

The Vermilion Lake Indian School



FROM ASSIMILATION TO TERMINATION

Linda LeGarde Grover

Editor's Note: This article first appeared in the Winter 2002–03 (58:4) issue of Minnesota History. With the recent revelation of mass gravesites at Indian boarding schools in Canada and the renewed attention being paid to the harmful and tragic legacy of the boarding schools in the United States, we wanted to share this important and insightful article by Linda LeGarde Grover about the history and legacy of one such school in Minnesota. The article is reproduced as it originally appeared, with the addition of a new introductory section by the author.

MY COUSIN DENIS called me to talk about our family members' experiences at Indian boarding schools and how profound and long-lasting the impacts of that rupturing have been. "I know it affects me," he said in his soft voice. "Do you feel it, too?"

Our family, the Drouillards and LeGardes, is one of many thousands of Native families broken apart in order to fulfill that destructive experiment in social engineering, the Indian boarding school system. And as it was with other families, tremendous damage was caused by the breaking of families—children taken from parents, grandparents, and each other. We are still trying to put things back together, we cousins who are older now than my grandmother and her mother and mother-in-law were when their children were removed from home, separated, and sent to boarding schools. The Vermilion Lake Indian School, about which I wrote this article nearly twenty years ago, was one of the places the children

would be sent; the others were Pipestone, Red Lake Mission, Red Lake Government, Hayward, Tomah, Flandreau, and Haskell.

Denis's father, Bud, was never able to talk about his time at Indian school. Denis loved him, helped him where he could, and asked about Indian school only once. "You don't want to hear about that" was all Bud said.

"I've been thinking," Denis said to me when we spoke. "It's all about the Indian schools."

News travels quickly in the internet age: the discovery of graves at boarding schools in Canada and the United States in 2021 has shocked the world. In Indian Country, that is not news so much as a recurring echo of shocks felt since the time the boarding school system began, a grief interwoven with identity, pride, and gratitude.

Gakina awiya, we exist in the light of our ancestors' spirits, those who survived Indian school and those who didn't. May we live in ways that honor them.



"It is commonly supposed that there is no systematic education of their children among the aborigines of this country. Nothing could be further from the truth."

—OHYESA (DR. CHARLES A. EASTMAN), *INDIAN BOYHOOD* (1902)

THE VERMILION LAKE DISTRICT of Nett Lake Reservation lies on the southern end of Lake Vermilion in Minnesota's St. Louis County. Visitors to quiet, wooded Hoodoo

Point near the town of Tower can see across the lake to the reservation on Sucker Point: the Head Start building, gymnasium, community center, playground, baseball field, and powwow grounds. From that distance they cannot see an old sidewalk running by the lake to an unused field, a sidewalk imprinted with the invisible yet indelible footprints of hundreds of children. Their presence is still felt on this site of a long-closed boarding school that for half a century housed Indian children and

attempted to educate them through assimilation.

The Vermilion area was home to the Bois Forte people and a central part of the vast Ojibwe, or Chippewa, lands that stretched from Mine Center, Ontario, to the Laurentian Divide (north of Virginia, Minnesota) and from Saganaga Lake to the Little Fork River. Treaties in 1842, 1854, and 1888 resulted in a reservation consisting of two Bois Forte "districts." Vermilion is the smaller; the more populated Nett Lake lies about 50 miles west.



Uniformed students and staff pose by a school building on a wintry day, 1910s.

Between 200 and 300 residents live in the Vermilion district today.¹

Educating children has always been of prime importance to the Ojibwe people. At the time of western impact—as it is now—education was a holistic and lifelong experience. Children learned from their parents, other relatives, and members of the community, particularly the elders, whose wisdom and experience ensured the survival of the culture. But the Ojibwe tradition of training by observation, modeling, experience, and oral tradition was not acknowledged or validated—perhaps not even seen—by missionaries, entrepreneurs, and policymakers who arrived in the Upper Midwest in the nineteenth century. The United States' Indian-education system that followed was built on the premise that Indian children were not being educated and needed exposure to the superior western culture.²

Historically, Indian education was linked with federal policies designed to force assimilation. In 1819 Con-

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gress passed the Indian Civilization Act, which authorized federal funding for Christian missionary societies to establish Indian schools. In 1870 mission schools began contracting for government subsidies to operate as “federal contract” schools. A new system was born in 1879 with the opening of the federal Indian boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Its founder, Richard Henry Pratt, had previously worked with Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche prisoners in Florida. To instill discipline and order, he dressed them in old army uniforms and drilled them as a platoon. As a further experiment, he had some of them taught to read. Pratt claimed he had discovered a new way to deal with the “Indian problem”—by education and assimilation. “I believe in immersing the Indians in our

civilization and when we get them under holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked.” His method became the policy of federal Indian boarding schools for the next half-century. Generations of Indian people were supposed to gain economic independence by emulating white society and abandoning tribal cultures. To reach this goal, the government mandated compulsory education. Children were removed from their homes and sent to boarding schools to learn the English language and values of American culture while forgetting their own languages and values.³

By the 1890s this policy of assimilation was firmly in place. In Minnesota, boarding and reservation day schools for Indian children had increased in number and scope from

the small mission schools of the 1830s to campuses that could house more than 400 boarders and serve more than 1,700 children. Vermilion Lake pupils had attended a mission school on Pike Bay between 1878 and 1890. In 1885–86 officials counted 163 children in the district; 50 of them were enrolled in day school, although average attendance was 25. A dozen years later, a new government Indian boarding school was being planned for Vermilion Lake. “Capt. G. L. Scott, 6th U.S. Cavalry, Indian agent from Ashland . . . was in town on Tuesday for the purpose of looking over the site for the Indian school at Sucker Point,” the *Vermilion Iron Journal* reported in February 1897. “That the school will be built is . . . an assured fact.”⁴

