

# Unraveling a shattered history

Historians piece together remnants of the past in an attempt to give burial grounds the respect they deserve.



SuAnn Reddick

Story by Shannon Keaveny

A dilapidated and rusted fence borders the Chemawa Cemetery on the Chemawa Indian School property, northeast of Salem. The fence curves downward into a slew.

Inside the fence, Douglas firs tower over the two hundred gravesites, which are minuscule in comparison.

Green grass shadows the small metal plates with student names, tribal enrollments, and dates of birth and death engraved.

For the passerby, the only obvious indication of a graveyard is the looming wrought-

iron sign that says, "1886 Chemawa Cemetery."

Most of the students buried here died while attending the school before 1940 as part of a government forced assimilation plan for Native American children.

Many died of consumption and the Spanish flu.

There are reasons a body was not returned to the family. In those days, it took 6 weeks to transport a body by train. For this reason, a burial at the school was a better choice.

Often letters to the family took too long to arrive. Many children were orphans.

When the Spanish flu epidemic hit the school, children died almost weekly. The govern-

ment quarantined dead bodies to prevent the virus from spreading. The bodies were usually quickly buried.

In 1960, the long-neglected and overgrown lot was bulldozed in an effort to clean it up.

Tombstones disappeared in the nearby slew. The cyclone fence, today in dire need of being replaced, was installed. Sheep were put inside the fence to keep the grasses down.

For reasons not historically documented, school faculty and students took almost immediate action to recreate the cemetery.

The only remaining documentation of grave locations was a map from 1940.

Based on the map, students and faculty reconstructed the matrix of graves with strings and stakes.

Students made new grave-stones with metal plates. A new map was created in 1960.

SuAnn Reddick, Chemawa Indian School volunteer historian, doubts the accuracy of the 1940 and 1960 maps due to many reasons.

"When the students copied the names, they made errors. Registered names and tribal enrollment at the school were also incorrect or misspelled at times," she said.

Also, according to Reddick, birth and death dates are sometimes wrong.

People, like Reddick and fellow historian Cary Collins, have made it their mission to give each grave a correct name.

"It's a real project to untangle the information and make it as accurate as possible," said Reddick.

Reddick also suspects the graveyard may have at one time been larger.

She believes this because some student records indicate a student died at the school, but there is not a gravesite to go with the name.

Fitting names with graves is often through the process of elimination.

"There are different sources

## Can you identify these students?



The photograph above is the first Chemawa Indian School all-boys class from Warm Springs, taken in 1880. Chemawa Indian School Historian SuAnn Reddick needs to put names with faces. In some cases, the tribal identity may be incorrect. The students names and tribal identity, according to Chemawa Indian School records, are: Benjamin Miller (Wasco), Jerry Hollaquila (Wasco), George J. Piute (Paiute), George Pinouse (Wasco) William Skitus (Wasco), Frank Meacham (Wasco), and Melville Rex (Wasco). Some of these students may have died at the school and be buried at the Chemawa Cemetery. If you know who is who, contact SuAnn Reddick at (503) 472-4005 or [cissuann@viclink.com](mailto:cissuann@viclink.com). Photo taken by Davidson. To view a larger picture, stop by the Spilyay Tymoo office.

that appear valid. But, ultimately, tribal rolls and memories will have the final say," said Reddick.

But progress has been made. Much of that progress is creating public awareness and finding funds to maintain and support the Chemawa Cemetery Restoration Project.

Last May, a memorial was held at the cemetery to reclaim the history of the children who never returned from Chemawa.

"It was a poignant realization that these children are being remembered for the first time," said Reddick of the memorial. "The whole restoration project is about healing. Families are wounded."

Volunteers for the cemetery are planning another memorial this year and would like to make it an annual event.

Just weeks ago, volunteer students spent a Sunday cleaning

up accumulated garbage around the cemetery.

Currently, the only cemetery maintenance funding is a limited allowance from the BIA.

Also, the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians (ATNI), a non-profit promoting tribal sovereignty, has taken up the cause.

In 2001, ATNI passed a resolution dedicated to finding the means to restore gravesites and repair the cemetery grounds, retrieve information and share with tribes as historical data, and develop a permanent maintenance program for the cemetery.

In 2002, another resolution was passed that included ATNI's belief that the cemetery should fall under the protection of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990.

NAGPRA states that Native American human remains

placed on federal lands during a death rite or ceremony are protected.

In 2003, ATNI passed another resolution that plans to create a Chemawa Committee, which would address efforts to find more funds and legal protection for the cemetery.

Reddick plans to circulate former student names, still shrouded by mystery, among Northwest tribal elders.

She hopes doing this will facilitate the process of families reclaiming their history.

"Tribal memories are critical to the project," she says, "I hope more people get involved and we are able to receive grant money to support our efforts."

Please see the photo of former Warm Springs students above. To contact SuAnn Reddick, call (503) 472-4005 or email [cissuann@viclink.com](mailto:cissuann@viclink.com).

# Chemawa: students purchased some of the land

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Although initially created for the forced assimilation of Indian children, today Chemawa Indian School - 123-years old and thousands of students later - has become a historically important place for Native Americans.

Of the 30,000 students that have attended the school, thousands have been from Warm Springs.

Between Interstate 5 and the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks lies an 86-acre parcel of land. The piece of land is where the original Chemawa campus was built.

Today the old buildings are gone, but the Chemawa Cemetery, a burial ground for over 200 Native Americans, still exists. Most of the gravesites are those of students who died while attending school. Due to the efforts of Bill Wilson, a Salem local, and others, the parcel of land was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992. The National Register is a national program that identifies cultural resources worthy of preservation.

