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“The Hindrances are Many”: Zunis and Missionaries at the Christian Reformed School, 1908–1934

BENSON TONG

“It is very hard to get the children to attend school while those dances take place,” complained a frustrated Nellie De Jong in 1909 in a letter to Henry Beets, secretary general of the Board of Heathen Missions (Christian Reformed Church or CRC). But after venting her feelings about Zuni distractions, the young teacher concluded her letter with the hope that “the work which is done among those little heathens and which is often discouraging, may not be in vain.”

De Jong had joined the mission field of the Zuni reservation in 1908. Her workplace, the Christian Reformed day school, was built on a high mesa on the south bank of the Zuni River within walking distance of the former historic Halona village, today’s Zuni Pueblo. One of many mission schools across the country that supplemented the government’s work in Indian education, the institution served the denomination’s proselytizing efforts amongst Zunis that began in 1898, following the arrival of pioneer CRC missionary, Andrew Vander Wagen, and his wife, Effa Vander Wagen.

Of course, Zunis and other native peoples in the present-day United States had been objects of civilization and Christianization for hundreds of years since the days of the late sixteenth–century missionaries. But in the years following the United States Civil War, the federal government defeated the Indians through warfare, settled many of them on reservations, and renewed efforts to bring about the assimilation and

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absorption of Indians into mainstream American life. Bureaucrats, reformers, and missionaries sought to transform seemingly wild, roaming Indians into self-sustaining, self-respecting citizens through education.\(^3\)

During the long period of forced assimilation, from the Reconstruction Era to the early years of the Great Depression, Indian education stressed character building and moral uplift—two characteristics considered essential to the process of turning Indians into patriotic American citizens. Indians would then learn to appreciate the responsibilities of holding land in severalty and loyal citizenship, both of which were extended to them under the Dawes Act of 1887. That legislation marked the beginning of more intensive efforts to expand educational opportunities to all Indian youth.\(^4\)

The implementation of assimilation at the primary and secondary school level was less than a resounding success. In *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891–1935*, Robert A. Trennert demonstrates that neither complete success nor total failure resulted at the government boarding school in Arizona. Students rarely merged into mainstream American society as permanent workers. Yet the students valued their schooling experience since it broadened their knowledge and skills.\(^5\)

Like Trennert, Michael L. Coleman in *American Indian Children at School, 1850–1930*, rejects simplistic portraits of school life. After studying about one-hundred autobiographies of ex–students, Coleman concludes that the Indian youngsters responded to European American education with a high degree of ambivalence. Students demonstrated a range of responses while in school. Most went through stages of adjustment, resistance, and rejection at various times.\(^6\)

The scholarship to date clearly reinforces the argument that Native Americans were not always just passive participants in their power relationship with the dominant civilization. Most historians tend to focus on government schools, particularly those off the reservation. Still somewhat unaccounted for is the role of missionary schools. A few historians, including Francis Paul Prucha, have examined church–government relations at the national level, but the dynamics between mission officials, students, and Indians at the local level remains unexplored. This article examines that particular cultural meeting between two groups rarely mentioned in the literature—Christian Reformed Church (CRC) missionaries and Zuni Indians who interacted in a reservation setting.

Beginning in the closing years of the nineteenth century, Zuni school–age children had wider access to education through the work of the CRC missionaries, whose Christian outposts were scattered all over the American Southwest. In Zuni country, the efforts of these missionary teachers failed to bridge the cultural gap between the Indians and Anglo–Americans. Zuni parents, students, and tribal leaders resisted the
overtures of zealous CRC missionaries. In the long run, however, the educational experience gradually chipped away at the cohesiveness of the tribal society, and eventually brought some Zunis into the fold of mainstream America. Still, Zuni Indians have shown remarkable resilience in preserving their heritage, even in the face of strong assimilationist pressures.

The people of Hepatina (the Middle Place), as Zunis called themselves, came into contact with Westerners through the labors of Franciscan missionaries. Franciscans emphasized Christian doctrines, as well as instruction in reading, writing, and vocational training. But Zunis recoiled from these offerings and "clung to their ancient practices and beliefs," according to one padre.7

Another group, Presbyterian missionaries, also failed to undermine the collective consciousness of the tribe. In the years after the Civil War, government subsidies given under the school contract system—whereby religious groups that set up schools on reservations received financial aid on a per capita basis—encouraged the Presbyterian Church and other Protestant denominations to establish mission schools in the Southwest. Beginning in the late 1870s, Presbyterian missionaries—such as Reverend Henry K. Palmer and his successor, Reverend Taylor F. Ealy—ran a school on the reservation that drew only a handful of Zuni students. Zuni parents' indifference toward the school meant that few Indian children received practical instruction in European American farming and homemaking techniques. Some adult Indians, tempted by the school's offer of free clothing and food, sent their children to school, but prevented their attendance during days set aside for ritual dances and traditional ceremonies.8 Most Zunis, in the words of a Dutch visitor to the reservation, failed to "see why they should allow their children to be taught the doctrine and ideas which differ so greatly from their own and those of their ancestors."9 A significant number of Indians, however, utilized the medical services provided at the school. Thus, many appreciated the material benefits of white civilization, but were less receptive to values that threatened the cohesiveness of their society.10

