

**“To Run and Play”: Resistance and Community at the Mt.
Pleasant Indian Industrial School, 1892 - 1933**

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For my parents
*Thank you for **everything***

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Preface: The First March	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter One: “I Came From a Broken Family”	11
Chapter Two: “Just Like In the Army”	27
Chapter Three: “There for Life”	52
Conclusion: “The Worst Thing They Could Have Ever Done”	75
Epilogue: The Second March	79
Appendix One: List of Superintendents	83
Appendix Two: Photographs of the Mt. Pleasant School	84
Bibliography	90

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. **Students outside the school** – pg. 84
2. **View of Mt. Pleasant campus** – pg. 84
3. **Girls outside school hospital** – pg. 85
4. **Graduating Class** – pg. 85
5. **Mt. Pleasant men's basketball team, 1930** – pg. 86
6. **Mt. Pleasant men's football team, 1932** – pg. 86
7. **Woodworking shop, 1900** – pg. 87
8. **Mt. Pleasant student band** – pg. 87
9. **Students during drill** – pg. 88
10. **School girls dressed for Catholic Church, 1930** – pg. 88
11. **Pencil Drawing by Hazel Deer, 1926** – pg. 89

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PREFACE: THE FIRST MARCH

The Laying of the Cornerstone, October 18, 1892:

On a rainy Tuesday in October at least 2,000 people gathered in the town of Mt. Pleasant, Michigan and paraded to the newly constructed Indian Industrial School. The “Grand Parade” organized downtown into four divisions and stretched to nearly one mile in length. The mayor of Mt. Pleasant declared the day a holiday and all businesses closed for the afternoon, turning the town’s attention solely to the new school. Guests came from all over the state and represented nationally recognized organizations such as the Sir Knights of Templar, Free and Accepted Masons, Knights of Pythias, Maccabees, and the Grand Army of the Republic. The Mt. Pleasant band was joined by the nearby Bay City, Saginaw, and Ithaca bands for the occasion. The parade culminated at the school with an ancient and deeply religious ceremony: the laying of the cornerstone.¹

Once the procession reached the school, the crowd gathered in the basement where the Grand Master of the Free and Accepted Masons led the “ancient ritual” of the placing of the cornerstone. He called upon the Grand Chaplain to lead the crowd in a Christian prayer that stated the purpose of the school: “Mercifully be pleased to bless this stone that we are to lay as a corner stone to this building now being erected by this Great Republic, for the advancement in civilization and education of our red brothers.” The Grand Master continued the ritual by laying the stone with three deeply symbolic tools: the square, the level, and the plumb. First, he used the square which taught “to square our actions by the square of virtue.” Second, the level was applied and showed “the equality of men.” Lastly, the plumb demonstrated the need “to walk uprightly before God and man.” The stone proved to be square, level, and plumb, indicating that the

¹ “The Stone is Laid: With Imposing Ceremonies,” *The North Western Tribune*, October 21, 1892.

building was properly constructed both physically and spiritually. The townspeople then deposited a time capsule with the stone which contained twenty-eight articles including documentation of the local churches, histories of the various organizations in attendance, a history of Mt. Pleasant, newspaper clippings, photographs, and a program detailing the ceremonies of the day. The Masons mortared the stone into place and blessed the building with corn, wine, and oil—concluding the Masonic ritual and the Benediction.²

Before the ceremonies had concluded, the honorable R. B. McKnight gave a closing speech that outlined the necessity of the school and placed it in historical context for the audience. He immediately equated the school's opening with the 400th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America; suggesting that the school was an advancement along the continuum of "progress." McKnight's lengthy speech highlighted the racism of the time and exemplified white America's views of Indians. He boasted that the end of the recent Indian Wars out West represented the end of an era or—more accurately—represented the end of the old way of dealing with the "Indian Problem." The boarding schools represented the new way: "[it] teaches them to work and to think; interests them in a better civilization and aims to prepare them for the duties and responsibilities of life and citizenship." America's policy had changed: instead of killing the Indians, they would be forced to assimilate. The Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial School would institute this new policy. Similar to its predecessors, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania and the Hampton Institute in Virginia, the purpose of the Mt. Pleasant School was twofold: to provide students with a basic education and to train young boys and girls in "skilled professions" such as farming, sewing, carpentry,

² *Ibid.*

and housekeeping. McKnight's speech reminded his audience (and perhaps reassured them) that this school was created by whites and it would be run by whites.³

Indeed, the celebration commemorating the opening of the Mt. Pleasant School was organized by, conducted by, and attended by whites. If a single Indian were present, his or her name was never mentioned in any of the newspapers and is lost from the historical record. Indian bands did not play, tribal chiefs did not make speeches, Indian rituals were not performed—activities were completely organized by white, Christian, Americans. Since the school was specifically designed to educate Indian children this fact may seem odd, but it is a fact that dominates the school's history. The fate of the Mt. Pleasant School was determined as soon as the cornerstone was laid.

³ *Ibid.*

INTRODUCTION

On August 11, 1913, Jessie McDonald wrote to Superintendent Robert A.

Cochran and refused to return to the Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial School:

I have decided not to come back to school any more. Because I have made arrangements to work here in Detroit and besides my mother is getting porly and going down so much that I'll have to help her out. She needs my help pretty bad now...I had rather stay with my mother and help her out, all I can. And one thing I have been to school about 9 years and did not get anything out of it very much I must say. And of course I am not very well at the same time either.

Well I must close this letter and wishing to hear from you soon.

I remain as your friend

[Signed] Jessie McDonald¹

Superintendent Cochran demanded that Jessie return to school and reminded her: “you are home now only on a vacation and that I have the papers here where your mother signed for you to remain in school three years and your time will not expire until next year, therefore I will expect you back here ready to start into school as soon as it opens.”²

Conflicts with the school’s superintendent such as Jessie’s were common among the students of the Mt. Pleasant School. Once students enrolled in the Mt. Pleasant School, they fell under the authority of the government officials who administered the school.

School officials dictated how often students would visit home, and it was not unusual for

¹ After careful consideration, I have decided to leave the full names of students in this thesis. These men and women are important historical figures and should be recognized as such. I encourage families of former students to contact me about my research, and I am happy to share my findings. Jessie McDonald to the superintendent, August 11, 1913, National Archives, Record Group 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Records of the Mt. Pleasant School (hereafter cited as NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant), Student Case Files.

² Supt. Cochran to Jessie McDonald, August 12, 1913, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

a student to be away for years at a time. Students were frequently homesick, and many attempted to run away from school or simply refused to return entirely as Jessie did.³ Jessie's insubordination exemplifies how students and school officials constantly clashed over how the school should operate. For students, the school was a place to receive three meals a day, clothing, and a formal education— necessities that were not always guaranteed at home. However, the U.S. government constructed off-reservation boarding schools such as Mt. Pleasant to separate children from their families and assimilate them into white society. Conflicts over visits home betrayed this philosophy. Students such as Jessie had very clear expectations of how the school should cater to their needs; when these expectations clashed with the intentions of school administrators, students resisted.

Since the Mt. Pleasant School opened, there was a perpetual struggle between Indians and school officials over how the school should be run. School officials and representatives from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) attempted to regulate the lives of the students very closely. Administrators told them what language to speak, forced them to dress in uniforms, confined them to a rigid daily schedule, provided them with a carefully constructed curriculum, punished students who misbehaved, and decided how often they would visit home. Yet, as Jessie's letter suggests, students and their parents were not silently oppressed, nor were they passive victims—they were active resisters. When school policies interfered with their lives, students resisted in many ways: they ran away, stole food, practiced their own beliefs, and even set fire to the school. Students and parents viewed the school as a resource that could be utilized at their will and

³ After debate with Superintendent Cochran, it appears Jessie was allowed to remain at home with her mother. A deeper analysis of this case is detailed in Chapter Three.

repetitively shaped the school to fit their needs, despite harsh regulations and the intentions of BIA officials.

This thesis focuses on the lives of the students of the Mt. Pleasant School: how they managed life away from their homes, how they experienced a demanding daily schedule, how they endured punishment, and how they resisted. Moreover, this thesis analyzes the perpetual tug-of-war between school officials and Michigan Indians to exert agency within the school. In other words, both sides struggled to control aspects of school life wherever they could instill their power and demonstrate their independence. For example, school administrators had the agency to determine what time students would wake, what they would eat, and what they would learn. In contrast, students displayed their agency when they ran away, stole food from the cafeteria, held forbidden pow-wows, and even set fire to the school. Furthermore, this thesis will examine the complicated view Michigan Indians had of the Mt. Pleasant School. While the school separated families and destroyed cultural practices, it also provided Indian communities with needed aid and facilitated the creation of new social bonds. Former students are often conflicted over their experiences at Mt. Pleasant, and the school plays a paradoxical role in Michigan Indian history.

Despite the strict regulation whites instituted at the Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial School, enrollment of Indian students filled the school to capacity (320 by 1908) almost every year. The school was a place where Indian children from across Michigan (with a few children from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and New York) learned together, interacted together, resisted together, fell ill together, and died together. It was a school for Indians, and it was quickly adopted into their society. The school may have been funded by

whites, erected by whites, and staffed by whites, but it was never fully *controlled* by whites—such a capability would require a submissive student body. Through persistent resistance and the creation of community within the school, the students of Mt. Pleasant were able to overcome the policies of school officials and establish the school as a place that was distinctly theirs. This thesis recounts their struggle.

It is important to reiterate that the Mt. Pleasant School is by no means an exceptional case. It was one of many federally run schools that was administered by the BIA. It was just one of the tools of the nation-wide campaign to “kill the Indian, save the man.”⁴ This campaign has been well documented by historians. One of the first historians to evaluate the Indian boarding schools was Fred Hoxie. His book *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880 – 1920* (1984), examines Indian education on a national level. Hoxie’s work focuses mainly on the federal policy of the United States and how the goals of the assimilation campaign shifted and evolved. Hoxie discusses the perception of Indians to white Americans and how those perceptions shifted as the assimilation campaign endured. Hoxie points out that by 1880 it had become clear that Native Americans would no longer be savages on the fringes of the nation, but would become members of society, for better or for worse. Hoxie concludes that the assimilation campaign was not designed to fully integrate Indians into white society, rather it demonstrated where Indians resided on the American social ladder—a ladder deeply divided along social and racial lines. Hoxie writes: “The key to assimilation was

⁴ These are the infamous words of General Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of the first Indian Boarding School and leading advocate for the assimilation campaign. For a detailed account of Pratt see Fred Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880 – 1920*, (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1984).

no longer the act of becoming part of an undifferentiated, ‘civilized’ society; instead, assimilation had come to mean knowing one’s place and fulfilling one’s role.”⁵ The assimilation campaign was inherently racist and it was designed that way. Hoxie argues that the boarding schools were never constructed to turn Indians into white men and women; they were instead intended to prepare Indians to operate in a society dominated by white men and women. While Hoxie’s work provides an excellent overview of Indian education policy, Hoxie admits in his preface that the narrative lacks views of the Indians themselves.⁶

However, David Wallace Adams does include the Indian viewpoint in his book *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875 – 1928* (1995). Although he focuses on the politics of the schools (primarily Carlisle), Adams folds the Indian narratives into the boarding school history. By telling the story of how Indian children and parents resisted the boarding schools, Adams highlights the failures of the schools to fully integrate Indian children into “civilization.” The children were not merely passive participants in the schools, but actively shaped their experience in them. Adams shows how students developed new concepts of how white America viewed them and how they viewed themselves. One of the major effects of the school that white reformers did not foresee was the development of a pan-Indian consciousness—for the first time Indians began to equate themselves with all American Indians, despite their tribal affiliation.⁷

⁵ Hoxie, 242.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁷ David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875 – 1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 336.

Recently, many historians have written books detailing individual boarding schools, focusing primarily on the experiences of the students. K. Tsianina Lomawaima's book *They Called It Prairie Light: the Story of Chilocco Indian School* (1994), positions the Chilocco Indian Industrial School into the larger context of the "educational crusade."⁸ Lomawaima uses interviews of former students to reveal how social structures were formed under such strict regulations. It was through these student-formed networks and kinship groups that resistance against authority was collaborated. In this way students shaped their environments and "made Chilocco their own."⁹ Chilocco students were not mere victims of the assimilation campaign, but used their experiences at the school to shape their identities in ways that the white administrators did not intend.

Donal F. Lindsey also examines the cultural identity of students in his book *Indians at Hampton Institute, 1877 – 1923* (1995), which is one of the first Indian schools. Located in Virginia, the Hampton Institute instructed both blacks and Indians, creating a unique environment where two of the most oppressed groups in American could interact. While the Indian education program was abandoned at Hampton by the early 1920s it had a profound effect on Indian education in America and Canada. Hampton published two monthly papers that launched the issue of Indian education into the public sphere: *The Southern Workman* and *Speeches, Talks and Thoughts*. The former equated Indian affairs with black affairs while the latter was the first paper to be

⁸ K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: the Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), xi.

⁹ *Ibid*, 167.

written, in part, by Indian students.¹⁰ Additionally, Lindsey explores Hampton's curriculum, which taught young Indians and blacks the history of their cultures. Lindsey denies that this was an attempt at cultural pluralism, but suggests that this was done to show the students "how much further they had to travel before catching up to whites."¹¹

Students were not the only ones affected by the boarding schools; families play an important part in understanding the effects of the school on Indian communities. Brenda J. Child addresses this in her book, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families: 1900 – 1940* (1998), in which she primarily uses letters between students and parents to retell the experiences of families during the boarding school era. Child discovered that despite the hardships many families retained strong bonds, and students were never completely removed from tribal life. Constant communication through letters assured that the "boarding school agenda did not triumph over Indian families or permanently alienate young members of the tribe from their people."¹² Child's work shows how the boarding schools have become an essential memory in American Indian communities.

While many of the schools have been the focus of multiple historical works, some schools have only briefly been discussed. For example, anthropologist Alice Littlefield provides a brief overview of the Mt. Pleasant School in her article, "The B.I.A. Boarding School: Theories of Resistance and Social Reproduction" (1989) and later a book chapter in *Native Americans and Wage Labor: Ethnohistorical Perspectives* (1996). Littlefield's work is primarily based on 27 interviews with former students and an examination of 111 BIA student case files for statistical information. Her article briefly describes the daily

¹⁰ Donal F. Lindsey, *Indians at Hampton Institute, 1877 – 1923* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 1995), 268.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 191.

¹² Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families: 1900 – 1940* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1998), 100.

life of students and outlines common forms of resistance against the school officials. However, her article is primarily a social-economic study and identifies how the school integrated Michigan Indians into the economy. Littlefield argues that “although the BIA schools failed to integrate Indian Americans into middle class Euro-American society, they were effective in integrating many of them into the rural and later urban working class.”¹³ To support her study, Littlefield provides statistical data on the occupations of former students in comparison to their parents. While Littlefield’s work examines student resistance and community within the school, the article only presents broad trends common in the sources. This thesis, then, aims to build on Littlefield’s work as an effort dig deeper in to the experiences of students and to reconstruct their worlds.

While schools such as Carlisle, Hampton, and Chilocco have been written about extensively, historians have nearly passed over the Mt. Pleasant School in Michigan. Aside from the work of Alice Littlefield, no publication focuses its sole attention on the Mt. Pleasant School. Part of this may be due to the limited resources that were available to historians previously. The National Archives in Chicago house all the administrative files concerning the Mt. Pleasant School. Part of this collection includes “student case files” which contain any files pertaining to a particular family; only recently have many of these files been available to the general public. These files are at the core of this paper and therefore their contents require further explanation. I have looked extensively through 26 different student case files which contain various documents, including: letters from parents to the school, copies of administrative letters sent to parents, health records of the students, and police reports and other government reports of the students.

¹³ Alice Littlefield, “The B.I.A. Boarding School: Theories of Resistance and Social Reproduction,” *Humanity & Society*, 13, no. 4 (1989): 429.

While often students wrote home to their parents, these letters were not property of the school and therefore rarely appear in the BIA files (except, for example, when letters were returned due to an incorrect address). I have examined the student files in depth, effectively reconstructing the lives of the students from the time they enrolled to the time they returned home. I employed a somewhat open-ended approach when choosing which files to examine, trying to look at the largest files while also tracing social and familial networks amongst students. Given the difficulty of examining so many files closely within the limited timeframe of a thesis year, it is important to note that I have only looked at a small fraction of these student case files. Therefore, this study is *a* history of the Mt. Pleasant School; I believe it to be an accurate representation of the typical student's experience, but I do not claim it to be universal to the experiences of all.

In addition to these sources I have also looked at the various administrative records that are available at the National Archives, including: letters of correspondence between the Mt. Pleasant School and the BIA, cost ledgers of the school, annual reports of the school, curriculum examples, and other various day-to-day correspondence. The lives of the students are well represented in these documents, but interviews and memoirs from the students are scarce. There are, however, published interviews with ex-students available in Pamela J. Dobson's book, *The Tree That Never Dies: Oral History of the Michigan Indians*. Also, a panel discussion with 20 former students was recorded on the film, *School Days Remembered: the Mt. Pleasant Indian School Reunion* (1991). In addition to these resources, Alice Littlefield interviewed thirty five former students, and the results are available in the book *Native Americans and Wage Labor: Ethnohistorical*

*Perspectives.*¹⁴ I utilized these sources as much as possible to provide the student perspective and counter the narratives of the administrative records.

