

HARD LESSONS IN AMERICA

Henry Sicade's History of Puyallup Indian School, 1860 to 1920

Edited and with an Introduction by Cary C. Collins

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For 60 years Puyallup Indian School provided the native peoples of Puget Sound, western Washington, and the Pacific Northwest with singular opportunities in education. During that period, American attempts to assimilate the nation's Indian population reached their bare-knuckled zenith. The school thus experienced a shifting identity but an unshakable purpose. Situated on the Puyallup Indian Reservation in Tacoma and operated under the paternal hand of the United States government, the institution opened as a day school in 1860. Subsequent expansions, the first in 1873 and another in 1898, reflected ongoing changes in the school's status to reservation boarding school and then off-reservation boarding school. Through each manifestation, however, the objective remained the same: to saturate Indian children in the culture and ideals of the dominant American society.

Puyallup Indian School embodied a six-decade experiment in American policies of forced assimilation. Henry Sicade (1866-1938) knew those policies intimately. A great-nephew of Chief Leschi of the Nisqually tribe and a grandson of Chief Stann of the Puyallup tribe, he enrolled in Puyallup Day School in January 1873, just a month shy of his seventh birthday. He continued as a student for over seven years—until February 1880—before transferring to a new off-reservation boarding school in Forest Grove, Oregon. A year at Forest Grove Indian School (now Chemawa Indian School in Salem) preceded another three at adjacent Pacific University, academic experiences that he later applied to optimal effect. Sicade served on both the Puyallup Tribal Council (for 46 years) and the Fife City Council, and he helped found the Fife Public School System, holding the position of director.

The deficiencies and problems that plagued Puyallup Indian School throughout so much of its history eventually prompted Sicade and other Puyallup leaders to turn elsewhere in looking for education for their children. In 1903 Sicade and his friend William Wilton played a key role in establishing, on their reservation at Fife, a public school that became heavily populated by Puyallup tribal members. That success—swelling enrollments soon expanded the facility from a one-room schoolhouse to a large two-story building—conspired to the detriment of Puyallup Indian School, and in June 1908 the Office of Indian Affairs decided to terminate operations. Only the spirited intervention of Francis W. Cushman, a Republican congressman from Tacoma, staved off closure.

Acting on the premise that the school returned considerable economic benefits to the region, he proposed that it be made viable, a mandate that resulted in a name change in his honor; from 1910 forward, the facility was known as Cushman Indian School. Meanwhile, the federal government responded by significantly upgrading the school's physical plant to accommodate a heavier emphasis on industrial training. However, in an era punctuated by an increasing emphasis on public school attendance, that measure proved inadequate. Following several years of intermittent stoppages, the BIA permanently closed Puyallup Indian School at the conclusion of the 1920 academic year.

In 1927 Sicade wrote a history of Puyallup Indian School. Startling in its revelations, his brief personal account describes an institution deeply flawed in virtually every detail. By no means a doleful story—

indeed, his narrative is framed around positive observations—Sicade's history poignantly contrasts the hopes embodied in the treaty the Puyallups signed with the American government in December 1854 with the basic truth of a nation only grudgingly willing to honor the promises made in those negotiations.

For many tribal members, Sicade included, the wide gulf that separated expectations from reality fomented disappointment, frustration and, ultimately, disillusionment. That which had been bargained for simply had not been received. What had been realized, among other shortcomings, included an insidious mixture of political and religious bickering among officials, tumble-down facilities, incompetent teachers (if any at all), arbitrary corporal punishments, inadequate nutrition, deficient clothing and pernicious disease. Such problems have long been recognized as defining aspects of the Indian school experience, but Sicade's vivid firsthand testimony starkly exposes the scale on which the government school system at Puyallup failed, particularly early on, to meet even the most basic needs of its students.

What follows is Henry Sicade's history of Puyallup Indian School. It has been edited for clarity and readability. The original manuscript is housed in the Eells Collection, Special Collections Division, at the Washington State Historical Society Research Center.

The Puyallup Indian School, what is now [1927] known as the Cushman School, was first established somewhere at or about East 27th Street, near Portland Avenue, Tacoma, Washington, in 1860. The one-room shack, built of rough lumber about 16 feet square, with one window and a door, contained a few rough benches, and to this primitive school five volunteer students, young men, came to attend each day. There was but one book for this pioneer class, no doubt some sort of a primer, and when the ambitious student had recited, he stepped out to the trail and returned to his primitive home. Each took his turn likewise. The teacher's name or where he had lived, legend does not tell, but he was a white man. This [government] day school was the result of the treaty, entered into by the Puyallups before the Indian war of 1855 and 1856, whereby this tribe insisted on two things; first, that an Indian school be established within the bounds of their land to educate their young, and second, [that the tribe] be left where they had always lived. The Puyallups flatly refused to receive or accept gifts of calico or beads, blankets and whatnot [during the negotiations], although Governor [Isaac I.] Stevens did once give a "potlatch," promising many gifts, but in reality each aborigine received but very little or none at all.

