

Rapid City Indian School / Sioux San Lands

In 1896, the US government began acquiring land for a boarding school in the rural valley west of Rapid City. At the time, the city was growing from a small mining camp to a regional trade center. By 1900, the population was just over 2,000 people. Due to the persistence of federal regulations limiting the movement of Native peoples from their reservations, only a handful of Rapid City's residents were Native American. In 1898, as the federal government was consolidating a group of homestead plots, Congress appropriated funds for the Rapid City Indian School. Over the next several years, it added additional acreages including the Cleghorn Spring, which pumped water to the school's campus and, for a time, served as the main source of drinking water in Rapid City. By 1907, the school's property totaled 1,391.16 acres and extended from what is now Baken Park in the east to Canyon Lake in the west. Overall, the boarding school lands totaled around two square miles of property.¹⁵¹

Like federal boarding schools across the United States the Rapid City Indian School sought to assimilate Native children into mainstream American society. To this end, government officials removed children from their homes, often by force or coercion, and took them to boarding schools. There, children were forbidden from speaking Native languages, practicing Indigenous ceremonies or traditions, wearing customary hairstyles and clothes, and more. Meanwhile, students were made to participate in a combination of academic curriculum, social training, and manual labor. Through this "industrial education," as it was called, Native children would be prepared for integration into non-Native society. This is why the boarding school property was so large. To be self-sustaining, the campus required outbuildings and infrastructure and fields for farms and livestock like dairy cows. As part of their daily tasks, students attended academic courses and then worked to support the facility's operations and maintain the sprawling, rural campus.

The first class of students at the Rapid City Indian School arrived in 1898. Although some students came from the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, the Pine Ridge and Cheyenne River Reservations accounted for more than 80 percent of the student body.¹⁵² During the 35 years of the school's operation, thousands of Native children from reservations in South Dakota, North Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana attended the institution. Enrollment regularly topped 300 students in the 1920s. In 1927, US President Calvin Coolidge and First Lady Grace Coolidge toured the campus during the summer they spent in Rapid City.¹⁵³

Life at the school was difficult. The staff enforced strict codes of conduct, using corporal punishment that ranged from beatings to solitary confinement before federal regulations prohibited these practices. At least 40 children died at the school from diseases

¹⁵¹ "Indian School Not at Fault," *Rapid City Journal*, August 3, 1909.

¹⁵² Riney, "Life at the Rapid City Indian Boarding School," in "An Inconvenient Truth," *Rapid City Journal* May 4, 2017.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

like tuberculosis, malaria or meningitis; work accidents; and other, unknown causes. Several died, and others were maimed while attempting to escape and return to their families. The exact numbers of enrollments and deaths are difficult to determine, in part because many records from the school's early years were destroyed and because existing records are vague. In some cases, staff failed to record the names of deceased children. In other cases, the school never informed families of their child's death, and many of the children were buried in unmarked graves on the school's campus.¹⁵⁴

In 1929 and 1930, the school closed due to a tuberculosis outbreak and served as a temporary sanitarium. The school reopened briefly but was closed for good in 1933. Three factors contributed to the closure. First, the federal government developed a growing awareness of the shortcomings of the boarding school model and the goals of assimilatory education and began to phase out residential boarding schools across the country while revising core tenets of the curriculum. Second, the Great Depression created new demand for federal facilities and resources. Finally, as scientists better understood the transmission of infectious disease, officials raised concerns about community members living near and visiting the sanitarium. This inspired a reevaluation of the ways the federal government should use the boarding school land and facilities.¹⁵⁵

After the school closed, the campus was converted to a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp. Between 1933 and 1939, the CCC and the Works Progress Administration conducted extensive renovations that created the buildings, landscape, and general aesthetic that would characterize the main campus into the 2020s.

The federal government started construction on the main building of the Sioux Sanitarium in 1938. The facility opened in 1938 and served as a tuberculosis clinic for Native American patients into the 1960s. (Another sanitarium for non-Native patients operated in Custer.) Many patients died during this period, and again, some may have been buried on the grounds. Sioux San became part of the Indian Health Service in 1955. As treatments for tuberculosis improved, the facility transitioned to a full service medical clinic for Native patients, a role it continued to fill until very recently.¹⁵⁶

Boarding School Lands

Rapid City boomed as Sioux San underwent these changes in the 1940s, solidifying its place as the largest urban center in West River, South Dakota. The population nearly doubled from around 14,000 to 27,000 people, driven by the opening of the Rapid City Air Base during World War II and its postwar expansion. In 1947, a city report noted that it would need to quickly add 1,500 dwellings (800 rentals and 700 owner-occupied homes) to keep up with demand.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Riney, "Life at the Rapid City Indian Boarding School."

