

Made from Scratch: Navigating Assimilation and Resistance Through Food at Snowbird Day School

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Abstract

The community-based Tuti Tsunadelogwasdi Uninohelv” (Stories of the Snowbird Day School) is an indigenous digital history project that encompasses over 100 scanned documents, 476 digitized photos, and oral histories to document the history of the Snowbird Day School, a Bureau of Indian Affairs-operated school that existed from 1935-1965. Snowbird (*Tuti yi*) is an Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) community located in Graham County on a non--contiguous piece of the EBCI. Students’ frequent recollections of the cultivation, cooking, serving and eating of food at Snowbird Day School suggest a deep level of engagement with food that created an environment where students formed strong memories about the foods they ate. While students remember the food at Snowbird Day School in an overwhelmingly positive way, it’s important to note that the Western-style foods served were one aspect of the BIA’s assimilationist curriculum. By presenting a digital timeline comprised of oral history audio excerpts, documents, correspondence and photos, this paper will examine how Snowbird Day School students’ memories of food are intertwined with both cultural assimilation and resistance.

1. Introduction

Snowbird Day School was operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1935-1965, in the Snowbird (*Tuti yi*) community, on a non-contiguous piece of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) reservation in Graham County, North Carolina.¹ The Snowbird Day School Digital History Project, *Tuti Tsunadelogwasdi Uninohelv* (Stories of the Snowbird Day School) collected oral histories from former students, teachers and staff, and digitized over 1,000 documents and photos related to the school. One theme that frequently emerged from the oral histories conducted was the food served at Snowbird Day School, which was remembered by many students as an important part of their education. After contextualizing the food at Snowbird Day School in the history of both BIA education and Cherokee foodways, I will examine how day school students’ memories of food are simultaneously intertwined with cultural assimilation and resistance.

The memories former students shared in their interviews suggest that taking part in the process of growing, cooking, serving, and eating the food at the school was an aspect of their education that encouraged the formation of positive memories about the school. Students recalled helping school chef Zena Rattler with food preparation in the kitchen, serving food to their peers, as well as learning agricultural skills and spending time outdoors while gardening, canning, and preserving fruits and vegetables during the summers.^{2 3 4} Parents and community members also participated in the food culture surrounding the school, organizing box suppers to raise funds for Christmas gifts for the children.⁵ Students connected their memories of food to learning English, as well as speaking Cherokee at school.^{6 7} The level of involvement students had in the cultivating, cooking, serving and eating food at Snowbird Day school created an environment where students were strongly connected to the foods they ate, evidenced through their frequent recollections of these experiences in their oral histories.

As a day school, Snowbird had several key differences in comparison to BIA-run boarding schools. Snowbird Day School students both lived and attended school in their own community. Many of the students were friends, some were relatives, and all were members of the small, tight-knit Snowbird community. In contrast, children educated at boarding schools were often sent off reservation, away from their families to live in an environment with students they did not know, facing extreme pressure to assimilate into American culture.⁸

2. Historical Background

In 1860, the Bureau of Indian Affairs began an initiative to educate American Indian children in the American way of life, opening the bureau's first boarding school on the Yakima Reservation in Washington state.⁹ Captain Richard H. Pratt, headmaster of Carlisle Indian School, summarized the intentions of the BIA education system in an 1892 speech, saying, "All the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him and save the --man."¹⁰ The boarding school system was intended to acculturate students to white society, in order that they would be able to successfully adapt to the modern world and be productive members of mainstream society. Though some white 19th century American Indian rights reformers claimed to truly believe that assimilation would benefit Native American children,¹¹ the reality of boarding schools was incredibly harmful, leaving lasting trauma that has been passed down through generations.¹² Education at these schools entailed what amounted to cultural genocide: the removal of children from their homes and communities, placing them in distant schools, barring them from participating in their culture, and punishing them harshly for noncompliance as a part of the strictly regimented boarding school life.

