

2. Francis La Flesche's Memories of Boarding School

One young clerk working in the office of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the 1880s (see section 1 above) was not comfortable with what he heard there. Francis La Flesche was an Omaha Indian. His grandfather had been a French trader, and his father was therefore somewhat acquainted with white culture and decided to send his young son to a Presbyterian boarding school. As an adult living and working in Washington, DC, the former boarding school scholar decided to go to law school. He also worked with anthropologist Alice C. Fletcher, who had long been his mentor, in hopes of preserving knowledge of his people's culture. In 1910, he went to work for the Bureau of American Ethnology. He had become, in fact if not in name, an anthropologist in his own right. In a book he published in 1900, he attempted to convey to educated, policy-making Americans what he believed they needed to know about Indian children, writing in as accessible a style as possible.

Preface

As the object of this book is to reveal the true nature and character of the Indian boy, I have chosen to write the story of my school-fellows rather than that of my other . . . friends who knew only the aboriginal life. I have made this choice not because the influences of the school alter the qualities of the boys, but that they might appear under conditions and in an attire familiar to the reader. The paint, feathers, robes, and other articles that make up the dress of the Indian, are marks of savagery to the European, and he who wears them, however appropriate or significant they might be to himself, finds it difficult to lay claim to a share in common human nature. So while the school uniform did not change those who wore it, in this instance, it may help these little Indians to be judged, as are other boys, by what they say and do.

It is not my purpose to give a continued story with a hero in the following pages, but, in a series of sketches, to present the companions of my own young days to the children of the race that has become possessed of the land of my fathers . . .

All the boys in our school were given English names, because their Indian names were difficult for the teachers to pronounce. Besides, the aboriginal names were considered by the missionaries as heathenish, and therefore should be obliterated. No less heathenish in their origins were the English substitutes, but the loss of their original meaning and significance through long usage had rendered them fit to continue as appellations for civilized folk. And so, in the place of Tae-noo'-ga-wa-zhe, came Philip Sheridan; in that of Wa-pah'-des, Ulysses S. Grant, that of Koo'-we'he'ge'ra, Alexander, and so on . . . The names thus acquired by the boys are used in these sketches in preference to their own, for the reason that Indian words are not only difficult to pronounce, but are apt to sound all alike to one not familiar with the language, and the boys who figure in these pages might lose their identity and fail to stand out clearly in the mind of the reader were he obliged to continually struggle with their Omaha names . . .

The misconception of Indian life and character so common among the white people has been largely due to an ignorance of the Indian's language, of his mode of thought, his beliefs, his ideals, and his native institutions. Every aspect of the Indian and his manner of life has always been strange to the white man, and this strangeness has been magnified by the mists of prejudice and the conflict of interests between the two races. While these in time may disappear, no native American can ever cease to regret that the utterances of his father have been constantly belittled when put into English, that their thoughts have frequently been travestied and their native dignity obscured. The average interpreter has generally picked up his knowledge of English in a random fashion, for very few have ever had the advantage of a thorough education, and all have had to deal with the difficulties that attend the translator. The beauty and picturesqueness, and euphonious playfulness, or the gravity of diction which I have heard among my own people, and other tribes as well, are all but impossible to be given literally in English . . .

Chapter 11: A New Study

It was a hot September afternoon; our gingham handkerchiefs, which matched our shirts, were wet with mopping our faces. We all felt cross; Gray-beard was cross, and everything we did went wrong.

Warren, who had been sent to the spring for a pail of cold water, leaned over his desk to Brush, and whispered loud enough for the boys around us to hear, "A big black carriage came up to the gate just now, and the Agent and three other big fat men got out. The super'tendent shook hands with them, and they went to his room."

While Gray-beard was shaking a boy to make him read correctly, the news of the black carriage and the fat men went from boy to boy. The girls

were dying to know what word it was the boys were passing around; but the aisle that separated them from us was too wide to whisper across. Warren's girl made signs to him which he at first did not understand; when he caught her meaning, he tore a fly-leaf out of his book, wrote on it, rolled it into a ball and threw it to the girl, who deftly caught it; these two were adepts at such transmission of messages. The girl unfolded the paper, read it, and passed it on; then the girls felt better and resumed their work.

The class in mental arithmetic took the floor. Not one of the boys knew his lesson. As the recitation went on, Gray-beard's face darkened and his forehead wrinkled; he came to a timid youngster with a hard question. I knew there was going to be trouble for the little chap; so, to save him pain and distress, I thought of a plan by which to distract Gray-beard's attention. I reached under my desk and took hold of a thread which I carefully drew until my thumb and finger touched the stiff paper to which it was attached, then, as the boy stammered out the wrong answer and Gray-beard made an impatient movement toward him, I gave the thread a gentle pull, "Biz-z-z-z!" it went.

