



Pauline Seneca teaches a classroom of first graders at the Thomas Indian School.
Courtesy of New York State Archives, NYSA_A1913-77_63

THOMAS INDIAN SCHOOL

Social Experiment Resulting in Traumatic Effects

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Lori's academic leadership roles have involved articulating a vision for the future and building a culture of intellectual excitement to shape centers of excellence and distinction by establishing a diversified portfolio of programs. Her research interests include second language acquisition, culturally relevant pedagogy, learning community theory and multigenerational trauma. In her work, Lori focuses a great deal of energy on the development and sustainability of programs that are socially just, culturally responsive, and aggressively seek to serve all students.

In the late 1800s, the United States created special boarding schools in locations all over the United States, with the purpose of “civilizing” American Indian youth. It was an educational experiment, one that the government hoped would change the traditions and customs of American Indians. In the past several decades, research into these boarding schools has produced a rich, growing body of American Indian history. The best of this burgeoning scholarship looks beyond an examination of the federal policies that drove boarding-school education to consider both the experiences of Indian children within the schools and the responses of Native students and parents to school policies, programs, and curricula. Incorporating archival research, oral interviews, and photographs, these studies portray the history of boarding schools from American Indian perspectives, uncovering of the meaning of boarding school education for Indian children, families, and communities both past and present.

This particular topic resonates with me and my family. In 1942, at the age of five, my mother Marlene, a young Seneca girl, was designated an orphan and ward of the state of New York and placed in the Thomas Indian School, where she lived and was a student for ten years. From what my mother had been told by our relatives, her mother, Georgianna Bennett, was simply unable to care for her. Needless to say, her life was forever changed. For while Thomas Indian School became a place where my mother developed life-long friendships and learned homemaking skills designed to help her gain employment, the boarding school was also a place where non-Indian matrons held complete disregard for the cultural and linguistic heritage of Indian children. As a survivor of the Native American residential boarding school era, my mother never fully understood the reasons why she was placed at the school—that is, until years of research allowed me to begin unraveling pieces of the puzzle.

As a young Seneca woman and mother, I witnessed the continued sociological impact of the residential boarding school era on my own family, as well as families throughout the Cattaraugus and Allegany reservation communities. I yearned to learn more in an effort to support tribal and agency initiatives focusing on healing. For nearly two decades, my research has focused on the *impact* of the Native American residential boarding school era. I have studied the policies of forced separation of Indian children from their families and tribal communities; information



Thomas Indian School boys at work in the fields. Courtesy of New York State Archives, NYS_A1913-77_117



Students are photographed under the arches of the boys' dormitory. Courtesy of New York State Archives, NYS_A1913-77_16

regarding gender roles, gender role reversal and family relationships impaired as a result of the boarding schools; and, most disheartening, the trauma compounded with the loss of parenting skills, the loss of children's identification with parents and community, and other complex processes.

Funded through the Larry J. Hackman Research Residency Program in 2006–2007, my early research started with the founding of the school framed within historical and social contexts. I sought the residency at the New York State Archives shortly after a S.U.N.Y Distinguished Professor of history informed me that I might possibly locate my mother's file (contents to be discussed in the latter section here) from Thomas Indian School in the Archives collections.

Historical Background

In the late 1700s, the Senecas were among the Iroquois who, while at first reluctant, aided the British during the American Revolution in battles like the famous Oriskany and the notoriously controversial Wyoming and Cherry Hill. Unfortunately for the Seneca, the Revolutionary War proved disastrous for the Indian loyalists. In 1779, General John Sullivan, sent by George Washington, led an expedition that annihilated forty Indian towns and burned nearly 60,000 bushels of stored corn, thus destroying the agricultural base of the Iroquois and causing a great exodus to Fort Niagara—the start of a great winter of suffering, during which time thousands died of exposure to the elements

and starvation. At the war's end, no provisions were made for the Indians who supported the loyalist factions. The war with the Senecas and their Indian allies was finally settled at a treaty signed at Fort Stanwix, present day Rome, New York, in 1784.

In 1794, the Canandaigua or Pickering Treaty defined Seneca territory as lands west of the Genesee River, ostensibly preserving the agreed-upon lands for the Senecas in perpetuity. However, because of unrelenting demands for new lands for settlements, the chiefs of the nation signed another agreement, The Treaty of Big Tree, which sold the greater part of their lands to the Holland Land Company in return for \$100,000 and additional annuity payments. The Senecas retained 310 square miles of the existing settlements in the Genesee Valley, at Buffalo Creek and Tonawanda, and on the Cattaraugus Creek and Allegheny River.¹

In the 1830s, Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal policy led to the Buffalo Creek Treaty of 1838, through which the Ogden Land Company purchased the remaining Seneca reservations—Allegheny, Buffalo Creek, Cattaraugus and Tonawanda—for \$202,000, causing roughly 200 Seneca to emigrate to Kansas. The relocation was disastrous, and after about half of the emigres died, many others returned to New York.² Having been betrayed by their leaders, and with the support of a Presbyterian Reverend Asher Wright and some Quakers, these returnees contested the Buffalo Creek Treaty, lobbying Congress after an investigation uncovered bribery and fraud. But when the treaty was ratified nonetheless, the Seneca again marshalled the

help of their Quaker friends, successfully fighting for a compromise treaty which, in 1842, left the Seneca Nation in control of the Allegheny and Cattaraugus reservations, as well as an additional square acre of land at Cuba, New York.³

