

*Bum-a-ling! Bum-a-ling!
Bow-wow-wow!
Ching-a-ling! Ching-a-ling!
Chow-chow-chow!*

The cheer that rose from the ranks of the uniformed students assembled on the parade ground that Montana morning in early June 1904 was familiar enough, similar as it was to the kinds of nonsensical verses that floated over football fields across the country every fall. Familiar, yet singularly out of context, chanted as it was in the accents and cadences of the various Native peoples represented in this particular student body.

*Bum-a-ling! Ching-a-ling!
Who are we?*

the voices demanded. Then came the resounding response:

*Fort Shaw! Fort Shaw!
Rah! Rah! Rah!*

The volume and intensity of the closing lines left no doubt as to the crowd's collective pride in the basketball team they were sending off that morning.¹

Since the team's organization in 1902, the girls whose accomplishments engendered such pride had been virtually unbeatable in the fledgling sport of "basket ball," routinely defeating most of the state's college and high school girls' teams—and a few boys' teams as well. Now Superintendent Fred C. Campbell

World Champions

The 1904 Girls' Basketball Team from Fort Shaw Indian Boarding School

by Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith

A team of remarkable athletes from Montana's Fort Shaw Government Industrial Indian School traveled to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri, to put on exhibitions for fair-goers in 1904. As the official champions of the exposition and, in the eyes of their supporters, "the undisputed . . . world's champions," they brought home the silver trophy pictured here. The team members, photographed in St. Louis, are (standing from left) Rose LaRose, Flora Lucero, Katie Snell, Minnie Burton, Genevieve Healy, Sarah Mitchell, and (seated from left) Emma Sansaver, Genie Butch, Belle Johnson, Nettie Wirth.



Courtesy Barbara Winters



had decided it was time for a greater challenge. In less than twenty-four hours the girls from Fort Shaw Government Industrial Indian Boarding School would be on their way to St. Louis, Missouri, where, as students of the Model Indian School on the grounds of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, they would be holding twice weekly intrasquad exhibition games and challenging all comers.²

En route to the World's Fair, the girls would sharpen their skills and increase their visibility by playing exhibition and challenge games at whistle-stops all along the way. And they would finance their meals and lodging in the

towns in which they played by changing from their basketball uniforms—wool serge middy blouses and bloomers—into ceremonial buckskin dresses and beaded breastplates and charging fifty cents admission to a postgame program of music, dance, and recitation.³

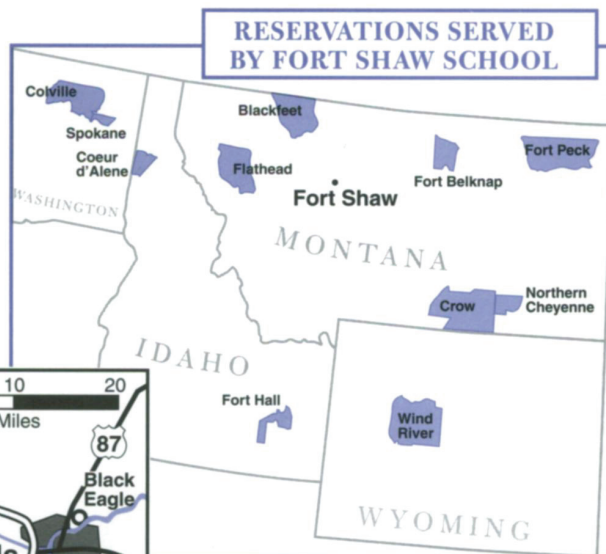
Superintendent Campbell's faith in his team was well placed, for the young women from Fort Shaw would prove to be worthy ambassadors of their school, their state, and their tribes, defeating every team they played over the next five months and returning from St. Louis with a trophy declaring them champions of the World's Fair of 1904—in effect, champions of the world.⁴



Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

Unfortunately, the Fort Shaw team had more staying power on the court than their story had on the page. Indeed, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, as girls' and women's basketball is drawing the attention of sports fans around the globe, relatively few of those fans realize that more than a hundred years ago full-court girls' basketball was already challenging long-held assumptions about women and sports. And that the best of the best—a team one Missouri reporter described as “eleven aboriginal maidens . . . from the Fort Shaw Reservation”—overcame barriers of gender, race, and class to emerge as champions, thereby shattering stereotypes concerning the athletic, academic, and artistic capabilities of Native American girls and women.⁵

According to that same St. Louis reporter, the girls from Fort Shaw were “Lizzie and Mattie Wirth and Sarah Mitchell, Assiniboine Sioux; Belle Johnson, Blackfoot; Genevieve Butch, Yangton Sioux; Minnie Burton, Shoshone; Genevieve Healy and Katie Snell, Gros Ventre; and Emma Sansaver and Flora Luciro,



Modern map showing Fort Shaw area

Chippewa.” That the reporter omitted Rose LaRose’s name from the roster, called Nettie Wirth “Mattie Wirth,” misrepresented (and misspelled) the tribal affiliations of several of the girls, and called Fort Shaw a “reservation” is not too surprising, since the story of this legendary team has often been riddled with contradictions and misinformation. That he referred to the

girls from Fort Shaw as “aboriginal maidens” should also come as no surprise, unaccustomed as journalists of the day were to writing about Native Americans as anything but “the enemy” or “the victim.”⁶

1. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, September 9, 1904.

2. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Leader*, June 2, 1904; Gertrude LaRance Parker, interview by Barbara Winters, Lame Deer, Montana, November 1990, transcript in the possession of the authors. According to Don Evans, who coached the boys' team at Great Falls High School, his teams and “other boys teams in Montana” were “severely trounced” by the Fort Shaw girls. “Shoot, Minnie, Shoot’: Famous Battle Cry Carried Fort Shaw Indian Belles to 1904 World Title,” *Montana Sports Magazine* (Spring 1968), 222.

3. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Leader*, June 2, 1904.

4. This trophy is held by Valerie Goss, granddaughter of Belle Johnson Arnoux Swingley Conway, captain of the team during their 1904 season. It was a major attraction at a gathering of team descendants at the March 2000 Sun River Valley, Montana, Heritage Fair sponsored by Simms High School and the Sun River Valley Historical Society. Thought for years to be lost, the trophy was located by three Simms High juniors—Tana Fleming, Sarah Green, and Ashle Wheeler—in the course of their research on members of the Fort Shaw championship team of 1904. The research was carried out as part of their school’s Montana Heritage Project under the guidance of their teacher, Dorothea Susag, and the authors. See the Simms High School student literary magazine, *Stories in Place III: Our Sun River Valley Heritage* (Spring 2000), 11-12, 14-16, 18-19.

5. *St. Louis Republic*, June 15, 1904. On the evolution of women’s basketball, see, in particular, Joan Hult and Marianna Trekell, eds., *A Century of Women’s Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four* (Reston, Va., 1991).

6. *St. Louis Republic*, June 15, 1904.

7. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Leader*, June 2, 1904.

8. Newspaper stories based on interviews conducted with Nettie Wirth Mail and Genevieve Healy Adams in their later years convey the women’s positive attitudes toward the team’s experiences at Fort Shaw and at the World’s Fair. John Bye, “Shoot, Minnie, Shoot’: Lusty Cry of Unbeaten Indian Girls,” *Montana Post*, Montana Historical Society newsletter, August 1965, 1-2; *Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune*, April 3, 1977; *Choteau, (Mont.) Acantha*, December 30, 1976. Beginning in March 2000, the authors conducted a series of interviews with descendants of team members. In every case, these descendants said that, from the stories they heard from their mothers and grandmothers, the team members saw that summer in St. Louis as their own individual and collective moment of glory. Among descendants interviewed were Betty Bisnett, daughter of Emma Rose Sansaver; Ella Barrows, daughter of Emma Rose Sansaver; Barbara Winters, granddaughter of Emma Rose Sansaver; Valerie Goss, granddaughter of Belle Johnson; Rose Stuart, daughter of Catherine Snell; Thelma James, granddaughter of Catherine Snell; Donita Nordlund, granddaughter of Genevieve Healy; Rita Nordlund, great-granddaughter of Genevieve Healy; Jessie James Hawley, great-niece of Genevieve Healy; Cecilia James, niece of Genevieve Healy; Terry Bender, great-niece of Nettie Wirth and granddaughter of Lizzie Wirth; Elsie Bennett, daughter of Lizzie Wirth and niece of Nettie Wirth; Grace Lavendis, niece of Flora Lucero; James Dawson, grandson of Flora Lucero; Dorothy Smith, daughter of Sarah Mitchell; Greg Courchene, grandson of Sarah Mitchell; Drusilla Gould, great-granddaughter of Minnie Burton; William Sansaver, descendant of Emma Rose Sansaver, Catherine Snell, and Sarah Mitchell; and Donald Clark, great-nephew of Genie Butch.

