A Complex Journey: The Ho-Chunk Nation and the BRF School District

Part 1: The Post-Removal Period to 1963

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Introduction

Noted documentary film producer Ken Burns is once said, *History isn't really about the past – settling old scores. It's about defining the present and who we are.* Teaching high school history for 36 years has prompted me to remain grounded in practical questions that define our lives: Why are things the way they are? How did we arrive here? Such questions reflect the premise that, in reality, no clean break with the past exists -- what happened "back there" is continually being played out in our lives today and into the future. Within this framework, local communities grapple with public memory, a crucial component of an evolving collective identity. Finding common ground in that memory is a consistent challenge, particularly when dealing with contentious issues that "have a history" within the community. The race divide, one such issue, is analogous to two people looking at an optical illusion and each seeing something entirely different. Multiple paths to the present make for a rich and diverse story but can also prompt clouded perceptions. Perhaps no clearer example of this exists than the educational experience of American Indian children over the past several generations. That story is varied and complex and intertwines with the broader story of the Federal Government's approach to tribal nations across Indian Country. To study the educational experiences of American Indian children then, is to recognize it as a microcosm of race relations, a topic that marries institutions and experiences, realities and perceptions, facts and emotions--all of which create a vibrant community.

The Context

Black River Falls is an old river town in west-central Wisconsin. The Ho-Chunk people, formerly known as Winnebago, have been in this region of the state for centuries.[1] They are one of 11 federally recognized tribes in Wisconsin and considered "original" to the region, along with the Ojibwa (6 bands) and Menominee. Three tribes migrated into Wisconsin from the east – the Potawatomie (Michigan), the Oneida, and the Stockbridge-Munsee (both from New York). There

[1] The term "Winnebago" is derived from a French misinterpretation of an Algonquian word meaning "people of the stinky water," a reference to the area near Green Bay where Ho-chunk people lived. Ho-chunk people referred to themselves as "Hochungra," meaning "people of the big voice." With governmental reorganization and the new Constitution of 1994, the Wisconsin Winnebago officially adopted Ho-chunk as the tribal name.

is another tribe in the state known as the Brothertown, although they have not been federally recognized (made up of people from New England and New York). There are approximately 55,000 American Indian people in Wisconsin (5.8 million) and 1,500 in Jackson County (21,000). Euro-Americans ventured into the area as early as 1819 and established a permanent settlement by the late 1830s.[2] The earliest settlers were second-wave New Englanders, soon to be followed by a mix of people with European ancestry. Consequently, native and non-native people have co-existed here for over 175 years, or nearly 7 generations. The relationship between the various cultures represented in the region's history is an important part of the city's identity. It is a relationship that at times has been contentious, congenial, or ambivalent. Though not often discussed, the city's inhabitants seem to assume a shared, though complicated, history. And, though the groups interact naturally and regularly, a de facto pattern of segregation still persists, primarily due to where people choose to live.

The Public School System

Schools never operate in a vacuum, and the Black River case study is no exception. Integral to the life of any small community, the public schools are the one place where everyone must interact.[3] The roughly 1800 students in the Black River system attend one of five schools: Forrest Street, Third Street, and Gebhardt Elementary Schools, the Middle School, and the High School.[4] Approximately 20% of our students are of Native American heritage, primarily members of the Ho-Chunk Tribe. 2013 marked the 50th year since the schools of the district became fully integrated. It was in the fall of 1963 that a majority of young Ho-Chunk children boarded a bus and walked through the doors of previously "all-white" schools. By the spring of 1976, Ho-Chunk students were graduating potentially having experienced all 13 years of their primary and secondary school experiences within the Black River district. Those early students are now in

[2] The earliest interaction between Native and Euro-Americans is well documented in an unpublished thesis by Lawrence Onsager titled, "The Removal of the Winnebago Indians From Wisconsin in 1873-74." A copy of Onsager's thesis is on file at the Jackson County History Room at the City Library. I have also explored the unique relationship between Jacob Spaulding, the founder of the small city, and the Ho-Chunk people in an essay titled, "Spaulding's Funeral." The essay may be accessed through the Falls History Project Website, available at http://www.brf.org/rykken/fhp/

[3] Relevant to this discussion is the fact that since the 2006-07 school year the district has operated within a "grade-centers" model. Prior to that time, a high percentage of native students attended Gebhardt Elementary (K-5). Full integration, therefore, did not really occur until the Middle School years (6-8). The move to Grade Centers (PK-1, 2-3, 4-5) means that students experience the fully integrated environment for 13 years.

