The cemetery at Rehoboth, New Mexico, is hardly a tourist stop, even though thousands of travelers pass it daily, thousands more each summer. Just a few miles east of Gallup, New Mexico, a city sometimes dubbed “the Indian capital of the world,” the village of Rehoboth sits quietly off legendary Route 66 and its burried descendent, I-40. Beneath the hogbacks a mile south rests the town’s century-old cemetery.

Should travelers happen to glance out their windows when they pass by the village, they would see a circle of homes and school buildings, two churches (one brand new, the other abandoned), a spacious, new athletic field, and, all around, fairly significant ongoing construction. A century ago, Rehoboth, New Mexico, was a dedicated mission compound, the very first significant outreach of a young North American denomination composed almost exclusively of immigrant Dutch, the Christian Reformed Church—my church, my people. By 1920, the place would have resembled any of a dozen other mission compounds on or adjacent to Native reservations throughout the West: school and hospital, dormitories and staff housing. But even today you have to make a point of seeing the place. It’s not hard to miss Rehoboth.

The hospital is gone now, moved west a few miles into the city, where in the early 1980s it was merged with McKinley County Hospital. Today, the new system’s centerpiece facility is a 68-bed acute care campus that stands proudly atop the city, the home of Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Systems.

The oldest stories that rise, even unbidden, from the beguiling cemetery are those intimately connected to the hospital that stood for years on the north end of the mission. According to Rehoboth’s own historians, the idea for some kind of medical care facility on Rehoboth’s campus grew from an early commitment to holistic ministry. In fact, Coca Hartog, the first full-time teacher at the school way back in 1910, took courses in nursing, in all likelihood to prepare for work once a hospital was up and running.

The need for good medical care on the Navajo Reservation, the nation’s largest, had to have been obvious. The hospital is not well-kept. Yet, even months after Memorial Day, more fresh adornments festoon the burial sites, per capita, than at almost any graveyard off the reservation: a miniature basketball and hoop on the grave of a young woman who only a year before her death had helped her Gallup team to a state championship; half-empty bottles of Coke half-buried in the dirt; stuffed animals galore, ceramic angels, all kinds of toys; rosebud beads hung from a homemade wooden cross jammed in the ground beside a miniature Mary in a Navajo blanket; hundreds—maybe thousands—of plastic flowers.

Arlington National Cemetery’s impressive orderliness makes the soldiers buried there seem as heroic and selfless as they were in war. But at Rehoboth cemetery the dead are remembered individually, strikingly, memorably, so that everywhere you look there is personality. So many stories. So much sadness. So much faith.

There’s the daughter of a missionary—six years old, died tragically in a car accident, just 19 years old. And there’s Albert Henry—a single man, war hero, assistant pastor at a church nearby, and just beyond him, Sidney Nez, a missionary at Toadlena. There’s Ben Musket, from a family that’s been part of the Rehoboth mission for four generations—and Marie Davis, who worked in the school’s kitchen for years. Just beyond a ways is Juke Den Bleyker, the mission’s faithful maintenance man for decades.

Over there, a kid who played basketball as well as any in the last thirty years, he died of alcoholism. There’s Coolidge Begay, a quiet man whose son was a sheriff and whose great-grandson is in the 6th grade, at the new Rehoboth Middle School today. There’s David Charles—died tragically in a car accident, just 19 years old. In a straight line running north and south, you’ll find a list of Dutch names: the Reverend L. P. Brink, pioneer missionary, who came to the long shadow of the Red Rocks in 1901 and died here in ’56. Rolf Veenstra, a patriarch of more recent vintage, his stone, flat and tan and somehow perfect for this desert landscape, calls him a “saint.” Then comes Casey Kuipers and his wife Martha, who spent a lifetime in and around the Zuni pueblo, talking to folks about Jesus.

A number of Code Talkers are buried here, authentic World War II heroes, distinguished warriors from the Navajo nation who ratted off military secrets to each other in their native tongue, words and phrases indecipherable to the sharpest Japanese cryptographers. Their wives are here too, beloved grandmas who stayed home and prayed—scores of them. There are Dumas and Oppenhouizens, Hentys and Bosschers, Kamps and Begays, Yazzies and Bousmas.

On the slope at the eastern edge, five rows of white crosses stand, fatigued as war-weary sentries—forty or more of them, some already broken or fallen. In a cemetery that’s as heavily decorated as this is with American flags, it’s impossible not to think of those crosses as marking something military.

Books consulted for this essay:
Coca Hartog, Indian Mission Sketches (privately printed by the author, n.d.).
Amelia V. Katanski, Learning to Write “Indian” (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2006).
Jon Rehner and Jeanne Eder, American Indian Education (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2004).
Hampton Sides, Blood and Thunder: An Epic of the American West ( Doubleday, 2006).
Zitkala-S’s, American Indian Stories (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2005).
But, strangely, those crosses bear no names. At Rehoboth, there were rules for Christian burials back then, just as there were rules at cemeteries all over the continent, rules long since loosened or abandoned. For a time, it seemed to me that they had to somehow note the graves—unmarked—of Native people.