As inaccurate and inherently, if unconsciously, racist as vintage journalistic accounts tend to be, they offer evidence that these skilled, energetic, and adventure-some young women not only went to the World's Fair of 1904, but went, as Fort Shaw school officials were quick to point out, "not as an exhibit or anything of that sort" but as pupils of the Model Indian School the government maintained on the fairgrounds that summer and fall. Of course, this disclaimer clouds the issue since the government's Model Indian School was, in and of itself, an exhibit designed to show the world how "civilized" American Indians were becoming under the tutelage of non-Indian teachers, how readily the younger generation had taken up their new language, how well they had mastered "white" homemaking and farming techniques that would assure their success as members of the larger society, and how accomplished they had become at "non-Indian" pursuits.⁷

Even so, interviews with descendants of the Fort Shaw team suggest that the girls were highly motivated participants in the government's game of "show and tell" and that they traveled east with hard-won confidence in their individual and collective abilities, looking forward to the coming adventure as a rare and wonderful opportunity to see the country and enjoy the sights and sounds of the World's Fair while representing their school before an international audience.⁸

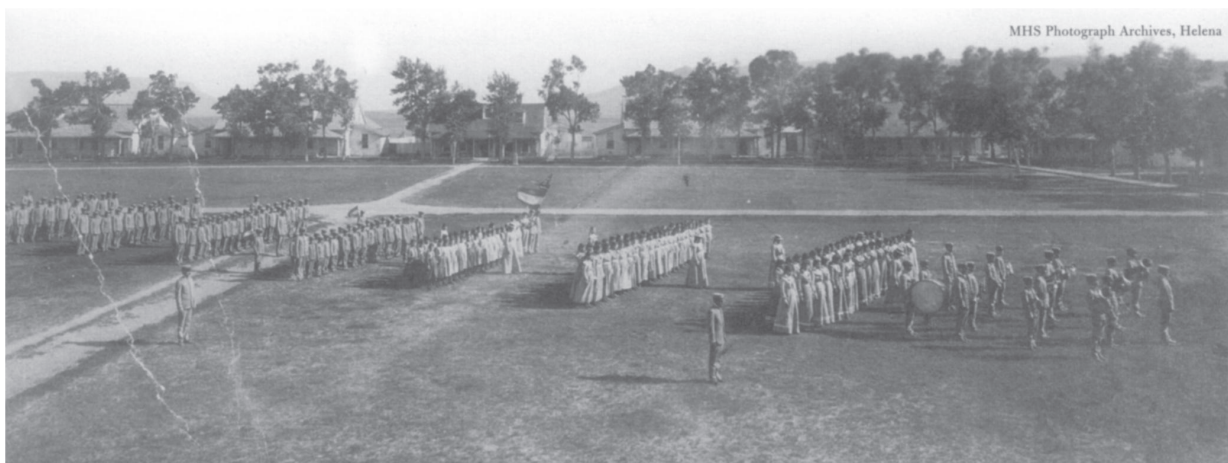
And, since the government's interest in demonstrating the effectiveness of its programs and the team's interest in making the most of an unprecedented opportunity were not mutually exclusive, events at the World's Fair of 1904 provide a particularly vivid example of the ways in which Indian students were able to turn boarding school experiences to their own use.

The trip to the World's Fair had its beginnings a dozen years earlier—in 1892—with the establishment of an off-reservation government school for Indian children in the Sun River Valley, some thirty miles west of Great Falls, Montana. And, at almost the very same time—but on the other side of the country—with the invention of the game of "basket ball."

By 1892 most of Montana's Native American population was being served by mission and government day schools and boarding schools, all of which were part of a movement afoot at the time to "assimilate and acculturate" the nation's Indians. The dual goal was to strip Indian children of their language and culture and to teach them English, academic subjects, and vocational trades that would bring them into the "white world." Into this white world *with* the children, it was hoped, would come their elders and, eventually, their offspring.⁹

When the government school at Poplar on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana burned in 1892, the federal government looked with interest at the recently vacated Fort Shaw military compound, some three hundred fifty miles to the west, realizing it could be easily—and economically—retrofitted as an off-reservation boarding school. Because of the beauty of its setting and the design and landscaping of its buildings—all of which faced inward on a four-hundred-square-foot green—Fort Shaw had long been known as the "Queen of Montana's Military Posts." Now it would become the "Queen of Montana's Indian Schools." The administrators and faculty could be housed in the old officers' quarters, the children in the soldiers' barracks. The school would have its own chapel, mess hall, post office, store, laundry, and hospital.¹⁰

The students below are lined up to drill on the parade grounds of the former military compound that became the Fort Shaw Indian school in 1892, the same year that James Naismith invented "basket ball" on the other side of the country.



As an off-reservation school modeled after Carlisle in Pennsylvania, Haskell in Kansas, and Chillico in Oklahoma, Fort Shaw would have the added advantage of being too far from the homes of most of its students to allow for regular visits from family members or for frequent trips home to the reservations, both of which educators feared would kindle nostalgia for native languages and familiar customs. The school would also be sufficiently distant and isolated to discourage would-be runaways. Fort Shaw would serve the region's most promising Indian children, drawing its students—ages five to eighteen—from various tribes across the state and from Idaho and Wyoming as well. The school officially opened on December 27, 1892, under Dr. William Winslow, superintendent, physician, and principal teacher.¹¹

Such were the beginnings of Fort Shaw Government Industrial Indian Boarding School. Meanwhile, on the other side of the continent, in 1891 James Naismith, an educator at the International YMCA Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, was developing a new sport—"basket ball." In the beginning, there was only a soccer ball and a peach basket, and the rules of the game varied widely. There could be five, nine, or as many as forty members of each team on the court at any one time. Designed for indoor play during the winter months, Naismith's sport became popular almost overnight. With popularity came some semblance of standardized rules: five to a team, two points per goal (or "field throw"), fouls for intentional contact. By the end of the nineteenth cen-

tury—less than a decade after its invention—basketball was being played on high school and college campuses across the country.¹²

Though originally intended as an indoor sport for men and boys enrolled in YMCA programs, the game immediately gained popularity with girls and women, and by 1892 gymnastics instructor Senda Berenson had introduced her own modified version of Naismith's new game to her students at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Soon thereafter women at Wellesley, Vassar, Radcliffe, and other women's colleges and normal schools in the Northeast had taken up the sport. It was only a matter of time before basketball was being played by girls and women in high schools and colleges across the United States—including Montana.¹³

The game's instant popularity with females is understandable since it was one of the few active sports deemed acceptable for the "fairer sex" at a time when conventional wisdom held that strenuous activity could be harmful to female health. Welcome as the sport was to the girls and women who played it, opposition quickly arose from critics for whom the term "strenuous activity" included anything considered "unladylike." Running, for instance. Certainly, running across a gymnasium floor in pursuit of a ball. By 1896, in response to growing public outcry and fearful that the game would be banned altogether for women if it was not altered to curtail such unacceptable behavior as "snatching" the ball or attempting to block an opponent's shot, a committee headed by Senda Berenson established a uniform set of rules that would allow women to play basketball "safely." The court was divided into three sections—front court, center court, and back court. There could be six to ten players on

9. The idea that boarding school students took advantage of the opportunities offered, "while retaining their tribal values," is delineated by K. Tsianina Lomawaima in *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chillico Indian School* (Lincoln, 1994), 167. In the past decade many excellent books about Indian education in government boarding schools have been published, most notably David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence, Kans., 1995); Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln, 1995); and Margaret Archuleta, Brenda Child, and K. Tsianina Lomawaima, eds., *Away from Home: American Indian Boarding School Experiences* (Phoenix, Ariz., 2000).

10. Built on the Sun River in 1867, Fort Shaw took its name from Colonel Robert Shaw, who met his death while leading the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteers, a regiment of black soldiers, in an engagement at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, in 1863. Originally established to protect the region's settlers from "marauding Indians," Fort Shaw housed units that participated in the infamous Baker Massacre, engaged in the Great Sioux War, and marched against the Nez Perce in the Big Hole Basin. Don C. Miller and Stan B. Cohen, *Military and Trading Posts of Montana* (Missoula, Mont., 1978), 76-79; *Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune*, June 21, 2000; *Great Falls (Mont.)*

Tribune, July 11, 1999; Bill Thomas, "Early Life and Times of the Montana Smith Family: A Biography of Tom Smith," 1995, p. 66, ms., copy in the possession of the authors.

11. The school opened with an enrollment of 52 students, but by the end of its first year of operation there were 176 children in residence. Jeffrey Cunniff, "Fort Shaw Indian School," p. 5, Fort Shaw Vertical File, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena (hereafter MHS); Dorothy Baldwin, "History of Fort Shaw," p. 9, *ibid.*

12. James Naismith, "Basket Ball," [*YMCA*] *Triangle* (January 1892), 145-46; David Anderson, *The Story of Basketball* (New York, 1988), 4-17; Zander Hollander, ed., *The Modern Encyclopedia of Basketball* (New York, 1969), 3-5.