The Buffalo Creek reservation, however, did not share the same fate. When both the city of Buffalo planners and the Ogden Land Company laid claim to the Buffalo Creek reservation, some of the Indians at Buffalo Creek moved to Canada, while most moved to the Cattaraugus reservation. The aforementioned Reverend Wright and his wife Laura, who had together operated a mission at Buffalo Creek since 1831, also moved to Cattaraugus, where experienced Seneca community members who opposed Christian missionaries.⁴ A letter written by Philip E. Thomas—a Quaker banker from Baltimore who would become the early financial backer of his namesake Thomas Indian School—reminded the Seneca of their friends in the Quaker community: "When these Friends came to your relief you had by the frauds of your enemies, assisted by some of your own chiefs, been deprived of every foot of your land in the state of New York"⁵

The Wrights also interviewed when typhoid fever broke out at Cattaraugus in September 1847, killing seventy Indians within six months. Caring for the orphaned children fell to Laura Wright and her niece, Martha Hoyt, who cared for the children in the mission house.⁶

The typhoid epidemic also brought increased political instability among the Seneca, and by December 1848 the authority of the Seneca chiefs was overthrown. In its place was born an elective system

of government with a new constitution, which was acknowledged by both the federal government and the state of New York.

In the years following, the missions at Cattaraugus witnessed a growth in membership. At the same time, the deplorable living conditions of the children on the reservation reached a crisis.

Establishment of an Orphan Asylum

When Laura Wright investigated the living conditions at Cattaraugus, she discovered nearly fifty orphaned or destitute children in a "very wretched condition and exposed to the most fearful of degrading influences." The Wrights responded by dedicating their lives to the creation of a school, or asylum, that would assist them in caring for many poverty-stricken orphans.

Laura Wright immediately sought assistance. Despite realizing the Seneca government treasury could not support her efforts, Laura Wright convinced Nathaniel J. Strong, one of the Seneca Nation councilors, to initiate a resolution that would call for the establishment of "an orphan asylum for the benefit of the destitute orphan children, and to locate it upon the Cattaraugus reservation."

The first donation to the new project was \$100 provided by Thomas, who, ironically, had earlier in the year encouraged the Senecas to establish an industrial school in a building abandoned by Quaker missionaries; Thomas viewed this opportunity as a chance to restore the Quaker presence at Cattaraugus.



Girls in a classroom in the Thomas Indian School. Courtesy of New York State Archives, NYS_A1913-77_101



Girls inside their dormitory. Courtesy of New York State Archives, NYS_A1913-77_140

Whatever his motivation, Thomas's donation had the intended effect. Noting his assistance, the Board of Missions voted to approve the mission house as a temporary shelter for the children until a permanent building could be constructed.⁷ Thomas also encouraged Wright to travel to Albany with a charter application in hand and lobby members of the State Assembly—such as J.V.H. Clark from Onondaga, who was chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs—to support the school.

Eventually, on April 10, 1855, the New York State Assembly passed an act incorporating the Thomas Asylum for Orphan and Destitute Children as a private institution receiving State aid. The State appropriated \$2,000 for the construction and maintenance of a suitable building, to be built on the Cattaraugus territory of the Seneca Nation of Indians in Iroquois, New York.⁸

In accordance with an earlier resolution, on April 27, 1855, the school was charged to receive destitute and orphaned children from all Indian reservations and tribes across the state—Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, Poospatuck (Unkechaug), Shinnecock, and Abenaki. The State allotted ten dollars for the maintenance of each child and placed the school under the jurisdiction of the Department of Instruction. On June 14, 1855, the Seneca Nation authorized the purchase of 15 acres of land for the institution. Then, in 1856, the State legislature appropriated an additional \$1,500 and provided a total of \$4,000 for the building of the asylum. Additional funds came from the federal

Commissioner of Indian Affairs, whom Thomas persuaded to grant a \$500 appropriation to the school.

The asylum was furnished with contributions from The Society of Friends, who held fundraisers in Buffalo. Funds also paid for a double wagon and three milk cows.

By July 1856, the children moved from the old mission house into the asylum building. Yet among all of this movement, an ominous note sounded: the trustees passed a resolution requiring exclusive use of the English language in order to erase the children's Native past and accelerate their assimilation into the dominant society.⁹

Four years later, in a letter to Eber M. Petit, treasurer of the asylum, Thomas indicated how pleased he was with the school's success. He was particularly gratified by "the continued improvement in the moral, social and intellectual life of my Indian friends at Cattaraugus, especially of the improvement already realized by the children who have been received into the orphan asylum, and I trust thy anticipation of the future beneficial influences of that institution here after, upon the Seneca nation, will be realized."¹⁰

The yearly reports of the Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1855 to 1875 provide detailed records of the continued growth of the asylum. Reports indicate unstable finances for the school, with state and federal aid remaining small and with the trustees relying heavily on the benevolent support of the Society of Friends and the public. Annual trustees' reports during these early years show financial records

filled with increased debts, accompanied by pleas for more funding by the state.

