

FIRST DRAFT

TELLER INSTITUTE

Closure sparked decade-long search for replacement facility

Citizens of Mesa County were confronted by a dilemma in the late winter of 1911: The Indians were leaving, along with the economic boost they provided.

To be more precise, about 200 Native American youngsters who lived at the Teller Institute, aka the Grand Junction Indian School, were being moved to other schools or sent to their home reservations. The non-Indian workers at the school would lose their jobs and the buildings would be turned over to the state.

There had been predictions of the pending closure for at least three years, but in 1911 the Bureau of Indian Affairs made it official.

Mesa County residents sent to federal officials, members of Congress and local newspapers arguing to keep the school open or find a suitable replacement use for the property.

Among other ideas, some people argued the facility should become a state teachers college or a horticultural school. The federal legislation that turned the 170 acres of the school over to the state required it to continue as an educational facility.

However, there were also military-related ideas for the property. It could become a training camp for new recruits as the nation prepared to enter World War I, or an internment camp for captured enemy soldiers. Or it could be used as a recuperation hospital for injured soldiers and a home for veterans.

The idea of making it an institution to house people with mental impairments surfaced several times. But it wasn't until 1919 that a bill to fund the institution was approved by Colorado Legislature. In the final weeks of 1920, the facility that would become the Grand Junction Regional Center began accepting patients.

The Grand Junction Indian School had opened in 1886, under legislation pushed by Colorado Sen. Henry Teller, and the school later became known as the Teller Institute. Initially, its goal was to educate Ute Indian youngsters to "materially aid in the civilization of the Utes."

However, the Utes despised the school. Some escaped from it to return to their homes on reservations in Utah and Southwestern Colorado. Others petitioned to be released from



HISTORY COLORADO

The Teller Institute is shown in this undated photo from the early 1900s. Some of the buildings still stand at the now-Regional Center.

the school. Efforts by school administrators to recruit students from among Utes proved a failure, and other regional tribes, including the Navajo, showed little interest in sending their youngsters to the school.

The school struggled for several years with low enrollment. But in the early 1890s, new recruitment efforts were made on other reservations, primarily in New Mexico and Arizona.

Soon, Apaches from several tribes, Mojaves, Yumas and Navajos made up the bulk of the school's student population. Later, Tohono O'odham of Arizona and the members of New Mexico's Pueblo groups were recruited, as well.

There were agricultural and vocational programs for the male students, and domestic service programs for the females. But the soil was heavily alkali, and the water table was very high. The farming efforts at the school were never a rousing success. Often, students were sent to farms in the area to work as unpaid laborers.

People in the Grand Valley began to embrace students from the school when they ventured into town. The coronet band from the Teller Institute was especially popular, as was the all-girl mandolin orchestra.

Teller Institute sports teams competed regularly in baseball and football with non-Indian teams in the region, and they won frequently. One young man, a Moqui Indian named Saul Halyve, won considerable acclaim as a long-distance runner, repeatedly defeating professional runners in head-to-head competitions.

Citizens of Mesa County either didn't know or willfully ignored problems at the school. Decades after the school was closed, reports showed Native students were abused by staff at the school, food was often poor and disease a frequent concern. No one knows for sure how many students died in Grand Junction, but some reports put it at nearly 40 students and one teacher.

However, locals knew well that the Indian school provided jobs, purchased food from local farmers and goods from local merchants. Consequently, they were eager to find a replacement use of the property that would provide a similar economic boost.

In January 1911, The Daily Sentinel worried about the fate of the property in an editorial called "The Indian School Dilemma." The paper called the facility "as vital as any other to this city and valley."

By April, the newspaper eagerly reported on a visit of State Board of Agriculture members to the Indian School to assess it for a possible state horticultural and forestry college.

The federal government officially turned the property over to the state of Colorado in June 1911, but the plan for a horticultural college never materialized. The Legislature authorized money for an agricultural high school near Durango, but none for Grand Junction.

Additionally, Grand Junction lost to Gunnison in an effort to have the property become the site of a new state teachers' college.

Moreover, state officials soon realized that groundwater issues at the site needed to be addressed. The land was leased to a local dairy, and the buildings remained empty, although they were occasionally used for

community events such as high school graduations.

In 1915, the Legislature appropriated \$5,000 to fix the drainage problem. And in 1916, Congressman Edward Taylor of Colorado successfully amended the federal bill to eliminate the provision that the site had to be used for education.

Taylor's amendment authorized the site to be used "for the care of the insane, as an agricultural experiment station, or for such other public purposes as may be authorized by the Legislature of the State."

U.S. involvement in World War I was looming, and soon there were the proposals to put the site to military use.

But the war ended with none of the military ideas realized. So, in 1919, local and state officials turned once again to housing people with mental handicaps. The Indian school would become an alternate campus of the State Home and Training School for Mental Defectives in Wheat Ridge.

The Legislature approved funding for the home in March of 1919, and in November work began to remodel and restore the buildings of the old Indian School. New efforts to drain groundwater from the property were also undertaken.

More than a year later, in December 1920, the State Home and Training School began receiving its first students. The facility later became the Grand Junction Regional Center, and it continued to operate on the Indian School site until December 2023, when the last patients were removed.

The Regional Center continues to serve residents in 10 group homes around the Grand Valley.

The property on D Road that was home to the Regional Center for more than 100 years still belongs to the state of Colorado. But, as occurred more than a century ago, there are multiple ideas put forth on what to do with the property. Those discussions are ongoing.

Sources: "Cesspools, Alkali and White Lily Soap: The Grand Junction Indian School, 1886-1911," by Donald A. MacKendrick, Journal of the Western Slope, Summer 1993; "Grand Junction Indian Boarding School," by John Seebach, Colorado Encyclopedia, www.coloradoencyclopedia.org; information from the Grand Junction Regional Center; historic editions of The Daily Sentinel at www.newspapers.com.

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PHOTO BY JUDY SILBERNAGEL

One of the main buildings of the Grand Junction Regional Center as it appears today. The last students from the facility were removed in December 2023 and moved to group homes in the community.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MUSEUMS OF WESTERN COLORADO

Students from the Teller Institute Indian School, including members of the school's band, outside one of the school's main buildings. The school was named after Colorado Sen. Henry Teller, who was instrumental in crafting the legislation for the creation of the school, and opened in 1887. Photo is circa 1900.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MUSEUMS OF WESTERN COLORADO

Members of the Teller Institute football team, circa 1908.

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