

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda S. Peavy, Ursula Smith. *Full Court Quest: The Girls from Fort Shaw Indian School Basketball Champions of the World*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. xiv + 479 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3973-9.

Reviewed by Jon Reyhner (Northern Arizona University)

Published on H-Education (April, 2011)

Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik



The authors of this history of the Fort Shaw Indian Boarding School, which educated American Indians from mainly Montana and Idaho from 1892 to 1910, and its girls basketball team, go beyond the usual historical analysis. They write, in their introduction, “In shaping this narrative we have also drawn upon our own informed sense of prevailing conditions and attitudes to conjure the day-to-day reality of those who lived the story to tell” (p. xiii). The authors’ imaginative re-creation of events based on the limited historical record make their narrative both more readable and somewhat less scholarly. The book’s subtitle, *The Girls from Fort Shaw Indian School Basketball Champions of the World*, is a stretch of their actual accomplishments and has more to do with selling books than accuracy, but, overall, this book sheds light on two parts of the history of education: Fort Shaw as part of the history of boarding schools for American Indian children and girls’ basketball at the school.

The authors document the competition for students between various government- and missionary-run schools and depict how sports, the school band, and other activities were used to help recruit students. Their narrative reveals that events at the school paralleled those at other U.S. government boarding schools of the time. These included epidemics of measles (affecting one-third of the students) and influenza, resulting in the deaths of seven students. One young, runaway boy froze to death trying to get home. Also, many of the students at Fort Shaw had both Indian and white ancestry.

The first superintendent of the Fort Shaw industrial training school was a medical doctor, and the school’s curriculum of half-day industrial training and half-day

academics was typical of most boarding schools for Indians, started soon after the U.S. government’s first attempt with the establishment of an off-reservation boarding school at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, at an army base no longer used by the U.S. government. Carlisle had a normal department for teacher training for some of its more advanced students, and Fort Shaw employed three recent Blackfeet Carlisle graduates as assistants.

Indian boarding schools were pretty much designed to erase Indian culture from their students, but not entirely. Estelle Reel, the superintendent of Indian schools from 1898 to 1910, originally from Wyoming, saw traditional arts and crafts as a source of income for Indian people, and, therefore, she was not against having them taught to Indian students. Also, efforts were made to improve the instruction at these boarding schools by the U.S. government. *Full Court Quest* includes sketchy information on a week-long Indian Education Institute at Fort Shaw attended by the founder of Carlisle Indian Industrial School, Richard Henry Pratt, and Dr. William N. Hailmann, Reel’s predecessor as superintendent of Indian schools for the United States from 1894 to 1898. Hailmann was well suited as a participant. Among his many accomplishments, he translated the works of German educator Friedrich Froebel into English in 1887.

While the book has much general information about the Fort Shaw school, its focus is also on the development of its girls basketball team and their stay at the two-story model Indian school, built on the hill in the thirty acre “Indian Village,” established on the grounds of the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, where the Fort Shaw students met Geronimo, Helen Keller, Alice Roosevelt,

and other famous Americans. The authors report an estimated thirty thousand visitors a day to the model Indian school that had actual classes being taught, including a kindergarten class with students from Sacaton, Arizona, and daily student performances, including ones by the Fort Shaw Mandolin Club. The use of gatherings like the St. Louis World's Fair to showcase the "success" of the Indian boarding schools was not new. At the 1893 World's Columbia Exposition in Chicago, Pratt, a U.S. Army officer, showed off the Carlisle band and his students' accomplishments. In St. Louis, the Fort Shaw girls basketball team, after performing a pregame musical and literary show, beat the St. Louis All-Stars in the Olympic Stadium that was built for the third Olympiad of modern times. Overall, the authors conclude that the St. Louis World's Fair Indian Village was part of the one hundred-acre World Fair's Anthropology Exhibit, designed to portray the march of progress "from the dark prime to the highest enlightenment, from savagery to civic organization, from egoism to altruism" (p. 139).

The authors include the story of the beginnings of

basketball as well. It only began in 1891, with the first rules published in 1892, and the subsequent start of girls basketball is interesting. At least some of the girls had experience playing traditional Indian games, including "double ball" and shinny, before attending Fort Shaw. The girls initially played under boys basketball rules and were coached by the school's superintendent. The Fort Shaw boys played football, the game that with the coaching of "Pop" Warner put the famous Carlisle Indian Industrial School "on the map," as they played Harvard University and other postsecondary institutions in the Ivy League.

While this book is well documented (sixty-nine pages of notes and fourteen pages of bibliography), some of the references are problematic for historians. For example, the source of the quotation on page 139 is unclear in the endnotes. However, the authors have certainly relied on an extensive use of government records, contemporary newspaper articles, and interviews with the descendants of students and staff to write their compelling account of some very remarkable young Indian women.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-education>

Citation: Jon Reyhner. Review of Peavy, Linda S.; Smith, Ursula, *Full Court Quest: The Girls from Fort Shaw Indian School Basketball Champions of the World*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32293>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.