THE LAKE VERMILION AREA is typical of Minnesota’s north woods in its natural beauty. Forested and dotted with lakes, the wild and bounteous terrain had sustained the Bois Forte people for countless generations. The Indian school’s location on Sucker Point is particularly beau-

tiful, with the deep color of the water sometimes contrasting, sometimes blending, with the soft greens, blues, and grays of the forest and sky. The Office of Indian Affairs chose this location not for aesthetic reasons, however, but for pragmatic ones: the reluctance of Bois Forte parents to send their children away to school, the significant number of children in both the Nett Lake and Vermilion districts, and the lobbying from Indians and non-Indians in both districts for a school. One Indian family living in Tower enrolled its children in public school there, but most Vermilion Lake children did not attend school at all. The trip to the day school at Nett Lake, some 50 miles away, was not possible for them.⁵

Travel from the Vermilion district to Tower was difficult; it was two-and-one-half miles across the lake or ten miles along the shore by footpath. The lake could be crossed by boat in summer or over ice in winter, but unstable ice in the spring and fall and extensive swampland “rendered [the peninsula] an island” much of the year. This isolation made Sucker

Point the planners’ prime choice for the boarding school. Its remoteness would help curb runaways, a recurrent problem at Indian boarding schools.⁶

Most of the school buildings at Vermilion were constructed in 1898 and 1899. They were wood-frame structures painted white with iron roofs painted red. Behind them were grazing fields, farm acreage, and, later, a concrete-and-stone cow barn, the school’s most solid structure.⁷ The school was picturesque, with its clean and attractive red-and-white lines contrasting with the lake and greenery in summer and blending with the snow and ice in winter.

When Vermilion opened in 1899, it offered classes through the approximate equivalent of fourth grade; by 1911 its top level was comparable to today’s sixth or seventh grade, although the students were generally older. The school was administered by a superintendent and between two and five teachers over the years, as well as support staff such as a cook, matron,

Ojibwe family on Lake Vermilion, about 1905



and handyman. Although opened for Bois Forte children, the school enrolled students from other Ojibwe bands as well as other tribal groups from Minnesota, northwestern Wisconsin, and parts of Canada. In fact, in the early years, only about 20 percent of the pupils were Bois Forte. Absent were the 30-or-so students expected from Nett Lake. Although the day school had closed in the summer of 1898, parents resisted sending their children away.⁸

Like the staff at all Indian boarding schools, Vermilion Lake's superintendent, teachers, and staff were responsible for recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of pupils to maintain government funding. The first superintendent, Oliver H. Gates, began before Vermilion opened. (Gates also helped reopen the Nett Lake day school in 1902, when it became apparent that its children would never enroll at Vermilion Lake.) Although many accounts exist of children being forcibly torn from their families and sent to boarding schools, there is no evidence of that practice at Vermilion. However, coercion was certainly a useful tool. Typically, the Vermilion recruiter would visit families, point out the difficulties of their existence and the futility of efforts to continue living the Indian way, promote the educational and life opportunities that school offered, and attempt to persuade the families to send their children with the recruiter—that very day, if possible.⁹

Recruiting efforts at Vermilion school were successful. By the 1906–07 school year there were 40 pupils. This number peaked at 120 in 1909–10 and leveled off at 100 to 115 pupils for the next decade. Attendance was good, and the problem of runaways appears to have been minor. One reason may have been the presence and effective utilization of the Indian staff, such as Mary



Lakeside view of the "Government Indian School, Tower," from a postcard, about 1910

Susan LeGarde Riegert, the cook: "She was always good to us, and she didn't care if we talked Indian in the dormitory. She talked Indian with us when she was putting us to bed," recalled a former student.¹⁰

The Indian staff was crucial to the school's success. During the 1900s and 1910s, between three and seven Indian people were employed as workers and vocational teachers. The cook also taught cooking; the laundress, sewing and laundering; the laborer and disciplinarian, farming and industrial arts. Unlike most superintendents, Indian employees contributed to the stability of the school by staying for years and knowing the students and families. Many of them, including Mrs. Riegert, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Wetenhall, Mrs. Angus, and Mr. Anderson, did much of the successful recruiting. Parents, powerless in the face of federal policy, worried about their children's health and safety, both physical and spiritual.¹¹ The Indian staff at Vermilion made a sad situation more bearable for students and their families.

Mary Riegert, for example, a local Ojibwe widow with five small children, became the cook shortly after

the school opened, stayed for nearly 20 years, and then worked until retirement at other Indian schools. She was promoted to be a combination cook and domestic-arts teacher and eventually became the girls' matron. Her children attended the school, then a Bayfield, Wisconsin, Catholic boarding school, and finally Haskell Institute, an Indian trade school in Lawrence, Kansas. Several of Riegert's nieces and nephews also attended the Vermilion school, drawn there by her presence. Because the boarding-school system was designed to break the ties so revered by Indian families, the opportunity to attend a school with relatives was especially appreciated.¹²

AT MOST BOARDING SCHOOLS, including Vermilion, children were introduced to a philosophy of education far different from the gentle oral tradition that they, their parents, and grandparents had experienced. On arrival, they were "sanitized"; that is, bathed, sometimes by a staff member, and deloused, whether they had lice or not. Their clothing was thrown away or stored, and they

were outfitted with a school uniform. Boys were not allowed to wear their hair long, and girls were given the hairstyles of non-Indian schoolgirls. This alteration in appearance was meant to be the first step in changing the entire American Indian population by way of its youngest, most impressionable, and most pliable members.¹³

Children usually wore military-style uniforms like those Pratt had introduced at Carlisle. At larger Indian schools, uniforms were sometimes elaborately decorated with epaulets and insignia, but Vermilion's were plain. The boys wore dark, military-style jackets, pants, and caps. The girls wore dresses made by the older students and staff members; only girls who "needed" a dress got one. The bolts of government-issued fabric varied by the year, so the girls were dressed in a variety of dark gingham plaids, solids, and prints, sometimes poorly woven or badly sewn. The boys' ready-made uniforms were sometimes of shoddy material, poorly cut, ill fitting, and uncomfortable. Shipments of uniforms and school

Indian employees contributed to the stability of the school by staying for years and knowing the students and families.



supplies to the Vermilion school were sporadic and usually late. In 1910, when the new uniforms arrived before school opened, Superintendent Thomas F. Rodwell thanked the Indian bureau and noted the improvements: "1. The quality of the uniforms are an improvement . . . both in material and color (boys). 2. In style they are more becoming, and neater (boys). 3. The fit of the coats are fine, the pants not so good."¹⁴

