

Haskell Cemetery: A Symbol for Healing and Growth

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This photo is of the cemetery at Haskell Indian Nations University

American Indian families being broken up and children feeling lonesome, homesick, and often abandoned and unwanted has a long tradition with Indian boarding schools. Often this phenomenon is spoken to in the many myths and ghost stories that are told about children of long ago who haunt the boarding schools today. Stories are frequently told about children who died of disease or were sometimes murdered and their bodies were buried underneath the school buildings or nearby. Nobody claimed their remains because either the death was being covered up by school officials, or simply, nobody cared. At Sequoyah boarding school, I learned about the story of “Elbows” a girl who was brutally murdered and now haunts the school howling and dragging her body across the floor. American Indian workers near the now closed Pawnee Indian boarding

school told me about ghost children who sometimes run through their buildings and that in the cellars of some buildings are mounds in the concrete where children's bodies are buried. Many of the old boarding schools have cemeteries where children were buried. There are usually no markers past 1915 at which time superintendents started making sure children were sent home just before they died to prevent cemeteries from becoming too large of an embarrassment to the school. But that didn't mean that deaths stopped occurring at Indian boarding schools. On a recent visit to Haskell Indian Nations University in Kansas, there were news reports of children's remains being found in unmarked graves near the school. They were found during road construction. Haskell, once a boarding school for youth of all ages, is one such school that has a cemetery. After a recent visit to Haskell, myself along with two of my friends, also counseling psychology doctoral students (Lahoma Shultz, MS, LPC – Creek Seminole and Andrea Dudley, MA – Cherokee) wrote the following essay:

For more than 117 years American Indians and Alaska Natives have been sending their children to Haskell. Today, accredited by the Kansas State Board of Education and the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Haskell Indian Nations University offers 12 associate degrees and three bachelor degrees and has its sights set on achieving full university status. However, this present-day dynamic force in American Indian country had ominous beginnings that reverberate throughout North America. On the inside cover of the school catalogue is a campus map. Barely noticeable in the southeast region of that map, Haskell Cemetery is noted.

In the cemetery, stand 103 old army-issue, unpolished marble headstones that mark the death of young Native people who died between 1885 and 1913. Most of those died at about ten years of age. The youngest and first death was Harry White Wolf who died at 6 months old. As one walks among the unnaturally serene stones, an image that stays with you is not only the names and brief lifespan of these young people, but that in this small half-acre space, thirty-seven tribes are represented. Ponca lies next to Pawnee and Miami next to Navajo. The history of Haskell Cemetery is covered in detail by Miller (1980). Miller (1980) elaborately describes a system of neglect that resulted in deplorable living conditions that caused the death of these children. The cemetery is an iconic symbol important to American Indian boarding school history.

Haskell Cemetery is an important symbol to American Indians to never forget the attempt made by the US Government to systematically destroy American Indian culture through forced assimilation. As such, this cemetery has the potential to become a powerful symbol for American Indians to, instead, embrace their cultural ways, and strengthen families and communities. It serves as a reminder of the hardships endured and overcome. These children were some of the first casualties to fall in the battle for Indians to gain control of their education to determine their future.

Yet, as it stands now, Haskell cemetery appears insignificant. It is not displayed as important. It just happens to be there as an unfortunate reminder. There are no signs bringing its presence to visitors' attention. There is no designated parking to visit the area. The cemetery sits hidden behind a sewage pump station.

Hearing the story of how parents not wanting to leave their children and choosing to endure the same conditions as the students to be near their children generates overwhelming emotion. One can't help but feel the pain of the parents, whose children were pulled from their sides, in some cases at gunpoint, and taken hundreds, even thousands of miles away from their homes to live in an institution stripped of their traditional cultural ways. Were these children's lives meaningless, their brief time, from six months to nineteen years insignificant? A visitor to Haskell Cemetery today might likely think so. Acknowledging that these children died lonely and away from home generates passionate desire to embrace values of family, community, and Indian culture. Although justice may never be achieved, creating a national memorial at the Haskell Cemetery would promote healing and growth by honoring the memories and sacrifices of these people.

References

Miller, Y. E. (1980). Tribes that slumber. True West May-June.

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