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The dining hall at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, is decorated for the holiday season.



Photo Credit: USAMHI.

An unidentified student of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.



Photo Credit: USAMHI.

The parade field at Carlisle Barracks in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Students from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School would often play games and sports here, even during the cold winters.

Christmas at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School

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Story Highlights

- The Carlisle Indian Industrial School was a boarding school for Native American students.
- The school attempted to teach Native American children the ways of the white man to ensure peace in future generations.
- The students enjoyed a festive atmosphere at the school with ice skating, decorations and a lavish Christmas feast.
- A dance was also held for the students and the holiday season created lasting memories for years to come.

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School was a boarding school for Native American students which operated from 1879-1918 on the grounds of Carlisle Barracks, an Army base in central Pennsylvania. The school, which included both boys and girls as students, represented an effort to take Native American children (and later young adults) and teach them the ways of the white man, so that the two races would grow up in harmony without repeated warfare between them. English was the only language permitted, while academics and learning a trade were part and parcel of the philosophy of the school.

The school at Carlisle was proposed by First Lieutenant (eventually Brigadier General) Richard H. Pratt of the 10th U. S. Cavalry Regiment, a Civil War veteran and experienced Indian-fighter. Having suggested the school, he was detailed from the Army to the Bureau of Indian Affairs of the Department of the Interior to serve as the first school superintendent. He and his successors ran the school with military precision. Students wore uniforms, marched to dinner and classes, and were subject to strict

discipline during their regimented school days.

During the Christmas season, though, the school took a respite from training and teaching, and it became a snowy and lively place where the children skated, listened to concerts, and ate a scrumptious dinner served in a gaily decorated hall. The holidays would not have been complete without the sounds of the season throughout the school. Musical programs were numerous and highly enjoyed by the students and faculty alike. The band, choir, and clubs all presented concerts which were widely attended and which variously consisted of a mixture of Christmas carols and popular songs such as "Christmas Greeting," as well as instrumental classical music recitals that included Haydn's Piano Trio in C major and Chopin's Polonaise Opera 53 in A flat major. Excerpts read aloud from Charles Dickens's classic holiday fable, A Christmas Carol, kept the children spellbound.

Religious observations were de rigueur at the school, and the birth of Christ was celebrated in a holy manner. On Christmas Day, after the bells had sounded at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Carlisle, the students would attend a special school service in the chapel, decorated prettily with evergreens occasionally lit with tapers (candles). The service included carols and hymns sung by the school choir and a sermon appropriate to the season.

The Christmas dinner was a major event that was eagerly anticipated by the entire student body. The meal was served in the dining room, which, like the chapel, was decorated with fresh greenery with the addition of banners, flags, and flowers. After grace was said, the students would dig into a hearty meal, which not only included a larger portion than normal but which also included fresh fruit, pastries and cakes. The main course varied but usually consisted of roast chicken, roast pork or turkey (it took 53 turkeys to feed everyone). Here is a sample menu:

Chickens roasted with Filling	Cranberry Sauce
Giblet dressing	Assorted Cakes
Irish Potatoes	Pies
Jersey Sweet Potatoes	Bananas
Corn	Cheese
Peas	Tea
Celery	Coffee

The children also exchanged Christmas gifts in the gymnasium, which was decorated for the holidays with a Christmas tree placed in the center. The students were marched to the gym and then presented with their gifts by Santa Claus. These gifts, which varied from year to year, were either something useful such as pencils, paper, clothes, or pictures, or else something handmade by the students themselves such as small moccasins, knife sheaths, or baby cradles. Accompanying these wrapped gifts were bags of candy, nuts and fruit which were given to the children as they left the gymnasium.

Physical activity and sporting activities of all types were encouraged, and the holiday

season usually brought ice skating and sleighing along with basketball. In order to make a skating rink, one of the nearby creeks was dammed up to provide a nice large skating pond where the students from the school would skate together with the children of the borough of Carlisle. If the weather was poor, the students moved indoors to play basketball, where handpicked teams of girls would battle among themselves as did the best male players. Typically, the holiday would end with a dance in the gymnasium. These mixers brought together boys and girls under the watchful eyes of the chaperones and were filled with laughter and good cheer. As related in the school newspaper, the Carlisle Arrow: "The usual 'Sociable' occurred on Christmas evening, and the zest with which this feature of the social life of Carlisle always meets, was intensified all the more by the Christmas spirit that was everywhere."

This special time at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was fondly remembered later by its students, who had garnered many happy memories of the crisp air, the fine food and good camaraderie that prevailed throughout the campus during the Christmas season.

ABOUT THIS STORY: Many of the sources presented in this article are among 400,000 books, 1.7 million photos and 12.5 million manuscripts available for study through the U.S. Army Military History Institute (MHI). The artifacts shown are among nearly 50,000 items of the Army Heritage Museum (AHM) collections. MHI and AHM are part of the U. S. Army Heritage and Education Center, 950 Soldiers Drive, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5021. Website: www.carlisle.army.mil/ahec