Early Years: Education and Labor

The first twenty years of the asylum provided the students—often referred to in historical documents as "inmates"—with the rudiments of an elementary education. According to an 1860 report, the children were plainly clad and furnished with "cheap but wholesome food." The boys were trained in the elements of agriculture; the girls, by contrast, were trained as domestics to run "civilized households." At the age of sixteen, the children were sent out for employment as farmers or domestics in neighboring counties. An 1864 Trustees Report stated, "Those girls who have been placed in white families to perfect their knowledge of domestic employment have surprised their employers by their energy and efficiency—so much beyond what had ever been expected of them."¹¹

At Thomas, each day was divided equally between manual labor and basic elementary education. Boys performed perfunctory duties such as chopping wood, pulling out stumps to clear fields, planting and harvesting, and milking cows alongside a hired hand. Girls performed domestic work ranging from

house cleaning to serving food and dish washing. The children's daily routine started with the:

rising bell at 5 am; followed by chores and morning worship at 6 am; more chores until 9 am followed by the noon diner; school and then more chores in the afternoon; followed by evening chores and supper at 6 pm and evening worship at 7. At 8 o'clock the younger children go to bed while the older children are taught instrumental music and singing; books are read to them and on Friday night there is a special feature—the Band of Hope, a temperance organization composed of all of the older children meets. Saturday morning, after chores are done, work classes are conducted for the boys on the farm or shop and the girls in the sewing room. Saturday afternoon was devoted to the weekly bath and recreation. On Sunday—according to the laws of the Christian Sabbath they rested, attended Sunday school, listened to sermons and attended worship service.¹²

In effect, the Thomas Asylum had become a manual labor school, much like the Irish industrial schools during the same historical time. In 1875, William P. Letchworth, Vice President of the State Board of Charities, noted, "The importance of inculcating habits of industry is fully recognized, and forms the principle feature of asylum training."¹³

Lewis Seneca, an Indian and president of the Board of Managers, reported in October 1875 that the workforce at the asylum consisted of nine people. The



Young men at work milking cows. Courtesy of New York State Archives, NYSA_A1913-77_107



Young women at work in the laundry room. Courtesy of New York State Archives, NYSA_A1913-77_11

seven year-round employees were the superintendent, a matron, assistant matron, seamstress, housekeeper, assistant laundress and general assistant. A farm hand was employed during the summer and a foreman oversaw the broom shop where the boys made brooms out of cob in the winter. However, Seneca also noted most of the intense work at the asylum was performed by the children.¹⁴

The Thomas Asylum continued this child labor pattern until the early decades of the twentieth century when the asylum was somewhat modified to add more academic work. Willard Beatty, then the federal Director of Indian Education, noted upon his inspection of the school in 1946 that he was “surprised to discover that the school still maintains a program of part-day details where children are assigned to do non-educational labor in the laundry, the dairy, etc. around the school.”¹⁵

Financial and Operational Challenges

By 1874, Trustee meetings painted an unsettling picture, with 75% of the operating funds coming from the state treasury. That year, the school’s enrollment rose to 104, and for the first time, state appropriations amounted to more than \$11,000. At the same time, however, an amendment to the state constitution stated that “neither the money nor credit of the state shall be given or loaned, to or in aid of any corporation, association or private undertaking.” Thus, in its annual

report to the state assembly, the Board of Trustees reminded the assembly that 104 children would be friendless and homeless if the institution closed. The report stated, “The children who are received at the asylum are mostly those of the poorer and pagan class of Indians, and unless they were taken charge by the asylum authorities, would grow up, if they are arrived at maturity at all, ignorant, idle and vicious.”¹⁶

During the winter of 1875, Letchworth, who was a good friend of the Wrights, persuaded Senator Daniel P. Wood to hold hearings in Albany. A frail and feeble Asher Wright also traveled to Albany and, with the help of Letchworth and Wood, succeeded in convincing the state to pass the Act of April 24, 1875, which transferred ownership of the asylum to New York State. As a result, the residents became subject to the supervision and control by the State Board of Charities (the agency name was changed to the Department of Social Welfare in 1929).¹⁷

In effect, Letchworth and the Wrights had saved the school from financial disaster, believing that Thomas Asylum would become a haven for orphaned and destitute Indian children and stand as a beacon of hope that would uplift the Indian population at Cattaraugus. Letchworth wrote, “it must be admitted that the most hopeful means of elevating the Indian race is by instructing children in the industries and usages of the white people,” emphasizing that the mission is an important one “especially as the class relieved by it would, if neglected, largely become outcasts.”¹⁸

Nutrition and Health Concerns

In 1875, Letchworth also interviewed B.F. Hall, who served as superintendent of the Thomas Asylum for seventeen years and spent a total of twenty-nine years among the Indians. Realizing the limitations of the institution he supervised, Hall shared with Letchworth his conclusions that:

if the Indian children could be brought into families where they could have a thorough family bringing up, where they would have a seat at our tables and eat the same kind of food as we eat, making no difference between them and ourselves, more satisfactory results would be attain. We do here all that is possible, under our system, still I think the children realize that they do not enjoy the full sympathy of family membership, so much so that I have been almost tempted to sit down with them and eat at their table. They are, I know, under the impression that their food is not as good as mine, but if I ate at the same table with them they could not think so.¹⁹

Public records located in the New York State Archives document the meagre diet of the children of the asylum. Daily logs detail each meal’s menu, and what the children ate depended largely on what they raised on the institution’s farm; annual reports provide summaries of produce harvested and either used to feed the children or sold for profit to other state

institutions. The farm supplied vegetables and fruit, and the cows provided milk. Cattle were purchased and fattened to supply meat. Potatoes, flour and sugar were bought from outside vendors. In years of drought, the children’s diets suffered further.