"We have a historical and cultural resource that's irreplaceable," said SuAnn Reddick, volunteer historian at Chemawa Indian School, "The cemetery is like the heart."

Still, the land may be at risk. The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) surveyed the land last June to determine if it is "underutilized." Federal law mandates the GSA survey federal land periodically. The

survey decides whether the land is underutilized.

According to Zunie, land determined underutilized is then turned over to the BIA. The BIA, the Chemawa School Board, and the ATNI have the power to declare the land "excess," if it is unneeded, said Zunie. Excess land is at high risk of being declared "surplus" by the GSA.

"Land declared surplus is like an open door," says Speaks.

The GSA disposes of real property (land and buildings) using the following process:

*Once a federal agency determines it has unneeded property, that property is declared to be excess property. It is available for transfer to any other federal agency. If no agencies want the excess property, it is declared surplus to federal needs. It may then be donated to state or local governments or selected non-profit organizations, or it may be sold through public auctions.*

Despite this policy, Speaks remains confident the land will not be declared surplus as long as the school is open.

"We are not in a position to transfer the land. We don't want to lose the property to another entity. We can do that only if the school is not in use. At this point we have no intention of doing that," said Speaks.

"There is a zero chance that will happen," said Zunie of the 86-acre parcel that may be at risk of being declared surplus.

The cemetery situated within the 86-acre parcel is enough to

declare the land utilized, said Speaks.

But what if the school closes down? At least two times in history the BIA has threatened to close down the school. The first time was in the 1930s due to a poor economy. The most recent threat was in the 1970s, because officials felt an Indian school was no longer necessary. If the school closes, 123 years of Native American history could be lost to developers.

Also, as recently as 1997, 15 acres of Chemawa land was transferred as "excess" property. Zunie claims the land was declared "excess" because the highway divided it from the school. The Chemawa School Board gave written permission to relinquish 15 acres to the Siletz and Grand Ronde tribes with the caveat the land would be used to benefit Chemawa students.

Yet, the deed for the land transfer states nothing about using the land for the benefit of the students. In addition, although the school board approved only 15 acres, 19.86 acres were transferred. Speaks said the BIA "did not need permission" for the additional acreage added into the deed.

The cemetery itself may never be threatened. But the acreage surrounding it is some of the last undeveloped land surrounding a freeway interchange in Oregon. There is probably a high value on the land.

Reddick fears that if action is not taken, hotels and gas sta-

tions may someday nuzzle the fence of the cemetery.

The historically rich land could be lost to pavement.

Putting the land in trust of the nine Oregon tribes may be the only solution to the potential problem, Reddick said. To Reddick's knowledge the BIA has not been approached about putting the land "in trust" for the Oregon tribes.

"We need a good solid legal argument," said Reddick.

Hope for Chemawa lies in the 1990 success of Sante Fe Indian School in Sante Fe, New Mexico. Nineteen Indian pueblos in New Mexico managed, with a legal fight, to get the BIA to agree to donate the land to them.

After many years of legislation, the Pueblos became the owners of the school land collectively. Today, the BIA holds the land in trust, affording it the same protection as a reservation.

Hope may also lie in the treaty rights of Native Americans and the documented fact that Indian students purchased a large part of the land.

**Who owns Chemawa Indian School Property?**

History proves the school board and the tribes have little control over what happens to the land.

Speaks says the BIA will not relinquish land without the permission of the school board.

More often than not the school has sold property to settle financial woes or giving up land because of the encroachment

of Interstate-5. All Americans face the same fate when the government decides they want to build a highway through your backyard: Take what financial compensation you can get.

Yet, Oregon tribes are guaranteed the funding of education in their treaties. It could be argued Chemawa Indian School should not have to sell their land to finance basic needs for students.

More significantly, it could be argued the land belongs to the Tribes because Indian students purchased a large portion of the school property.

"The belief that the students purchased 260 acres is a relatively new development," Reddick explains.

Historical records indicate the first parcel of Salem land purchased in 1885 may have been with the aid of student monies.

The first location of the school was in Forest Grove on the Pacific University campus.

An excerpt from the Chemawa Indian School newspaper, *Indian Citizen*, published at Forest Grove in February of 1884 regarding the attempt of the school to purchase a piece of land near Newberg, states:

*Mr. Smith from Newberg was in town on the 28<sup>th</sup> looking after the title to one hundred acres of land at Newberg, Oregon, which the citizens of Newberg and the employees and members of our school are trying to buy for the school. The children have subscribed from one to fifty dollars each in all over \$550.*

The Newberg property was never purchased. Instead, a part of the current property was purchased. In April 1885, "donors" purchased the first 177 acres of the new Chemawa campus. The Statesman *Journal* newspaper in Salem celebrated the decision and wrote, "sufficient money had been raised." According to the deed, \$3,000 in cash was paid for the land "for use of an Indian industrial farm and school."

The only historical documentation of where the money may have come from is found in the *Indian Citizen* excerpt. Historians, like Reddick, feel the donors were students and faculty at Chemawa Indian School.

Coincidentally, the following purchase of 83 acres in the spring of 1887 documents that the students and faculty provided the funds.

Again students picked hops to raise money for the land. The superintendent at the time requested permission from the Indian Bureau to allow the school to use the money to purchase the acreage.

In those days, according to Reddick, the land was deeded directly to the federal government, despite where the funds came from.

There was not the infrastructure in that time to credit the students, she said.

"My stance is that this land belongs collectively to all descendants of all the children and families of Native American or Alaskan tribes who attended this school," said Reddick.