The Indians held a council among themselves after this first schoolhouse was built, and to show their good faith in their demand for the education of their youth, set aside over 600 acres of their common land for the use and benefit of their school. The government, seeing the Indians determined to have a real school, built several buildings along the river bank where the Interurban crosses the Puyallup River—mostly employees quarters—in about 1863.

The most conspicuous buildings were the agent's home, the day schoolhouse, the blacksmith shop, the carpenter shop and, in the midst of this group of buildings, whitewashed, stood a jail made of logs, popularly called "Skookum House." With very little excuse, for minor offenses, natives were jailed with iron balls and chains [attached] to their legs and made to sleep on the floor on straw and to live on bread and water for diet.

A young Indian, Jack by name, volunteered to go to school but was so handy with tools that he was put in the blacksmith shop and became famed as a blacksmith, and pioneers from everywhere came to have their work done free of charge. Jack never saw the inside of the

schoolroom and was known as "Chickman Jack," Iron Jack. Thus the shop made for the Indians became a shop for the white settlers.

After the Civil War of 1861 to 1865, General R. H. Milroy was sent west to take charge of the Indians, with headquarters at Olympia, Washington. Byron Barlow was the [Puyallup] subagent and resided on the school grounds. A dozen and possibly 15 students attended the day school; their hours were quite short and they had long recesses. There are now but three living who attended this school.

Owing to the low nature of the school grounds—the river often overflowing its banks—the school usually could not be reached for a long period. About 1873 Reverend George W. Sloan came to build up a permanent school at the present site among the tall timbers and gullies, where deer, bears and all kinds of game roamed at will. Chief Thomas Stolyer had cleared and cultivated what is now the school garden tract, established a growing orchard where the superintendent's house stands, and built a lumber one-and-one-half-story house with a large fireplace and a large barn made of logs, well stocked. He decided to give up his home and give to the struggling school his land so that this school could have its own garden land.

The first building, made of rough lumber, was two stories high. The first floor was used for a schoolroom, with benches to study on; to the rear was the washroom for the boys and upstairs were their sleeping quarters. To the rear, connected by a covered porch, was the main building, built in an "L" shape. To the rear were the kitchen and storeroom; in the center was the dining room; the "L" was the headquarters of the teacher and his family; and upstairs, the girls' dormitory, which was comfortably built.

The boys' quarters were very ill-built; during the cold winter seasons the boys often crawled into the straw beds to keep warm. Usually the winter seasons were so cold that it was with great difficulty that we managed to comb our hair.... The Puyallup River often froze up so teams were able to cross on the ice, and snow lay deep for weeks.

Earthquakes were of frequent occurrence and once, in the fall of 1872, about nine o'clock in the evening, severe shocks occurred and nearly all thought the world's end had come. The river swayed north and south; and the ferry, with many on it, was forced over on the opposite side and landed high and dry. All leaning and old trees fell down suddenly. The great roaring and crashing of the forests from every direction, rocking of huts and houses, tumbling of articles, and sudden lurching of footing brought terror to the hearts of the natives. Those of the Catholic faith, with scant clothing on, hurried to their little church and prayed in the dark aloud and sang with pauses as the earth rocked back and forth. The following day the earth quivered and none dared to talk aloud.

Under Reverend Sloan's management, the little school with about twelve students, including three of his children, was quite popular, and he and his family were kind and attentive to the natives. The children learned to read and write and work. Immense trees were cut down for wood on these school grounds and gullies were filled with rocks and dirt; stumps were grubbed out and burned before there was room for a playground. The good teacher worked with the boys and ruled with kindness and goodwill. Owing to Mrs. Sloan's death, the good man who never used harsh measures and was beloved by all, moved east, leaving a school of about twenty, including six or seven girls.

About 1874 Major [H. D.] Gibson succeeded General Milroy as general agent; he sent his son to succeed Mr. Sloan. Young Gibson, a refined, well-educated young man, made a great success, and the little school was forging ahead. After six months' service his father died, our teacher was forced to return east, and the school came to a standstill. But there was much work to be done, wood to cut, lands to be cleared, and other work. After a long wait for school to open, a Mr. Hill, he of the long beard and clarion voice, appeared and took charge. Spelling bee was the main study, and in time the boys delighted to beat the teacher in spelling. Flashes of bad feeling occurred, and the teacher often used switches with much exertion for trivial offenses; sometimes he would never let up until the offender cried, but he did not know the older boys were inured to hardships and some would not cry or give in until their clothing would rip and tear up...; it's needless to say their backs were black and blue and cut up. One day the teacher was taken by the beard, violently floored, and warned to desist with such punishment or he would get his own medicine. School was again suspended, but there was much work to do.

