



**Scott Riney.** *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. x + 278 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3162-7.



**Reviewed by** Izumi Ishii (Department of Russian and Eastern Studies, University of Kentucky)

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## Indian Boarding School Experience at Rapid City

At the turn of the century, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas Jefferson Morgan (1889-93) advocated universal compulsory education for Indian children. Believing that it would help solve the “Indian problem,” Morgan encouraged the establishment of off-reservation boarding schools. When the Rapid City Indian School opened its doors to Northern Plains Indian children in 1898, more than twenty Indian boarding schools had accommodated Indian students living away from home. In *The Rapid City Indian School, 1898-1933*, Scott Riney seeks to reveal the complexity of the Indian boarding school experience. Using various school records, correspondence, government documents, and oral histories, Riney’s topical study presents an overview of how the Rapid City Indian School served the interests of the federal government as well as Indian people.

Riney defines an off-reservation boarding school as “the government’s most powerful weapon against tribes and tribal cultures” (p. 7). Isolated from their families and traditions, Indian children were supposed to learn the English language and Christianity as well as Anglo-American lifestyle and trading skills to prepare them-

selves for assimilation into American society. Recruiting Indian children on the reservations of Wyoming, Montana, and western South Dakota, the Rapid City Indian School secured students, most of whom, Riney suggests, chose to enroll in this specific school. Some believed that off-reservation boarding schools offered a better education than reservation or mission schools. Some chose to come to Rapid City because they wanted to be with their friends; others attended because it had employed their family members. The school catalog and school personnel also impressed Indian children with their dedication and encouraged them to enroll in this particular off-reservation boarding school. The Rapid City Indian School even provided shelter for impoverished children when Indian communities could not support them. Collected from various places and separated from families and reservation life, Indian children commenced their education and group life at the Rapid City Indian School.

During thirty-five years of its history between 1898 and 1933, the Rapid City Indian School educated children in fourth through eight grades with occasional acceptances of students from lower grades, and in 1917, it

extended its curriculum to the tenth grade. With their time regulated by bells and steam whistles, students at Rapid City spent half a day on academic learning and the other half on vocational training. Superintendent Jesse F. House (1904-22) had observed that proximity to the Rapid City public high school, the South Dakota School of Mines, and the Business College provided Indian students with a better educational environment at the Rapid City Indian School than at other Indian schools. Nevertheless, by 1920, the school had to end the practice of sending its graduates to these finer institutions because the students at Rapid City spent much of their time on vocational instruction “to keep the school running,” and they could not master the academic subjects essential to pursuing a higher education (p. 117). “Vocational instruction” was often little more than manual labor. Unable to afford clothes for students, for example, the school instructed female students to sew boys’ trousers for their male classmates. As Riney concludes, the Rapid City Indian School was not an academically sophisticated institution and rarely produced well-educated or even vocationally well-trained students. The school did not fulfill the assimilative goals of the federal government.

According to Riney, for most students at Rapid City, the transition from Indian to Anglo-American life was not as abrupt as in reservation boarding schools or mission schools because the Rapid City Indian School was not their first schooling. They probably had experienced having their long hair cut or their clothes stripped off in their initial schooling, and so Rapid City allowed students to keep their own clothing. Still, the school was not sufficiently lenient or liberal to prevent student “deserters.” Students who ran away from the school incurred severe punishment. Riney compares many of the punitive practices at Rapid City to those in the U.S. Army: Once recaptured, children had their heads shaved; they were chained altogether. School employees forced them to march across the campus until they had covered the distance they had run away. When they were not marching, they were confined in a school jail. The school

also assigned them forced labor which ranged from splitting firewood while wearing a ball and chain to working the entire summer on campus when their friends had gone home for vacation. While Riney points out that the superintendents of the Rapid City Indian School failed to understand why Indian children ran away from the school, he himself does not provide any specific reasons for their turmoil except that “it was an act of resistance” (p. 150).

The Rapid City Indian School was not only an educational institution. It employed its graduates and other educated Indians as assistants; it also substituted for the Indian agencies in serving those who lived in the city and away from their reservations. School employees, therefore, supervised a wide range of Indian economic activities. Though he recognizes the valuable services the school offered for the off-reservation Indian population, Riney concludes that the Rapid City Indian School was more like “extending reservation controls to Indians living in the city” (p. 214).

Riney describes the Rapid City Indian School as “a predominantly Lakota school” (p. 15). Did this rather uniform student body give the school any peculiar characteristics? Did it affect the operation of the school? Did it help Indian children retain their Lakota traditions? How much, in fact, did the students benefit from the schooling at Rapid City? What was their pre-school history, and what did they actually accomplish at Rapid City? Readers may want to know exactly what the students learned as well as what the school taught them. Still, Riney has produced an important case study of an off-reservation Indian boarding school, which will enhance further scholarly discussion about Indian schools and education.

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