This thesis is broken into three chapters and is roughly organized temporally. The first chapter focuses on the early years of the school up to the mid 1900's. It details early student resistance, culminating in the successful arson by a student, at a time when the school experienced large growth. Additionally, it provides the reader with early Michigan Indian history and early Mt. Pleasant history to better contextualize the important role of the school in these communities. The second chapter concentrates on the period between the mid 1900's to the late 1920's. During this time the school reached its peak attendance and consequently this period is well documented. This chapter reconstructs the daily lives of the students and illustrates how they resisted. The final chapter focuses on the late 1920's to 1934 when the school closed. It describes how Michigan Indians created community within the school, and how they began to utilize the school during the Great Depression when Indian communities were hit particularly hard. It shows Furthermore, it explores the reasons why the school was shut down and thus questions the effectiveness, or success of the school.

¹⁴ See Littlefiled, 100-121.

CHAPTER ONE: “I CAME FROM A BROKEN HOME”
Colonialism, Progressivism, Arson

The Indian School was built on the old Mission farm and included three hundred and twenty acres of tillable land. The building sat upon a hill overlooking Mt. Pleasant, dominating the city scene. A cool creek and a small forest of maple and beech complimented the bucolic landscape. One reporter wrote: “The site chosen could not be better. Nature seems to have designed it for this very purpose.”¹ Mt. Pleasant is located in the center of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula, and school officials claimed that the school’s location made it easily accessible to Indians throughout Michigan. At the same time, Mt. Pleasant was a sizable white city away from most Indian populations and effectively separated the students from their families. The superintendent boasted that the school is in “the midst of the highest white civilization and it combines more than any other Indian school in the country the advantages of both reservation and non-reservation schools.”² In effect, the school was close enough for students to attend (and run away), but it provided an environment foreign to them—a condition that most government officials thought was necessary to educate Indian children.

What most newspapers failed to report was that the school was built on an old Ojibwe burial ground. The students believed that the school was haunted by spirits and commonly reported hearing strange noises in the attic of the dormitories. At night, the children would exchange ghost stories and their experiences of the unexplainable. On at

¹ “Located,” *Isabella County Enterprise*, October 30, 1891.

² The school is located just a few miles from the Isabella Indian Reservation where the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal Nation resides. While members of this tribe attended the school, it is important to note that a majority of Mt. Pleasant students came elsewhere in Michigan. The superintendent’s claim that the school is a reservation school is therefore exaggerated. “Superintendent Spencer Report,” *Isabella County Enterprise*, December 7, 1894.

least one occasion a priest was called in to expel the spirits with holy water.³ One girl recalled that “there was somebody in the attic, could ‘a been a bearwalker.” Bearwalkers were familiar to all the children and had been observed by the Ojibwes, the Ottawas, and the Potawatomis for centuries. It was believed that bearwalkers could change forms using special medicines and would inflict bad luck, disgrace, poverty, sickness, and even death upon their enemies using “bad medicine.” Many believed that the bearwalkers themselves were ghosts.⁴ Therefore, the children believed the school grounds to be haunted by their ancestors. Stories of ghosts and bearwalking demonstrate that children had very well developed conceptions of their surroundings. The land where they now learned, slept, and played, had belonged to their ancestors; it was not “designed” to be a school, it was taken for that purpose. Indian children believed that ancestors were haunting the school because their land had been wrongfully seized. The Mt. Pleasant School was the result of, and contributed to, the same American Imperialism that had driven their grandparents off their lands.

Early Michigan Indian History: Cultural Practices and Colonialism

Gaw-be-naw: The First Man

The first among the Indians of L’Arbre Croche in story and tradition was Gaw-be-naw. He was said to be the first man created by the Gitchi Manitou (Great Spirit). He ruled over the land and the sea; named all the animals; taught the people how to plant and make gardens; how to hunt and fish; how to build wigwams and canoes; how to count; how to make clothing from the skins of wild animals; and many,

³ Pamela J. Dobson, ed., *The Tree That Never Dies: Oral History of the Michigan Indians* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Public Library, 1978).

⁴ *Ibid*, 82–95.

many other things. He was a prophet, philosopher, seer and natural born leader.⁵

Stories such as the one of *Gaw-be-naw* are passed down by oral tradition and vary across cultures. Generally speaking, Michigan Indians refer to themselves as *Anishinabek* (or, in the singular, *Anishinabe*) meaning “from whence the male of the species was lowered” or “the good beings.”⁶ *Anishinabek* consider their language to be sacred since it was a gift from *Gichi Manido* (*Gitchi Manitou*), or the Creator. *Anishinabek* are further distinguished as Ojibwes (who are often incorrectly called “Chippewas”), Ottawas, and Potawatomis. These peoples share a common cultural background and speak a dialect of the Algonquian language. Throughout their histories, Ojibwes, Ottawas, and Potawatomis have made important political alliances and are commonly referred to as the “People of Three Fires.”⁷

While creation stories and other legends vary according to the oral traditions of communities, the *Anishinabek* had a deep spiritual connection to the land. In the summers they would farm small plots of land in forest clearings, fish Michigan’s vast lakes, and harvest berries and other wild foods. In the winter, settlements would retreat into the forests where the *Anishinabek* would hunt wild game to survive the winters. The *Anishinabek* also had strong cultural traditions in creating maple syrup, basket weaving, and harvesting sweetgrass for spiritual rituals. Housing usually consisted of bent tree branches covered in beech bark that formed circular houses called *waakaa’igaans*.

⁵ *Gaw-be-naw: The First Man* is a traditional Ottawa legend told in the settlement of L’Arbre Croche, MI, located in present day Emmet County. John C. Wright, *The Crooked Tree: Indian Legends of Northern Michigan* (Harbor Springs, MI: John C. Wright, 1917), 21-2.

⁶ Basil H. Johnston, *Tales of the Anishinaubaek* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1993), 9.

⁷ Charles D. Cleland, *Rites of Conquest: The History and Culture of Michigan’s Native Americans* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), Map 6; Patrick Russell LeBeau, *Rethinking Michigan Indian History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 7-8.

Before contact with Europeans, the *Anishinabek* tended to live in small settlements between 50 and 200 people and were usually related by birth or marriage. The *Anishinabek* were both patrilineal and patrilocal, that is, ancestry was traced through the male's bloodline and newly married couples lived with the husband's family. Elders were highly respected and children called all people who were two generations older than them "grandmother" and "grandfather." Children learned by helping their parents with daily chores and through storytelling. Typically, gender roles were clearly defined, but complemented each other. For example, men tended to negotiate politics, fish, and hunt, while women farmed small garden plots, tanned hides, and collected wild foods and medicines. At the same time, gender roles were flexible as men and women often worked alongside each other depending on the season.⁸ Women performed labor intensive duties such as farming and hide tanning, which Europeans characterized as "squaw drudgery." *Anishinabek* women were depicted as savage when compared to an idealized representation of Victorian women—for whites, a woman's proper role was in the household, not in the field. Europeans used "squaw drudgery" as one of the primary justifications for colonialism.⁹

While their locations changed at various times in history, the locations of the three dominant Indian nations can be generalized as follows: the Ojibwes occupied the Upper Peninsula and parts of Mid-Michigan near Saginaw and Mt. Pleasant; the Ottawas resided in the west of the state along Lake Michigan; and the Potawatomis were mostly

⁸ It is important to note that while broad generalizations can be made about the *Anishinabek*, tribes were by no means homogenous and had distinct histories and cultural traditions. For detailed accounts of early *Anishinabek* history see: Cleland, 39-72; Charmaine M. Benz, ed., *Diba Jimooyung: Telling Our Story* (Mt. Pleasant, MI: Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan, 2005), 1-15.

⁹ For a discussion of how "Squaw Drudge" contributed to Euro-American conceptions of Native Americans, see David D. Smits, "The 'Squaw Drudge': A Prime Index of Savagism," *Ethnohistory*, 29, No. 4 (1982): 281 – 306.

concentrated in southwest Michigan. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Indians in the Great Lakes region owned a majority of the territory that is now Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Ontario. Within fifty years nearly all of them had become displaced by white settlers.

The war of 1812 secured U.S. dominance in the great lakes region, and immediately white American settlers scrambled to claim land. From 1820 to 1836 the population of non-Indians in Michigan rose from 8,765 to 174,543.¹⁰ This great wave of white settlers had a profound impact on Michigan Indian communities, and a series of treaties pushed them off of their land, leaving them with some of the worst land in Michigan's most remote areas. Significantly, The Treaty of Saginaw (1819) ceded six million acres of land—roughly one-third of Michigan's Lower Peninsula—to the U.S. government. The War Department sent the U.S. Third Infantry with \$1,500 in gifts, 39 gallons of brandy, 91 gallons of wine, 41 half gallons of fourth proof spirits, 10 gallons of whiskey, and six gallons of whiskey, to convince the Saginaw Chippewas to sell their land in north-east Michigan.¹¹ There is no written record of the treaty, so details are known only through white witnesses. The land that the U.S. gained in this territory included what would become Mt. Pleasant. Additionally, the treaty established the Isabella Indian Reservation, just east of Mt. Pleasant, which still exists today.¹²

Just seventeen years later in 1836, The Ottawa-Chippewa Treaty of Washington took another significant portion of land from Michigan Indians. This time the U.S. government combined both the northern Ottawas and the neighboring Ojibwes into one

¹⁰ Cleland, 209

¹¹ *Ibid*, 213.

¹² For a detailed account of the Treaty of Saginaw see Charles P. Avery, *Indian and Pioneer History of the Saginaw Valley and Pioneer Directory and Business Advertiser for 1866-68*, comp. James M. Thomas and A.E. Galatin (Saginaw: Thomas and Galatin, 1866).

category into one political entity to gain the rest of the Lower Peninsula and the eastern half of the Upper Peninsula. Negotiations took place in Washington D.C., isolating the tribal chiefs from the rest of their community. While the tribal leaders had been guaranteed fourteen reservations and hundreds of thousands of dollars in aid, the U.S. Senate changed the terms at the last minute and the use of the reservations to only five years. Reassured that the U.S. would not need their land for many more years and threatened that they would receive no federal aid until the treaty was signed, the tribal chiefs had no choice but to sign the document. They needed money desperately, and they knew that white settlers would simply squat on their land anyway. Additionally, the concept of land ownership and the notion that it could be exchanged by written documents was foreign the *Anishinabek* and clashed directly with their oral culture. The exchange of land is explained in the Ottawa story *Outwitting a White Man*: “An Indian could not understand how a little piece of paper with his signature, or often only his mark upon it, could be so valuable as to allow the one who held it to take away his home...the Indian valued his word and would keep it under all circumstances.” In this hopeful story, an Ottawa man and his wife trick a white man into paying double for their land by each demanding payment separately. However, this story was “one case in a thousand where an Indian got the better of a bargain when dealing with a white man.”¹³ By the mid-nineteenth century Michigan Indians had become fractionized and forced onto small pockets of land on the margins of the state.¹⁴ It was the negative impact of Euro-

¹³ John C. Wright, *The Crooked Tree: Indian Legends of Northern Michigan* (Harbor Springs, MI: John C. Wright, 1917), 83-86.

¹⁴ Cleland, 225-30.

American colonialism that led one former student to state, “I came from a broken home.”¹⁵

In 1894, Andrew Spencer, the superintendent of the Mt. Pleasant School, wrote the school’s first official report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs and noted that Michigan Indians were in great need of education. He reported that “they do not mingle at all with the whites in social relations, and are nearly as much isolated from the elevating influences of our civilization as are the Indians of the remote West.” He continued by noting that very few could speak or understand English and therefore used the “Indian language exclusively.” He concluded that Indian children were unfit for public school: “No teacher of a public school can be expected to give the time required to teach our language to the child. At best, they learn less readily and more slowly than white children.” The government school in Mt. Pleasant, he proposed, was therefore a necessity to the Michigan Indian community.¹⁶ However, the superintendent’s broad claims were unfounded; by the turn of the century Michigan Indians were more than “mingling” with whites, they were rapidly adapting to their changing environments by juggling their own cultures and white culture. While continuing to practice their beliefs and customs within their communities, they were simultaneously learning skills necessary to coexist with whites—and they were doing so without a government school.

Before the idea of the Mt. Pleasant School was even conceived, Mark Stevens, the U.S. Indian Agent appointed to the state of Michigan, reported in 1886 that “the majority

¹⁵ “School Days Remembered: The Mt. Pleasant Indian School Reunion, 1991,” The Michigan Humanities Council, Mt. Pleasant, MI, 1992, videocassette.

¹⁶ Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1894* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1895), 383.

of Indians upon the reservations can read the English language and can converse in the same sufficient to transact the ordinary business of life.” He went on to report that many of them read the newspaper and “as a rule are familiar with the current events of the day.” Particularly, he noted that the younger generations of Indians were well educated and could write and perform arithmetic. “They all dress like the white people, and no semblance of the savage Indian can be seen in their manners or in their dress,” Stevens concluded.¹⁷ It must be noted that fluency in English, integration into businesses, reading, writing, and white-style dress were all “advances” that the Mt. Pleasant School would stress later. Therefore, children attending the Mt. Pleasant School were not isolated from white society as Superintendent Spencer suggested; they were already exposed to it and actively learning it.

Stevens’ observations are reflected in the testimonies of Michigan Indians. Many Indians mourned that Michigan was no longer their land, but they became active participants in the land it would become. The demise of Michigan’s forests symbolized the loss of the old way of life for many Michigan Indians. Once the source of their culture, food, and shelter, the vast forests were clear-cut; by the end of the nineteenth century they were nearly gone. Not coincidentally, logging on a mass scale first began in the early 1840s on freshly acquired Indian land in Saginaw, just east of Mt. Pleasant.¹⁸ Perhaps paradoxically, many Indians were employed by local saw mills since the

¹⁷ Stevens did mention the need for an additional school but he did not recommend a non-reservation school; in fact, he recommended that the school be built in Petoskey, MI which is located in Northern Michigan close to a large Ottawa reservation. Quoted in: Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1886* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1886), 165.

¹⁸ The Department of Natural Resources reports that early estimates calculated that Michigan contained enough trees to be logged for at least 500 years. In 60 years nearly all of Michigan was clear cut. The ecological impact of the deforestation in Michigan is still being understood. Maria Quinlan, “Lumbering in Michigan,” http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,1607,7-153-54463_18670_18793-53133--,00.html; for a history of logging in Michigan see Theodore J. Karamanski, *Deep Wood Frontier: a History of Logging in Northern Michigan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

booming logging industry demanded a large supply of cheap labor. The destruction of forests cleared the way for farmland, some of which was granted to Michigan Indian families through the General Allotment Act of 1887. While most eventually lost their land (or never received it), due to governmental corruption, high taxation, manipulation, poor soil conditions, and sheer theft, some Indians did become successful farmers.¹⁹ One man who lost his land became frustrated and declared: “The Indian ain’t no farmer.”²⁰ This statement is somewhat ironic since Michigan Indians had been farming for centuries; however, it is an important reminder that industrialized farming was far different than the sustainable, small-scale, farming that was once practiced. In addition to owning farms, many Indians were employed by white farmers and were paid very little.²¹ Despite the difficulties of modern farming, many turned to it out of necessity.

Before the Mt. Pleasant School opened, many young Indians were already attending school. While access was rare and treatment was poor, some attended public schools. Experiences within Michigan’s public school system were recalled negatively, and many students dropped out because they were ignored by teachers and other students made racial slurs against them. Most importantly, Michigan Indians did not trust the white schools because they associated them with the poor treatment they had always received. One Ottawa man recalled that his grandmother was suspicious of “white” education in the late 1800s: “Indians didn’t know what education was. They thought it was another trick. In those days, most Indians are going to stay Indian. They didn’t go for education.”²² In addition to the public school system, several mission schools were

¹⁹ For a discussion of how allotment affected Michigan Indian see Cleland, 248-56.

²⁰ Dobson, 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 46.

already in existence on reservations. These schools were funded by the U.S. government and were established as a part of the earlier land treaties. Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century very few Indians attended a school operated by whites—a fact that the BIA viewed as a daunting problem.

