

## *Reflections on Bethany Mission: September 2021*

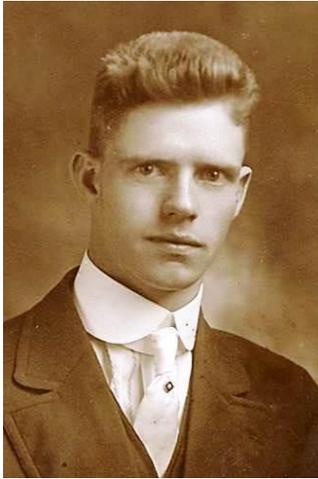
By Paul Rykken

Understanding how the past connects to the present is central to the study of history. No topic offers a more vivid example of this than the story of Native American Boarding Schools. By 1926, it is estimated that more than 80 percent of school-age Indigenous children were enrolled in the approximately 400 schools established in 29 states.<sup>1</sup> Operating within the assimilationist paradigm of the period, boarding schools sought to provide education for Indigenous children. Though seemingly well-intentioned, the “Americanization” process included what can only be viewed in hindsight as cultural genocide. That Christian missionaries were complicit in this process is deeply troubling and adds a complicated layer to the story, particularly for those of us who carry that faith into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>2</sup> Wisconsin had 11 such schools throughout the state under government or church sponsorship or a combination thereof (note the listing of the Wisconsin schools at the end of the paper). Many Ho-Chunk children attended the Tomah Industrial School, the Neillsville Indian School, or the Bethany Indian Mission in Wittenberg. Initially founded by the Norwegian Lutheran Church in the late 1880s, Bethany operated as a boarding and day school for roughly 50 years until its closure in 1934.<sup>3</sup> From 1900 to 1917, it was government-run, before returning to NLC sponsorship in 1918. Over time, hundreds of students attended, including Ho-Chunk, Oneida, Stockbridge-Munsee, Brothertown, Menominee, and Ojibwe children. Like much of our history, most of the experiences of those students and those who worked with them have been lost over time and we have much yet to learn. As we honor the tentative evidence we have, we must also remain open to the inherent silences in the record,

“unfathomably deep” silences of pain and fear. We must apply what historian Greg Dening referred to as “creative imagination” as we unpack this history.<sup>4</sup> In September of 2021, I had the unique opportunity to participate in a panel discussion and presentation with descendants of children who attended Bethany and missionaries who served there, a powerful and sobering day.<sup>5</sup> Our exchanges throughout the afternoon brought sadness, anger, and reflection, sprinkled with humor, strength, and stories of survivance. It is an experience I will not forget.



*Wittenberg panelists included (left to right standing), Richard Gonzales (Oneida), Betty Bergland (historian), Paul Rykken; and sitting, Susan Sihler, S. Verna Fowler (Stockbridge-Munsee), and Heather Bueugl (Oneida).*



*Thorvald M. Rykken  
(1897-1945)*

My connection to the story of Bethany Mission comes through my grandfather, T.M Rykken. He served as mission pastor there for ten years (1920-1930). The son of Norwegian immigrants steeped in Lutheranism, he attended Augsburg College in Minneapolis and later, Luther Seminary in St. Paul. Upon graduation in 1920, he intended to go to the African mission field, but his new wife Alma, my grandmother, was not keen on that idea. Instead, the Norwegian Lutheran Church assigned him to the “home mission” which meant working among Indigenous communities in either the Alaska Territory or the lower 48 states. He and my grandmother arrived at Wittenberg, sight unseen, in the summer of 1920. My sense is that they had minimal understanding of First Nations people at that point in their lives, but that certainly changed over time. My Aunt June and my father Thor were born on the Mission in the 1920s. In infancy, two of my aunts (Beatrice and Edith) died there and are buried across the road from where the Mission stood. I grew up with many shared stories and perspectives about Bethany and was occasionally around people, both Native and non-Native, who had experienced Bethany during those years. In my capacity as a history teacher, I have researched the story of the Mission in Wittenberg, work that I continue to do. My family’s connection to Bethany has been challenging, complicated, and, at times, painful, especially considering what we continue to learn about the boarding school experience.

Boarding schools, of course, were not all the same. Dr. Betty Bergland’s extensive research on Bethany Mission and the story of Norwegian settlers in Wisconsin in general, suggests that those who staffed the Mission were somewhat unique within the missionary experience. In the first place, most were first and second-generation immigrants, who often themselves felt marginalized in the American society. My grandparents fit that description as children of immigrants whose first language was Norwegian. Second, the Bethany missionaries were settler-colonists occupying the land and therefore displacing the Indigenous people they sought to convert. This distinguished them from those serving in Africa, for example. Third, it is plausible they developed contradictory and ambiguous relationships with the Native people and communities.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, they operated within the powerful and culturally destructive assimilationist paradigm of the era. On the other hand, some individuals played the role of mediator between policies put forward by governmental bodies or structures and the vulnerable Wisconsin tribal families and communities. My grandparent’s years at the Mission came fifty years into the boarding school era, at a time when Native communities and tribal nations of Wisconsin were in dire straits. In this respect, they navigated a “middle space” where Native and non-Native people tenuously co-existed. My grandfather, for example, attempted to speak Ho-Chunk and Oneida, and to understand the cultures and histories of the people he was serving. On some level, he became what historian Paulette Regan calls a “settler-ally” of those he worked with.<sup>7</sup> My father’s sponsors in baptism, for example, were Native elders (William and Nancy Pallideau), as were his babysitters. His first schoolmates were Ho-Chunk and Oneida children at

