

## Letters from the Chemawa Boarding School

Collins, Cary C. "The Broken Crucible of Assimilation: Forest Grove Indian School and the Origins of Off-Reservation Boarding-School Education in the West." *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. 101, no. 4, 2000, pp. 483–487, 504-505. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20615095.

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*When the Spokane students arrived at Forest Grove in 1880, only one spoke English. The October 5, 1881, Pacific chronicled their initial experiences in school. "The Warm Springs and Puyallups [who enrolled before the Spokanes] received these wild strangers very kindly Soon their long hair was cut and they were clothed in civilized garb. They were very quick to adopt themselves to circumstances.... This summer this number has been increased by the addition of eleven, seven being girls. They were clad in blankets and filthy in the extreme, yet the girls of the school received these wild sisters kindly, and performed all the disagreeable work of renovation.... Oliver Lot, the chief's son, a fine looking man, sat with his arm around his little sister whom he had not seen for months, his face glowing with pride and happiness." The students were from the Deep Creek Settlement, where nineteen Spokane families, including those of Chief Lot, Ah-ma mel-i-can, and William Three Mountain, had a thousand acres under cultivation. The Colville Reservation in northeastern Washington fell under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church, creating tension between Wilkinson and the agent there.*

August 20th [188]1

For Chief Lott, My Friend:

I want to tell you that your little daughter is better, that the Doctor has helped her very much, and we hope before long that she will be quite well, and the sore entirely cured. This will be good news for you, and your wife, and it will make you very happy that GOD is taking this way of answering your prayers that she might be made well. [Your son] Oliver is well. I have taken all the boys up near the foot of a mountain where they can fish and hunt for about two weeks while the teachers get rested here. I have written a long letter to the Indian Com missioner. [Colville] Agent [John A.] Simms has written to him that I have been taking away some girls from his jurisdiction (agency) without asking him. I have explained the whole matter.

You must tell all the Fathers, and Mothers, and friends, of all the children in this school, from your people, that they are well; that they are learning to speak English fast, and learning many other things- I am so glad, all the time, that our Heavenly Father keeps them all well & that they are growing fat & strong. All this letter will make your heart strong & all your people hearts strong & happy. I sent you the photographs, did you get them with my letter?

Your friend,  
Captain Wilkinson.

*Martha Lot died of tuberculosis and was buried in grave 10, lot 215, in Forest View Cemetery in Forest Grove. Chief Lot had complained bitterly of the decision to locate the school in the moist climate of the Willamette Valley. On October 2, 1891, the Morning Oregonian had reported a visit to Portland by Chiefs Joseph, Moses, and Lot. During their stay, Chief Lot was quoted as saying, "The young men [of the Spokane tribe] have attended the Chemawa school, but the change from the mountainous to the low land has been fatal to them. We want schools in our own territory." Guy Haines, a farmer living at Walker's Prairie just east of the Spokane Reservation, served as interpreter for Chief Lot in his correspondence with Wilkinson.*

October 18th [188]1

To/

Chief Lott Spokane Indian!