Not only the students' appearance changed at school. They were taught to stand at attention with eyes straight ahead, a difference in demeanor for Indian children who had learned at home that an indirect stance with eyes lowered indicated respect. Sometimes children were given new names, as well. No wonder that children sometimes returned home changed in ways that were neither understood nor desired.¹⁵

While Vermilion children were

fortunate to have a school nearby, even those who lived within walking distance could not go home until the end of the school year. This was part of the assimilation plan; even brief contact with family was considered detrimental. Vermilion students lived in a dormitory where girls and boys were separated by floor or wing. Students slept two to a bed, at least until 1910. They washed and ate their meals in another building. Shower and toilet facilities, located in a basement, were inadequate. Three showers had to accommodate 120 students, and the septic system, installed between 1911 and 1914 and functioning for only a few years, could not handle the volume of use.¹⁶

Outside the classroom, students were overseen by a girls' matron and a boys' disciplinarian. Native languages were not allowed, but some Indian staff spoke Ojibwe with the children in the dormitory, although this was not officially "known" by the teachers or superintendent. Discipline was strict and regularly included spanking, whipping, and at least one instance of a student having to kneel on a navy bean for an hour. Punishments at schools that students attended after Vermilion were even more severe. Some had "cells" or "dungeons," dark rooms where students were confined for days and given only bread and water; some used psychological punishment, such as forcing a young boy to dress like a girl for a month or cutting a rebellious girl's hair as short as a boy's. One Vermilion graduate attempting to run away from Haskell Institute sustained injuries requiring hospitalization and resulting in permanent disability. Although there are no written records of this



Staff members (from left) Mrs. Riegert, Mrs. Angus, and Mrs. Wetenhall relax with young Conrad Wetenhall on a warm day, 1910s.



Female students in matching dresses, 1913, including Emma Mantell (first row, left) and Rhoda St. John (first row, right)



James Mantell, with roomy jacket and rolled pants legs, and John Anderson, whose school uniform was a better fit

degree of punishment at Vermilion, former students recalled at least one punishment that resulted in a student's death. (Tallies of the number of students who died there vary greatly, from very small in federal reports to much larger in the accounts of former students.) Robert Gawboy recalled, "A lot of Indians died in that Indian school. . . . I know. I was there."¹⁷

As at all Indian boarding schools, pupils at Vermilion had work assignments. Girls cooked, cleaned, washed clothes, and sewed. Boys worked in the school's sawmill, repaired and maintained buildings, and labored on the grounds. Both boys and girls worked in the dairy, a popular place because they liked the animals. Older students helped take care of the younger children, making sure that they washed and dressed in the mornings, teaching them to keep their clothing in order and make their beds, and comforting them when they were lonely and homesick. Everyone worked on the farm, planting and cultivating vegetables, which was often backbreaking and exhausting. Stu-

dent labor made the Vermilion school self-sufficient in many ways.¹⁸

Most Indian boarding schools included farming in their curriculum, regardless of its feasibility in differing locales. With the 1887 General Allotment (Dawes) Act, the federal government had broken reservation lands into allotments of 40, 80, or 160 acres distributed to individual band members. (The people of the Vermilion district were assigned parcels at Nett Lake, 50 miles away.) This new concept of land ownership for Indians gave another direction to education policy: children would be taught to farm in preparation for assimilation into rural America. Boys would become farmers who produced food for their nuclear families as well as cash profits; girls would become farmers' wives who would instill Euro-American values in their children. Vermilion Lake Indian School's superintendents enthusiastically fostered agricultural education but met with limited success because of northeastern Minnesota's rocky terrain, swamp-land, and short growing season.¹⁹

BY 1910 VERMILION LAKE Indian school had grown to 120 pupils, 8 staff members, and 10 buildings: a dormitory, school, employees' living quarters, double cottage for the superintendent and school engineer, laundry, commissary, barn, boat-house, and cottages for employees with families. In the next few years five more employees' cottages were built with the help of male students. The decade that followed was a relatively stable time. Attendance was good, and there was a consistent core of three or four dependable staff members, a turnover rate lower than at most boarding schools. But in many ways the school began to stagnate, as each of the succeeding superintendents became discouraged trying to communicate with a federal government—distant in miles and farther away in spirit—that required voluminous, highly regulated written reports and moved slowly in

supplying the school's needs. Pleas for money to improve facilities went unmet, and the buildings began to deteriorate. Each superintendent from 1910 to 1919 requested money for repair, replacement, or additional facilities, requests that were unanswered or only partially funded.²⁰

For example, Dr. Thomas Rodwell, superintendent and physician at Vermilion from 1907 to 1910, resigned to return to his medical practice in Wisconsin after fighting a constant and losing battle to improve the school buildings. In his final report to the Department of the Interior, he stated that many Indian children still were not attending because their parents would not send them away. He hoped that "as the country is being rapidly settled up by white families, and the district school is sure to follow . . . should the Indian pupil happen to live near one of these district school[s], he or she could readily take up the work and a great gain would be made in advancement by such pupil." Rodwell also reported that the school's buildings were in need of repair; plumbing and sewage systems were being stretched far beyond their capacity; and an infirmary was needed.²¹

Health was another reason Indian parents were reluctant to send their children to boarding schools. Rheumatic diseases, pneumonia, meningitis, and tuberculosis had been problems during Rodwell's superintendency, along with less life-threatening but serious illnesses such as trachoma, a contagious eye infection that can cause blindness. His 1909–10 report lists one death from cerebral spinal meningitis, as well as one of acute rheumatism that resulted in cardiac failure. (Students in other years died from measles, influenza, blood poisoning, diphtheria, and by accidents such as drowning and falls.) Rodwell closed his final report by urging the Department



Gas lamps illuminate the dining room, where students ate beneath a tattered American flag and presidential portraits.

of the Interior to build a suitable hospital, estimated to cost \$5,500. He added that this would not only benefit students but would help parents overcome their prejudice against boarding schools. Although it was requested by every superintendent in the decade following, a hospital was never built.²²

Rodwell's successor, Dr. A. H. Spears, spent one tumultuous year at Vermilion. Dr. Otis O. Benson then became superintendent in 1911 and stayed until 1916. Previously assigned to the boarding school on Minnesota's White Earth Reservation, Benson felt that his duty to Indian children went above and beyond academic and vocational education. According to his annual reports, he earnestly watched over his students' moral and ethical development, stressing his own values of sobriety and thrift. Benson became involved in booster and chamber of commerce efforts in Tower and encouraged the Tower school district to allow a few Vermilion graduates to continue their schooling in town.²³ Benson's relationship with Tower would result in support from its citizens and pol-

iticians when the Vermilion school encountered problems later on.

