Residental Schools and

Native American Boarding Schools

Orange Shirt Day/National Day of Healing -- September 30, 2025

Audrey Miller, NAIS Intern

Background on Orange Shirt Day

National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, or Orange Shirt Day, began on September 30, 2013, in Canada as a memorial to the atrocities of the lives changed and lost in the Canadian Indian residential school system. The day began to be recognized after Phyllis Webstad, Northern Secwepemc from Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation, shared her traumatic experience as a former student of St. Joseph's Mission Residential School of British Columbia. She recalls her grandmother buying her a new set of clothes to wear to the Mission and picking out an orange shirt. Once she arrived, she was stripped of her orange shirt, and later her identity. September 30th recognizes the past traumas, abuse, alienation, and assimilation suffered by Indigenous children in the residential schools, as well as beginning conversations through awareness, sharing of personal experiences, and the on-going impact the schools have today. In Canada alone, it is estimated that 150,000 Indigenous children attended government-sponsored residential schools, and at least 6,000 children died in these schools. In the U.S., the second volume of Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Reports, released in July of 2024, found 417 federal institutions across 37 states and identified 1,025 other similar institutions, confirmed at least 973 Indigenous children's deaths occurred in these schools, and at least 74 marked and unmarked burial sites found at 65 different schools. These schools and related policies were funded over a total of $20 billion by the U.S. government from 1871-1969.

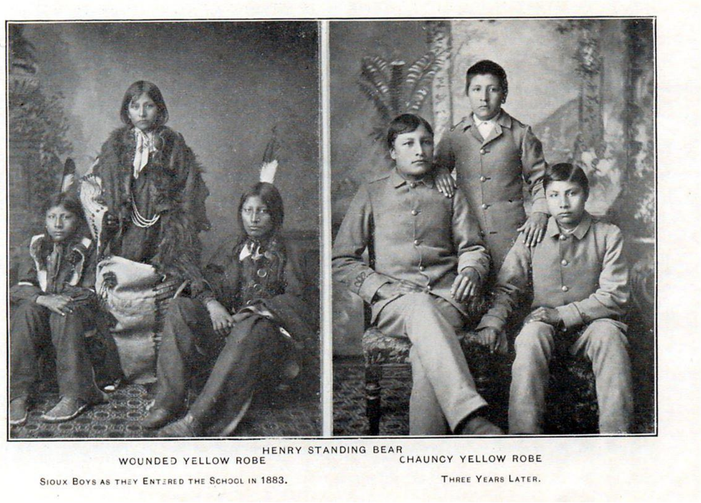
"Orange has always been to me… not mattering to anyone," she says. "Nobody cared that we had feelings. So to me, that's what orange meant."

— Phyllis Webstad

"Kill the Indian, Save the Man"

The residential schools in Canada and the boarding schools in the U.S. encapsulated the idea that in order to save them from their cultural plight, Native Americans had to be forced, assimilated, and expected to be the white man—learn his language, wear his clothes—and as a result shed their personal, Native identity. These institutions targeted Indigenous children, an idea that Brigadier-General Richard Henry Pratt originated at the Carlisle Indian School. In their innocence, he believed it would be much easier to start with the children and mold them into a perfect, assimilated white image of themselves. The first funded, off-reservation boarding school opened in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1879. There, Indigenous children were stripped of their Native identity, language, culture, and even clothes, forced to live away from their families, homes, and reservations.

From 1958 to 1967, the Child Welfare League of America, in partnership with the Bureau of Indian Affairs through the Indian Adoption Project, sought to place Indigenous children in non-Native families. This exploitation was another way to forcibly reform and assimilate Indigenous children.



What Can You Do?

- Donate to the Orange Shirt Society, who look to raise awareness across Canada about the Indian Residential Schools and their continuing impacts on individuals, families and communities, and to promote the concept of "Every Child Matters."
- Learn about the Indigenous lands you reside on and the residential and boarding schools in both Canada and the U.S.
- Listen to those who have personally experienced trauma from their time in these schools.
- Spread awareness about the on-going generational effects of residential and boarding schools today, including the uncovering of mass graves and unmarked burial sites which continue to be found across Canada and the U.S.

Every year, the Cathedral of the Holy Cross recognizes Boston Orange Shirt Day

September 30 – 5 p.m. – 1400 Washington St., South End of Boston