

## Commemorating Orange Shirt Day – September 30th

The Orange Shirt is a symbol of the harm done to the indigenous children, who were forced to attend Indian Residential Schools. In the U.S., Orange Shirt Day was observed officially for the first time on September 30, 2021.

The orange shirt comes from a true story about six-year-old Phyllis Webstad, who began school at St. Joseph Mission Residential School near Williams Lake, British Columbia, in 1973. As she boarded the bus alone, Phyllis was frightened; not only was she starting school for the first time, but the school would be her home for the school year. To ease her fears, her grandmother gave her a brand-new orange shirt to wear. New clothes were rare on the reserve where Phyllis lived with her grandmother. When Phyllis arrived at the school, she was stripped of her clothing, including the new orange shirt, then she was given a bath, her long hair was cut short, and she was issued a school uniform and Phyllis never saw her orange shirt again. Phyllis attended the school at Williams Lake for only one year; nevertheless, the experience contributed to years of low self-esteem. She says, “that feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the mission, affected the way I lived my life for many years. Even now, when I know nothing could be further than the truth, I still sometimes feel that I don’t matter.”

Phyllis’ story is relatively mild compared to other indigenous experiences. Other children who attended boarding schools for longer periods of time lost their native languages, native cultures, the nurturing presence of their families, and sometimes their lives. They were exposed to cold, hunger, fatal diseases like tuberculosis, even beatings and rapes. Many children died at the residential schools. In some cases, parents were not advised of their child’s death, and children were buried onsite. If you have never heard about these experiences, we recommend the books and the websites at the end of this article.

In the summer of 2021, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland announced the creation of an Indian School Initiative to quantify the problems and to create a way for Indigenous people to heal from their boarding school experience. The U.S. Dept. of the Interior released the first portion of their promised Indian Boarding School report on May 11, 2022.

The findings stated: “The investigation found that from 1819 to 1969, the federal Indian boarding school system consisted of 408 federal schools across 37 states or then territories, including 21 schools in Alaska and 7 schools in Hawaii. The investigation identified marked, or unmarked, burial sites at approximately 53 different schools across the school system.” This is just part one of the federal investigation, and the number of burial sites is expected to increase.

The May 2022 report by the U.S. Dept. of the Interior also announced the launch of *The Road to Healing*. “This year-long tour will include travel across the country to allow American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian survivors of the federal Indian boarding school system the opportunity to share their stories, help connect communities with trauma-informed support, and facilitate collection of a permanent oral history.”

Please do your part by informing yourself. There have been important announcements in the media, and we recommend the following sources.

## **Websites**

[WATCH: Report finds 500 Native American boarding school deaths in 'terrible system,' Haaland says | PBS NewsHour](#)

[A report on Native American boarding schools shows their horrors | The Economist](#)

[Department of the Interior Releases Investigative Report, Outlines Next Steps in Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative | U.S. Department of the Interior \(doi.gov\)](#)

[Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report \(bia.gov\)](#)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/11/deb-haaland-indigenous-boarding-schools/>

## **Books**

[Keep in mind that there are many Indian Boarding School accounts; this list is far from comprehensive]

Adams, David Wallace. *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the boarding school experience, 1875-1928*. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 2020. [a classic]

Child, Brenda J. *Boarding Schools Season: American Indian Families, 1900-1940*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. [Overview of the Indian Boarding School experience. Many tribes are mentioned, although much of the focus is on Flandreau Indian Boarding School at Flandreau, South Dakota.]

Dover, Harriette Shelton. *Tulalip from My Heart: an autobiographical account of a reservation community*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013. [Specific to the Tulalip (Salish tribes) Reservation near Marysville, Washington; detailed but readable first-hand account]

Lomawaima, K. Tsianina. *They Called It Prairie Light: the story of Chilocco Indian School*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1994. [Author is an associate professor of American Studies at the U. of Arizona, and her father attended this school located in northern Oklahoma, just south of the Kansas border.]

Webstad, Phyllis. *Phyllis's Orange Shirt*. Medicine Wheel Education, 2019. [This children's picture book comes from Canada. It is available via Amazon. Phyllis Webstad, a boarding school survivor, and she has written several books on the topic of Indian Boarding Schools aimed at various age/reading levels.]