

Noah White's Story: A Ho-Chunk Indian Goes to Boarding School

Social Studies B.4.1 – Identify and examine various sources of information that are used to construct an understanding of the past, such as artifacts, documents, letters, diaries, maps, textbooks, photos, paintings, architecture, oral presentations, graphs, and charts.

Social Studies B.4.10 – Explain the history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and current status of the American Indian tribes and bands in Wisconsin.

Social Studies B.8.1 – Interpret the past using a variety of sources, such as biographies, diaries, journals, artifacts, eyewitness interviews, and other primary source materials, and evaluate the credibility of sources used.

Social Studies E.4.2 – Explain the influence of factors such as family, neighborhood, personal interests, language, likes and dislikes, and accomplishments on individual identity and development.

Social Studies E.4.8 – Describe and distinguish among the values and beliefs of different groups and institutions.

English Language Arts A.4.3 – Identify and summarize main ideas and key points from literature, informational texts, and other print and non-print sources.

English Language Arts A.4.4 – Summarize key details of informational texts, connecting new information to prior knowledge.

English Language Arts A.8.3 – Provide interpretive responses, orally and in writing, to literary and nonliterary texts representing the diversity of American cultural heritage and cultures of the world.

Goal: Students will come to see the boarding school experience from a Native person's point of view.

Objectives:

- 1) Students will read a portion of a transcript of an oral history interview regarding Noah White's boarding school experience.
- 2) Students will reflect on this interview in a journal format.
- 3) Students will imagine what it would have been like to be in a situation similar to Noah White. They will write a letter home describing the emotions they believe they might feel if they were not allowed to speak their own language, taught to forget their own culture, made to work for half the day, and not able to see family members for years.

In June of 1970, Mr. Noah C. White sat down with Mr. Herbert Hoover, an interviewer for the American Indian Research Project. Mr. Hoover was collecting what are called

oral histories for the research project. An oral history tells the story of everyday people through the voice of those who experience it. According to the Alberta Youth and Heritage Learning Source website, “Oral histories are created when one person (the interviewer) interviews another person (the interviewee) about a specific time period in the interviewee’s life or a specific topic they can recall.”

(http://www.youthsource.ab.ca/teacher_resources/oral_lesson1.html) While history textbooks concentrate on telling the history of political figures, important events, or significant trends, oral history tells us the story of individuals responding to or living in the midst of those people, trends, or events. Oral histories help us to learn the history of those who are sometimes left out of textbooks.

Noah White was a Ho-Chunk Indian. He attended a government-run boarding school in Genoa, Nebraska for 11-12 years. In his interview with Herbert Hoover, he talked about his experiences at this school. Read the following excerpt of the interview to hear about what those years were like for him.

Q: You were talking about the government school, and I was interested in some of the things you said a few minutes ago. You said for one thing that you weren’t allowed to speak Indian.

A: That is quite true. See, I went into school without being able to talk English at all, so they had to have an interpreter from my own tribe to interpret for me for the first year or so, until I began to learn the English language. And then after that, we were forbidden to speak our own language, and we were taught to forget our culture and learn everything we could about the white man’s ways, this modern way of living.

Q: That was in the 20’s?

A: That was in the 20’s and up to the middle 30’s.

Q: You said toward the end there that you were allowed to dance.

A: Yes, Commissioner Collier had some of that changed so that in some of these Indian schools we would be able to send for our Indian costumes to hold tribal dances during commencement week. But it didn’t last too long because the school closed up. But in most of the schools today now, they are trying to revive all of the traditions of the various tribes. They are trying to teach basket weaving, bead work, and they are trying to teach tribal dances and tribal singing. And in some places they even teach the languages; the various Indian tribes are trying to bring back their own languages. There are quite a few of them that have lost their language.

Q: What did they teach you there at that school?

A: Well, it’s mostly academics just like any other high school, with history, science, and anything pertaining to academics. For half of the day, for the boys that were from the

seventh grade on up, we had to work half a day in order to help in maintaining the school. We could learn any kind of vocation that we wanted to learn. They didn't have welders then, they used to call it blacksmithing; and you could learn crop farming, or poultry, or you could learn truck farming. And they had a hog farm there, they had a dairy farm there. Just about anything – you could go into music or carpentry. They had a baking school there – anything that the individual wanted to learn, they could pick it up.

Q: Did you march at that school?

A: Yes, it was on the same basis as a military school.

Q: It was?

A: Yes. It was nothing to see children five years old learning how to drill like they do in the services today.

Q: How about the food and the places you slept?

A: Well, for the larger boys they had smaller dormitories. They had regular officers just like they do in the service. The officers slept two or three to a room, four to a room; but the other students slept in large dormitories where there were sometimes ten, fifteen to a dormitory. Some even maybe about twenty in a dormitory. They had large dormitories there. And the smaller boys all lived in large dormitories, some in larger rooms. The only ones that had small rooms were the officers. They had a captain for each company, and they had majors, and that ran along the same line in our girls' dormitories. They had the same thing.

Q: Did they ever send you home to see your relatives?

A: Well, some of them got to go home every summer to see their parents and everything, but I was one of the unfortunate ones; I didn't get a chance to go home at all for 13 years.

Q: You didn't?

A: No.

Q: Your father had died though, hadn't he?

A: Yes, my father died. Then after my father died, I was sent to the government school. See there were a lot of half orphans and a lot of orphans there, and they grew up right in the government school. One thing nice I found out about a government school is you learned discipline. If nothing else, you disciplined yourself; and you can tell between the students that went to a government school and the ones that didn't.

(Research data obtained through the archives of the South Dakota Oral History Center, Institute of American Indian Studies, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD (AIRP 0507).)

What is your reaction to Noah White's interview about his boarding school experience? What are the things that he seemed to like about boarding school? What are the things that he did not seem to like? What are your impressions of life at boarding school? Write a journal entry answering these questions and reflecting on:

- The military nature of the school
- The inability of students to speak their own languages or practice their culture.
- The subjects taught at the school, including vocations (jobs)
- The dormitories
- The ability or inability of students to visit with their families

Re-group as a class to give students a chance to share their journal entries.

Imagine that you are sent away to a boarding school similar to that Noah White attended. At this boarding school, you wouldn't be allowed to speak your native language (English or whatever you normally speak). You have to drill like the military, marching in lines and obeying orders. You are not allowed to play games or sing songs familiar to you. You sleep in a dormitory with perhaps 14 other children. You attend classes for half of the day, but then you go to work on the school's farm in order to learn the trade of farming and to supply food for the school cafeteria. You must wait years before seeing your family. Write a letter home that expresses your feelings at being in such a situation.