



# National Resource Center for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Elders

## Boarding School: Historical Trauma among Alaska's Native People

*Prepared by*

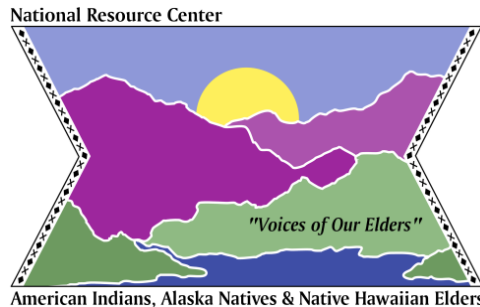
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*The information in this paper does not reflect the opinion of the Administration on Aging.*





January 2006

Dear Reader:

The National Resource Center for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Elders (NRC) at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) has completed its second year and is pleased to send you its four papers: (1) Alaska Native Elders and Abuse: Creating Harmony by Voicing Traditions of Listening; (2) Achieving Best Practices in Serving Alaska Native and American Indian Elders; (3) Achieving Best Practices in Long Term Care for Alaska Native and American Elders; and (4) Boarding School: Historical Trauma among Alaska's Native People.

These papers are intended to provide information to decision makers on all levels in the Alaska Native community statewide and regionally, to the State of Alaska, to various federal offices in Washington, D.C., to all Title VI programs and to all the federally recognized tribes so that culturally appropriate Elder health care services and programs can be designed and implemented with input from the Elders themselves. By extension, the information provided here would be of interest to the many American Indian tribes and Native Hawaiian Elders. Dr. Josefina Carbonell, the Assistant Secretary on Aging, has directed the NRC to concentrate its efforts in Alaska in the first, second and third contract years. We recently were informed that there is funding for the two resource centers for the 2006 contract year.

This project started with meetings between the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) and the NRC Alaska. A memorandum of agreement was reached to have a joint Alaska Native Elder Health Advisory Committee. This committee has met four times to give direction to both organizations in the first and second year. The ANTHC board has approved the Joint Elder Advisory Committee to meet three times a year. In the second year, individual interviews were held with Elders from the following cultural groups: Inupiaq, Athabaskan, Yup'ik, Sugpiaq, Aleut, Tlingit, and Tshimshian. The interviews were transcribed and coded by the Alaska Natives into Psychology students supervised by Dr. Kathy Graves. Cultural consultants from all of the regional areas were also included to review the final comments in the paper entitled, "Alaska Native Elders and Abuse: Creating Harmony by Voicing Traditions of Listening."

This project, also referred to as "Voices of Our Elders," is funded by the Department of Health and Human Service through the Administration on Aging (AoA) in Washington, D.C., Grant No. 90AM2752. The NRC is officially located at the College of Health and Social Welfare (CHSW) at the University of Alaska Anchorage. The NRC started in the fall of 2003. Dean Cheryl Easley of CHSW traveled with the NRC staff to many of our regional meetings. The strategic focus chosen for the College is gerontology.

Listening sessions were held by the AoA through the Title VI programs, and the Title VI representatives (mostly American Indian and Alaska Native Elders) voiced several concerns to be addressed by the two National Resource Center to provide pertinent information to Native American and Alaska Native decisions makers who provide health services to their Elders. The Elders were concerned with Long Term Care issues and preventative health programs that identify best, promising, and emerging programs. The Elders were also concerned with Elder mistreatment and how to address this issue by the communities themselves. The two National Resource Centers have been successful in meeting the directives of the Listening Sessions by the papers drafted by the two NRC staffs. Electronic copies of Alaska NRC reports have also been sent to various pertinent organizations listed above, namely the Title VI programs, and to all the federally recognized tribal organizations. The work of the NRC is designed to provide information to help decision makers meet the expressed culturally relevant needs of their Elders. As such, the Alaska NRC does not conduct research but disseminates health information vital to Elders for culturally appropriate health programs.

The NRC is one of two resource centers in the nation. The other is the National Resource Center for Native American Aging, which has been in existence for over twelve years, located at the University North Dakota in Grand Forks, North Dakota. They conduct surveys on the status of Native American Elder health programs and related issues across the nation. The surveys are in response to the needs expressed by individual tribal organizations. The tribal organizations passed a tribal resolution asking the North Dakota NRC to conduct various surveys.

