

Article

Student Snapshots: An Alternative Approach to the Visual History of American Indian Boarding Schools

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Abstract: Photographs of American Indian boarding school students have often been used to illustrate the federal forced assimilation practices of the 1870s–1930s. Taken by official school photographers, these propagandistic images were produced to emphasize the “civilizing” benefits of the boarding school system. Although some Native students obtained cameras and recorded their own boarding school experiences, the visual history still relies on the institutionally-produced images. Using a collection of photographs created by Parker McKenzie (Kiowa) and his classmates while attending Rainy Mountain and Phoenix Indian Schools, this paper intends to rectify that exclusion through a reading of these snapshots as examples of visual sovereignty. The concept of visual sovereignty involves examining Native self-representations as the (re)claiming of indigenous identities in order to counter colonial imagery that has dominated the archives.

Keywords: American Indian; Native American; indigenous; boarding school; photography; visual culture; visual sovereignty; self-representation

1. Introduction

Deadly diseases, forced separation from family, exhaustive manual labor, military marches, and inferior curriculum feature prominently in the common perception of the American Indian boarding school experience at the turn of the twentieth century. Official school photographs have been used to

illustrate these harsh conditions of assimilation [1–17].¹ Images of Native students in military dress staring vacantly at the camera are indeed persuasive in casting indigenous youths as victims of state-sponsored oppression. Created most notably by the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania [2,13], but also by other Indian schools across the United States and Canada, the photographs frequently depict students “before-and-after” entering school or otherwise engaged “civilizing” activities (Figures 1–4).

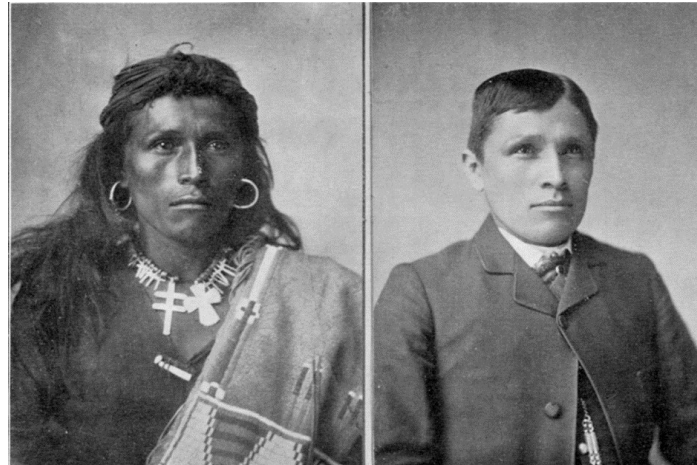


Figure 1. Tom Torlino—Navajo, “As he entered the school in 1882” and “As he appeared three years later” from *Souvenir of the Carlisle Indian School*, 1902. Courtesy of the Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.

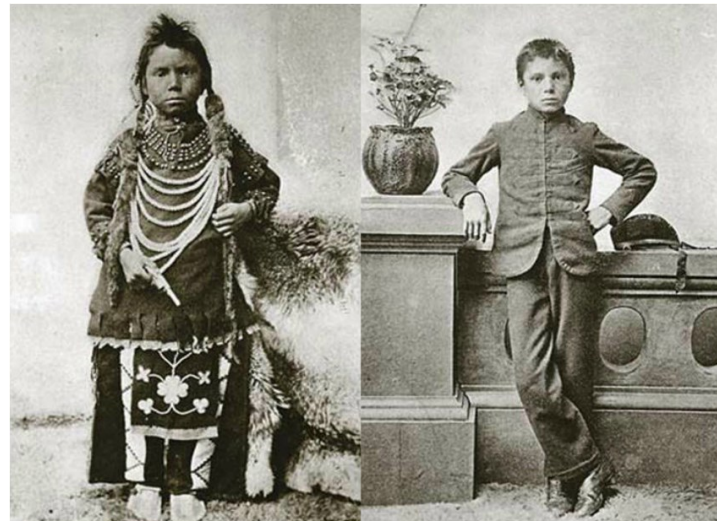


Figure 2. Thomas Moore before and after admission to Regina Indian Industrial School, ca. 1897. Saskatchewan Archives Board (R-A82223 1-2).

¹ The use of these photographs is not limited to these scholars. I have found that media outlets (including PBS and NPR), museums (such as the Smithsonian Institution), and various websites (including K-12 common core instruction manuals) have also employed the official school photographs in this manner as well.



Figure 3. Indian boarding school at Cantonment, Oklahoma, *ca.* 1909. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Neg. no. LC-USZ62-126134).



Figure 4. Albuquerque Indian School, *ca.* 1895. National Archives at Denver (NAID 292873).