Benson's successor, Henry A. Edsall, outlined the pressing need for building maintenance and repair in his 1917 report. The next year, he solicited the aid of the academic teaching staff. When the Vermilion school closed temporarily during the influenza epidemic of 1918, Edsall requested that teachers help with repairs. When some declined, the superintendent persisted, creating a hostile climate. Edsall left in December 1918.²⁴

ONE REASON THAT THE government neglected the Vermilion school is that it was being considered for abandonment. Nett Lake was—and still is—the larger of the two Bois Forte districts, and in some years its day school served more Bois Forte students than Vermilion did. Nett Lake, in fact, lobbied unsuccessfully to have its day school become a boarding school to replace Vermilion. One Vermilion superintendent wrote that the only reason the school remained open was that students and

staff made repairs—albeit with limited skills and materials—so that the cost to maintain Vermilion was nearly nothing. As the facilities deteriorated, the price of repairs, maintenance, and new construction increased from Rodwell's estimate of \$5,500 for a hospital in 1910 to Edsall's request of \$53,350 for many projects in 1917. Not included were the superintendents' estimated cost of a much needed road connecting the reservation with the main road into Tower: \$12,000 in 1918 and 1919, of which Tower and St. Louis County would pay half.²⁵

Superintendents also repeatedly begged for improvements such as new lavatories to replace the "deplorable" ones in the dormitories; a central-heating plant; playground equipment; single beds instead of double for the students, to curtail the spread of contagious diseases; and a septic system so that the school's raw sewage would not empty into the lake. Unsanitary conditions contributed to parents'

fears that their children would take sick and die while at school, and students did, indeed, continue to suffer from trachoma, tuberculosis, pneumonia, and other diseases common at Indian boarding schools. From 1909 to 1917 each superintendent's annual report listed between one and four deaths from communicable diseases, a lack of medical care and resources, or accidents. Outbreaks of measles in 1913 and 1915 left the school quarantined for weeks, and typhoid and scarlet fever resulted in quarantines in 1914. Mrs. Riegert stayed at school with sick students during these times, once nursing her nephew, who died of black diphtheria contracted at school. When the worldwide influenza pandemic of 1918 reached Vermilion, resulting in the deaths of several schoolchildren and several Indian adults living nearby, the school was closed from October 12 through December 10. Because funding was based upon class days and student hours, school was extended into the summer of 1919 to make up for time lost.²⁶

EVEN DURING VERMILION LAKE Indian School's most successful years it, like other boarding schools, did not offer an education comparable in curriculum or quality to that of majority-culture public schools. In the end, the system failed twice: Indian people, determined to maintain family ties and cultural identity, did not assimilate, and the system created generations of poorly educated students who had learned to distrust it. The time and effort spent forcing Indians to learn the ways of the majority culture cut into time allotted to academics and vocational training. Only basic reading, writing, and arithmetic were taught at the Vermilion school—with emphasis on "develop[ing] the Indian youth into good, industrious, and sober citizens" and "no attempt . . . to introduce any of the so-called 'frills' of education," according to Superintendent Benson. Certainly the parents of Vermilion students wanted their children to be good, industrious, and sober, along with other Ojibwe values. At home, children were reared, in addition, to

Children planting a garden at one of Minnesota's Indian boarding schools, about 1900



be respectful, cooperative, mindful of the group, modest, kind, considerate, and honest. Years later a Vermilion student said, “I liked my lessons and it was a disappointment to me that we spent so little time on them. We were kept busy working, which didn’t leave as much time for school as we would have liked. When I went to Tower school I was quite a bit behind the other students my age.”²⁷

The “outing system” developed at Carlisle was seldom used at the Vermilion school. Theoretically, students in outing programs gained exposure to life in American society. Girls were often sent to families as mothers’ helpers, boys to farmers or tradesmen. Some worked all or part of the day and spent nights at school, while others’ placements required living away from school. Students were sometimes paid, but the money went to the school, which distributed funds as it saw fit to students who petitioned for clothing, fare to travel home for the summer, or other needs. Transportation logistics made outing from the Vermilion school difficult, however, and in 1914, when George LeGarde lost a finger while “working out” in a brickyard, Superintendent Benson reported that the program was more trouble than it was worth. His accident report stated that there was plenty of work to be done right at the school, and outing appears to have ceased.²⁸

Schoolwork sometimes lacked continuity at Vermilion because of teacher turnover, a problem at many Indian boarding schools. In addition, Vermilion experienced difficulty finding teachers qualified in industrial and vocational training—particularly carpentry and farming—who would relocate to a remote place and work with Indian children. The physical condition of the buildings hampered education, too. For example, during the 1914–15 school year, the evening



School picnic, about 1915. Among the seated staff (beginning second from left) are Mrs. Angus, Maggie Barney, Mrs. Wetenhall, and Mr. Wetenhall; John Anderson stands at right.

study hour had to be canceled when the gas lighting failed. The faculty substituted “leisure-time” classes in lace making, fancywork, and agriculture, which were done by candlelight in small groups. Students and adults alike enjoyed the social interaction, and these activities continued when the gaslights were repaired.²⁹

The first students to complete studies at Vermilion, or “run out of grades” and look for classes beyond its approximate fourth-grade curriculum, were Wilbur and Amelia Riegert, Peter Holden (superintendent-to-be Rodwell’s nephew—Rodwell was married to an Indian woman), and Louisa Blue Sky. In 1905 the four walked across Lake Vermilion through the winter to attend school in Tower, once getting lost in a blizzard.³⁰