The NRC is interested in receiving your comments and thoughts on the information presented in the four papers. We invite you to view them on our website: <http://elders.uaa.alaska.edu/>. We would also welcome your comments or questions at our e-mail address: [afjwl@uaa.alaska.edu](mailto:afjwl@uaa.alaska.edu) or call Mr. Jim LaBelle at 907-786-4303.

Sincerely,

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*“Beginning in the late 1800s, the U.S. government implemented policies whose effect was the systematic destruction of the Native American family system under the guise of educating Native Americans in order to assimilate them as painlessly as possible into Western society, while at the same time inflicting a wound to the soul of Native American people that is felt in agonizing proportions to this day.”*

*Native American Postcolonial Psychology  
1995 by Eduardo and Bonnie Duran*

## **I. Introduction**

This paper begins with a discussion of the broader aspects of historical trauma among Alaska’s indigenous people, beginning in the late 1880s and continuing through most of the 1900s. Topics include: the introduction of Western illnesses and diseases, Western education (boarding schools), and forced Western Christianity. However, the main focus of this paper is to examine the traumatic impacts of the Wrangell Institute Boarding School and the significant role the Episcopal Church of Alaska played in recognizing, implementing, and organizing a “Healing Convocation” for some of its parishioners.

This paper may have a relevance to and bearing upon policy makers, educators, parents, and Elder health care providers. It is important to remember that many boarding school children of the 1940s and 1950s are entering the status of “Elder” in indigenous societies, and the prospect of entering elder hostels, assisted living facilities, and the like could provide a linkage back to the traumatic times of boarding school.





## II. The History of Boarding Schools in Alaska

### A. Background

Within a few short years of purchasing Alaska from Russia in 1867, the United States government began to exercise its educational dominion over its indigenous inhabitants. The first Native groups to be affected were the Thlinget, Haida, and Simpsian in Southeast Alaska. This occurred because the seat of the new government was located in the Southeast community of Sitka. Despite Alaska's vastness, the U.S. government then began to extend its educational program to the rest of the territory, which occurred within a generation.

In time, as a result of gold seekers looking for "yellow metal," Alaska soon came to also represent a new economic frontier for America and the rest of the world. Tens of thousands of miners flocked to Alaska in search of instant riches. At about the same time, America's established churches began to send missionaries to Alaska's many villages in order to mine the aborigines for the spiritual gold of Christianity. In time, the religious industry soon partnered with the U.S. and territorial governments in educating and converting Alaska's indigenous populations.

### B. Educational Policies

The educational policies that took place in Alaska in the late 1800s and early 1900s were a continuation of U.S. government policy that began in 1879 as a result of western expansion in the continental United States. These new policies focused on treaty-making that put Indians on reserves and educated Indian children in boarding schools.

By the late 1870s, the American public grew weary of the Indian wars and wanted another solution to the "Indian problem." Swapping genocide of the American Indian for their total assimilation into Western society became the new government mantra. In order to accomplish this, educational policies were developed. First, boarding schools were established on and off reservations. In the west, as well as in Alaska, government agency representatives often forcefully took children away to boarding schools hundreds and even thousands of miles away from their homeland.

This educational policy was an attempt to assimilate and acculturate indigenous children into Western culture, and America's "melting pot." Boarding schools needed to be far enough away to discourage families from easily visiting their children, since family members would only hinder and detract from the goals of assimilation. The educational policy was also aided and abetted by many of America's religious communities, which had begun to establish boarding schools of their own.

At these government and religious run boarding schools, Native children soon learned to read and write the English language. They were also taught American, European, and world history from a Western perspective, as well as the principles and doctrines of Christianity. Educators and the government wanted children to put away their parents' weapons of war in order to learn new skills and jobs, such as farming, carpentry, and animal husbandry. It would be easier to control an Indian with a hoe in his hand rather than with him on horseback, waving a rifle. Corporal punishment and other forms of harsh discipline were meted out consistently and





forcefully to Native children who attempted to speak their language or practiced traditional ceremonies and songs.

**C. Government Schools in Alaska**

In Alaska, Native tribes had fought no major wars against the United States. There were a few skirmishes with the military in Southeast Alaska and the naval bombardment of Angoon village. The United States government did not attempt to put Alaska’s indigenous population onto reservations. It did, however, import a small tribe of Canadian Tsimshian and create a reservation called Metlakatla.

