

Intertwined Histories of the Navajo and Japanese at the Old Leupp Boarding School Historic Site

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Introduction

The Old Leupp Boarding School (OLBS), is a historic archaeological site in Leupp, Arizona on the Navajo Reservation. The OLBS is unique in that it was used to assimilate and educate Navajo children into Western society from 1909 to 1942, but it also served as a Japanese Isolation Center in 1943. Both of my grandparents attended the OLBS in the early 20th century, and they shared a few stories of this place to entertain me as a child. Years later, when I became an archaeologist for my tribe and worked for the Navajo Nation Archaeology Department, I was able to do public outreach at the OLBS historic archaeological site with Navajo youth. The Navajo students learned about the history of the OLBS, while gaining an introduction to archaeological survey methods and artifact identification at the OLBS site. This experience along with my grandparents stories shaped my goals of becoming an archaeologist who researches Navajo historic sites. Unfortunately, due to the nature of cultural resource management (CRM) undertaken on the Navajo Reservation, historic sites are given minimal attention and important Navajo history is being lost. I hope to alter that trend.

My dissertation research has the potential to contribute to issues of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity. Although race is a controversial concept, it is nonetheless useful in describing power relations, prejudice, and racial discrimination, and for understanding how Native Americans and the Japanese were treated within the context of the OLBS during the early 20th century. How were expressions of one's ethnicity allowed within the OLBS? Were the expressions of ethnicity by the Navajo and Japanese carefully monitored, or encouraged? How did expressions of indigeneity or one's culture allow for the resistance to oppressive rules and policies inflicted upon Navajo students or Japanese prisoners identities? I hope to address the answers to these questions through my dissertation research.

Theory

Historical archaeology covers the more recent past. Many of the culturally identifiable Navajo sites on the landscape in the southwestern United States, date primarily from the late 1700's onward, therefore, most Navajo archaeology is defined as historic archaeology. Ethnoarchaeology involves the use of history (written documents), archaeology and interviews with living informants (oral history or ethnohistory) to investigate the past (Orser 2004:10-11). The benefits of historical and ethnoarchaeological research is that each allows for the research of underrepresented groups, whose history is only generally known, or who may not receive great attention, such as slaves, factory workers, native peoples, and/or public works laborers, etc. (Orser 2004:22). Archaeology has the potential to encourage the public to draw connections between the history of sites and contemporary implications, stimulating dialogue on social issues, while promoting democratic and humanitarian values (Shackel 2011:5-6). By engaging diverse segments of a community's population and addressing a range of periods of time, a public profile emerges that is more representative of the breadth and depth of experiences (Jackson 2009: 10).

My research will be guided by post-colonial theory and is shaped by decolonizing methodologies. Post-colonial theory is drawn upon to understand the effects of assimilation of Navajo children, and of the unjust imprisonment of innocent Japanese American citizens at the OLBS during World War II. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) describes this type of research as follows:

1. **Claiming:** Whereby indigenous groups conduct intensive research projects, resulting in the writing of nation, tribe and family histories (144);
2. **Story telling:** Encompassing story telling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and women, who have become an integral part of indigenous research (145); and
3. **Celebrating survival-survivance:** Accentuating the degree to which indigenous peoples and communities have retained cultural and spiritual values and authenticity in resisting colonialism" (146).

Feasibility Study

In 2012 and 2013, I undertook a feasibility study for my dissertation research of the OLBS. My goals were as follows:

1. To visit the Navajo Nation and conduct preliminary archival searches
2. Contact and talk to teachers on the Navajo Reservation to learn of their interest in the OLBS, and their needs with regards to information about Navajo history and archaeology.
3. Identify potential Navajo elders, who attended school at the OLBS, to interview on the Navajo Reservation
4. Visit the Old Leupp Boarding School site to take pictures and notes in the field.
5. Obtain approval from the Navajo Nation of my dissertation research.

Preliminary Findings

My preliminary findings are based on a literature review, archival investigations, preliminary interviews with Navajo elders and teachers on the Navajo Reservation.

- Regarding the first goal, the Navajo Nation Museum archives proved to be a wealth of information. Historic photographs were found depicting the Old Leupp Boarding School and the Navajo children who attended school there. These photos were from the Milton Snow collection, which Mr. Snow took in the early 20th century. The collection of historic photographs portray Navajo children in various activities. Historic photos include Navajo girls weaving, which is perplexing since Indian Boarding Schools are notorious for denying students the right to speak their language and practice their culture. This begs the question of how assimilationist policies may have played out at different boarding schools. Other photographs show Navajo children learning about chickens and a "pet" porcupine.
- I spoke with teachers from the Little Singer Community School in Birdsprings on the Navajo Reservation and the Star School, near Flagstaff, Arizona. Teachers indicated their interest in the unique history of Old Leupp. They do include the OLBS in their teaching, however, since no curriculum exists to teach about the OLBS, the teachers are forced to create their own. Teachers also made clear the need for more Navajo based curriculum, because presently it is scarce. They would like especially like Navajo curriculum created from a Navajo perspective.
- For the third goal, I recruited the help of my mother, who knows many Navajo elders in the area of the OLBS. She helped me to identify potential interviewees. We visited four elders, who then provided names of other former OLBS students and staff. One of the interviewees drew me a map of the OLBS dormitory and how it was divided between boys and girls, and older and younger children. Of particular interest was the elder that spoke about learning to weave at the OLBS, which was verified by the historic photos found in the Milton Snow collections.

