

Leonard Peltier's Boarding School Testimony

THE TAKING OF LEONARD PELTIER'S

CHILDHOOD

My name is Leonard Peltier and I am 77 years old. I am a member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa tribe. I am Anishinaabe and Dakota. I was taken to Wahpeton Indian School, an Indian boarding school, in Wahpeton, North Dakota when I was nine years old and did not leave until I was 12. This is my story.

When I lost my grandfather in 1952, life changed forever. He was a good and kind man and he was my mentor and knew how to live off the land. But then he got pneumonia and did not survive. I will never forget watching him die from the foot of his bed. Even now, that sad memory comes back to me as I lie in my bunk at night in a federal penitentiary.

About a year after my grandpa died, my grandma had to go to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to beg for help for her and me, my sister Betty Ann and cousin Pauline. As it turned out, that made things much worse for us. Now, we had to worry about the BIA agents coming to take us away. I grew up with the stories. I was old enough to know what happened when the government took you away. I knew some children never came home. So we — my grandma and my sisters and I — watched for new cars from the top of the hill. Indian cars were old and made a lot of noise so we heard them coming. We were always prepared to run and hide in the woods.

But then one day, I forgot to run and hide and the girls were hiding in the house. This shiny car drove up the hill and stopped in front of our house. A man stepped out of a 1952 Chevy Fleetline.

I will never forget that government car.

Grandma could not understand much of what he said, and no other adult was there. But she finally understood that he came to take us away. The government man told us he was taking us away to a boarding school because my grandma could not take care of us. I loved my grandma. I knew he was wrong.

She started to cry and pleaded with him not to take us. She cried out, but he told her she would be jailed if she tried to interfere. That was it. I said nothing. I was 9 years old, but

I was afraid if I said anything or tried to run, the government man would take my grandma and put her in jail.

So, I watched as Grandma packed the few clothes we had and put them in a small bundle.

“Protect your sisters. Do not let anyone harm them,” Grandma told me before the government man took us away. I promised her I would.

But I almost broke out crying. In a single day, my whole world changed. I know I was just a little kid, but I just felt so helpless.

Maybe that day was my introduction to this destiny I did not choose. Little did I know that those school years would condition me well. I was treated very badly by the people in that school, but it made me stronger. I found out in boarding school I had no rights. So I guess I am not surprised that at 77 and still locked up, it is the same for me now.

The government man drove us to a parking lot with a long line of buses at the Belcourt high school. Families were saying goodbye. Children and parents crying in each other's arms.

Some of the traditional Natives were chanting in that way they do when someone has passed. It was an eerie sound for a small boy and a chill ran up my back. I almost lost it.

Betty and cousin Pauline were crying, and I could not do or say anything to get them to stop. I thought: “I have to stay strong and be ready to fight if anyone tries to hurt them.” They held onto me so tight I couldn't move at times, though. I can only describe the scene at the bus loading as one of horror. I know I was terrified.

Everyone was crying as they kept yelling at us to get on the bus. The BIA officials and Indian Police were watching and guarding. They made sure no one escaped and no Indians came to help us. They were all powerless to come and take us home.

We traveled all day. Poor Betty and Pauline cried all the way. They asked for water and to use the restroom only once -- the bus driver told them to shut up and sit down. I told them I had to watch where we were going. If we got away, we needed to know how to get home. Getting home -- all I could think about was getting home, but I soon understood that there were too many turns. I could not remember them all.

We finally got to a rest stop. Only a few at a time were allowed to get out. Everyone had to urinate so badly, poor Betty and Pauline barely made it.

When we finally got to Wahpeton, they separated us and lined us up in military formation, smallest to tallest.

The girls were sent to the girl's dorm, a two-story building, and us boys to the other one. The dining hall was in the middle, the school was across the road. To rez kids, this looked scary as hell. It was hell.

I could hear Betty and Pauline crying and screaming for me not to leave them. I came close to breaking down. But I knew I had to show them I was strong and brave. I did not cry. Mostly for their sake.

Other kids did break down. It was the beginning of a nightmare that at 77 years old, the fear of remembering it all still keeps me awake some nights.

The matrons used our fear against us. They yelled, "Shut your mouths...stop your damned crying...it won't help."

Some of us were angry, but we were scared. We had to whisper our anger. They marched us down to the basement where the shower and laundry rooms and the barber shop was. First, they buzz-cut our hair off. Then they took us to the showers and stripped off all our clothes.