For the most part, as the U.S. Government focused on the Alaska territory, Alaska Natives became the beneficiary of their change in policy—from annihilation of American Indians to pacification and assimilation. One day, the Alaska Native people must pay tribute to their lower 48 Indian brothers who helped change that policy through loss of many lives and loss of their lands. The government, however, continued to exercise the same educational policies in Alaska, which was to assimilate the indigenous population.

In 1886, Sheldon Jackson was named “General Agent of Education” for Alaska. In his lengthy and seminal report to Congress, Jackson said much was still needed to be done. Of Alaska’s Inuit population, he stated, *“They are savages, and with the exception of those in Southern Alaska, have not had civilizing, educational, or religious advantages.”* Jackson stated that the Indians of Southeast Alaska were no longer savages, but had been civilized and given proper education and religious advantages. At the time of Jackson’s statement, almost 20 years of Presbyterian schools had been in existence in many Thlinget and Haida villages. Elsewhere in his report to Congress, Jackson stated that Alaska’s indigenous population was uncivilized: *“He must try to educate them out of and away from the training of their home-life. They need to be taught both the law of God and the law of the land.”*

Jackson’s statement that *“...the best and brightest can go to the larger training schools,”* paved the way for Alaska Native children to be placed in boarding schools. It was Jackson’s report to Congress in 1886, which requested \$50,000 to begin the process, that set the stage for educating Alaska’s Native people. Until then, missionary groups had been footing the bill. It was payback time.

**D. The Roots of Historical Trauma**

**1. Western Illnesses and Diseases**

In the meantime, the rush of miners and missionaries continued their influx into Alaska, looking for gold and souls. With them, they brought the insidious Western diseases and illnesses that had already decimated other indigenous groups, beginning in 1492 with Columbus’ “discovery” of the new world. The consequence of those illnesses and diseases gave Alaska Native children an unexpected start.

Thousands of Alaska Natives died. They died from Diphtheria, Influenza, cholera, smallpox, syphilis, measles, mumps, chickenpox, tuberculosis, and alcohol. As Western diseases were introduced, waves of death swept over indigenous peoples and villages. Harold Napoleon, in his book Yuuyaraq, The Way of the Human Being, referred to this time period as the “great deaths.” Native people simply had no immunity to these diseases, and the Shaman and traditional





healers had nothing in their repertoire of healing skills to cure them. Thus, these catastrophic illnesses became the first leading cause of historical trauma, followed by boarding schools.

## 2. The Introduction of Boarding Schools

Thousands of children who survived the initial onslaught of disease and illness became orphaned when their parents and grandparents died. Out of necessity, missionary groups and the federal government began establishing orphanages. In many respects, the “great deaths” jump-started boarding schools in Alaska. It is in this context that boarding schools are the second leading cause of major trauma among Alaska’s indigenous people, with the great deaths being the first. It must be remembered that boarding schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs only ended in the mid 1970s. The trauma is still being felt today by thousands of Native people who are entering elder status, many without having healed from their experiences. It must also be remembered that boarding schools began with the separation of children from their parents, and that nearly every official act had a negative or traumatic affect on them both.

Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, some orphanages and government-run “day” schools gave way to large boarding schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), an agency of the US Department of the Interior and the ever-present affiliated armies of catholic and protestant missionaries. It was during this time period that boarding schools were scattered all across Alaska. The government’s policy of assimilation through education and religious indoctrination was in full swing.

The assimilation process began by separating children from their parents. Authorities told most parents that they had no choice but to give their children over to the BIA so that they could be provided a proper education. Any parent who resisted this mandate was threatened with jail. Some of these schools were hundreds, if not thousands, of miles from their home village. Many children were sent to places foreign to them. In many cases, kids from the arctic and sub-arctic plains were sent to mountainous and forested regions of the State. The Wrangell Institute Boarding School, deep in the heart of the Southeast Panhandle, was one such place.

Boys and girls, as young as five years of age, were taken from their homes and sent away to the elementary school of Wrangell Institute. The youngest of these children had never been away from their home or village before. Many would not understand why their parents would let them go and why strangers would come and take them away. Oftentimes, children were not told what was to become of them because their parents did not know either. The authorities came and loaded thousands of children from hundreds of villages across Alaska onto boats, skiffs, dog teams, and sleds for shipment to rural centers for redeployment to larger gathering places like Fairbanks and Anchorage. About 400 would go to Wrangell. Many left their homes speaking only their traditional languages.