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Kibbe Conti, "History of Sioux San as a Segregated Tuberculosis Clinic," in "An Inconvenient Truth."

¹⁵⁷ "City Needs 1,500 New Dwellings According to Housing Survey," *Rapid City Journal*, June 8, 1947.

As the city expanded, the federal government realized that it no longer required the large acreage once used for the school to support the operations of the Sioux Sanitarium. In the late 1940s, the Department of the Interior made plans to reduce the Sanitarium's campus and make the remaining property available to other entities in the Rapid City community. Immediately, stakeholders from the city, the chamber of commerce, the school board, the state of South Dakota, members of the Native American community, and area churches began an intensive lobbying effort to gain access to the former boarding school lands.

Informed by these discussions, in May 1948, Congress passed a law authorizing the Secretary of the Interior "to convey without compensation any lands contained in the Sioux Sanitarium Farm at Rapid City, South Dakota, not necessary for the administration and operation of the Sioux Indians Sanitarium, to the City of Rapid City for municipal purposes, or to any public-school district for educational purposes, or to the State of South Dakota for use of the South Dakota National Guard." The act also made portions of that land available to "church organizations for religious purposes, upon receipt of the reasonable value of such lands," and to "utilize any of the said lands for the rehabilitation of needy Indians." The law also contained a clause stating that "the title to any lands so conveyed shall revert to the United States of America when the land is no longer used for the purposes for which such lands were initially conveyed."¹⁵⁸

Over the next few years, the city, the school district, and the state created Sioux Park, several schools and school facilities (including Canyon Lake Elementary, West Middle School, and Stevens High School), Camp Rapid, and the National Guard training facility west of Stevens. Meanwhile, several diocesan church organizations purchased acreages.¹⁵⁹ Some kept the land and built facilities for new congregations organized as the city grew on the West Side. (See the essay on postwar churches in Rapid City.) Other church organizations sold all or part of the land at substantial profits to real estate developers who created residential neighborhoods on the former boarding school property.

An early, informal agreement provided that the Native community would receive land for a housing development near what is now West Middle School. But a group of neighborhood residents petitioned the City and threatened to seek a legal injunction if plans for Native housing in the area moved forward.¹⁶⁰ As a result, none of the more than 1,200 acres of former boarding school land went to the "needy Indians" included in the 1948 Act.

The dispersal of the boarding school lands intersected with broader processes that shaped the racial landscape of Rapid City at midcentury. In 1952, the DOI conveyed just over 27 acres of land to the City of Rapid City, which then sold that land to the Rapid City

¹⁵⁸ Public Law 543, H.R. 5651, "An Act Authorizing the Secretary of the Interior to Convey Certain Lands in South Dakota for Municipal or Public Purposes," May 20, 1948.

¹⁵⁹ "Sioux Indian School Lands Grants to City Approved," *Rapid City Journal*, May 11, 1948.

¹⁶⁰ "Local Indians Request Some of Their Land," *Rapid City Journal*, June 16, 1948; "Petitions Protest Indian Camping Ground Proposal," *Rapid City Journal*, November 11, 1951; "Oshkosh Camp Should Go to Soo San Land-Decision," *Rapid City Journal*, April 26, 1953; "Commission Leaves Indian Camp Business Up in Air," *Rapid City Journal*, May 5, 1953.

Independent School District for \$15,000. The school district built West Middle School on that property. Meanwhile, the city gave the \$15,000 to a city organization called the “Mayor’s Committee on Human Relations,” which used the funds to buy 20 acres of property north of Rapid City. That plot of land became the Sioux Addition, and many Native families were moved there following the dismantling of the Osh Kosh Camp in 1954. (See the essay on Indigenous Presence: Deep History to 2021.) Over time, continued economic challenges and formal and informal processes of residential discrimination pushed the majority of the Native community to the North Side of Rapid City, where they have continued to face high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage ever since.

In the decades following the dispersal of the boarding school/Sioux San lands, members of the Native community sought recourse. For 60 years, Native community members and groups repeatedly raised this issue with local and federal officials. They requested numerous property allocations; developed plans for housing, economic development initiatives, cultural centers, and more. Many sought investigations into why the Native community, despite these efforts, never received portions of that property.¹⁶¹

Around 2013, a new generation of Native leaders in Rapid City reopened this issue. Their research began during the 75th anniversary celebration of the Sioux San IHS hospital, when a group of elders asked them to locate the graves of the children who died at the boarding school. Conducting land research towards this end, the researchers once again surfaced the challenging history of the boarding school and the inequities related to the dissolution of the associated property. In November 2020, the Rapid City Council adopted a resolution acknowledging this history and committing to a plan to move the community forward on constructive terms.