The BIA's philosophy of assimilation through education involved much more than simply learning the English language and being educated in Western academic subjects. The schools were also directed to instill Anglo-American values through the changing of students names, cutting boys' long hair, and teaching the children how to dress, act, and even eat Western foods with the same social niceties and table manners as white Americans.¹³ In the late 19th century, boarding school administrators "forbade, whether in school or on reservation, tribal singing and dancing, along with the wearing of ceremonial and 'savage' clothes, the practice of native religions, the speaking of tribal languages, the acting out of traditional gender roles."¹⁴

Several decades later, a report on the deplorable state of Indian Affairs ushered in a new era for BIA schooling. 1928's Meriam report, which was derived from extensive research done on reservations, at boarding schools, and regional BIA offices, described the deplorable conditions Native Americans were living under at this time. Citing the harsh boarding school conditions and the schools' failure to successfully produce well-educated, independent Americans, the report urged the BIA to allow schoolchildren to be "raised within natural settings of home and family life," rather than attend off-reservation boarding schools. In 1932, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Charles James Rhoads remarked that his most significant achievement had been to "shift Native American children from boarding schools to day schools on the reservations, or public schools off the reservation, signaling a shift toward educating students in close proximity to their home communities."¹⁵ John Collier, the commissioner who succeeded Rhoads, continued his predecessor's push for education reform, successfully campaigning for the passage of the Indian Reorganization act in 1934.¹⁶ Also known as the "Indian New Deal," this act ended the individual land allotment system, allowed tribes to adopt their own constitutions and form self governing bodies. The act also introduced the teaching of tribal history and culture to BIA schools, funded vocational training, and ended assimilation policy in BIA education.¹⁷

Snowbird Day School opened one year after the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act, as a part of a school system that also included Big Cove, Birdtown, Cherokee, and Soco Day schools.¹⁸ Most former students interviewed attended Snowbird Day School during the 1949-1965 period when Albert and Louise Lee taught.¹⁹ Former students also discussed memories of other school staff members, including bus driver/maintenance man Jesse Crowe and school chef Zena Rattler, both Snowbird community members. In the early 1960s, students began slowly integrating into Robbinsville Public Schools as a part of desegregation policy, with the school closing in 1965.²⁰

3. Foodways

While most students' memories of the food at Snowbird Day School were overwhelmingly fond, it is important to remember that the Western-style foods served at the school were one aspect of the day school's assimilationist curriculum. Several students linked their memories of food at the day school with speaking Cherokee language in the lunchroom, or with their earliest memories of learning English. Gilliam Jackson recalled knowing English words such

as “ice cream” and “Coca Cola,” as a young child, hinting at assimilation into a modern American diet.²¹ The food grown and eaten at Snowbird Day School in the early to mid 20th century is situated in a context of decreased gardening and reliance on homegrown produce in the EBCI, in addition to an increasing dependence on commercially produced foods such as those provided by federal commodities programs.²²

The diet of Cherokee people has varied throughout their long history, with the arrival of European colonizers leading to changes in diet that involved assimilation into new dietary practices as well as resistance against these new foods through the continued cultivation of traditional Cherokee food plants. In the 15th-16th centuries, Cherokee people engaged in agriculture, farming corn, beans, and squash, as well as hunting and fishing of wild game. Gathering of chestnuts, berries, and wild greens native to the southern Appalachian region was also an important part of Cherokee food at this time. With the arrival of Spanish colonizers came loss of life from disease, and land theft. The Spaniards also brought new food plants with them, which Cherokee people quickly adapted into their diets. Some of the newcomers introduced to the region in the 15th and 16th centuries included sweet potatoes, watermelon, peas, and peaches.²³

During the 18th and 19th centuries, after the population sustained heavy losses from smallpox and other European diseases and much land was lost to the Spanish, environmental management and agriculture became even more extensive and sophisticated. At this time, Cherokee people used crop rotation and cultivated desirable wild nut and fruit trees near towns to provide easy access to these foods. In the 1830s, a pre-removal US census documented that “In the mountains, most Cherokee people had a small farm with one or two cabins, a corn crib, sometimes a hot house, and an average of about two acres to fifteen acres under cultivation. They often had apple and peach trees as well.” During the removal era, between 1800-1850, Cherokee women continued to plant and tend gardens while men broke up the soil and hunted, despite the federal government pressuring men to take up farming at this time.²⁴