13. Joanne Lannin, *A History of Basketball for Girls and Women: From Bloomers to Big Leagues* (New York, 2000), 10; Betty Spears, "Senda Berenson Abbott: New Woman, New Sport," in Hult and Treckel, eds., *Century of Women's Basketball*, 24; Scott Johnson, "Not Altogether Ladylike: The Premature Demise of Girls' Interscholastic Basketball in Illinois," www.ihsa.org/feature/historic/earlybkg.htm. College basketball came to Montana in 1898 when the women of Montana Agricultural College in Bozeman began practicing the game twice a week in the drill hall on campus and "urg[ed] the men to form a team too." *Exponent*, newspaper of Montana Agricultural College in Bozeman, November 1898.

each team. On most indoor courts, there were two guards, two centers, and two forwards. Players could not step outside their designated zones and could dribble no more than three times before shooting or passing. These so-called “girls’ rules” so drastically altered the dynamics of Naismith’s new sport that most high school and college teams—especially those west of the Mississippi—ignored them and continued to play by “boys’ rules.”¹⁴

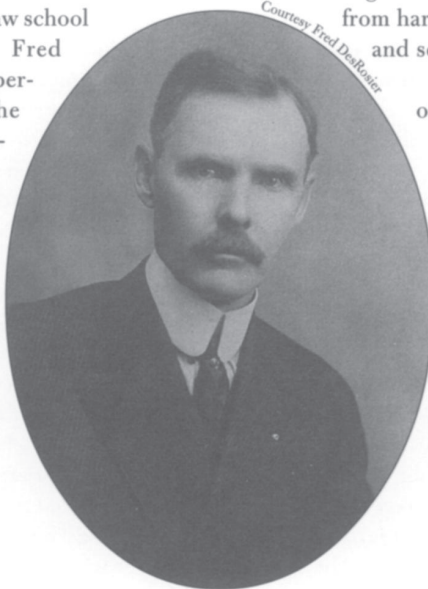
Both basketball and the Fort Shaw school had come of age by the time Fred Campbell assumed the school superintendency in summer 1898. The three hundred students then enrolled represented all the tribes of Montana as well as the Bannock, Colville, Kalispel, and Shoshone of neighboring states. They came, often as not, from families of mixed parentage, most often a non-Indian father and an Indian mother. And they came with different attitudes toward the school and their presence there. A goodly number—like Genevieve Healy from the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation (who would become a guard on the 1904 girls’ team)—came willingly, supported by parents who saw some advantage to educating their children in the ways of the white world.¹⁵

Other youngsters were taken to Fort Shaw over the objections of parents who feared that such an education would cause their children to forsake tribal and family customs. Such fears were not unfounded, for with assimilation and acculturation as its primary goal, Fort Shaw did its share of discouraging adherence to the old ways

of life. One of the school’s first pupils, Lone Wolf, a Piegan who was eight years old when he was taken from his home on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in 1892, recalled the trauma of that experience: “It was very cold the day they loaded us into the wagons. . . . [W]e cried for it was the first time we were to be separated from our parents. . . . [When we arrived at the school] our belongings were taken from us, even the little medicine bags our mothers had given us to protect us from harm. Everything was placed in a heap and set afire.”¹⁶

Not surprisingly, Lone Wolf and others in his situation suffered from what one Indian scholar has described as “the homesickness that would not go away.” Yet still others, like Gertrude LaRance of the Little Shell band of the Chippewa, had nothing but fond memories of their years at Fort Shaw. Taken by her mother to the school when she was five years old, little Gertie, who was destined to become the “mascot” of the 1904–1905 girls’ basketball team, had long anticipated the day when she would join her older sisters at Fort Shaw. By her own report, she suffered not a single moment of homesickness and recalled some ninety years later that she had been the “pet” of the school’s staff, all of whom were “just wonderful” to her.¹⁷

Perhaps the experiences of Louis Youpee, a Chippewa youth brought to Fort Shaw as a six-year-old in fall 1900 are more typical—beginning as they did with apprehension and ending in Youpee’s expressed appreciation for the “patience and kindly advice” of Superintendent Fred Campbell, the



Fred C. Campbell, who became superintendent of the Fort Shaw school in 1898, recognized the self-esteem sports could impart to young athletes and expanded the athletic program. By 1902 he was coaching the girls’ basketball team.

14. Spears, “Senda Berenson,” 28; Lannin, *History of Basketball*, 10. For an excellent overview of “girls’ rules,” see Joanna Davenport, “The Tides of Change in Women’s Basketball Rules” in Hult and Trell, eds., *Century of Women’s Basketball*, 83–108.

15. Baldwin, “History of Fort Shaw,” 9; Indian Census Rolls, 1885–1940, Fort Shaw School, roll 161, microfilm M595, Records of Office of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter RG 75, NAW). In his 1901 annual report to officials in Washington, D.C., Campbell noted that only 17 percent of the students came from full-blooded Indian parents, adding that it was “a very difficult matter to secure as many full bloods as desired.” F. C. Campbell, Report of School at Fort Shaw, Mont., 1901, entry 48501, Records of Non-Reservation Schools, Field Office Records, RG 75, NAW; W. H. H. Healy to Indian Commissioner, September 19, 1894, Letters Received, 1894–1895, entry 36194, *ibid.*; *Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune*, April 3, 1977.

16. Cunniff, “Fort Shaw Indian School,” 7; John Greer, “A Brief History of Indian Education at Fort Shaw Industrial School” (master’s thesis, Montana State University, 1958), 39; Paul Dyck, “Lone Wolf Returns to That Long Ago Time,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 22 (Winter 1972), 24. Lone Wolf, or Hart Merriam Schultz—later a leading artist of the West—was the son of Fine Shield Woman, a Piegan Blackfeet, and James Willard Schultz, who lived among the Blackfeet and gained fame for the books he wrote about the tribe and its history.

17. Peter Iverson, introduction to *From Trout Creek to Gravy High: The Boarding School Experience at Wind River*, Shoshone Episcopal Mission’s Warm Valley (Wyo.) Historical Project exhibit catalog published in 1992. Born near Choteau, Montana, Gertrude LaRance came to Fort Shaw in 1901 and was there nine years later when the school closed. Parker interview.

man who “practically raised that then Indian boy against his own wishes and educated him.”¹⁸

A visionary under whose leadership the Fort Shaw school continued to grow, Superintendent Campbell quickly realized that “assimilation and acculturation” was a two-way process. If Fort Shaw students were ever to make the cultural transition for which they were being educated, then the white world needed educating too. The non-Indian residents of Sun River Valley and nearby Great Falls needed to see for themselves the caliber of the students at Fort Shaw, and toward that end, Campbell began to invite area residents to visit the school.

In spring 1901 he convinced United States senator Paris Gibson of Great Falls to inspect the government boarding school that was practically in his own backyard. In honor of the visit by Gibson and several other Montana politicians, the *Great Falls Daily Tribune* devoted front-page coverage to what its feature editor hailed as “one of the largest and best of the Indian boarding schools.” Of particular interest to that editor was the exemplary behavior of the students at the school, especially since there were “but 30 employees and teachers all told to control [316 children] . . . most all of [whom had] . . . come from the tepees of savage parents . . . and ha[d] ever been free to go and come when they chose,” making their “resignation to the necessary restraints at the school” all the more amazing.¹⁹

In addition to the discipline displayed by the children—both in their general behavior and in the elaborate precision drills performed on the parade ground by the boys’ and girls’ battalions—the visitors were equally impressed by the academic achievement of Fort

Shaw students. Though admitting that “it [was] hardly a pleasant thought,” the reporter duly noted that “for the number of hours of study and not [even] taking into consideration the difficulties consequent upon a poor understanding of the English language,” the Indian children at Fort Shaw were “much further advanced than [the state’s] . . . white children of the same age.”²⁰

Such academic success seemed doubly impressive since pupils spent only half of each day in the schoolroom and the other half engaged in “other necessary and useful employment.” That “employment” not only constituted the vocational arm of the curriculum at Fort Shaw but also provided the school with vegetables and meats for its tables; uniforms and shoes for its students; chairs and other wooden furniture for use and for sale; and embroidery, lace making, and other needlework that consistently took top prizes at the state fair in Helena. Predictably, the school’s vocational education was gender-specific, with the girls being taught “to cook, to sew, to cut out and manufacture their own clothing, and to do everything necessary to the maintenance of a happy home,” while the boys were trained in carpentry, blacksmithing, and the mechanical arts deemed appropriate for the man of the house. And while the future farmers were taught “to milk and take care of the [cows] and the calves,” the future farmers’ wives were “instructed in the care of the milk and the manufacture of butter.”²¹

“To say that the statesmen and those who accompanied them were astonished” by all they observed during their tour was, according to the *Tribune* reporter, “putting it mildly.” Yet as impressed as the distinguished visitors were that day, neither they—nor Superintendent Campbell—could possibly have imagined that within a few years representatives from this school would become Montana’s most impressive—if

18. Louis Youpee, “A Friend of the Indian,” *American Indian Journal* (May 1938), 6.

19. *Sun River Valley, (Mont.) Rising Sun*, June 28, 1893; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, May 26, 1901. While Superintendent Winslow had cultivated the support of Sun River Valley’s non-Indian residents early on, Campbell’s 1901 invitation expanded outreach efforts to include Great Falls and beyond. The *Tribune* reporter did not mention that Fort Shaw had its share of runaways, most of whom were boys. For example, in the 1907–1908 school year there were forty-nine runaways, all of them boys, eleven of them repeats. Records of Runaways, 1907–1908, entry 1358, Fort Shaw Indian School, Records of Non-Reservation Schools, Field Office Records, Records of Office of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives, Denver (hereafter RG 75, NAD).

20. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, May 26, 1901. According to John Greer’s study, Fort Shaw students spent the first two years of their school life “mainly in acquiring the English language and . . . the white man’s way of living.” Greer, “Brief History,” 46. The discrepancy the reporter noted between the work of Indian and white

students of the same “grade” could be attributed in part to expectations that students at Fort Shaw master the work of each grade before being promoted. There was no notion of being “too old” for one’s grade nor was any stigma attached to remaining in a grade until one’s performance merited promotion. Though many students stayed at Fort Shaw through their late teens, the school provided an education only through eighth-grade proficiency. Campbell, Report of School at Fort Shaw, Mont.

21. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, May 26, 1901; Greer, “Brief History,” 46; *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, October 12, 1903. In 1899 Fort Shaw School, which comprised five thousand acres, had 425 head of cattle and 50 milk cows. *Reports of Inspection of Field Jurisdiction of Office of Indian Affairs, 1893–1900* (Washington, D.C., 1980), 12.