The poor diet, compounded by the hard manual work and close living quarters, took its toll on the children. Epidemics raged; dysentery and tuberculosis (consumption) were not uncommon. A sampling of the death rates of the children indicates the following: in 1864, of the fifty-six children in the asylum, twelve died; in 1875, the year that the state assumed control over the asylum, eight out of 104 inmates died of consumption.²⁰ Annual reports indicate that by 1905, a combination of better health care, new buildings and dormitories, improved sewage and well planning, and more abundant diet contributed to a decline in the yearly death rates at the school, which was now known as the Thomas Indian School.²¹

However, as the meticulously detailed hand-written ledgers of the school’s daily meals denote, the children’s diet remained monotonous at best until the closing of the school in 1957. Mary Pembleton, a student who spent her early years in the 1920s at the Thomas Indian School, recollected that the food “just wasn’t good to eat. The oatmeal was wormy, the salt pork was cooked and served in its own grease and the beans and potatoes weren’t done.” Calvin Kettle, who lived there in the late 1930s, recalled that “at night after milking, we separated the cream from the milk. The whole milk went to the employees and teachers, the skim milk went to us kids.”²² Interestingly, diet was rarely blamed for the children’s many sicknesses.



The author's mother Marlene Bennett is pictured in the second row, second from the left, with classmates in front of the administration building. Courtesy of the author



Students participate in a graduation ceremony at the Thomas Indian School. Courtesy of New York State Archives, NYSA_A1913-77_68

John H. Van Valkenburg, the school's superintendent from 1881–1892—and who, at the time of his appointment, was viewed by Letchworth as embodying the right philosophical approach to the care and educational training of Indian children—attributed the children's ill health to heredity: "We do not find in the youth of this race, at present time, the strong physical development that enables them to battle against disease and endure hardships but rather [a] weakened constitution, in which hereditary seeds of decay have been handed down."²³

Tumultuous Years Filled with Scandal

Van Valkenburg was the first to publish formal superintendent's reports, which are all housed in the New York State Archives. Van Valkenburg's annual reports contained moral allusions and reference to local temperance union work and were accepted prima facie for the next decade by the State Board of Charities and Letchworth. Some of Van Valkenburg's comments provide important insight into his beliefs, such as "The old sloth, improvidence, and passion for a wild life still dominate [the children's] nature"; "I have become fully convinced that the means of education and improvement will never be productive of the highest good as long as [the children's] tribal relations continued"; and "too much importance cannot be attached to the industrial training of Indian children, as they cannot hope to become valuable members of any community or hope to do away with their inherited shiftlessness."²⁴

Shortly after Van Valkenburg's tenure as superintendent, scandal broke out at the Thomas Asylum, leading the State Board of Charities to open an investigation. The scandal brought to light allegations that claimed Van Valkenburg, who was by this point nowhere to be found, committed indiscretions ranging from illicit relations with young female residents to mishandling of the institution's finances. The allegations also highlighted the general poor treatment and abuse of the Indian children.²⁵

The individual who purportedly broke the scandal was a newspaper journalist named Varian, who wrote for *The Buffalo Enquirer*, which would eventually publish nearly verbatim the testimony of the Board of Charities' investigation. (The paper remains the primary source of this evidence, as thousands of pages of testimony and documentation seem to have "disappeared" and cannot be found in files of the State Board of Charities or the Correspondence files housed in the State Archives.) The story first appeared in the *Enquirer* in April 1892, with detailed testimony from the investigation printed from July through December of that year. During that first month, the *Enquirer* questioned the Trustees' careless oversight of Van Valkenburg's leadership of the school by posing the important question: "If he is innocent, why has he disappeared?" The authors followed their question with an assertion: "If Van Valkenburg is guilty, his irregularities must have extended over a number of years. If he is guilty, the Board of Trustees [is] convicted of gross and unpardonable negligence."²⁶

During the investigation, one of the trustees, Frank C. Vinton, was also indicted for receiving a one

dollar commission for every \$6.50 barrel of flour sold to the asylum. The entangled details as reported in the *Enquirer* note that Van Valkenburg signed the checks for each delivery.²⁷

In a July 22, 1892 article called "Simply Awful: Poor Indian Orphan Girls Beaten, Starved, and Horribly Ill-Treated," the *Enquirer* printed signed affidavits and sworn testimony by the staff and children who served as witnesses for the State. Witness accounts continued, and the *Enquirer* reported on July 27, 1892 that Van Valkenburg had been found in Brockport and arrested. The next day, Van Valkenburg pleaded not guilty and was released on bail.