A Yupik schoolmate, now in his late 50s, recalled what his older sister, who did not have to go to boarding school, said, “There were no school-age children in the village, it was eerily quiet that winter.”

A cadre of BIA employees, Native and non-Native alike, would meet the aircraft coming in from rural centers, which began an annual fall ritual. From a roster, the employees would determine the names of the children and their village of origin and then tether them together by small pieces of rope. Sometimes a rope held a few kids, other times ten to 15. BIA personnel would affix a yellow tag on thin wire to each child’s coat, bearing that child’s name and flight data and







destination. Hundreds of tethered children wearing yellow tags dotted waiting rooms across Alaskan airports. Their faces represented Yupiit, Inupiat, Athabascan, Aleut, and Suqpiat heritage.

Many children wore pensive, frightened looks on their faces. The sights, sounds, and smells surrounding them were foreign and menacing. Some were crying, rocking themselves back and forth in their seats, and calling out for their mothers and loved ones in their Native languages. Still other kids shivered and shook from fear, apprehensive of the BIA officials, their eyes darting around, seeking anyone familiar. The younger children would blink their eyes tight, perhaps wanting to make their immediate surroundings disappear.

In this day and age we take air travel for granted; we travel as passengers on many types of aircraft and see airplanes in the air and on the ground at airports. Many of us do not think twice about boarding an airplane. That was not so for many Native children traveling by air for their first time between the late 1940s and mid 1960s.

Many children had never seen an airplane up close, let alone ridden in one. Even scarier was flying in large two and four-motor aircraft into Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau. Strapped in their seats, some of the kids screamed with fright at the roar of the engines or as they lost sight of the ground. For these children, airplanes came to represent unknown forces that took them to alien places, then returned them in the spring profoundly changed.

The children who arrived in Juneau were met by still more BIA officials who placed them onto small seaplanes destined for Wrangell. Those flights were even stranger because the kids experienced a water take off and landing for the first time. Seaplanes such as Widgeons and PBYS constantly flew back and forth between Juneau and Wrangell, delivering the elementary school aged children and ending their long and arduous travels. This annual fall exodus from hundreds of far flung villages would repeat itself for more than two generations.

Arriving on the beach in the town of Wrangell, the children were met by still more BIA officials who herded them onto busses for the five-mile drive to an isolated outpost. For many children of the arctic and tundra, the scenery along the drive was equally dramatic and frightening. Mountains and tall trees, which they had never seen before, overwhelmed their senses. This experience added to the trauma of being separated from their family, and of traveling for days in a foreign craft to a strange town.

Wrangell sits deep in a rain and wind swept archipelago. The Wrangell Institute Boarding School was built into the base of an imposing island mountain backdrop. Turning 180 degrees, the landscape tiers downward to a dirt road running perpendicular to the school that meets the beach and water. The campus itself was surrounded on three sides by tall green Sitka Spruce, averaging more than 100 feet in height.

The main campus was comprised of three interconnecting pale yellow buildings. Built in the 1930s, the buildings' architecture appeared Victorian in nature. The three-story school sat in the center of the complex and extended left and right down open hallways to the two-story boys and girls dorms, respectively. In the back of those structures were smaller buildings comprised of the commissary, the maintenance building, and a clinic.





For nine, sometimes ten, months this structured array would house some 400 boys and girls who had come from upwards of three time zones away. They had reached their physical destination, and the destination of forced acculturation and assimilation was just ahead.

At the dorms, the pace quickened. Children were met in numerous receiving lines for processing into living quarters and into school. In separate dorms, both girls and boys were put through a series of separate functions. In the first line, boys that came in that day were ordered by BIA men and women employees, called “matrons,” to strip naked. Of course, many children did not understand any English at all. In still louder voices, employees barked orders, “take off your clothes!” Still no response from many kids. In exasperation, staff rushed over to these children and practically ripped the clothing off their little bodies. Children, already traumatized by their trip, were screaming and crying. There were no attempts at providing any modicum of modesty by the staff. Shivering with fright and cold, standing on a concrete floor, kids as young as 5 and 6 removed everything they had on. They were ordered to place them in a bag along with anything else that was brought along for the trip.

The next line was for haircuts. Each boy, regardless of the length of his hair, had his head shaven, cropped “G.I.” style. The electric clippers were pressed firmly next to the scalp and whirred loudly in their ears.

