLEDO: Saturday night we have a movie. Every Saturday night. Do you know what the movie was about? Cowboys and Indians. Cowboys and Indians. Here we're getting all our people killed, and it's the kind of stuff they showed us.

(Soundbite of gunfire)

BEAR: And for decades, there were reports that students in the boarding schools were abused. Children were beaten, malnourished and forced to do heavy labor. In the 1960s, a congressional report found that many teachers still saw their role as civilizing Native American students, not educating them. The report said the schools still a, quote, "Major emphasis on discipline and punishment."

Bill Wright remembers an adviser hitting a student hard.

Mr. WRIGHT: Bust his head open and blood got all over him. I had to take him to the hospital, and they told me to tell them he run into the wall and I better not tell them what really happened.

Wright says he still has nightmares from the severe discipline. He worries that he and other former students have inadvertently recreated that harsh environment within their own families.

Mr. WRIGHT: It's mostly you do what I tell you. You jump when I tell you to jump, you don't talk back. So you grow up with discipline. But when you grow up and you have families, so what happens? If you was my daughter and if you left your dress over there, you know I'll knock you through that wall. Why? Because I'm taught discipline. And you go, like, ooh, man, better behave. But you have to look at - look what they've done to us.

BEAR: Not all Indians had negative experiences at boarding schools. Some have fond memories of meeting spouses and making lifelong friends. But the scathing government reports led to the closure of most of the boarding schools.

(Soundbite of children playing)

BEAR: One school that remains is Sherman Indian High School in Riverside, California, the same boarding school Lucy Toledo attended.

Hershel Martinez and a group of his friends gather casually in a school hallway and begin a drum circle.

(Soundbite of drumming)

BEAR: The school encourages native activities like this. That's one reason Martinez feels more comfortable here than at his former public school in Los Angeles.

Mr. HERSHEL MARTINEZ: And everyone was wondering what nationality, what race am I. And I'll tell them. They're like, oh wow, you're Indian? You're, like, the only guy I know that's native. But here, at Sherman, they know how I feel about being native, and they understand where we're all coming from.

(Soundbite of drumming)

BEAR: But a recent change in federal budgeting means the off-reservation boarding schools are receiving less money, and their future is in doubt.

Charla Bear, NPR News.

MONTAGNE: Tomorrow, we'll have more about Native American boarding schools today and what their future might be. You can learn more about the history of the boarding schools and see a photograph of one class on its first day and then how it looked four months later at npr.org.

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Heard on Morning Edition

May 13, 2008 - STEVE INSKEEP, host:

For generations, American Indian children were taken from their reservations and sent to government boarding schools. Many children were abused there. Most were taught that their traditional way of life was wrong. Now, there have been decades of reform since then, and the schools that remain have become havens for at risk youth, far away from the troubles and temptations on the reservation.

But some people, including prominent tribal leaders, and officials at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, think it's time for the federal government to get out of the business of running boarding schools entirely. NPR's Charla Bear has the second of two reports.

Unidentified Woman: Start moving around. Let's start moving around. Get up.

CHARLA BEAR: Students get up before the sun at Sherman Indian High School in Riverside, California. They have to clean their aging dorm building before class. Supervisor Teresa Iyotte says if the students don't rise and shine the bathrooms, they'll suffer the consequences.

Ms. TERESA IYOTTE (Supervisor): They get demerits if they're not up at 6:00 o'clock. If they're not up by 6:15, they get demerits. If they're not up by 6:30, they get more demerits.

BEAR: A lot is expected of students at Sherman. It's one of seven federally funded boarding schools for some of the most at-risk Native American youth. They come from more than 85 tribes from big cities and reservations across the country.

Sheila Patterson is from the San Carlos Apache Reservation in Arizona.

Ms. SHEILA PATTERSON (Student): We have our traditional ways, where us girls, we become a woman and we wear camp dresses.

BEAR: She shows off the moccasins she wears with her ceremonial dress.

Ms. PATTERSON: And it's made out of the cows. And it's beaded and it has (unintelligible). It's really hard.

BEAR: Patterson misses home, but says she needed to leave.

Ms. PATTERSON: Back at home it's, like, a lot of people drink and a lot of young kids like to suicide theirself and just kill theirself and all that. That's why I had to get away and come here.

BEAR: Some students are ordered to Sherman by judges who see the school as an alternative to jail. Most come because they see the school as a way to do better. The national graduation rate for Native Americans is around 50 percent. Charlotte Longenecker is a counselor at Sherman.

Ms. CHARLOTTE LONGENECKER (Counselor): When you work with a population that has the highest suicide rate, the highest alcoholism and drug usage rate, the highest - I've never met so many people in my life who had lost family members, and so many in such rapid succession - that's going to happen.