I know the antagonism among the Lakota for what remains of an Indian Insane Asylum in Canton, South Dakota, not far down the road from where I live. On what is now a golf course, 121 Sioux and Ojibwa are buried beneath a marker between the fourth and fifth fairways, hundreds of miles from the reservations where the deceased once lived. Between 1902, when it was opened, and 1933, when it was closed by order of John Collier, the commissioner of Indian Affairs in the Roosevelt Administration, Native people were committed to the Canton Indian Insane Asylum, more than occasionally for reasons that now seem spurious, at best. There, some died. Those who did were buried on the grounds of what has become, ironically, Hiawatha Golf Course.

Every year, in May, some folks from the Rosebud Reservation make the three-hour trek east to Canton to burn sage, smoke tobacco, and pray for the spirits. But the graves will not be moved; they will stay on the Hiawatha Golf Course because Native people have determined that moving the remains would afflict the spiritual journeys of the deceased.

The inmates were brought to the asylum in the night. By train or road. The blizzards howled. The train howled. There was a stirrings of sound from the cells below. A baby cried. We were ordered to be quiet. To hold our noises, our cries and moanings. But in the asylum we could hear the ghosts, the spirits, the old ones, the dead ones, until we descend into death. The world was insane. They brought it with them. It was the disease we caught like small pox. They recorded our deaths. I dug the graves. Children were born here. This hell they invented in God's name.

I couldn’t help but wonder, when I first stood before all those unmarked crosses in the Rehoboth cemetery, whether my own people were as insensitive with the remains of all those Navajos who died at the old hospital.

In the gravelly New Mexico soil, four long lines of weather-beaten, unlettered wooden crosses may well bear witness not only to the white man’s selfishness and greed, his cultural blindness and racism, but also to the heartbreaking tragedy created by all of our own very best intentions. Those white crosses tell a story I have been trying hard to piece together. And it is in no small part my own.

The Rug

I’m not sure why I’m the grandchild who has it. My Arizona cousins play an envy game with me every time we speak of it—they think they should have it, after all, an ancient Navajo rug deserves to be displayed honorably someplace closer to its homeland. Some might question whether any of us—palefaces all—should have it. Perhaps it belongs to the kin of the weaver, whoever she was.

Once upon a time it belonged to our grandfather, a Dutch Calvinist preacher who served on what was then called “The Heathen Mission Board” for more than thirty years and thrice, according to his obituary, was sent to New Mexico to make “inspection tours” of the Rehoboth Mission. Presumably—and by way of family lore—he received the rug as a gift for his good service.

By the time I recognized the rug for what it was, I was a college kid, and the rug was doing its work on the cement floor of our basement, right in front of the washing machine, where it likely took the bruising that has resulted in its edges being rather unfashionably unraveled. If its whites once were, they are no more; today they’re dingy grays. No matter—the old rug hangs from a wall here in my study, one of my most treasured possessions, its discoloration and tattered edges telling their own story. My parents had no objection to my taking it when I left home; I’m guessing they appreciated their son’s thinking enough of family history to want it for his own.

That Navajo rug has been with me for forty years, and I’m only beginning to understand its character, largely because I’m only beginning to understand the immigration and homesteading that make up a formative chapter of my family’s history. Like so many others, my ancestors marched west to the tune of “manifest destiny,” and in so doing displaced the aboriginal inhabitants of the land.
In America, Dutch settlements, like the one I was born in and the one I still live in today, exist only in the northern tier of Wisconsin at a time when pioneering white folks had to weld axes because the land was in the midst of the forest and had never before been occupied by white settlers,” according to his obituary. “Then the hardships and trials of the early pioneer were experienced,” it asserts, “for they had little to eat, not much clothing, and scarcely any of the comforts of life. The red men were still numerous in this section, but were not troublesome to the white settlers, except as beggars.” Were the “red men” Winnebago, Potawatomi, or Fox? I’ll never know; but history makes clear that at least some of the Winnebago were dispossessed of their Wisconsin lakeshore lands and relocated to treeless plains just west of the Missouri River, 500 miles away, and not all that far from where I live today: This much seems irrefutable: my great-grandparents, and every generation since, were buried, with dignity, on what was once Winnebago land, while its original inhabitants were buried, with dignity, on what was once Winnebago land. The red men were still numerous when I was born, in 1890, when news of the Dakota childhood brought him into contact with Native people, even though they were Lakota, not the Navajo and Zuni of the Southwest. What I know is that he played a significant role in the development of the Rehoboth Mission, then in its infancy. Nothing in my collection of family stories leads me to believe that he was anything less than sincere about his faith, nor that there was ever any disagreement between his walk and his talk. He was a quiet, determined, and convicted churchman, not at all unlike many other Dutch Calvinist pastors of his vintage. He would never deliberately poke a sharp stick in the eye of someone with whom he disagreed. He wasn’t mean or argumentative.