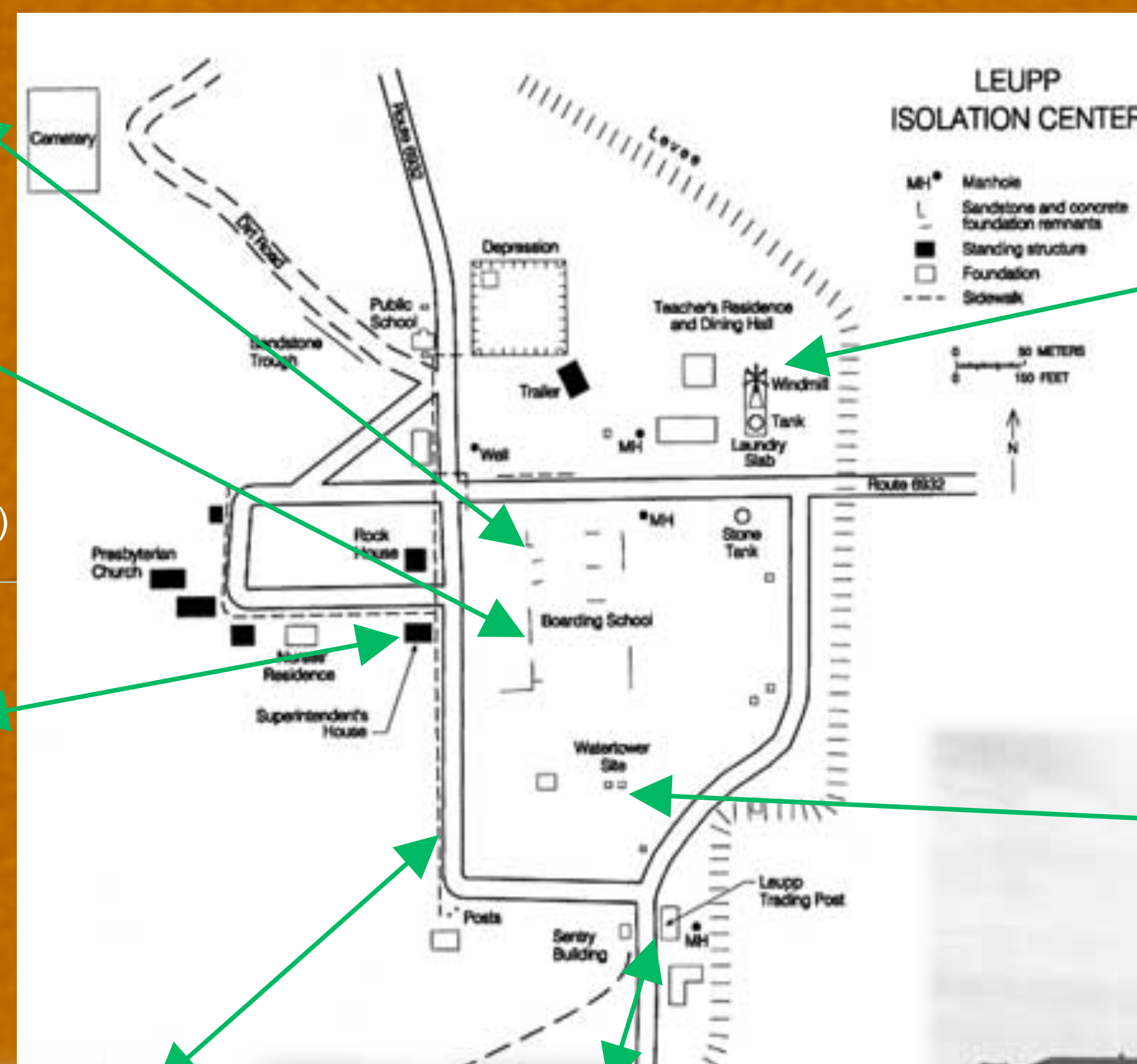
Memories of the Old Leupp Boarding School