During the forced assimilation era, between 1870 and 1930, countless numbers of these images were created and circulated.² As visual sociologist Eric Margolis notes, these photographs “conformed to established conventions of middle-class portraiture, thus reinforcing the predominately Anglo viewers’ perception that a ‘civilizing process’ was being documented” ([3], p. 78). In addition to Margolis, other scholars have examined these school-produced images as “powerful vehicles of ideology” ([18], p. 1) and as the “art of Americanization” [13] but, thus far, there has not been an analysis of the student-produced photographs, nor of the images that they collected of their own school experiences.

Using a group of photographs collected and created by Parker McKenzie (Kiowa) and his classmates while attending both Rainy Mountain and Phoenix Indian Schools, this paper intends to rectify that oversight through a reading of these snapshots as examples of visual sovereignty. Visual

² The forced assimilation era originates with the establishment of Carlisle in 1879 (which became the model for the other 26 federally funded off-reservation boarding schools), and concludes after the Meriam Report of 1928 that exposed failures in the boarding school system. The U.S. Government instigated policy changes culminating in the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which reversed the assimilationist agenda and ushered in the Progressive era. Most photographs employed for boarding school boosterism were created in the forced assimilation era. For a discussion of Progressive era boarding school photographs, see Montez de Oca and Prado [18].

sovereignty, originally coined by (Seminole-Muscogee-Diné) photographer Hulleah Tsihnahjinnie, describes Native photographic self-representation and the (re)claiming of indigenous identities in order to counter colonial imagery that has dominated the archives. She calls this “compensating imbalances”, where “an imbalance of information is presented as truth. No longer is the camera held by an outsider looking in, the camera is held with brown hands opening familiar worlds. We document ourselves with a humanizing eye, [and] we create new visions with ease...” ([19], p. 29). An examination of McKenzie’s images provides a first-hand account of the educational institutions that affected the lives of so many American Indians during the first half of the twentieth century. The results of this examination challenge the prevailing treatment of the subject in suggesting that the official school photographs are not the most representative visual record of American Indian boarding school experiences. As Don Alexander stated, “Native people live in a prison of images not of their own making” ([20], p. 45).

The student-produced photographs portray a much different story than those found in most boarding school collections. In these images, students picture themselves as active participants in a changing modern world, not the passive victims often described and depicted in conventional narratives. This is not to say that these photographs are the only records of students’ experiences. In fact, over the last thirty years scholars have extensively documented the Native point-of-view through diaries, personal correspondence, and interviews with former boarding school students [6,11,15,16,21–26]. Through these histories, we have learned that their experiences were much more nuanced than previously described. Some students enjoyed aspects of their time at the boarding schools, which included playing sports, meeting new friends, and learning new skills. While the oral histories now tell a different story, the visual history still reflects the assimilationist propaganda for the schools. As Tsihnahjinnie argues,

Native people, photographed dramatically in appropriate savage attire, vanishing before one’s eyes. Native people photographed in suits of assimilation tailored to the correct perspective of a progressive new world. Such schizophrenia lamented the disappearing of the “Indian” and yet celebrated images of “Indians” accepting progress. That which could not be scrubbed with soap and water, dressed properly, beaten or destined for extinction was and is the persistence of the indigenous soul, persistence to exist the strength of endurance... There is no doubt in my mind that the people imaged in these photographs are aware of the integral link they have to today’s existence ([27], pp. 43–44).

Rather than depicting the relentless regimentation and systematic extirpation of Native cultures, the visual record presented by students points to a certain degree of autonomy that allowed for the development of fraternal bonds and pride (both for their culture and their school). As a whole, the student snapshots give us a glimpse into the identity formation and transformation that occurred within Indian boarding schools during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Photographic Sources

According to the *Oxford Companion to Photographs*, “by 1906, photography was being taught to students at Carlisle Indian School in one of the finest and best equipped photography studios in the state of Pennsylvania” ([28], p. 437). Presumably, there would be several examples of student work

produced in this studio. Yet, only one student has been identified as a photographer at Carlisle—John Leslie (Pullyap)—and he attended more than decade before the studio was completed. On 1 June 1894, Carlisle’s school newspaper, *The Indian Helper*, described Leslie as the “right hand Indian man” to John Choate, the official school photographer ([29], p. 116). A later issue advertised the 1895 souvenir catalog of the school as including photographs by Leslie (Figure 5), announcing that, “Remember this is Indian work and the first sent out from Carlisle school” ([29], p. 118).



Figure 5. “The Farm House” photograph by John Leslie (Pullyup) from the *United States Indian School, Carlisle Pennsylvania*, souvenir catalog published in 1895.

However, the photographs in the souvenir catalog are not credited, and some images are considered to be the work of John Choate (per the Cumberland Historical Society). Those photographs that are attributed to Leslie are largely architectural photographs and, as art historian Hayes Mauro states, “his images bear a noticeable imprint of Choate’s compositional influence” ([13], p. 125). In other words, he was directed to take certain pictures, and did not have much artistic license while practicing photography at school.³ For these reasons, I opted not to include the work of John Leslie in this study.