Frustrated by their failure to make any significant inroads into Zuni religion, Presbyterian mission workers withdrew from the field in 1897, and educational services fell into the hands of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This development also stemmed, in part, from the termination of federal payments to denominational mission schools in the 1890s. In Zuni territory, the federal agency opened a regular day school at Halona in 1897, but the school challenged little of the old tribal ways of life.11 Zuni Indians, having just succeeded in resisting the well-meaning overtures of these white men, found themselves in the early twentieth century confronting another group of misguided reformers. This time, the
new harbingers of Anglo civilization—the CRC missionaries—mounted a more aggressive plan of Americanization than had their predecessors which eventually enervated the close-knit Zuni society.

Although Protestant denominations in the early years of the twentieth century showed, in the words of historian Pierce R. Beaver, an "evident slump in interest in the Indians," a few including the Christian Reformed Church remained active in the mission field. The first CRC mission workers in Zuni territory, Andrew and Effa Vander Wagen, introduced themselves to tribal leaders as qualified "farmer and stockman" and "medical woman" respectively. Speaking on behalf of his people, Chief Naochi responded, "Your words have not only entered into our ears, but have lodged in our hearts. Come over and help us."

By offering their skills to the community, the Vander Wagens won the friendship of a sizeable portion of the local population. They earned the gratitude and respect of the Zunis for their medical services during a devastating smallpox epidemic that wiped out countless Indian lives at the height of the 1898–99 winter. As a token of appreciation, the Indians allowed Vander Wagen to establish his chapel in the pueblo and honored the Vander Wagens' courage through a folktale entitled "Ed Vanderwagen and the Bears."

Though the Zunis appreciated the material culture of the whites, few listened to the accompanying spiritual message. In a meeting with Vander Wagen, members of the Zuni Council expressed their fears of invoking the wrath of the Indian gods if they paid obeisance to the Christian God. They predicted that bad droughts and poor crops would be the gods' punishment for abandoning ritual dances and homage ceremonies.

Members of the Zuni tribe also distanced themselves from white institutions to avoid "shaming." Anthropologists consider Zunis, more than other Indians, to be easily embarrassed before others. A Zuni child, anxious to make a positive impression on the rest of the tribe, pays considerable attention to what is expected of him and follows dutifully the rules of his society. In 1902, familial objections prevented one young Zuni girl, Nena Halean, from pursuing her Christian duties. After her baptism, she returned to the folds of her indigenous religion and never again appeared at fellowship meetings.

Already suspicious of the intentions of the missionaries, Zunis had little to celebrate when in 1908 the Board of Heathen Missions erected a one-room schoolhouse. CRC missionaries, unflinching in their determination to make progress, proposed to use the school to spread God's word and to "fulfill the Master's [God's] commission to preach, teach, and heal the Indian." The school and the teachers were—in the words of Cornelius Kuipers, a former principal of the establishment—"the handmaidens of the church" because they "opened up opportunities to visit homes and families" for proselytizing.
Though the professed goal of the missionaries centered on conversions, few ignored the link between religion and civilization. Missionaries believed that the tribe had to develop the same social institutions as whites in order to sustain Christianity in their midst. Like reformers of the early twentieth century, CRC mission officials propagated detribalization and private ownership of property. One ordained missionary, Herman Fryling, outlined the role of CRC mission workers: “besides booklearning, they teach sanitation, hygiene, and how to better themselves materially by teaching them how to farm, dress better, live more comfortable, and how to act in meeting with civilized people.”

Given missionaries’ no compromise approach towards native religion and culture, Indians were not keen about sending their young to the CRC school. They also had practical reasons for keeping their children away from the institution. One Zuni governor protested the establishment of the school on the grounds that his people needed their children to work in the fields and at home. When school lessons began on 5 October 1908, Native Americans who had earlier agreed to send their children to the school reneged on their promise. Enrollment remained low for many years. Between 1908 and 1924, no more than forty-five students out of nearly 400 Zunis below the age of eighteen attended the school.

The general lack of interest in the school forced mission officials to adopt more aggressive methods. They hired a Zuni to help persuade parents to accept the benefits of the schooling experience. This arrangement failed, however, to stabilize attendance. On a few occasions Zuni leaders themselves placed their moral authority at the service of the missionaries. One ex-governor, “Mr. Lewis,” exhorted his people to accept Christian schooling.