[4] In the fall of 2014, District voters approved a building referendum and a new grade school will be constructed that will replace both the Gebhardt and Third Street schools. All students in grades 2-5 will be housed in the new school by the fall of 2016.

their late 50s, and their story and the shared experience they encountered with non-native students are significant.[5]

The Background: The Post-Removal Period

The first school in our area dates to February of 1847, prior to Wisconsin statehood. Jacob Spaulding hired Massachusetts-born Calvin R. Johnson as the village's first teacher. Johnson taught for several months prior to enlisting to fight in the Mexican-American War, returning to teach several more terms when his military service ended in 1848.[6] Public schooling continued in the growing village during the tumultuous 1850s and into the Civil War years. Union High School, built in 1871 and considered one of the premier schools in the region, signaled a more formally structured school system and represented a "golden era" in early Black River educational history.[7] For the children of the Euro-American settlers of the region, primary schooling became the norm, and secondary level opportunities also became available.

By the early 1870s, however, Ho-Chunk children and their parents were facing an existential struggle to remain in the land of their ancestors. For more than a generation, Federal authorities had been engineering native removals from Wisconsin. The controversial Treaty of 1837, signed between Ho-Chunk representatives and the Van Buren Administration, ultimately caused a division within the tribe due to the nature of the negotiations and the final treaty provisions. One faction of the tribe, the treaty-abiding faction as they came to be known, begrudgingly accepted the flawed treaty that called for the tribe's removal from Wisconsin, while another group – the non-abiding faction – spent the next 37 years resisting removal. By the middle 1870s, the latter group, in an astonishing act of resilience, overcame multiple obstacles and obtained land grants in the area east of the Black River, among other areas of the state. Their resistance and the

[5] Graduation rates among Ho-chunk students remained low throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, with significant increases beginning to occur in the 1990s and early 21st Century. I will be documenting that story more fully in the next installment of this paper.

[6] Johnson's story is compelling. Among other things he was employed on a whaling ship out of New Bedford at age 18 before venturing west in 1844. Eventually he became an attorney working with William T. Price and held a number of elected positions both locally and at the state level. He returned to soldiering during the Civil War, raising and organizing Company I of the 14th Regiment drawn from the men of Jackson and Clark Counties. He returned to Black River Falls where he lived until his death in 1897.

[7] Black River Falls Union School was considered a premier public school in northwestern Wisconsin during those years. Built at the cost of $20,000 with bricks from the Spaulding Brick Yard, the building remains an iconic feature of the city's landscape today.

assistance they received from various members of the local white community remain an under-appreciated and misunderstood part of the region's history.[8]

The situation of native children in this disruptive post-removal period was precarious, and various religious denominations stepped in and attempted to educate the students in mission schools. In the post-Civil War period, for example, the government began to provide direct support to schools operated by missionary groups through something called the Peace Policy, first initiated by President Grant in 1870. So began the complex era of the Boarding Schools. From 1871 until well into the 20th Century, a patch-work system of boarding schools emerged across the country. Many of the schools had a religious orientation, while others were simply an arm of the state. In most cases, the goal was the full cultural assimilation of the native children and, consequently, the destruction of native culture in the name of "civilization" and "progress." Within the past generation, volumes of literature have addressed the nature of boarding schools and how generations of American Indian children were negatively impacted by their experiences in such schools.[9]

The full story of boarding schools, of course, is complex and has yet to be fully documented. Well-intentioned missionaries often provided much-needed assistance to children and their families at a time of extreme deprivation at the hands of federal authorities. It was in this context that the Reformed Church established a mission seven miles east of Black River Falls with Reverend Jacob Hauser serving as the first missionary beginning in 1878. By 1882, the Church constructed a chapel and, two years later, Jacob Stucki arrived as Hauser's replacement. Stucki served at the mission for 46 years and established a fledgling school there in 1917. The education of children was a natural fit with the missionary activities, and, by 1919, Stucki and his son, Ben, solidified a boarding school in Neillsville that some Ho-chunk children attended. Others enrolled at Bethany Mission in Wittenberg, Wisconsin, established in the latter years of the 19th century by the Norwegian Lutheran Church, while others went to the Tomah Indian Industrial School, a federally-sponsored boarding school established in 1893. In all cases, Indian children experienced

[8] Beyond the references previously mentioned, historian Mark Wyman documents the removal and resistance story in Chapter nine of his 1998 book, The Wisconsin Frontier. City founder Jacob Spaulding and his relationship with the native people is particularly interesting in this regard, something I have documented in an essay titled "Spaulding's Funeral," available on the Falls History Project web site: http://www.brf.org/rykken/fhp/

[9] Richard Henry Pratt's autobiography, Battlefield and Classroom, offers excellent insight into the original concept of the boarding schools. Pratt was a long-time army officer and the founder of Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Historian Robert M. Utley's introduction to the 1964 edition of the autobiography is especially helpful for understanding the position of the Federal Government during the latter years of the 19th Century.

the challenges of being away from home and family for portions of each year. The federally sponsored schools, in general, tended to be harsh and draconian in approach, while the church-sponsored schools may have been somewhat more culturally sensitive to the needs of the children and their families.[10] We also know that during the 1920s and 30s, some of the Ho-chunk children attended various County schools including the Clay School in the Hatfield area and Sandy Plains Elementary east of Shamrock.