Although photography was a popular art form that was taught in at least one Indian boarding school, there are relatively few Native-produced photographic collections available to the public. This is probably because these photographs, like most personal photographs, have been retained by the family or tribe of the author, rather than being accessible in public archives. A useful exception to this pattern is a large photographic collection created by a Kiowa man, Parker McKenzie (1897–1999), which he personally donated to the Oklahoma Historical Society. McKenzie is perhaps best known for his work in recording and preserving the Kiowa language, which culminated in two publications, *Popular Account of the Kiowa Language* (1948) and *A Grammar of Kiowa* (1984). As a young man, McKenzie attended both an on-reservation boarding school at Rainy Mountain and an off-reservation school at Phoenix. His photographic collection provides valuable insights into the early years of the

³ After graduating from Carlisle in 1896, Leslie returned home to the Pacific Northwest where he became a professional photographer. The *Indian Helper* reported that the alumnus was “doing well in his photography business. In three weeks he took in \$40.00” (as cited in [13], p. 125). An analysis of Leslie’s professional career would be interesting, but falls outside the purview of this article.

boarding school system and contains photographs taken by himself and his school sweetheart (later his wife) Nettie Odlety, as well as a small assortment of official school photographs. It is on this collection that this article is based. Although there are approximately three hundred photographs in his collection, I selected a small sample of fourteen images by using the following criteria: the reproductive quality of the print, the amount of information written on the *verso*, the variety of subject matter, and the oral and written documentation provided by Parker McKenzie when he donated the collection to the Oklahoma Historical Society.

2. Rainy Mountain Boarding School

Parker Paul McKenzie attended Rainy Mountain Boarding School from 1904 to 1914. One of several on-reservation boarding schools established by the federal government, Rainy Mountain was located on the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache Reservation in southwest Oklahoma. Although it was intended to serve the Indian community as an elementary school (kindergarten to sixth grade), several students enrolled as teenagers. McKenzie noted that “since many started at a late age, they got too old before finishing the available grades” [30]. This explains why the students photographed in the Pie Club (Figure 6) seem to range in age from pre-pubescent to late teens. The image depicts seven girls dressed in aprons and holding platters of desserts (strangely, none of which appear to be pies) and standing outside a school building.



Figure 6. Rainy Mountain Pie Club, *ca.* 1915. Unknown photographer. Parker McKenzie Collection, Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The Pie Club is one of the few Rainy Mountain school photographs retained by McKenzie that appears to be taken by an official school photographer.⁴ By the time this photograph was taken (*ca.* 1915), McKenzie had already advanced and transferred out of the school. Yet he held onto the photograph, and almost seventy-five years later, he was still able to name all of the people in the photograph: “Left to Right Standing: Nellie Ontowe Komalty, Eunice White Buffalo, [unknown given name] Hootetter, Isabell S. Tsatske, Grace Odlepaugh (Doyeto). Front Row: Carrie Quetowe

⁴ Parker McKenzie admitted that he collected, but did not take any photographs while attending Rainy Mountain. I was unable to locate the identity of Rainy Mountain official school photographer, so it may have been an itinerant photographer or, most likely, one of the staff.

Sahmaret, Nellie McKenzie (died in 1917)” [*photo verso*]. As he noted, shortly after this picture was taken, his little sister, Nellie, would die of tuberculosis—an unfortunately common disease that plagued boarding schools. McKenzie had very few images of her, and although this is most likely the reason he kept the photograph, it can be read as much more than a wistful keepsake.

“Creating a visual history,” states curator Theresa Harlan (Santo Domingo/Jemez Pueblo), “is a question of ownership” ([31], p. 20). By incorporating the Pie Club photograph into his personal archive and identifying the figures, McKenzie has effectively claimed the picture as part of his family album. The image no longer functions as an anonymous group portrait like so many other Indian boarding school photographs have become. This act of transference is possible because, as aboriginal photographer Michael Aird maintains, indigenous viewers “look past the stereotypical way in which their relatives and ancestors have been portrayed, because they are just happy to see photographs of people who play a part in their family’s history” ([27], p. 25). However, I am not implying that visual sovereignty is enacted exclusively as a mnemonic device for the purposes of nostalgia. Visual sovereignty also gives agency to Native peoples to combat decades of non-Native representations. Like Harlan argues, “we must reject the reduction of Native images to sentimental portraits...this type of thinking reduces Native survival to a matter of nostalgia, and precludes discussion of the political strategies that enabled Native survival” ([31], p. 20).