Mission teachers often blamed low enrollment figures on the overcrowded conditions of the school. Missionaries claimed that Zuni parents were interested in education, but the lack of space prevented more children from joining their enrolled peers. Enrollment also fluctuated from year to year because some parents exercised their right to transfer their children to the nearby government school or, after 1922, to the local Catholic school.

The number of students at the CRC day school began to increase in the mid-1920s. In 1925, the school enrolled about seventy students. When a new three-room school building was completed in the spring of 1927, more Zuni children flocked to the school. On the eve of the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934—the legislation which promised to establish Indian self-determination—enrollment in the school peaked at 104, a trend which paralleled the growth of mission
schools across the state of New Mexico. Parents began to recognize that a few years of formal education could give their children an edge in bridging the gap between their own and the white man's world. In a 1930 resolution the Council of New Mexico Pueblos declared the following: "we want our children ... to have day school education as white children have." Parents continued to bring their children to school after 1930, despite the impact of the Depression which forced school authorities to stop providing free clothes to the students.

Though yearly enrollment improved somewhat in the 1930s, daily absenteeism continued. Enrolled students frequently missed school, or worse, dropped out. Female students often had to end their schooling days before completing the entire program because of pregnancy or impending matrimony. One student, Naomi, attended the school for two years before dropping out at the age of twelve to marry. In 1921 alone, five girls between the age of fourteen and sixteen left school to marry.

Because a Zuni individual is only conferred full social recognition following active involvement in socio-religious, rather than in economic, activities, young students found it expedient to participate in tribal ceremonialism. The Zuni Way proscribes a continuous practice of rituals and ceremonies that make heavy demands on time and energy. Early in the winter, usually in late November or early December, both male and female youngsters join members of the tribe in an elaborate religious festival named the Shalako or house-blessing ceremony. This public ceremony involved a series of rituals celebrating the annual coming of the supernaturals to the village. Offerings and dances in honor of the gods are key elements of this community-wide religious activity. These religious observances often stood in the way of steady attendance. A youngster named Lulu Zuni enrolled in October of 1908, but left during the dancing season and never returned. Male students also abandoned their studies to participate in a springtime initiation ceremony into a Kachina society. Since the structure of Zuni communal-oriented religion consists of numerous cult groups, and since members of the tribe are allowed to hold multiple memberships in these groups or societies, young men and women rarely spent much time in school.

Furthermore, from April to June, few students attended school when their families left the main village for their summer dwellings out in the country, where they raised corn and other crops. For example, Yustsahe, a ten year old boy, attended school for five months; then in early April 1910 he followed his parents to the countryside. According to one school report, students also left school in early spring to help herd and shear sheep. One student, Sayasitsa, missed two months of school to help tend the family stock. Pupils also lost learning time whenever the school
closed due to serious epidemics. In 1924, an outbreak of whooping cough swept through the reservation and delayed the opening of the new school year by almost a month.29

Attendance at the CRC school constantly fluctuated. The Indians' unreceptive response was also determined by the level and nature of involvement of the missionaries in the Zuni world. There was a tendency on the part of missionaries to permit other demands on their time to take precedence over their teaching responsibilities. For example, female teachers since the days of Nellie De Jong, the first CRC teacher at Zuni, shouldered the additional responsibility of visiting the old and the sick in the village. They also took on the task of teaching hygiene and personal care since many women and children suffered from skin diseases. Both teachers and the principal also spent much time filling out government reports (quarterly, semi-annual, and annual), completing monthly reports to the mission board, updating correspondence with financial beneficiaries, and attending weekly meetings with other missionaries in Rehoboth or Gallup. The CRC teachers assigned to Zuni also devoted countless hours teaching religious classes outside the reservation, travelling as far as fifty miles or more to reach nomadic Navajos throughout the rugged country.30

During the first thirty years of the school's existence, one particular issue more than any other problem diverted the attention of the missionaries from the task at hand. Rooted in a personal conflict between two missionaries, layman Andrew Vander Wagen and Reverend Herman Fryling, this bitter animosity divided the small white community of the Zuni reservation. Vander Wagen accused Fryling of undermining his plan to establish an Indian industrial school on the outskirts of the reservation. When Vander Wagen opened a trading post, Fryling claimed that Vander Wagen planned to profit from articles manufactured by the students of the so-called industrial school. Reverend Fryling also blamed Vander Wagen for the tense relations between Zunis and CRC missionaries, citing unsatisfactory business dealings between Vander Wagen and local Indians as the cause of the contention. Tensions built and even Zunis became involved. In 1911, the Vander Wagen faction presented a petition signed by approximately four hundred Zunis demanding Fryling's removal. But nothing came of this request, and Fryling remained in Zuni.31