22. W. J. McGee, “Universal Exposition of 1904, Division of Exhibits: Report of the Anthropological Department,” p. 22, ts., box 30, Louisiana Purchase Exposition Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis; Report of W. C. Buskett, Special Agent in Charge at St. Louis, January 30, 1905, January 30, 1905, folder 10, box 315,

unofficial—ambassadors to the World's Fair of 1904, where their academic, artistic, *and* athletic accomplishments would astound some three million of the nearly twenty million people who attended that exposition.²²

The athletic accomplishments of his students were of special concern to Fort Shaw's superintendent. Hailed as the best catcher ever to play for the University of Kansas, Fred Campbell knew from experience the self-esteem sports could impart to young athletes. That knowledge, plus his strong belief in the concept of "a sound mind in a sound body," motivated him to expand Fort Shaw's athletic program by strengthening the baseball, football, and track teams. And since he, like James Naismith, needed an indoor sport to keep his students physically fit through long, cold winters, he introduced them to the new sport of "basket ball."²³

The game seemed perfect for his purposes. The dance hall of the original Fort Shaw military establishment was of sufficient length—at 125 feet—to allow for indoor play, and its dirt floor, hard-packed by legions of heavy-booted soldiers, was ideal for bouncing a ball. Not only did Campbell have the right facility, he also had some very receptive players—among girls as well as boys, for almost universally in Indian cultures there was a long history of female participation in games. Girls' games—lacrosse, shinny, double ball—like boys' games, were central to the spiritual as well as the sporting life of Indian communities. And girls and women played their games with as much intensity as did men and boys.²⁴

By 1902 Superintendent Campbell was acting as Coach Campbell, and the Fort Shaw girls were working seriously on their game, running up and down the dirt court in the old dance hall, practicing the dribble, the pass, the "field throw," and the free throw. The ball they used was the standard equipment of the day. The leather sphere that encased an inflatable leather

bladder had lacings and was approximately thirty-two inches in circumference, making it larger than the balls used by today's women's teams (twenty-nine inches in circumference) or even today's men's teams (thirty inches). The basket, an iron ring with a net, was suspended some ten feet above the floor, and the net held the ball in place until the goal had been duly noted. The referee then pulled a chain that released the ball and allowed play to resume with another jump ball at center court.²⁵

Over the weeks of practice, as the players' individual aptitudes became more apparent, the starting lineup evolved. At center was Josephine Langley, daughter of a Piegan mother and a Métis father who had once served in the military at Fort Shaw. Born on Birch Creek near Valier, Montana, in 1880, Josie had come to Fort Shaw the year it opened. Four years later, at age sixteen, she had been recommended for the position of assistant matron. Now, in 1902, because of her leadership skills and her maturity—at twenty-two she was by far the oldest of the girls—she became the team's captain.²⁶

At right guard was Nettie Wirth. Daughter of an Assiniboine mother and a German immigrant father, Nettie had barely begun her schooling on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation when an 1892 fire destroyed the Poplar school she and her siblings attended. Shortly thereafter, she became one of Fort Shaw's earliest students—and, at age six, one of its youngest. Now, ten years later, she was an outstanding student and a natural at this game of basketball.²⁷

The tallest girl on the team was Minnie Burton, an eighteen-year-old transfer from the reservation school at Fort Hall, Idaho. Her mother, a Western Shoshone

MC 35, Governors' Papers, MHS Archives. From June 1 through November 1, some three million people—or twenty thousand on any given day—toured the Model Indian School and saw the programs given there. By contrast, the Montana Building on the opposite end of the fairgrounds drew some five hundred people a day. The Fort Shaw girls were, indeed, Montana's most visible ambassadors.

23. *Helena Montana Daily Record*, February 18, 1939. Born in Shawnee, Kansas, in 1864, Fred Choteau Campbell graduated from the University of Kansas, taught at a nonreservation boarding school in Genoa, Nebraska, and served as superintendent of the day school on Montana's Fort Peck Indian Reservation before moving to Fort Shaw. LaRue Smith, "Campbell Mountain in Glacier National Park," *Sigma Nu Delta* (March 1943), 164; "F. C. Campbell, Veteran Indian Worker, Retires from Service," clipping in family scrapbook in the possession of Campbell's grandson Fred DesRosier; "Personal Statement of F. C. Campbell," January 1918, *ibid*.

24. Baldwin, "History of Fort Shaw," 5. See Stewart Culin, "Games of the North American Indians," in *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C., 1907), 647-64.

25. *Great Falls (Mont.) Weekly Tribune*, January 22, 1903; *Spalding Official Basketball Guide, 1901-1902* (New York, 1901), 124; Davenport, "Tides of Change," 97, 98.

26. Fort Shaw School, in 1900 United States census; W. H. Hailman to W. H. Winslow, August 21, 1896, Letters Sent, 1895-1896, entry 37183, RG 75, NAW; *Helena Montana Daily Record*, November 20, 1902; *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, November 25, 1902. Josephine Langley was the daughter of a Piegan mother, Many Kills, and Charley Choquette, ward of Louis Langley. Blackfeet Records, courtesy of Joyce Spoonhunter, cultural officer, Blackfeet Tribal Center, Browning, Montana.

27. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, January 30, 1903. Born in 1886, Nettie was the next to youngest of six children born to Jacob Wirth, a native of Württemberg, and Woman That Kills Wood, sister of a local Assiniboine chief. Nettie followed two older sisters to Fort Shaw. It is said that before the Poplar school burned down Woman That Kills Wood attended classes with her daughters, not only to learn English herself but in order to make sure the girls were attentive to their lessons. Thomas, "Early Life and Times," 23, 26, 28, 37-38, 67, 72, 74.



In November 1902, after weeks of practice and local games, the Fort Shaw girls were ready for tougher competition and traveled to Butte and Helena to play. They beat Butte High but lost to Helena High. Team members, pictured at left, are (standing from left) Nettie Wirth, Belle Johnson, Minnie Burton, Genie Butch, and (seated from left) Delia Gebeau, Josephine Langley, Emma Sansaver.

the offensive skills for which she would eventually be known. Biding his time, he put her at left guard.²⁸

At right forward he placed eighteen-year-old Emma Rose Sansaver. Daughter of a Métis father and a Chippewa-Cree mother, Emma was born near Havre, Montana. She and her younger sister Flora had attended St. Paul's Mission School on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation before transferring to Fort Shaw in 1897, shortly after the death of their father. The shortest girl on the team—and one of the quickest—Emma compensated for her lack of height by her energy and agility. From the beginning, she could always be counted on to sink her “field

throws” or to get the ball to someone else who could.²⁹

Often that person was left forward Belle Johnson, who was sixteen during her first season with the team. Belle was born near Belt, Montana, the child of a Piegan mother who had married a white miner from Fort Benton. She was still a young child when her folks took up ranching near Browning, and she and her two sisters began their education at the Holy Family Mission before transferring to Fort Shaw around the turn of the century.³⁰

from Nevada, had died when Minnie was nine, and she and her younger brother were thereafter raised by their Lemhi Shoshone father and their stepmother, a Bannock woman. Though she had barely arrived on campus when Coach Campbell began to choose his players—many of whom had been classmates at Fort Shaw for several years—the new girl was readily accepted by the team and promptly dubbed “Big Minnie.” While her defensive ability seemed almost instinctive, Campbell saw that it would take her a while to develop

28. Register of Indian Families, Lemhi Agency, 1901, Special Collections, Idaho State University Library, Pocatello; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, January 30, 1903. William Burton, Minnie's father, served as an interpreter for the Lemhi Agency. His first wife, Minnie's mother, was Jemima Osborn. Records of Fort Hall Resource Center for Shoshone-Bannock Tribe, Fort Hall, Idaho (hereafter Fort Hall Resource Center); Drusilla Gould, interview by authors, Pocatello, Idaho, July 24–25, 2000; family records in the possession of Drusilla Gould. The relative sizes of the team members have been established through news accounts and descendants' memories of the heights of their mothers and grandmothers.

29. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, January 30, 1903. Emma's father, Edward Sansaver [St. Sauveur], died when she was seven years old, and by the time she turned fifteen, she had lost her mother, Mary Rose, as well. Emma and Flora's older brother Isadore, who had earlier been with them at the mission school, followed them to Fort Shaw in

1898. According to Emma's granddaughter Barbara Winters, from that time on Emma looked upon the school's students and staff as her “family.” F. C. Campbell to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, October 24, 1901, Letters Received, 1900–1901, entry 61154, RG 75, NAW; family records in the possession of Barbara Winters; Barbara Winters, letter to authors, January 3, 2000.

30. Belle Johnson's mother was Jennie (Nearly Died) Martin, a Piegan; her father, Charles, was a miner turned rancher. She was the fourth born in a family of six. Valerie Goss, interview by authors, Browning, Montana, March 13, 2000; Indian Census Rolls, 1885–1940, Blackfeet, 1890–1896, 1897–1907, rolls 3 and 4, microfilm M595, RG 75, NAW; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, January 30, 1903; “Death Claims Belle Conway at Helena Hospital,” undated news clipping in family scrapbook in the possession of Valerie Goss; Nora Connolly Lukin, “My Early Years,” p. 1, ms., copy in the possession of the authors.