For some students, surviving the boarding school experience meant taking ownership of their situation—some ran away, while others stayed on and carved out a space within the institution. The Pie Club image evinces the latter. Baking was not only encouraged, but enforced by the domestic science curriculum that constituted half of the female students’ coursework ([8], pp. 136–64). The goal, according to historian Michael Coleman, was the “extirpation of tribal cultures and the transformation of Indian children into near copies of white children...[with] labor appropriate to ‘proper’ gender roles” ([7], p. 40). Regardless of the implications of baking as “gendered” work or its Anglo associations, the women pictured in the Pie Club appear to have enjoyed cooking enough to join an extracurricular club. Such concepts of happiness and enjoyment do not usually accompany the descriptions of Indian boarding school photographs. If a student actually took pleasure in a school activity, then he or she has been seen by some scholars [9,10,32] as a victim of brainwashing. Yet, “sovereignty is the border that shifts indigenous experience from a victimized stance to a strategic one,” declares Tuscarora artist and scholar Jolene Rickard ([31], p. 51). Simply labeling these students as “victims” does very little to explain how these people adjusted, endured, and maybe even enjoyed parts of their boarding school experience.

Perhaps the most popular activity that reportedly brought pleasure to the students was participating in one of the athletic programs. In a photograph titled, “Spring 1913 Ball Team” (Figure 7) the nine members of the Rainy Mountain Indian baseball team are posed in their uniforms for a team picture. This is the same year that Jim Thorpe started his major league baseball career. So, it is likely that these players felt immense amount of hope and pride in playing baseball at this particular time.



Figure 7. Rainy Mountain, Spring 1913 Ball Team. 1913. Unknown photographer. Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The Ball Team photograph can also be read as just another attempt by the dominant, Anglo society to instill a Western value system—one that favors competition, discipline, and winning. However, sports historian John Bloom found that “even though mainstream sports were intended to assimilate the Native children and teenagers who attended boarding schools, former students expressed a type of ethnic pride in their memories of sports, a pride that conveyed antiassimilationist sentiments” ([21], p. xix). Team photographs, thereby, stand as visual reminders of the sense of pride and honor associated with boarding school athletics. For example, when Bloom was collecting oral histories for his book, he noted that participants eagerly requested old photographs of student athletes ([21], p. 101). One student remembered that, “I was a good athlete...I think in the end I got the better of that school. I was more of an Indian when I left than when I went in” ([21], p. 980).

As with the Pie Club photograph, McKenzie provided a complete list of the subjects: “Left to Right, Front Row: Catcher Daniel McKenzie, David Frizzlehead, Leslie Aitson. Standing: Fred Quoeton, Luis Necone, Andrew Ahhaitty, Jimmie Chanate, Matthew Botowe & Inkonish Henry (a Caddo)” [*photo verso*]. A common tactic of visual sovereignty is restoring the names and tribal affiliations to the subjects. Artist and curator Gerald McMaster (Cree/Blackfoot) did the same when he analyzed a Battleford Indian School football team photograph and granted “the boys the dignity of names...to give them back their identities” ([33], p. 78). In McKenzie’s case, he identified the last figure, Inkonish Henry, as being “a Caddo”—a tribal nation with roots in East Texas and Oklahoma. He makes tribal designations for almost all of subjects in his photographs (or at least those people whom he could remember); indicating that even though they are part of a team or a school, each person still has their own tribal identity—even if the tribes did not traditionally coexist in a peaceful manner. This tribal integration in the Indian boarding schools led to a type of intertribal identity that fostered a sense of community among all students regardless of tribal origins. The manner in which these Pan-Indian students presented themselves was not Western, nor was it traditionally tribal. As Amelia Katanski writes, “through their creativity and their flexible understanding of identity, boarding-school students represented themselves as much more than paper Indians or Cook’s representative Indians, icons of cultural assimilation. Instead, they fashioned a creative space for self-articulation and for complex,

syncretic identity formation...” ([6], p. 130). The photographs taken by Parker McKenzie when he transferred to Phoenix Indian School offer some the best illustrations of this movement.

3. Phoenix Indian School

By his own account, McKenzie did not take any photographs while at Rainy Mountain. In a letter accompanying his collection he stated:

At Rainy Mountain, we had no knowledge of picture taking with kodaks. On an occasion [*sic*] Sunday visitors from Gotebo would show and took few pictures of the students. None of the employees or their family members had kodaks, so they were new things to us when we arrived in Phoenix in September 1914. We soon learned few of the students were taking pictures and in no time, some of us Okies began the practice, and after “learning the ropes”, we were snapping many pictures [34].

Indeed, McKenzie’s photographic collection consists of over three hundred images taken with a Kodak Brownie camera during his schooling at the Phoenix Indian Boarding School. It is astounding that McKenzie was able to create so many photographs, since scholars and former students have commented on the military-style scheduling that made every moment of a student’s day strictly planned. For instance, according to historian David Wallace Adams, boarding school life was marked by a “relentless regimentation...nearly every aspect of his day-to-day existence—eating, sleeping, working, learning, praying—would be rigidly scheduled, the hours of the day intermittently punctuated by a seemingly endless number of bugles and bells demanding this or that response” ([8], p. 117). The official boarding school images seem to back up this statement and often depict students in class, marching, or doing chores.