Fryling finally was avenged in 1925 when a female teacher branded Vander Wagen a heretic. She declared him unfit to be a member of the church and stormed out of a meeting attended by a number of Indians. The struggle between the two factions continued into the 1930s, in spite of attempts by higher authorities to reconcile the warring parties.32 The rift within the white community left an indelible impression on the native people. Already unconvinced of the benefits of Anglo civiliza-
tion, Indians now received confirmation of their convictions. One tribal leader advised a mission worker "to tell [what] you say to us to your people, for they need it as much and more than we do."³³

On the whole, Zuni Indians maintained some distance from CRC officials, though most treated them cordially. One missionary assured his eastern friends that "the people [Zuni] are friendly towards us, receive us in their homes... speak freely to us, are willing to assist us in every secular way."³⁴ Yet Indian toleration of alien influence sometimes stretched beyond the limits. In 1877, following the establishment of the Zuni reservation, non-Indians established mines, farms, and ranches on Zuni land. Non-Indians also restricted Zuni access to traditional grazing, hunting, gathering, and sacred areas by fencing the land.³⁵

Native Americans found it increasingly difficult to accept more foreign settlers in their midst. Throughout the 1910s, Zunis repeatedly destroyed fences around the mission, the minister’s home, and even the school building. Hostilities intensified in 1929 when CRC officials brushed aside tribal objections to plans for mission expansion. Zunis tried to prevent the erection of a fence cordoning off new land earmarked for a playground, but failed. Not only did CRC workers secure that piece of land, but they also ended up with property they had not paid for; the missionary charged with overseeing this affair defiantly fenced off an additional ten square feet. For the Zunis, this bitter experience deepened their anxiety about the possibility of losing control over the children to mission authorities.³⁶ Some parents did permit their youngsters to enroll in the school, however. Pressure from school authorities intensified to the point that even unwilling parents gave their consent. Youngsters sent to the school benefited from free clothing and lunches but little else. One woman, Flora Zuni, admitted that she only sent her children to the CRC school because they "gave them better clothes there."³⁷

Since the CRC mission school offered instruction from grades one through sixth, most Zuni students ranged between the ages of five and thirteen, although a few began their schooling in late adolescence. Anna Walwe, for example, arrived at the school when she was seventeen years old. Available statistical evidence, unfortunately, provides little clue on the sexual distribution of the students.³⁸

Pupils followed formal instruction from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon. A long lunch break of two hours interrupted the daily schedule. Beginning in the mid-1920s, however, the school day was extended by an hour to accommodate lessons in manual training and home economics. Though school hours were somewhat shorter than those in public schools, Indian students unfamiliar with the prescribed schedule and more attuned to the leisurely pace of tribal life seemed to find the adjustment difficult.³⁹
One of the most difficult adjustments involved "de-Indianization." Mirroring the attitudes of government officials and reformers, CRC officials ran the school on the assumption that Indian children needed training in discipline, etiquette, attire, and hygiene. Personal discipline in these areas was designed to ensure spiritual growth—an obsessive concern of the mission teachers. The fastidious matron bathed pupils every week and washed their hands and faces every morning. Students also learned oral hygiene and how to care for their hair. They were issued school clothes and work outfits, including undergarments, socks, and shoes. Indoctrination of Christian thought began at this stage; the matron often told the pupils Bible stories or taught gospel hymns.  

Few pupils took their classroom work in stride. For the boys and girls, the rigid academic routine in the school was an educational experience that differed markedly from their traditional, informal method of learning. Traditionally, Zuni children derived part of their knowledge of the Indian world from tribal stories told by a skillful narrator. They listened to storytellers who presented subtle moral messages embedded within the tales. Young children heard about the need to have a sense of duty and fidelity to their elders. As apprentices to their parents, they learned the skills necessary for adult life. Girls were trained to help their mothers, while boys learned to be farmers and stockmen. In addition, boys were taught to hunt, while girls engaged in beadwork and pottery making. Both sexes absorbed the values of society from a number of people: their parents, members of the extended family, and even mere acquaintances. The mission school sought to replace these authorities with one fearful authority who sought to "wean children from their time­less life-style through routine and regimentation."  