Beginning with these four, students graduated from Vermilion every year. The number peaked at 16 in 1919. Promising students were encouraged to further their education at Haskell Institute or other off-reservation Indian vocational schools. However, many chose to return home, an indication that the assimilation policy had failed. Some graduates asked to stay at Vermilion for further training or employment as laborers, cooks’ helpers, or dormitory helpers. A few attended the

Tower school, which in 1910 began receiving a subsidy of 15 cents per day from the Office of Indian Affairs to defray the costs of educating students from outside the district. Most pupils, however, did not graduate but simply became too old to attend. Their formal education ended with their Vermilion school experience, whether they graduated or not. Some stayed at the school, continuing to go to classes and work odd jobs because they had nowhere else to go. All students had to be listed on superintendents’ reports, and the Indian office regularly directed that those children be transferred to another school or sent home.³¹

IN AUGUST 1919, at the end of the Vermilion school’s most stable and successful decade, the annual maintenance appropriation for Chippewa (Ojibwe) schools and agencies in Minnesota was greatly reduced, and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs ordered the school closed. This came as a surprise to the students, staff, the town of Tower, and especially Superintendent C. E. Dennis. Hired in December 1918 after the influenza epidemic, he had worked to rebuild the staff, improve morale, and get students caught up with their studies.

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He reported a successful year and had cultivated a friendly relationship with the Tower Commercial Club.³²

Dennis was told to close the school immediately and move to the Klamath Indian Agency in Oregon. Two long-time staff members were transferred to other schools: Mrs. Riegert, matron, to Yankton, South Dakota, and Miss Jacker, seamstress and sewing teacher, to Cheyenne River, South Dakota. Livestock was to be sold and any harvest distributed.³³

Dennis immediately informed the *Tower Weekly News* and asked the Tower Commercial Club for help. Its president, G. C. Carlson, and secretary, Herman T. Olson, immediately urged Senators Knute Nelson and Frank B. Kellogg and Congressman William L. Carss to keep the school open, stressing the importance of

on-reservation education to the Vermilion Lake community. Carss and Nelson supported this, while “nearly all Indian families in the area” petitioned the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.³⁴ In spite of these efforts, the school closed.

For the next two years, the Vermilion and Tower communities worked to reopen the school. “Over at the Vermilion Lake Indian School there are twenty-six little Indians running at large with not even a remote possibility of an education. Red tape at Washington is depriving these children of an education. Were they wards of this district they would be cared for as they have a right to be,” wrote the editor of the *Tower Weekly News*. “They are American children regardless of their color. They have a right to be treated right. . . . Minnesota is

justly proud of its school system. A child without an education in our good state is a rarity. Let us interest ourselves at once in behalf of these children,” the editorial concluded.³⁵

Rewarding the efforts of businessmen, politicians, educators, and Indian families, the government reopened the Vermilion school in 1921, but the school never fully recovered. Few school records exist from the 1920s, but older people in the Vermilion and Tower area remember vacant buildings and small numbers of children, most from the immediate vicinity. Some buildings in poor condition were torn down. At least one burned. Because overland transportation had improved, more of the older children attended public school in Tower. The per-capita subsidy from the Indian bureau continued, making it feasible for the Tower school to accommodate more students from the reservation. Vermilion Lake Indian School was becoming an on-reservation day school, serving fewer children in lower grades and acting as a “feeder” to the public school, much like the school at Nett Lake. This development reflected a national trend. By 1928 about half of all Indian children who attended school were in public schools.³⁶ Superintendent Rodwell’s 1910 wish was coming true.

BY THE LATE 1920S, it was clear that federal Indian policy needed reform, and a movement led by John Collier, a publisher and executive secretary of the American Indian Defense Association, took shape. In 1928, a survey team headed by Lewis B. Meriam of the University of Chicago completed *The Problem of Indian Administration*, a two-year study commissioned by the Department of the Interior. This “Meriam Report,” a critical analysis of the Indian bureau, stressed the need for education in a



Staff of Vermilion Lake Indian School, 1910s (from left): Mr. Hughes (engineer), Miss Corey, Mr. Dawson (farmer), Mr. Tobey (behind Dawson), John Anderson, Mary Riegert (cook/matron), Mrs. Holiday (seamstress), Peter Wetenhall (disciplinarian), Mrs. Hughes, Maggie Benson (employee Maggie Barney married the superintendent), Otis Benson (superintendent), Mrs. Wetenhall, and an unknown woman

“natural setting of home and family life,” better teachers, and a better curriculum that incorporated cultural values and vocational training suitable to the job market—not to maintenance of school facilities. It promoted day schools and recommended that pre-adolescent children not be sent to boarding schools. The Meriam Report concluded that the primary task of Indian education was to provide children and parents with the skills to succeed as independent citizens in both Indian and white cultures. It acknowledged the failure of assimilation policy and launched a “New Deal” in Indian education.³⁷

More changes came when the 1934 Johnson–O’Malley Act provided that public-school districts would receive federal money to educate Indian children. Although the Office of Indian Affairs had been sending subsidies to some public schools for 40 years, contracting would now be done on a federal-state basis, with the states disbursing funds to individual school districts. The possibility of new or increased funding made many districts eager to serve larger numbers of Indian students, and some used the money to pay salaries or to construct