Overall, there are relatively few photographs of Native students relaxing during break. McKenzie’s collection is an exception to this fact. In one photograph, two girls, Nettie Odlety (Kiowa) and Francis Ross (Wichita), lounge on the grass, propped up by their elbows, smiling at the camera (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Nettie Odlety and Francis Ross. 1915. Photograph by Parker McKenzie. Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Both girls have bows in their hair and appear to be dressed in casual, white sundresses. It is an image of relaxed, carefree youth, enjoying their teenage years. With a smile, they welcome the photographer whose agenda is simply to show his affection by taking a snapshot. Here is that “humanizing eye” as described by Tsinhnahjinnie, and the warmth and intimacy that is simply not found in earlier photographs of boarding school students.

In a similar photograph created following year (1916), Doye Cleveland and Nettie Odlety are pictured in their school uniforms seated on the campus grounds (Figure 9). They appear to be caught in the act of studying, as there are books scattered about them. Once again, Parker McKenzie has found his sweetheart and has persuaded her and her friend to have their picture taken. These photographs are just two of the hundreds of images created by McKenzie as he roamed the campus taking pictures of his classmates during break. Most of his photographs depict Odlety alone or with classmates, leading us to believe that McKenzie spent most of his breaks seeking out his girlfriend.



Figure 9. Doye Cleveland and Nettie Odlety, 1916. Photograph by Parker McKenzie. Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

By enacting visual sovereignty, Parker McKenzie’s photographs reframe the Indian boarding school experience, placing the focus on individual experiences and personal relationships rather than sanctioned activities and impersonal forces. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his photographs featuring his future wife Nettie. Three years after this photograph (Figure 9) was taken, Parker and Nettie were married. They stayed married for 59 years until her death in 1978 and would eventually have five children together. Indeed, these photographs document the initial stages of an epic love story as shared by its Native author, reflecting the words of Comanche cultural critic and curator Paul Chaat Smith, “our snapshots and home movies create an American epic,” ([33], p. 99). Like all classic love stories, this one has a player that attempts to keep the lovers apart—the Indian boarding school.

Indian boarding schools prohibited physical contact between the sexes as much as possible. Dorms were segregated and administration kept a watchful eye on the students. Classrooms and common areas gave students the opportunity to fraternize and flirt. This was certainly true of the relationship of Parker McKenzie and Nettie Odlety whose relationship began with notes passed in class, which were

written in phonetic Kiowa “to foil our teacher in the event one of our notes fell into her hands” [34]. One photograph shows the couple together on campus, in front of the Administration building, dated March 1916 (Figure 10). The administration building, a neutral area (as far as proctors are concerned), was the perfect setting for an innocent meeting between school sweethearts. They stand in their own space, not touching or even looking at each other—in fact, while Nettie gladly smiles at the camera, Parker looks somewhere off-camera. Their body language seems almost uncomfortable, perhaps shy, as they stand stiffly with their hands shoved in their pockets.



Figure 10. Nettie Odley and Parker McKenzie in front of the Administration Building, March 1916. Unknown Photographer. Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Of course, this could be a reaction to being observed by the faculty—they are, after all, posed directly in front of the administration building. McKenzie complained that, “keeping the sexes apart was routinely strict...we were under strict discipline, we were never free” (as quoted in [22], p. 74). Contrary to this statement, he and Nettie were still able to create this portrait directly under the collective noses of the administration. Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor would call this a “fugitive pose” ([35], p. 7). It is an embodied act of visual sovereignty, operating in a space of resistance and compliance. Furthermore, this image is probably one of the only visual examples of an actively courting couple at an Indian boarding school. While there are images of couples at school-sanctioned activities, such as school dances or picnics, there are few, if any, focusing on one specific couple as this image does.

Judging from the casual dress of Nettie and Parker, the photograph was most likely taken on a Saturday. Saturdays were the one day of the week that students were free to choose their own schedule. They could participate in an extracurricular activity, study, relax, or sign up for a position with the outing system. The outing system (a type of paid vocational training which was met with mixed reviews) allowed the students to earn some extra spending money, from \$10 to \$40 per month ([12], p. 136). Considering the time period, this was a lot of money for a teenager, and these students were often the only breadwinners in their household ([12], p. 136). The school established banking accounts for these students so they could save, send the money back home, or spend it on

“town day.” On select Saturdays, students were allowed off-campus to visit the downtown Phoenix area. As Trennert notes, “those with money spent it on ice cream, candy, a movie, or some personal item from a department store; the rest did considerable window shopping” ([12], p. 133). Although he did not specifically mention it, McKenzie most likely had his film developed and purchased new film on these shopping days. Moreover, some of the more fashionable hats and dresses can probably be traced to purchases made on these Saturdays.