Early Mt. Pleasant History

The village of Mt. Pleasant is located in central Michigan and is 149 miles north of Detroit. By the time the school was built in 1892 Mt. Pleasant had grown into “one of the most prosperous and thriving little cities in Michigan.” Connected via the Ann Arbor and Pere Marquette railroads, Mt. Pleasant was accessible to both southern, urban Michigan and northern, rural Michigan. These railroads were the primary transportation for students attending the Mt. Pleasant School. By 1906 Mt. Pleasant was inhabited by 5,000 people and was quickly growing. In a 1906 booklet promoting the city, Mt. Pleasant was described as one of the “most enterprising, hustling, and progressive little cities to be found in the state.” It continued: “here there seems to be less local bickering and strife than in most places, and the business men are apparently agreed that they will pull together for the welfare of the city.” The townspeople of Mt. Pleasant felt justified in their boasting since they housed two “progressive” schools by 1892: The Central State Normal School and the Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial School. The former “Normal School” was designed to train teachers for Michigan’s public education system and would later become Central Michigan University.²³ Interestingly, these two schools were

²³ R. A. Miller and Chas. J. Seely, (compilers) *Faces & Places Familiar Mt. Pleasant, MI* (Mt. Pleasant: Courier Press, 1906), 1-8.

founded around the same time largely by the efforts of the local business tycoon, Samuel W. Hopkins.²⁴

As the “Grand Parade” celebrating the school’s opening might suggest, the people of Mt. Pleasant were deeply invested in the new Indian Industrial School. In early 1891 the people of Mt. Pleasant formed a seven person committee to insure that the bill to establish the government school be turned into law. They hammered out the details including how much capital was needed to complete the project and where the building would be erected. When funds fell short, the citizens of Mt. Pleasant reached into their own pockets and donated nearly half of the necessary funds. Once the school was completed it became the crown jewel of the city. Citizens would take tourists on carriage rides specifically to see the school. The school’s superintendent noticed that the school was receiving a great deal of attention and ordered that the grounds be improved. In the first year alone, the school spent five hundred dollars on the beautification of the grounds.²⁵

The appeal of hosting an Indian Industrial school is partially apparent: it would boost the economy, providing jobs for not only masonries, carpenters, and local building suppliers, but for new school employees as well. Furthermore, the funds would come from the seemingly infinite purse of the federal government. More importantly however, the people of Mt. Pleasant saw themselves as part of a “great crusade” to educate the Indian. This notion is reflected in many newspaper articles and speeches made about the school. They were part of a cause: bringing the benefits of civilization to the uncivilized—and they were helping the children.

²⁴ John Cumming, *The First Hundred Years: A Portrait of Central Michigan University 1892 -1992* (Mount Pleasant: Michigan, 1993), 1-8.

²⁵ “Located”; “School Notes,” *Isabella County Enterprise*.

Early History of the Indian Industrial School

On January 3, 1893 the school opened its doors to its first 17 pupils. By spring that number had grown to 40 students, most of whom Edmund D. Riopel, the school's first superintendent, had personally recruited in his visits to various Indian communities. In mid-June the school had cultivated 127 acres of crops, including corn, potatoes, peas, beans, oats, and grass. In addition to this, the school had a garden, an orchard, and raised cows. The purpose of an extensive farm was twofold: to provide food for the students and to teach the students the importance of farming.²⁶

While the boys primarily worked on the farm, the harvest in the fall was celebrated by both boys and girls. The harvest was always well recorded and described both in the annual reports and the local newspapers. For a number of years the school held an annual corn husking contest where both male and female students would divide themselves into two teams and select a captain. They would then proceed to husk as much corn as they could as fast as they could. These contests lasted all day, and in 1893 the students husked an astonishing sixteen acres of corn in just 14 hours.²⁷ These "husking-bees" were advertised as a fun exercise by the school administrators, but at least one girl did not think so. In December of 1904 Martha James was taken out of school by her father. During his visit he was appalled to find her hungry, tired, poorly clothed, and "lousy" in appearance. She claimed that she was forced to husk corn in the field upon arriving in October and certainly did not have fun. While the superintendent denounced

²⁶ This information is recorded in a notebook kept by Edmund D. Riopel entitled: "History, Mt. Pleasant Indian School." NA RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant School, History of Mt. Pleasant School.

²⁷ "Local News" Isabella County Enterprise, November 10, 1893.

her as a liar, her testimony demonstrates that work in the fields was generally difficult and not celebrated by all the children.²⁸

When not participating in “husking-bees,” girls also performed other chores around the school. They were immediately taught how to sew and produced a majority of the clothes, tablecloths, and bed sheets for the school. In addition to this, girls helped in the kitchen and were in charge of doing the laundry. Until, 1898 laundry was done by hand and school officials noted that the work was too difficult and labor intensive for the young girls. Finally, the school purchased laundry machines reducing some of their labor. The superintendent declared that the goal of the school was to “make them good and saving housekeepers, faithful and worthy wives.”²⁹

In 1898, the superintendent noted that “so many of the pupils have been required on the farm that too little attention has been given to training in handling tools.” In fact, farming was the primary goal of the superintendent: “we try to make our farm a model for the boys to follow in their own farm work, doing our work as it should be done and when it should be done.” Very early on students were implanted with a notion of what their social roles should be: they were to go home and farm in the way that they were taught in the white school. The Indian would become a farmer.

In fact, it was primarily because of the success of the farm that the school expanded. Superintendent Spencer referenced bountiful harvests and a strong labor force as proof that the school needed further development. He noted that the yield of the school would greatly increase if he had more students to work the field. He complained

²⁸ Robert A. Cochran to The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, February 1, 1905, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Press Copies of Miscellaneous Letters Sent.

²⁹ Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1895* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1895), 375.

that there was no sufficient space to accommodate all the children who wished to attend his school and regretted that he was forced to turn away a number of requests from parents asking if their son or daughter could be admitted. In 1899, 40,000 dollars were invested in the school for the construction of a girls' dormitory. Previously, the boys and girls had resided in the same dormitory, which created many problems according to Spencer: "Anyone familiar with boarding school work, and especially with Indian boarding-school work, will appreciate the difficult, I almost said impossible, task of keeping the two sexes apart."³⁰ The new dormitory increased the schools' capacity to 300 students and the average attendance rose from 150 in 1898, to 215 in 1899.³¹

The new building was much needed as Superintendent Spencer noted that there was no adequate place where a student could "sit in quiet, visiting or reading." Indeed it was distracting for students to eat, play, learn, and sleep within the same building. Also, there was little recreational space where kids could relax and enjoy some much needed play time. The basement was converted into a playroom for the boys and the store room was equipped as a sitting and playroom for the girls. Even the superintendent noted that these rooms were "ill suited" for such a purpose.³²

When improvements on the school grounds were instituted, the students often made them. For example, by 1897 the students had constructed a sugar house, an icehouse, a henhouse, a lumber shed, a pig house, a wagon shed, and the woodworking

³⁰ Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1994* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1894), 385.

³¹ Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1898* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1898), 9; Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1899* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1899), 10

³² Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1895* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1895), 376.

and blacksmith shop.³³ This saved the school money while taughing the students carpentry. Pupils made these improvements in addition to their school work and their fieldwork. Indeed, the school had grown rapidly in less than a decade. In just six years the school had spent 40,000 dollars on additions and the average attendance rose from 40 students to 215 students. Yet the expansion of the school was not viewed positively by all, especially the students.

On June 30, 1899, the same year all the improvements were made, Martha Shagonaby, a sixteen year old pupil, set fire to the dormitory. A resourceful girl, she saturated rags with kerosene, threw them into a room on the upper floor, and ignited the rags. She promptly shut the door and ran away. The fire was not discovered for at least an hour and, when found, was extinguished immediately. School officials were used to extinguishing fires by this time since this was the third fire that Martha had caused within three weeks. She was not caught on her previous two attempts, which caused much more damage to the school. Five days earlier, she set fire to the laundry room, and the school officials barely managed to save the entire building from burning down. They were unable to save the main building of the school on June 13 when Martha successfully burnt the building to the ground, destroying the original cornerstone in what was the largest fire among the U.S. Indian boarding schools in many years.³⁴

While Martha's intentions were never recorded, they can be surmised. After she burned down the schools' primary building, she deemed it necessary to set fire to the place where she worked, and finally, the place where she slept. While it was reported

³³ Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1897* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1897), 353.

³⁴ *Isabella County Enterprise*, July 7, 1899.

that “she was very sorry for it and didn’t know why she did it,” it is more likely that she desperately wanted to go home. When her previous two attempts failed to achieve the desired results she targeted the building that housed the students; if that building was destroyed surely the children must be sent home. Martha’s actions were not a unique case and student arson was common among the boarding schools.³⁵ For many students, arson was the most effective way to resist the boarding schools. It showed dissatisfaction with their environment and many have reported that they set fires in hopes of going home. By burning down the school they could accomplish that goal. Martha set fire to the school on three separate occasions; she had a distinct agenda. When questioned as to why she set the school on fire she claimed that she “didn’t know what else to do.” Martha was later tried in court and was sent to a reform school in Adrian, MI, where the matron refused to accept her. The local newspaper reported that she “shows no manifestation of remorse or regret and maintains an utter indifference as to her fate.”³⁶ Martha would likely disagree with that assessment; she had not yet made it home.

With the strike of a match a 16 year old girl silenced the echoes of a “Grand Parade” and the calls for expansion by school officials. With the strike of a match, she was able to show who the school was really for. With the strike of a match, she burnt the Mt. Pleasant School and its symbols of progress to the ground.

³⁵ For a discussion on student arson, see Adams, 229-31.

³⁶ *Isabella County Enterprise*, August 4, 1899.

CHAPTER TWO: “JUST LIKE IN THE ARMY”
Enrollment, Daily Life, Resistance

On Friday, November 30, 1900, a new cornerstone was laid with Masonic ceremonies to replace the cornerstone that was destroyed in the fire the previous spring. Again, a large crowd gathered from neighboring communities for the event, including Aaron Thomas Bliss, an early advocate for the construction of the school and the newly elected governor of Michigan. Within the cornerstone a large box was placed that contained numerous mementoes, including the original time capsule that was salvaged from the fire.¹ A crowd gathered in the school’s sanctuary for the speech of Dr. Addis Albro, a 33rd degree Mason. He did not talk about student resistance, nor did he mention the fire in any way. Instead, he echoed McKnight’s speech from eight years ago, and praised the school as progressive: “The real objective of this school is development and training...It seeks to render all of the human faculties—physical, intellectual, social and religious—capable of the highest exercise.” Albro described Indians as a “prehistoric race,” a “wonderful yet unfortunate people,” and instructed his audience: “let us as a people prove worthy of our trust and endeavor to secure for these dusky wards that nobility of character and station in life which will enable them to enjoy with us the advancing civilization which is so rapidly placing our nation foremost among the nations of the world, the acknowledged leader of the whole world.”² Albro’s tone is clear. Indians were viewed as unequal to whites; they were wards, or people who needed to be watched over by whites. The government boarding schools were the institutions that

¹ The contents of the two time capsules are unknown at present. It is likely that the documents are still preserved in the school’s cornerstone.

² “With Masonic Ceremonies,” *Isabella County Enterprise*, November 30, 1900.

would raise Indians up to the levels of whites—the institutions that would allow American Indians to enjoy the benefits of civilization.

School and government officials did not interpret the fire as a form of discontent among students; rather they treated it as an isolated incident. Surprisingly, the fire was never mentioned in the superintendent's personal report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, and was mentioned only briefly in the *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* where the fire was called the “most disastrous fire of years,” and totaled 28,000 dollars in damage.³ There was no interpretation of the event and—beyond the need for an improved water system—the BIA did not indicate that it would take measures to insure such incidents would not happen again. The solution of the school administrators did not change how the school operated or how the students were treated; it simply sent the rebellious student to a reform school. Administrators concluded that the cause of Martha Shagonaby's insubordination was not her environment, but an innate character flaw.

Despite this institutional silence, there were some indications that the BIA viewed the fire as deeply troubling. The superintendent at the time, Rodney S. Graham, was let go and replaced by E.C. Nardin the following year. There was no explanation provided detailing Graham's release, but it is likely that it was no coincidence that he was removed at the same time as the “most destructive fire of years.” Nardin's pronouncement as the new superintendent of the school was widely celebrated in the local papers as the *Isabella County Today* ran a lengthy article about his life.

³ Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1897* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1899), 26.

Although school administrators dismissed the fire, Martha's motivations must be carefully considered. Was it the case that she was mistreated at the school and was therefore driven to such an extreme measure? Was it the case that she simply wanted to return home to her family and saw arson as her only way of achieving that goal? Whatever her exact motives, such an extreme act raises questions regarding the daily life of students: What were they taught? How were they disciplined? What social bonds did they create? What autonomy did they have? Martha was not the only student to reject her environment; she was not the only student to exercise her agency. The persistence displayed by students and their families to exercise their agency suggests that it was the policy of the school officials that needed reforming, not the attitudes of pupils.

Arrival

With the completion of the new dormitory, the school could house 300 children, and by 1908, capacity topped off at 320 students. While the average attendance of the school was almost always filled the school, "total enrollment" was often as high as 350 students. Frequent runaways and the spotty attendance of some students skewed these numbers, and there were never more than 320 students in school at one time. Therefore, "total enrollment" included *all* students enrolled for the year, even if it was just for a couple of days. Since funding for the school was based on the number of enrolled students, administrators were quick to replace students who died or successfully dropped out of school. This trend is not uncommon and is reflected in most government boarding schools.⁴

⁴ For enrollment trends at Mt. Pleasant, see any *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* between 1893 and 1930.

By 1911, students arrived to a sprawling campus that consisted of 11 brick buildings, including the main classroom building, a boys and girls dormitory, a dining room that could seat 300 students, a hospital, a building for industrial training, a club house for employees, and various farm buildings.⁵ The only other major addition to the school was the gymnasium which was built in the mid 1910's. For a majority of the new students, these buildings were the largest they had ever seen. One former student chuckled over his initial amazement of the "modern" buildings: "[we] got into a new environment where we had modern plumbing [laughs]. We didn't have that up north."⁶ Students traveled large distances away from their homes and were plunged into an environment foreign to them.

Children from all across Michigan (and occasionally Minnesota, Wisconsin, and New York) filled the school beds. Many lived in rural areas in Northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula where most of the reservations were located. Still, others came from urban areas such as Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Lansing. Many students were members of poor families whose circumstances stemmed from decades of European and American colonization. As shown in Chapter One, reservations, allotment, and industrialization, left Michigan Indians dislocated and impoverished. While the students arrived from all across Michigan and had different backgrounds, they held one thing in common: few had better options. This was not a school for the privileged, but a last resort for the needy. For many, this was their only option since public schools were unavailable or undesirable, income levels were low amongst Michigan Indians, and some children were orphans with no other place to go. A close examination of the backgrounds of some of

⁵ For an account of the Mt. Pleasant School in 1911 see: Hon. Isaac A. Fancher, *Past and Present of Isabella County Michigan* (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen & Company, 1911).

⁶ "School Days Remembered"

the students exemplifies the difficult lives many had prior to their experience in Mt. Pleasant and underscores the emotional distress they were facing. It also reveals the expectations students and parents had of the school—how they intended to use the school as a resource.

In 1926, David and Russell La Pointe enrolled in the Mt. Pleasant School shortly after their mother died. Since her death, their father, James, was having difficulty providing for them and their older sister, Helen. Two of the children's cousins were already attending the school, and had learned of the school through them. James wrote to the superintendent asking if the two boys could be enrolled: "they have no mother and that's the only place I can see for them." Helen, who was 18 and therefore too old to attend, hoped that she could work at the school to make money and to be with her brothers. Her father wrote on her behalf in the same letter: "I hear that they hire girls to work around the school there. If so I would be very much obliged if you could give her a job, as she would be near her brothers."⁷ It appears that Helen was not given a job at the school. Suffering the loss of their beloved mother and wife, the La Pointe family turned to the Mt. Pleasant School to provide shelter, food, and employment. They did not attend to be "uplifted" by whites or to become "civilized"; they attended to survive during a difficult time.

Five siblings from Detroit enrolled in the Mt. Pleasant School from the mid-1920s to 1932. William, Alice, Eva, Jimmy, and Hazel Deer all attended the school to escape poverty at home. Their father could not afford proper treatment for his diabetes, and was therefore constantly ill and unable to work at times. The family received welfare

⁷ James LaPointe to Superintendent Padgett, April 8, 1926, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Applications for Enrollment: 1921 – 1932.

sporadically, received just nine cents a person per day. In 1926, William ran away from school so that he could get a job and support the family. In 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, their mother wrote to the superintendent when he would not initially enroll Jimmy in school: "If you only knew how poor I am, sometimes we eat dry bread."⁸ Their father was unable to work due to his illness, and William lost his job after he was sick for two weeks, leaving the family with no source of income. In early December of 1931, their mother died suddenly, possibly during the birth of her son. The Deer children were left desperate. The family was unemployed; their father was bedridden, and they had a new baby brother to care for. William wrote to the school shortly after his mother's death asking if his sister Alice could come home and care for their new brother since he was busy trying to find a job. "We are lonesome that she is gone," he added. William also enrolled his younger brother Jimmy because he could no longer care for him. Both Eva and Hazel were already in school so Jimmy could be with his sisters. Eva, William said, "would be like a mother to him, she can take [better] care of him than any of us in the family."⁹ For the Deer family the school was not only a place to turn in a time of need, it was a way to keep the family together. Eva could watch over both Jimmy and Hazel at school, while William and Alice could care for their father and their baby brother at home.

