

Introduction

“The only good Indian is a dead Indian” was the prevailing view in 1879, just three years after what the popular media called “Custer’s Last Stand” and a decade before Wounded Knee.

Civil War hero and veteran of the Indian wars cavalry officer Richard Henry Pratt thought differently: Indians were educable. He was ridiculed when he started Carlisle Indian School with the express purpose of educating Indians in order for them to enjoy the full fruits of citizenship. His position was as unpopular then as is voicing controversial opinions in this current time of heightened sensitivities. Critics dubbed this heretic “an honest lunatic” for espousing the belief that Indians could do anything whites could do, given proper training and opportunity. He based his philosophy on what he had observed firsthand, watching how his black troops, called Buffalo Soldiers by the Indians, and his Indian scouts performed militarily. He saw no reason they couldn’t also function well in the white man’s society. Endlessly promoting the school, he gave speeches around the country, wrote articles for major newspapers and magazines, and lobbied government officials.

The Carlisle Indian School newspaper echoed his position and provided examples of students’ and former students’ excellence. In great demand, the school’s popular band marched in several inaugural parades and played at world fairs and other major events to show the general populace what Indians could do if given the chances whites had. So, even though he abhorred the violence in the game, it was totally in character for him to demand that, if Carlisle boys were to play football, they must soon play and beat the best college elevens.

Some others cited reasons why they thought Indian athletes should outperform their white counterparts. R. Meade Bache, a longtime scientist with the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, wrote articles about the physical force imparted by boxers’ muscles and got them published in scientific journals. His 1895 paper on reaction times by race attracted the attention of University of Pennsylvania Professor of Psychology Lightner Witmer, who applied an electrical shock to the wrists of a dozen young men of three races and timed how soon they responded using a telegrapher’s key. In Witmer’s experiment, whites had the slowest reaction times and Indians the quickest. Blacks’ times were in between. Bache explained away the Indians’ faster reaction times than Blacks as the result of the Blacks having had intermarried more with whites than had Indians.

The Philadelphia Inquirer reporter covering Penn's football game with Carlisle that fall shifted the differences from genetics to culture: "[The Indians] saw more quickly, heard and responded to all sensations more quickly. Mr. Bache's theory is that the higher the civilization the greater the loss in quickness of automatic movements." After the game, long-time Penn football Coach George Woodruff reportedly said "[H]e would rather train the Indian boys than his own team and that they composed the ideal team for which he has been long looking would seem to sustain the purely scientific experiments." It seems logical that young men who have spent their lives living in nature and observing animals while hunting would develop quicker reflexes than those who lived in towns and cities.

Later, Pop Warner made observations of his own players. He noticed both physical and cultural differences. He claimed that Indians' lower legs dropped straight down from the knee where whites' lower legs curved slightly outward. Carlisle publicist Hugh R. Miller maintained that most Indians' feet were flat, parallel to each other, and pointed straight ahead where whites' pointed outward. (The author, a subject group of one white person, noticed the reasons he was a poor kicker. His lower legs curve slightly and that his toes point outward.) Warner thought straight lower legs gave Indian kickers an advantage. And Indians could get kicks off slightly quicker because their feet were already pointed straight ahead where white kickers had to turn their foot to put it in the proper position. To the author's knowledge, this claim hasn't been researched. His experience coaching Indian players led Warner to observe how they learned:

While at Carlisle, I had developed a theory that the Indians boys had been trained by their forefathers to be keen observers. Often when the Indian boys were exposed to a new sport or game, they would usually refuse to participate. Instead they would stand and watch the older, more experienced Indian boys, who were participating in the new sport or game, demonstrate how it was to be played.

Then after having studied the play or actions of the elders, they would attempt to mimic those same actions, or motions, and would usually be almost as accomplished as those who they had just observed.

Gridiron Gypsies was written because no existing book covered the complete Carlisle football story. It includes games not in the previous attempt and

corrects scores and locations that were reported incorrectly. Information not easily found seventy years ago was located using technology not available to the earlier writer.

Carlisle Indian School, created and operated by cavalry officer Richard Henry Pratt and located on the Army's second-oldest post, was a construct of the Federal Government. Dependent on government funding, it was an endangered species on the edge of extinction its entire existence. As early as 1898, success on the football field aided its survival against political opposition. This was not the last time football came to the school's assistance.

During his twenty-five-year tenure as superintendent, the school and everything it did reflected Pratt's views and opinions. Following superintendents were either cavalry officers or government employees, and the football team, although "owned" by the athletic association, was not exempt from government influence and policies, which changed over time.

This book is also about the players themselves, the most colorful to ever don football togs, and not just because several were inducted into the Hall of Fame. Their lives and personalities were much more interesting than the scions of the wealthy they played against.