"The boarding school was situated on a barren red clay flat area near the Little Colorado River bed. When we arrived I saw a cluster of large brick buildings, mixed with a number of white frame houses, with here and there a big cottonwood tree. The outer edge of the campus was surrounded by huge dikes. At the south end there were a couple of trading posts several yards apart. The campus also had a high steel tower with a big water tank on top. . . Leupp gave me the impression of being a big place. And it was just that, because I never had seen anything like it" (Denetsosie 1977:82-85)

Old Leupp Boarding School Facing South ca. 1959



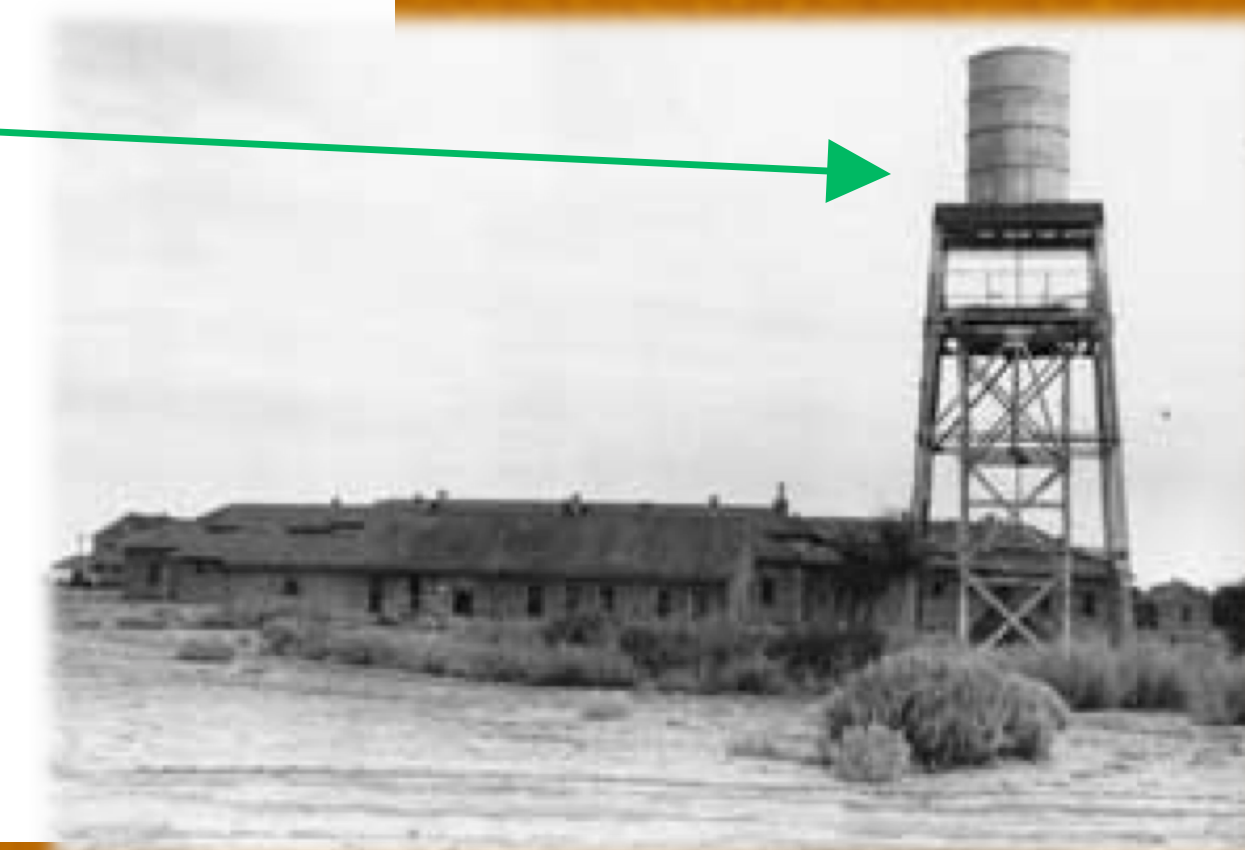
Leupp Isolation Center (Burton 1999 et al.)



Windmill, water tank, and OLBS Rubble



Above: Water Tower and OLBS Kitchen & Dining Building (Early 20th Century)



Japanese Prisoners at Old Leupp



Above: Leupp Trading Post ca. 1950s;
Below: Leupp Trading Post Today



- As for the fourth goal, I visited the OLBS historic archaeological site on 2 separate occasions to take photographs and notes. The first time, I did so with the aid of a Navajo college student in the student training program at the Navajo Nation Archaeology Department. Teaching Navajo students about archaeology and the history of this site is important to me. We took a number of photographs and GPS points of OLBS features on the ground. It was an opportunity for this Navajo student to gain archaeological field skills, and to learn about the history of the OLBS site.
- Finally, I received approval of my dissertation topic from the Leupp Chapter, the local Navajo governmental entity, as well as the Little Singer Community School Board. I also obtained a permit from the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department for my feasibility study. The next step is the lengthy process of obtaining approval from the Navajo Nation Institutional Board.
- For the future, I will conduct ethnographic interviews with Navajo elders, and also seek out the descendants of Japanese prisoners of Old Leupp to interview. Thus far I have one Japanese descendant, who had agreed to be interviewed by me.