In the girls’ dorm, hair was shorn closely above the shoulders. In some Athabascan cultures, the cutting of hair was a sign of mourning after passage of a loved one in the village. The cutting of hair of Athabascan girls became an annual rite of spiritual sacrilege.

Back in the boys’ dorm, naked kids were ordered to form another line for cleansing. The first part of the bathing process entailed passing through a liquid chemical bath on the genitals and feet. The caustic purplish mixture was painful and irritating. The second part of the bath consisted of going through a narrow door that opened into a large shower area of eight to ten nozzles coming out of three walls. There was a large center drain where all of the water disappeared into. Groups of children were ordered into the open ended shower stall to bathe. Some of the matrons forcefully used short scrub brushes on children who were reluctant or frightened of the spewing hot water coming out of the walls. The brushing was so hard that they howled with pain and the skin of some kids turned pink. Children witnessing that event did their best to bathe with the large bars of lye soap handed out to them and save themselves from a violent scrubbing.

The next line was for government issued clothing. Most kids came only with what they had on. Everyone was fitted with similar pants, shirts, socks, and shoes. Later, in the clinic, boys and girls who need spectacles were eventually given horned rimmed glasses. The glasses all looked the same.

The next process was the issuance of numbers, which were central to about everything that was done at the institute. Each child was issued and ordered to memorize a two or three digit number that would stay with them the rest of the year. This number was written on each child’s government issued clothing in indelible ink. One’s number was also associated with a similarly numbered, open-ended box. Bedding, linens, and towels, as well as mail, were placed there. A child was generally harshly scolded or spanked for forgetting their number.

Some matrons would refer to kids only by their assigned number, never by their name. For some kids, this was their only public identification for the entire school year. Kids returning to





Wrangell Institute for any number of years would accumulate multiple numbers over time. Years later, at a forum in Sitka, Alaska, a Yup'ik lady from Bristol Bay recalled that one particular girl's dorm matron only referred to her by her assigned number for the entire year, never by the name her parents had given to her. Now in her late 50s and approaching elder status, the Yup'ik woman says that she will always remember how impersonal the matron was to the girl. That was all she had recalled.

In both dorms, children in grades 1 through 4 were housed on the first floor. The older kids, in grades 5 through 8, were housed on the second floor. The dorms were arrayed in a barracks style fashion with a large center aisle which glistened with floor polish. Each room was separated from the others by an open-ended partition. The kids could stand on the top bunk and peer over into the next room, and the tiniest children could slide beneath the partitions.

Each dorm room consisted of four bunk beds, for a total of eight cots. Each bed had a thin mattress and pillow. Sheets, pillow cases, and an olive drab army blanket made up the bunk. Brown metal dressers and study desks complemented the room. Children would later have to pass inspection by having a glove-clean room and bunk beds tight enough to bounce a quarter on. If the room was not in shape, demerits were handed out, and those in the room were given extra duty.

"Lights out" was generally by 9 p.m. or 10 p.m., depending on whether it was a school night. Newly arrived children, especially the youngest, would begin to cry as soon as the dorm's lighting was brought down. It would start out with one child who would whimper softly, then grow louder until it became a deep sob. This usually caught on to the next child, and then the next, until the entire floor of children were wailing for their moms and loved ones. "Mamma, mamma, mamma!" the children cried in unison. One by one they would cry themselves to sleep. In the morning, when they would awaken, their eyes would be puffy and tear stained. This would repeat for nights on end. Slowly, however, this would diminish over time and, towards the middle of the school year, no one cried. Perhaps it was because crying did not bring their mothers to them, and the memories began to fade. Nine months is forever to a five year old. In the spring, when they would go home, they would need to become reacquainted with their parents who had become strangers.

The aim of government-run boarding schools for American Indian and Alaska Native children, of course, was for total assimilation and acculturation into the dominant society. At Wrangell Institute, the process was brutalizing and thorough. Native children were to be taught reading, writing, and arithmetic in English. It was primarily taught in school but reinforced in all facets of daily life. At the same time, there was a constant message that Native cultures, heritage, and languages were of no use, including singing, dancing, and drumming.

It did not make any difference where a student was on campus. Even out on the school grounds, if a student was caught speaking his/her Native language he/she received a wide range of punishments. Students had their mouths washed out with soap, were put in closets, or were ordered to sit in classroom corners on high stools wearing dunce caps. Some students were spanked or whipped with belts and "cat-o-nine tails," or had their knuckles rapped by night sticks and rulers.

