Cynthia Canty: You’ve probably heard that phrase 'school of choice' used when describing public education options in Michigan. But what about a school of no choice? Such was the case for many native Michiganders. With November being Native American history month, it’s our pleasure to welcome Eric Hemenway, the director of repatriation, archives and records for the Little Bay Bands of Odawa Indians and the director of the Michigan History Center, Sandra Clark. Welcome to both of you!

Eric, before we break down the school of no choice, would you describe for us what Odawa education looked like as Europeans first began arriving in Michigan?

Eric Hemenway: Odawa education was very community-based, very land-based. There was a lot of interaction between tribal elders and the youth as people began to transition into elder status and couldn’t perform a lot of the hard duties of hunting, fishing and gardening. They would pass that knowledge onto the youth, so there’s a lot of interaction with uncles, aunts, grandmas and grandpas with the children of the community.

Cynthia Canty: Sandra, how did things begin to change after the War of 1812?

Sandra Clark: Well, the War of 1812 is really that last chance that the native people have to find allies to fight what turns out to probably be inevitable - the settlement that the United States brings with it. You have real pressures on native people. The term used was “to become civilized.” “Civilized” meant that you were Christian, you went to school, and that you farmed.

Cynthia Canty: As things began to change, we want to focus on Harbor Springs. Eric, how did this play out on the ground there?

Eric Hemenway: Up in Harbor Springs, a big push was education. Education was seen as a tool not only to ‘civilize’ natives, but also the Odawa flipped it and used it to combat all the changes that were going to occur for the communities. They were preemptive and started to educate their youth according to Western standards very early. One of the methods they used was sending them to schools down in Cincinnati - seminary schools - but they also worked with the local church to build a mission school in conjunction with their communities. They were being taught in their native language of Anishinaabemowin. They were actually printing materials in their native language. This would be deemed ‘uncivilized’ or ‘savage’ by later standards. It stopped by the 1880s.

Cynthia Canty: Sandra, how did things shift again with this change of attitude in the 1880s? What was going on?

Sandra Clark: In the 1880s, you’re past the Civil War. This is the time when you have the Indian Genocide, I think it’s fair to call it, in the Western part of the United States. You have armed
conflict between the United States and native people. One of those army people takes some Apache to Florida. He cuts their hair, makes them wear uniforms and act like white people. He says, “this is the way you’ll save the Indians. If you don’t like what’s happening in the West, take the Indian out of the Indian.” The idea is to found these Indian Boarding Schools where Indian children will basically not be allowed to be Indian children anymore.

Cynthia Canty: Eric, how did that focus on ‘civilizing’ Odawa students play out? What were the conditions of the schools like?

Eric Hemenway: The idea of civilizing natives was widespread. The individual that Sandra is referring to is Richard Pratt - he has an infamous quote: “to save the man, you have to kill the Indian.” The system that they deemed the best way to do this was Indian Boarding Schools. Boarding Schools varied from community to community. We had one up here in Harbor Springs that started out as a mission school in conjunction with the tribe and the local Catholic church.

As federal policy dictated Indian education into the 1880s, the policy said that Indian language was forbidden, Indian dress was forbidden. When these kids were going to these schools, they were forbidden from speaking their language, practicing their traditions and, in a lot of cases, interacting with their siblings. These schools were sometimes for one or two years, but sometimes they were for several. Some of the kids actually went to schools outside their communities. We had kids from Harbor Springs who went to Carlisle, PA or to Kansas. They would be for these schools for four or five years at a time.

Cynthia Canty: What kind of education did these children get?

Eric Hemenway: Well the education for these children was primarily that of being a laborer. They were not training these children to go into higher education and become lawyers or doctors. They were expected to go right into the labor force as maids, nannies, carpenters, working printing presses, etc. That was really the goal of the education. Also, they were teaching them to read and to write and un-educating them on being Odawa. That was equally a mission of the schools as educating them in a Western standard.

If these kids were at school and they spoke their language, they were reprimanded in many different ways - either physically or emotionally. To de-program them out of their Indian mindset and program them into a Western mindset was happening simultaneously.

Cynthia Canty: Sandra, by the 1920s, views about these schools shifted again. How so?

Sandra Clark: They were very, very expensive. You’re just coming out of WWI and the federal government is paying for bringing these children up - their housing, their clothing, all of those things. There is an expense reason to cut the budget and to close the schools. The threat from native people is perceived in a very different way than it was when the schools were first started. I don’t think that their stopping had a lot to do with people looking around and saying, “Gosh, we really shouldn’t be doing this.” It simply was an expensive thing and perhaps not needed anymore.

Cynthia Canty: Were they all closed down? Eric, did the school in Harbor Springs outlast the others?

Eric Hemenway: It did. Once the grandaddy of all the schools - Carlisle - closed in 1924, a lot of other schools started to follow suit. As Sandra said, a lot of this was due to funding. These were expensive to run - they had to house the kids, feed them, clothe them, pay for staff, etc. When the
funding started to dry up, so did the schools. What makes Holy Childhood an anomaly is that it keeps going for another 60 years. It doesn’t close until 1983. It’s the last Indian Boarding School to do so.

**Cynthia Canty:** I think you can hear jaws drop. I don’t think many people realize that was going until 1983. Ultimately, what happened? What led to its closing?

**Eric Hemenway:** Once again, funding. Once the government started to pull funding from these schools in the 20s and 30s, Holy Childhood managed to keep its own fundraising efforts going. By the 40s and 50s, a lot of kids started to transition into public schools up here in Harbor Springs. Some still went to the boarding school and a large number of Odawa from the Little Traverse community and others went to that boarding school up until the 50s and 60s. Sometimes even the 70s.

**Cynthia Canty:** We opened this segment with a phrase from an article that you wrote, Eric, for the Historical Society of Michigan. Why do you call these schools intended for native people “school of no choice?”

**Eric Hemenway:** I use that title because when you look at the history of these schools, these native children all across the country had no choice to be themselves. They had no choice to pursue their indigenous beliefs, their indigenous language and culture. This foreign, alien system of thinking was imposed on them as a very early age. During the critical, fundamental years of development, they were taking these kids from their homes and their community structure and putting them into these oftentimes abusive, abrasive and harsh environments. It was not by their choice.

The repercussions of these schools are still felt very strongly to this day in native communities all throughout North America, Canada included.

**Cynthia Canty:** Spell that out for us. What kind of lasting impact has it had on native communities.

**Eric Hemenway:** Loss of language is one of the biggest impacts, I think. When these kids were at school, they were forbidden from speaking their language. Loss of culture, tradition, spiritual beliefs, community ties, family skills [were lost]. We hear devastating stories of kids who survived the school and grew up to be our elders. They talk about the situations they went through and how that affected their ability to raise children and develop relationships with other people - because of what happened to them at the boarding schools.

**Cynthia Canty:** It’s certainly a key part of Michigan's history, isn’t it Sandra?

**Sandra Clark:** It is. And I think it’s a key part to understanding a lot of things that happen today. As Eric has said, this is a generational trauma. It’s not something that dies with the people who lived through it, who were told that their culture had no value. You see the effects of it still today and if you don’t understand that, sometimes you have a hard time understanding what native people are saying or why they are taking various positions - why they don’t trust some of our Euro-American institutions.