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A troubled past: The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and St. Mary's Indian School

By Avery Wehrs

In 1883, a group of nuns established a school in Odanah, a village on the Bad River Reservation in northern Wisconsin, near the shore of Lake Superior.

The sisters at St. Mary's Indian School were the servants of two masters — the federal government, which saw such schools as the front line in a battle to “civilize” Native people, stripping them of their culture just as they had been stripped of their land and freedom; and the Catholic Church, which further sought to save their souls.

St. Mary's students and their descendants still live with the consequences of this troubled history. Less apparent is its lasting mark on the organization that staffed the school for more than eighty years: the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

In recent years, with the passage of time and a new focus on racial and social justice, the FSPAs have begun to examine this chapter of their history in a new light.

“In 2018,” current FSPA President Sr. Eileen McKenzie said in a recent interview, “we discerned a call to unveil our white privilege.” That included, she said, “listening to the hard stories of the Ojibwe at Bad River.”¹



A Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration poses with St. Mary's students and lay staff in this undated photo. Photo courtesy of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

Listening to those stories takes on new urgency now, as sustained protest across the nation forces the American public to take a hard look at the devastating legacy of racial injustice and the damage done on a daily basis by systemic racism against people of color. Beyond reform in policing and criminal justice, communities are reexamining the way they remember and commemorate their histories.

For the FSPAs and the people of La Crosse, St. Mary's School is one of those histories — one removed from our daily experience by time and distance, but nevertheless important to understanding our relationship with Indigenous communities.

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The Native American boarding school movement

Some historians have traced roots of Native American boarding schools as far back as the 1660s, when Puritan missionaries in New England built “praying towns” where Native Americans were isolated both from colonists and their own communities to instill Christian beliefs and encourage white cultural values and practices.²

However, their most recognizable form emerged in the nineteenth century. The 1819 Civilization Fund Act established education as a means of instilling “good moral character” in Indigenous children, a project escalated decades later under President Ulysses S. Grant’s “Peace Policy.”³ For 150 years, education remained an essential part of U.S. Indian policy into the twentieth century.

In his annual report in 1897, Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Arthur Jones wrote about the task facing reservation schools: “Raw Indian boys and girls from the camps and tepees must be built up intellectually, morally, and socially — frequently on a very slender foundation. Traditional prejudices must be overcome, the language learned at the mother's breast discounted, and a new character and habit developed. The process is slow and the difficulties many, but with a commendable patience and missionary zeal great results are accomplished in transforming the wild Indian of the plain into a quiet everyday average citizen.”⁴

For proponents of assimilation, reservation schools did not go far enough; they believed Native children needed to be fully removed from their own communities in order to truly

embrace white culture. They advocated off-reservation schools, chief among them the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Its founder, Gen. Richard H. Pratt, famously articulated its message in unyielding terms: “All the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”⁵

As these schools grew in size and popularity, the reservation schools often worked in tandem with them, functioning — as Commissioner Jones put it — as “a great feeder for the nonreservation boarding schools.”⁶ Long after Pratt’s Carlisle School closed in 1918, many boarding schools remained, with reservation schools proving some of the longest-lived. In some cases, their administration shifted to different religious organizations or local school districts. Still, even into the 1960s and ’70s, they remained emblematic of the United States’ persistent campaign to eradicate Native culture — and, in ways subtle and overt, continued to enforce the pernicious myth of Indigenous inferiority.

Life at St. Mary’s

Over the decades, thousands of students passed through the doors of St. Mary’s School, mostly Ojibwe children from the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, on whose reservation the school was built. But they also came from all across the La Pointe Agency, which also encompassed the Red Cliff, Lac Court-Oreille, and Lac du Flambeau reservations in Wisconsin and the Fond du Lac, Vermillion Lake (now part of the Bois Forte Reservation), and Grand Portage reservations in Minnesota. Records list students



St. Mary's Indian School in Odanah, Wisconsin, grew from a one-room log cabin to a 160-acre campus with multiple buildings. "St. Mary's Mission Edition." The Indian Sentinel. Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions: Washington, D.C., Fall 1930.

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from Superior, more than 60 miles away, and Red Lake, Minnesota, more than 200 miles away.⁷

St. Mary's was an on-reservation school, and it educated both day school students and boarders. For families in Bad River, that proximity made St. Mary's preferable to other options in the area, like the government-run schools in Lac du Flambeau, Hayward, or Tomah.