My Dear Friend

It is always easier to smile about life than death. When I wrote you in my last letter that Mattie, your dear child, whom you and her mother, and all of the school here, loved so much, was getting better, and I felt so sure in my heart, that she would soon be quite well, and learning fast out of GOD's word, and books, & was very happy indeed, for she had such a good mind and heart, and was so good and obedient and loving and kind that all of her teachers and I felt that in GOD's time she would come back to you and her dear people and be a teacher to guide them out of the darkness, into the light. I have just returned with ten children, boys and girls, of the Umatilla Indians. I came back to my school with my heart strong, for GOD has been so kind in giving this school so many bright Indian children and has ever since it has started, kept away from us any serious sickness, and has so protected us from death, but when I got back to my own home today, I found the dear little child, I had prayed for and loved so much, your own dear little Mattie was dead! You must go with your wife and talk with GOD about it - He alone can comfort you in his Holy Spirit, but I can help your hearts a little by telling you that my wife when she found that Mattie was very sick brought her into our own home and [our] own neighbors came in and all have tried the best they could to save her life. She had three Doctors and they all did all they could. When the sore on her side healed up and stopped running it went to her head and that is what caused her death.- so the doctors all say, and when you and your people feel so sorry in your hearts-about her dying, you will not forget that the poor little girl has been suffering a long time with the disease that has now caused her death and when the disease went to her head she could not feel her pain and at the last, crossed her pretty little hands over her breast and went to sleep in Jesus. Oliver [Lot] and Charley Abraham are sitting by me while I tell my wife what to write you, and my daughter Eva is as sorry as any of the Spokane children, about her death. We laid her out in a beautiful white dress and put her in as beautiful a coffin as I would bury one of my own children in, and the kind friends who have watched with her every night since she has been so sick, brought beautiful flowers which we put around her and on the coffin, and all the boys and girls stood around her coffin and we prayed and sung and have promised GOD to go ahead and leave faster and better, because there is one less of us to do the great work of helping to save the Indian race. All of the rest of the children are well and bear the loss like brave, Christian, boys and girls. It is our first death, as I have told you, and so the loss seems doubly hard to bear. I have purchased a little piece of ground near the school, in which some of the best people in the Country are buried, and [I] shall make it beautiful by any improvement I can put upon it

so that when you and your friends come to visit the school, by & by, as I hope you will, your hearts will be as happy as though Mattie were buried in your own Country & it will do the Indians more good to have her buried here, where the boys and girls can visit her grave often and make it beautiful to GOD in plants and flowers and as a place where they meet to pray that his Holy Spirit will guide them in the way of all truth. Now I want Oliver to say a word next to you & his mother.

Oliver says he came down to the Captain's home many days, and stayed at night some times, and watched the care Mrs. [Gertrude B.] Wilkinson and all took of Mattie and he feels as if they did all they could-he and all of the Spokane boys and girls were very much comforted when they saw how peaceful and beautiful Mattie looked in her coffin-Oliver says in two or three days he will feel like writing more to his Father-Tonight he cannot think -

Charley Abraham wants to say a few words-I am very sorry tonight that my little friend's mother and Capt. Wilkinson & the rest have very heart strong. And this night I don't know what to say-because my heart hurts much" Charley thinks in a few days he will write some more. -

Dear Friend -

This week Saturday I [will] take all the children to Portland where they will be the guests of the different churches-that is-where the people of the churches will take care of them. In the largest buildings in Portland, they have put all kinds of mechanical implements-and my carpenter boys & shoemakers and blacksmiths and the girls also, have put specimens of what they have done with their own hands-and this has greatly pleased the thousands of white people who [will] visit that building every day and evening. It will do all the boys and girls a great deal of good to see for themselves what it is that makes the white-man's civilization and it will encourage them to know that they are growing up into the same civilization- It is encouraging them very much to know that their exhibition is attracting a great deal of attention and gaining them a great deal of praise. So that while you must necessarily feel so sadly about your great loss you must not forget how fast your children are learning that wisdom which will bring them back to you and your people wise and strong to help you & them up-I will send you a little box which you can get when you go to Walkers Prairie by calling on Mr. Haines. In this little box will be a few things which will remind you of Mattie, they belonged to her. I will also send you some of the flowers that were about her little hands in the coffin. I shall be very anxious to hear from you & the people.

Your true friend,  
Captain Wilkinson.

*The Reaction of the Umnatillas to the news of a student's death suggests the strain parents suffered under while their children attended Forest Grove. Emma, the daughter of Chief Winampsnoot (abbreviated in this letter to Winam), was enrolled in Forest Grove on October 17, 1881, the day after Martha Lot died. It is unknown whether Emma contracted tuberculosis on the reservation or at Forest Grove. William Cameron McKay, the author of this letter, was the grandson of fur trader Alexander McKay. His father Thomnas fought in the Cayuse War; his mother was a member of the Chinook tribe.*