As the Deer family case indicates, the Mt. Pleasant School was often used as a vehicle for family cohesion. In one extreme case, Marie Williams wanted to come all the way from Niagara Falls, NY at the age of 13 to enroll in the school. She recently lost

⁸ Josephine Deer to the superintendent, August 29, 1931, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

⁹ William Deer to the superintendent, December 11, 1931, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

both of her parents and was residing with a relative who could no longer support her. In a letter to the school, she claimed that she wanted an education to “be a trained nurse and to study music.” However, it is also clear that she wanted to reunite with her sister, Hattie, who was transferred to Mt. Pleasant after the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania closed down in 1918. Sadly, Marie was denied admission to the school.¹⁰

At times, whites intervened to place needy Indian children in the school. In the case of the Pontiac family, the predominately white citizens of Cadillac mobilized to aid the 11 Pontiac children and their father. The local newspaper, *The Cadillac Evening News*, sought aid for the children in 1923 after their mother had died from tuberculosis. The townspeople took great interest in the family once it was discovered that the children were the direct descendents of the famous Chief Pontiac, who played an important role during the French and Indian War.¹¹ Shocked that these children were “living in abject poverty in a hovel,” the citizens of Cadillac raised money so that the family could move into a more comfortable home. The newspaper wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington D.C. to inquire about what sort of Federal or State Aid was available for Indians. The editor declared: “This newspaper believes that Indians are the wards of the government and that as such the government has made provision for their care...Is there not a system of pensions and guardianships for the remnants of the Indian race?”¹² The newspaper soon discovered what the Pontiac family had known all along: there was no aid; the Mt. Pleasant School was all they had. Before the people of Cadillac

¹⁰ Lucille C. Williams to the superintendent, June 6, 1924, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Administrative Records of the Superintendent 1915-1933.

¹¹ The name Pontiac was well known by 1923, and the famous chief already had a city in Michigan named after him; the famous Pontiac car line was introduced in 1926.

¹² M. M. Vanvalkenbrugh to Charles H. Burke, December 1, 1923, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant Student Case Files.

became involved, both Celia and Hazel Pontiac had been enrolled in the school for years; their brother Cecil had tried to enroll, but was denied because he was too young. If the Pontiac family wanted to receive needed aid, the children would have to leave their community and attend the Mt. Pleasant School.

In some cases the Michigan government gave custody of children to the Mt. Pleasant School. Many times these children were orphans with no relatives to care for them, but in the case of the Day family, custody was taken from the parents all together. Amos, Alexander, and Josephine Day, were placed in the school after their parents divorced. A judge ruled that they were to remain in the school until they reached the age of sixteen or completed their studies at Mt. Pleasant, whichever came first.¹³ These children had no choice: they had to attend school whether they wanted to or not.

Children were often denied admission to the school. In many letters, the superintendent writes back to desperate parents informing them that the school was already overcapacity and it would be impossible to accept more students. Enrollment was a complex process with many restrictions. By U.S. law, all students were required to have “at least one-fourth Indian Blood,” and the degree of Indian blood was recorded for every student who attended the school.¹⁴ If the child did not fit this blood quantum—or a parent could not prove that they did—they were denied. Applications for enrollment were sent out to parents or guardians who had to complete them in English and send them back. It is clear on some applications that parents had others fill out the necessary information on their behalf because they were not proficient enough in English. When the school was at capacity young children were often denied unless they had an older

¹³ Van Buren County Circuit Court Decree, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

¹⁴ This policy applied to all government boarding schools. The blood quantum policy is described on applications for enrollment: NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Applications for Enrollment: 1921-1932.

sibling to look after them. The superintendent describes his frustration with the number of applications of young children: “It seemed this past year that all the parents wanted to put their ‘babies’ in school and I have taken tired to take all who asked for admittance, but I can’t take another so young.”¹⁵ Also, the superintendent often required the children to be examined by a physician to insure their health and to prevent the spread of disease at school. Children who had a history of running away or insubordination were not readmitted.

Many children had a hard time adjusting to school life after arrival. One former student recalls his arrival to school: “I was quite small for my age when I went to Mount Pleasant. They let me stay with my sisters for about a month in the girls’ building so I wouldn’t get homesick. An awful feeling to be taken away from home. I was pret’neer raised in Indian schools.” This woman was not fortunate enough to have older siblings to facilitate her arrival: “After your were done crying for your ma and crying for everything else, you might as well make up your mind to stay there, ‘cause there’s no one to tell you to shut up.” Most students quickly made friends, however, and many former students preferred Mt. Pleasant to public schooling. For many, it was comforting to be with other students who were experiencing a similar uprooting.¹⁶ Relationships made with other students eased their arrival far more than the environment school officials provided them.

As children arrived at the school, it is clear that many had expectations of the school that conflicted directly with how their white instructors operated it. Indians viewed it as a place to receive shelter, clothing, and food—essentials that were not always guaranteed at home. Additionally, the school could be used as a way to find

¹⁵ Superintendent to Rev. Rogers, May 3, 1923, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

¹⁶ Dobson, 54.

employment in a time when it was difficult for Michigan Indians to secure employment. While many did enroll to receive a formal education, it was almost never their most dire need. In many ways, the school became a children’s home for young Indians who had no better alternative; it became a *de facto* orphanage.¹⁷ With the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s it becomes increasingly clear how reliant many were on the Mt. Pleasant School, a phenomenon that will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Army Life

The lives of students were highly structured within the Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial School, much like a military institution. Every day they had a set routine, enforced by a demanding schedule:

A.M.	
Ring Bell and Reveille.....	5:30
Assembly Call.....	6:15
Breakfast Bell.....	First 6:30; Second 6:45
Work Whistle.....	7:25
Industrial Departments in Session.....	7:30 11:30
Physical Training—Large Girls.....	8:00 8:30
School Bell.....	First 8:30; Second 8:45
Breathing Exercises.....	10:00 10:10
Dinner Bell.....	11:55
P.M.	
Work and School Whistle.....	12:55
Industrial Departments in Session.....	1:00 5:00
Breathing Exercises.....	2:30 2:40
Recall School Bell.....	4:00
Athletics and Physical Training, Large Boys...	4:00 5:00
Supper Bell.....	5:25
Band Rehearsal.....	6:00 7:00
Physical Training, Small Girls.....	7:00 8:00
Study Hour Bell.....	First 7:00; Second 7:15
Roll Call, Small Boys and Girls.....	8:30
Tap and Lights Out.....	9:15

¹⁷ Alice Littlefield notes concludes this as well in her article “The B.I.A. Boarding School: Theories of Resistance and Social Reproduction,” *Humanity & Society*, 13, no. 4 (1989): 434.

Classes were not held on the weekends, but on Saturdays the children worked around the school and had “Catholic Instruction;” on Sunday morning all children attended local church services, either Catholic, Methodist, or nondenominational. Students were required to dress up for church and the Catholic girls wore mantillas and rosaries (see figure 10). Each day the children rose at 5:30 AM and went to bed between 9:00 and 10:00 PM—their lives dictated by bells.¹⁸ Boys and girls were dressed in identical, handmade uniforms, sewn by the girls themselves.

Students were expected to work half of the day, in the morning one month and in the evening the next. One student recalls that “they called the work assignments ‘details’ like the regular army did. At the end of each month you’d go down into the basement and they’d call out your name and your detail, where you’re supposed to work the next month.”¹⁹ Each spring, all students participated in a marching competition: “each company, like Company A and Company B, they’d compete in marching exercises to see who would be judged the best for the year. They had strict discipline there. You had to keep in step like at West Point.”²⁰ Pupils were required to respect the U.S. flag and it was always present during disciplinary drills (see figure 9). Sixty years later, two sisters quickly recalled this poem describing school life:

Six o’clock in the morning,
Our breakfast comes around.
A bowl of mush and Molasses,
Was enough to knock you down.
Our coffee’s like tobacco juice,

¹⁸ Annual Calendar: U.S. Indian School Mt. Pleasant, Mich 1917-1918, the Clarke Historical Library, Mt. Pleasant, MI.

¹⁹ Dobson, 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Our bread is hard and stale,
And that's the way they treat you
At Mt. Pleasant Indian Jail²¹

Various forms of discipline were used to enforce the rules. Students caught talking in the dining room were not allowed to finish their food, and they were forced to stand until the meal was over. Often, students were assigned additional “duties” if they misbehaved and were not allowed special privileges such as going into town, attending school movies, or attending dances.²² Other punishment involved physical abuse or “lickings.” Students recall being beaten with a rubber hose and being forced to kneel on a hard surface for extended periods.²³ One man describes these beatings in vivid detail: “He made me crawl on my hands and knees. In them days you used to have those rubber belts for machinery, or he used a rubber hose. And he whipped us with that. You can break a spirit. I got tremors and I blame that on the school beating the hell out of us.”²⁴ One woman still has a scar from when her teacher hit her with a ruler because she could not see the blackboard. She was born nearly blind.²⁵ Perhaps not surprisingly, punishments were not recorded within BIA documents, but are vividly recalled by former students in interviews. School officials did not record methods of punishment and did not explain the measures taken to parents, leaving a gaping silence in BIA records.

Still, some parents questioned the treatment of their children at the school. James Pontiac, the father of eleven children, responded with discontent when the superintendent informed him that his fourteen year old daughter ran away from school with another

²¹ Alice Littlefield, “The B.I.A. Boarding School: Theories of Resistance and Social Reproduction,” *Humanity & Society*, 13, no. 4 (1989): 437.

²² Dobson, 53.

²³ Littlefield, 430.

²⁴ *School Days Remembered*.

²⁵ Dobson, 54.

student: “It is very hard for us to believe anything said on them. They must have very hard Punishment that you don’t know. The woman who punishes them is to blame on this case that way I would put, I think her name is Jameson, I was told she mean woman. I shall look for my Cecilia and find out what make them do that.”²⁶ Pontiac believed that the harsh punishment that the matron (Ms. Jameson) used was the reason that his daughter ran away. Furthermore, he appears to have heard of the strict punishment from others in the community before it was applied to his daughter. In fact, Pontiac was so convinced that his daughter suffered from unfair punishment that he suggested to the superintendent that he was entirely unaware of what was going on at his school—had the superintendent known he would not be searching for reasons why the children ran away.

All mail sent to and from the students was censored. Letters were one of the few means of contact students had with the outside world; to censor them was to censor their lives. In one example, the superintendent returned a letter written to a girl with this note: “All pupils’ letters are read by the School authorities before they reach the pupils and any objectionable mail is promptly returned to the sender. I want you to distinctly understand that no such mail is allowed to get to the pupils while they are under my charge at this school.” The content of the letter was never explicitly stated, but it clearly upset the school authorities. The superintendent went on to threaten the man: “We do not permit such men as you to visit the school or pupils. I have therefore to request that you remain away from the grounds. You will not be allowed to visit here.”²⁷ The man could have been a boyfriend, childhood friend, or uncle; his relation to the girl was never stated.²⁸

²⁶ James Pontiac to Sup. Cochran, April 6, 1922, Student Case Files, Pontiac, NA, RG 75, BIA

²⁷ Superintendent to Ralph A. Hintlay, July 16, 1923, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

²⁸ In at least one case, a “love letter” was written by a student’s uncle. It should be underscored that in *Anishinabek* culture, children often had close relationships with their uncles and they were often considered

Nevertheless, the school administrators decided that the girl would no longer be able write him or see him. In another letter that was censored the superintendent instructed the sender to stop writing, claiming that: “A letter like this might construe to a young girl as a love letter rather than a friendly letter.”²⁹ Through the censorship of letters, school officials could effectively control all aspects of the students’ lives, even their personal relationships.

English was the only language allowed in the Mt. Pleasant School. All instruction was done in English and speaking native languages—or “speaking Indian” as it was referred to by the students—was strictly forbidden, even in private. This created immediate barriers for new students who could not speak English. One girl recalled that she hardly spoke to anybody for the first two years of her stay at Mt. Pleasant because she was shy and did not know any English.³⁰ Students were taught to be ashamed of their native languages and were punished when they “spoke Indian.” A former student remembered being punished: “If I started talking Indian in the institution I was taken care of with a strap.” Another student noted that some instructors were less severe: “If they or a matron would walk by and hear us talking Indian she or he would shake a finger at us and shake their head, ‘no,’ while looking real stern. We’d shut up. Don’t know what they would have done if we’d dare disobey.”³¹ Another student remembered one teacher who would pull students’ ears if they used their native language in class. Using either verbal scolding or physical abuse, the school officials purposefully created an

parents. Therefore, this letter appears to have been misinterpreted by the superintendent. For a discussion of kinship among the *Anishinabek*, see Cleland, 41-54.

²⁹ Superintendent to Geo. E. Shagonaby, March 7, 1929, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

³⁰ Littlefield, 431.

³¹ Dobson, 56.

environment where students quickly became embarrassed to speak any language other than English. Students who could not speak English were used as examples and made to seem inferior. One former student recalls this environment frankly: “[I] didn’t talk Indian. Stuck with English. You felt kind of bashful if you talk Indian at anybody. They make fun of you. Tease you.” Classmates would tease those who “spoke Indian” and peer pressure provided further motivation for some students to only use English.

The destruction of native languages had a cross-generational impact that became apparent immediately. It has been stated by many former students that children tended to speak English prior to arriving to Mt. Pleasant—especially in the later years of the school’s history. While some students claimed to have completely forgotten their native languages during their schooling, many retained it, but never used it. One former student studied language loss by “talking to elders in Michigan” and concluded that former students “sixty years of age and up who attended the government Indian schools, almost every one of them, even though they may be able to speak the language themselves, after that didn’t teach it to their children ‘cause they themselves had such a hard time learning their lessons in classes. They didn’t want their kids to have to go through that ordeal too.” Former students then “were determined not to speak Indian themselves anymore and to not teach it to their children.”³² Parents who attended the Mt. Pleasant School would not teach their children their native language, hastening its decline. Students, then, were not only embarrassed to use their native language in school, they were embarrassed to use it at all—even years later. Second generation students who enrolled in the Mt. Pleasant School often only spoke English, demonstrating very clearly the severity of

³² *Ibid.*

language loss across just two generations.³³ As the student body became predominately English-speaking, punishments for “speaking Indian” seemed to have become less severe. Several former students even recalled that some Native American teachers would translate lessons for struggling students until they learned English. As it became apparent that English was the dominate language amongst Michigan Indians there was no need to enforce strict punishments—conversion to English was inevitable. Even today, the impacts of language loss are still not entirely realized and current studies continue to shed light on the link between language destruction and the loss of culture.³⁴

Daily lessons explicitly demonstrated a “proper” way to live, teaching students how they should, and should not, perform daily, mundane tasks. White society was depicted as superior to Indian society, and this hierarchy was painstakingly reiterated in daily lesson plans. The superintendent constantly oversaw the student body, and he and his wife embodied an idealized white family (see figure 1). Boys were taught that industrialized farming—involving large plots of land and modern technologies such as fertilizers and machinery—was more profitable than subsistence farming—or small “plot” farms—which is how many Michigan Indians farmed. Girls were taught how to become “good and saving housekeepers” and “faithful and worthy wives.”³⁵ Girls helped in the kitchen, sewed, did the laundry, and cared for the sick while in school. Yet, they were also instructed in how to keep house once they left school.

Girls learned how to sew and were told to remember all the different parts of the sewing machine. They learned the different types of cloth and were told what type of

³³ Alice Littlefield notes this trend in her article: “The B.I.A. Boarding School,” 431.

³⁴ See K. David Harrison, *When Languages Die: the Extinction of the World’s Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³⁵ Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1895* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1895), 375.

fabric was suitable for various garments. For example, girls were asked: “What kind of material would you buy for a towel? How much should a kitchen towel cost?” The importance of cotton was highlighted and girls learned its many uses as well as its history. Girls learned how to work with silk even as teachers stressed “the inappropriateness of silk stockings for school wear.” They did not just learn how to sew, they were told how to dress as well. Girls would patch their own clothing and make school supplies such as school uniforms, pillow cases, and even bean bags for recreational use. Sewing was presented as a useful skill, and girls were encouraged to brainstorm how it would be a helpful skill when they returned home. Teachers presented them with this scenario: “I will need to sew for my father and brother when I go home. What can I make at school that will help me in doing this when I go home?” This part of the lesson was crucial. Sewing was not a skill to regurgitate at school and then promptly forget; it was a skill that should be applied as soon as the child returned home. Since they had the benefits of education, they would now play a pivotal role at home by repairing their families’ used clothing. In another lesson, girls were asked to demonstrate their new skill to their parents by giving them a gift: “What could I make for my mother’s Christmas gift that will be useful and decorative around the house?” Students were meant to share their knowledge with older generations, explicitly suggesting that schooling by whites was crafting a more productive generation of American Indians.³⁶

Older girls were encouraged to discuss the benefits of abandoning old customs and were told how to raise a family and how to maintain the home. Girls were asked to

³⁶ This analysis is based on several lesson plans for pre-vocational and junior vocational grades: Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Outline of Study: Clothing*, *Outline of Study: Cooking, Foods and Management*, and *Outline of Study: Home Training*, (Lawrence, KA, Haskell Printing Department: 1925), NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Decadal Correspondence Files.

complete the following exercise: “List [the] responsibilities of each family member of the family as recognized in the Indian home [and] compare with white homes.” They were encouraged to recall what they learned in school and to introduce “modern practices” at home; especially modern medical practices. As mothers, they were told that they had a “responsibility for [the] progress of the race.” This “progress” would come by the “establishment of a new home by [a] young married couple.” This future married couple was encouraged to “set up [their] own standards” that were “not influenced by old customs.” Girls were asked to consider their grandparents and were asked “how progress is retarded by following old customs.” Any old practices that were counterproductive to “progress” should be abandoned completely. Students also examined “how homes differ among the Indian tribes” and were asked to “list good and bad points in each type of home.” Girls were taught *exactly* how to keep house: how to set the table, how to cook, how to entertain guests, what type of furniture to buy, where to plant flowers, how to dispose of trash, how to clean, and even where to hang family photos.³⁷ Parents (but especially mothers), were responsible to “progress” not only their own lives, but the lives of *all* American Indians. It was up to the students to apply what they learned in the government school to Indian communities—education was part of it, but change would have to come from them. Therefore, the implication was that any failure to “progress” was the fault of the Indians themselves, not the school lesson plans.

