

**Identifying Colorado Indian Boarding Schools After the Discovery of the  
Unmarked Graves of Canada's Indian Residential Schools**

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The 2021 discovery of more than 1,300 unmarked graves of First Nation students at the sites of four former Canadian Indian Residential Schools is a year old now and may be thought not of concern to those who live south of the border from the Great White North. Yet it is far from isolated to Canada. The United States government has now conducted its own Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative to review America's hand in possible genocides committed by its own Native American boarding schools. This has inspired the Colorado Legislature to pass House Bill 1327, "which establishes a Native American boarding school research program in the Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs" (McKinely, 2022). For Colorado residents unfamiliar with the state's Native American history, it may not be common knowledge that Colorado had five such boarding schools.

To be honest, when I first heard of the shocking discovery made in Canada, I did not think that my home state of Colorado could have played a role in enforcing these culture-erasing boarding schools. In fact, it was not until October 2022, after I began looking at the photographs of Native Americans found in the Denver Public Library's Digital Collections, that I first learned that Colorado did have their own similar schools.

On the first page of the "Native Americans" digital collection, I came across a photo titled "Girls class photo" (CPHOTO418-2021-518) taken circa 1895-1904 at the Colorado River Boarding School in Parker, Arizona. Upon looking over the black-and-white, expressionless photo of the dark-uniformed girls, and reading the description of

the photo saying “[c]hildren from many tribes were separated from their family and discouraged from learning tribal language and traditions,” I immediately recalled the discovery of the unmarked graves at Canada’s Residential Schools. Despite this photo being from Arizona, I wondered if Colorado had its own nightmarish history of these boarding schools.

A quick google search of “Colorado Native American boarding schools” pulled a handful of recently published articles talking about Colorado’s role in these schools, and from these articles I learned that Colorado had five: the Fort Lewis Indian School (near Durango), the Teller Indian School (Grand Junction), the Southern Ute Boarding School (Ignacio), the Good Shepherd Industrial School (Denver), and the Ute Mountain Boarding School (Towaoc) (Cooke, 2022; McKinley, 2022).

I was curious to find photos taken of the students at the Colorado schools so I could put faces to the tragedy. I wanted to see the conditions under which they studied and lived. Once I discovered the names of the five schools, I was able to search and locate photos for three of the five schools within DPL’s digital photographs collection.

I began my search by looking up “Fort Lewis Indian School” and found one photo in the collection titled “Fort Lewis School Indian Band” (P-2174). This photo, taken in August 1896, captures the school band of “Native American (tribe unknown) boys” posing outdoors with their instruments. They are wearing uniforms and hats with “TIB” pins. Members of a fraternal order (mostly white men it appears) stand on a float behind the band, wearing “robes, sashes, and conical hats.”

The boys of the band look sharply dressed. They must have taken pride in their musical talent and skills. However, you cannot help noting that the uniformed clothing, the musical instruments, and the short-trimmed hairstyles, were likely not part of their original cultural heritage. The photo depicting the cultural assimilation of the boys recalls the unpleasant saying, “[k]ill the Indian in him, and save the man”, coined by Captain Richard Henry Pratt (1840-1924); Pratt was the founder and superintendent of the Carlisle Indian School of Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Ironically, this statement was made in 1892 at the National Conference of Charities and Correction, held in Denver, Colorado (CIS Digital Resource Center, 2022).

A search in the digital collection for “Teller Indian School” brings up nine related photos, including photos of student groups, dorm buildings, a printing office, a football team, and a picnic scene, all taken circa 1900-1911. This collection allows the researcher to see the buildings where students lived and studied, and to see some of the activities in which they participated.

One group photo that stands out is titled “Christian Endeavor Society” (X-30667). It shows Ute boys dressed in military uniforms and girls wearing dresses, posing with a banner which says, “American C. E., Grand Junction”. The group varies in age, with the youngest in front and eldest in back. They stand in five rows, mostly posed facing sideways. Again, we see all the boys have short, European-styled haircuts. While it is possible these young girls and boys enjoyed passages from the Bible they studied, and even liked being part of this group, we must remember that the role of the boarding school was to further distance the children from their ancestral language, customs, and religious views.

In the collection of nine photos, three are of dorm buildings, including one of the “Large boys dorm” (X-30660), one of the “Small boys dorm” (X-30662), and one of the “Girls dorm” (X-30663). In all three photos, students pose in front of the buildings. Each building is two stories high. They appear to be solidly built with bricks and sturdy roofs. We can see that the small boys dorm has both a balcony and a porch, and the girls dorm has a porch. Judging from the outside, (there are no photos of the interiors), it appears the students are housed in functional, well-built and maintained dorms. However, research shows that in Canada’s Residential Schools, many students died from tuberculosis, linked to the conditions in the schools themselves. Archival records show that “school inspectors, school principals, medical officials and Indian agents repeatedly issued warnings about the unhealthy conditions in the schools, the inadequate medical facilities, nonexistent isolation rooms, and lack of school nurses...as well as woefully inadequate nutrition provided to students” (Mosby, 2021).

A search for “Southern Ute Boarding School” brings up six photos from the collection, including photos of the school’s dining hall, the girls dorm from inside, a first-aid ward, and planting and plowing scenes, all taken circa 1900-1930.

These photos allow us to see the interiors of the building students utilized, and to see some of the work students were required to do. The dining hall photo (X-30670) shows the students segregated by gender, with girls at one end of the room and the boys at the other, while an adult keeps a watchful eye over them. All the girls in the photo have short-bobbed haircuts, again departing from their cultural norms. While we can see multiple plates on the tables, we have no idea about the size of the portions or the nutritional value of the foods served.

The scene inside the girls dorm (X-30674) seems rather staged, with the bobbed-haired girls each reading a book in a different seat. We do not get a glimpse inside the bedrooms. We are left wondering how many children were housed in a room.

The scene of Ute children planting crops (X-30673) in the school's garden brings to mind the question of child labor. Were they forced to plant and grow their own food?

These three sets of photos taken at the Fort Lewis Indian School, the Teller Indian School, and the Southern Ute Boarding School, are of historical significance because the photos capture faces of students who may not have made it out of the boarding schools alive. They show us areas on the campuses which could help to identify possible grave sites. And they allow us to understand the daily lives and activities of the students. Most importantly, the photos capture moments in time that we can reflect on today, thinking about what it must have been like to attend these schools as lonely, separated children. They allow people today to understand the importance of righting wrongs of the past, to the degree we possibly can.

Thanks to DPL's digital photographs of Native Americans, these priceless, historical photographs are freely and easily accessible to everyone. Whether you are a student working on a project or someone simply interested in Native American history, DPL's digital collection can help you to find unique photos and stories, triumphant and tragic. You are sure to learn something new.

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