Doctor [C. H.] Spinning was the first physician put to work for the Puyallups; he took charge in 1871. The good doctor lived up the Stuck Valley but rode down nearly every day and visited the Indians from place to place looking for the sick. The changing of our way of living to the whites' was very fatal, and Dr. Spinning did much to save the young. No other doctor had done such noble, conscientious work—going out in all kinds of weather and nothing but trails to follow, and sometimes making his own trails, fording streams, and often afoot—always hailing with that cheery voice.

One day a very large, stocky man arrived with a young wife and baby and announced that school must resume. As we filed in the schoolroom we noticed a large switch about six feet long. When that big switch came down on the table with a whack, that meant order. Everybody got a touch of that switch, and the blue marks on backs and legs told of the iron rule of the new teacher. He was a good teacher and we learned by force. One day there was a whisper among the boys and various implements were gathered together. When the teacher happened to step out, the doors were quickly locked. Iron rods and old picks were thrust into a big heater; ax handles and whatnot were brought out. When the teacher tried to enter by the window, hot irons were applied to his hands, ax handles were wielded over his head; everybody had some missile to use. The leader told him the Indian chief had sanctioned their request for him to leave and he must leave right away.

Vacation again came but there was work for all. In time Mr. [Charles A.] Hartsuck came and the school had grown until there were 30 or 35 students. For days and sometimes for weeks there was no school as the employees may have had other business elsewhere—they would go at will and return at their own pleasure.

Once Willie Wilton, a pupil, who was the most advanced, presided over the school for days and weeks, relieved by other students at times. School was orderly and the sub-teachers had no trouble. One day a strange man walked into the schoolroom and was astonished to see an Indian boy in charge. After many questions he told the school he was the government inspector, and I believe he was the first inspector ever sent out. He bade us good-bye and went the way of the rest of the government Indian employees.

Half a day school and half a day work was the system, and sometimes it was all work and no school. The children were always short of clothing; their parents furnished some clothing and

shoes. Provisions were always short and we often went home to stock up. Those who could not stock up fished the streams and cooked in the woods.

When caught in the dreadful act of cooking trout or salmon, we were punished or put into jail, this useful, ill-ventilated institution being again revived to house the offenders. When the employees' stock of wood ran low, some pretenses were found to jail a few to cut wood. The older Indians were continually after the government employees for better quarters, more clothing and more food.

A bowl of cornmeal with black molasses to sweeten it and a slice of bread or sometimes two was the usual breakfast, with plenty of water to wash it down. Stew with potatoes only at times and bread and more molasses for dinner. Two slices of bread with molasses and sometimes hardtack [was provided] for lunch at night, after wrestling with those big stumps or cutting wood. Once we had an Indian woman for a cook, and we enjoyed steaks and roasts and meat soups. But the cook, for some cause or other, was fired and we went back to stews again.

The apples from the orchard presented by Chief Stolyer were harvested each fall and put away. So was the corn and other garden stuff. We never saw the apples or corn unless we had the courage to crawl under the fence and pick the windfalls, and woe unto us if caught.

In 1875, the school having dwindled down to a handful of students, it was announced that the last of the provisions had been cooked and the school must close indefinitely. A year later the little school again was opened, but there were only three students who came—William Wilton, Joe Young, and this writer. For months we chored and worked, and by and by a few more came before school took up again.

About 1876, when the Northern Pacific Railway built its branch up to Puyallup town near a village known as New Tacoma,—Dr. [Stacy] Hemenway was appointed physician for the Indians. He lived in the new berg and we seldom saw him. His son, a bright boy about 16 years old, volunteered to teach school. The schoolwork forged ahead and all were happy. School was again suspended when our new teacher had to go to school elsewhere.

Most of our early teachers were not very learned and did not care whether we made any headway or not. Once a lady—our first lady teacher—took sick, and when she returned to her work the class had passed her standing and she resigned. Around this time Reverend M. G. Mann, who for two years previous had acted as missionary among the Indians, was appointed subagent. He brought all his wife's relations to fill other positions, and those too young to work went to school with us. Singing religious songs and writing lessons were the main features of our education.

An epidemic of itch and measles swept the school. Some died, and many of us lay rotting with no care of any sort, not even food. But for the timely arrival of our parents, the school might have closed for want of scholars. Once in a while someone would show up and look at our tongues and then quietly go away with no comment.