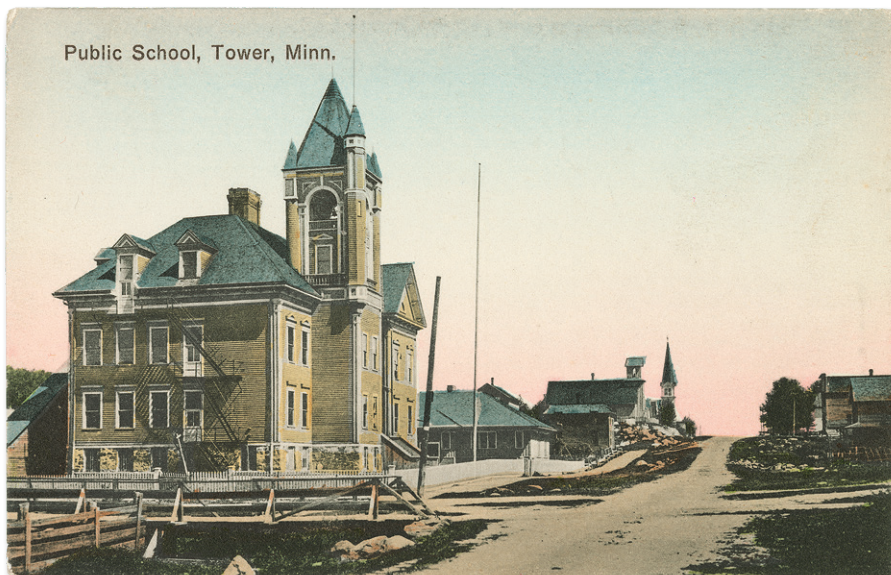
Vermilion Lake employees (from left): Wilbur Riegert, Maggie Barney, and John Anderson

or improve buildings with the justification that all students—including Indians—would benefit.³⁸

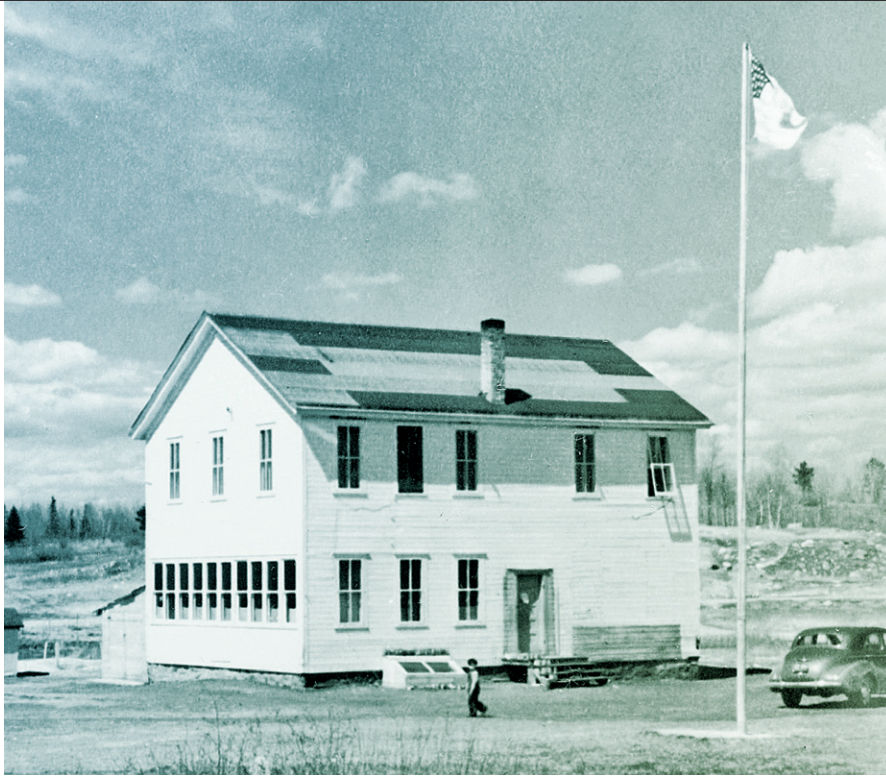
Although the Johnson–O’Malley Act had a positive and profound effect on Indian students that continues today, Vermilion Lake Indian School did not benefit greatly. It did receive “JOM” money but, since the number of students had dwindled to 34 by 1936, this was not a large source of revenue. O. R. Sande, Minnesota’s director of Indian education, calculated that “if the contribution from the

Indian Office were considered tuition, the rate would be 42.7 cents per pupil per day of attendance.”³⁹

BY 1940 VERMILION LAKE Indian School served between 25 and 30 students from the immediate area and employed two teachers and one part-time cook. Most of the larger buildings and some of the employee cottages had been torn down. The old laundry building had been converted to an all-purpose school building, with two classrooms on the lower floor and a lunchroom, apartment, and “shop” classroom on the upper. The curriculum, now comparable to Tower’s, emphasized academic subjects more than vocational training. The primary-grades teacher (through grade 3), who also taught sewing to the girls, commuted daily from Tower; by this time there was a dirt road into the reservation. She regularly visited with families in the area and learned “quite a vocabulary” in Ojibwe from her students. The upper-grades teacher (4 through 6), who also taught shop class to the boys, lived in the upper-floor apartment all year. He was active in community life on the reservation, kept an extensive garden, and enthusiastically assisted the students and their families with gardening projects. The cook, a woman from the reservation, worked mornings preparing a balanced meal. Each week students were chosen to assist in peeling vegetables, fetching water, starting the fire in the wood stove, and washing the dishes, tables, and floor after each meal. The school had no running water or indoor plumbing—the short-lived septic system having long since failed—and, as a result, there was particular emphasis on hygiene. The county health nurse visited regularly. Floors and towels were washed with bleach and rubbing alcohol was used to disinfect hands.⁴⁰



Public school in the still-unpaved town of Tower, as seen in a postcard from about 1910



Vermilion Lake school building, about 1940, when enrollment totaled no more than 30 day students

[The Merriam Report] stressed the need for education in a “natural setting of home and family life,” better teachers, and a better curriculum that incorporated cultural values and vocational training suitable to the job market.



Both teachers stayed for several years, and when the primary-grades teacher left, she went to the Tower school, working with some of the same students and families from Vermilion until her retirement. She described teaching at Vermilion as an enjoyable experience, a learning experience. In addition to her Ojibwe vocabulary, she supplemented her education with Indian studies courses from the University of Minnesota.⁴¹ This contrasted greatly with the earlier Indian education policies of suppressing native language and culture. The teacher was now also the learner, the students now also the teachers.