BEAR: Sherman administrators keep temptation to a minimum with a tightly controlled environment. There's zero tolerance for drugs and alcohol. And students can only leave campus if they've earned a group activity, like a trip to Wal-Mart.

Steve Yankton, from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, says it can be tough.

Mr. STEVE YANKTON (Pine Ridge Reservation): We really can't live high school life like regular teenagers would. Like we can't just go shop at the mall whenever we want for how long we want. We can't go eat at a restaurant with our friends whenever we feel like we want. Staff always has to be around us.

BEAR: Every day at Sherman is rigorously structured. But students who stick it out say Sherman offers them opportunities too, like the chance to learn about other tribes.

Ms. TARA CHARLEY-BAUGUS (Teacher): Okay. Let's go and get started. (Singing in foreign language)

BEAR: In Tara Charley-Baugus's classroom, students are learning the language of the Dine - or Navajo - one of three native languages taught here.

Ms. CHARLEY-BAUGUS: One the reasons why we do this song also is it's cultural, you learn something about your culture, a little bit about the history, 'cause of the sheep, from way back in the 1500s, I think, when the Spaniards brought them in. And you can teach these to your brothers and sisters or little ones too, and it's how you pass on the language.

BEAR: Until the 1960s the government schools tried to expel Indian culture. Students were severely punished if they practiced Indian ways. Not anymore.

Ms. LORENE SISQUOC (Teacher): You tie this one right here like this. It's going to be beautiful.

BEAR: Lorene Sisquoc now tries to revive native customs at Sherman by teaching traditional skills like basket weaving.

Ms. SISQUOC: But why I have to be teaching it at a school? Why isn't it taught in our families, all our families? You know, because of boarding schools, because kids were taken from their homes and those traditional things weren't always taught.

BEAR: Dom Sims recently retired as the principal of Sherman. He says the off-reservation boarding schools have more applications than they can handle. But a federal budget change is reducing each school's funding by hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Mr. DOM SIMS (Retired Principal): We will be in dire straights 'cause we won't have enough money to start the school, to have enough staff, to give the services needed for the kids. It's an impossible situation.

BEAR: Officials at the Bureau of Indian Affairs say they know these schools are in trouble. But they disagree over whether the federal government should even be running Indian schools in the 21st century. Angelita Felix is with the BIA Education Office.

Ms. ANGELITA FELIX (Bureau of Indian Affairs): You can talk to, you know, 20 people in our organization and ten people will say that we shouldn't have off-reservation boarding schools and ten other people will say that there's a need for these kinds of schools because of the at-risk students.

BEAR: In the past few decades, tribes have begun taking over boarding schools. They now control about half of them. Most are on the country's largest reservation, the Navajo Nation. The Navajos discourage students from attending boarding schools off the reservation.

Mr. EDDIE BIAKEDDY (Navajo Nation Department of Education): You know, a lot of other Indian tribes in the United States have lost use of their language and therefore their culture.

BEAR: Eddie Biakeddy is deputy director of the tribe's department of education. He says most Navajo students now attend public schools close to home.

Mr. BIAKEDDY: And there is a goal of the Navajo Nation to establish its own educational system, where the Navajo Nation would have control over all the schools and there should be no need for any on-reservation students to go to an off-reservation boarding school.

BEAR: But many smaller tribes don't have the money or political organization to run their own schools, let alone facilities for at-risk youth. At Sherman, many students and recent alumni say off-reservation boarding schools have helped them.

Ms. SEANA EDWARDS (Student): Sherman pretty much did save me, I guess, in a way.

BEAR: Seana Edwards, a Prairie Band Potawatomi, nearly failed freshman year at her public high school in New Hampshire.

Ms. EDWARDS: I'd probably be working at some dead-end retail job. I'd probably have my mom kick me out the house as soon as I was 18 'cause I wasn't going to go anywhere.

BEAR: But she transferred to Sherman, graduated, and now attends the University of California, Berkeley. She goes back to Sherman often to convince students that they too can go to college. She says she appreciates how far the school has come.

Ms. EDWARDS: They have pictures of, like, when students still had to wear uniforms and march in lines. And yeah, you feel part of that history and you get sad, but at the same time you realize that it's so much better today and you get the opportunity to change it. You get the opportunity to make it better. And not just for you but for other people, for younger generations.

BEAR: Edwards' own younger brother and sister are in elementary school in New Hampshire. She thinks they could achieve as much as she has at Sherman. But if they do need its tight structure, morning wake-ups, and nightly check-ins someday, she wonders if Sherman Indian High School will still be there for them.

Unidentified Woman: (Unintelligible)

Charla Bear, NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

INSKEEP: By the way, Sherman Indian High School encourages students to learn traditional customs, and you can hear students participating in a Native American drum circle simply by going to NPR.org, where you can also listen to part one of this report.

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