Rounding out the roster that first year were substitutes Delia Gebeau and Genie Butch. Like Minnie Burton, with whom she often shared the position of left guard, sixteen-year-old Delia was a first-year student at Fort Shaw. Her mother—a Spokane from the Colville Indian Reservation—had died when Delia was two. Since that time she had lived with her French Canadian father and seven older siblings on the Flathead Indian Reservation, where she had attended school prior to her enrollment at Fort Shaw.³¹

Daughter of an Anglo rancher and an Assiniboine mother, Genie Butch grew up on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation and attended school there during her early years. Able to play offense as well as defense, fifteen-year-old Genie gave depth to the Fort Shaw team during its first year of competitive play, and her persistence made it evident she intended to earn her way to a starting position. Indeed, all the girls on the team demonstrated similar dedication and determination, and they were soon outperforming the boys who had shown an initial interest in the game.³²

Perhaps because the boys at Fort Shaw were already involved in football, track, and baseball while the girls had no such outlets for physically challenging team play, perhaps because this particular group of girls was composed of unusually talented athletes, perhaps because they enjoyed the freedom of running up and down the old dance hall and the exhilaration of sending a ball flying through the air and into an iron hoop, perhaps for individual and collective reasons that may never be known, there developed a magical meld between these young women and the game of “basket ball.”

Their talents did not go unnoticed by their coach. As an educator dedicated to increasing public awareness of the abilities of his Indian students, Fred Campbell knew the public relations benefits that could come from fielding a winning team. But to showcase his girls, he had to come up with some worthy opponents against whom to test their skills. With basketball not yet broadly established in Montana, Campbell set about organizing a girls’ team in nearby Sun River to

introduce the Fort Shaw girls to interscholastic play and ready them for competition on a higher level. When he thought the Sun River team capable of giving the Indian girls a game, he brought them by wagon to Fort Shaw for the first of several one-sided matches.³³

By late November 1902, sensing his team was ready for tougher competition, Campbell arranged a game with Butte High. On their first long-distance road trip, he and the Fort Shaw girls traveled by wagon to the railhead several miles distant, then by train to Butte, where they defeated the home team 15-9. The next morning they boarded the train once more, this time bound for an evening game against Helena High. Despite “superb passing on the part of the forwards from the Indian school,” Fort Shaw scored only six points, while Helena put up fifteen.³⁴

While scores of 15-9 and 15-6 seem low by today’s standards, they were typical in the early days of basketball, due in large measure to the clock continuing to run while the ball was being retrieved from out of bounds *and* while the ball was being returned to center court for a jump ball after every score. Because that center-court tip had most often gone Helena’s way, Coach Campbell made an adjustment in the lineup, moving Nettie Wirth to center and putting Josie Langley at right guard. Though by no means the tallest girl on the team, Nettie had an astounding vertical leap that more than made up for her lack of height. The change would serve Fort Shaw well in the games ahead.³⁵

Now Campbell set about making arrangements for what was to be “the first basketball game ever played in Great Falls,” matching the girls from Butte Parochial against the girls from Fort Shaw. On Thursday evening, January 15, 1903, Luther Hall was “crowded to its limit with spectators,” few of whom were familiar enough with the rules of the game to realize that the opposing teams would ordinarily have played two twenty-minute halves, rather than the three twelve-

31. The daughter of Henry Gebeau [Geboe] and Cecille Shaw, Delia was the youngest of ten children, two of whom died in early childhood. Register of Flathead Families, 1905, Salish Kootenai College Library, Pablo, Montana; Delia Gebeau Ladderoute obituary, in *Pablo (Mont.) Char-Koosta*, November 1957, courtesy of Gene Feldsman, archivist at Salish Kootenai College.

32. Genie was the youngest of three daughters of Joe Butch, a British immigrant, and Steps On, an Assiniboine woman. Indian Census Rolls, 1885-1940, Census of the Assiniboine, 1897, roll 152, microfilm M595, RG 75, NAW; Joe Butch obituary, in *Wolf Point (Mont.) Herald*, March 27, 1931; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, January 30, 1903; Donald Clark, telephone conversation with authors, April 25, 2001; “Two Games to Be Played Tonight,” February 6, 1903, clipping in Nettie Wirth scrapbook in the possession of Terry Bender.

33. For an overview of the public relations role of athletics at Indian boarding schools, see John Bloom, *To Show What an Indian Can Do: Sports at Native American Boarding Schools* (Minneapolis, 2000). Fort Shaw played games against the Sun River school for several seasons. Edna Blossom Jenkins, “Reminiscence,” in *Montana Centennial, 1864-1964* (Sun River Valley, Mont., 1963), 8.

34. Parker interview; *Butte (Mont.) Inter Mountain*, November 28, 1902; *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, November 28, 1902; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Leader*, November 28, 1902. Despite rumors that the Helena game was played by “girls” rules, newspaper reports confirm that it was a full-court, five-on-five contest. *Helena Montana Daily Record*, November 29, 1902.

35. Anderson, *Story of Basketball*, 9; *Great Falls (Mont.) Weekly Tribune*, January 22, 1903.



minute periods agreed upon because Coach W. J. Adams, who had seen Fort Shaw's handy defeat of Butte High, had expressed concern that his girls were "[not] equal to longer periods of play after their journey from the smoky city." In their navy blue uniforms trimmed in white, the Fort Shaw girls took the floor against the girls from Butte Parochial, and the game was underway.³⁶

Though "the nimble maidens play[ed] like lambent flames back and forth across the polished floor," there were no successful field throws, and the first period ended in a score of 1-0 in favor of Butte Parochial, the lead having been gained on a free throw assessed for "holding" on the part of one of the Fort Shaw girls. The following period saw the "little maids from Butte" explode, scoring five goals from the field to bring the score to 11-0 before "the ball suddenly sped down the

36. *Great Falls (Mont.) Weekly Tribune*, January 22, 1903. Since there is no record of the existence of a "Butte Parochial High School" in 1903, the team put together by Coach Adams likely included a core of girls from St. Patrick's High School and from several parochial elementary schools in the city that had added high school-level courses for their recent graduates. Pat Kearney, *Butte's Big Game: Butte Central vs Butte High* (Butte, Mont., 1989), 3.

37. *Great Falls (Mont.) Weekly Tribune*, January 22, 1903.

Montana fans quickly took to the new sport of basketball, though they did not always comport themselves admirably, as this *Butte Inter Mountain* cartoon of November 28, 1902, illustrates. The "mascot" generating the rude complaint was ten-year-old schoolmate Louis Youpee.

room, thrown by an Indian girl. Another dusky maid caught it and before anyone could block her she had deftly tossed it in the goal basket." At that point, "thunderous applause broke forth, 500 voices cheered . . . [for] local sympathy was with the Indian school girls." In the final period, "the Indians went on the warpath" and the "leather globe was hurled about as fast as a ping pong ball," but time ran out and the game ended at 15-6 in favor of Butte Parochial. Reflecting the partisanship already evident among the fans in Great Falls, the *Tribune* reporter noted that "the short periods of play probably afforded the Butte players some advantage" since the Fort Shaw girls were "credited by their supporters with more staying power than their white opponents."³⁷

Despite the loss, basketball had obviously been a hit with the fledgling fans of Great Falls, and "a good patronage [wa]s assured for future contests." Indeed, some two weeks later, on the evening of Friday, January 30, when the college girls from what was then known as Montana State University in Missoula played Fort Shaw in Luther Hall, "numbers of persons who desired admission to the hall . . . [had to be] sent away, it being impossible to accommodate them." This time the home team came through for the local fans, crushing the college girls 19-9.³⁸

Impressed by the "fearlessness with which the Indian girls entered into the game," the *Tribune* reporter noted that "despite a few hard falls they never flinched

38. Ibid; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, January 31, 1903; "Indian Girls Win Out," undated news clipping in Nettie Wirth scrapbook.

39. "Indian Girls Win Out," in Nettie Wirth scrapbook; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, January 30, 1903.

40. See, for instance, *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, January 30, 1903; *Missoula (Mont.) Missoulian*, January 31, 1903. Until a rule change in 1923, all free throws could be taken by one player, the team's best shooter, and in 1903 that was Nettie Wirth. Anderson, *Story of Basketball*, 9.

or ceased for a moment in . . . [their] effort to score a point.” And score they did, more than doubling their previous game high and moving into double figures for the first time. This sudden surge in scoring might well have been matched without another significant change in the team’s original lineup. Belle Johnson had been moved to left guard, making way for Minnie Burton to begin playing forward opposite Emma Sansaver. The front line of Minnie, Emma, and Nettie combined for six points in the first half and then exploded for thirteen more in the second.³⁹

That the Great Falls fans were hooked on the game and on “their” team was evident from the changing tone of the press coverage. Up until that point, little effort had been made by reporters to name individual players, though Nettie Wirth’s many center jumps, her role as the team’s designated foul shooter, and her constant involvement in the offense made her readily identifiable by fans and reporters alike. But in subsequent newspaper reports, individual girls began to be credited for outstanding plays. The *Tribune* even ran the team’s picture, along with thumbnail sketches of the players: Emma Sansaver, “the little one,” was “quick

about her schoolroom . . . work”; Minnie Burton was “a general favorite with employees and pupils”; and Josie Langley was “reliable and trustworthy.” This was a journalistic turning point of sorts—though reporters continued to use such phrases as “dusky maiden” and “on the warpath.” Whatever they were called by contemporary reporters, in a few short months the young women from Fort Shaw had, in effect, transformed an activity once seen as merely “good exercise” for high school and college women into a standing-room-only spectator sport.⁴⁰

During the rest of that 1902–1903 season, the girls played—and won—at least six more games. They twice humbled the “Farmerettes” from Montana Agricultural College in Bozeman, first by a score of 36–9 in Great Falls, then by a score of 20–0 in Bozeman. For the second game well over eight hundred people—“probably the largest crowd that ever attended a college game”—squeezed into Story Hall for their first glimpse of “the Indian girls.” The girls from Fort Shaw also traveled to Missoula for a game at the Union Opera House, where the audience “filled every foot of standing room allowed them between the walls and the players.” The

In May 1903 Campbell received an invitation to send some of the school’s best students to reside at the Model Indian School at the upcoming World’s Fair. He chose the girls’ basketball team, whose abilities on and off the court made them ideal ambassadors for the school. Team members pictured are (standing from left) Nettie Wirth, Katie Snell, Minnie Burton, Sarah Mitchell, and (seated from left) Genie Butch, Belle Johnson, Emma Sansaver.