The formal curriculum in the CRC school emphasized reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, and art, a curriculum similar to the government day schools of the early twentieth century. Indian culture received no attention. Unlike students in government or other missionary schools, there is little evidence that CRC students were exposed to history, geography, science, or literature. Consequently, the students’ world view expanded little beyond their immediate surroundings. In 1917, the reading room in the mission building was stocked only with old magazines and dusty copies of Christian literature. A library fund-raising campaign later that same year failed to provide anything but materials related to Christian theology. In the classroom, students memorized biblical lessons, and repeated the teacher’s "same short sentences over and over again until they memorized the Gospel truths." Students learned a number of Bible texts, the Apostle’s Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer by rote. Pupils also attended special Bible classes
on a particular weekday, and also met for Sunday School work. An or-
dained minister usually ran these meetings, with the assistance of an
interpreter, and drilled the children in the "essentials of Bible truths."43

Like the government schools operated outside of reservations of that
time, the CRC day school offered vocational education. Though less
comprehensive and less intensive than government school training, the
goals of the CRC practical training program differed little from that of
the Bureau of Indian Affairs; that is, pupils would learn a variety of
mechanical skills which they could use to help raise a respectable
Anglo-like family. Indian boys applied these skills to build houses and
sheds, to mend fences, and even to repair shoes. The industrial training
program also served to promote the school's evangelical mission. At
one local meeting in 1930 the minutes read: "the school needs addi­
tional industrial quarters to meet local competition . . . the industrial
output of a school is something the Zuni can easily see and appreciate,
more than booklearning."44

Unfortunately, for some years this practical program remained in
the planning stage. In 1926, vocational education for boys began with
the arrival of the versatile layworker John Romeyn, who introduced car­
pentry and shoe repair classes—activities that received the wholehearted
support of the government field inspector. Later, he taught students how
to build fences, fix water pumps, tend gardens, and tackle plumbing prob­
lems. The shrewd instructor made use of the students' labor to repair
all physical defects in the mission buildings and surroundings. Pupils
clearly had more than a fair chance of putting into practice the knowl­
gedge they acquired. By 1930 the school's industrial department also of­
fered beadwork—a concession to Zuni tradition brought on by strong
demands made throughout the 1920s by Commissioner of Indian Af­
fairs Charles Burke and advocates of Indian arts and crafts. This tolera­
tion of Indian culture, however, ignored gender role differentiation within
the Zuni tribe; traditionally, girls rather than boys engaged in this par­
ticular craft activity.45

Indian girls at the CRC school discovered that their vocational train­
ing was the first stage in their assimilation to Anglo domestic life. The
curriculum focused on the basics of the skilled homemaker—sewing,
embroidery, and cooking. Instructors also taught laundry and ironing.
Girls in the higher grades attended cooking classes held by the house­
keeper of the Zuni mission. These girls helped prepare the noon meal,
which usually consisted of homemade bread and powdered milk. Under
the supervision of a matron, all girls mended clothes and washed laun­
dry. Most work related to student laundry and mending required weekly
attention. Student work details saved the school money and relieved
teachers of heavy burdens, particularly that of the matron. Because stu­
dents themselves made few clothes, mission teachers frequently re-
quested donations of used clothes from eastern churches. Donated clothes were distributed to students and their families. Unlike industrial training for boys, the girls' vocational experience was useless for reservation life; after all, sewing machines and western kitchen utensils were almost non-existent in Zuni homes.

School life for the boys and girls did include some extracurricular activities. When recruitment improved in the late 1920s, school authorities organized team sports including baseball and basketball. The baseball team traveled outside Zuni territory and played against both CRC and government school teams in the region. In 1935, the Zuni baseball team capped off a successful year by beating their main rival, the Navajo team of the CRC Rehoboth school.

Under the assumption that Indian students needed to boost their low self-confidence, CRC mission teachers cajoled their charges to participate in musical programs. Talented students were selected to join a brass band, and members of the band, full of youthful energy, enjoyed their practices and performances. A few highly talented pupils earned the honor of accompanying a teacher on a fund-raising tour of the East during the early 1920s to collect donations for a proposed new building. These pupils performed skits, sang hymns, and delivered well-rehearsed orations. All students had at least one opportunity to take center stage during the annual Christmas celebrations at the mission. Pupils sang hymns and recited verses from the Bible, and in return, received gifts of nuts, fruits, and candy. School authorities relied on these few activities to sustain student interest, since church elders frowned on school dances or screenings of commercial films. For students, organized cultural activities opened another window into the Anglo world.

Making opportunities available to students was one thing, but deriving full benefits from them was another. Zuni students struggled to comprehend their school lessons. Zuni children were capable of absorbing new knowledge, according to one former principal, but faced an uphill task “thinking in English.” Their lack of proficiency in an alien language often prevented them from reacting quickly to their teachers and resulted in low grades for most subjects. Hypersensitivity to shame also hindered learning in the mission school. Because Zuni children were sensitized to ridicule at a young age, he or she became “very self-conscious when making mistakes and ... afraid of ridicule from others,” according to one teacher.