The clothing worn on town days is perhaps best illustrated in a photograph (Figure 11) taken by McKenzie sometime between 1914 and 1917. He identifies the three classmates pictured as “Easchief Clark (Pro-Wrestler); Ross Shaw, Pima; Andrew Ahhaitty, Kiowa” [*photo verso*].



Figure 11. Easchief Clark; Ross Shaw; Andrew Ahhaitty. *ca.* 1914–1917. Photograph by Parker McKenzie. Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The individualized approaches to fashion reflected in what we can assume are the personal clothing of each—the subjects wear different styles of hat, tie, shoes, and slacks—stand in stark contrast to the sartorial conformity imposed by the boarding school uniforms. However, for the source of the image, the viewer would be hard pressed to associate the urbane young men in the picture with the dull grey stamp of the Indian boarding school. It is quite possible that, in dressing for town days, McKenzie’s classmates were reflecting the influence of a common town day activity—the movies. The fashion choices revealed in the photo recall the look of Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, and other popular actors of the day. Thus, by appropriating popular trends and actively engaging with mainstream culture, these Native subjects are expressing their visual sovereignty. Film and visual studies scholar Michelle Raheja (Seneca) finds “visual sovereignty as a way of reimagining Native-centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy that engage the powerful ideologies of mass media...” ([36], p. 197). The personalized choices visible in their wardrobes suggest that these students are acutely aware of the contemporary identities that they are projecting. They represent a vibrant and contemporary Native culture, dynamically reconfiguring their Native identities and embracing modernity and mainstream culture on their own terms. Quite distinct from the hapless figures staring out from behind school uniforms in official boarding school photographs, these young

men have donned modern “uniforms” of their own choosing, tailoring their identities in every sense of the word.

Parker McKenzie not only photographed his friends and sweetheart, but his family as well. One of the earliest photographs that he took at Phoenix was a portrait of his brother, Daniel McKenzie dated to September 1915 (Figure 12). In this image, Daniel is seated behind a desk in the middle of his dorm room. Behind him, there is a steel-framed bed, a nightstand with several framed photographs, and a few pennants hanging on the wall. By all indications, the students could decorate their space as they saw fit.



Figure 12. Daniel McKenzie, Kiowa, September 1915. Parker McKenzie Collection, Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Daniel sits facing the viewer with his left arm casually thrown over his chair while his other arm rests on his desk behind a pile of books. He presents himself using the entire setting, as Erving Goffman states, “infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure” ([37], p. 30). In other words, he presents himself as a serious student, studying and embracing a new Indian identity. This is not only apparent in his appearance, but in his expression. He appears very confident and self-assured, the complete antithesis of typical hollow-eyed student pictured in so many of the officially-produced boarding school photographs. Here, Daniel’s gaze is visually arresting—it is neither welcoming nor challenging. Like Vizenor writes, “the true stories of pictures are in the eyes...the eyes are the tacit presence...the eyes that meet in the aperture are the assurance of narratives and a sense of native presence” ([35], p. 7). Native brothers on either side of the lens, co-authoring their visual narrative of boarding school, this is visual sovereignty.

Nearly a year later, Parker would be photographed in much the same manner. In 1916, Parker created one of his many self-portraits that he titled: Parker McKenzie, Kiowa, at Main Building (Figure 13). In this image, the young Parker, like his brother before him, is seated at a desk, leaning back, with his left arm resting on his chair. His right hand, however, is placed atop a typewriter on a desk in front of him. The entire scene is photographed outdoors, on the grass, with a school building in the immediate background.