The Impact of the Meriam Report of 1928

It was amidst this patch-work system in the post-World War I era, that voices both within and outside the government pushed those involved with American Indian education to rethink their approach. In 1926, Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work called on the Brookings Institute at Johns Hopkins University to conduct a thorough investigation of Indian affairs, including educational policy. Published in 1928, "The Problem of Indian Administration" (better known as the Meriam Report, named for Louis Meriam who headed the investigation) sharply criticized the boarding school model. W. Carson Ryan Jr., an activist in the Progressive Education movement, wrote much of the education portion of the report with help from Reverend Henry Roe Cloud, a prominent Winnebago educational leader.[11] The Report's criticism of culturally destructive practices common in many boarding schools led to dramatic changes in philosophy. In 1930, President Hoover appointed W. Carson Ryan Jr. as director of Indian Education, and Ryan promptly promoted a three-pronged approach: to develop community schools, support federal-state contracts to place Indian children in public schools, and gradually phase out boarding schools.[12] The passage of the Johnson O'Mally (JOM) Act of 1934 further solidified Ryan's approach by authorizing the Secretary of the Interior to enter into contracts with states to pay them for providing services to Native children. The practical effect of JOM was that states began promoting the education of American Indians in public schools across the country.

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[10] Historian Betty Ann Bergland has written extensively on this subject and offers a concise analysis of the Bethany Mission located in Wittenberg, Wisconsin. She provides a balanced appraisal of the complexity of motives and methods in "Settler Colonists, 'Christian Citizenship,' and the Women's Missionary Federation at the Bethany Indian Mission in Wittenberg, Wisconsin, 1884-1934" (Competing Kingdoms: Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812-1960, 2010). On a personal note, my grandfather, T.M. Rykken, served as a teacher and missionary at Bethany from 1920-1930 and his story illustrates much of what Bergland discusses in her research. My father was born at Bethany in 1924 and I was able to learn much about the Mission from him prior to his death in 2013.

[11] The timing of the Meriam Report is significant because it coincided with the Progressive Movement in public education at the time. Influenced by the teachings of John Dewey, progressive educators emphasized culturally responsive curriculum and teaching methods.

[12] Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder document the work of Ryan and others in Chapter 8 of American Indian Education: A History (2004).

The Hochungra School: 1934-1963

Prompted by these developments, the school district of Black River Falls opened an "experimental day school" at the Mission within the framework of the numerous County Schools of the period. Norma Krametbauer was hired as the first teacher at the K-8 school (1934-35) which operated at the Mission Church. In 1936, the district constructed a new building and hired Emma Olson as principal and teacher, roles she held for the next 27 years. Olson recounted her experiences at the school in her 1975 book, My Years in the Winnebago School and Community. Her lively account documents a vibrant and healthy school and one that was progressive for its time.[13] Among other creative approaches, Olson took the 8th grade students on annual trips to Madison where, on one occasion, they received their diplomas from the State Superintendent in the Capitol building. Trips to Milwaukee were also a regular occurrence and introduced students to a world far beyond the boundaries of Jackson County. Herman and Alma Gebhardt provided financial support for these trips, and, beyond the thrill of riding the train, students attended Milwaukee Braves games and visited the Washington Park Zoo. Another example of her creative approach was the annual "adoption" of an ocean-going vessel, an idea Olson got from a women's organization in New York. Students wrote letters to the ship's Captain and tracked the vessel for a year, learning about world geography and shipping practices in the process. One senses from reading Olson's book that she understood how important it was for native children to maintain a strong sense of their cultural identity. Ethno-historian Nancy Lurie who began studying the Ho-Chunk community in Black River Falls in 1944 by living with the people for a part of each year recognized the singularly important role the school played in the mission community. Nearly everyone had a child, grandchild, or other relative attending the school, and it is clear from Olson's book that parents were in and out of the school on a regular basis while in session. While native children had experienced education prior to the school's opening, the Hochungra day school was unique and allowed community members to have a vested interest in the various activities associated with their children's education.[14] The school operated as a K-8 building until the middle 1950s, at which time it became a K-6 school. Upon completing their years at the Hochungra School, some Ho-Chunk students enrolled in the public high school in Black River.