In 1945 the Vermilion schoolhouse was remodeled. The exterior was painted, the classrooms, apartment, and lunchroom redecorated, and an oil-burning heater installed. Maps, globes, a set of encyclopedias, and

new texts and library books were purchased. However, enrollment kept shrinking. In 1946 daily attendance averaged 19 of the 24 pupils enrolled—all day students from the area. Beginning that year, Minnesota’s director and supervisor of Indian education recommended in their annual report to the Office of Indian Affairs that the school be closed and the students transported to Tower, where they could be given “the opportunity to attend a modern graded elementary and high school.”⁴²

In 1952 the state’s Indian education department reported that eight small reservation schools—but not Vermilion Lake—had been closed “during the past few years” because they were expensive to staff and maintain and it cost less to transport students to nearby towns. Since the 1940s, Minnesota had made “every

effort . . . to eliminate the small segregated (mostly Indians enrolled) schools,” a report assured the Office of Indian Affairs, citing “inferior education,” the failure of pupils to transfer successfully to secondary public schools, and the improved educational opportunities at consolidated schools. Since the number of pupils attending Vermilion had dropped to between 12 and 15 annually by the early 1950s, its closing was only a matter of time.⁴³

In 1953 Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution 108 to “free” Indians of “segregation.” This new “termination” policy dictated that tribes were to disband and Indian people were to be encouraged to leave their reservations (and families and communities, an echo of earlier assimilation policies) and live in cities. The tribes would eventually lose federal recognition and, ultimately, federal aid, including funding for Indian education. Introduced in phases, termination policy was in effect until 1958. Nationally, 61 tribes were terminated, but the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe remained intact. Nevertheless, this policy helped erode political and cultural identity among all American Indian people, including those of the Vermilion Lake district.⁴⁴

In 1954 the Bureau of Indian Affairs ordered the Vermilion school closed “in line with the policy of desegregation of Indian pupils.” There is no record of efforts to keep the school open. That fall, Vermilion Lake students were transported to the consolidated elementary school in Soudan, a few miles from Tower. Usable books, furniture, and shop equipment were taken to Tower, and the Vermilion school building was eventually torn down. Some of the employee cottages were sold to individuals in Tower, who moved the buildings to town. The school lands became the property of the reservation.⁴⁵

TODAY, THE VERMILION LAKE reservation uses the school site for community services and activities. Where the laundry-turned-school once stood is a beautiful Head Start building with facilities for children and families. Close by is a gymnasium and, where the dormitory stood, a community center with medical and dental facilities and a nutrition program for elders. There is a playground, a baseball field, and pow-wow grounds. The sidewalk that passed the school buildings is now surrounded by tall grass. It runs by the community center and ends at an empty field. The ruins of the sturdy cow barn—Superintendent Edsall once said that it housed the animals more comfortably than the dormitory did children⁴⁶—stand as a community landmark across a now smoothly blacktopped road. From the ruins, the “farm road” leads to a new housing development on the site where hundreds of schoolchildren once worked long hours in the fields. A short distance away is the Fortune Bay Resort and Casino, built and run by the Bois Forte Band, which has made possible many of the recent improvements on the reservation. And next to the casino is the Bois Forte Museum and History Center that opened in 2002, a lovely building in a wooded setting. Honoring and preserving the past, it educates visitors about the Bois Forte people, their long migration here, their stark and beautiful means of survival based on the traditional teachings of their ancestors’ ancestors, and the story of the Vermilion Lake Indian School. The faces at the museum’s grand opening contrasted, blended, and matched the faces in the multigenerational photo display, faces of those who walked before us and those who watched that day.

Not far from the museum, hidden on a spot where nothing has been built or disturbed for years, are small

places—overgrown, covered, and protected by years of changing seasons—that contain the unmarked graves of the children who died while at the school. They rest in the shelter of the wilds of Sucker Point. On winter days and nights, snow covers this place and comforts memories with a white quiet that is heavy and gentle. Summer days and nights, small breezes sing soft green whispering songs that caress those sleeping children. *Abinoojiiyag nibaawag.*⁴⁷ □

Notes

We descendants of boarding-school children thank them and also those who did not survive the experience for their courage, which made it possible for us to live as Indian people today.

1. Marvin G. Lamppa, “The Vermilion Lake People: Vermilion Lake Bois Forte History Project,” Iron Range Research Center archives, Chisholm, MN.
2. David H. DeJong, *Promises of the Past: A History of Indian Education in the United States* (Golden, CO: North American Press, 1993), 3–21, 107.



Bois Forte children of the Vermilion Lake district, about 1915

3. Jeffrey Hamley, “An Introduction to the Federal Indian Boarding School Movement,” *North Dakota History* 61 (Spring 1994): 2–3; Robert M. Utley, introduction to *From Battlefield to Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian*, by Richard Henry Pratt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), xii–xiii, quote, 335; Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 13.

4. Newton H. Winchell, *The Aborigines of Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1911), 676, 682–83; Mitchell E. Rubinstein and Alan R. Woolworth, “The Dakota and Ojibway,” in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 29–30; *Vermilion Iron Journal*, Feb. 25, 1897, p. 1. Minnesota boarding schools operating in 1892 were: Leech Lake (opened in 1867), White Earth (1871), Red Lake (1877), Pine Point (1892), and Wild Rice River (1892).

5. C. Larabee letter, Sept. 19, 1905, in Letters Received, Vermilion Lake Indian School, Consolidated Chippewa Agency Records, U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Central Plains Region, Kansas City, MO (hereinafter cited as RG 75, Kansas City); Winchell, *Aborigines*, 676; Thomas F. Rodwell, Annual Report, 1910, p. 3, in Superintendents’ Annual Narrative and Statistical Reports from Field Jurisdictions of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1907–38, National Archives and Records Administration Microcopy M1011, roll 161, copy in Minnesota Historical Society Library (MHS), St. Paul (hereinafter cited as Annual Report).

6. Otis O. Benson, Annual Report, 1916, p. 1.
 7. H. A. Edsall, Annual Report, 1917, p. 3.
 8. Benson, Annual Report, 1912, p. 1, 3; 1914, p. 1; Oliver H. Gates to Samuel W. Campbell, 1902, in Great Lakes Consolidated Agency Records, 1869–1950, U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives and Records Administration microfilm, copy in University of Wisconsin, River Falls, archives.
 9. Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 13, 56; Gates to Campbell, 1902; Wilbur A. Riegert, *Quest for the Pipe of the Sioux, as Viewed from Wounded Knee* (Rapid City, SD: J. M. Fritze, 1975), 25.