Conditions elsewhere also likely played a role in the choice to send students to St. Mary's: Records show that the Lac du Flambeau school had a high prevalence of whooping cough, measles, and tuberculosis, while there are accounts of students at the Hayward school being put in ball and chains as punishment.⁸

Hayward and Lac du Flambeau, like many other state and religious schools for Indigenous children, also used an "outing system," which placed children with white families to serve as domestic servants during the summer months — meaning that families often didn't see their children for years at a time. St. Mary's had no such program.⁹

Government agents took coercive measures to ensure Native children attended school, sometimes directly punishing parents, withholding supplies, or threatening forcible removal of the children. In an 1897 report, La Pointe Agency Commissioner J. C. L. Scott wrote, "Little trouble has been experienced in keeping the children at school. In a few instances they have run away and been secreted by their fathers, but the prospect of a few days on bread and water in the guardhouse has invariably induced them to change their minds regarding the propriety of educating their children and returning them to school."¹⁰

Despite these differences, St. Mary's was very similar in its aims and practices to other Native American boarding schools. Students were discouraged from speaking their native languages (mostly Ojibwe, though records list a few students from other tribes) and practicing their religion.¹¹ In addition to academic subjects, children received industrial training — sewing, lacework, and housekeeping for girls; farm work and other domestic trades for boys — to prepare them for lives of menial labor.¹² This practice, common at such schools, reflected the widely held belief that few Indigenous children could expect to rise any higher.

Historical documentation from St. Mary's is incomplete, and much of what remains is administrative. Few first-person student accounts exist, particularly of the earliest decades of the school. Still, hints about students' experience

can be gleaned even from attendance records — which show, for instance, high rates of turnover and students who were listed as truant, runaways, or even "stolen" by their parents.¹³ Such evidence speaks to the fact that the boarding school experience was an unpleasant one for both students and parents.

Yet some practices set St. Mary's apart from other similar schools. Historian Patty Loew, herself a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, has documented the practice of government schools sending agents to persuade — and often coerce — St. Mary's parents to send their children to government schools. Representatives from the "big three" Native American schools — Carlisle in Pennsylvania, the Haskell Institute in Kansas, and the Hampton Institute in Virginia — also made frequent trips to northern Wisconsin to bolster their enrollment numbers. The sisters at St. Mary's vehemently opposed this practice, complaining to their superiors and even hiding unwilling children from the government representatives who came to take them away.¹⁴

The sisters had mixed motives to be sure; they were at least as concerned about the "immorality" and Protestant influence of government schools as they were about children being unwillingly separated from their families.¹⁵ The nuns' superior, Director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Father William Ketcham, expressed his concerns about government schools this way: "It would be just as reasonable to expect a man to live in an Arkansas swamp and breathe a poisoned atmosphere without contracting malaria as to expect a Catholic child in a government school to escape perversion."¹⁶

Still, other evidence of the sisters' attitudes toward their charges can be found in projects that instilled pride and preserved Native culture. An example is 1909's *Noble Lives of a Noble Race*, a collection of laudatory prose and verse about Native Americans copied down by St. Mary's students with the intention of "doing justice to the noble traits of a sadly misrepresented race" — and showcasing the penmanship of St. Mary's students.¹⁷ Another is the Chippewa Indian Historical Project, spearheaded by Sr. Macaria Murphy, one of the nuns who staffed St. Mary's. Funded by the Works Progress Administration, from 1936 to 1942 it generated hundreds of pages of essays, reports, and statistics on Ojibwe life, history, and culture.¹⁸

In all, this evidence led historian Patty Loew to conclude that "St. Mary's offered an atmosphere that was more

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tolerant of Indian culture than that which existed in the government-run schools.”¹⁹

Enduring legacies

It well may be that St. Mary’s was, in some ways, less destructive than some of its peers. Nor were many of the measures employed there unique to Native American schools; in the 1960s, at the height of its educational mission, the FSPA staffed 90 elementary schools and 20 high schools — several of them boarding schools that employed strict discipline and, by their nature, separated children from their families.²⁰

Nonetheless, St. Mary’s had a uniquely devastating effect on many of the Native students who passed through its doors.

Journalist Mary Anette Pember, daughter of a St.

