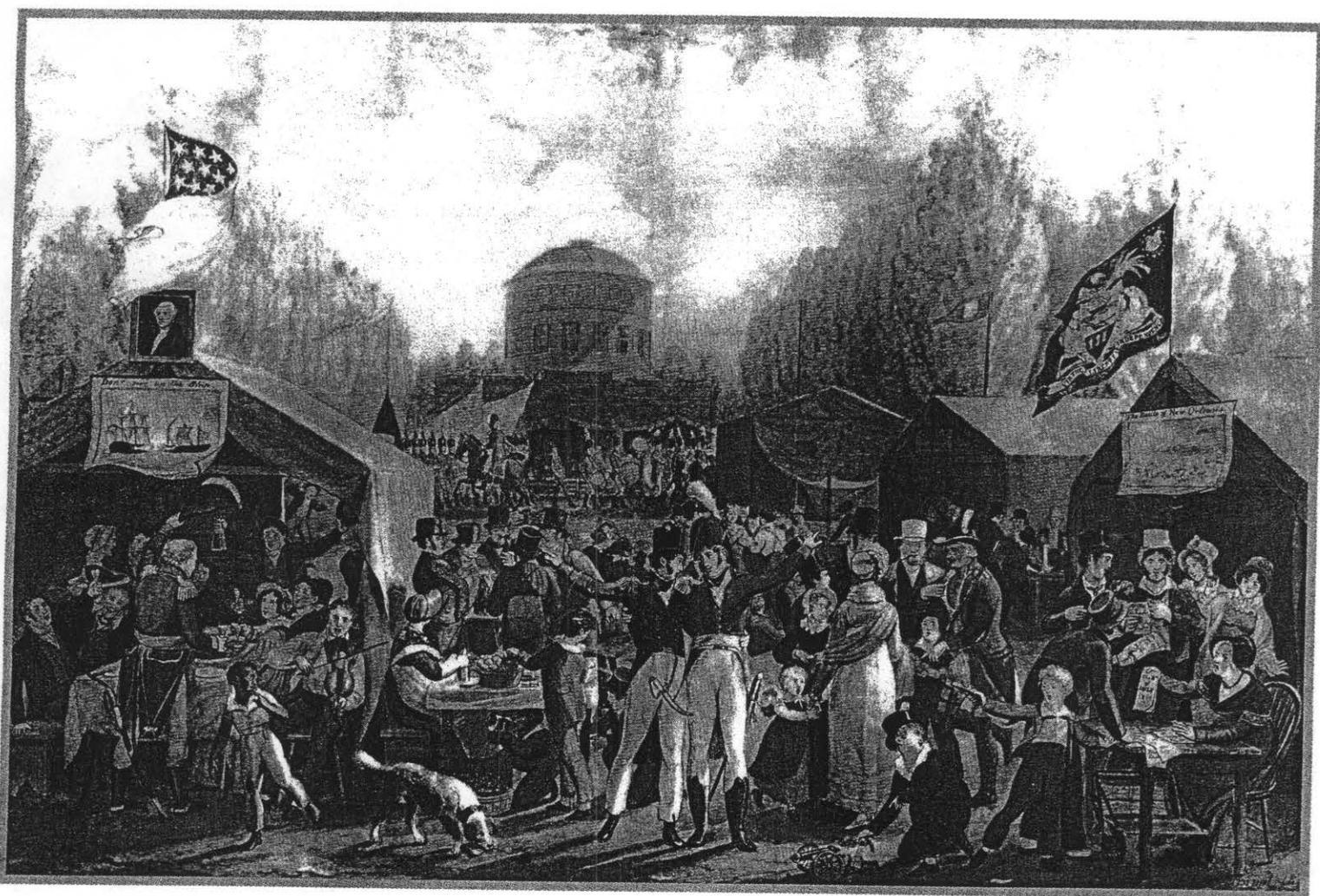


We Are Americans

VOICES OF THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE



by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler



 SCHOLASTIC NONFICTION



“AMERICANIZING” THE FIRST AMERICANS

Over time, the growing numbers of European settlers, with their superior firepower, pushed the Native Americans into smaller and smaller areas. In the nineteenth century, tribes were placed on reservations, areas set aside for their use. These lands were poor in resources and isolated from the rest of the country. Agents appointed by the United States government had great power over the lives of Native Americans.

Many European Americans felt that it was necessary to “Americanize” these original Americans. They wanted to change their way of life by stamping out their values and customs, teaching them to adopt the ideals of their conquerors. Missionaries came to the reservations to make converts to Christianity. They condemned Native American religious practices, such as the ceremonies of the Sun Dance. Indian religious leaders were often expelled from the reservations and the telling of legends and myths was discouraged.

Young Native Americans were sent away to special boarding schools, such as the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. The school was founded by Captain Richard Pratt, who defined his goal for the young students as “Kill the Indian in him and save the man.”

On entering such schools, the Native American children had their names taken away. Their hair was cut short and they were forced to discard their Indian clothing. Often, they were encouraged to make fun of their own culture. Martha Bercier, a Chippewa student, recalled the effect of one such school on her:

“Did I want to be an Indian? After looking at the pictures of the Indians on the warpath — fighting, scalping women and children, and Oh! such ugly faces. No! Indians are mean people — I’m glad I’m not an



These two pictures show the same person before and after he attended the Carlisle Indian School in the 1880s. He took the name Tom Torlino.

Learning How to Be White

The schools established by the United States government to teach Native Americans sought to "civilize" them by taking away their tradition and culture. Lone Wolf, a Blackfoot, described his school experience:

"School wasn't for me when I was a kid. I tried three of them and they were all bad. The first time was when I was about 8 years old. The soldiers came and rounded up as many of the Blackfeet children as they could. The government had decided we were to get White Man's education by force.

"It was very cold that day when we were loaded into the wagons. None of us wanted to go and our parents didn't want to let us go. Oh, we cried for this was the first time we were to be separated from our parents. . . . Nobody waved as the wagons, escorted by the soldiers, took us toward the school at Fort Shaw. Once there our belongings were taken from us, even the little medicine bags

our mothers had given us to protect us from harm. Everything was placed in a heap and set afire.

"Next was the long hair, the pride of all the Indians. The boys, one by one, would break down and cry when they saw their braids thrown on the floor. All of the buckskin clothes had to go and we had to put on the clothes of the White Man.

"If we thought that the days were bad, the nights were much worse. This was the time when real loneliness set in, for it was then we knew that we were all alone. Many boys ran away from the school because the treatment was so bad but most of them were caught and brought back by the police. We were told never to talk Indian and if we were caught, we got a strapping with a leather belt."

Indian, I thought. Each day stretched into another endless day, each night for tears to fall. "Tomorrow," my sister said. Tomorrow never came. And so the days passed by, and the changes slowly came to settle within me. . . . Gone were the vivid pictures of my parents, sisters and brothers. Only a blurred vision of what used to be. Desperately I tried to cling to the faded past which was slowly being erased from my mind."

This training effectively cut these young people off from their communities and snuffed out their pride in their cultures. That pride was eloquently expressed by White Bear, a Kiowa chief: "I love the land and the buffalo, and will not part with it. . . . I want the children raised as I was. I don't want to settle. I love to roam over the prairies. There I feel free and happy. . . . This is our country. We have always lived in it."

