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Media Contact: Lovett: 202-343-7445
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Chemawa School at Salem, Oregon is the oldest Indian school in the United States --soon to celebrate its centennial --but it is, in at least one way, like an adolescent.

Chemawa is going through a difficult time of transition.

The school was started at Forest Grove, Oregon in 1880 when not many people worried about education for Indians. (The nation's first Federal Indian school, Carlisle Institute in Pennsylvania, was started just one year earlier.) In 1885, the school was moved to Salem and in 1886 reached an enrollment of 200 youngsters from the tribes of the Northwest.

Today, Chemawa, once again, has an enrollment of about 200 Indian students from the tribes of the Northwest - down from peak years of more than 1,000.

The school isn't going down hill, however. This spring Northwest Indian leaders culminated a long effort when they came to Washington and convinced Congress, to the tune of $10 million in construction funds, that Chemawa was needed and was important to the Northwest Indians.

Chemawa will be building totally new facilities to replace the 50 to 70 year old school buildings that are now condemned and empty. Temporary modular units are being used in this transition period.

The new buildings will meet academic, residential and recreational needs for 600 Indian high school students who need the special programs available to them at an Indian boarding school.

Some of the old buildings may be preserved as historic sites. The Oregon Historical Society has intervened to this end and alumni, for sentimental reasons, don't want them torn down. Mrs. Jim McKay, wife of the Chemawa Indian Advisory Board Chairman, said of the old buildings, "Our spirits are in the walls."

The McKays attended Chemawa in its heyday in the late 1920s. By that time the school had progressed from the rudimentary training institute which most of the early Indian schools were in their beginning, to a fully accredited high school, with an enrollment of 1,100 in some 70 buildings.

According to a historical brochure put out by the school, the Chemawa athletic teams of this period "had gained renown throughout the whole of the Pacific Coast." The played "such teams as Stanford University, Multnomah College, University of Oregon and Oregon State Colleges."

Jim McKay, who is a Lummi and represents the Western Washington tribes on the Chemawa school board, feels strongly about the value of the school -- past and present.

"Many of the former students feel as I do," he said. "If it hadn't been for Chemawa and the other off-reservation schools, Indian people would have achieved much less than they have."

"Those that came to Chemawa in my day appreciated the opportunity to get in. The school was crowded.

We had lots of spirit. Many went on to college and to other achievements. We were given incentives here to accomplish many things."

McKay thinks that Chemawa is as needed today as ever. "The public schools don't meet the needs of all our Indian students. Chemawa can provide special programs oriented toward reservation needs and implementation of the Indian Self-Determination Act. "

Chemawa has served thousands of the Northwest Indians from Washington, Oregon and Idaho --three and four generations of some families. These tribes have given their active support to the school and lobbied forcefully to get funding for the needed facilities.

In the 1950's and 60's Chemawa provided special programs for Navajo students when that reservation did not have facilities for all its students. It also has served thousands of Alaskan students from small villages with no education programs beyond the sixth grade.

Both of these groups now have local schools to meet their needs, so the new Chemawa is expected to enter its second century as a school for the Indian students of the Northwest --Washington, Oregon, Idaho and some from Montana.

At the Appropriations hearings this spring when the Northwest Indians testified on behalf of the school, the student body president said, "We students know Chemawa is run down and old, but it is the only place we have left to go to school to get an education."

Chemawa is old, and it has become run down, but it is going to be rebuilt, and somehow the spirits in the walls - the spirits of Chemawa alumni who made the rebuilding possible - will continue to be felt on the campus.