In the early to mid-twentieth century, many of the same plants continued to be grown by Cherokee people, and were preserved after the harvest by drying, canning, and occasionally pickling. A genetically unique corn variety, Cherokee “flour corn,” was grown, which students at Snowbird cultivated and showed in the Indian Flour Corn exhibit at Cherokee Fair.²⁵ Chestnuts remained an important wild food until the blight of the 1920s wiped out the remainder of the chestnut trees in southern Appalachia. Cherokee people on the Qualla Boundary generally remained remarkably healthy until the mid 20th century, with little concerns around obesity thanks to active lifestyles that involved miles of walking every day.²⁶

After World War II, high-fat, high-calorie food staples such as cheese, lard, and flour were provided to families by federal commodities programs. Unemployment rates were very high in the EBCI, and most families lived below the federal poverty level. Subsistence farming and raising of home gardens decreased, as did hunting and the gathering of wild foods. With the rapid change from healthier, traditional foods and an active lifestyle to an American diet and the sedentary lifestyle that came with it, new health concerns began to impact Cherokee people, in the form of diseases of civilization such as Type 2 diabetes.²⁷

Though the EBCI’s shift to an American diet was already in motion during the early to mid-20th century, today’s mainly sedentary American lifestyle is still a far cry from that of Snowbird Day School students. Nearly all interviewees recalled frequent physical activity and outdoor play as a vital part of their educational experience, with former student David Crowe recalling that “after lunch we’d go out and play softball, or in the summertime, we’d go up to the swimming hole and swim.”²⁸ Many Snowbird students walked to school nearly every morning, and spent plenty of time playing outside, swimming, and working in the school garden.²⁹

“Yeah everything was fresh, ‘cause they raised their own stuff you know, then,” recalled Diamond Brown, Sr, describing the school garden.³⁰ Gardening was another important part of the learning experience at Snowbird. Students were involved in helping to grow a portion of the food they ate for lunch, with the keeping of a garden and raising of chickens, as well as a small orchard that existed during earlier years of the school. During wartime in the 1942-1943 school year, principal Ernest Cooley Agee reported that the children “The boys and girls, beginning with Group 1, have assisted in the planting and cultivation of our garden,” which included Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, and beans, cultivated in such a way as to achieve the maximum production. He also described spending quite a bit of time in the garden with students, explaining to them why certain gardening techniques and practices speed up growth and produce higher yields.³¹

Agee particularly emphasized the connection between academic work and spending time doing work outdoors in his narrative reports, also stating that he made a strong personal effort to improve the school, especially where the garden was concerned. “I have worked in the garden many times as much as twelve and fourteen hours a day,” Agee wrote, “in order that our garden would be one of the best in the service.”³² He and his students’ hard work on the school garden paid off during WWII, when Snowbird students canned more produce than students at any other Cherokee day school, 35.2 quarts canned per Snowbird student, adding up to 1411 quarts total.³³ In addition to a garden and orchard, at this time Snowbird Day school also boasted a poultry house, which contained twenty hens and

40 baby chicks that year. During the 1942-43 school year, there were ten fruit trees growing at Snowbird, which Agee noted had improved drastically thanks to the school boys treating them with manure.³⁴

Upon their arrival at Snowbird in 1949, teachers Albert and Louise Lee continued the work of Ernest Cooley Agee, instilling the importance of gardening and agricultural skills. During the Lees' time at Snowbird, students worked in the school garden and raised chickens during the school year. "Then the kids would come in the summer, and we'd can beans-- gallons, gallon jars. Green beans, and tomatoes," Louise Lee said.³⁵ Freida Rattler-Brown also recalled summer activities at the school, saying, "In the summertime the bus driver, whom was Jesse Crowe at that time, would plow the field down below, and the boys and girls, especially the boys, would help him with the crops. And when they come in, then us girls that was in the kitchen with Mom, you know, at the school lunchroom, we fixed the vegetables and stuff." The gendered division of garden labor echoes the BIA's imperative to assimilate students into Western gender roles.³⁶ In exchange for their efforts to garden and preserve the produce, the teachers took them to a nearby swimming hole, and Zena Rattler fed them a "fresh vegetable meal."³⁷