Interviews with former students detail the response of some of the students and reveal the cultural impacts of the school curriculum. One former student said, “We didn’t have a chance to learn the Indian way. We couldn’t keep the customs the way we learned

³⁷ Curriculum for Girls, Tenth Grade, 1929, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Administrative Records of the Superintendent 1915-1933.

from our father and mother. When we went to Mount Pleasant we had to start picking up the white man's way. We learned English. We learned the convenience of machinery. The way the white man sees it, the way it goes now." This former student points out that "the Indian way" was not only absent from their lesson plans, it was effectively removed from their lives completely. At an early age students were removed from their homes and from "the Indian way" and lived in the Mt. Pleasant School. Parents rarely had an opportunity to instruct their children even if they wanted to. When children returned home, they had been indoctrinated with "the white man's way," advised to instruct their parents and therefore "progress the race." Other former students believed that the skills they learned provided them jobs, but not good ones. One woman who learned to sew at Mt. Pleasant said the skill "helped during the Depression, WPA days. I made a little bit sewing house dresses for women folk. Sometimes evening gowns and graduation dresses. Would charge fifty cents for making a house dress." She was not patching clothes for her family, nor making cotton dish clothes for her kitchen; she was sewing to simply survive. Another man recalled that he enjoyed working with machinery, but he knew his training would never advance him on the social ladder. He believed that he was not given the same opportunities as white children in public school: he was "Indian and poor" and he would remain "Indian and poor."³⁸ As other historians have noted with other Indian boarding schools, the Mt. Pleasant Industrial School assimilated Michigan Indians into white society, but into the bottom rungs of white society. They would become farmers and factory workers, not businessmen and politicians—a fact well known by students. Yet, they were taught that if they did not own a home and have a job

³⁸ Dobson, 55.

it was because they did not properly abandon old customs.³⁹ Failure to assimilate was ultimately pinned on the students.

Runaways and Resistance

Living in such a structured environment and under close supervision, many children decided to run away from the school. Runaways were very common and motivations varied greatly. Some students ran away just for the day, some returned after short periods, and some ran away for good. Interviews with former students and BIA documents reveal that students ran away due to unfair punishments, difficulties adapting to their new environments, homesickness, and simply to visit nearby towns for fun. One student recalled that the school administrators had a strict policy regarding runaways: “Usually the government took them back but if they run away three or four times, that was it. They’d let them stay home. They didn’t want them there anymore.”⁴⁰ While school administrators often threatened not to accept runaway students, it was not uncommon for students to run away from school and come back multiple times. One former student recalls running away “every now and then” with two older girls who brought her along because her mother had always sent her spending money. They would then abandon the younger girl and visit their boyfriends.⁴¹ Boyfriends were forbidden to enter the school grounds and love letters were discarded; to run away was the only way

³⁹ See Fred Hoxie, *Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880 – 1920*, (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1984). Alice Littlefield discusses the transformation from school life in Mt. Pleasant to the Michigan labor force in detail in her article: “The B.I.A. Boarding School: Theories of Resistance and Social Reproduction,” *Humanity & Society*, 13, no. 4 (1989)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Dobson, 54.

girls could maintain relationships. Therefore, running away was commonplace for students—almost a routine exercise that was as carefully planned as their daily lessons.

In some cases students did not wait long to run away. Ollie Williams ran away just one day after his arrival in Mt. Pleasant, stole a car, and drove it 30 miles south-east to Breckenridge, MI. He was apprehended by the local police when he ran out of gas and tried to sell the car for 15 dollars. Two days later, Ollie escaped from the Mt. Pleasant detention center by leaping out of the second story window and stealing another vehicle, this time driving about 50 miles north-east to Gladwin, MI before being apprehended again. Ollie was tried for his crimes and was sent to a reform school in Lansing. He was later readmitted a few years later to Mt. Pleasant where he promptly ran away again, this time to see his family for Thanksgiving.⁴² Ollie never went back to school, but lived with his grandfather and was employed making bark canoes. In this case, school officials finally determined that Ollie was “not the proper sort of boy to have” since he had “been running away every few days ever since he came [to Mt. Pleasant].”⁴³ Clearly, Ollie did not want to stay in school and took extreme measures to escape.

Hardships at home often determined a student’s decision to run away. William Deer, whose father was ill with diabetes and struggling to support the family, decided to return home. The easiest way to do this was to run. The superintendent did not understand his motivation to leave and reported to his father that he had “no reason for leaving,” and informed him that the Chief of City Detectives was searching for him and would return him.⁴⁴ As it turns out William did not enjoy school and felt it was his duty as the eldest son to care for the family in a time of need. His father asked the

⁴² Student Case Files, Williams, NA, RG 75, BIA.

⁴³ Superintendent to W. L. White, November 10, 1924, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

⁴⁴ Superintendent to John Deer, March 30, 1926, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

superintendent if William could stay home stating: “I have seen from his talk that there is not much use to send him back to school. I am afraid if I force him back, I may lose him altogether.” He added: “And if you will let him stay with me. He might be some help to me. I am not in good health myself. I am going to send him to public school here in the fall.”⁴⁵ Since public schooling was available to William he was allowed to stay home. He ended up getting a job and even arranged for the enrollment of his younger siblings that the family could not support. William’s two sisters, Hazel and Eva, both ran away on at least one occasion. Hazel and another girl made it almost 100 miles to Muskegon, MI before they were apprehended.⁴⁶ Eva ran away shortly after her mother’s death and was caught before she could make it home. She “expressed dissatisfaction with the school” and requested to leave.⁴⁷ Facing the death of her mother and the responsibility of caring for her two younger siblings at the school, Eva was likely distressed, causing her to run away.

Similarly, Cecil Pontiac went home to help his father who was 74 years old at the time. He wanted to return home for the summer but was forced to stay for summer schooling, given only a week over the July 4th holiday to visit his father. Once Cecil left he simply never returned. Presumably he was helping his father who hunted, fished, and picked berries during the summer to make a living. By early September the superintendent ordered the Deputy Sheriff to apprehend the boy and bring him back to school, emphasizing that “he is back in his studies and should not miss any more

⁴⁵ John Deer to superintendent, April 4, 1926, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

⁴⁶ L. E. Baumgarten to Mr. and Mrs. John Deer, September 27, 1929, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

⁴⁷ Superintendent to John Deer, September 12, 1932, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

school.”⁴⁸ For Cecil however, school was secondary and he would attend when he chose to.

The use of local authorities to apprehend runaways was not uncommon, and rewards were often given for captured students who were treated more like fugitives than rebellious children. Despite efforts from school officials, boys and girls of all ages ran away both individually and in groups. Students overcame the large distance that separated them from home by walking, hopping on trains, and even stealing cars. In one case, two boys took a freight train nearly 200 miles to the Straits of Mackinaw, snuck onto a ferry, and eventually traveled to their homes in the Upper Peninsula.⁴⁹ Running away was perhaps so common because it was the only sure way to escape the 24 hour surveillance of the school administrators. When students ran away they could have relationships, work for pay, visit, and care for their families. In short, when students ran away they could retain their agency and autonomy. They could live their lives.

Other forms of resistance existed on a day-to-day basis. Unlike running away or arson, this daily resistance is not reflected well by the BIA and is therefore harder to reconstruct. Anthropologist Alice Littlefield notes that many of her interviewees reported “pilferage,” or the stealing of small amounts of food. Since meals were regulated and often unappetizing, students had to steal food if they wanted an extra snack. Students would take fruit from the school orchard or nearby farms and cache their own private supply in the woods. This way, students would have their own private food supply that was hidden from school officials. A former student recalls stealing food by tucking it under his shirt on a regular basis: “That was a big thing. [We would take a] peanut butter

⁴⁸ Superintendent to Deputy Sherriff Lake City, MI, September 1, 1925; Superintendent to Jim Pontiac, April 4, 1925, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

⁴⁹ Littlefield, 430.

sandwich, bean sandwich.”⁵⁰ It was also reported that boys would sneak into town in a group, distract the store owner, and steal small amounts of candy and other goods. Students went so far as stealing extra food from the dining hall to keep as forbidden snacks and to feed students who were not allowed to eat as punishment. One student climbed through the window of the staff’s dining hall to swipe pastries.⁵¹

Also, both boys and girls created alcoholic beverages by placing sugar and other food items in a container and fermenting them into alcohol. The containers were then placed in the vents where they were hidden and would ferment faster. Two boys recalled “with considerable glee” building a still in the attic to make alcohol.⁵² It is a substantial possibility that one of these homemade alcoholic beverages killed David La Pointe who reportedly “drank poison alcohol” and died. Surprisingly, the incident was not documented in the BIA records. David’s brother’s leg amputation was, however, well recorded. The only document that mentioned David’s death was a letter from the Commissioner of the BIA that dealt primarily with another student. The commissioner said the following about the death: “The circumstances under which this occurred are very serious indeed. A letter has been sent to you asking for a formal investigation of the matter. Please express our sympathy to the parents of the boy. The Indian Office feels very seriously concerned about the whole matter.”⁵³ It remains unclear whether David died from consuming too much alcohol, the alcohol he drank was poisoned during the fermentation process, or an added poison caused his death. What is clear is that alcohol was readily made by students, enough so that an official investigation was launched.

⁵⁰ “School Days Remembered.”

⁵¹ Littlefield, 436-7.

⁵² *Ibid*, 437.

⁵³ Commissioner of Indian Affairs to L. E. Baumgarten, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Administrative Records of the Superintendent, 1915-1933.

The Mt. Pleasant School served multiple purposes for students. Students came because they had no other place to go, they preferred Mt. Pleasant to public schooling, and because they enjoyed the companionship of other Indian children. However, students came with their own expectations. They expected a better life than the one at home. They expected three meals a day and clothing. They expected a sense of community. They expected better jobs once their training was complete. When the expectations of students collided with the intentions of their white instructors, tensions grew. When life at school seemed more like a “jail” or the “army” than a school, students resisted. They stashed their own food supplies, they made alcohol, they pursued romantic relationships, and, of course, they ran. Students often felt conflicted with their schooling at Mt. Pleasant; they seemed to be learning valuable skills at the cost of isolation from their cultures. Nevertheless, Michigan Indians continued to exercise their agency and the school became a valuable—yet problematic—resource. Yet, worse times were to come.

CHAPTER THREE: “THERE FOR LIFE” *Creating Communities, Dissolving Families*

The Mt. Pleasant School played a complicated, and often contradictory, role in the lives of Michigan Indians. As Chapter Two demonstrated, school administrators and students often had different ideas of how the school should operate, and when these ideas clashed, students resisted. Still, students also enjoyed many aspects of their life at school, as it provided opportunities unavailable at home. In fact, school administrators promoted a healthy social life for students within the school boundaries in many ways. However, school officials attempted to control who would be a part of the Mt. Pleasant community and what activities the school body would partake in. Nevertheless, both students and parents used the school as a platform to strengthen social networks, even as the school helped to tear old communities apart.

Community

The Mt. Pleasant School presented Michigan Indians with the unique opportunity to interact with other Indians from across a very large and diverse state. Suddenly, Ojibwes, Ottawas, and Potawatomis from both rural and urban areas could interact in a single area. Despite the highly structured and controlling lifestyle in the Mt. Pleasant School, students from across the state and across tribal affiliations were able to cultivate relationships. Significantly, many young children discovered that they were not alone and that their burden was shared by Indians across the state. In some ways, the school became a point of pride in Michigan Indian communities, especially when it came to sports where the “Indians” competed against white teams in basketball and football.

Community in other boarding schools has been identified by historians as creating a sense of pan-Indianism, or the beginning of American Indians as identifying under a single social group. The boarding schools are often cited as helping to cultivate the progressive American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1970s. The Mt. Pleasant School was no exception to this.¹

There was a strong sense of community among the students that attended the Mt. Pleasant School. Many students described the school as comforting because only Indian children attended and they were able to escape the racism and prejudice that existed in Michigan public schools. One Indian student that attended a public school recalled his experience vividly: “The white kids acted though they were more fitting and better than we were. Everything was natural to them. We felt we were out of place.” The student stresses that the “teacher didn’t seem to care for us, whether we learned or not.” One Ottawa woman who attended the Bretheren School in Manistee County remembers the blatant discrimination at school: “White kids call us ‘you damned Indians or you damned squaws!’” White kids teased another boy by calling him a “big Injun.” Another student from Hart, Michigan remembered that teachers did little to stop the discrimination against Indian students: “didn’t do any good to report it to the teacher there in those days. They just told us to fight back. When white kids picked on Indian kids on the way home from school, they went to the teacher about it. We were called tattletales. So we just fought our own battles.” Racism in public schools was amplified mostly because Indians were far outnumbered by whites. Many times, Indian students lived far from the school on the outskirts of towns, further isolating them from their fellow white students. In some cases

¹ For a discussion on pan-Indianism see Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 2-4.

buses did not operate that far, and Indian students had to travel up to a mile and a half to get to school, making winter commutes nearly impossible.²

Many students at the Mt. Pleasant School had previously attended public school and were therefore exposed to the racism before attending Mt. Pleasant. In that sense, it contrasted starkly with public schooling—there were no white students to make the Indian students feel out of place. While some incoming students did feel excluded at times—particularly when they did not speak English, or were slow to adapt a “white” lifestyle—the teasing was not motivated purely by racism as it was in public schools. Most students quickly made friends, however, and many former students preferred Mt. Pleasant to public schooling. One former student claimed to speak for many students: “we felt like we were at home when we see all Indians.”³

The school hosted a number of events that reinforced a sense of community among the students. For example, the students attended an annual Halloween party where they were encouraged to dress up in costumes and a contest was held to designate the best one. One student, Beulah Gilbert, wrote enthusiastically about the Halloween party in a letter to her parents, recounting the various costumes. “We had a Halloween party last Friday and we had a good time the children [were] masked some of them were so funny,” she writes. Beulah continues to describe the costume contest: “They had the first second and third prizes. The ostrich won the first prize that was Mary Hugo, the colored maid that was Ellen Fountain, the Old man was Charles Kiogama and Daniel Pigeon was little old man he won the third prize.”⁴ In her letter Beulah confides what she

² Dobson, 47-50.

³ Dobson, 54.

⁴ Beulah’s letter never made it to her father since his address could not be found and her letter remained in the possession of school administrators. Letters from students such as this are rare, but provide great

finds the most important about her experience at school, and it does not include what she learns in class, but mostly what she does for leisure. She continues to detail other common social events and expresses her disappointment when films began to be shown bi-weekly instead of weekly: “We had movies last Sunday night they were good pictures. We have movies only twice a month now that is better than not having any at all, and party once a month.” Social events such as Halloween parties and film showings are rarely recorded by school officials and therefore difficult to reconstruct. Nevertheless, they were vital parts of students’ lives while in school and fostered important social networks.

However, no holiday was more anticipated than Christmas. Students wrote letters to Santa Claus asking for gifts and providing explicit instructions on how to get to their new homes. Some of these letters were published in the local paper:

Dear Santa Claus:

Christmas will soon be here and I hope you will not forget me. I live at the Indian school and when you get off at Ann Arbor depot it is only a little way across [the] field to the school. I sleep in No. 7 Dormitory in the first row on the left handside, the second bed from the door. So you will not make a mistake. I will only ask you for three things, a doll that can open and shut her eyes, and a pair of skates. Put in my stocking, which will be on my bed. Good bye Santa.

Jennie Turonssway⁵

One girl was allowed to write her letter in *Anishinabe*:

Sahyakeana Santa Claus:

Kiccioshebi ahmon pung gi mongo. Kipah go sa ne uim, sah ga na jago pung Ki Che pedawe yon. Vindagnosenh veinshvaso pison negis. Ahdaneno wah gon duch gouch ga nag a gi dape nah min wa makos Sese

insight into the daily lives of the students. Beulah to father, October 31, 1923, Student Case Files, Gilbert, NA, RG 75, BIA.

⁵ “Indian School Santa Letters,” *Central Michigan Times*, December 18, 1908.

pabgodosum gakonah. Vinda gi no ah ma Ko mon da pi
Mt. Pleasant *ahnesnaba ah Kin a usadtwi gom gong ah*
*nesh un sah me vig Pasho Vin sah, Prudence Boulton*⁶

It is likely that Prudence Boulton was a new student who could not yet write in English so the school administrators allowed her to write to Santa Claus in *Anishinabe*. It seems ironic that school officials framed Santa Claus as an *Anishinabe* speaker while, at the same time, forcing girls such as Prudence to learn English.