Courtesy Terry Bender

balcony, too, was “filled to its capacity . . . [and] every good play, whether by a university girl or a Fort Shaw player, was loudly applauded.” There was much to applaud, but ultimately the “more accurate throwing, . . . splendid catching,” and balanced attack of Fort Shaw carried the day: “Belle Johnson threw three baskets from the field, Minnie Burton threw two from the fifteen-foot line, and Nettie Wirth one from the same place.” In the end, it was a 17-6 victory for the girls from Fort Shaw.⁴¹

Perhaps their sweetest victory was a 28-10 win over the girls of Helena High School, a win that avenged their late-November loss to “the capital city girls.” The rematch, played in Great Falls two months later, was reported to be “the prettiest, fastest and most enthusiastic [game] ever played in the state.” Eager to avenge their only other loss of the season, Fort Shaw traveled to Butte in late March to take on the girls from Butte Parochial—and came away with a resounding 18-8 win. On that same road trip, they crushed the girls’ team from Boulder High, 37-6.⁴²

Having run up a record of nine wins and two losses (both of which came at the outset of the season), the Fort Shaw team concluded its first year of interscholastic basketball as the sport’s undisputed—if unofficial—state champions. In the process they became the acknowledged favorites of fans across Montana. And by season’s end, the cheers and applause of the Fort Shaw stalwarts were joined not only by the curious folk who had come out just to see what all the publicity was about but also by the originally partisan fans of their opponents, so that the team’s rallying cry,

Shoot, Minnie, shoot!
Shoot, Minnie, shoot!

rose to the volume and intensity that made it the stuff of legend.⁴³

In effect, the Fort Shaw girls had become “Montana’s team.” Furthermore, their exemplary conduct in the course of their athletic achievements had earned them an entrée into social as well as athletic arenas in the

non-Indian world. When the Fort Shaw girls traveled to Bozeman to meet the Farmerettes in late March 1903, they were special guests at a schoolwide assembly followed by a luncheon where “each Indian was seated beside the white girl who was to be her opponent [that] . . . evening,” giving the girls “a good opportunity to get acquainted.” And during a postgame dance held that evening, the victorious “dusky bell[e]s had no cause to complain of a lack of partners among the college boys.”⁴⁴

From the standpoint of Superintendent Campbell and his colleagues, the fact the girls on the Fort Shaw team could move easily and gracefully in the white world provided ample evidence that Fort Shaw was meeting—even exceeding—the goals of the government’s Indian education system. Other educators in that system took notice. In late May 1903 Campbell received an invitation from S. M. McCowan, superintendent of Chilocco Indian School and the newly appointed director of the Model Indian School that was to be constructed in St. Louis in conjunction with the upcoming World’s Fair. This school would house 150 students selected from among the various Indian boarding schools located within the boundaries of the Louisiana Purchase territory, and McCowan wanted Campbell to send a cadre of Fort Shaw’s best students to reside at the Model Indian School from the fair’s opening on May 1, 1904, until its closing on November 1.⁴⁵

Choosing those students was a relatively simple matter for Superintendent Campbell, who immediately turned to the girls on the basketball team. If they met all their classroom and workroom requirements, he told them, if their conduct was in every way beyond reproach, and if they played as well in the upcoming season as they had in the season just concluded, he would take them to St. Louis the next year to represent the school at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. The girls responded with “the greatest enthusiasm, unanimously determined to make themselves worthy of the honor.” And they welcomed Coach Campbell’s proposal to expand the roster to ten so that when there was no competition to take the floor against them—a situation that was to become increasingly common—Fort Shaw could field two teams to engage in scrimmages against each other.⁴⁶

41. “Fort Shaw Wins Again,” undated [late March 1903?] news clipping in Nettie Wirth scrapbook; *Bozeman (Mont.) Avant Courier*, April 3, 1903; *Exponent*, newspaper of Montana Agricultural College in Bozeman, April 1903; *Kaimin*, newspaper of Montana State University in Missoula, April 1903.

42. Fort Shaw had lost the November 28, 1902, game in Helena by a score of 13-6. *Helena (Mont.) Independent*, November 29, 1902; “Indian Girls Win Out,” in Nettie Wirth scrapbook; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, January 28, 1903; *Kaimin*, newspaper of Montana State University in Missoula, April 1903; undated news clipping in Fort Shaw Vertical File, MHS Library; “Shoot, Minnie, Shoot,” *Montana Sports Magazine*, 222.

43. *Havre (Mont.) Plaindealer*, June 27, 1903; *Bozeman (Mont.) Avant Courier*, April 3, 1903. The team’s popularity had financial benefits for the schools that scheduled home games with them, for invariably when Fort Shaw came to town, there were capacity crowds and record ticket sales. Edna Tracy White, “Women’s Activities as I Knew Them at M.S.C. from 1904-8,” copy in the possession of the authors.

44. *Exponent*, newspaper of Montana Agricultural College in Bozeman, April 1903.

The front line of the first team—center Nettie Wirth and forwards Emma Sansaver and Minnie Burton—remained in place. The back court, however, underwent a major change. Josephine Langley, who was now planning her marriage to Harvey Liephart, the school's baker, left the team to become a full-time employee of Fort Shaw. Genie Butch, the substitute who had seen the most playing time in the recently concluded season, took Josie's place at right guard. And into Josie's place as captain stepped Belle Johnson, who remained the starting left guard. The anchor of the team to be formed with the new recruits would be Delia Gebeau, the other substitute of the 1902–1903 season, who was more than ready to take on this new role.⁴⁷

So it was that these six veterans welcomed new teammates that spring as they began preparing for the adventure to come. The “recruits” were already classmates and friends, of course. Indeed, they had probably practiced against the team earlier in the year. Genevieve Healy now took one of the guard positions on the scrimmage squad. She was the daughter of “Colonel” W. H. H. Healy, an adventurer and army scout, and White Eagle, a full-blooded Gros Ventre. With her siblings, Gen had first attended the mission and agency schools on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, but in 1899, with the death of their mother, Colonel Healy sent Gen and her two sisters to Fort Shaw. At fifteen, Gen was among the youngest of the team members—and apparently the liveliest, known for her pranks in classroom and dorm. But on the basketball court, she took her responsibilities seriously.⁴⁸

Gen Healey was joined at the other guard position by another Gros Ventre, seventeen-year-old Catherine Snell, who had also begun her education at Fort Belknap Agency before transferring to Fort Shaw with her three sisters. Like Nettie Wirth, Katie was the daughter of a German immigrant father; her mother, Fannie Black Digger, was Assiniboine. One of eleven children, Katie was by nature a quiet girl, and she brought a quiet strength to the team.⁴⁹

Fifteen-year-old Sarah Mitchell, like many of her teammates, had followed siblings to the school at Fort

Shaw. The youngest of six, she had been born in Wolf Point, Montana, to an Assiniboine-Chippewa mother and a father who was part Shoshone. Another fifteen-year-old, Flora Lucero, was paired with Sarah at the forward position on the expanded roster. Born near Choteau, Montana, Flora was the daughter of a Chippewa-Cree mother and a father who had immigrated from Spain. With Healy and Snell, Mitchell and Lucero now lining up with Gebeau, Fort Shaw could field two teams worthy not only of giving each other some spirited practices but also of giving any audience a fine introduction to the game of basketball.⁵⁰

With additional girls came the need for more uniforms, and several of the members of the team were among the domestic science students who crafted the middies and bloomers for the members of the “red” team. The new uniforms were much like those worn by the veterans—navy blue wool serge bloomers, matching long-sleeved blouses with striped dickies, sailor collars, and loosely fitted cuffs—though, to distinguish between the players, the uniforms of the red squad, including the monogrammed “F” and “S” on the collar were trimmed in red rather than white. Black cotton stockings and black gym shoes made by the boys in the shoemaking class completed the outfit.⁵¹

With schoolwork done for the year, the girls donned their new uniforms in late June for “a clever, fast, and snappy” exhibition game in Swanton Hall in Havre, playing before “a large audience, many of whom had never seen a basket ball game” and most of whom “[had never] seen the Indian girls [who] exemplify the sport.” This intrasquad exhibition game—like all the team's earlier games—gave Superintendent Campbell a platform for his favorite cause, and he spoke briefly to the crowd about the “benefits of Indian education.” With that game concluded, the team members returned to Fort Shaw only long enough to pack their belongings before heading off to their respective homes for the summer, full of excitement over the coming year.⁵²

Back at school on September 1, they worked diligently, both in the classroom and on the gym floor, intent on meeting Campbell's expectations. To help

45. *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, March 25, 1904.

46. *Ibid.*; *Helena Montana Daily Record*, February 29, 1904.

47. Roster of Employees, 1892–1910, Fiscal Year 1901, vol. 1, entry 1361, RG 75, NAD.

48. William H. Healy, “Reminiscence of William H. Healy, 1869–1916,” pp. 1–2, SC 814, MHS Archives; W. H. H. Healy to Indian Commissioner, September 9, 1894, Letters Received, 1894–1895, entry 36194, RG 75, NAW; Register of Pupils, 1892–1908, vol. 1, entry 1358, RG 75, NAD; Donita Nordlund, interview by authors, Malta, Montana, March 20, 2000.