But even greater humiliation comes to her a few hours later when she’s told by another animal driven by the herder. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother, I had suffered extreme indignities. . . .In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do, for now I was only one of many little animals driven by the herder. I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and stretching wildly . . . I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother, I had suffered extreme indignities. . . . In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do, for now I was only one of many little animals driven by the herder. In Learning to Write “Indian”: The Boarding-School Experience and American Indian Literature, Amelia V. Katanski explains how Bonnin’s essay angered the single remaining member of the Rehoboth Mission, then in its infancy. Nothing in my collection of family stories leads me to believe that he was anything less than sincere about his faith, nor that there was ever any disagreement between his walk and his talk. He was a quiet, determined, and convicted churchman, not at all unlike many other Dutch Calvinist pastors of his vintage. He would never deliberately poke a sharp stick in the eye of someone with whom he disagreed. He wasn’t mean or argumentative.

Yet, about Native people, about the purpose and mission of Rehoboth itself, it’s quite likely that this very good and righteous man, who undoubtedly prayed fervently for the Indians his denomination was evangelizing, was in some respects grievously wrong. He wasn’t wrong in his unshakable conviction that Navajo and Zuni people needed Jesus, too— and here Diane Glancy, unlike many Native writers today, would say amen. But if the message really did come from God, the message-bringers were flawed, as we are too, looking back from our enlightened vantage point.

Indian Boarding Schools

That boarding schools—like Rehoboth—robbed Native people of heritage, culture, and dignity was clearly asserted even before Rehoboth itself existed, at least as early as 1900, with the publication, in the Atlantic Monthly, of “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” an essay by Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Bonnin), a Yankton Sioux, who wrote vividly of her first days at a Quaker school in Indiana. That she wanted to go to school is made clear in her memoir of her early years on the Yankton reservation. Nevertheless, when finally she came to boarding school, what she faced was nothing close to what she’d imagined: a paleface woman, with white hair, came up after us. We were placed in a line of girls who were marching into the dining room. These were Indian girls in stiff shirts and closely clinging dresses. The small girls wore sleeved aprons and shingled hair. As I walked noisely in my moccasins, I felt like sinking to the floor, for my blanket had been stripped from my shoulders. I looked hard at the Indian girls, who seemed not to care that they were even more immodestly dressed than I, in their tightly fitting clothes. But even greater humiliation comes to her a few hours later when she’s told by another animal driven by the herder. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother, I had suffered extreme indignities. . . . In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do, for now I was only one of many little animals driven by the herder.

