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# Caravan condemns residential school legacy, honors Indigenous resistance

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SLL photos: Zola Fish

On July 18, between 50-60 cars gathered at the historical Sherman Indian School in Riverside, Calif., for a caravan to honor “Indian resilience” in the face of brutal European colonialism. The event also honored “lost children,” a reference to the many Indigenous youth who perished while attending the boarding school.

The gathering was called in response to news out of Canada that the remains of 215 children were found in a mass grave on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia.

Beginning in the mid-19th century, European colonizers to the Americas began

forcing young Native people out of their reservation homes and into off-reservation boarding schools, with the express purpose of assimilation into European culture and training for menial labor.

Caravaners dressed in bright orange and their cars were decorated with bright orange flags and signs that read "Honor the children" and "Honor the survivors." The route proceeded from the campus to the Sherman Indian School Cemetery five-and-a-half miles away, where the remains of 67 Native children reside.

It has been reported that the causes of death of the children were from disease (typhoid ravaged the school in 1904), "accidents" and bad water. Ten children were reported to have died from typhoid, including three siblings and a 1-year-old baby girl. The average age of youth who attended Sherman were from 4 years old into their twenties.

The Sherman Indian School, also known as the Sherman Institute, was founded by Frank Miller and named after James S. Sherman, U.S. vice president in the Taft administration. Originally the Perris Indian School located in Perris, Calif., it moved to Riverside in 1903.

Modeled after the infamous Carlisle School in Pennsylvania, the school's motto was "Kill the Indian, save the man." Miller said his goal was to "make the Indian useful" by teaching English, a little math and science, with the rest of the curriculum consisting of sewing, smithing, shoemaking, baking, gardening and barbering.



## **Legacy of racism and greed**

Miller's motive for moving the school was to build a resort for the wealthy in Riverside, using cheap Native labor and entertainment for guests of his Mission Inn. The school and the inn were dedicated in the same year.

By 1912, the Sherman Institute had 631 pupils from 12 states and 55 tribes. It included a 400-acre-farm on which students raised produce used at the school. It continues to operate on the original campus as a high school administered by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Native children were subjected to brutal and inhumane treatment in colonial boarding schools. They were forbidden from practicing their own traditions and religions. Nor were they allowed to speak their own languages. Their hair was cut

and they were forced to wear colonial clothing.

Children were punished and humiliated when caught practicing anything “Indian” and were made to do hard labor as punishment. Physical beatings were a common punishment for violations of school rules.

Corporal punishment was unheard of in Indigenous culture. Its use at Sherman helped cause great psychological anguish among Native youth.

Sexual abuse was also rampant. One survivor remembered, “We had many different teachers during those years; some got the girls pregnant and had to leave.” She went on to describe her own story of sexual abuse at the hands of one of the nuns.

At the cemetery Native people prayed, lit sage and placed tobacco on the graves. There was a women’s drumming circle with Paiute Salt Songs to aid in community healing and to assist with the transition to the next world.

In attendance were the Harriet Tubman Center for Social Justice from Los Angeles, the Answer Coalition, BAYAN USA, Unión del Barrio, the San Diego Leonard Peltier Defense Committee and many more.



*Zola Fish is a member of the Choctaw Nation.*



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