In the late summer of 1878 a steamer came up the river and landed Dr. [J. A. C.] McCoy and family. Dr. McCoy was the first resident physician. A great change came as these new people put

new life and goodwill [in]to the school; things began to hum. A total enrollment of about 50 gave the little school a dignified appearance. New studies were introduced, a little drugstore was started, and the older boys learned to roll pills and whatnot.

There was much bad feeling engendered by numerous whippings that had occurred on trivial pretenses—especially the cruel punishments given the girls for small offenses or mischief, which had forced the boys to protect their sisters or the very little ones. Those soon disappeared and there was no more trouble.

Great athletic contests took place, with the Puyallups meeting all comers. Once we beat ten tribes, each tribe taking a turn each day. The best of feelings prevailed.

In December 1879 an army officer came and announced that a great Indian school was being built at Forest Grove, Oregon, to give the Indians higher education. On February 24, 1880, four girls and fourteen boys left with Captain M. C. Wilkinson to be the nucleus of the new school. Thus Puyallup School had the honor, being the most advanced, to start what is now the famous Chemawa Indian School. We, the most advanced, had reached about the sixth grade. A Miss [Georgiana] Thompson, our second lady teacher, was made principal of the depleted school, which struggled on with success under this very kind and good lady who later married and moved away. Mr. [T. R.] Wilson, a kindly disposed and conscientious teacher, came in 1881. He allotted lands to old and young, but his successor took away from the young the lands allotted to them.

In [1883] Major [Edwin] Eells came as resident agent and Mr. [George W.] Bell, who had married Miss Thompson, came as principal. Mrs. Bell taught again and her husband became chief clerk. In 1886 a new political party came into power and there were many changes, but Major Eells held out. New teachers and employees came and the old ones were let out. There was much dissension; Mr. [Samuel] Motzer, the new principal, had but a handful of students. Even the older Indians were affected and much bad blood prevailed. One day the ring leader of the new party was given an hour to leave the grounds, and he disappeared. Major Eells was given full control and E. L. Chalcraft came as principal, but he was soon promoted to be assistant superintendent and Mr. H. J. Phillips, a college man of unusual talents, came as principal. The school grew up by leaps and bounds, new buildings were added, and soon the school had about 125 pupils.

The school had about 200 pupils in 1890. The first graduates, in 1891, having completed the eighth grade, were given diplomas. The Indians had reached their zenith of education. The old and cruel system of beating boys and girls with clubs and whips again came into vogue and flourished until the parents took a hand and lawyers came to intervene.

In the year 1893 an Indian commission came in to sell off the school lands. About 1895 Dr. R. E. L. Newberne took charge, and the school assumed a different aspect. Boys and girls from all over the Northwest and Alaska came to the school. The children learned to dance the white man's dances, and an era of good feeling prevailed.

Major [Frank] Terry came in 1898, and during 1899 new buildings were put up—dining room, schoolroom and the boys' quarters. Major Terry, a good friend of the Indians, went out, and in

the summer of 1900, when Mr. [Joseph C.] Hart came to take charge, all Indian employees were either let out or cut in pay. A year later Major Terry returned and the Indian employees returned. The school suffered much, owing to the quarrels of the officials. The attendance was quite small and there was talk of closing the school for good. We older Indians threatened to bring suit to get possession of money received for the sale of school lands. We sought to enlarge the school so as to educate any Indian desirous of education or of learning any trade.

During [1906] Mr. [Harry F.] Liston came to succeed Major Terry. His five-year term was noted as very slack in rule, and he was very much given to sporting proclivities; he finally absconded and disappeared, very much to the relief of the school.

A gradual building-up followed, and the school found its highest mark after Mr. H. H. Johnson came in control in 1908. A capacity attendance of 350 was the order, and various trades were taught. The school had never been in better shape, and higher education was given to the more ambitious. In short, this time the school reached its highest standard. A former students association was formed and banquets were in order from year to year.

In 1913 a new political party changed the complexion of the school and, as usual, there was much dissension. Mr. Johnson was summarily removed, and a year later Mr. T. B. Wilson came to take charge.

Conditions were such that a downward tendency prevailed, and in the spring of 1917 Cushman School was closed for want of funds for the second time. In 1875 it had closed its doors because there was nothing to eat; in 1917 the storehouse had plenty of food and clothing.

Cushman School closed its doors for good in June 1920. No Puyallups were then attending the school—all were going to public schools. Since that date the United States Veterans Bureau has been in possession of the property and is now [1927] paying rentals to the Puyallup Tribe.

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