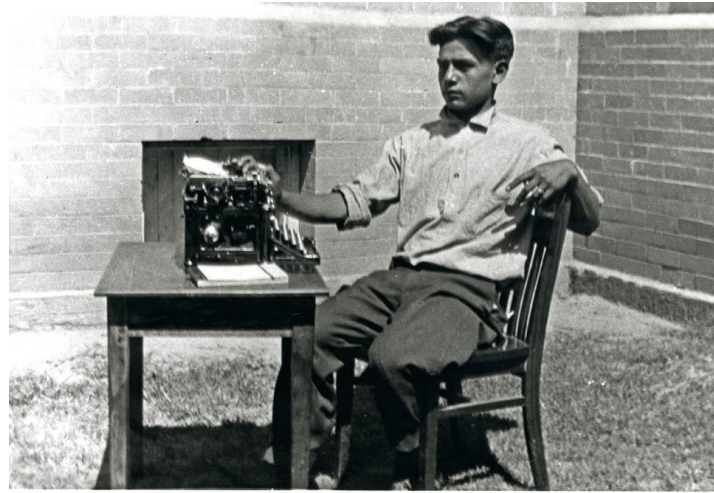


Figure 13. Parker McKenzie, Kiowa, at Main Building. 1916. Parker McKenzie Collection, Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Instead of facing the viewer, Parker McKenzie chooses to pose in three-quarter profile, gazing off into the distance. This pose, along with the hand on the typewriter, recalls images of famous intellectuals and statesmen—as if he is fashioning himself in the canon of traditional Western portraiture. Art historian Richard Brilliant considers that “most portraits exhibit a formal stillness, a heightened degree of self-composure that responds to the formality of the portrait-making situation” ([38], p. 10). Indeed, McKenzie responds to the act of producing a portrait by forcing a pose and styling himself in the manner of a distinguished scholar. This reading of the image may be contested, but it is reinforced by McKenzie’s later remark that he “owes much to his early training” for becoming a Kiowa scholar and furthering his cultural heritage [34]. Furthermore, he was already thinking about his future as a linguist, when he stated that “the innocent practice [of passing notes written in Kiowa] was beginning to fascinate me if not my partner. It led me to experiment with words and simple expressions for myself and soon saw some words would not yield to English spelling or be written phonetically with the English alphabet” [34]. While this image foreshadows the later career of McKenzie, what is even more fascinating is where this scene is photographed—outdoors.

There is evidence that in some years, the boarding schools were overcrowded, but never to the point that classes took place outside. This is why the desk and typewriter are such an enigma in the self-portrait of Parker McKenzie. Were the items brought outside for the purpose of staging the photograph? Or were these items already outside because they were in the process of moving them in/out of the building? Given the purported rigid military schedule at the school, it would give McKenzie little opportunity to stage such an image (much less the permission to play with school property). According to Trennert, “...everything operated on a schedule, and the campus resembled an army boot camp. In contrast to the leisurely pace of reservation life, children were required to study, clean their rooms, sleep, and eat at specific times. Sundays were devoted to discipline” ([12], p. 117). So it seems as though the photograph was made surreptitiously, by finding some time to steal away and create the portrait. It is also possible that school administrators did not have a problem with the photograph being taken if they thought it supported their civilizing and modernizing goals. If this were true, then McKenzie’s actions become an embodied act of visual sovereignty. He is fashioning himself as an

ideal student of their making, yet he is already planning to use the knowledge he acquired to preserve and continue his Native language (which coincidentally was prohibited to be spoken at school). By authoring his self-portrait in this manner, he performs the act of visual sovereignty while simultaneously making a broader argument for cultural revitalization and self-determination.

4. Nettie Odley, Photographer

Nettie Odley purchased a camera at the same time as Parker McKenzie, and with it, she photographed what is perhaps the only existing vernacular imagery within the girls' dormitory walls. In a series of snapshots (Figures 14–17) taken sometime between 1915 and 1916, Odley and her friend, Lucy Sumpty, took turns being photographer and subject. As the girls alternate posing on the ground and lounging on a bed, the afternoon sun comes through the dorm room windows and illuminates the scene. Upon closer inspection, it appears as though they are mimicking each other's pose—from the vantage point as photographer to the body positioning as subject.



Figure 14. Nettie Odley, Inside the Girls' Dormitory—Phoenix Indian Boarding School, c. 1915. Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



Figure 15. Nettie Odley, Inside the Girls' Dormitory—Phoenix Indian Boarding School, c. 1915. Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



Figure 16. Lucy Sumpty, Inside the Girls' Dormitory—Phoenix Indian Boarding School, c. 1915. Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



Figure 17. Lucy Sumpty, Inside the Girls' Dormitory—Phoenix Indian Boarding School, c. 1915. Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Formerly subjects of the Western gaze, these women have taken the camera into their own hands, and they are becoming agents, not objects of photography. With their alternating snapshots, the girls demonstrate their burgeoning visual language of self-fashioning, and in doing so they are “stretching the boundaries of Indigenous representation through the deployment of visual sovereignty” ([36], p. 220). They seem to be taking their time modeling for the camera, despite the “complete surveillance of and control over female Indian bodies within the schools” ([23], p. 96). Yet, this instance of private indulgence was not necessarily an uncommon occurrence. Some female students reportedly “managed to smuggle bean sandwiches out of the kitchen, tell stories after lights out, even hold peyote meetings in their dorm rooms. Private moments knitted students together in shared joy, shared language, or shared mischief” ([11], p. 48). The photographs seem to back up the idea that the dorm rooms were not only a place for sleeping, but a space where friendships were formed and, in this case, recorded.

An extensive study of the female boarding school experience was undertaken by K. Tsianina Lomawaima who found that “a complex network of bonds and divisions that simultaneously bound and segmented the large student population. Girls united in groups formed by dorm-room association, shared hometowns, native language ties, company or work detail assignments, or similar

personality” ([23], p. 97). Along with this statement, she provides a photograph of two Chilocco girls in school dress, dated to 1914, and uses this image for her book cover (Figure 18) [23]. In the photograph, the girls stand stiffly and unsmiling as they pose for an official school photographer. One girl has an arm around the other girl’s shoulders, but it looks forced and unnatural. This is in stark comparison to a photograph taken one year later (1915) by Nettie Odlety of her roommates, Deoma Doyebi and Ethel Roberts (Figure 19).