Though students recalled being much less thrilled about helping in the garden than swimming and playing afterward, they also recalled another aspect of helping out with the food at school that they described as contributing to their sense of pride and self esteem. Older students, beginning in 4th or 5th grade, sometimes worked as kitchen helpers, complete with white linen coats and caps provided by Southern Cafeteria Co, the food contractor that supplied the Cherokee Day schools beginning in the mid-1950s.³⁸ "I mean, that was such a prideful thing to do, that we got to go serve and stand up there, you know, give them a dip, you know," said Gilliam Jackson, "The kids would come through, and it was a wonderful experience."³⁹ Billy Brown also recalled feeling "just privileged" to help serve food in the lunchroom, saying, "when you got older, when you got in the fourth and fifth grade, you get to go over and help in the lunchroom, get to serve over there, dish out food and stuff like that...They [The Lees] say, 'Go on over there and help your Grandma, will you.' I said 'Okay,' we'd take off over there."⁴⁰

In reminiscing about their time at Snowbird Day School, students and staff members returned often to their recollections of the tastes and aromas of food cooking in the lunchroom, prepared by chef Zena Rattler. Rattler's daughter, Freida Rattler-Brown, described how her mother attended Cherokee Day School until 9th grade, at which time she relocated to Oklahoma to complete her education. "...She was bound and determined to get her high school education," Rattler-Brown said, "So she went to Oklahoma, stayed out there for three years and while she was there, she majored in home ec - learning how to cook and sew." Following the completion of her studies, Zena Rattler returned to Snowbird and was employed as the chef at Snowbird Day School.⁴¹

While most of the students interviewed attended school after Zena Rattler's arrival, Albert and Louise Lee recalled the food quality being quite poor when they first arrived at the school in 1949. Louise Lee noted that, "We didn't [eat with the students] at that time, no, and then the food went contract after several years. It was pretty pitiful food they had for the kids at that time." Not only was the quality of the food described as dismal, it was of little variety: "A lot of cabbage, a lot of potatoes," Louise Lee remarked.⁴² In 1949, reservation principal Joe Jennings sent a letter to Sam Gilliam entitled "Apportionment of Food to the Various Day Schools," noting that the food distributed to the day schools was inadequate and unsatisfactory, suggesting that "Hereafter, careful record should be kept of meats, milk, etc that are sent weekly to the day schools."⁴³

It was not until 1956 that the quality and quantity of food significantly improved, when the Southern Cafeteria Company was awarded the food contract for all of the Cherokee Day schools. In order that Southern Cafeteria Operating Co. be awarded the contract, the BIA required the food supplier to meet certain nutrition requirements in the food provided for the students. A 1957 "Invitation, Bid, and Award" for the Cherokee Day school food contract lists the daily requirements for school lunches, advising bidders that very careful planning is required to make sure that the lunches served would be "well-balanced and highly nutritious." Southern Cafeteria Operating Co. was required to provide an adequate supply of food that included the following:⁴⁴

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INFORMATION FOR BIDDERS

General: The Bureau of Indian Affairs operates boarding and day schools for Indian children. As an incident to this operation the children are provided with meals.

Location of the Projects: The food services under this contract will be required to be furnished at the five (5) schools at the Cherokee Agency, Cherokee, North Carolina, as specified herein.

Visit to the Site: Bidders shall inform themselves fully as to the local conditions, the facilities and equipment available, the condition of the equipment and buildings as well as the conditions under which the food services are to be performed. Failure on the part of the successful bidder to familiarize himself with these local conditions will not relieve him from performing the food services in strict accordance with this invitation.

The School Lunch: The noon day meal requires careful planning to insure a well-balanced and highly nutritious meal. As a matter of general information, the following table is included to inform bidders of the minimum daily food essentials for Indian children attending the Cherokee Day Schools. The menu should be planned in such a manner as to insure an adequate lunch.

MINIMUM DAILY FOOD REQUIREMENTS

<u>Food Group</u>	<u>Amount per child</u>	<u>Suggestions</u>
<u>Milk</u>	1 qt. per day	1/2 pint (1 cup) pasteurized milk each meal as a beverage. May be varied by serving as cocoa. Additional milk in cooking.
<u>Eggs</u>	1 egg per serving 3-4 times per week	Allow additional eggs for cooking.
<u>Meat, Fish</u> Poultry	1 serving per day (2 oz. lean meat minimum)	Portions of meat should be provided so that each child receives the amount allowed. Meat substitutes, cheese, dry beans and peas, and peanuts may be substituted once a week.