the Mission. Further, when my aunt Beatrice died of diphtheria, Native elders assisted my grandfather with a torch-lit burial of the child – a powerful story that resonates across generations within my family. Native people gathered at the gravesite in the middle of the night to offer prayers and support for him at a horrible moment.<sup>8</sup>

My grandfather's driving purpose was to spread Christianity. Described by my father and others who knew him as a "driven" individual, an extrovert who loved to laugh, and an idealistic reformer, there is much about his world and his time that I do not yet understand. His premature

death in 1945 means I have experienced him primarily through his papers and my father's memories. I have come to conclude that he experienced profound changes during his ten years of interactions with the Indigenous children and families in and around Wittenberg. I would call this voluntary acculturation on his part.<sup>9</sup>

This is not my attempt to apply 21<sup>st</sup> Century racial sensibilities to his story; rather, it is based on research

of his writing, interviews with those who knew him, and letters he exchanged with Native people. Though working within that powerful assimilationist paradigm, I remain intrigued that he was willing to speak openly and critically about the treatment of Indigenous people.



*T.M. Rykken with students at Bethany Mission in Wittenberg, Wisconsin, 1922.*

The following excerpt is from a 1927 speech TM gave in Wausau while seeking funds for Bethany Mission and provides an example of my assertion. His language indicates that he heard the stories of Ho-Chunk removals directly from people and communities who felt the impact of those removals – most likely the parents and grandparents of children he was working with at the time. He arrived at Bethany in 1920, 46 years after the final (failed) removal attempt in 1874. One of his students at Bethany, for example, was Jim Funmaker, father of Anna Rae. Jim's parents were young children at the time of the final removal attempt of the Ho-Chunk people in 1874, something Anna Rae shared with me in a 2010 interview.<sup>10</sup> He was speaking to a white audience here who most likely had scant knowledge of the surrounding tribal communities.

*“The early history of Bethany Indian Mission shows us that it was no small task to get a start. The Winnebago Indians, among whom the work was first begun, and among whom it even now is mainly carried on, were quite averse to any contact with the whites. Really, the white man's attitude to the*

*Indians in general tended to make them skeptical over against all approachings of the whites. But the treatment the Winnebagoes of Wisconsin had received made them particularly averse. Perhaps some of you are unacquainted with the treatment given them. Permit me, therefore, to narrate the cruel manner in which they were handled. They dwelt on fertile lands near Oshkosh, some also in the fertile Trempealeau Valley. Reports were made to Washington, no doubt truthful, that the Winnebagoes were troubling the white settlers. It was nothing short of natural if they did, as the whites gradually encroached upon them, taking away from them their hunting grounds. In 1872 Congress made an appropriation for the removal of the Winnebago. And in 1873 the Wisconsin Winnebago were forcibly removed to their Nebraska reservation – but many of them returned to the State. Some of the old Indians now living in the vicinity of Wittenberg recall this terrible deal. Under a pretext of friendliness, the Winnebago were invited to Madison for a grand celebration. Some few chiefs, without authority of the tribe, had entered into an agreement with the Government, selling the fertile lands for 10 cents an acre. While the Indians who had arrived at Madison, whole families, and member of families, were enjoying their feast, the soldiers suddenly rounded them up as they would cattle, boarded them on box cars and shipped them bodily to Nebraska. There was great lamentation and dissatisfaction over this, and many returned, some walking, some on horse-back, some in wagons and some riding the blinds on trains, many perishing on the way. Thus, the Winnebago were back in the State. The Government procured lands for them in certain settlements, stony, swampy farms of 40 acres.”*

My grandfather’s reference to the determined return of Ho-Chunk people and their procurement of those “stony, swampy” lands, resonates with me. From 1990 to 2020, I taught history at Black River Falls High School, within a community that serves as a microcosm of the complex story of the interactions between Native and non-Native people in Wisconsin. Those “stony, swampy” homesteads were staked out seven miles east of our small city, and we live in the shadow of that history. Indeed, more than a few times, students sat in front of me whose ancestors attended school at Bethany Mission in the 1920s, something that made my work seem eerily personal. I remain cognizant of that possibility as I continue to explore the history of the Ho-Chunk people through my teaching in affiliation with UW-Green Bay’s First Nations Studies Department and Dual Access Virtual Academy.