This constant punishment for speaking one's language, and the berating of a child's indigenous culture, finally took its toll. Many children who returned home for the summer understood less of their home language. Many came home speaking only English. Some were ashamed to be





associated with their language and culture. After many years of elementary boarding school at Wrangell, upwards of eight years, some children lost parenting role models; there were no father figures to emulate, no mother figures to emulate. They came home estranged from their parents.

As was mentioned, the BIA's boarding school program lasted for two generations, well into the 1970s. Religious-run boarding schools lasted much longer. In many cases, the government and the established churches collaborated on assurances that children would also receive religious instruction. By the 1970s, thousands of elementary and high school Inupiat, Yupiit, Athabascan, Aleut, Suqpiat, Thlinget, Haida, and Tsimshian children were sent to the dozens of religious and BIA-run boarding schools across Alaska and the lower 48 states. The process of acculturation and assimilation came close to doing what was intended--turning Native children into the likeness of Western European children.

The Yupiit culture of the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta and the Inupiat culture of the North Slope seemed to have survived the educational onslaught better than other groups. Most other cultural groups suffered a significant loss of children who could speak and understand their language.

The moral impacts of those bygone educational policies are evident today. There are many boarding school-era students who have faced a loss of cultural identity, language, and tradition. They suffer from post traumatic stress disorder due to the indignities and traumas of years in boarding school. Since the mid 1970s, these individuals have made up the high percentages of alcohol-fueled statistics: accidents, domestic violence, murder, and suicide. Many have passed through the criminal justice system. They have been living on the margins of both societies, caught between the Native world and the Western world. And they have passed this legacy on to their children and grandchildren, never healed from those emotional wounds.

Many of the survivors of the Great Deaths that Harold Napoleon talked about were now burdened with the erosion and loss of cultural identity and language for having attended boarding school. The result was the compounding and acceleration of indigenous trauma over which they had no control.





### III. A Personal Journey

I know the reports about boarding school to be true for I have lived it. As I was writing I found it difficult to remain calm and dispassionate. As individuals who have gone through the boarding experience, we need to tell our story. It is part of our history that has not been completely told. At the same time, as an Inupiaq, we were taught not to call attention to ourselves. This creates a dilemma: on one hand it is extremely important to account for what happened, but on the other hand it is difficult to bringing attention to one's self. It is certainly not in my nature to take credit for what happened, but it is important enough that I must relate my boarding school experiences. Therefore, I apologize if I offend anyone in the process.

Today I am nearing my 59<sup>th</sup> birthday. Yet the memories of boarding school are as clear as if they happened yesterday. There are many Native people who went to boarding school before me and many more after me. They all have their stories to tell.

I was eight years old, and my brother was six, when we were sent away to Wrangell Institute Boarding School in the fall of 1955. I was 18 years old when I graduated from Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school in 1965, and was on my own. I had spent ten long years in the government's boarding school system.

Boarding school taught me that everything I knew about my culture, language, and world view were evil and must be pushed away. Wrangell Institute Elementary school did its best to eradicate everything I identified with as an Inupiaq. After six years at Wrangell, graduating at age 14 in 1961, I was happy to get away from a place of routine punishments and abuse.

As a young child I witnessed countless acts of cruelty against other children. There was emotional abuse, psychological abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.

I saw a grown man beat a twelve year old boy into unconsciousness. It will be forever seared into my memory. The force of the man's fist against the young boy's jaw splayed the boy's mouth open to his ear. His cheek just fell open. He quickly blacked out from the force of the blow. Blood gushed out everywhere, his jaw broken in a number of places. The sight of the young boy with his mouth wired shut was a constant and daily reminder of that violent scene.

Scenes of torture also occurred. A young Yupik lad and I (we were both about 10 years old) were wrestling, as young boys will do, when a matron on duty ordered us to stop. The matron grabbed both of us by the collars and dragged us off to the showers. We were instructed to undress; he said we were to be punished for wrestling. We were ordered into the open shower stall. Blocking the doorway, the matron grabbed a fire hose nearby, turned it on and directed the beam of spray towards me and my friend.