This was disrespectful and humiliating. In shame, we marched into the showers. They had set them on HOT. Very HOT.

Some of the kids screamed as the water scalded them. None of us knew how to adjust the temperature. The older kids showed us. Some kids never wanted to go to the showers again – they had to be forced.

When we left the showers, they put DDT (an insecticide used in agriculture, now banned) all over us. The poison even got in our eyes and mouths. They said it was to kill lice and other insects that carried disease.

Then the matrons sat on benches with a large jar of Vaseline. They lined us up very close together, naked and spread it on the top and back of our ankles, arms, and elbows. They then took a towel, wrapped it around their finger and rubbed the Vaseline off. If any dead skin came off, we were hit with a fat ruler. That sucker hurt. Then we were sent back to wash again. We rubbed our skin raw so as not to get beaten.

A young Native student came and brought me over to the girl's dorm that first night. Betty and Pauline were still clinging to each other, crying. I almost broke down again. I

somehow managed to stay strong and console them. I told them that they would beat me if they didn't stop and that worked.

Later, we were assigned to wash the smaller kids. If dead skin was found after we washed them, we got the beating.

They made it clear they considered us filthy from the inside out. They made it clear we were hated. With every look, with every cruel word, they continued a war our ancestors had fought since their ancestors landed here back in 1492.

The sound of the ruler hitting the boys and their screams is something that still affects me whenever I see someone striking a child on TV or in a picture.

When I was older, I was forced to scrub the little kids. A small boy named White Cloud had tender skin and cried, so I did not scrub him as hard as they told me to do it. They found dead skin and they beat me. I had to scrub him again, with a stiff brush like we used to scrub the floor, only smaller. I was angry and I scrubbed until he started to bleed.

How does a person live with those memories?

As time passed and I lie in my bed, I heard crying and whimpering every night. So much crying and so much fear. The bigger kids would try to quiet the little ones, telling them the matrons would come in and beat them if they didn't stop.

Some older boys told us they were trying to scare us into being submissive, but for some of us, our pain turned to hate and it made us rebellious.

We spoke our language. We sang our songs. And we prayed in our languages, all in secret. In secret, behind the gym. We called ourselves the Resisters, after the famous French Resistance.

I think I've hidden my hate and my anger throughout my entire life. It was impossible to manage as a kid. But I learned how to deal with their demons. I had to, as I was determined not to ever become one of them. I never felt bigger by hurting others. I am my grandmother's legacy, not Wahpeton's.

There was a prison cell in the basement of the gym. In my last year at Wahpeton, they used it for storage. They had me take a broken chair down there one time, and I saw it. I thought of what kids must have gone through in that prison cell in the past. I heard some children committed suicide and had been buried somewhere on the grounds. We

did not want to know where this sacred ground was, so we never tried to find it. I admit I was scared.

What could be worse – the yelling and beatings, or being buried there?

Some heard phantom crying in the night. Lost children, hurt so badly they took their own lives. Some of us would not allow ourselves to believe they were spirits crying.

Many of us dreamed of escaping. When you are a child in trouble you want hope for rescue. I knew there was no hope, there would be no rescue. We were less than human. We were something else. Something that could be beaten, put in a hole on the ground, and forgotten.

My cousin Danny Peltier and I tried to escape. In my desperation I gave my body to the glacial waters of the Red River. I dared to hope that I could make it across and escape the pain my life had become. The icy water took my breath and pulled me under. I came close to drowning. Even as I believed my life was ending, I wondered if drowning would be better than to be caught trying to escape.

When Betty and Pauline found out about the escape attempt, they made me swear I would not leave them there alone.

At one point we heard Eisenhower ordered no more maltreatment of Native children. It took a couple of years for the law to be enforced and it did not come in time for us – if it ever came at all. The staff was used to having free reign to beat the hell out of children that could not fight back.

I used to sit around with Dennis Banks and other men and talk about our days at Wahpeton. We could not find a single pleasant memory. Our memories from those vulnerable, formative years are harsh and violent. But we learned one thing from those awful places your people sent us to: We are survivors.

And we survived with our hearts intact.

I enlisted in the Marines when I was 16 years old and was honorably discharged.

You don't treat people badly like that. I rise only when I help you rise. Despite all those beatings, I still believe it. It's a law, like physics, and it's true. You get nowhere being mean and disrespecting the feelings of others, especially the most vulnerable. I have seen both kinds of people and more than my share of evil ones, and I know I'm right. I rise only when I help you rise.