The school held an annual Christmas party that was planned by the superintendent in response to the flood of letters from parents requesting that their children be sent home for the holiday. Since students were only allowed to visit their parents over the summer vacation, the superintendent reassured parents that the students would have a proper Christmas. The superintendent wrote to one mother reassuring her that her daughter would have a “very good time” during Christmas. He stated that “there will be a Christmas tree for them with plenty of candy, nuts and popcorn, and the gifts which the parents send. They will have a delicious Christmas dinner of roast goose and plum pudding, and a party in the evening. Also moving pictures and various entertainments.”⁷ Many Michigan Indians were Christian and Christmas was therefore an important holiday to celebrate with friends and family.⁸ School administrators believed that it was an important holiday as well, but they did not allow students to celebrate with their families. Even if parents offered to pick up their children or pay for a train ticket, students were not

⁶ The *Central Michigan Times* translated her letter as follows: “Dear Santa Claus: I will write a few lines to you. I am a little girl eight years old and I wish you would bring me something when you come. I would like a little doll and a bear and some candy, if you please. I am here in Mt. Pleasant Indian School. This is all. Goodbye. I am Prudence Boulton.” *Ibid.*

⁷ Superintendent to Mrs. Emma Gilbert, December 12, 1923, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

⁸ Missionaries established a number of churches on reservations and therefore many Michigan Indians had converted to Christianity before attending Mt. Pleasant. See, Cleland, 234-262.

allowed to leave for the holiday. Therefore, the celebration of Christmas was encouraged, but it was restricted to the students' fellow classmates.

Since parents could not join their children for the holiday, they often sent gifts. The tradition of sending gifts from home was an important factor in retaining family ties. Gifts varied greatly by income level, but the effect was the same. For example, during the Christmas of 1926 Mrs. Louie Askinaway could only spare a single dollar to divide equally among her three children, Lillie, Josephine, and Alexander. She requested that the superintendent use the money to buy candy for her children so they would have something under the tree that Christmas. Mrs. Askinaway had been ill that winter and was unable to leave the house to buy gifts for her children. She regretted that she could not provide a better gift, but she said that "this is the best we can do for the children just now."⁹ Clearly, it was important to Mrs. Askinaway that her children receive something for Christmas, no matter how small it was. Beulah's mother, Emma Gilbert, not only sent a gift to her daughter, but she also sent a package full of gifts to her fellow classmates. The mother did not buy the gifts for any student in particular; she simply did not want any student to be left out on Christmas. She told the superintendent, "I don't know any one there at all only my girl Beulah. So I will leave the presents to you to give them to the children. I don't care who they are I believe they ought to get presents as well as having a good time at your Christmas tree."¹⁰ In *Anishinabek* culture, gift giving was a way to foster relationships and was deeply significant. In fact, it was as important

⁹ Mrs. Louis Askinaway to the superintendent, December 13, 1926, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

¹⁰ Emma Gilbert to the superintendent, December 6, 1921, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

to receive a gift as it was to give one. Gift giving during Christmas had religious significance, but it was also deeply rooted in the *Anishinabek* tradition of kin relations.¹¹

In another example, Mrs. Bowen sent gifts to her three children, John, Julia, and Mary, every year. She hoped that the superintendent would give the packages she sent to her children. “If not,” she joked, “Santa Clause will soon arrived. Ha ha.”¹² In 1919, Mrs. Bowen set aside extra money to give to students who were orphans or whose parents could not afford a Christmas gift. She sent one dollar to the superintendent for the children that “has no presents.” In a letter to the superintendent she stressed the importance of Christmas: “we will be glad to send something to our little ones...we never forget them or neglect them on that special day. As it come only once a year and all children looks for that day.”¹³ Between her gifts and gifts from another kind parent all the girls who did not receive gifts were able to have something that Christmas. Julia Bowen knew the girls who received the money her mother had sent; the money was split amongst her friends and they were each able to purchase a piece of ribbon for Christmas. Using the school, parents were able to make sure that their children’s friends were able to receive gifts during an important holiday. Students greatly appreciated these gifts even if it was something as modest as a piece of ribbon. Gift giving during Christmas created a strong sense of community and was viewed as important by both students and parents. At home some children might not receive anything for Christmas; at school they had a strong community of people to support them.

¹¹ See Cleland, 54-8.

¹² Jennie Bowen to Superintendent Cochran, December 17, 1918, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

¹³ Jennie Bowen to Superintendent Cochran, November 20, 1919, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

Unbeknownst to the school officials, students also hosted their own social gatherings. One former student distinctly recalls when students held pow-wows after supper. Students would sneak into the basement and create a makeshift bonfire with a flashlight and some red paper. Students would practice their “own traditions” by “Pass[ing] around a stick like a peace pipe, [they would] wave their hands around. And the ones that didn’t participate had to pay a marble or a safety pin.” These underground meetings created social bonds that were not regulated by the school administrators. During pow wows, students could exchange stories and gossip in whatever language they chose without restriction.¹⁴

Social gatherings such as Christmas parties and pow-wows created an environment where some students felt at home. Adolph Romer left school after he found a factory job in Ohio. He wrote to the superintendent reminiscing about his time in school: “thank you very much for you, you was treating me very nicely at school. I am very glad I went in your school for three years it help me out quite lot.” Joseph Oley stayed in contact with the school administrators after he graduated and moved to Minnesota to take a teaching job and later a job as an engineer at the White Pine Copper Mine. He wrote to Mr. Balmer (presumably Joseph’s former teacher) a couple of times informing him of his current job and salary and about his recent marriage. He also asked if Balmer’s brother was still living in Duluth, Minnesota and wanted to meet up with him. Joseph was curious as to how all his friends were doing at school: “How is the band and also how are all the boys getting along down there? Sure would like to see them all...also

¹⁴ “School Days Remembered.”

give my regards to Mr. Cochran.”¹⁵ The friends and connections made while attending the Mt. Pleasant School were important to some students, even after they had married and had begun working.

In 1914, Mary Schiomer wrote a thirteen page letter addressed to everyone in the Mt. Pleasant School. In the letter she talks about her experiences at school and reflects on how important the school was in her life: “It has always been the pride and joy of my life knowing I was a graduate from the Mt. Pleasant School, it has been and will forever be a stimulus for me to go forward.” In her letter, Mary discusses the importance of the friendships she made while at school and wishes she was still in touch with them. Mary says, “I have often wondered what has become of my classmates, I’d like to hear from them if I only know where they were at.” She goes on to explain the last thing she heard about her friends at school and says, “I wish them all success in their different vocations.” Mary speaks to the importance of having a strong group of alumni and explains why she is writing to everyone at school: “It’s a grand and uplifting idea to keep in touch with the ‘Home’ school and the pupils who have left it.”¹⁶ While at school, students made strong and lasting social bonds, some of which lasted far after graduation.

Another way students developed community was through sports. Athletics was highly emphasized at the Mt. Pleasant School among both boys and girls. The school hosted men’s basketball, football, and baseball teams, as well as a women’s basketball team throughout the years. The Mt. Pleasant “Indians” tended to draw large crowds when their team traveled, and in some cases spectators had to be turned away because

¹⁵ Joseph Oley to J. W. Balmer, September 2, 1916, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Administrative Records of the Superintendent 1915-1933.

¹⁶ Mary Schiomer to The Mt. Pleasant School, June 17, 1914, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Administrative Records of the Superintendent 1915-1933.

sporting venues were not large enough.¹⁷ During one baseball game in June of 1906, the entire town of Coleman turned out to watch their team compete against the “Indians.” Businesses closed for the event, causing a large crowd to gather for the game. “The crowd did every thing possible to rattle” the Mt. Pleasant team, but “the Indians simply out classed the Coleman team” and won the game easily, 19 to 5.¹⁸ Soon, the Mt. Pleasant teams earned a reputation as being difficult to defeat, and newspapers referred to their victories as “taking scalps.” This racist term was applied to both the boys and girls sport teams and was undoubtedly employed to illustrate a savage and ruthless style of play. When white teams were victorious, they were never rendered in this way.¹⁹ Despite taunts at sporting events and negative depictions in the newspapers, students saw their success in athletics as a point of pride. In fact, sports were one of the most vividly recalled aspects of school life by students in interviews. In a 1991 panel of 20 former students, nearly all of them remember the success of the sports teams and recall their men’s basketball team making it to states several times. In addition, they recalled some of their fellow students transferring to the Haskell Indian School in Kansas after graduation because of their athletic talent.²⁰

All students experienced sports at some level, whether they played pickup games in their free time, participated on the school teams, or watched their fellow classmates at sporting events. For example, Beulah Gilbert was excited to learn how to play basketball and wrote to her “daddy” to tell him how she learned the new sport: “We go to the gymnasium every day after school when it is our turn to go. And we learn how to drill

¹⁷ “Indian School News,” *Isabella Co. Enterprise*, March 14, 1924.

¹⁸ “Base Ball,” *Isabella Co. Enterprise*, June 1, 1906.

¹⁹ See, for example, “Indians Take 2 Scalps From High School, *Mt. Pleasant Times*, January 27, 1927.

²⁰ “School Days Remembered.”

and learn how to play basketball it is fun playing ball.” In another letter, she described the enthusiasm surrounding the new sport and was pleased that Mt. Pleasant hosted a basketball tournament that included teams from across the state.²¹ Sports, then, contributed to a sense of community, not only for the students athletic enough to play for the school teams, but also for a majority of the children. Pupils such as Beulah were able to participate in pickup games during their leisure time, creating important social bonds essential to their school experience. For students, sports were a natural way to build and celebrate community.

While the Mt. Pleasant School destroyed Indian communities in many ways, it also created new ones. As Chapter Two demonstrated, Indian families such as the Deer Family and the Williams family, used the school to keep families together. As parents moved constantly in search of work, siblings could be kept together safely at school. Similarly, as entire Michigan Indian communities fell apart and families became scattered across the state, the school was used as a vehicle to kindle new relations and to maintain old ones.

Vacations and Visits

When students enrolled in the Mt. Pleasant School they were obligated to fulfill their “term,” typically between three and four years. Since the Mt. Pleasant School offered eight grades (a ninth grade was added in 1925) and most students had received previous schooling, many students graduated within two terms. Students were not allowed to leave in the middle of their term as school administrators treated applications

²¹ Beulah Gilbert to her father, October 31, 1923; Beulah to her father, March 29, 1923, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

as legally binding documents—in some cases they *were* legally binding. Students, then, were classified more like prisoners than pupils. They were not allowed to visit home for holidays even if parents were willing to supply transportation. School administrators determined whether or not students were able to go home for summer vacation, always making visits home uncertain. If the superintendent was not fond of a student's family, the student's family could not afford the train fare home, or if the student had failing grades, they were usually not allowed to visit home for the summer. The school operated through the summer for the students who stayed. In very rare cases, some students were allowed to visit home briefly during their term—usually after a tragedy such as the death of a parent.

Students and parents clashed with school administrators most often on the issue of leaving school. Students felt entitled to leave Mt. Pleasant when it was no longer beneficial for them, and parents grew angry as school administrators told them that they no longer had authority over their own children. As Chapter Two demonstrated, students often ran away from school when they were unable to visit home. Some students would simply refuse to return to school. Communication between parents and students was limited by school officials, and pupils were usually only able to write a letter when their monthly report cards were issued. Writing home was not mandatory, and at times students would write to other friends or lovers causing some parents to worry. School officials usually only wrote to parents when a student had become sick or ran away from school. Students who required better care than the school could provide were sent to the University of Michigan's hospital in Ann Arbor. Therefore, a sick student could have been taken out of school and admitted to the University Hospital before the parents were

even aware that their child was sick. This policy often upset parents, as many preferred that the child come home during their sickness. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Shagonaby were concerned to discover that their son Johnnie had been wetting his bed. They offered to send money so he could recover at home and added, “we will be glad to have him with us.”²² Despite what their son told them, the superintendent assured them that “he is well and there is no need for you to worry.”²³ “Bed wetters” at Mt. Pleasant were moved out of the dorms and forced to sleep on the porch until they stopped. In Johnnie’s case the matron claimed that he stopped bedwetting after they told him he would have to move, and that he was never scolded.²⁴ Another mother wrote to the superintendent after she found out from a “different party” that her son, Stuart, was sent to the hospital with tuberculosis: “you naturally know what love we all have for our children and how hard it is for one to hear that they are sick and so many miles away.” She requested that Stuart come home for the summer so she could help him recover, but he was not allowed to return.²⁵

Parents were often persistent about seeing their children over the summer vacation. Visits home were discouraged even over the summer, when many students stayed for further schooling, worked around the school, or even took local jobs that school administrators lined up. Many parents assumed that they would be able to see their children during the summer at the very least. However, school officials treated student enrollment more as a business deal than an educational opportunity. In a letter to

²² Mr. and Mrs. John Shagonaby to superintendent Cochran, September 13, 1922, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

²³ Cochran to Shagonaby, September 15, 1922, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

²⁴ Mrs. E to Superintendent Cochran, September 15, 1922, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

²⁵ Mrs. Perrault to superintendent Cochran, July 14, 1920, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

a parent who insisted that he would not send his daughter, Helen Blackman, to Mt. Pleasant unless she could visit home every summer, the superintendent laid out his terms very plainly: “I will be unable to promise you any such thing; in fact, I am of the opinion that the pupils will not be allowed to go home for vacation next year.” He warns Helen’s father that the school is close to capacity and that many students would eagerly fill her space. The superintendent believed that parents did not get to decide when they could see their children once they enrolled: “[if] you want to make terms and dictate them yourself I will be unable to do business with you...but you must understand that if your daughter does not enter this school she will be debarred from all other Indian schools in the United States.”²⁶ Helen and her father were forced into a predicament by the policies of the superintendent; she needed an education, but was hesitant about being away from home for up to three years. Even though Helen could afford her railroad fare, it was doubtful that she could visit home during the summers. Helen decided to attend the Mt. Pleasant School and was able to visit home only after her first “term” of three years had expired, despite her perpetual homesickness.

Even during a family crisis, students were unable to go home—even during the summer. Amelia Birds’ mother was terribly ill and almost died during the winter of 1918. Her mother hoped that Amelia could come home for the summer, “I’m not able to do much this summer. I want her to help me...I haven’t got any husband, I’m alone he died when she was two year old.”²⁷ Even though Amelia’s mother was ill and needed

²⁶ Superintendent to Mike Blackman, September 13, 1919, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

²⁷ Mary Bird to the superintendent, April 29, 1918, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

her help at home the superintendent would not allow her to leave because her term had not expired.²⁸

In the rare occasion that a child was able to visit home, they were not allowed to stay home for long. James Pontiac wrote to the superintendent asking if his two children, Cecilia and Cecil, could visit their dying mother: “Mrs. Jim Pontiac is ready to die. No chance to live. Maybe she’ll die tonight.” Pontiac realized that he could only afford a train ticket for one child and knew that the school would not pay for another ticket: “Cecilia Pontiac we like to have her come see her mother...I would like both [children], I have not enough for him [Cecil]. Here is \$3.50 for Cecilia.” He could not afford the train fare for both children to visit their mother before she died, and the superintendent would not allow Cecil to leave unless Pontiac furnished another \$3.50 for his ticket.²⁹ The superintendent allowed Cecilia to visit home, but demanded that she come back directly following the funeral. He claimed that her studies were the most important part of her life: “I don’t want Cecilia to miss any more class work than is absolutely necessary. It isn’t fair to her to keep her out more than necessary. So I shall place you upon your honor to return her as soon as possible.”³⁰ Even when faced with the death of a parent, students were expected to focus on their school work.

In a letter to the superintendent, one mother directly challenged his policy about summer vacations after her two boys, Leonard and Stewart Holiday, were not allowed to come home. The mother was angered when she discovered that students from another family were home for the summer: “I think they [Leonard and Stewart] should be allowed

²⁸ Superintendent to Mrs. Mary Bird, May 4, 1918, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

²⁹ James Pontiac to Superintendent Cochran, March 22, 1924, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

³⁰ Superintendent Cochran to James Pontiac, March 26, 1924, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

to come home if other can as long as I pay their fare. Why should some be treated better than others? We all have the same love for our children.”³¹ Yet, for school officials, vacations were a matter of authority over the lives of students; love for children or homesickness was not reason enough for vacations to be issued. Students and parents, then, had to be bold and creative if they wished to leave school.

For example, Howard Lucia ran away from school in August of 1927 shortly after the death of both of his parents. He was returned to school, but his grandmother suggested that he would never be happy at school in a letter to the superintendent: “I do know that he was very discontented at the school. I thought perhaps in time he would be better satisfied.”³² In 1928, Howard returned to his grandmother’s home in Detroit for the summer where he decided not to go back to school. When superintendent Baumgarten demanded that he return, Howard was determined to prove that he did not belong in the Mt. Pleasant School and claimed that he did not have any Indian blood. In the following letter to superintendent Baumgarten, Howard claimed that his grandmother had lied about his heritage:

I Howard Lucia...wish to state that Mrs Aslyn purged herself when she said I was of Indian blood. My father was an Italian my mother was of German and French decent. I have been working and keeping my Grand Mother and my Aunt while I have been here. I am now out of employment and they wish to get rid of me the best they can...I am taking the matter up with the Detroit Board of Education as I do not wish to go back to your school. And by rights do not belong there.