10. Ellen Monroe, interview by author, Hibbing, Oct. 1992; Rodwell, Annual Report, 1910, p. 6, and subsequent superintendents’ reports.

11. David W. Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 210–15. Staff names are from identified photographs in the privately held Mary Anderson collection.

12. For further education, some of Riegert’s younger relatives went to the Pipestone Indian School in southwestern Minnesota, Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma, Haskell, and to the Tower public school. Riegert, *Quest for the Pipe*, 13–14.



Patriotic gathering, probably during World War I, of teachers and Indian staff including Mary Riegert (standing, holding white paper) and Jim Boshey (center)

13. K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of the Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), xi–xiii, 3–6.

14. Rodwell, Annual Report, 1910, p. 13.

15. Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 15–18; Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 28–31, 97. See also, Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 276–83.

16. Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 13; Rodwell, Annual Report, 1910, p. 6; Benson, Annual Report, 1912, p. 1; Lamppa, “Vermilion Lake People.”

17. Lamppa, “Vermilion Lake People”; Student Records, Vermilion Lake Indian School, RG 75, Kansas City; “Anishinabe,” in *Northern Lights: A Cultural Sampler*, ed. Patrick Parks (Ely: Ely Public Schools, 1991), n. p.

18. Rodwell, Annual Report, 1910, p. 4–5.

19. Superintendents’ Annual Reports, 1910–16, especially Benson, 1912, p. 3; 1914, p. 1.

20. Superintendents’ Annual Reports, 1910–19.

21. Rodwell, Annual Report, 1910, p. 3, 11–12.

22. Rodwell, Annual Report, 1910, p. 8–9, 12. See also Superintendents’ Annual Reports, 1911–17. Trachoma and tuberculosis were major, recurring problems at all Indian boarding schools; see Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 131–35.

23. Benson, Annual Reports, 1912–16.

24. Edsall, Annual Report, 1917, p. 2–4; [C. E. Dennis], Annual Report, 1919, p. 4, 6.

25. Benson, Annual Report, 1916, p. 1, 2; Edsall, Annual Report, 1918, p. 2; [Dennis], Annual Report, 1919, p. 1.

26. Superintendents’ Annual Reports, 1910–18, especially Edsall, 1917, p. 2–3, and [Dennis], 1919,

p. 4; Riegert, *Quest for the Pipe*, 25. Mrs. Riegert experienced an Indian mother’s worst fear when her teenage son was permanently injured at Haskell. His injury left him paraplegic, and he worked at the Vermilion school for a short time after completing his studies at Haskell; Student Records, Vermilion Lake Indian School, RG 75, Kansas City.

27. Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 315; Superintendents’ Annual Reports, 1910–19, quote from Benson, 1913, p. 20; Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 28, 97; Lamppa, “Vermilion Lake People.”

28. Utley, *From Battlefield to Classroom*, xiii–xiv; Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 156–57. In his 1910 report, Rodwell mentioned “trying” one student in the outing program; see p. 2. Information on the LeGarde accident is from LeGarde family oral history.

29. Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 87; Benson, Annual Report, 1915, p. 1.

30. Reigert, *Quest for the Pipe*, 13–14.

31. Superintendents’ Annual Reports, 1910–19; on 16 graduates, see [Dennis], 1919, p. 4; F. H. Abbott to Benson, 1912, Letters Received, Vermilion Lake Indian School, RG 75, Kansas City.

32. [Dennis], Annual Report, 1919, p. 4–5, 7; *Tower Weekly News*, Aug. 1, 1919, p. 1.

33. *Tower Weekly News*, Aug. 8, 1919, p. 1, Sept. 12, 1919, p. 1.

34. *Tower Weekly News*, Aug. 1, 1919, p. 1; Letters Received, Vermilion Lake Indian School, 1919, 1920, 1921, RG 75, Kansas City.

35. *Tower Weekly News*, Oct. 1, 1920, p. 3.

36. Letters Received, Vermilion Lake Indian School, 1919, 1920, 1921, RG 75, Kansas City; State of Minnesota, Indian Scholarship Office Records, 1954, Dept. of Children, Families, and Learning, St. Paul; Edward H. Spicer, *A Short His-*

tory of the Indians of the United States (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1969), 116–18.

37. Lewis B. Meriam et al., *The Problem of Indian Administration*, Institute for Government Research Studies in Administration, no. 17 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1928). Meriam’s 1928 essay, “The Effects of Boarding Schools on Indian Family Life,” is reprinted in *The Destruction of American Indian Families*, ed. Steven Unger (New York: Association on American Indian Affairs, 1977), 14–17.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Collier commissioner of Indian affairs in 1933; he served through 1945. Kenneth R. Philp, ed., *Indian Self-Rule: First-Hand Accounts of Indian-White Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995), 125, 139, 247–48.

38. Philp, *Indian Self-Rule*, 125, 139, 247–48.

39. O. R. Sande and R. H. Larson, Annual Report to the Office of Indian Affairs from the Director and Supervisor of Indian Education for the State of Minnesota, 1937–38, p. 7, 12, in Education Dept., Indian Education Section, Minnesota State Archives, MHS. Minnesota first contracted for JOM money in 1936; Annual Report . . . of Indian Education, 1949–50, p. 15.

40. Lamppa, “Vermilion Lake People.”

41. Former teacher, interview by author, 1989.

42. Annual Report . . . of Indian Education, 1946, p. 4, 1947, p. 18.

43. Annual Report . . . of Indian Education, 1950–51, p. 4, 1951–52, p. 4, 21, 1952–53, p. 4, 16, 1953–54, p. 10. The schools were: Horack and Beaulieu in Mahnomon Co.; Jackson, Itasca Co.; Mission, Beltrami Co.; Goat Ranch, Becker Co.; Nett Lake (grades 7–8), Koochiching Co.; and Onigum, Cass Co.

44. Philp, *Indian Self-Rule*, 174–85.

45. Annual Report . . . of Indian Education, 1954–55, p. 30.

46. Edsall, Annual Report, 1917, p. 3.

47. This Ojibwe phrase translates: “The children sleep.”

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