

**Excerpt from “What a school could have been established” (1933)  
by Luther Standing Bear (a Sioux graduate of Carlisle)**

...Father was a ‘blanket Indian,’ but he was wise. He listened to the white strangers, their offers and promises that if they took his son they would care well for him, teach him how to read and write, and how to wear a white man’s clothes.

I could think of no reason why white people wanted Indian boys and girls except to kill them, and not having the remotest idea of what a school was, I thought we were going East to die. But so well had courage and bravery been trained into us that it became a part of our unconscious thinking to accept various tests in an effort to grow more brave and fearless. So I gave myself up to go East to prove to my father that he was honored with a brave son.

In my decision to go, I gave up many things dear to the heart of an Indian boy, and one of the things over which my child mind grieved most was the thought of saying good-bye to my pony. I rode him as far as I could on the journey, which was to the Missouri River, where we took the boat. There we parted from our parents, and it was a heart-breaking scene, women and children weeping....For many, it was a final parting.

On our way to school we saw many white people and the manner in which they acted when they saw us quite indicated their opinion of us. It was only about three years after the Custer battle, and the general opinion was that the Plains people merely infested the earth as nuisances...Whenever our train stopped at the railway stations, it was met by great numbers of white people who came to gaze upon the little Indian ‘savages.’ The shy little ones sat quietly at the car windows looking at the people who swarmed on the platform. Some of the children wrapped themselves in their blankets, covering all but their eyes.

At these stops, white people craned their necks, talking and laughing, and making a great noise. They yelled and tried to mimic us by giving what they thought were war-whoops. Some of the children were naturally very much frightened. In my mind, I often recall that scene—eighty-odd blanketed boys and girls surrounded by a jeering, unsympathetic people whose only emotions were those of hate and fear; the conquerors looking upon the conquered.

At last at Carlisle the transforming, the ‘civilizing’ process began. It began with clothes. Never, no matter what our philosophy or spiritual quality, could we be civilized while wearing the moccasin and blanket. The task before us was not only that of accepting new ideas and adopting new manners, but actual physical changes and discomfort had to be borne uncomplainingly until the body adjusted itself to new tastes and habits.

Of course, our hair was cut...That was part of the transformation process and in some mysterious way long hair stood in the path of our development. Almost immediately our names were changed to those in common use in the English language. Instead of translating our names into English and calling Zinkcazimwin, Yellow Bird, and Wanbli

K'leska, Spotted Eagle, we were just John, Henry or Maggie as the case may be. I was told to take a pointer and select a name for myself from the list written on the blackboard. I did, and since one was just as good as another, and as I could not distinguish any difference in them, I placed the pointer on the name Luther.

Of all the changes we were forced to make, that of diet was doubtless the most injurious, for it was immediate and drastic. White bread we had for the first meal and thereafter, as well as coffee and sugar. Had we been allowed our own simple diet of meat and fruit, with perhaps a few vegetables, we should have thrived. But the change in clothing, housing, food and confinement, combined with loneliness was too much, and in three years, nearly one half of the children from the Plains were dead. In the graveyard at Carlisle, most of the graves are those of little ones.

I am now going to confess that I had been at Carlisle a full year before I decided to learn all I could of the white man's ways. The inspiration was furnished by my father, the man who has been the greatest influence in all my life. When I had been in school a year, father made his first trip to see me. He told me that on his journey he had seen that the land was full of 'Long Knives.' "They greatly outnumber us and are here to stay," he said, and advised me, "Son, learn all you can of the white man's ways and try to be like him. " From that day on, I tried. Within three years, I had been 'made over'. I was Luther Standing Bear. I was now 'civilized' enough to go to work in John Wanamaker's fine store in Philadelphia.

I returned from the East at about the age of sixteen, after five years' contact with the white people, to resume life upon the reservation. While I had learned all that I could of the white man's culture, I never forgot that of my people. I kept the language, tribal manners and usages, sang the songs and danced the dances. I still listened to and respected the advice of the older people of the tribe. I did not come home so 'progressive' that I could not speak the language of my father and mother.

But I soon began to see the sad sight, so common today, of returned students who could not speak their native tongue or worse yet, some who pretended they could no longer converse in the mother tongue. They had become ashamed and this led them into deception and trickery. The boys came home wearing stiff paper collars, tight patent-leather boots and derby hats...The girls came home wearing muslin dresses and long ribbon sashes with their feet squeezed into heeled shoes of factory make. The wearing of them was part of the 'civilization' received.

So we had gone to school to copy, to imitate, not to exchange languages and ideas, and not to develop the best traits that had come out of uncountable experiences of hundreds and thousands of years living upon this continent. While the white people had much to teach us, we had much to teach them, and what a school could have been established upon that idea! However, this was not the attitude of the day.

About the author:

*Luther Standing Bear was born around the time of the Ft. Laramie Treaty (1868). He was brought up to be a Sioux warrior, but by 1876, his people had been confined to a reservation, following the Battle of Little Bighorn. In 1879, his father enrolled him in the first class at the new Indian boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He graduated in 1884 and returned to the Rosebud reservation, where he became an assistant at the government school on the reservation. After Wounded Knee, he did a stint with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show (which thrilled audiences with extravagant re-enactments of the Battle of Little Bighorn) and eventually became a movie actor, playing Indian stereotypes in westerns. Luther Standing Bear also wrote books, including "My People the Sioux" (1928), "Indian Boyhood" (1931), "Land of the Spotted Eagle" (1933), and "Stories of the Sioux" (1934), which championed traditional Indian life and criticized the government's Indian policies.*

Source: Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978)

**Answer these questions on separate paper:**

1. Why did Luther Standing Bear go to Carlisle and cooperate in his makeover?
2. How did the American public-at-large perceived Native Americans shortly after Custer's battle, according to Luther Standing Bear's first-hand account?
3. What does Luther Standing Bear consider the most harmful change in the daily lives of Indian children that occurred at Carlisle?
4. Based on Luther Standing Bear's life, could you conclude that anything positive resulted from the boarding school experience?
5. What irony do you see when you compare Luther Standing Bear's own career path (in the *About the Author* section at the end of his story) and his account of how Americans treated him and his fellow classmates on their train trip to Carlisle?
6. What educational opportunity did the U.S. miss giving all students, according to Luther Standing Bear?