"Who's making that noise?" asked Gray-beard, turning toward our end of the school-room.

I loosened the pressure, and the noise ceased. When Gray-beard returned to the boy, I again pulled the thread, "Biz-z-z-z-!" Something was wrong this time; the buzzing did not cease, it became louder and angrier.

"Who's doing that?" exclaimed Gray-beard.

Every boy and girl looked up to him as though to say, "I did not do it." The buzzing went on; I alone kept my eyes on my book, and so aroused suspicion. I did not dare put my hand under the desk again to stop the buzzing, for I had lost the thread. Gray-beard came towards me and asked, "What have you there?" I did not answer.

"Stand up and let me see!" he exclaimed. Before I could give him any warning, he put his hand in the desk and felt about; he sprang back with a cry, "Ah! I'm bitten! Is it a snake?"

"No, it isn't," I answered; and, peering carefully into the desk, I drew out the buzzing thing and showed it to him; it was only a wasp fastened by its slender waist to a sheet of paper.

Although he felt relieved of his fright, the pain of the sting was arousing his anger, and I saw that there was trouble coming to me: but at that moment the door opened and in walked the superintendent and the four fat men. Gray-beard went forward and was introduced to them. There was a scramble by three of the large boys to get chairs from the dining-room for the visitors. When the gentlemen had made a quiet survey of our faces, they sat down and questioned Gray-beard about the branches taught at the school, and the progress made by the pupils. In the meantime I had released my prisoner; it went buzzing around the room, and then maneuvered over

the bald head of one of the visitors, who beat the air with his hands to ward it off.

“Frank, catch that wasp,” said Gray-beard.

I caught the troublesome creature in my hat and turned it out of doors.

When the questioning of the visitors was over, Gray-beard turned to us and said, “Now, children, pay strict attention; these gentlemen want to see what you have learned. I will put some questions to you.”

We became so silent that we could hear a pin drop. The visitors smiled upon us pleasantly, as though to encourage us.

“Who discovered America?” asked the Gray-beard. Dozens of hands went up. “Abraham, you may answer.”

An expression of amusement spread over the faces of the scholars as the great awkward boy stood up. Gray-beard must have been bewildered by the sting of the wasp and the sudden appearance of visitors, else he would not have made such a blunder; for he knew very well what every boy and girl of the school could do; however there was no help for it now; Abraham Lincoln, standing with his hands in his pockets had the floor; he put his weight on one foot and then on the other, the very picture of embarrassment; he cleared his throat, looked helplessly at me, and then at Brush, – “Come,” said Gray-beard, “we are waiting.”

“George Washington!” answered Abraham.

A titter ran around among the pupils. Gray-beard’s face turned red, then white, as he said, “Abraham, take your seat. Brush, can you tell us who discovered America?”

“Columbus,” promptly answered the boy. Then a series of questions were asked, which the children answered voluntarily, and did credit to their teacher. The visitors nodded approvingly to each other. When the examination was over, the Agent arose and, addressing the school, said:

“You have acquitted yourselves well in this sudden and unexpected test; I will now ask you to spell for me. Here is a book,” said he, turning the leaves of a pretty gilt edged volume, “which I will give to the scholar who can spell best.”

Taking a spelling book, he gave out the words himself. We all stood up, and those who misspelled a word sat down. One by one the pupils dropped to their seats, until only Brush, a big girl, and I remained on the floor; finally I was sent down, and the girl and Brush went on; they were now in the midst of the hard words. At last Brush failed; the girl also misspelled the word, but as the prize book could not be divided, it was given to her.

“Are the children taught music?” asked one of the strangers.

“No, replied the superintendent; “but they can sing nearly all of the Sunday-school hymns.”

“They should be taught music as well as reading and spelling,” remarked the gentlemen, then, addressing the children, he asked:

“Have your people music, and do they sing?”

“They do,” answered one of the large boys.

“I wish you would sing an Indian song for me,” continued the man. “I never heard one.”

There was some hesitancy, but suddenly a loud clear voice close to me broke into a Victory song; before a bar was sung another voice took up the song from the beginning, as is the custom among the Indians, then the whole school fell in, and we made the room ring. We understood the song, and knew the emotion of which it was the expression. We felt, as we sang, the patriotic thrill of a victorious people who had vanquished their enemies; but the men shook their heads, and one of them said, “That’s savage, that’s savage! They must be taught music.”

Source: Francis La Flesche, *The Middle Five: Indian Schoolboys of the Omaha Tribe* (University of Nebraska Press, 1963 [1900]), pp. xv–xix, 96–100.

Study and further exploration: See section 1 above. In addition, Luther Standing Bear, Charles Ohiyesa Eastman, and others wrote compellingly on their experiences in boarding schools. Their work could be meaningfully compared with Francis La Flesche’s.