*BRFHS graduate Minnie Lonetree was a student in my First Nations Studies class in 2019. She had a family member that attended Bethany Mission at the time my grandfather was there.*

The history of the boarding schools has yet to be fully explored, and in 2022, we may have arrived at an inflection point. Recent revelations concerning residential schools in Canada, for example, shined a bright light on the tragic nature of this history in both Canada and the United

States. The emergence of Deb Haaland of the Pueblo Nation as Secretary of the Interior in January of 2021, and her establishment of **The Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative**, will further energize the important work that must be done. Various Christian denominations have begun the work of confronting this hard history, including the role that missionaries played. The church of which I am a member, for example – the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American (ELCA) – whose ancestor body was the Norwegian Lutheran Church, is working to increase awareness of the various issues facing American Indian people resulting from this complicated history. Healing and reconciliation will take time.

In a 2019 article in the *Atlantic* magazine, Mary Annette Pember, a citizen of the Red Cliff Ojibwe tribe in northern Wisconsin and reporter for *Indian Country Today*, made the following observation:

*Indigenous people on both sides of what Native people call the medicine line—the border between the U.S. and Canada—have been reckoning with the residential schools’ traumatic repercussions for generations. They lie underneath our collective psyche, waiting to be unearthed. This history will continue to resurface until our governments, institutions, and non-Native people fully reckon with it.”*

Reckoning with our shared history is a significant challenge and we see that play out day to day in the headlines. It is my hope that we continue to move forward with gestures of authentic reconciliation.



## Indian Boarding Schools in Wisconsin

School	Location	Sponsorship
St. Mary's Indian Boarding School	Bad River Reservation	Catholic Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration
Bayfield Boarding School	Bayfield (Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe)	Catholic Church
Bethany Mission	Wittenberg	Federal and the Norwegian Lutheran Church
Red Springs Indian Mission	Gresham	Missouri Synod Lutheran Church
Hayward Indian Boarding School	Hayward	Federal
St. Joseph's Industrial School	Keshena	Green Bay Catholic Diocese
Menominee Boarding School	Keshena	Federal
Lac du Flambeau Government Boarding School	Lac du Flambeau Reservation	Federal
Oneida Boarding School	Oneida Reservation	Federal
Tomah Industrial School	Tomah	Federal
Winnebago Indian Mission School	Black River Falls Neillsville	German Reformed Church

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "US Indian Boarding School History." *The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition*, <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education/us-indian-boarding-school-history/>.

<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that nearly one-third of the boarding schools operated under the auspices of various denominations of the Christian Church, often in cooperation with the federal government. Additionally, it is important to realize that the boarding school experience was transnational and common within settler-colonizing societies such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. A similar story is found in Scandinavia among the Sami people. See the following reference for further information: *Table of Contents - United Nations*. [https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/IPS\\_Boarding\\_Schools.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/IPS_Boarding_Schools.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> The Bethany Mission continued to operate for another 21 years, closing in 1955. After the school closure, the Mission took on various functions that might be loosely described as social services for the neighboring Native community, as well as alumni of the boarding school. Because the Ho-Chunk Nation was not federally recognized until 1963, they received no federal assistance during these years.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Dening's discussion of "creative imagination" is explored in his essay, "Empowering Imaginations," *Contemporary Pacific* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 419-29. See also, Tronnes, *Corn Moon Migrations*, 21-22, for further discussion of Dening.

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<sup>5</sup> The Wittenberg Historical Society sponsored the event and Dr. Betty Bergland, UW-River Falls historian, provided historical background prior to the panelist's statements.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Bergland's research on Bethany is titled, "Settler-Colonists, 'Christian Citizenship,' and the Women's Missionary Federation at the Bethany Indian Mission in Wittenberg, Wisconsin, 1884-1934," and is included in Reeves-Ellington, Barbara, et al. *Competing Kingdoms: Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812-1960*. Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Regan, Paulette, and Taiaiake Alfred. *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*. UBC Press, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> I heard this heart-wrenching story repeated often while growing up. It is recounted in the following: Estness, Borghild T. *Josie Rykken's Family: A Story about the Immigrants from Hardanger, Norway, Torger and Agata Kannikeberg Rykken, and Their Widespread Family in Their Adopted Land*. Xenos Books, 1983, p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> Acculturation refers to "a cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture" (Merriam-Webster). In the final chapter of his 2013 book, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America*, Dartmouth historian Colin Calloway describes the process of acculturation that informed my use of the term here.

<sup>10</sup> Anna Rae's interview was part of a project we did in 2011 related to the final removal attempt of the Ho-Chunk people in 1874. You can access the full interview here:

<https://fallshistoryproject.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/2011-standardized.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Pember, Mary Annette. "Death by Civilization." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 6 Jan. 2022,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/03/traumatic-legacy-indian-boarding-schools/584293/>.

#### Author Bio



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