49. *Thunderstorms and Tumbleweeds: Blaine County (MT), 1887–1987* (Visalia, Calif., 1989), 314; Fort Shaw School in 1900 United States census; Rose Stuart, letter to authors, March 22, 2000.

50. Dorothy Smith, telephone interview by authors, March 14, 2000; Greg Courchene, conversation with authors, March 17, 2000; Dorothy Smith, letter to authors, June 8, 2000; Grace Lavendis, telephone interview by authors, May 21, 2001; Emma Toman, Sun River Valley Historical Society secretary, letter to authors, February 10, 2000.

51. “Three Survivors in This Area of Famous Indian Girls' Team,” undated *Phillips County (Mont.) News* clipping in family scrapbook in the possession of Donita Nordlund; descendant of Fort Shaw student, communication to authors, October 18, 1998.

52. *Havre (Mont.) Plaindealer*, June 27, 1903.

Coach Campbell handle the practices, Sadie Malley, who had been teaching at the school since 1899, took on the duties of assistant coach. By the time the season opened, the players were more than ready to defend their title as state champions, but they were denied that opportunity. Whether Coach Campbell's inability to secure "consecutive dates [for games] in different cities," as he had done the previous year, was simply one of the scheduling difficulties "managers of athletic aggregations in the Northwest [had] to contend with" or whether the difficulties were due to an understandable reluctance on the part of other coaches to put their programs on the line against the team from Fort Shaw may never be known. Making the best of a frustrating situation, Campbell scheduled a series of exhibition games around the state that allowed fans to see the girls play—and gave his "second team" a chance to gain experience before large crowds.⁵³

If the fans wondered why their local teams had not included Fort Shaw on that season's schedule, so be it. Campbell could not let himself be concerned about something over which he had no control. Nonetheless, he had to feel some justification when the *Anaconda Standard* noted that Fort Shaw's "famous girls' basketball team" was coming to town to give "an exhibition of how that exciting game should be played. This team has not been playing much throughout the state this season," the reporter continued, "for the reason that there is no girls' team in the state that can give them

anything like a tussel [*sic*]. They stand alone and unrivaled. This may not be [pleasant] . . . reading for the white girls, but it is true."⁵⁴

In Anaconda, as elsewhere through February and March, the girls not only entertained the sellout crowds with their athletic skills, they entertained them after each game with a program that included a mandolin concert, a literary recitation, and various calisthenic exercises. The program was a preview of the scheduled entertainments the girls would be expected to provide for the visitors to the Model Indian School on the St. Louis fairgrounds, for though they had been selected to go to the World's Fair because of their basketball prowess, as students at the Model Indian School they would also be giving weekly literary programs, musical concerts, and demonstrations in gymnastics.⁵⁵

Disciplined athletes, the girls easily mastered the use of Indian clubs and dumbbells. But to choreograph the exercises and lead the girls in their drills, Superintendent Campbell brought in Lizzie Wirth, Nettie's older sister and a very recent graduate of Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. At twenty-three, Lizzie had the experience and maturity Campbell sought. She would be a steadying influence on his teenaged charges during their summer at the fair.⁵⁶

Preparing the girls' musical program for St. Louis was a task that fell to Fern Evans, the school's music teacher and an accomplished violinist. The task was not a difficult one, for most of the players on the team

Model Indian School, St. Louis World's Fair, 1904



Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

had studied instrumental and choral music since coming to Fort Shaw, and several of them had become skilled musicians. Miss Evans now organized a mandolin club that fostered the girls' talents, and they were soon playing in concert as smoothly as they played on court.⁵⁷

If Miss Evans's task was a relatively easy one, the assignment that fell to Lillie B. Crawford—training the girls in “pantomime and recitation”—was, by Miss Crawford's own report, “most disconcerting.” Before fall 1903, the girls had never been required to speak in public, and their beginning efforts at recitation were “very crude.” But by spring they had surpassed their teacher's “most sanguine expectations,” perfecting an intricately choreographed recitation of “The Famine” from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, an act they performed in ceremonial buckskin dresses and beaded breastplates.⁵⁸

For these performances, Miss Crawford added another member to her troupe, one Rose LaRose, a talented dancer. Like Minnie Burton, Rose was the child of Shoshone parents and had come to Fort Shaw from Idaho's Lemhi Agency. Interested as she was in the balletic form of movement that Miss Crawford was using to choreograph a “tableau in pantomime” for weekly presentations in St. Louis, Rose was not particularly fond of basketball, but she joined the “traveling squad”

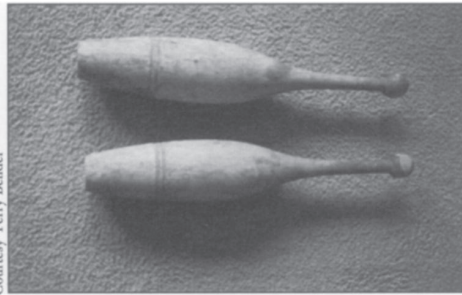
when Delia Gebeau decided to leave Fort Shaw and return to her home in the Flathead Valley.⁵⁹

Training in music and public performance was not just the privilege of the basketball girls. It was a part of the curriculum for all Fort Shaw students, and the school's orchestra and its marching band had long enjoyed the reputation of being among the best in the state. Frequently invited to perform at special events, the band often as not also appeared at the girls' basketball games, especially through spring 1904 as the team toured cities in the western part of the state.

Ten-year-old Louis Youpee was also often a part of that entourage. A “natural-born actor,” the youngster's recitation of pieces like “Grandpa's Meddler” kept the audience “in a continual [uproar].” Little Gertie LaRance, the team's seven-year-old “mascot,” appeared with Louis during these half-time shows. While he did comedy, she did tragedy, performing heartrending versions of “The Culprit's Plea.” This entourage—team, band, and young-

sters—played to full houses in Anaconda, Butte, and Missoula that spring. Each appearance was billed as the residents' last chance to see the Fort Shaw girls in action before they left for the World's Fair.⁶⁰

While the fair officially opened on April 30, 1904, when President Theodore Roosevelt ceremoniously touched a golden telegraph key in Washington, D.C., that threw on the lights in St. Louis, the Model Indian School did not open until June 1. And it opened without the delegation from Fort Shaw, since school commitments kept the team in Montana until the end of May. On the first day of June the long-awaited trip began with a festive send-off on school grounds as



Lizzie Wirth, team chaperone and calisthenics coach, incorporated these Indian clubs in a drill performed by the girls at the fair. This demonstration was just one of the many the team gave in addition to their intrasquad basketball games.

53. *Helena Montana Daily Record*, February 26, 1904. Sadie Malley was new to the Indian Service when she came to Fort Shaw in 1899 at age twenty-seven. Roster of Employees, 1892–1901, Fiscal Year 1901.

54. *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, March 1, 1904.

55. *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, March 20, 25, 1904.

56. Thomas, “Early Life and Times,” 74, 82, 91–103; Terry Bender, interview by authors, March 23, 2000.

57. Roster of Employees, 1892–1910, Fiscal Year 1901; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Leader*, June 2, 1904.

58. Roster of Employees, 1892–1910, Fiscal Year 1899, vol. 1, entry 1361, RG 75, NAD.

59. Parker interview; Ardith Peyope, Fort Hall Resource Center librarian, interview by authors, Fort Hall, Idaho, July 25, 2000. Though Rose LaRose was never listed in team lineups, she is shown in a basketball uniform in a picture taken of the girls in St. Louis. The photo is in the possession of Terry Bender.

60. *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, March 1, 1904; *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, March 25, 1904; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, May 31, 1904; *Helena Montana Daily Record*, May 6, 1905; *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, March 20, 1904.

61. Because of construction delays, the Model Indian School opened on June 1, a month late. *Daily Reports of the Department of Anthropology* (St. Louis, 1904), 26; S. M. McCowan to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, June 2, 1904, Letters Received, 1903–4, entry 36905, RG 75, NAW. Traveling with the team were Superintendent Campbell and instructors Lizzie Wirth, Fern Evans, Lillie B. Crawford, Sadie Malley, and John Minesinger, a twenty-one-year-old graduate of Fort Shaw who had stayed on as maintenance staff and was taken along as companion and chaperon for young Louis Youpee. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Leader*, June 2, 1904; *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, October 12, 1903; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, June 21, 1904; McGee, “Universal Exposition of 1904,” 26. The Fort Shaw handwork was displayed with other anthropological items in a large exhibit hall on the fairgrounds. S. M. McCowan to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, telegram, June 25, 1903, Letters Received, 1903–4, entry 3933, RG 75, NAW.