Figure 1. Page 1 of minimum daily food requirements for Cherokee Day Schools

Account Files

MINIMUM DAILY FOOD REQUIREMENTS (Cont'd)

	Amount per child	Suggestions
<u>Vegetables</u>		
Potatoes	1 serving per day	Should be baked or boiled in skins as often as possible. Substitute sweet potatoes frequently.
Leafy green and yellow vegetables	1 serving per day	Should be served raw frequently. Can be served as salad or chunks
Other vegetables such as peas, beets, string beans, turnips, etc.	1-2 servings per day	The method of cooking should be varied and the selection should be made from a wide variety.
<u>Fruits</u>		
Fresh oranges, apples, bananas, etc.	1 serving daily	Raw fruits should be washed or peeled before eating.
Juices; orange, grapefruit, orange & grapefruit	1 serving 4-5 times a week	1/2 cup of fruit juice to a serving. Tomato juice requires 3/4 cup.
Dried or canned		
<u>Bread</u>	1 serving each meal	Whole wheat bread should be served twice a week. Usual serving would be 2 or 3 slices per meal. Corn-bread, rolls, biscuits, enriched bread, etc., should be used for variety.
<u>Butter or fortified margarine</u>	1 serving each meal	1 tablespoon butter for each serving.
<u>Desserts and other sweets</u>	1 serving per day	Fruits, pudding, pies, cakes, cookies, jello, ice cream, etc. Jams, honey and syrup should be served for variety.

Figure 2. Page 2 of minimum daily food requirements for Cherokee Day Schools

Beef stew and vegetables, ham hock with potatoes, meat loaf with gravy, and chicken pot pie with vegetables are just a few of the entrees on a 1958 sample menu for Cherokee Day schools.⁴⁵ “The thing that I remember the most was chicken pot pie,” Gilliam Jackson said, recalling one of the meals Zena Rattler cooked from the day school’s menu, “Boy, that was so good.”⁴⁶ In accordance with the requirements listed for day school lunches, the meal plans on these district-wide menus generally included a meat, two vegetables, enriched or whole wheat bread with butter, fruit, and a dessert. Milk and bread were both required to be served with every lunch, with one quart of milk per student provided each day. For variety, the meal plan suggested that the milk be served as hot cocoa, and the bread be served as biscuits, rolls, cornbread, or in an enriched form. Many of the meals that former Snowbird students recalled in their oral histories can be found listed on the school menus,⁴⁷ from Diamond Brown Sr’s memories of the scent of hot chocolate and fresh rolls,⁴⁸ to Billy Brown’s recollection of his grandmother’s (sometimes unappetizing) country-style liver with onions.⁴⁹

Unlike public schools today, children at Cherokee Day schools were usually not served a morning meal. “We would show up, and kids nowadays they get breakfast, and [if] we didn’t eat at home, we didn’t eat at school until lunch time,” said Gilliam Jackson. Research today has shown that skipping breakfast can negatively affect children’s academic performance. Jackson contrasted the failure to provide a breakfast for students at Snowbird with today’s public schools, saying “That’s so contrary now to public education where, you know - Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. It says you’ve got to have basics, you’ve got to have safety, you’ve got to have sleep. You’ve got to have food, you’ve got to have water, you’ve got to have certain things, and *then* it promotes learning.”⁵⁰

Some Snowbird families began the day with at least a simple breakfast, according to Freida Rattler Brown. “Well, I’d get up of a morning and I didn’t have to cook breakfast because we didn’t have time. I think most time it was cereal or, you know, something quick,” she said.⁵¹ In other families, this may not have been the case, as Gilliam Jackson noted that it was “probably true in most families” that breakfast was not regularly eaten at home.⁵² During the mid-20th century, at the time Rattler-Brown and Jackson attended school, most Cherokee people lived below the federal poverty line.⁵³ “Back then, everybody kind of had a large family, you know,” said former student Billy Brown, adding that “They didn’t have one or two kids, everybody had five or six kids and stuff like that.”⁵⁴ Jackson also noted that the food they ate for lunch at school included many things that Snowbird children did not get to eat at home, where diets were much less varied. “I think we probably just grew up on pinto beans...maybe some meat if we got lucky, and beyond that I don’t think we had that much of a variety.”⁵⁵ One way in which the Snowbird community met the needs of its members during this time was through fundraisers, including box suppers hosted at Snowbird Day School.