Lonesomeness, Hunger, Illness, Death, and Punishment

"The first year I didn't attend many classes because of lonesomeness. Being small and young, I couldn't adjust to things, and I cried much of the time. Conditions at the school were terrible. It was isolated, the nearest town being Winslow, about 30 miles away. Food and other supplies were not too plentiful. We were underfed; so we were constantly hungry. Clothing was not good, and, in winter months, there were epidemics of sickness. Sometimes students died, and the school would close for the rest of the term. It was run in a military fashion, and rules were very strict. Some teachers and other workers weren't very friendly. When students made mistakes they often were slapped or whipped by the disciplinarian" (Denetsosie 1977:82-85).

A Typical Day at the Old Leupp Boarding School

"A typical day went like this: Early in the morning at 6 o'clock we rose at the sound of bugles. We washed and dressed; then we lined up in military formation and drilled in the yard. For breakfast, companies formed, and we marched to the dining room, where we all stood at attention with long tables before us. We recited grace aloud, and after being seated, we proceeded with our meal. If, during the meal we got too noisy, an attendant, who was the disciplinarian, usually blew a basketball whistle, and all became quiet. After the meal was finished we went into formation again, and one of the boys, who had been selected rose and took a position where he could be heard, holding a thick sheet of metal about 10 inches square with a rope handle, together with a metal rod. He would "bang" away at this metal, while we kept in step and marched single file out of the dining room, and then back to the dormitories until we were properly dismissed" (Denetsosie 1977:82-85).

Winslow Mail April 16, 1943

"Repair of the old Leupp school buildings has been started and several hundred Japanese internees soon will arrive according to word received by the chamber of commerce. . . According to information furnished the Japanese to be located here will be taken from war relocation camps in other sections of the southwest, and are to be closely guarded. They are Japanese who have caused trouble or are suspected of being loyal to Hirohita, it was said.

Establishment of the camp will mean an appreciable amount of new business in Winslow, as there will be 50 or more guards and other employees stationed there.

The Leupp school has been closed for several years after operating as a boarding school for Navajo Indians. The Indians are now educated in day school scattered about the reservation and the Leupp plant, which cost many thousands of dollars, has been rapidly deteriorating." (Winslow Mail 1943).

Forgotton Arizona Compound Housed Japanese American 'Troublemakers'

"... Nimashi Oishi, 72, now a Phoenix resident was interned at the Gila River Relocation Center near Sacaton before he was sent to Moab and then to Leupp. . . Oishi, who was 28, did not consider himself a trouble maker, a disloyal American or a threat to national security. According to the man who ran the camp at Leupp, Oishi probably went to the relocation center because of erroneous information or misunderstandings. Oishi is a kibe, Japanese people living in the United States were distinguished as being issei, born in Japan; nisei, born and raised in the United States; or kibe, born in the United States, educated in Japan, and then returned to the United States. . . Oishi said that he did not find life in the camp particularly difficult, and he once asked two soldiers guarding the facility to take him and his friends on an excursion to see Rainbow Bridge. 'I asked the soldier boys to take us and they said, 'Sure.' I even have a picture somewhere of me and my two friends sitting on the jeep near Rainbow Bridge. One soldier boy took the picture and the other is behind us with a rifle.' . . On April 27, 1943, all inmates at Moab were transferred by bus to Leupp. . . [Paul Robertson, who was in charge at Leupp] said the Leupp facility consisted of two buildings, a dormitory and schoolhouse, on about two acres of land. It was surrounded by a cyclone fence, barbed wire and four guard towers, one at each corner of the property. About 150 soldiers were housed in barracks outside the camp and patrolled the area continuously. . . Robertson did not see most of his Japanese prisoners as being particularly troublesome or dangerous. 'They were typical young people who had grown up in a democracy and then had democracy yanked out from under them, and they were angry. Under the circumstances I'm surprised they didn't tear more of those camps apart,' he said. 'The camp had been set up mainly for people who were causing trouble at other camps, but I didn't find them that bad. There was one fellow who was supposed to be so dangerous. . . I had two very small daughters at the time, and we had that man baby-sit for us and take care of our garden. . . Robertson remained at the camp until it was closed on Dec. 2, 1943. In the course of that time, he had reviewed the cases of the men incarcerated there and reported to his superiors that he was 'amazed at the lack of evidence against these men' (Negri 1987:11)

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