Mary’s student, has written about the lasting effects of her mother’s time at the school. Her time at the “Sister School” cultivated “hypervigilance, defensiveness, resentment, and a hair-trigger temper,” Pember wrote in a 2019 article in *The Atlantic*. The nuns’ label “dirty Indian” lived in her mind long after her time at the school; Pember writes that her mother “would spend hours washing the laundry ‘white, white’ like the Sisters had taught her, rushing up and down the cellar steps with baskets of heavy, wet sheets. ‘We may be Indian, but by God we ain’t dirty,’ she’d say while hanging laundry on the line.”²¹

Other St. Mary’s students similarly recall poor treatment as late as the 1950s and ’60s. Delphine Hurd told Pember, “The nuns shamed us if our folks were poor or drank, or if we came from (single-parent) homes. We were always treated as ‘less than.’”²²

Edith Leoso, former student and tribal historic preservation officer for the Bad River Band, also lives with painful memories of St. Mary’s. Leoso is still struck by what she

describes as the hypocrisy of the nuns who taught her. “On the daily, they contradicted the love that Jesus was teaching as expressed in the Bible,” she said.

In her time at St. Mary’s, from the ages of five to 12, Leoso was a witness to regular abuse at the hands of the nuns. One incident remains particularly vivid. “I saw a nun who was interrupted by a student who dropped his pencil on the floor right after she said, ‘Do unto others as they do unto

you. If they show you kindness, show kindness in return,’” Leoso said.

“She no more than uttered those words and spun around towards him stomping so hard on the floor (that) the floor shook, grabbed him by his hair, slapped him on his head so hard it echoed, and dragged him into the cloak room, where we could still hear the sounds of smacks from skin hitting skin, and

him squirming and squealing from the pain caused by the blows.” The boy was left in the coat room until after lunch and was not allowed to eat.

“Later on, I don’t know how old he was, he committed suicide,” Leoso said. “He was already an alcoholic. I believe the torture he endured by this nun, and possibly other things that were done to him at this school, was a major factor that contributed to his mental condition, which led him to that path in life.”²³

The cumulative effects of such experiences has deeply scarred the Bad River community and Native communities across the United States. A growing body of evidence shows that historical trauma has effects that persist across generations through epigenetic changes and fractured social structures. These can manifest as depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance use disorders, poor child welfare and education outcomes, and more.²⁴

Boarding schools, though they failed in their mission to eradicate Native cultures, succeeded in disrupting the



Franciscan Sisters pose with St. Mary’s students (c. 1930). “St. Mary’s Mission Edition.” The Indian Sentinel. Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions: Washington, D.C., Fall 1930.

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transmission of culture from one generation to the next. "The whole move was to make Indian children white," Kay McGowan, professor of cultural anthropology at Eastern Michigan University, told WKAR Public Media in 2010. "Of course, at the end of the school experience, the children still weren't white. They were not accepted by white mainstream America. When they went back to their tribal homelands, they didn't fit in at home any more either."²⁵

The schools even dealt a blow to the financial well-being of tribes. From 1908 to 1970, the Catholic Church siphoned individual treaty and trust funds to pay for tuition — money owed to Native people for seized ancestral lands. The same coercive methods used to ensure children's attendance at schools were used to secure parents' (often uninformed) consent for schools to claim their funds held in trust. One investigation found that in just nine years during this period, the Church took in the equivalent of \$30.4 million in today's money.²⁶

A 2014 Pew Research Center study found 1 in 4 Native Americans lives in poverty.²⁷ While it is impossible to draw a direct line between the actions of the Church and poverty today, they are representative of the kind of financial exploitation that has contributed to a cycle of poverty for many Native communities.

Reconciling a painful past

For the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, the ideology that justified their work at St. Mary's School is far removed from who they are today.

Back then, Sr. Eileen McKenzie said, the Catholic Church's understanding of missions was "we're going to bring God to the natives, because God isn't there." To the sisters who staffed the school, "(God was) white, he speaks the King's English — or Latin, probably. ... It was a very specific way of understanding God and bringing God."

Since the Second Vatican Council, which renewed the Church's focus on human dignity and opened new avenues for interreligious dialogue, the meaning of missions has changed profoundly. Now, McKenzie says, the approach is "God is everywhere. God is where you're going, (and) the people you're going to mission to already have a sense of God, whether they call him God (or not)." Mission today, she said, is "much more about mutuality."

However, McKenzie acknowledges that these changes do not erase the decades of intergenerational trauma suffered by the Bad River community.

Right now, the FSPAs are working on understanding a history that has long been relegated to the shadows. "We're studying, we're listening, we're gathering information," McKenzie said.