Snowbird Day school was also used as a gathering place and community center for the broader Snowbird community, with parents and community members as well as students participated in the food culture surrounding the school. The community organized frequent box suppers, primarily to raise funds for the purchase of Christmas gifts for the children of Snowbird. Mr. and Mrs. Lee, as well as former student Diamond Brown, Sr, recalled these box suppers fondly. “Put all the sandwiches in there, put a lid on it and we’d take it there,” said Brown, describing how the suppers worked, “and they’d sell them out there, auction them off. They’d auction off and somebody pay, 2, 3 to 5 dollars at the time, just a box.”⁵⁶ The box suppers served both as fundraisers and social events, where community members gathered to eat together, hopefully, with a sweetheart. Mr. and Mrs. Lee recalled the romantic element of these suppers in their interview:

LL: Well, all the ladies brought a box, a lunch: sandwiches and cake or pie, and then they’d auction each box. Of course, the guys didn’t know whose box was whose, and whoever got the box, of course it was--

AL: The idea was, if you and David were sweethearts or something [points between interviewers David and Kylie Crowe] David would want to buy your box.

Whoever purchased the box supper shared a lunch with the person who prepared it, presumably someone they wished to be their date. Zena Rattler served coffee, students often sold cookies as a part of the fundraisers, and the sandwiches and desserts were eaten in the school lunchroom. The primary reason for holding the box suppers was to raise money for Christmas presents for the children of the community, and they usually raised more than enough for every child to receive a gift, valued at about \$2 per child.⁵⁷

The box suppers were merely one type of fundraiser held at the school. The various descriptions of suppers and other events based around the preparation and eating of food collected in both the oral histories as well as Mrs. Lee’s journal demonstrate how food was not only used to bring the people of Snowbird together to socialize, but also as a way to pitch in and help fellow community members in times of need. An entry in Louise Lee’s school journal from March 17th, 1950 reads, “Indians have a pie supper at the school to-night to raise money for the sick and needy,” adding that over 100 people attended the supper.⁵⁸ The use of the school as a community gathering place and events

center is one way in which the culture of food at Snowbird Day School is connected to resistance, with the people of Snowbird using the school as a resource to help students and community members in need.

“The playground and the lunchroom, and just-- they bring so many memories, I mean, just serving food, eating food, good food!” said Gilliam Jackson.⁵⁹ Fresh-baked rolls, chicken pot pie, hot chocolate, and fresh, crisp vegetables from the school’s garden, were among the rich sense memories recalled by former students. Diamond Brown Sr. remembered the scent of food wafting from the kitchen while the children waited for lunch. “Boy, you’d be in class there, you could smell that cooking,” Brown reminisced, “Kitchen just right off on the other side of the section of the building there, and boy, you could smell anything they were cooking back there, that aroma you know, and them rolls and hot chocolate,” he said, whistling appreciatively.⁶⁰

However, not all sense memories are associated with tasty foods, but rather some of these memories are attached to certain strong and unpleasant flavors. Several of the former students interviewed noted their love-hate relationship with one dish in particular: beef liver and onions. “The biggest thing out there [in] Snowbird, I remember, was eating beef liver. *My God, we had to eat beef liver again,*” said Billy Brown, chef Zena Rattler’s grandson. “It’d be tender and it’d taste good, sometimes it’d be tough. We’d say, ‘Golly, what’d grandma do to it!’”⁶¹ Several other students also mentioned the liver and onions as a dish they associated with very potent, if not always pleasant, memories. Former student David Crowe humorously recalled running outside whenever the dreaded liver and onions were served. Discussing Zena Rattler, he said “She was a fantastic cook. Apple pies, and cherry pies. Except- yeah. She had liver... So, when they’d have liver, I didn’t eat it.”⁶²

Contextualizing these remembrances in the poverty that existed in the community at this time, as well as the decreased amount of home gardening and animal husbandry among Eastern Cherokee people, suggests that simply having fresh, relatively healthy food available at school may have been one reason why students’ frequently referenced the day school food.⁶³ While having food provided through the school helped ensure the students’ nutritional needs were met, it’s important to understand that the menu was designed to assimilate Cherokee children into a Western-style diet, serving as perhaps a more pleasant seeming aspect of assimilation.