Pendleton Org. Oct 31st 1881

Yours of 20th inst came duly to hand. But have been unable to answer it. I was called away immediately after receiving it, and [I] only returned night before last. Yesterday I visited [Umatilla head chief] Winum and his people and read your letter to them. It was a great blessing and *restorer* of good feelings, as they were much exercised in the circulation of a report that one of the children you took down *had died*. I found them in a sorrowful *mood*; but after reading your letter of the 20th to them it pleased them. I told them should anything of the kind [have] happened, I was positive you would have *written me* immediately on the subject. *Mrs Winum* felt worse than any, thinking that [her daughter] *Em[m]a* might be *the one*, as she is not very *robust*. [Cayuse chief] Old *UmHowlish* stated he would feel sorry if any of the children had died, but [at] the same time, he would not say anything nor would he feel that he was doing wrong or sorry that he had sent them down with you: as they would have died even were they *here*. He says to tell you his feelings-be kind and take good care of them.-The Priest continues to abuse the Indians for sending the children to the America School and [where they are] taught everything but the true *Religion*. They would surely go to *Hell* and there is no salvation for them, all such argument he used to effect upon the indians *mind*, and [he] has *succeeded* to effect the Catholic Indians. They certainly believe that it was not right to send them to a Heretical School- But Winum and his people are better pleased that they have been the means of filling up the *quota* that has been allowed by the Government in your *training school*. He considers that he has so much the advantage of the others. Do not fail to write often as I will inform them of the contents of your *letter*-they look for it. I would like [it] if I [could] ... go down [to Forest Grove] as soon as you could make it convenient or else put it off till first or middle of *December*-use your judgment-We shall have much to tell you of the doings at the agency, and of course-we are trying to keep ourselves posted of their doings &c.

I remain Yours Respectfully  
Wm McKay M

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*The following is an undated statement attributed to Chief Lot. Other than his remarks in the Morning Oregonian, this is Chief Lot's only known response to the events that unfolded at Forest Grove.*

My father was Chief of all the Indians and he used to tell them what it was right to do. After his death my brother became Chief and he was a good Chief too. I was bad ... When my brother died they wanted me to be Chief. But my heart was full of bad. I could not get good out of the bad. But [the federal government in] Washington wanted me to be Chief. Then I studied to be good. I was anxious to learn to read and to use pen and ink. I like my family to go along side of me, and I was anxious to have my people learn to read and write. The minister tells us God is up there. I hear it but it goes in the ear and out. I lose it. I look up into the sky and see nothing. Where is the road to see God Almighty? I look through something that the white man uses to see a long distance and I see nothing but blue. I look down and see only the ground. The minister takes the Bible and interpret what Jesus said, and that was to me a glass to see God. Then I worked harder than ever, and I wanted to see my children read and write before I died. That was my mind when General Howard saw me. He told me, "Washington wants you to send your children to a place towards where the sun goes down where they can go to school." God knows I love my children. God knows what I wanted. Captain ... [Wilkinson] came the next year and asked if I could send some. The people were afraid, but I sent mine. The next year he wanted some more. I gave him a lot of boys and girls. They sent the sick back; the rest died down there. (Of twenty-one pupils sent, sixteen died.) I made up my mind that my people were right in being afraid to send the children away Then I wanted a school house right by my house. I went to Washington and spoke only one thing: "I like a school house." Two men then told [Chief] Moses, "Lot says he wants a school house; do you want a school house?" Moses answered, "No." Then they asked [Chief] Tonaskit and again they used my name. "Lot says he wants a school house; do you want one?" "No, I sent my children to Catholic school." Then they turned to me: "Why do you not send your children to Catholic school?" "I want an American and not an Italian to teach my children," (answered Lot.) They said, "Lot you go home and in two months you will have a school house." (That was in 1883.) It was three years that I was very anxious. They built one for Moses, and one for Tonaskit, but none for me. I hear that they looked at a place on the hill ten miles from my house. My people do not want to send their children so far away. If I had had white people's children I would have put their bodies in a coffin and sent them home so that they could see them. I do not know who did it, but they treated my people as if they were dogs. My people are afraid.... They should give me that school house. When they buried sixteen of our children they should pay by building a school.