While the order is still mulling how best to address its past, other congregations have taken steps toward reconciliation. For example, the four major denominations involved in Canada's residential schools — the United, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Presbyterian churches — all took part in that country's Truth and Reconciliation

Commission, which collected the testimony of thousands of survivors in an effort to recognize the devastating effects of the schools and lay a foundation for reconciliation.²⁸ Nonprofit organizations like the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS) also offer resources to congregations interested in the work of healing and reconciliation.

For many boarding school survivors, recognition of their experiences is an important first step. Christine Diindiisi McCleave, executive director of NABS, told Mary Annette Pember, "We just want the truth from the federal government and churches that operated boarding schools."²⁹

Former St. Mary's student Edith Leoso agrees: "Restorative justice is teaching the truth about what they did."³⁰

For FSPA President Sr. Eileen McKenzie, the process begins with listening and reflection — and she hopes the FSPA's willingness to address this painful chapter of its history will inspire others to do the same.



Students at St. Mary's in Odanah, c. 1930. In the article accompanying this photo in Catholic missionary publication The Indian Sentinel, staff member Sr. Catherine writes about the changes taking place on the Bad River Reservation: "Where once roamed the famous red deer, now we see domestic animals, the horse and cow quietly grazing. The hunter's cry which formerly resounded through the dense forest, has been succeeded by the more civilizing ring of the ax." "St. Mary's Mission Edition." The Indian Sentinel. Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions: Washington, D.C., Fall 1930.

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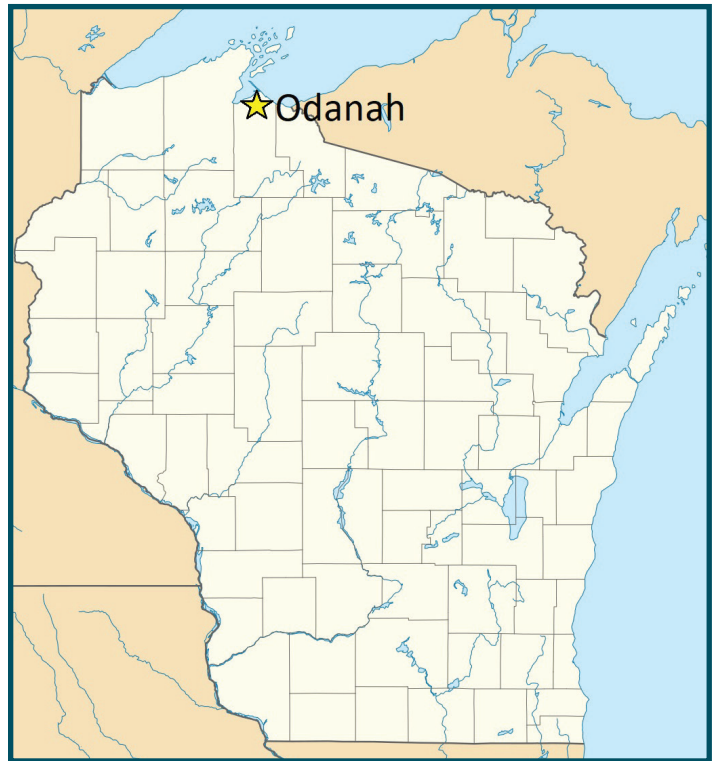
“My hope is that as we do this, others will engage with their own discomfort... in listening to the different stories and really looking at what our systems ... need to be dismantled or changed to enhance dignity and healing and life.”

She knows having these conversations will be hard. “It’s painful, we get defensive, (and) strong emotions come out,” she said. “So the tendency is, with white privilege, let’s keep it nice and calm and safe, and we don’t want to ruffle feathers. ... (But) our congregation knows that we have to move into that area — and it’s a painful area to go, but it just has to be done.”

“We’d like to leave a legacy of healing,” she said.³¹

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Odanah, site of St. Mary’s Indian School

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La Crosse County Historical Society
145 West Avenue South
La Crosse WI, 54601
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La Crosse, Wisconsin
Permit No. 372

is published quarterly by the
**La Crosse County
Historical Society**
(608) 782-1980
www.lchshistory.org

Readers are invited to submit articles for publication; however, the LCHS reserves the right to edit for clarity, brevity, and accuracy. Articles should pertain to regional history.

Mail articles to 145 West Ave. S., La Crosse, WI 54601, or email to admin@lchshistory.org

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