Missionaries working in the school were equally frustrated. Progress in English language skills seemed indiscernible, despite the heavy emphasis on learning English. To some extent, the lack of progress in English proficiency could be attributed to the CRC Board of Indian Mission’s reluctance to put civilization ahead of Christianization. Like many early twentieth-century missionaries, the board in 1915 opposed
Commissioner of Indian Affairs Cato Sells' objection to the use of native languages in schools. As a result, mission workers in the CRC Zuni school made no attempts to suppress the use of the Zuni language. In fact, CRC teachers learned the tribal language so that they could use it to impart biblical lessons. Herman Fryling, who served in the Zuni field for more than twenty years, argued that a missionary fluent in the native language gained their confidence, therefore "his influence is far reaching." Thus, mission school teachers compromised their personal conviction about the inferiority of the Zuni language and culture for the sake of evangelism.  

Many of the missionaries suffered from physical fatigue and general poor health due in part to unsuccessful acclimatization. The rugged and desolate low-altitude region wore many of them down. Beset by such physical liabilities and frustrated by the derailment of their evangelical program, missionaries became defensive. They attempted to preserve the few gains achieved by imposing stern disciplinary measures on any pupil who erred. When a student broke the rules, stressed Nellie Lam, a CRC principal, "he must be taken to task and be put back on the right track." Another church worker, Cornelius Hayenga, said, "when they [Indian children] see you mean business they give in." Such postures only heightened the uneasy atmosphere of the classroom, making it even more difficult for the students to have a fruitful experience.  

Though CRC teachers harbored no personal animosities toward their wards and even praised those who converted, the superior–inferior relationship between teacher and student, exacerbated by the dogmatic and paternalistic attitudes of teachers, ensured that few students would form strong bonds of friendship with their instructors. Nonetheless, these mission teachers who worked closely with the Indians were less inclined than their fellow brothers and sisters in the East to call the students "liars," "cheats," and other derogatory names. Students, for their part, respected their teachers—they gave matron Nellie Hamming the Zuni nickname of see-luh-se-it-sah, or "a high priest's daughter"—while maintaining some distance from their superiors.  

Before 1935 the CRC day school graduated students at grade six. In that year, four students passed the eighth grade examination, so school officials decided to show off their accomplishment. At a special commencement, students presented an elaborate program for local dignitaries. Before this time, many students did not complete the six-year program. Students who completed a few years of study usually continued their involvement in the tribal subsistence economy. A few found menial jobs in Gallup, working as day laborers on construction sites or as semi-skilled workers in railroad repair shops. In 1924, mission workers in Gallup reported the presence of forty Indian laborers at these work-
ing places. These urban Indians were the exceptions, however. Most ex-pupils—even the few Christian Zunis—remained within the boundaries of the Zuni country. Once adults, these ex-pupils fulfilled the predictions of southwestern mission workers, gathered for a conference in Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1910, that “the great majority [of mission school graduates] will return to the ordinary family life and occupations of their people.”

Anglo teachers, nevertheless, hoped that the most capable students would continue their education at reservation boarding schools and then return to the reservation to continue their Anglo ways and initiate changes. The church weekly, *The Banner*, reported in 1917 that about thirty-five young Zuni men attended non-reservation schools in the Southwest. In the 1920s, a handful of students made their way to the Albuquerque Indian School, and by 1933 ten of them had completed a course of study through the twelfth grade. Missionaries were convinced that these returning students, hopefully the future elite of the tribe, would proselytize the gospel among their fellow kinsmen.

But CRC officials saw little of their labor come to fruition. Albuquerque students who accepted Christianity tended to backslide upon returning to their homeland and eventually reverted to the old ways. Of the many children who followed the CRC program, only a few accepted “the white man’s religion.” After the establishment of the school, ten years passed before school authorities celebrated the first conversion. No conversions were recorded throughout the 1920s, and between 1931 and 1938 only two students received the blessings of baptism. Not until the postwar years did missionaries have a large enough pool of Christian students to run the day school. Rex Natewa, a pioneer Zuni teacher, wrote in 1951 that he was “very thankful for the school” and praised the Board of Indian Missions “for sending the Christian teachers so that through these teachers Zunis might have the Gospel messages.”

Natewa, however, was part of a tiny minority; most Zuni Indians who came in contact with church workers showed little enthusiasm for the “white man’s religion.” Time and time again, mission workers bemoaned that family and community pressures thwarted the intentions of interested pupils. Unlike off-reservation schools, day schools such as the CRC institution maintained little control over their pupils outside the walls of the classroom and consequently, observed missionary Cornelius Hayenga, “the results . . . [were] very meager.” Students feared ostracism by Zuni society if they accepted the overtures of their evangelistic instructors. Christianization, the central tenet of the CRC educational program, floundered as a result of passive resistance by students and parents alike. As late as the 1960s, conversions were few, although many maintained loose affiliation with one denomination or another.
The rate of assimilation remained somewhat different. Ex-students of the CRC school, particularly those who stayed on for a few years, learned many aspects of the Anglo lifestyle. Students were forced to confront the white man's civilization when CRC teachers promoted assimilation as the cornerstone of their evangelical program. In spite of the foreign, rigidly structured CRC atmosphere of learning, students picked up some basic English language skills and certain aspects of Anglo material culture. Once their school days ended, Zuni youngsters slowly "began to favor the white man's way of life," according to an irked Zuni parent. The same parent claimed that "although the people carried on the old ceremonies they [children] seemed to feel differently towards them." The process of acculturation for the younger generation brought them into conflict with their elders, but the struggle to break with the past continued into adulthood. A 1948 study of Zuni men who attended the CRC school, served in the military during World War II, and returned to the community afterwards revealed that traditional sanctions were still strong enough to force these men to abandon their "white ways" and return to the traditional life.