The water came from a mountain dam of ice and snow melt. The water was barely above freezing. The matron adjusted the spray for full force and affect. The shock of water blew us around inside the open shower stall. We could not escape from it. We tried to dodge the spray but the matron followed our every move. We could barely breathe from the coldness of the water, and the force of the spray was beginning to peel off some of our skin. The assault seemed endless. My friend was already suffering from an ear infection and the cold water penetrated into his eardrum, causing him to scream louder. The matron just laughed at our pain and yelling. Clearly, he was enjoying inflicting pain on two little boys.





As an adult I still get flashbacks to that time in the shower room. The memory of it comes back at unexpected times. It will come when I take a shower, especially if the water is a little cold. It will come at times when I see fire hoses turned on, or whenever I feel claustrophobic and can't breathe. I always remember it when I see scenes of the 1950s and 1960s of black people being hosed down during the civil rights movement in places like Birmingham, Alabama.

At night the sexual molestation and assaults came. Shortly after "lights out," some of the men who worked as teachers, administrators, or matrons would come into the dorm rooms to pick out their prey. Occasionally a female matron would select a child for sex as well. Sometimes the molestation appeared random, while other times certain boys became favorite targets.

After years of receiving this unwanted attention, some of the boys began molesting the younger children themselves. Sometimes it was the stronger kid who overpowered a weaker one. In six years, I can recall being molested twice--once by an administrator and another time by a stronger kid. I felt alone, afraid, and ashamed. The perpetrators would whisper in their victims' ears, threatening them not to tell. If it wasn't happening to you it would be a matter of time before you witnessed it happening to another child. Generally, it was the more vulnerable and younger children who were selected. Sometime the assaults occurred in the children's beds, while other times they were led out to the bathrooms or the janitor's closet.

I felt the trauma of those assaults well into adulthood. Yet I could not or would not talk about what had happened to me for many years. As a parent myself, I became super protective and watchful. Often, my fear and anger would come out when I did not know where my kids were, and I would punish them for not telling me. I never told them of the secrets. Over the years, I ran into others who had been at the boarding schools and suffered the same fate. We knew what had happened to us, but in our awkward and embarrassed silence we would just exchange nods of acquaintance. For me, the shame was still there, and the anger. A lot more abuse occurred there, but I wanted to share only a few examples.

Mt. Edgecumbe was a continuation of Wrangell except without the violence and punishment. Yet we were prevented from going home on holidays or funerals. In 1963 my sister died and I was denied funeral leave.

We learned world, European, and American History from a Western perspective. Any references to the American Indian or Alaska Native were simply footnotes in their history books. No history was offered of indigenous peoples and nations. No Alaska Native history. Everything that I learned about the world was shaped in the Western image. I came away from boarding school confused and ashamed about my identity. And institutionalized. After ten years of boarding school, I believed that I was peripheral only to the whims of the Bureau of Indian Affairs; my life would evolve only around the government.

All sense of parenting left me; I had no role models. So, when my own children were born, I parroted what I saw. When my kids misbehaved (such as breaking a rule from my school's past), I took out my belt or whatever was handy and whipped them. And I did it with lots of anger. It took some years for my wife, who managed to hold on to traditional ways of child rearing, to show me a more nurturing and caring way to raise children. I look back on that time with some shame and remorse.





As an Alaska Native, I drank to have a good time. Alcohol was also a great way to numb my hurts and pain from the past. I was promiscuous and alcohol was a good way to mask my behavior. I had the best of both worlds. Or so I thought. My mother and father died from alcoholism so I vowed not to go that far down the booze road. But it crept up on me, caught me by surprise. In November 1985, just before thanksgiving, I was arrested for a DWI crime. I avoided jail but lost my license for 90 days. For me, this was my day of reckoning, my rock bottom. The arrest led me to closely examine my life and how damaging I was becoming to my wife and family. Over the years I began to realize the underlying causes of my self-destructive behavior; it was the many unresolved traumas that I had experienced while in Wrangell Institute.

Without first healing myself, I got involved in the Sobriety Movement, thinking this was the way for others to heal and deal with their pain. I wasn't "walking the talk," so to speak, and every time I was asked to relate some experience in a public forum, I couldn't. I choked up and couldn't get the words out. Clearly, I needed to find a way to come to terms with my past, my behavior, and with alcohol. How was I expected to be a leader in the so-called "Wellness Movement" when I hadn't even gone through a personal healing experience.





