

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

The American Experience

by Kathy Gerhardt

In *The White Man's Image*, premiering Monday, February 17 at 9 p.m. as the last episode in the fourth season of *THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE* on PBS, followed Captain Richard Pratt's mission to "civilize" the American Indian -- in his words, "to kill the Indian and save the man" -- and his founding of the Carlisle School for Indian Children in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Featuring interviews with Native Americans, historians, and writers; historical drawings, and remarkable before-and-after photographs of the school children, *In the White Man's Image* tells the story of a humanist experiment gone bad and its consequences for generations of native people.

In 1875, army lieutenant Richard Pratt volunteered to take charge of 72 Indian warriors suspected of killing white settlers, and deliver them to Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida.

Pratt, a Civil War veteran and leader of Indian scouts on the frontier, was one of the few officers who viewed the Indians as human beings. "Much can and should be done to reform these men under banishment," he wrote.

In *The White Man's Image* journeys to Florida to explore the ancient Spanish fort where the warriors were taken and taught to read and write and learn the white man's ways.

"It was quite natural then for Pratt to begin to change them physically," says Professor Henrietta Mann, historian and member of the Cheyenne tribe in the film. "To take off the kind of outer identity by placing them in military uniforms, by cutting their hair, to make them into the image of white men. And it must have been horrifying, because to us, cutting one's hair is a sign of mourning -- of death."

After three years in exile, the government freed the prisoners. For some, the conversion was complete -- one man became a Deacon in the Episcopal Church, another expressed a desire to live in a white man's wood house, "It will be easier to be good if I live in a wood house."

Most of the prisoners, however, returned to their homes and families in Indian territory.

Fort Marion was only the beginning. A year later, Pratt challenged Congress: "Give me 300 young Indians and a school in one of our best communities and I will show you how to solve the Indian problem," he said.

In 1879, Pratt travelled to Dakota Territory to recruit children for his Indian school, a thousand miles away in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. When they arrived at the abandoned army post that would be their home, 169 children

would hire him as a white person. But he was no longer an Indian and he had lost the acceptance of his own people as an Indian, and he ended up existing in a shadow world, neither Indian nor white."

In 1890, Plenty Horses murdered an army officer at Wounded Knee to prove that he was still Indian. "Five years I attended Carlisle and was educated in the ways of the white man," he said. "I was lonely, I shot the Lieutenant so I might make a place for myself among my people. Now I am one of them. I shall be hung and

the Indians will bury me as a warrior...I am satisfied."

By 1902, Congress had established 25 off-reservation boarding schools in 13 states. Thousands of Indian children travelled far from home to learn the white man's way. But when school was over, they returned to poverty and a sense of loss. By the 1930s, it was obvious that assimilation was not working. Many off-reservation boarding schools closed. Indians were urged to take back their cultures, their traditions, and their pride.

In the film, Sid Byrd recalls returning home to South

Dakota after attending the Genoa Indian School in Nebraska. "My grandparents had been informed and they were standing waiting at the train station," he says. "I practically leaped from the train, tears of joy streaming down my cheeks, and I ran to my grandmother and she embraced me, and she said, 'Tachojah, tachojah, ciant angalesco -- My grandchild, my grandchild, you come from a long ways.' And she embraced me. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. I suddenly discovered that the people that I loved and longed to be with, I could no longer communicate with them. My own language had been beaten out of me. And I wept bitterly and I vowed that I would relearn my own language."

*Editor's Note: The premiere of *In the White Man's Image* is February 17 at 9p.m., however PBS will re-air the program at any given time depending on their program schedule. You may call your local PBS station to find out when the next airing will be.*

"Give me 300 young Indians and a school in one of our best communities and I will show you how to solve the Indian problem."

*-Richard Pratt
Founder of the Carlisle School*

"In his mind, I'm sure that Pratt was absolutely convinced that he could take an Indian man and make him a white man. Through a simple process of changing appearances, changing values. ...Give him a uniform, cut his hair, teach him English. Above all, forbid him from speaking his native tongue, remove him as far as possible from the center of his religion, his spiritual existence, put him in a strange place, a place where he has no advantages and he will become what you want him to become. You can draw a picture and let him look at it and slowly he will transform himself into the image he can see there. Well, it doesn't work that way. It's not that simple."

*-N. Scott Mornaday
Native American Writer*

became the first subjects in a National educational experiment designed to re-make them in the white man's image.

They were dressed in military uniforms, forbidden to speak their native languages, baptised as Christians and expected to adopt the value system of industrial America. They learned competition, individuality, and to live by the clock. Some did their best to conform. Others were depressed and homesick. Hundred died at school from epidemics of cholera, tuberculosis, and influenza.

After graduation, students found that the outside world still saw them as "redskins." Unable to find jobs, they returned to their homes on reservations.

The film features the story of Plenty Horses -- an extreme example of the failure of Pratt's experiment. "Plenty Horses found on the reservation what so many Carlisle returnees did," says historian Robert Utley in the film. "He was not a white person now -- nobody



Pratt took a series of before and after photos of his students to counter the critics of his school. Pictured are students from the Pueblo tribe: (before/left and after/right); Mary Perry, John Chaves and Ben Thomas.