The cultural meeting between Zunis and the missionaries during the assimilation period produced less than satisfactory results for both parties. Mission teachers failed to convince the natives of the intrinsic value of Christianity, while Zunis had their traditions threatened, though not severely, by the dominant Anglo culture. Urged to explain the unsuccessful efforts of his colleagues, a CRC teacher replied, "the hindrances are many." Indians, for their part, also encountered many obstacles as they strove to accommodate change in the twentieth-century American West.

The Zuni-missionary meeting at crossroads also brought benefits to both sides. In the years following the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934, CRC mission workers, realizing the futility of their approach, gradually applied the spirit of cultural pluralism to their work. At first, missionaries rejected the Indian New Deal—the Roosevelt administration's attempt during the Great Depression to guarantee native cultures and to promote Indian self-government—and called it a "return to the blanket." Their attitude shifted in the early 1940s. Mission workers made serious efforts to learn and teach the Zuni language, and the Board of Indian Missions outlined a comprehensive educational program for the day school. Aware of past shortcomings, the CRC General Conference of Indian missionaries in 1950 called for greater tolerance of Indian languages and social customs. That shift in attitude seemed all the more remarkable in light of the postwar official Indian policy of termination—an "updated version of the old policy of assimilation," according to one scholar.
The "People of the Middle Place" had taken the long uncertain road of acculturation, though harboring doubts about white civilization. In striving to come to terms with the dominant culture, Zunis did not forget the lessons they heard in folk tales, including one which ended with this warning: "With the ways of the white man entering into our lives, perhaps it will not be long before our people become a wandering tribe, aimlessly roving the path of self-deterioration and destruction." These Native Americans had good reasons to treat cross-cultural interactions with circumspection. Their distrust of white society distanced them from Euro-American outsiders. In the end, Zuni Indians maintained enough resilience to resist, and then adapt, to the changing landscape of their home, the "Middle Place."

NOTES


7. Mary Stanislaus Van Well, "The Educational Aspects of the Missions in the Southwest" (Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 1941), 134-137, 141, 162.


10. Telling, "New Mexican Frontiers," 113; Bender, Missionaries, Outlaws, and Indians, 163.

11. Crampton, The Zunis of Cibola, 151.

12. Pierce R. Beaver, Church, State and the American Indians: Two and a Half Centuries of Partnership in Missions Between Protestant Churches and Government (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 207.


17. Fryling, “Missions,” Folder 3, HFP–HHCC; Beets to Local Conference, 2 December 1908, Journal 1, Box 1, BHMC–HHCC.


22. De Jong to Beets, 16 December 1910, Correspondence and Reports of De Jong, HMC–HHCC; Fryling, “Zuni Mission,” HFP–HHCC; Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 7 December 1920, BHMC–HHCC; Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 17 May 1921 and 15 June 1921, BHMC–HHCC; *Banner*, 22 February 1925; *Banner*, 4 November 1927.

23. The motivations of these parents, however, is not clear. See Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 9 December 1919, BHMC–HHCC; Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 13 June 1923, Journal 2, Box 1, BHMC–HHCC.


27. Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 13 September 1921, BHMC–HHCC.


30. De Jong to Beets, 16 December 1909, Correspondence and Reports of De Jong, HMC–HHCC; Marie Vos to John De Korne, 14 August 1939, Correspondence of Former Missionaries, World Missions Collection (WMC–HHCC); Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 8 February 1921, HMC–HHCC; Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 15 April 1924, Folder 749, HBC–HHCC; Hemsing, "History and Trends of Education in New Mexico," 85.

31. Minutes of Local Conference, 5 May 1910, Folder 1, Correspondence with Henry Beets regarding Indian Missions, 1904–1913, HMC–HHCC; J.W. Brink, Diary, 7 March 1921 and 23 April 1912, J.W. Brink Papers, HHCC.

32. Beets to Andrew Vander Wagen, 24 April 1925, Folder 60, HBC–HHCC; A. Vander Wagen to Beets, 26 June 1925, Folder 60, HBC–HHCC; Cornelius Hayenga to John Dolfin, 23 April 1934, Correspondence of Former Missionaries, WMC–HHCC.