#### IV. The Role of the Episcopal Church in Indigenous Healing

*"I accept and confess before God and you, our failures in the residential schools. We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God. I am sorry more than I can say:...that we were a part of a system which took you and your children from home and family...that we tried to remake you in our image...That in our schools so many was abused. On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I offer our apology."*

*Archbishop Michael Peers, Primate  
Anglican Church of Canada  
August 6, 1993, Minaki, ON.*

It hasn't been until recent years that the Wrangell Institute story has finally begun to come out. It has been coming out in serendipitous ways. In the early 1990s the Reverend Anna Frank of the Episcopal Diocese of Fairbanks was attending a Healing Convocation in the town of Wrangell, Alaska with a number of parishioners from Minto, Alaska. Anna Frank also happened to be a close relative of some of the parishioners in attendance. Not only is Ms. Frank a leader in the Episcopal Church, she is a leader in her hometown of Minto.

Reverend Anna Frank began to notice uneasiness and tears emanating from some of the parishioners from the village. She was reminded that some of them had gone to the Wrangell Institute Boarding School in the 1950s and early 1960s. The nearness of the town to the Institute was bringing back painful memories. Robin Sherry, who attended the first convocation, said the group was experiencing a lot of nervousness and anxiety over being so close to the boarding school, and that the experience of going out to the Institute some five miles out of town was traumatic and "the tears flowed even more."

The reverend Anna Frank thought long and hard about what she had witnessed. Then, early in 2003, some unanticipated church funds became available. Using these funds, Anna Frank and Cynthia Faust, Special Assistant to the Bishop, combined their efforts to offer another healing convocation specifically for those who had attended Wrangell Institute. The Episcopal Diocese of Fairbanks was in full support of using the money in this manner. Finally, here was a way to provide a healing journey for those able to travel. Some forty and fifty years had gone by for those who had attended the school from the early 1940s to the early 1950s. Here was an opportunity to put the memories firmly in the past and to move forward.

The Archdiocese contracted with Dr. Terry Turnbull of Hope Counseling Center in Fairbanks to provide for a nurturing environment, a safe haven for those who would be involved in various treatment modalities, including a religious-based, therapeutic group and/or the traditional talking circle. Dr. Turnbull, a professional therapist of Cherokee heritage, saw his role for the second convocation as a co-facilitator.

It is interesting and somewhat serendipitous that Robin Sherry and I would become co-facilitators on boarding schools in April of 2002 at the Alaska Federation of Natives' (AFN) very first Wellness Conference. Also, for the first time, in a public forum, Robin and I would begin relating our experiences of having attended Wrangell Institute. As with Ms. Frank, I owe Robin a debt of thanks for inviting me to be a part of the Healing Convocation. I had gone to Wrangell







Institute with her and many others from the village of Minto in the mid 1950s and early 1960s. What I have and will continue to cherish is that they accepted me as one of their own, as family, when few others did.

In the healing process I found the source of much of my anger, shame, and denial. A world has been lifted from my shoulders. I do want to share this story in hopes that it will never happen again. I have forgiven and bear no ill will towards those who gave me hardship while at the school.





## V. Conclusion

Many will never tell the story of their experiences; it is too painful for them. A Yup'ik man, now in his sixties, said that he remembers seeing me in Wrangell but cannot remember seeing himself there; the trauma for him was too great. Hopefully, the attempt to tell my story, humble as it is, will give others courage to tell theirs.

Thousands of Native people went through boarding school everywhere in Alaska and in the lower 48 states. Many still carry the wounds from that era. While a church was able to help some of us heal, there are many organizations, Native and non-Native, who can also sponsor healing events in their communities. I encourage you to call on the Episcopal Diocese of Fairbanks to help you with your ideas for healing in your area.

Many former students of boarding school have wonderful stories to tell of the positive experiences they went through. However, those that did not have such a positive experience are now reaching elder status in their communities. There will come a time when there will be a discussion of where they might spend their final years. Hopefully, it will be at home with loving relations and care givers. For others, there may be a decision to place them in an assisted living or elder care facility. However, it must be done with an understanding of what they may have gone through in an earlier life, perhaps a life in a boarding school.

If such a decision is made, there should be efforts to conduct a cultural needs survey and to ascertain an understanding of any boarding school experiences. Placement into an assisted living facility should be culturally relevant and appropriate to that individual's tribal affiliation. Programs, services, and food should be commensurate with that person's life ways.





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