I would appreciate it very much if you would look into this and take up the matter with Mrs. Aslyn and the Detroit

³¹ Mrs. Perrault to Superintendent Cochran, April 6, 1921, Student Case Files, Holiday, NA, RG 75, BIA.

³² Mrs. Aslyn to Superintendent Baumgarten, August 27, 1927, Student Case Files, Lucia, NA, RG 75, BIA.

Board of Education. I have working papers and I have been ordered from Mrs. Aslyn house before she succeeded in getting me committed to your school.

[signed] Howard Lucia³³

Howard had no other options in this situation; his grandmother wanted him to return to school because she could not support him during the winter, and the superintendent demanded that he return. He claimed to have collected legal documents to prove his heritage and got the local authorities on the Detroit Board of Education to take up his cause. Further, he rejected his ethnic identity (his grandmother claimed that his parents were both Chippewas). While Howard's heritage was never determined, there were no more records of him at the Mt. Pleasant School. It appears that Howard was able to leave after taking such extreme measures.

Another student, Jessie McDonald took similar actions and refused to return to school in the summer of 1913. Jessie did not enjoy her stay at school telling the superintendent, "I have been to school about 9 years and did not get anything out of it very much."³⁴ The superintendent answered Jessie's letter immediately and reminded her that her "time will not expire until next year" and therefore must return to Mt. Pleasant.³⁵ Even though Jessie had a job and was supporting her sick mother, the superintendent demanded that she complete another year of schooling before she return home. Finally, Jessie's mother wrote an angry letter to the superintendent revealing Jessie's poor treatment at school:

³³ Howard Lucia to Superintendent Baumgarten, December 29, 1928, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

³⁴ Jessie's letter is cited entirely in the Introduction. Jessie McDonald to the superintendent, August 11, 1913, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

³⁵ Superintendent to Jessie McDonald, August 12, 1913, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

Now my dear friends I am very sorry to tell you that Jessie will not return to Mt. Pleasant very soon for I shall need her myself from now [on]. Mrs. Potts [the matron] will have a very slim chance to make my girl get down to scrub the basement unless a dead woman can do it.

I never had the idea of mothers like her would do such a brutal thing to the girls at the school. Furthermore Jessie has to many good friends. I think she better stay away from school let her learn how use knife and fork at the table³⁶

Jessie's mother was very passionately against her daughter—or any student for that matter—returning to school. Jessie had been treated poorly and therefore her mother was going to do everything in her power to make sure Jessie stayed home where she would be properly cared for. This is the final document in Jessie's student file, implying that she successfully disenrolled from the Mt. Pleasant School.

Amos, Alexander, and Josephine Day had been placed in the Mt. Pleasant School by the state of Michigan after their parents divorced. Their mother, Margaret Skinaway, had remarried and was therefore in a better financial situation. She tried several times to regain custody of her children, but failed. She wrote the following letter threatening to take legal action if her children could not visit home:

Dear Supt.

just a few lines. I would like to have you sent my boys home on train you are to sent them home I didnt make no papers to let them stay there for life...you have no rights to keep them there I don't care to have them finish there. If you don't do as I aske you I will take it up with the court.

[signed] Mrs. Louie Skinaway³⁷

³⁶ Mary McDonald to the superintendent, August 27, 1919, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

³⁷ Skinaway to the superintendent, June 15, 1931, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

Later, she wrote to the superintendent telling him that he did not take the importance of family into account when not allowing her children to visit home: “you don’t know how it is not to see your children for many years. I sure like them come home...but it is funny you don’t let my boys come home just for vacation.”³⁸ Eventually, the two boys, Amos and Alexander, were allowed to visit home for the summer, but all three children had to fulfill their terms at Mt. Pleasant.

Control over visits home was not simply a way for school officials to insure authority over pupils, it was a carefully planned part of the students’ closed environment. Not allowing pupils to visit home until their term expired was the official policy of the BIA in Washington DC and therefore applied to all federal boarding schools. Separating children from their parents was part of the “educational” process. Students learned to break from their past ways in school, extended periods away from home enforced this lesson. BIA officials viewed the home environment as counterproductive to the student’s lessons, and therefore attempted to eliminate visits home as often as possible. The Mt. Pleasant School was designed to separate families.

Closing

When the Mt. Pleasant School closed in 1933 during the midst of the Great Depression, many Michigan Indians were confused. Many assumed that the school was created by a treaty and—like most treaties—the U.S. government broke this one as well. A former student recalled being told by a teacher that “the Indians signed off,” but was never told what that meant. Another student interpreted the school’s closing: “At that time the government said they were not going to put any more money into Indian schools.

³⁸ Skinaway to the superintendent, June 22, 1931, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

Indians just going to have to shift for themselves at public schools.” He continued to say that this “cause[d] a hard time for Indians. At that time many orphans had no other place. From then on they were shifted from one place to another. All Indian kids had a hard time in public schools.”³⁹ Many children had no other and option upon the school’s closing, Superintendent Frank Christy, desperately attempted to place orphaned children in other boarding schools across the nation. However, funding was tight, and most children were denied admission to the other U.S. boarding schools.

In truth, the closing of the Mt. Pleasant School was not sudden at all. Each year the school had to apply for funding from the federal government, and there was no guarantee that the school would continue operations from year to year. Depending on the political climate, the BIA threatened to cut off appropriations to the Mt. Pleasant School on several occasions. For instance, in 1908—shortly after the school was reconstructed—the Commissioner of Indian Affairs considered closing six boarding schools including Mt. Pleasant. He claimed that “they have served their usefulness and ought to be gradually dispensed with.”⁴⁰ Indian education cost money; money the government was not always willing to pay.

Most years school administrators received more applications than could be accepted and therefore had to deny admission to certain students. As a result, school officials encouraged Michigan Indians to attend public schools and were less likely to accept students who had access to public schooling. As early as 1911, the BIA encouraged the Mt. Pleasant School to survey the student body and begin transitioning

³⁹ Dobson, 57.

⁴⁰ “Concerning Our School,” *Central Michigan Times*, December 11, 1908.

students to public schools. The following questionnaire was sent to families, asking about their proximity to public schools:

How far is your home from the nearest public school?
What is the length of school term?
What grades are taught?
What is the name or number of public school district?
What is the post office address of clerk of district board?
Are you able to care for, support, clothe, and place your children in the public school near your home?

The superintendent left explicit instructions to have “some white friend” help fill out the form if they could not answer the above questions.⁴¹ Up to this point, however, the Mt. Pleasant School was only threatened for financial reasons and does not reflect a shift in ideology regarding the boarding schools.

A shift of policy within the BIA did occur when the school was shut down in 1933, and it was just one of a series of boarding schools to close during the same period. In January of 1928, the BIA published *The Problem of Indian Administration*, or the Merriam Report, after launching a “scientific” study of Native American life across the country. The report was highly critical of the government boarding schools and found funding to be entirely inadequate. Among other things, the report found students to be malnourished, teachers to be poorly trained, and school buildings to be health hazards. The report specifically mentioned the Mt. Pleasant School, citing that it had a “large proportion...[of] orphans for whom it would be exceedingly difficult to reconstruct any kind of home life.”⁴² Suddenly, the U.S. government viewed the boarding schools as not

⁴¹ Superintendent to Mary McDonald, February 16, 1911, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Student Case Files.

⁴² Institute for Government Research, *The Problem of Indian Administration*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1928), 405.

only expensive, but inefficient as well. The BIA concluded that the best way to deal with the poorly operated boarding schools was to close them entirely. All Indian students would be forced into public schooling.

Many Michigan Indians had come to rely on the Mt. Pleasant School during such tough economic times, making adjustment into public schooling difficult for them. Public schooling was poor near many Indian communities and some children had to walk miles just to get to school. After the Mt. Pleasant School closed its doors to students, Superintendent Frank Christy received a flood of letters from former students asking for economic aid. Many families were already impoverished and the depression amplified their desperate situation. Students often did not have adequate clothing, food, or school supplies. One student explains that he cannot attend school during the winter without better clothing: "I would like to go to school every day, but my coat is so thin that I miss every cold day. And 'daddy' cannot afford to buy me one, as it takes all he can make to keep the family."⁴³ In some cases Christy was able to provide students with supplies, especially clothing, but many times he referred them to their local Red Cross for aid. The requests became so overwhelming from Baraga, Michigan that a memo was issued: "Apparently the news that we provided clothing for our former students has got around and the requests for other children are likely to come in. Unless we know that there is definite need, I think it would be unwise to send clothing to Baraga County...there is no reason why they cannot provide clothing for their children."⁴⁴ Not only former students wrote to the school for aid, but other Indians in their community did as well. The Great

⁴³ Unknown sender to Superintendent Frank Christy, Feb 11, 1934, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Decimal Correspondence Files.

⁴⁴ Undated Memo, L.M.C., General Records, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Decimal Correspondence Files.

Depression had hit Native American communities especially hard, and therefore, they turned to only resource they knew to use: the Mt. Pleasant School. At a time when Michigan Indians needed aid more than ever, they had lost an important resource. In reality, families could not even afford proper clothing.

As soon as, students had succeeded in making the Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial School their own, it closed its doors forever. Despite constant surveillance and confinement, there remained something distinctly Indian about Mt. Pleasant. Parents from across the state used the school to distribute gifts during Christmas to students that would not otherwise receive them; students were distinguished as excellent athletes and consistently defeated their white rivals; and students preserved their cultural practices as they held pow-wows in the basement of the school, away from the watch of school officials. The school was a place where students could interact with other Indians; it was a place where they could build lasting relationships and exchange ideas. When students grew dissatisfied with the school they used innovative means to leave, and they even sought legal aid. Nevertheless, the school was administered by the BIA, and its closure during the depression is a stark reminder that the school was never designed to cater to the needs of Michigan Indians, it was designed to solve a “problem” fabricated by whites. It was designed to assimilate a peoples deemed inferior. When it came down to it, the school was funded and operated by whites, and whites decided when it had “served its usefulness.” Just as school administrators were never fully able to control the lives of students; Michigan Indians were unable to entirely craft the school to accommodate their needs.

CONCLUSION: “THE WORST THING THEY COULD HAVE EVER DONE”
Cultural Revitalization

Since its construction, Michigan Indians and school officials contended to define what the Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial School would become. Both groups exercised their agency in an attempt to dictate how the school would operate. School administrators contrived to control the lives of students from sunrise to sunset by dictating their daily schedules, dressing them in uniforms, controlling their social circles, severely limiting home visits, and punishing those who refused to obey. Students resisted their environments by stealing food from the school, distilling alcohol in secret, holding underground pow-wows, and running away from the school entirely. Parents used the school to feed and house their children during difficult economic times—effectively using the school as an instrument for familial cohesion at a time when colonialism pulled families apart. When school administrators seemed to keep their children “for life,” parents challenged the authority of the school officials and demanded their children back. This struggle between groups defined the history of the Mt. Pleasant School. It was never dominated by either group, nor could it be—fundamentally, they had opposing visions of what an “Indian” school was.

Ultimately, the Mt. Pleasant School became a place for children. It was not designed as one, but Michigan Indians made it so. Here students met, played, laughed, learned, ate, and slept. They ran away, resisted, cried, fell ill, and died. The school housed children by separating them from their homes. It created new communities while simultaneously destroying old ones. It prepared them for an idealized white-created world by insisting that they forget the world of their ancestors. At the expense of their

own distinct cultures, it furnished them with English, Christianity, new farming techniques, woodworking, sewing, and “proper” housekeeping. And above all else, it was a place where children lived their early lives.

At the same time, it was more than that. For Indians, the Mt. Pleasant School stood at the forefront of the most recent wave of U.S. colonialism. In the battle to solve the alleged “Indian problem,” the school attempted to assimilate Michigan Indians into white society—and what better way to assimilate a people than to systematically indoctrinate their children? By the time the Mt. Pleasant School was built, Michigan Indians had been defeated in war, forced off their lands, deprived of traditional hunting grounds, obligated to adopt a capitalistic lifestyle, and, as a consequence, scattered throughout Michigan. The school was simply the next step in the colonial process. Michigan Indians had become marginalized and impoverished and were considered “wards of the state” by whites, and therefore needed to become self reliant—they needed to become “white.” As, R. B. McKnight pointed out in his speech at the school’s opening, “uplifting” Indians was the primary reason for the establishment of the school:

The education of the children goes to the core of the problem. We must begin at the cradle if we would conquer barbarism and lift a race to a height beyond itself. It is a slow process, but the only sure one: and the sooner we recognize and apply it, the sooner...the troublesome issue of civilizing the Indians be relieved of its clogs and doubts and put in the way of ultimate practical settlement.¹

It is useful to compare McKnight’s language with the reflections of Mary Schiomer, a graduate of Mt. Pleasant: “[the school] has been and will forever be a stimulus for me to go forward and do whatever I may be able to do, to help others, first, last, and all of the

¹ “The Stone is Laid: With Imposing Ceremonies,” *The North Western Tribune*, October 21, 1892.

time. I am a 'Progressive' I believe in going forward and accomplishing things.”² In a lengthy letter, Mary demonstrates how she applies what she has learned in school to her daily life; raising her children, cooking for the family, attending church on Sundays, and reading the news daily. Coming out of school, many Indians shared McKnight's optimism that they would be “lifted beyond themselves.”

That learning experience came at great cost, however. In a 1991 panel interview with twenty former students, nearly all of the students recalled their educational training in a positive way. Many attributed the training, no matter how difficult it was, to the reason why they were not “lazy.” However, when asked what they liked least about the school, the former students almost unanimously wished they had retained the cultural practices of their ancestors, especially their language. Ambrose Brisson recalls when he first came home to his family: “Being away from my parents all those years. When I did go to home, my parents to me were totally strangers. I had to learn to talk to them again, simple words.” Despite their language barrier, Ambrose looked up to his father and decided to quit school when his father no longer wanted him to attend. He summarizes his stay at school in the following way: “I liked the school, but there was one thing I didn't like: they wanted to take that Indian background away from you and I think that was the worst thing they could have ever done.”³

Children who attended public schools were more likely to retain the *Anishinabe* language, than the students who attended Mt. Pleasant. One Ojibwe man explains, “I never lost the language because we never ceased to speak it there [at home].”⁴ Another

² Mary Schiomer to The Mt. Pleasant School, June 17, 1914, NA, RG 75, BIA, Mt. Pleasant, Administrative Records of the Superintendent: 1915-1933.

³ “School Days Remembered.”

⁴ Dobson, 57.

man who retained the *Anishinabe* language declared, “I feel strongly on the need for the young to learn their native tongue.”⁵ In the fall of 2009, the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe, located in Mt. Pleasant, launched a program to revitalize the *Anishinabe* language. For the first time since the Mt. Pleasant School was built *Anishinabek* children will learn the language of their ancestors in school. Toddlers between the ages of one-and-a-half and three will be fully immersed in *Anishinabe*—from the time they board the bus to the time they come home they will be instructed in only *Anishinabe*.⁶ It has taken the Saginaw Chippewas over 100 years to institute such a program; many other Michigan communities do not have such programs. Even today, the effects of the Mt. Pleasant School are still being felt.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ For more information of the Anishinaabe Language Revitalization Program, see the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe website, <http://www.sagchip.org/language/index.asp>.

EPILOGUE: THE SECOND MARCH
The Journey for Forgiveness, June 17, 2009

Early one June morning, over 400 people gathered in the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal Operations Building to walk five miles to the historic site of the Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial School.¹ Aromas of sage and tobacco filled the air as I entered the building's gymnasium for a special "Sunrise Ceremony" that would prepare the other participants and myself for a day of healing. George Martin, the Carrier of the Sacred Pipe, explained how to pray using *semaa*, or sacred tobacco. I watched as participants held the *semaa* in their left hand as they made a prayer before releasing it in a small dish to mix with the other prayers. The *semaa* was then smoked in the Sacred Pipe, allowing the prayers to be received directly by the Creator. After the healing ceremony, we followed the same roads to the school that participants in the First March had traveled over 100 years ago. Perhaps it was no coincidence that it was again raining.

Elders and tribal leaders from the Three Fires Confederacy (Ojibwes, Ottawas, and Potawatomis) directed the parade and carried the Tribal Eagle Staff. Former students of the Mt. Pleasant School and the descendents of students were distinguished and marched directly behind the tribal leaders. Some marchers wore shirts that honored their parents or grandparents who had attended the school. Police cars blocked off the road for the event and escorted the marchers while the local fire department distributed water to ensure that all the marchers stayed hydrated. Buses were available for those unable to make the entire five mile journey. The parade paused at the Mt. Pleasant County

¹ This account is based primarily on my personal experiences at the event. The event was also well documented by the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. Videos, pictures, and articles of the event are available on their website, <http://www.sagchip.org/council/events/2009/2009-0617-JourneyForForgiveness/061709-JourneytoForgiveness.htm>.

