

Dividing Gertrude from Zitkála-Šá

Zitkála-Šá (“Red Bird”) was born in 1876 on the Yankton Indian Reservation in South Dakota, where she lived until she reached 8-years-old. At that age, Quaker missionaries conscripted children from the Reservation (including Zitkála-Šá) and relocated them to Wabash, Indiana at the White’s Indiana Manual Labor Institute – a boarding school for native cultural assimilation. Zitkála-Šá was given the name “Gertrude Simmons” and began her conflicting journey as a Native American person being coerced to eradicate her heritage.

White’s Indiana Manual Labor Institute was supported as part of a United States federal policy initiative in the mid-to-late 1800s, which prioritized the forced assimilation of Native Americans into Anglo-American culture. The idea of these schools, in the words of their proponents, was to “(kill) the Indian in him, and save the man.” By luring children far away from their homes and culture with promises of education, the boarding schools would then impose a strict environment on the children: banning their native languages and cultural practices; changing their names (as happened to Zitkála-Šá); coercing them into adopting Christianity; and using the students as a source of hard physical labor for the school. Because of the boarding school’s complete lack of care when it came to cultural conflict, they often ran roughshod over Native American culture norms, creating an air of humiliation for the children that was compounded with physical and verbal abuse. Zitkála-Šá experienced this early in her time with White’s Indiana Manual Labor Institute, when she resisted the school cutting her hair – a grave insult in her culture associated with the shame of captured warriors. In response, school officials tied her to a chair to make the cut.

Indeed, the boarding school proponents may well have stopped with “(kill) the Indian” – as the schools often had that deadly effect. Unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, and malnutrition led to savage outbreaks of disease among the students. Facing those conditions, many students ran away, only to find that the schools offered a bounty for the capture of runaway students. Other children committed suicide. Deaths at boarding schools were so common that boarding schools had their own cemeteries – and children often built their classmates’ coffins. Those children who survived the schools’ inhumane conditions were often scarred by their traumatic experiences for the rest of their lives.

Zitkála-Šá returned to the Reservation in 1887 (then aged 11-years-old), but felt out of place given her experiences at the boarding school and ultimately chose to return to further her education. She studied piano and violin and was eventually offered a job as a music teacher at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which served as a flagship boarding school throughout the United States. She was asked to recruit more students from her home Reservation, and upon her arrival was distraught by the conditions and occupation of the Yankton lands. She began writing to present her people in a positive light in opposition to the negative, racist stereotypes portrayed to encourage the implementation of boarding schools.

In 1902, Zitkála-Šá married and moved with her family to the Uintah-Ouray Reservation in Utah, where they resided for the next 14 years. She continued writing and collaborated on composing the first Native American-written opera. She joined the Society of American Indians with the intention of pursuing full United States citizenship for Native American peoples. (Native Americans in this time period were not considered US citizens under the 14th Amendment, which change would not come about until the federal Indian Citizenship Act was passed by Congress in 1924). Zitkála-Šá and her family then moved to Washington, DC in 1916 and actively engaged in civil rights and suffrage efforts for Native Americans for years to come.

Zitkála-Šá utilized her experiences to bring perspective to the issues of Native American rights and access to preserving Native American culture and heritage, all while educating people. Loss of identity, abuse, theft, and other impacts of cultural assimilation and boarding school programs still remain prevalent in Native American communities (and in American culture as a whole). Zitkála-Šá died in 1928, and is buried with her husband in Arlington National Cemetery. That same year, the U.S. government commissioned the influential Meriam Report, an official report that criticized the boarding schools’ ineffectual education programs, their deteriorating conditions, and heavy manual labor imposed on children like Zitkála-Šá.