

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Voices from Haskell: Indian Students between Two Worlds, 1884-1928.
By Myriam Vučković.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9t712140>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 33(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Madsen, Deborah L.

Publication Date

2009-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Voices from Haskell: Indian Students between Two Worlds, 1884–1928. By Myriam Vučković. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008. 330 pages. \$34.95 cloth.

Voices from Haskell contributes to the growing body of historical scholarship about federal US off-reservation boarding schools. Vučković follows the groundbreaking work of Brenda Child, K. Tsianina Lomawaima, and others by documenting in great detail the everyday operations of Haskell Institute. Much of the study's value lies in the painstaking archival work that illuminates the history of Haskell from its founding in 1884 through the first twenty-five years of its operation. Though Vučković gestures in places toward the later transformations undergone by Haskell, her primary focus is on the conditions that led to the school's establishment as a successful federal institution. This means that the early effort is contextualized in terms of a brief history of Indian education in the period up to the involvement of the federal government in the early 1880s. Changing priorities in Indian education, changing pedagogical philosophies and practices, and growing concern with multicultural education in a period of accelerated European migration to the United States also provide the dynamic context within which the history of Haskell is located.

The book is organized thematically rather than chronologically, which allows a focused discussion of specific aspects of Haskell's operation, with attention to the ways in which students' experiences changed as the school became more established and the early financial problems eased. However, this manner of organization also obstructs a clear sense of historical change and prevents the telling of individual students' narratives. The opening chapters deal with the school's establishment and the manner in which children were recruited to the school. Vučković stresses the problems caused by early shortages of funds and the consequences these had for the quality of life at Haskell and the ongoing recruitment effort. For example, the lack of a boiler when the school initially opened rendered a harsh winter even more difficult to endure, with significant numbers of deaths in that first year. The damage to Haskell's reputation caused by the perception of a high mortality rate, together with the excessive discipline and militarization of school routines under the second superintendent, Colonel Grabowskii, took years to overcome. The school's success clearly depended upon the work of the superintendent, who needed to sustain good relations with federal authorities and the local community of Lawrence, Kansas, as well as the Native communities and Indian agents who had to be persuaded to send children to Haskell.

Vučković's history highlights the school's precarious situation during the first decade of operation; only in the 1890s was Haskell stabilized and considered a success. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the school was receiving more applications than there were places to allocate, and this intensified after the closing of Carlisle in 1918. Why then was Haskell so attractive to Indian students and their families? Vučković follows Child's *Boarding School Seasons* (1998) by underlining the importance of Haskell and other federal boarding schools for children who had been orphaned, those whose families

had suffered dispossession as a result of such policies as allotment and could no longer support or perhaps even feed their children, and children looking for an alternative to local schools where racism was pervasive. However, unlike Child, she does not contextualize this observation with any discussion of the impoverished home conditions experienced by such children as the result of federal policies and economic depression. Vučković's detailed account of recruitment and entry procedures is particularly illuminating. She pays close attention to the variety of factors that prevented some students from entering Haskell, such as the blood quantum rule and the requirement that parents or guardians and a federal Indian agent explicitly grant permission. Vučković does not, however, clearly address the sustained discrepancy between the number of enrollments and the number of students actually attending the school. Her interpretation of the archive of school documents can be summarized by this remark, made late in the book: "Most boarding school students perceived their years at Haskell as a formative experience, one that had a long-lasting influence on their life [*sic*]. Although time impacts memory by lessening negative recollections and nurturing nostalgic emotions, many students harbored a positive attitude toward their alma mater" (269). It is this positive attitude that Vučković emphasizes, and it is most clearly revealed in her discussions of health and punishment. The issue of abuse, which has been raised relatively recently in boarding school scholarship, is notably overlooked; Vučković's account implies that the only kind of sexual activity that took place at the school was between students, providing evidence that "all attempts to control the students' sexuality had their limits," and that Haskell's reputation for harsh punishment arose from cultural differences (183). "Obviously," she writes, "the standards as to what constituted acceptable punishment differed between the school and the parents as well as across cultures" (219). This is certainly a subject for further research, though satisfactory investigation of these issues will require the use of historical sources that Vučković does not deploy.

Vučković's description of the school's daily operations is organized around a central paradox: the school promoted conformity and obedience in a group environment despite the policy of Americanization and assimilation to the ideology of individualism. It is in this context that Vučković claims to document what she calls "a sub-culture of accommodation and resistance" rather than assimilation (1). Certainly she provides ample evidence of the ambivalence experienced by students and their families regarding the education offered at Haskell. The "between worlds" subtitle invokes the idea explored in Margaret Connell Szasz's collection, *Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker* (1994), but Vučković makes limited use of the concept. The book's major weakness lies in Vučković's tendency to celebrate rather than question the emergence of a common "Indian" identity, which she sees as a positive outcome of the school's paradoxical mission. She does not consider whether pan-Indianism might be seen as a successful strategy of detribalization. Early in the book, Haskell is described as a site of contestation and resistance, but what emerges from Vučković's account is more a sense of the "total institution" that was intended by federal authorities (2). The chapter

“Living by the Bell,” documenting the rigorous regimentation and discipline of everyday life at the school, is symptomatic of this. Consequently, Vučković’s assertion that an “intertribal culture” flourished in this environment is weakened by the power of contrary evidence. In part, this is due to the reliance on archival documents rather than oral histories. Like Child, Vučković uses students’ letters as well as published oral accounts and the Haskell newspaper the *Indian Leader*, but, unlike scholars such as Lomawaima in her history of Chilocco, *They Called It Prairie Light* (1994), she does not interview former students and depends on rather too few student informants. Esther Burnett and Jesse Rowledge, both of whom describe positive experiences of Haskell, are quoted repeatedly. For example, Lottie High Whitefox who reported that she did not learn much at the school is not quoted directly at all while half the facing page is given over to a lengthy first-person account by Rowledge about an incident when he took another boy under his protection and ensured he was cleaned, had his hair cut, and wore an appropriately laundered shirt (88–89). Vučković does not remark upon the possible reasons why some students rather than the school took responsibility for the personal care of their fellows. She uses this story to support a claim that friendship enabled students to learn about their respective tribal cultures, but the story instead seems to indicate that friendship was, at least in this case, a mechanism of white socialization or even detribalization, especially around the highly sensitive issue of the cutting of students’ hair.

This history of the early years of Haskell may be best read as a complement to Child’s study of Haskell, Flandreau, and Pipestone schools. Where Child is rather more critical of the schools in terms of policies, operational practices, impacts on Native communities, and the need Native people experienced for these schools, which appear to have offered a haven during devastatingly difficult economic times, Vučković is more positive, writing from a less invested point of view and with an emphasis upon the mostly good intentions of those who worked in the school and the more positive outcomes for those students, like Burnett and Rowledge, who found lasting value in their educational experience.

Deborah L. Madsen
University of Geneva

War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War. By Brian DeLay. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. 496 pages. \$35.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

War of a Thousand Deserts is a signal contribution to borderlands history, the history of Native peoples, diplomatic history, and our understanding of nineteenth-century America more generally. It focuses on Indian raids into Mexico in the years before and during the US-Mexican War of 1846 to 1848. But these are not the usual tales of Mangas Coloradas (though he appears here). Reaching far beyond the common focus on Apaches, Navajos, and