

DAKOTA ACCESS PIPELINE UNIT: LESSON 3: HANDOUT 2**THE INFLUENZA OF 1918 AT THE HASKELL BOARDING SCHOOL**

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Left: A 1909 postcard showing the entrance to the Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas.¹

Right: Students at Haskell.²

Introduction: In 1918, there was an influenza (flu) pandemic that killed 50 million people worldwide. Many boarding school students were affected by the pandemic. The Haskell Institute was one of America's largest boarding schools. In 1918, there was an outbreak of deadly influenza among the students at Haskell.

Superintendent Peairs, the leader of the school, had allowed Haskell to become overcrowded so he could make more money. The student sleeping areas were overcrowded and the flu spread rapidly. Many students died. Superintendent Peairs waited until the very last minute to notify the parents of the sick students. Most parents were not able to see their children before they died. In the following text, the author describes how American Indian parents resisted the harmful decisions made by Superintendent Peairs.

Adapted from: "A Very Serious and Perplexing Epidemic of Grippe" – The Influenza of 1918 at the Haskell Institute. By Mikaëla M. Adams, 2020. ³

Some parents pushed back against the superintendent's authority. The case of Irene Spratt is a good example. The thirteen- year- old Anishinaabe girl from White Earth, Minnesota, had suffered extreme homesickness since she arrived at Haskell that fall. Even before influenza struck the school her parents had written to Peairs requesting that she come home.

Peairs responded to their request by saying that he "should like to try Irene a while longer and see how she feels after she becomes acquainted and gets into the school work." Once they learned about the outbreak at Haskell in mid- October, however, the Spratts became more desperate to regain custody of their daughter. They even sent Peairs sixty- five dollars to pay for her journey home.

When the parents still had not heard from the school more than a week later, John L. Spratt said that he was “at a loss in my efforts to effect at least the [business] courtesy which I know that should have been extended to me without question.” On October 26, Peairs finally replied. He informed the Spratts that although Irene was “at present sick with the grip,” she was “getting along very nicely,” and there was “no reason whatever for you to be worried concerning her.” He made no mention of sending her home.

By this point, John Spratt had had enough. Frustrated that Peairs continued to ignore his ability to make decisions for his daughter, he wrote that “frankly . . . Irene’s [transfer] to your School was a mistake.” In a carefully written letter, Spratt invoked his parental authority, his new status as a US citizen, and federal Indian law to demand the return of his daughter.

Telling the superintendent, “We know best because we have raised her,” Spratt promised he would give Irene “a good Public school education [at home] which is my duty as a citizen.” Turning to the law, he reminded Peairs that Irene was only thirteen years old and that according to federal rules outlined in 1909, “no Indian pupil under the age of 14 years shall be transported at Government expense to any Indian School beyond the limits of the State or Territory in which such child reside.”

Confident of his position, he insisted that Irene be sent home as soon as the epidemic ended. Peairs knew he had been defeated. Three days later, on October 31, he wrote a rude reply to Spratt: “We did not solicit Irene and do not need her so far as attendance is concerned because we have scores of applicants on the waiting list at all times. As soon as she is able to travel I will arrange for her to go home.”

When Irene had not arrived by mid- November, however, John Spratt came to Haskell to collect her himself. The Spratts were fortunate to possess the literacy, legal knowledge, and financial means to force Peairs to release their daughter; other parents were not so lucky. Whether or not they had those advantages, Indian families did not passively accept the decisions boarding school administrators made. Instead, they actively worked to preserve their families and parental rights during this moment of crisis.

¹ <https://www.cardcow.com/296915/entrance-haskell-institute-lawrence-kansas/>

² <https://www.kshs.org/km/items/view/210600>

³ Adams, M. M. (2020). "A Very Serious and Perplexing Epidemic of Grippe": The Influenza of 1918 at the Haskell Institute. *American Indian Quarterly*, 44(1), 1 - 35. (Text excerpt has been edited for accessibility)