Building where the city, county, and state governments gathered peacefully with the three tribal governments for the first time in Michigan's history. Hunter Genia, of the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe's Behavioral Health program, was the Master of Ceremonies and gave a speech that established the purpose of the event: "all of us are here today together— the red, the white, the black, and the yellow. We're all part of the human race, and if we're going to progress together as a society we have to work together."² The goal of the Journey of Forgiveness was not only to acknowledge and heal the negative effects the school had on Michigan Indians, but also to extend healing to all races.

The Journey continued to the old school grounds where the buildings still stand. The crowd grew to nearly 600 people as we gathered under a tent where Don Coyhis, the President of the White Bison Society, explained how the Journey linked with the Wellbriety Movement. The movement sought to heal devastated American Indian communities across the country through communal storytelling and prayer. Coyhis demonstrated that traits demoralizing Indian communities such as alcoholism, depression, and violence stem from boarding schools. The Wellbriety Movement contends that trauma is carried across generations and the only way to break the cycle is to forgive the nation that instituted the policy. "Forgiveness will be our freedom," Coyhis declares.³ In all, the Journey of Forgiveness included a 6,800-mile journey across the U.S. to 23 present and former Indian school sites. It culminated in Washington D.C. where tribal members from across America marched together and asked for an official apology from President Barack Obama on behalf of the American government. The apology would acknowledge the destruction the boarding schools caused to American Indian

² Hunter Genia, recorded speech, June 17, 2009, <http://www.sagchip.org/council/events/2009/2009-0617-JourneyForForgiveness/061709-JourneytoForgiveness.htm>.

³ Don Coyhis, speech, June 17, 2009.

communities, including the devastation of families and culture. They did not ask for money or reparations, they asked simply for an apology. They still await that apology.⁴

At the conclusion of the event, the Sacred Hoop of 100 Eagle Feathers was brought out and everyone was invited to participate in the healing process by saying a prayer and sprinkling tobacco through the Hoop. The Hoop contained the power of Healing, Hope, Unity, and the Power to Forgive the Unforgivable. It was divided into four parts representing the four directions (red, black, white, and yellow) and all the human races.⁵ The crowd formed four lines in the four directions and made individual prayers one-by-one. As I approached the Hoop I prayed into the tobacco before sprinkling it through the Hoop's opening. I watched as the prayer danced to the ground to join the others on the cloth below. These prayers, along with the prayers made by people across the country at the other 22 school sites, would travel to Washington D.C. and be presented along with the request for an apology. As we prayed, music of the traditional *Anishinabek* 100 Drums honor song and the Sacred Jingle Dress Healing Dance filled the air.

When buffalo burgers were served to the hungry marchers, I took my meal and sat at the edge of the empty pond at the front of the school's campus. As I ate, I watched as people approached the deserted buildings. Many took pictures of the buildings, leaning over roped off areas as if they hoped to gain insight into the pasts of their ancestors. As

⁴ For more on the Wellbriety Movement see The White Bison Society, "Center for the Wellbriety Movement, <http://www.whitebison.org/>.

⁵ The Sacred Hoop is directly connected to Black Elk's famous vision. The Hoop was created in 1995, shortly after the first white buffalo calf was born in Janesville, WI. The Hoop has been on a number of journeys and has traveled 53,000 miles to Native American communities across the United States. See the White Bison Society's website for more information, <http://www.whitebison.org/wellbriety-movement/story-sacred-hoop-journeys.htm>.

the rain passed over and the sun shined, children began to play in the grass. I watched them laugh as they rolled in the soil their ancestors had once played in. It was perhaps the first time that children ran and played on the grounds of the school since it had closed.

The Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial School.

Forgotten, but not by all. It cannot be.

APPENDIX ONE: LIST OF SUPERINTENDENTS (DATES APPROXIMATE)

Edmund D. Riopel (1892 – Late July 1893)

James A. Cooper (1893 – October 30, 1893)

Andrew Spencer (1893 – 1897)

Rodney S. Graham (1897 – 1900)

E.C. Nardin (1900 – 1904)

Robert A. Cochran (1904 – July 1924)

Ora Padgett (July 1924 – May 1926)

L.E.. Baumgarten (May 1926 – May 1932)

Frank Christy (May 1932 – 1934)

APPENDIX TWO: PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE MT. PLEASANT SCHOOL

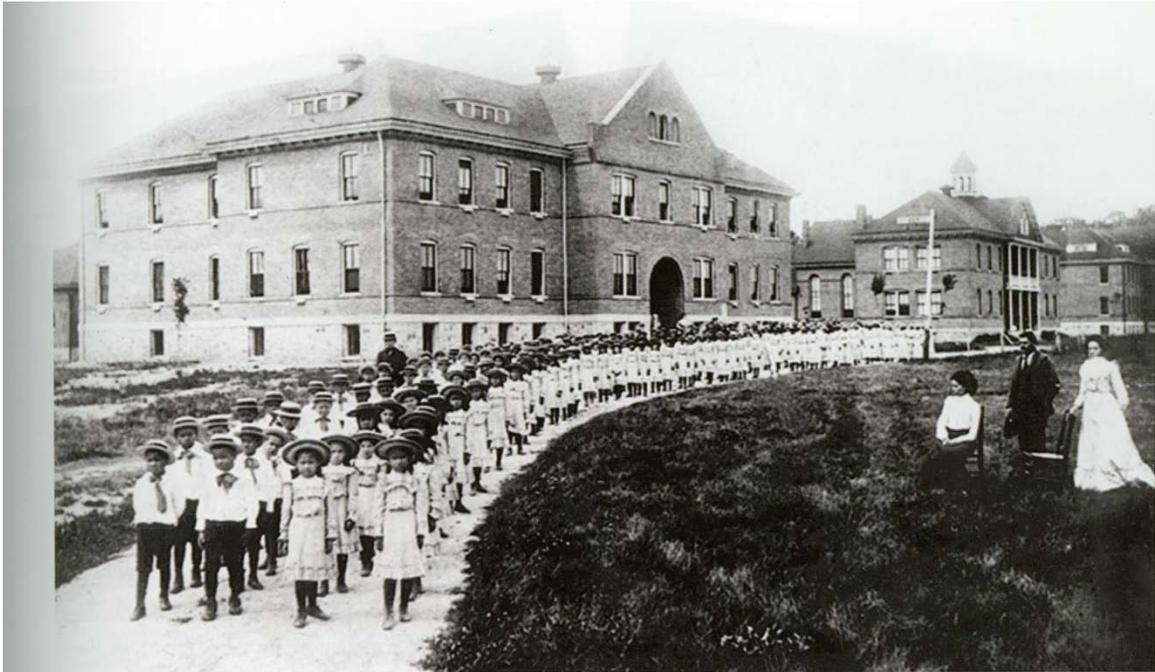


Figure 1. Students dressed in uniform line up outside of the school, date unknown. To the right the superintendent, his wife, and his daughter oversee the children. Courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library, Mt. Pleasant, MI.



Figure 2. View of the Mt. Pleasant campus, date unknown. Courtesy of Sherry Sponseller.

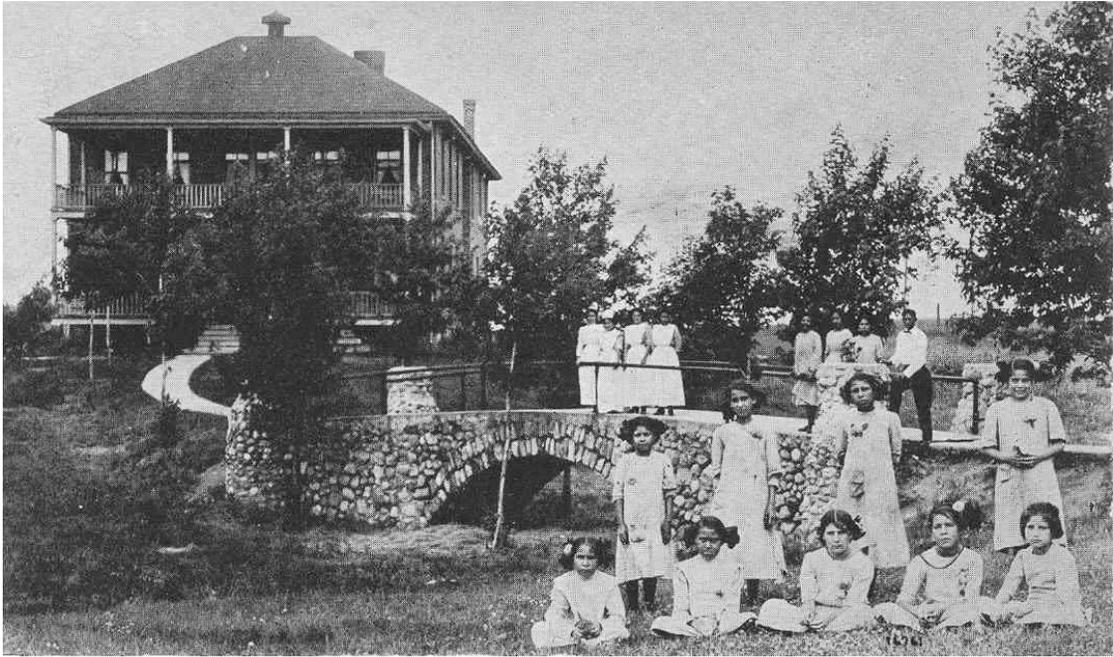


Figure 3. Mt. Pleasant girls gathered in front of the hospital, date unknown. Courtesy of Sherry Sponseller.



Figure 4. Graduating Class, unknown date. Courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library.

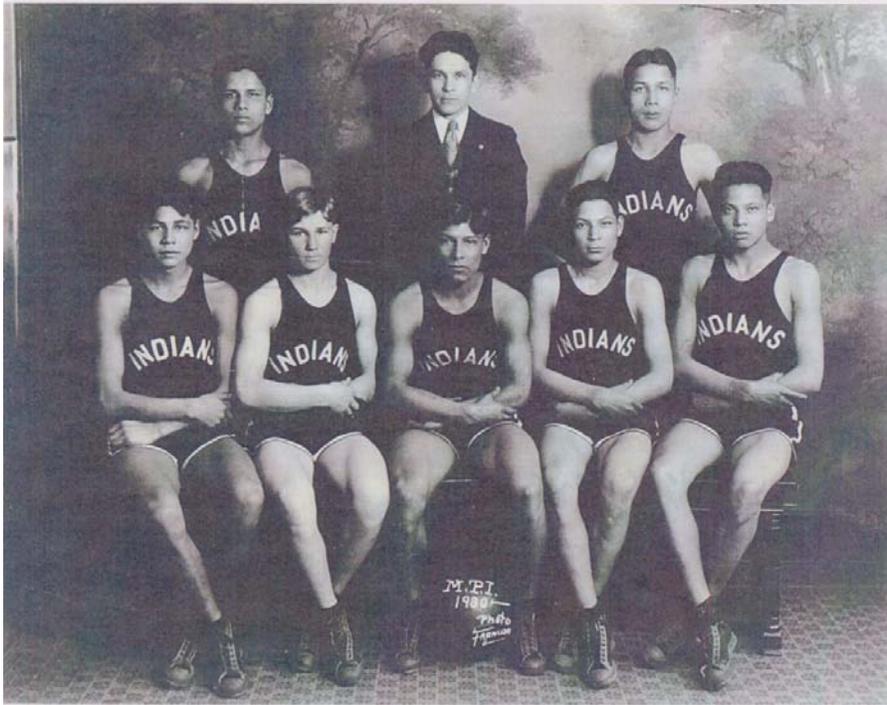


Figure 5. The Mt. Pleasant “Indians” basketball team, 1930. Courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library.



Figure 6. The Mt. Pleasant football team, 1931. Courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library

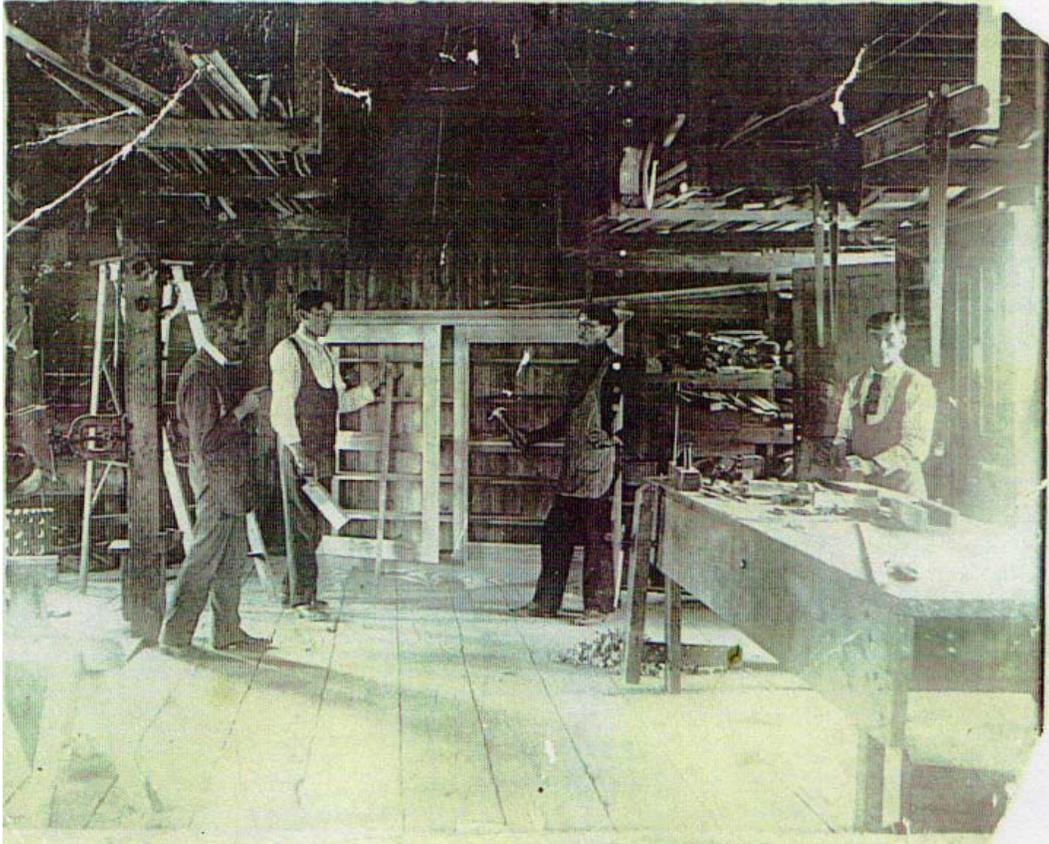


Figure 7. View of the woodworking shop, 1900. Courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library.



Figure 8. The Mt. Pleasant Band, date unknown. Courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library

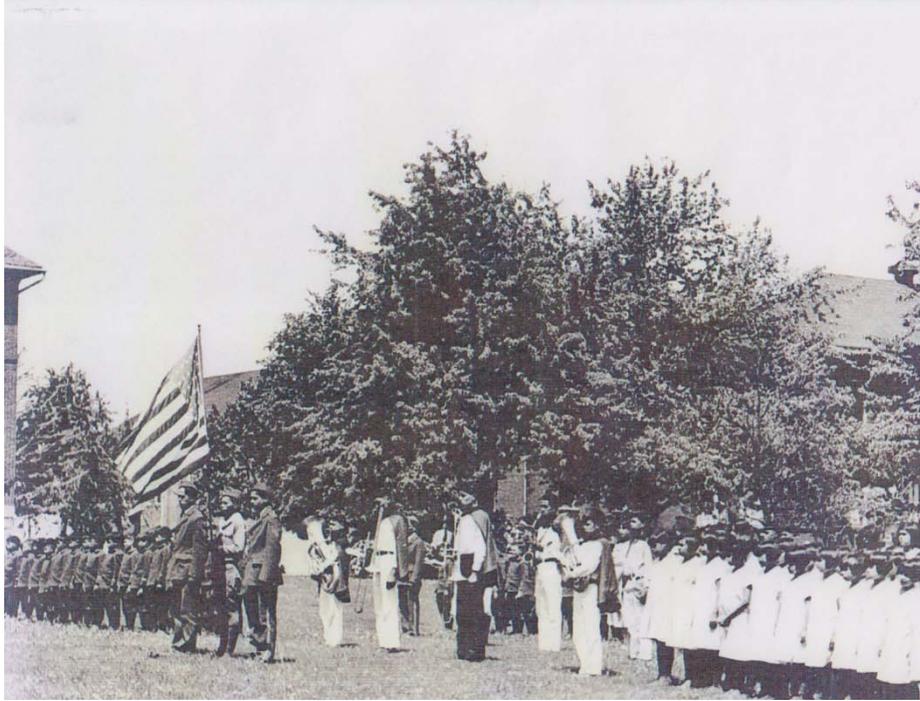


Figure 9. Students stand attention during a drill, date unknown. Photo courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library.



Figure 10. School girls dressed for Catholic Church, 1930. Courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library.



Figure 11. Pencil drawing by a student, 1926. Hazel Deer sent this drawing to her parents along with a note saying: “Dear Folks, please send me some slippers and one dollar. I like to run and play. I am a good girl.” Her letter never made it home. The title for this thesis has been adapted from Hazel’s letter.
Courtesy of the National Archives, Chicago.

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