On October 3, 1892, Oscar Craig, President of the State Board of Charities, sent a letter to Simon N. Rosendale, the Attorney General of New York, emphasizing that "the matter is an important one." Craig reported to Rosendale that complaints of negligence had been made against the Trustees in respect to finances and of supervision of the late superintendent, and that the gravest of charges "against the late superintendent allege illicit relations with girls under the age of sixteen at his institution."²⁸

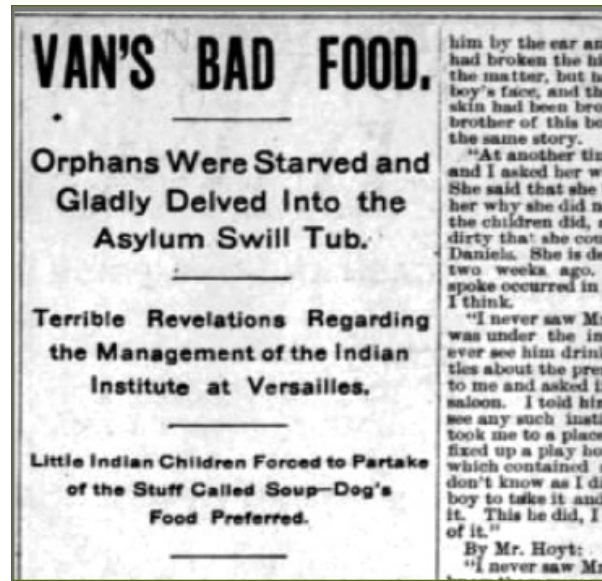
In all, the evidence uncovered painted a frightening picture of Van Valkenburg's treatment of the Indian children under his care. On December 7, 1892, the *Enquirer* ran a story entitled "Horrible Soup" that printed detailed testimony on the substandard and sometimes rotten food provided to the children on a daily basis, as well as accounts attesting to the many cruelties practiced on the children, from cold water baths and solitary confinement lasting several days at a time, to the youngest children being horse-whipped.

Before the trial resumed later in February 1893, on January 6, 1893, the *Enquirer* reported that Van Valkenburg had been admitted to the Buffalo State Hospital in December, having been judged insane by a Dr. Mann of Brockport. After a lengthy investigation and thousands of pages of testimony, the case was eventually closed by mid-March. A group of commissioners of the State Board of Charities, along with Attorney General Gilbert, announced after an hour's deliberation "that in view of the fact that John H. Van Valkenburg was insane and that a new board of trustees had been appointed and that their appointment ratified it would be useless expense and loss of time to continue." Attorney General Gilbert favored closing the investigation.

The special committee on the scandal issued its formal report to the State Board of Charities in 1893. It concluded:

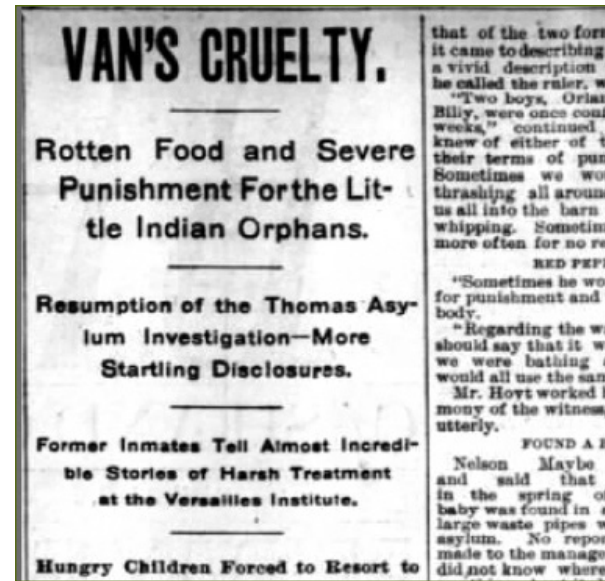
*Material found and substantial evidence has been received on the part of the people to prove the charges in the case of [the major complainant], and other similar charges, and other improper conduct, of the late superintendent toward female inmates, and to sustain complaints of improper and insufficient food, of undue severity, of cruelty in punishment and disciplining, and in other matters...*²⁹

In summary, Van Valkenburg was declared insane and he was never brought to trial; the Van Valkenburgs later moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan. Any reported misdeeds of the trustees went unpun-



VAN'S BAD FOOD.

The Buffalo Enquirer, December 8, 1892



VAN'S CRUELTY.

The Buffalo Enquirer, March 2, 1893

ished. "The whole matter," wrote Board of Charities president Craig, "seems more exasperating now in the suggestion that the late superintendent was simulating, and that his malingering was not detected by the specialist, who left us to believe that he was in fact, as was as in law, to be considered insane."³⁰

Improvements and Reorganization

The impact of this scandal was enormous: the entire Board of Trustees was dismissed, and a new board was appointed by Governor Roswell P. Flower. Unfortunately, the next two succeeding superintendents, Hooker and Bennett, became enmeshed in similar scandals, embarrassing the State so much that over \$74,000 was appropriated to the institution as part of a rebuilding program. In its Thirty-Fourth Annual Report (1900), the State Board of Charities wrote that "the buildings of the Thomas Asylum, the education and training, the institution affords have led to a greatly improved condition, morally, mentally and physically, of the children, and the asylum, through its relation with the different reservations, is quietly exerting a beneficial influence upon the adult Indians, especially upon those of the Cattaraugus reservation, upon which the asylum is located."³¹

A third change in superintendents was welcomed. In April 1895, the state appointed George I. Lincoln as

the head of the Thomas Asylum. During his tenure, capital improvements flourished, with the entire campus being rebuilt by 1905, just in time for the school's fiftieth anniversary. The influx of state appropriations aided Lincoln in the reconstruction of the school, which also paralleled his reorganization plan. In 1895, Lincoln started a kindergarten, and by 1899 the school witnessed its first commencement exercises for students in the sixth-grade—the highest grade in the school until 1905, when seventh and eighth grades were added, coinciding with Lincoln receiving legislative approval to change the name of the school. In 1905, athletics were incorporated into the program; Lincoln reported taking great pride in the school's football team.³²