34. Banner, 30 May 1907.


36. Minutes of Local Conference, 6 August 1908, Folder 1, Correspondence of Beets regarding Indian Missions, BHMC–HHCC; Hayenga to Board of Christian Reformed Missions, 1928, Correspondence of Former Missionaries, WMC–HHCC; Indian General Conference Minutes, 9 November 1929, HMC–HHCC; Li An–Che, "Zuni: Some Observations and Queries," American Anthropological Association 39, (January–March 1937), 71.


38. Dolfin, Thirty Years Among the Zunis, 87; Banner, 12 May 1920.

39. Jong to Beets, 1 January 1909, Correspondence and Reports of De Jong, HMC–HHCC; Marie Vos to John De Korne, 14 August 1939, Correspondence of Former Missionaries, WMC–HHCC; Leighton, 64–65.

40. Banner, 4 May 1911; Banner, 18 December 1913; Banner, 11 March 1927; Dolfin, Thirty Years Among the Zunis, 92–93.


43. Kuipers, interview; Zuni School Annual Report, 1909–1910, p. 3, Correspondence and Reports of De Jong, HMC–HHCC; Hailman, Education of the Indian, 9; Banner, 20 December 1917; John Dolfin, Bringing the Gospel in Hogan and Pueblo (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Van Noord, 1921), 335–36, quote from 335; Banner, 7 August 1925; Banner, 10 June 1927.

44. Indian General Conference Minutes, 15 May 1930, HMC–HHCC.

45. John Romeyn to Beets, 27 June 1927 and 22 March 1928, Correspondence of Former Missionaries, WMC–HHCC; Hemsing, "History and Trends of Indian Education in New Mexico," 142; Leighton, 66.

46. Dolfin, Bringing the Gospel, 328; Vos to De Korne, 14 August 1939, Correspondence of Former Missionaries, WMC–HHCC; Indian General Conference Minutes, 15 May 1930, HMC–HHCC; Banner, 11 March 1927.
47. Zuni Pictures, circa 1935, negative 113, and accompanying text, HMC–HHCC.
48. Zuni Pictures, circa 1935, negative 114–15; Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 18 March 1925, Folder 59, HMC–HHCC; Banner, 1 February 1924; Banner, 23 January 1925; Indian General Conference Minutes, 12 December 1929, HMC–HHCC.
49. Quote from Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 27 November 1923, Journal 2, Box 1, BHMC–HHCC; Leighton, 72.
51. Dena Vander Wagen, “Woman Recalls Gallup of 75 Years Ago,” DVP–HHCC; Groelsema, “Christian Assimilation,” 47; Cato Sells to Thomas C. Moffatt, 31 March 1915, Journal 1, Box 1, BHMC–HHCC; quote from Fryling to Mr. Black, 11 February 1908, Folder 2, HFP–HHCC.
52. Edward J. Davis to Andrew Vander Wagen, 15 October 1906, Correspondence and Reports of Vander Wagen, HMC–HHCC; Banner, 3 July 1935; Beets to Local Conference, 15 April 1910, Correspondence and Reports of L. Brink, HMC–HHCC; Social Research Center of Calvin College, The Christian Reformed Mission to Reservation and Urban Indians, 8.
54. Hayenga to Board of Christian Reformed Missions, 1928, Correspondence of Former Missionaries, WMC–HHCC.
55. Dolfin, Thirty Years Among the Zunis, 88; Dolfin, Bringing the Gospel, 320; Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 8 November 1921, Folder 31A, BC–HHCC; quote from Banner, 11 March 1927.
56. Banner, 5 July 1935.
57. Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 4 March 1924, Journal 2, BHMC–HHCC; Kuipers, interview; Fourth Annual Southwest Indian Conference, Flagstaff, Arizona, 17–24 August 1910, Folder 1, Correspondence with Henry Beets regarding Indian Missions, HMC–HHCC.
58. Kuipers, interview; Banner, 20 September 1917; Dolfin, Thirty Years Among the Zunis, 88.
60. Rex Natawa to R. O. De Groot, 29 April 1952, Folder 29, Correspondence with Native Workers, Indian Missions (American) Collection, HHCC.
61. Dolfin, Thirty Years Among the Zunis, 88–89; Martha Versprille to De Korne, 20 March 1939, Correspondence of Former Missionaries, WMC–HHCC; Hayenga to Mr. and Mrs. Joe Teucate, 20 October 1947, Cornelius Hayenga Papers, HHCC; Tedlock, “Ethnography of Tale–Telling at Zuni,” 66.
62. Leighton, 76.
64. Beets, 37.
65. Groelsema, 49.
67. Szasz, 4.
68. Quam, 38.