“You know, the amazing thing about the school, in my opinion, was the fact that even though there was an assimilation policy of the United States government, our teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Lee, never forbade us to speak the language, even in the classroom, that I can remember,” said Gilliam Jackson, who today teaches Cherokee language at UNC Asheville.⁶⁴ In contrast to many other BIA schools, Snowbird students were permitted to speak Cherokee at school.

As the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian community with the highest number, per capita, of Cherokee language speakers, language preservation and revitalization has always been prioritized in Snowbird.⁶⁵ Had the students at Snowbird Day School been prohibited or discouraged from speaking their native language, it may have been more difficult for the community to continue to use Cherokee language to the extent that it has. “...That’s also one of the reasons that I think that the community has maintained its strength in language preservation,” Gilliam Jackson noted.

Another student, Ethel Moose Jackson, recalled speaking Cherokee in the lunchroom and all other areas of the school, both during class and in the schoolyard. When asked if she recalled the school cafeteria, she was quick to associate those memories with speaking Cherokee while eating at lunchtime. “I can still remember it, and carrying the trays and eating there, and all the other children sitting around eating and talking,” she said, “And we spoke in Cherokee back then so that was, that’s-- When I think about it now, that’s so odd.” When she noted that it was odd that the children spoke their native language at school, she may have meant that it was exceptional that student were allowed to freely speak Cherokee at a BIA school.⁶⁶

The students’ experience of speaking Cherokee at Snowbird Day school stood in contrast to the strict English-only policies that existed during the earlier years of the BIA education system. Beginning in the 1860s, official BIA policy stated that Indian schools should teach English only, to the exclusion of all tribal languages. Official policy on which languages could be spoken in schools vacillated back and forth over the next several decades, before-settling on a more positive attitude toward tribal languages being spoken in schools in a 1951 BIA manual that noted “However, as language expression is essential to the development of thought, the use of native languages by Indian children may not be forbidden.”⁶⁷

Language was connected to day school students’ memories of food, both as an aspect of cultural resistance through speaking Cherokee, as well as assimilation through learning English. “The teacher said, ‘It’s noontime.’ I remember that. But I didn’t know what that meant, but I heard ‘noon,’ and in Cherokee, *nuna* is potato. I thought it was time to go eat potatoes, and I kind of put two and two together, it was noon, it was time to go eat,” said Gilliam Jackson, recalling a humorous misunderstanding that speaks to the student’s eager wait for lunchtime at Snowbird, as well as the ways in which a child’s mind tries to make sense of an unfamiliar language. Jackson also discussed some of his earliest memories of speaking English being connected to food, saying “We probably knew a few words, possibly ice cream and Coca Cola, those were important things you need to know.”⁶⁸ The familiarity and comfort of talking openly

to one's friends and relatives at lunch in your native language and home community was an experience that neither boarding school students, nor younger Snowbird children who attended Robbinsville public schools, shared with those who attended Snowbird Day School.^{69 70}

In the early 1960s, Snowbird Day school students began to transition into the Robbinsville Public school system, with the day school officially closing in 1965.⁷¹ As they entered a new and unfamiliar school setting, they were also exposed to new and different foods than they had eaten at Snowbird. Zena Rattler's grandson, Billy Brown, described the transition to public school, saying that the teachers were significantly stricter at Robbinsville and that Cherokee students experienced a "culture shock" as they were suddenly separated from one another into different age groups in a newly-integrated school. With an unfamiliar and uncomfortable school environment, came different foods that were not quite warmly received. "And we'd eat food we hadn't ever ate before, you know that's it," Brown said, laughing, "Because grandma cooked better than that, we thought, *what were they feeding us out here*, you know."⁷²

4. Conclusion

The oral histories recorded through the Snowbird Day School digital history project created space for former students to share their memories, not only of the foods of their childhoods, but recollections of their families and friends, hinting at the strength of community bonds in Snowbird. While these memories, as well as the documents that underpin the school's administration, are merely fragments of a larger narrative of American Indian education, the interplay between these sources demonstrates the often paradoxical, push-and-pull nature of cultural assimilation and community resistance against it. Memories of food at Snowbird Day School demonstrate a few of the ways in which Cherokee students, their families, staff, and community members navigated an assimilationist education, utilizing the resources afforded by the school to resist and adapt while maintaining Cherokee cultural ties.

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