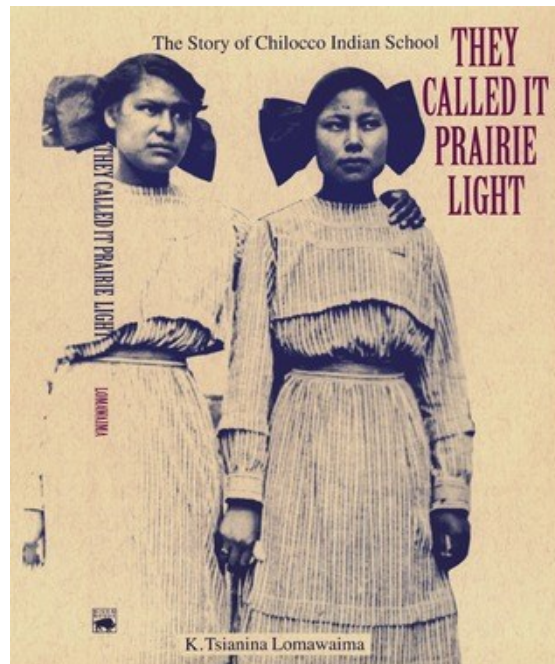


Figure 18. Book cover for *They Called It Prairie Light* by K. Tsianina Lomawaima.



Figure 19. Deoma Doyebi (Kiowa) and Ethel Roberts (Wichita), ca. 1916. Photograph by Nettie Odlety, Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Odlety captures her friends in a moment of camaraderie with their arms looped around each other’s shoulders as they enthusiastically grin towards the camera. While these two photographs have similar subject matter, it is clear that authorship can affect the manner in which the subjects are represented. As Theresa Harlan contends, “the camera technique and even the choice of subject may be similar, but

the interest and the treatment of the resulting works is not” ([39], p. 7). There is an obvious comfort level when being photographed by a familiar person—people tend to let down their guard and the resulting image is usually closer to the actual character of the person(s) being represented. This is certainly true regarding these two images. The girls in the officially-produced image may be friends, but they look uncomfortable expressing themselves in front of the photographer. Instead, they stand rigidly and display the formal public image (of proper young ladies) expected of them. Conversely, the photograph taken by Odlety seems to be a more accurate representation of the interpersonal relationships forged between her classmates and tribal members. According to Tuscarora artist and scholar Jolene Rickard, “photographs made by indigenous makers are the documentation of our sovereignty, both politically and spiritually...the images are all connected, circling in ever-sprawling spirals the terms of our experiences as human beings...hooking memories through time” ([31], p. 54). What she describes is an important aspect of indigenous visual heritage, the connections that create a dynamic, tangible link between the past, present, and future.

5. Conclusions

Student snapshots are overlooked primary sources in the documentation of the American Indian boarding school experience. As photo historian Graham Clarke writes,

The snapshot remains undervalued as a form of photography, lacking the distinctiveness and substance of images produced by the professional photographer. And yet, the snapshot is the basis of most people’s experience of the photograph; both of taking photographs and of saturating themselves within a photographic history of their own making. The snapshot has transcended its role as a photograph and answers a new set of needs, with a new kind of significance ([40], p. 218).

The Native-produced snapshots express multiple realities and illuminate stories of resistance, endurance, and continuing presence [41–43]. The visual sovereignty enacted by these photographers provides an alternative approach to the visual history of American Indian Boarding school experience. As Michelle Raheja states, these type of Native image-makers, “operate as technological brokers and autoethnographers of sorts, moving between the community from which they hail and the Western world and its overdetermined images of indigenous people” ([36], p. 219). This is where McKenzie’s photographic collection is most valuable. Unlike official school photography, which often has an agenda to provide evidence of “progress,” his collection functions as a corrective visual narrative to combat decades of Western cultural hegemony. For example, the smiling face of a school sweetheart (Figure 20) is an image that is simply not found in the officially-produced collections.



Figure 20. Nettie Odlety, *ca.* 1916. Parker McKenzie Collection. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Some scholars have taken the approach that boarding schools were created to obliterate tribal identity, and that officially-produced photographs reflect this fact [8–10]. However, as historian Clyde Ellis states, “as with so many other culturally loaded encounters, Indian education could be—and often was—used by Native people to serve multiple ends that included maintaining identity. That Indian people used the schools to suit their needs and purposes is an important consideration, for it raises the often-overlooked notion of agency” ([24], p. 67). This concept of agency has largely been absent in the visual history of the boarding school experience. By visually recording their own experiences, these marginalized students subverted the otherwise oppressive institution and claimed parts of it for themselves. In doing so, they created a counter-archive that documented their visual sovereignty.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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