W.H. Gratwick, of the State Board of Charities, approved Lincoln's reorganization and focus for the school, observing that "the scope of work had broadened with the change in architecture. Now a liberal education is offered to the Indian children who are fortunate enough to be taken under the care of the state in this institution." In effect, while the educational components may have expanded, Gratwick's papers also indicate a continuation of the practice that combined manual labor education, with the boys still performing general husbandry and the girls still working in the laundry, kitchen, sewing room and bakery.³³

In 1907, Lincoln passed away as the result of a stroke, and the former head teacher, John C. Brennan,

eventually became the next superintendent. Until his death in 1943, Brennan maintained Lincoln's philosophical approach to running the school.

In 1942, Brennan hired the school's first and only full-time social worker, a Miss Frances Kinkead, who was assigned to counsel the residents and to advise the superintendent and remained employed at the school until its eventual closing. Archival documents are filled with Kinkead's monthly and annual reports detailing the personal histories of the children who resided at Thomas during her tenure, as well as monthly newsletters about school events and alumni news and newspaper clippings.³⁴

Brennan was succeeded by Hjalimar Scoe, who reportedly ran the school with an iron fist, instilling assimilationist practices that included punishing the children for speaking their Native languages. In 1946, Willard Beatty, Director of Indian Education, toured the school and reported his surprise "to find metal barriers in the windows which would effectively preclude their use as exits in the event of fire, and despite the superintendent's explanation that this was to prevent the youngsters from getting out at night, seems an unnecessary precaution in view of the fact that the Indian Service operates more than sixty boarding schools in none of which we have found it necessary to bar the windows."³⁵ Later in the report, Beatty noted that superintendent Scoe had referred to several examples of the "restrictions which he deemed necessary to place upon the children that we began to wonder if we had been misinformed and were visiting a school for delinquents."³⁶

On August 31, 1956, newspapers across the state reported Governor Averell Harriman's announcement that the Thomas Indian School would be closed on or about September 1, 1957. The governor stated that the action was "the culmination of a program of integration through which Indian children are now being reared and educated in the community like all other children by sending them to regular public schools and placing them in family boarding homes and childcare institutions."³⁷ This rationale for closing the school ironically mirrored the reasons the school had been established and maintained (for over a century) in the first place: to integrate the Indian child into the life of the dominant society. Prior to the school's closing, its number of residents had peaked at 140 in



Students care for an ill classmate in the Thomas Indian School's infirmary during a nursing demonstration.

Courtesy of New York State Archives, NYSA_A1913-77_B2_61

December 1953; however, enrollment dwindled to 65 at the time of Harriman's announcement.

After his announcement, Harriman appointed a committee to suggest how the physical plant of the school should be used in the future. As it transpired, most of the institution's stately buildings were simply left to ruin and eventually condemned and/or demolished by the Seneca Nation. In the heart of the Seneca Nation's Cattaraugus territory, a few buildings remain from the place commonly referred to as "Salem" (a nickname derived from the earlier name of "asylum"), or from the Thomas Indian School. Some are still in use by the Seneca Nation government today, such as the former Hospital building, which is used for office space. Current tribal government buildings, a senior citizen residential home, an early childhood center, an Indian health services clinic, and a tribal library are just some of the newer buildings built on the land once occupied by the school.

Since the Thomas Indian School was a state-operated institution at the time of its closing in 1957, all of its records and sealed documents were sent to Albany, to be housed in the New York State Archives in perpetuity.

Thomas Indian School

Reconciling the Past

As a Native American educator, I began researching what has evolved into an in-depth account of the sociological impact of Thomas Indian School on the Seneca Nation by correlating factual documentation with the personal histories and stories as relayed to me by Thomas survivors. I am neither a historian nor cultural anthropologist—just a woman who is passionate about helping my Native community embark on a process of healing.

Just over a decade ago, as I was about to start the year-long residency at the New York State Archives, I secured permission from my mother and nineteen of her peers to access their sealed case files, which had been housed in the archival collections since 1957. As I sought their permission, I learned that not one of them actually knew these case files existed or that they had been preserved all these years in the Archives.

My research began not with these sealed files, however, but with an examination of public records, particularly (but not limited to) those dating from the time of my mother's stay at the Thomas Indian School. My intent was to gain a deeper understanding of the institution, as summarized in the sections above. Those records contained superintendents' reports, annual reports, centennial reports, social worker reports, school newsletters, agricultural accounts, dining hall ledgers, civil service newsletters, other state agency reports, and photographs. In the school's 102-year history, nine superintendents and two interim superintendents were employed. From numerous reports contained within the archival records, the conditions of the school—from finances and operations to education labor—varied as a result of each individual superintendent's method of overseeing both facility operations and the thousands of children who were residents of the school.