Indian policy was dominated by an abominable orthodoxy. Argument. Only two alternatives existed for the future of the American Indian—complete absorption into American “civilization” or mass extermination. Proponents for the second of those alternatives were more vocal and
more numerous than we might suppose, especially in areas bordering on Indian land. That Native boarding schools were an alternative to mass murder doesn't com- 34 January/February 2009 Books & Culture erate Pratt or my grandfather, but the context of the dis- cussion, unimaginable as it may be today, is certainly relevant to my own understanding of how he saw the mis- sion enterprise. And there were Native leaders who had given their early appreciation of the value of children off to Pennsylvania with Pratt. Sinte Galeksa (Spotted Tail), a Brule chief whose acquaintance with the white man had led him to believe—firmly—that his people could not profit from more war, sent several of his own children to Carlisle. But when, a year later, he traveled to the school and found his children homesick and diseased—one of them died—he pulled them out of immediately and ushered them quickly back home to the Dakota Territory. On a wider scale, the opinion, as all the confidence gen- erate by wise and thoughtful leaders—many of whom were deeply sympathetic with the Native people who'd been off their land—began to wane as the graduates of these institutions finished their schooling and went out in the world. Who were they now? Where would they find their homes? It is the earliest description of the Rehoboth Mission (1910), Ms. Coca Hartog opens up those questions. “The future has always been a great problem,” she writes in a small pamphlet titled Indian Mission Sketches. “What are these tender lambs to do? Will not all the good impressions in them be wiped out by the overwhelming influence of the old life?” That question had no clear answer at Rehoboth or Carlisle, or any of the many other Native American boarding schools in North America. By the late 1920s, so the historians say, the failure of the boarding school movement, on or off reservations, was already clear, though such institutions continued to oper- ate. With some notable exceptions, graduates either showed no tendency to “assimilate,” as Pratt and so many others had promised, or returned home only to find they were incapable of living with their own families, their own people. Education often—always, some would claim—entails alienation. That’s the theme of many a memoir, from tales of British boarding schools to Richard Rodriguez’s acclaimed Hunger of Memory. But the particular context of the Indian boarding school movement was the devastation that occurred when millions of white people determined the North American continent was empty land, there—and theirs—for the taking. What is painfully clear a century later is that, in taking the Indians’ land, white people also took away their culture, which is to say their way of life. Good people—good Christian people, my own grandfa- ther among them—were among those who carried out that destruction, often with painful intentionality and the convic- tion that what they were doing was what the Lord want- ed. How faithful believers could be so wrong is the story I’m trying to understand. Not simply them either. All of us Rehoboth Memories I’ve been interviewing some aging Navajo folks whose roots grow back into the century-old story of Rehoboth Mission and mission school. All of them remember the boarding school days very well—a few, slowly, a few very. Sev- eral have told me they know very good people who would not walk on the compound again, so deep is their resent- ment at what happened to them during their boarding school. One of them, a man now approaching his eightieth birthday, was taken off to school in 1945. “I didn’t know a word of English—didn’t get a word of what people were saying,” he says, remembering those first difficult days. One Navajo writer and speaker actually occasionally helped greatly, but it was the military-like regimen that still made him shake his head, a behavior so alien to him: marching off to dinner, marching off to school, marching off to church, two-by-two, like soldiers, like cavalry. The military-like regimen, which he also remembers how his brothers knew, was something like the Heidelberg Catechism, a task, quite certainly, the CRC teachers themselves had to per- form when they were children back in Michigan or even the Netherlands. Such forced and often meaningless mem- orization and an unflinching commitment to what seemed perfunctory obligations to religious ceremony which were rarely understood, made some people simply “go through the process, and a lot of people resent that today,” he told me. When he explains why some Rehobothobob graduates feel shamed by the education they received at the mission school, he says the implication—whether stated or not—was often violent and stark. “If you don’t do this, if you don’t do that, you’re going to hell.” What was pre- sumed worthy of damnation, for the most part, was behavior that arose from the hogan, from the Navajo cul- ture, what was redeemed was what was white—and even exclusively CRC. Some of these bitter memories are shared by many peo- ple, regardless of history or race, who have been sent away as children to boarding school. If you know any missionary Agreement, has been conducting hearings designed to examine the historical record of its First Nations boarding schools. Not unlike its neighbors to the south, the Canadi- an government, in the late 19th century, embarked on a policy of what they called “aggressive assimilation,” institut- ing a national program to enroll Native children in schools that would strip away their (“savage”) culture and teach the children to find their way in the white national culture. Religious denominations also continued to make much of that education, not only because churches were vitally interested in missionary outreach among “the heathen,” but also because churches were more determined, and therefore more likely, to go into largely unpopulated areas than were typical public schools. Such pressure, by announcing a $2 billion package for those who were forced to attend Native boarding schools. That compensa- tion, called the Common Experience Payments, offered all former students of Indian boarding schools an initial pay- ment of $10,000, plus additional payments of $3,000 for each of those students’ years of attendance. The govern- ment estimates that approximately $6,000 of its First Nations people are eligible for that compensation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is headed up by Canada’s first Native judge, Justice Harry LaRance, a member of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation in southern Ontario. The commission’s other members include experts in public policy as well as in the health problems facing Canada’s aboriginal people. The commis- sion was given a significant budget to carry out its work, and five years in which to accomplish its task. Like its famous South African ancestor, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission will focus on “restorative justice,” as opposed to adversarial or retributive justice. It will not, on its own, determine guilt and innocence; rather, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will attempt to determine truth, to find appropriate means to offer public mourning, attempting, as did the South African commission, to forgive and to heal. The most complex accusation made by First Nations people—and the least debatable—is that of systematic “cultural abuse” carried out on boarding school stu- dents. Students enrolled in boarding schools were snatched out of their homes and offered very few opportu- nities to return, even to visit, during extended school years. They were forbidden to use their native tongue and frequently separated from siblings, since the avowed purpose of these schools—just as for their U. S. counter- parts—was to systematically destroy their associations with their own native culture. In every way, Canadian Native people, like their cousins south of the border, were victims of a policy both created and carried out by Christians, many of whom fully believed that what they were doing, they were doing in the cause of Kingdom of the Lord. But in the process, what was created, without a doubt, is what some Canadian commentators call “national trauma.” Believers, like me, have much for which to be sorry, much for which to feel shame. A Bible verse frequently quoted by old-time Calvinists comes to mind: “All of us have become like one who is unclean,” the Old Testament says, “and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrive ourselves like a leaf, and like the wind our sins we sweep away” (Isa. 64:6, NIV). This is the first part of a two-part article.