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[13] Larry Garvin and Anna Rae Funmaker were both students of Emma Olson and we had the opportunity to interview them about their experiences at the school. Anna Rae, in particular, spoke highly of Olson and indicated that she was a gifted teacher who had a sincere interest in Ho-Chunk culture and traditions.

[14] Dr. Lurie was interviewed in 2009 as part of "Voices From the 1960s: Integration and the Black River Public Schools," an oral history project sponsored by the BRFHS History and Social Studies Department. Her interview and others can be accessed through the Falls History Project Website: http://www.brf.org/rykken/fhp/

The Beginning of Integration

Spurred by the emerging civil rights movement and especially the Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954, public education in the United States was moving toward an integration model in the early 1960s. Liberal-progressive voices of the time argued that full integration would mean greater opportunities for students of color, a discussion that impacted some areas of Indian Country, including Jackson County. Officials from the Indian Agency (later called the Bureau of Indian Affairs), the Department of the Interior, and the State Board of Public Instruction made the decision to close the Hochungra School at the close of the 1962-63 school-year. Their decision coincided with broader consolidation efforts going on within the Black River district for several years, efforts that closed the doors of many one-room schools in the county. Like any school closure, the loss of the mission school was emotionally difficult for parents and staff. The debate was legitimate: Where would Ho-Chunk students best be served within the infrastructure of the public school system? Reverend Mitchell Whiterabbit, UCC Pastor and one of the leading voices within the tribe at the time, for example, favored the move toward integration. The Black River Falls School Board received two petitions from members of the Ho-chunk community prior to the closure urging them to keep the school open, but to no avail.[15] A similar dynamic played out with other County schools during these years.

Post-Script

Although it is tempting to apply 2015 sensibilities about race and culture to events 50 years past, the moment that young native children boarded those yellow school buses and made the trip to Gebhardt Elementary in 1963 was a turning point in the story of the local public schools. Early school experiences are critically important for any children, and, for native children, it meant learning to "walk in two worlds." The integration experience and its consequences, both intended and unintended, continue to challenge us in the early years of the 21st Century. Those first children are now in their upper 50s and old enough to have grandchildren entering those same schools. Their story is important, as is the story of non-native children who were the first to experience integration from the other end.

[15] Ibid. Lurie offers a cogent analysis of the decision to close the school in her 2009 interview.

Historian John Lukacs reminds us that the "remembered past is a much larger category than the recorded past."[16] Indeed, the integration story is a complicated strand of our local public school history. In 2009 we began to more formally explore that memory by interviewing Larry Garvin, Sadie Winneshiek Garvin, and Nancy Lurie. Each offered a unique perspective on the story. Lurie's insights were important due to her extensive experience with the Ho-Chunk people during those years. Tina Boisen, who, at the time, was serving as the Native American Student Services Specialist for the District, offered her analysis of challenges facing American Indian students in the current setting. Those conversations prompted us to want to know more, and our intention is to build on the work we did in 2009 by inviting more voices into the mix. There is clearly much more to learn.

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Author's Note: *I am currently working on the second part of this story focusing on the relationship between the HCN and BRFSD since 1963.*

[16] The Lukacs quote comes from his 1968 book, Historical Consciousness or the Remembered Past (1968).

RELEVANT DATES

1870s	The first public schools in Jackson County date to the pre-Civil War period, but become more formally organized by the 1870s. Union High School, built in 1871, was considered a premier school in the region. A faction of the Ho-Chunk people survived a series of removals at the hands of the Federal Government, the last one coming in 1874. In the post-removal period, the Ho-Chunk people in the Black River area were in a major struggle for survival. It was during this period that boarding schools began to be prevalent.
1878-1921	The first "Mission" school is established by Jacob Stucki. In 1921 the school is relocated to Neillsville. Many Ho-Chunk children attend these mission schools.
1884-1950s	The Norwegian Lutheran Church establishes a school at Bethany Mission in Wittenberg, Wisconsin. This school goes back and forth between federal and church control. Many Ho-Chunk children attend Bethany.
1893-1935	The Industrial School for Indians is established in Tomah.
1924	The Indian Citizenship Act is passed.
1928	The Meriam Report is published. The report chronicles the dire situation of Native children in the US and prompts reforms that were played out in the New Deal period.
1934-1963	The Hochungra School is established at the Mission and is jointly funded with federal, state, and local dollars. The school operates within the Black River District for 29 years. As part of the District's consolidation of county schools during the 50s and 60s, and prompted by the Civil Rights Movement with its emphasis on school integration, Ho-Chunk students were bussed into the city schools beginning in the fall of 1963.