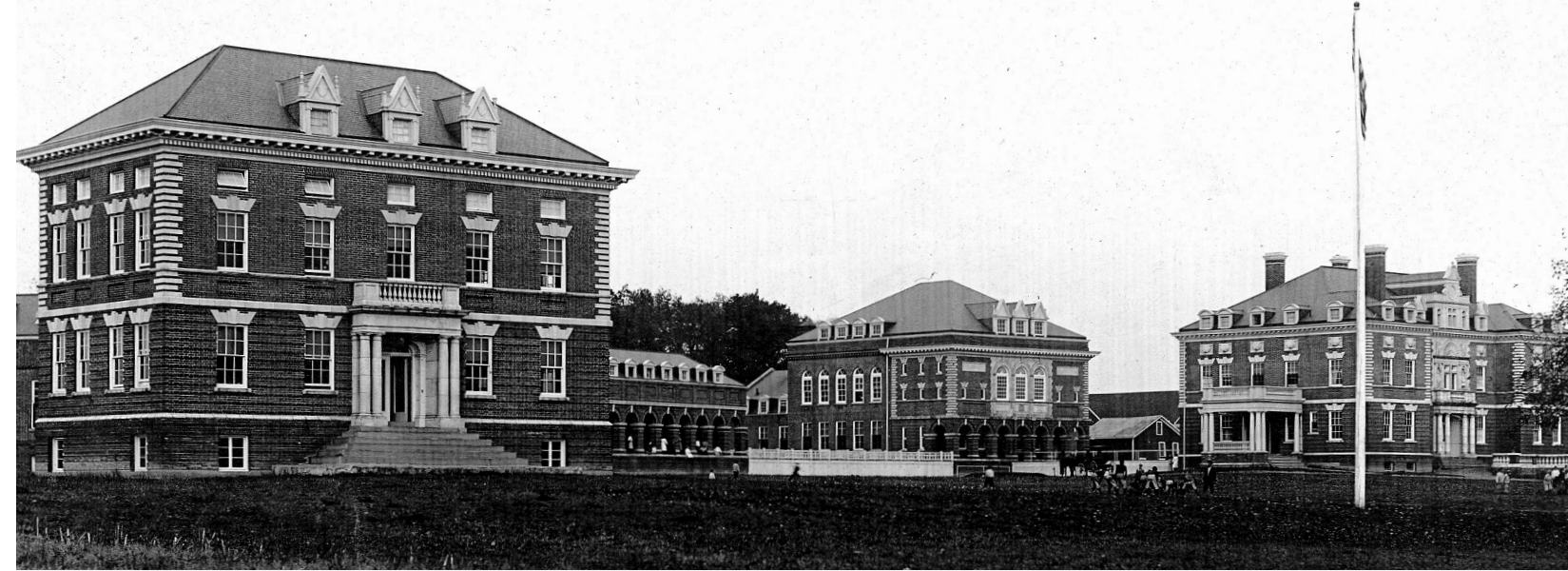
With the assistance of state archivists, I reserved and planned special days in which to access the aforementioned sealed records of twenty former Thomas Indian School residents, some of whom are still living today and yet others of whom have passed away since 2007. I discovered that these twenty orphaned, destitute and/or neglected Native American children had been referred to the school by either a parent or guardian unable to care for the child, a county welfare agency seeking to place the child in foster care, or

directly from children's court. Final determinations on admissions were made by the school's Superintendent and noted in each case file. The children's sealed case files contained a multitude of personal documents, such as intake case summaries prepared by social workers, completed application forms, birth certificates, court documents, detailed medical documentation, social worker case reports and summaries, house matron anecdotal records, wage earner records, personal mail correspondence, and transfer forms.

But my most important discovery was that the files contained many of the answers to the survivors' lingering questions, mainly related to their lack of understanding as to why they were isolated from their families and communities. For me personally, I soon realized my mother's sealed file contained the answers she had longed to know for over seventy years. During and after her ten-year stay, my mother could never understand why her extended family never came to her rescue. She resented the fact that her Aunt Betty (Bennett) Granich did not adopt her or raise her through foster care as she did with other children. Yet when I accessed her sealed case file in the NYS Archives, I discovered that correspondence between Aunt Betty and Miss Frances Kinkead, the school's social worker, chronicled that Aunt Granich did want to adopt my mother, but was refused by Kinkead. My mother did not discover this until she read her file for the first time about ten years ago, about five years after my great Aunt Betty had passed away.

Through a comparison of the public records and the sealed case files, I came to realize the ironic nature of the relationship between the residents and Kinkead, the social worker. Furthermore, interviews with the twenty former residents confirmed my hypothesis that Kinkead's perspectives, beliefs and decision-making allowed her to hold more power and authority over the lives of the children than that of the school's superintendents and headmasters.

Kinkead's monthly reports provided an accounting of the residents, her responsibilities as the sole social worker at Thomas, and her personal summaries of the many trips taken and conferences attended, as well as recommendations to the Board of Trustees. Public records also contain copies of the school newsletter that she wrote. In each of these documents, which detail current activities of the school and children, Kinkead nonchalantly recounts her knowledge



An exterior view of the Thomas Indian School, including Stewart Hall, the dormitories, and the administration building. Courtesy of New York State Archives, NYSA_A1913-77_3

of the residents who had entered the military, were transferred to other Native American residential boarding schools such as Chilocco and Haskell, or were placed in wage homes for employment.

However, no written documentation is included in the files that would provide explanation of decisions regarding any transfer of these students. For instance, my mother's sister, Barbara Bennett, was sent to Haskell Institute, presumably perhaps because she excelled in athletics; my mother was sent to a "wage home" at the age of 15 to work for an affluent family as a live-in maid. But to this date, my mother has no idea why she was chosen, along with three other Thomas girls, to pack her meager belongings and be transported to the Dunkirk-Fredonia area of Chautauqua County. For many of these young women, working in a wage home became their first experience living with a family outside of the institution.