¹⁶¹ See for example, Bob Imrie, “Investigation Sought on Deeds, Use of Land,” *Rapid City Journal*, July 17, 1981.

Documentation

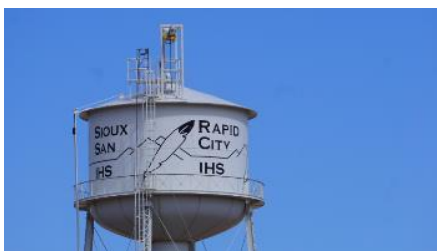
Plaque installed by the Works Progress Administration following improvements to the Sioux San campus in 1939.

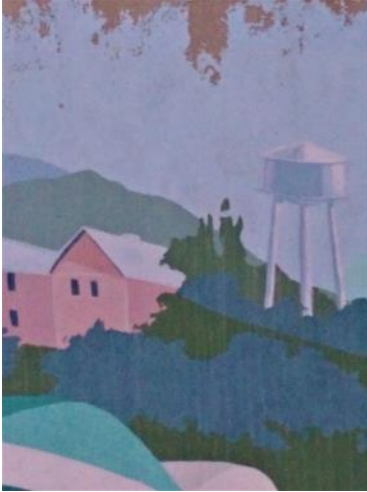


Many of the structures on the Sioux San campus have undergone updates over the years.



The water tower at Sioux San (above) stood from roughly 1932 until it was demolished in September 2020. Today, all that remains of the tower is its appearance on a mural painted on the side of the racquetball courts at Sioux Park (below).





The name “Sioux San” is a shortened version of “Sioux Sanitarium,” a name which hearkens to the facility’s history as a boarding school, primarily Native tuberculosis sanitarium, and Indian Health Service Hospital.



The Sioux Sanitarium came under the jurisdiction of the Indian Health Service in the 1950s.



Stevens High School (right) and much of the open space nearby were part of the boarding school lands.



Soldier Drive marks the gated entrance to the South Dakota National Guard training area across from Stevens High School. The National Guard received that land, along with the property for Camp Rapid, under the 1948 Act.



The Oyate Health Center/Sioux San and West Middle School looking east from the top of the hill where a community group hopes to build a memorial to the children who died at the Rapid City Indian School.



The south parking lot at West Middle School looks over the hillside where the children's memorial will be located.



The Canyon Lake/Jamie Johnson baseball complex from the Oyate Health Center/Sioux San campus.



The Catholic Church was the first religious organization to purchase boarding school/Sioux San property under the 1948 Act. In 1949, it bought just under 35 acres and built Blessed Sacrament Church.



Several churches that acquired land under the 1948 Act sold all or part of that property to real estate developers who created the neighborhoods within the original boundaries of the boarding school/Sioux San lands.



Maps/Historic Photographs

Rapid City Indian School campus, early 20th century.
Rise Photography



Chapel at the Rapid City Indian School, 1908.
McNamara Publications



Students entering a building on the boarding school campus, early 20th century.

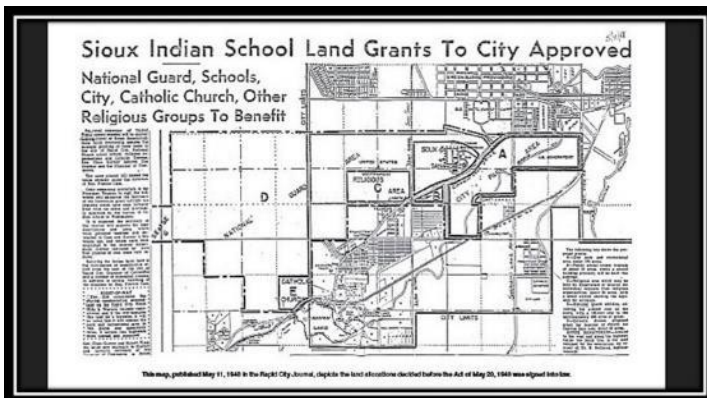


President Calvin Coolidge greets a group of boarding school students in 1927.

<https://blackhillsknowledgenetwork.omeka.net/items/show/11>



A map of the entities slated to receive boarding school/Sioux San lands published in the *Rapid City Journal* in 1948.



The original boarding school property extended from what is now Mountain View Road in the east to Canyon Lake in the southwest and includes the extent of the National Guard training facility.

Heather Dawn Thompson, 2017



Vintage postcard of the Rapid City Indian School.
Cardcow.com

