

NEWS | NORTH DAKOTA | News reporting

North Dakota Native Americans grapple with dark boarding school history in day of remembrance

At least 13 Native American boarding schools existed in North Dakota, including a large federally run institution at Fort Totten on the Spirit Lake Reservation.



Margaret Bear, left, and Michelle Hale help put a flag up during the "Every Child Matters" event in Fort Totten, N.D., on Friday, Sept. 30, 2022.

Chris Flynn / The Forum

By Jeremy Turley

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FORT TOTTEN, N.D. — The message written on Denise Lajimodiere's bright orange shirt is brief and blunt: "Federal Indian boarding schools were genocide."

It's a sentiment the **author and former North Dakota State University professor**(<https://www.deniselajimodiere.com/>) has believed for many years, but only recently has broader recognition come to the grim history of Native American boarding schools — what Lajimodiere calls “America’s best-kept secret.”

Lajimodiere was among about 50 people who gathered outside of the Fort Totten State Historic Site on Friday, Sept. 30, to observe a day of remembrance for Native American children who attended boarding schools that aimed to strip them of their culture, language and family ties.

The second annual “Every Child Matters” event held on the Spirit Lake Reservation aligned with the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, which Canadian activists established in 2013 to raise awareness for the legacy of the country’s residential schools.

The Canadian government made Sept. 30 a federal holiday last year after an anthropologist **announced she had found unmarked graves**(<https://apnews.com/article/caribbean-canada-7430e40bc8808410db45d08feb8fbf71>) likely belonging to 200 children on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia.

The disturbing discovery at Kamloops in May 2021 has caused the **U.S. to begin reckoning**(https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf) with its own history of government-sponsored forced assimilation of Native Americans. Events like the one in Fort Totten have grown out of that heightened attention, Lajimodiere said.

At least 13 Native American boarding schools existed in North Dakota, including a large federally run institution at Fort Totten, **according to Lajimodiere’s research**.(<https://library.ndsu.edu/ndsuarchives/recent-news/new-ndsu-press-book-stringing-rosaries-added-collection>)

The Spirit Lake Tribe, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa and the State Historical Society of North Dakota recently agreed to partner in a search for the remains of children(<https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/their-spirits-are-still-here-tribe-state-to-search-for-remains-at-north-dakota-boarding-school>) around the former Fort Totten Indian Industrial School.



An aerial photograph from the mid-1950s shows Fort Totten.
State Historical Society of North Dakota photo

The Friday gathering featured prayer, storytelling and a “healing fire” that burned from sunrise to sunset. Organizers from the Spirit Lake chapter of Family and Child Education handed out orange T-shirts — a reference to the event’s Canadian roots.
(<https://www.orangeshirtday.org/phyllis-story.html>)

Speakers including Lajimodiere and North Dakota Rep. Ruth Buffalo, D-Fargo, told attendees about their personal and family ties to boarding schools.

Lajimodiene, an enrolled Turtle Mountain member, has spent years documenting the experiences of boarding school survivors. Her father, grandfather and other family members attended Fort Totten, which she calls a “hellhole boarding school.”

“This is certainly a day of remembrance for me personally — remembering the hell that they went through here,” Lajimodiene said.



Author and scholar Denise Lajimodiene speaks during an event to raise awareness for the history of Native American boarding schools in Fort Totten, N.D., on Friday, Sept. 30, 2022. Chris Flynn / The Forum

Previous Forum News Service

reporting(<https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/their-spirits-are-still-here-tribe-state-to-search-for-remains-at-north-dakota-boarding-school>) and Lajimodiene’s findings found that the Fort Totten school, open from 1891 to 1959, had a culture of systemic abuse and neglect of children.

Lajimodiene said her father witnessed the deaths of fellow students from illness, physical abuse, starvation and loneliness (“failure to

thrive”(https://listen.sdpb.org/news/2021-07-16/in-the-moment-the-return-of-native-childrens-remains-from-federal-boarding-schools)).

“It was a form of genocide, besides cultural genocide,” Lajimodiere said.

Buffalo, an enrolled member of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, said she always knew her mother had attended boarding school in Wahpeton, but it wasn’t until the discovery at Kamloops last year that her mother began to share details of the punishments and cruelty she endured at the institution.

School administrators made Buffalo’s mother kneel on a broomstick for speaking her native language, the lawmaker said. Young boys had their hair cut short against their will, she added.

Those who survived boarding schools often had the trajectory of their lives shortened by the experience, and the scars remain in their families generations later, said Buffalo, who sits on the board of the **National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition**.
(https://boardingschoolhealing.org/about-us/board-and-staff/)



Orange shirts reading "Every child matters" sit on a table at an event to raise awareness for the history of Native American boarding schools in Fort Totten, N.D. on Friday, Sept. 30, 2022.

Chris Flynn / The Forum

Many boarding school survivors choose to keep their childhood experiences bottled up to avoid traumatizing the younger generations, but events like the one at Fort Totten "let people know it's OK to share their own stories," Buffalo said through tears. That public recognition can help set off a healing process, she said.

Spirit Lake Tribal Chairman Doug Yankton informed attendees about the tribe's efforts to **repatriate the remains of a boy named Edward Upright**(<https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/boys-remains-could-come-back-to-the-dakotas-from-notorious-native-american-boarding-school>) who died and was buried at the notorious Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania.

The U.S. Army, which maintains the cemetery in Carlisle, has **pledged to facilitate the return of Upright's remains**(<https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/army-boys-remains-wont-return-to-dakotas-from-notorious-native-american-boarding-school-this-year>) to the Spirit Lake Reservation next year.

A group of Sisseton and Wahpeton Sioux children arrived at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in November 1879. Edward Upright, who died and was buried at the school, is pictured in the middle.

Glass plate photo taken by John Choate in 1879 and published online by the Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center

Tribal leaders across North Dakota believe **the future will bring more repatriations**(<https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/my-heart-feels-so-heavy-young-men-from-western-north-dakota-tribe-never-came-back-from-boarding-school>) as researchers look into former boarding school sites.

Event organizer Nancy Robertson said she hopes shining a light on the history of boarding schools will aid in the tribes' push to "find all the kids that are missing."

Spirit Lake member Marva Tiyouwakanhdi, who opened the gathering with a prayer in the Dakota language, said the event can serve as "an awakening to the tragedies and traumas" endured by tribal elders and those who have passed away. But Tiyouwakanhdi said remembering

boarding school survivors also celebrates the resilience of her people in the face of persecution.

“One of the things we’re always saying since we’re standing here is that because one of them made it, we made it,” Tiyowakanhdi said. “If you look at it that way, it’s kind of an honor toward them.”

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