Initially, I was unable to determine how Kinkead came to know these details of the lives of residents outside the walls of Thomas Indian School. Upon closer examination of documents included in the sealed case files, I discovered my answer when I compared the contents from the public records to those contained in the sealed files. For example, I found letters written to Kinkead by former residents who were in the military. In one particular letter, the author confesses his realization to Kinkead that he finds it ironic how she has been the recipient of his letters throughout his military career. Understandably, as a result of his lack of relationship to his biological family or connection to anyone from his Native community, the young man admitted that he simply did not have anyone else to write to while in the army.

Examples of other letters written to Kinkead were sent to her from residents who worked at summer

camp. In one of the camp letters written by my mother, she relays the story of her feelings of excitement when the camp counselors discovered she was American Indian and asked her if she could provide the campers with Native American lore at an evening campfire—only to realize sadly that she had absolutely no knowledge of her Native culture and history because she had not learned it at Thomas Indian School.

In conversations, former residents informed me that while away and during times devoted to writing letters back home, their home *was* Thomas Indian School, and Kinkead had therefore become the individual to whom all personal communication was sent. For those young women who worked in wage homes, the wealthy women of the households in which they worked provided Kinkead with anecdotal notes describing the former residents' transitions into their homes, as well as an accounting of the money earned and yet forwarded back to Kinkead, with detailed receipts left in the sealed case files. Other letters included former residents humbly asking Kinkead for money from their accounts to pay for clothing and shoes or other personal items.

Reading these letters, I began to comprehend the mindset of Kinkead, a spinster charged with the oversight and care of hundreds of Thomas residents. In several cases, her decision-making, put simply, was mean and unjust. For instance, children under her supervision were once allowed to go home during the summer months, but Kinkead changed this policy in an effort to further isolate the children from their families and communities.

In the end, many, but not all, who lived at Thomas thrived despite the hardships. My mother, for example, became strong and independent, refusing to turn out to be "just another drunk Indian" as the children were

often described by the white matrons who worked at Thomas. Unfortunately, those words became a self-fulfilling prophecy for many who did not survive. I became witness to this on several occasions when I accompanied my mother to funerals of friends with whom she lived at Thomas, those who passed away in their thirties and forties—too early for their time. To this day, my mother is considered a *survivor*.

In October 2017, at my mother's request, I took her to see the mansion where she worked as a wage earner. The house presently serves as a home for the S.U.N.Y. Fredonia college president. Its former owners, the Van Burren family, sold the stately white stucco manor to the university before relocating to Mayville, New York. Invited by the college President Ginny Horvath to enter the front door for the first time—only having ever been allowed entrance via the servants' area in the back of the house—my mother sought understanding of her life as an abandoned and orphaned Seneca girl. While touring the home, she recalled in detail each room of the house as it appeared in the 1950s—the glassware cabinet in the butler's pantry, the secret staircase to the second attic where her room and bathroom were located, the hidden floor buzzer located in the middle of the dining room that rang into the kitchen, and the small area where her own tiny kitchen table was located. While being served afternoon tea, my mother relayed the story of her darkest hour of isolation and desperation, a story that revolved around a silver charm bracelet given to her from Mrs. Van Buren and that she wore for the first time that day as a symbol of her own resiliency. We shared tea biscuits, tears, and laughter that afternoon, while my mother quietly found peace and reconciliation.

Conclusion

A new field of science called epigenetics (literally “above the gene”) has begun to provide scientifically-based research to support the theories associated with historical trauma. For some, Thomas Indian School embodied both victimization and agency for Native people, as there exists a diversity of experiences, attitudes, and feelings from those who attended the institution and resided in its military barracks-style housing. These experiences, as relayed to me by the for-

mer residents, ranged from positive to horrifying. Some claimed that the school equipped them with important skills and training to succeed in the outside world, whereas documented evidence has demonstrated that others were in fact victims of physical and sexual abuse. For descendants of the boarding school residents, remnants of multigenerational trauma—resulting in alcohol and drug abuse, depression and other manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder—continue to affect families and the Native communities throughout the state of New York and Canada.

The results are far-reaching. Native communities and families touched by the residential boarding school era have been on a path toward healing. We lost family—the whole sense of it—and are trying to regain that again. Families and siblings were forcibly separated from one another. Many residents never returned to their Native communities or families; worse, the boarding school institution *became* their families. In Canada, legal action and reparations have begun on behalf of First Nations peoples who were abused at government and church-run residential schools. Apologies have been offered by the Canadian prime minister. Yet in the United States, we have not witnessed similar action or restitution. Documentaries, such as *Unseen Tears: The Impact of Native American Residential Boarding Schools in WNY*, have been produced and continue to be used as healing mechanisms so that we can talk about the impact without blaming but with the desire to regain all that was lost. Today, we continue to move beyond this tragedy by employing indigenous strategies of resilience, coupled with a rebirth and return to our traditional teachings. Those teachings are grounded in what is referred to as the *Gaiwiiio*, or the good mind. Haudenosaunee worldview philosophy is grounded in the *Gaiwiiio*, which teaches us to begin each day in thankfulness for all that the Creator has provided for us and to think with a Good Mind and a Good Heart in all that we say and do.

ENDNOTES

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