Pratt's history leading up to forming Carlisle Indian School is essential to understanding why the school was founded and what it attempted to accomplish. This and why he was reluctant to allow a football team to compete with other schools is included as Appendix A. Chapter 1 tells the story of how the football program started in 1893 and began competing in earnest in 1894. The early years are covered two per chapter. Beginning with 1897, Carlisle's first winning season, a chapter is devoted to each year. Coverage for each season begins with a list of important rule changes that went into effect that year. (Rule changes came fast and furious in those days.) Team photos are available for most years. A summary of the games played that season follows the narrative. Each chapter ends with postseason evaluations, such as All-America honors where appropriate. Things happening after the season's end that impact the upcoming season are generally, but not always, considered part of the next year.

Individual and action photos as well as period cartoons help illustrate the text. Identifying players on photos was a challenge for a number of reasons, with the absence of many student records the largest. Mischievous players sometimes gave photographers and reporters made-up names like Yahoo and Waukesha. Nicknames were sometimes used, confusing matters worse because one person's nickname might be another's actual name. Barrel was

one such example. When two or more with the same last name were on the team, initials often weren't included in newspaper articles if only one of them got into the game. Using the positions played wasn't infallible because they were so versatile.

Newspaper accounts of a game often varied significantly, including the scores. Misspelled names were the norm, nicknames weren't unusual, and first names were usually missing. The most troublesome of the errors was when different players were credited for having made a certain play or score. In the 1911 Johns Hopkins game, for example, *The Baltimore Sun* listed the following as having scored touchdowns: Thorpe, Powell, Williams, Veder-nack, and Broker. The *Pittsburgh Daily Post* credited the touchdowns to: Thorpe, Powell, Williams, Veder-nack, and Bergie. In this case as in many, I chose a local paper's coverage because its reporters would have been more familiar with the players than out-of-town scribes. Since no Carlisle or Harris-burg paper gave this game much ink, I relied on the *Baltimore Sun's* coverage of the action because it went into greater detail.

Something the modern reader might find confusing is the lengths of halves. In the early years, although the rules specified the length of halves, coaches often negotiated how many minutes each one was to be. One half being longer than the other wasn't uncommon. Games that had gotten out of hand or if the visiting team had to catch a train, were abbreviated before time had expired. Cartoons and articles cut from period newspapers are sprinkled across the chapters. Modern readers might find many of them to be racist. Not including them would be papering over important history.

The school's demise and end of the football team are covered in the last chapter. The epilogue covers attempts to reopen the school after WWI.

In recent years, Carlisle and other off-reservation government Indian boarding schools have been strongly criticized for several things and Indian graves at boarding schools are being moved to reservations. The implication in the popular press is that these schools were unhealthy places. This book only looks at Carlisle and no study of health conditions there as compared to the reservations has been made. What is known is that the world was an unhealthy place and reservations were particularly unhealthy. The average life span for all Americans wasn't much more than half of what it is in the early twenty-first century and for Indians it was less than that.

Trachoma, a disease of the eye that left untreated could cause blindness, was rampant on the reservations and many Carlisle students were afflicted with it. Superintendent Pratt arranged for noted eye specialists in Philadelphia and

New York City to treat afflicted students for a minimal fee. This quality of care would not have been available to most Americans at that time and definitely not on reservations.

Carlisle has been criticized for forcing students to speak English but Pratt didn't have to force them. Early on, he convinced chiefs to send their children to his school so they could learn English and no longer be cheated when signing treaties. With boys and girls from over seventy tribes on campus and no two from the same tribe allowed to room together, they had to learn English if they wanted to communicate with each other.

Pratt believed that complete immersion was the best way to assimilate the Indians and instituted outing periods, during which students lived and worked with families in eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey and earned some money while there. Carlisle students weren't forced to go on outings. In fact, they were required to apply and qualify for them if they wanted to go. Not all were accepted and appropriate host families couldn't be found for some. Students out on outings during the school year attended public schools with the children of the host families.

At the end of the enrollment period, usually three or five years, students were free to leave or reenroll. They weren't forced to assimilate

Student outcomes ranged widely. In general, those who flourished at Carlisle had good outcomes afterward. Those who "went back to the blanket" didn't usually do as well due to the lack of resources and opportunities on the reservations. Students who did well academically and learned their trades had good chances for productive lives as did musicians and football players. Carlisle's players were generally good students and were active in the debating societies and other extra-curricular activities. Football players became celebrities because their names were printed in newspapers from coast to coast. Integrating into the majority society was easier for them than others because of this. Many of them didn't return to the reservation. A few even married white women. Some of their grandchildren didn't even know their grandfathers had played football at Carlisle.

Looking back in later years after winning national championships and the Rose Bowl while leading other teams, Warner fondly remembered the Indians:

Great teams, those Carlisle elevens that I coached, and what was even finer, sportsmen all. There wasn't an Indian of the lot who didn't love to win and hate to lose, but to a man they were modest in victory and

resolute in defeat. They never gloated, they never whined, and no matter how bitter the contest, they played cheerfully, squarely and cleanly.



Superintendent Pratt with young student.