The creators of the Model Indian School at the World's Fair hoped to demonstrate the progress educators had made in teaching Indian children skills associated with a classical European education. Composed of many team members as well as other students, the Mandolin Club, shown here at Fort Shaw with a variety of stringed instruments, played for large audiences in St. Louis.

wagons laden with the team, faculty chaperons, and all their trunks rolled off toward the railhead. A last-minute addition to that group was Louis Youpee, for Superintendent Campbell had been asked to bring the youngster along to “make medicine for . . . audiences” in St. Louis. He had also been asked to bring samples of the handwork that consistently won blue ribbons for the school at the Montana State Fair, and packed away among the gear loaded onto the train that morning were not only the girls’ basketballs, musical instruments, and Indian clubs, but also a proud collection of the beadwork, needlework, and leather work of their classmates.⁶¹

That evening the team performed in Great Falls, and on evenings thereafter, as the train made its way across Montana, they played exhibition games in Bozeman, Livingston, Billings, Miles City, and Glendive. Across the state line they played challenge games in Dickinson, Bismarck, and Valley City, North Dakota, defeating an all-star team in the latter city by a score of 34-0. Press-

ing on, they played whistle-stop games in Little Falls, Minnesota, and in the Twin Cities before turning south toward St. Louis.⁶²

Arriving in that city to much fanfare on Tuesday, June 14—coincidentally “Montana Day” at the fair—they were immediately escorted to the Model Indian School for their first performance, a musical program that led a St. Louis reporter to exclaim: “One of the unique features of the U.S. Government Indian exhibit at the fairgrounds was seen for the first time yesterday afternoon when the Fort Shaw Indian girls’ mandolin club . . . furnished the music for the daily literary programme in the chapel [of the Model Indian School].”⁶³

The “literary programme” was not the only thing the girls participated in on the very day of their arrival. Having been on the train for almost two weeks by the time they pulled into St. Louis, they were obviously ready to stretch their legs and take in the sights. With

62. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Leader*, June 2, 1904; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, June 11, 1904. W. J. Adams, coach of Butte Parochial and a firm believer in the invincibility of the Fort Shaw team, was determined to give the girls the publicity they deserved as they made their way toward St. Louis, and he scheduled in advance most of the games and exhibitions they played across Montana, North

Dakota, and Minnesota. These appearances also assisted in defraying the girls’ incidental expenses in St. Louis. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Leader*, June 2, 1904.

63. *St. Louis Republic*, June 15, 1904; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, June 21, 1904; McGee, “Universal Exposition of 1904,” 22.

their first performance behind them, they asked to be taken to the fabled Pike, a mile-long stretch of amusements on the northern boundary of the fairgrounds. There they found such exhibits as the Temple of Mirth; Jim Key, the educated horse; Hagenbeck's Zoological Paradise and Animal Circus; daily reenactments of a battle in the recently concluded Boer War; and Cummins's Indian Congress—a Buffalo Bill-style display of cowboys and Indians, in this case some eighty Dakota Sioux “warriors” who traveled the country with the Cummins group.⁶⁴

The girls' first visit to the Pike would not be their last, though their free time was limited during their five-month stay at the fair. Their daily schedule, if not as rigorous as the one they kept at Fort Shaw, was heavy enough to keep them close to Indian Hill, the name given to that area of the fairgrounds designed to show off the “types of the aborigines of the present United States, and especially of the Louisiana Purchase Territory.” The focal point of Indian Hill was the Model Indian School, a beautiful three-story building whose elevation and surroundings made it one of the most conspicuous structures on the fairgrounds. The building faced an open plaza, surrounded by an area designated as “The Indian Reservation,” where representatives of some fourteen different tribes set up prototypical camps. There were Acoma and Santa Clara peoples from New Mexico in their “pueblos,” Navajos in hogans, Minnesota Chippewas in birch-bark houses, Pawnees in ceremonial earth lodges, Lakotas in tepees, Wichitas from Oklahoma in grass lodges, each group wearing clothing and preparing foods preferred by their respective tribes. In all, some 550 North American Indians—including the 150 students at the Model Indian School—were, in one way or another, “on exhibit” at the fair.⁶⁵

Fair-goers were left to draw the conclusion that students at the Model Indian School were much further “advanced” than the Native peoples living on the neighboring “reservation.” The students were, after all, an example of the progress being made by the government's educational programs. From 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. visitors were free to walk through the school and observe academic classes for seventh-grade pupils from Chilocco Indian School in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) and kindergarten students from the

Pima Indian School in Sacaton, Arizona Territory, plus domestic science activities, blacksmithing, wood-working, and farming and ranching demonstrations. These “exhibits” of students engaged in “modern” activities were readily accessible to visitors strolling the wide central hallway of the school building. They could look into the open-door classrooms and work-rooms on one side of the hall, then turn to look into the open stalls on the other side, where the “blanket Indians” plied their ancient—and presumably “primitive”—crafts.⁶⁶

Afternoons were given to literary and musical programs in the chapel of the Model Indian School, though within a few weeks, audiences had outgrown that space, and, weather permitting, the programs were moved to the east porch of the building. Performances given by the girls from Fort Shaw included dance and choral recitals and concerts by the mandolin club. The reporter who covered one such program in early September for the *St. Louis Republic* was dazzled by the “pantomime performance” of “Song of the Mystic,” a rhythmic dance performed by nine of the Fort Shaw girls garbed in ethereal white outfits. A woman from Boston declared the exercises that day “the finest of the kind” she had ever seen.⁶⁷

But the Fort Shaw girls were not in St. Louis merely to provide cultural entertainments. They had been brought to the fair to demonstrate their skill in basketball—and that they did, playing exhibition games twice a week, most often on the plaza in front of the Model Indian School, playing in midafternoon in the heat and humidity of the St. Louis summer in wool bloomers and middies. Their first exhibition game, played the day after their arrival at the fair, was reported in the *St. Louis Republic*. The writer who covered the event was impressed. The girls, he said, were veritable “streaks of lightning,” and the excellence of their play that afternoon had more than “justified their title of basket ball champions of the northwest.” His opinion as to the probable origins of such excellence gave equal weight to both sides of the old question of nature versus nurture: “The natural agility of the Indian maiden

64. *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, June 16, 1904; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, June 21, 1904; Timothy Fox and Duane Sneddeker, *From the Palaces to the Pike: Visions of the 1904 World's Fair* (St. Louis, 1997), 221, 223, 229.

65. *Daily Reports of the Department of Anthropology*, 33; “Indian Exhibits at the St. Louis Exhibition,” in *Department of Interior Report to Congress, Part I* (Washington, D.C., 1905), 51-56.

66. “Indian Exhibits at the St. Louis Exhibition,” 55; *Official Catalogue of Exhibitors: Universal Exposition, St. Louis, U.S.A., 1904*, rev. ed. (St. Louis, 1904), 19; *Daily Reports of the Department of Anthropology*, 35; Martha Clevenger, ed., “Indescribably Grand”: *Diaries and Letters from the 1904 World's Fair* (St. Louis, 1996), 11.

67. *Daily Reports of the Department of Anthropology*, 39; *Official Catalogue*, 20; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, September 11, 1904; McGee, “Universal Exposition of 1904,” 28.



Courtesy Barbara Winters

The girls often dressed in buckskins to perform a recitation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. Standing (from left) are Nettie Wirth, Genevieve Healy, Josephine Langley, Belle Johnson, Minnie Burton, Sarah Mitchell, and kneeling (from left) are Emma Sansaver, Gertrude LaRance, Rose LaRose.

. . . [had] been developed by the training . . . [at] Fort Shaw . . . to surpassing excellence."⁶⁸

Over the course of the summer, as the first Olympic Games staged in the United States were carried on just a few blocks away and Amateur Athletic Union, YMCA, college, and scholastic men's and boys' teams competed for trophies offered through the fair's Physical Culture Department, the girls from Fort Shaw afforded exposition attendees their only opportunity to observe women's team sports. And this despite the relatively positive response of the fair's athletic direc-

tor, James Sullivan, to those who had proposed adding a women's component to the competitions in St. Louis. "It would be a great thing for girls' sport," Sullivan had said, "and I believe [it] would prove a drawing card at the Fair." Provided, of course, participating institutions and organizations were prepared to violate the gender taboo against allowing female athletes to compete in a public arena. Predictably, deep-seated prejudice had prevailed, sparing Sullivan the need to make good on his offer.⁶⁹

So it was that at the World's Fair of 1904 team sports for "the fairer sex" were exemplified only by the hard-driving intrasquad games played twice a week by the young women from Fort Shaw—and these games, contested in a very public arena, did indeed prove to be "a

68. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, June 21, 1904; *St. Louis Republic*, June 16, 1904.

69. *Colorado Springs (Colo.) Telegraph*, September 6, 1903.

70. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, August 16, 1904; *St. Louis Republic*, August 24, 1904; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 27, 1904. The O'Fallon game was actually played in nearby Belleville, Illinois, on July 27. On August 10 the *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune* carried a reprint of a *St. Louis Republic* report of July 29. By this time Superintendent Campbell had returned to Montana and Sadie Malley was coaching the team in his absence.

71. "A Novel Athletic Contest," *World's Fair Bulletin*, 5, no. 11 (September 1904), 50, copy in the St. Louis, Missouri, Public Library; Allen Guttmann, *The Games Must Go On* (New York, 1984), 19-20.

72. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 27, 1904.

drawing card.” Somewhat less public were the games in which the girls competed against Missouri and Illinois high school teams that summer, most of which were apparently held indoors and on the home courts of the opposing teams. One notable exception to the indoor rule was a game played in late July against O’Fallon (Illinois) High School before “a crowd . . . so great that ropes had to be used to keep the field clear.” From the opening whistle, play was “extremely fast,” and the Indian girls displayed an adeptness at feinting and dodging that amazed the midwestern fans. The Model Indian School band that had accompanied the team and had provided their only support in that partisan crowd sent up cheers of “shoot, Minnie, shoot” as the girls ran up a halftime lead of 10-0 before Emma Sansaver sprained her ankle and had to leave the game. With Katie Snell taking her place at forward, Fort Shaw held its lead through the second half, winning by a score of 13-3. After the game, the band “gleefully . . . escorted both teams from the field and played concerts all evening.”⁷⁰

Only weeks later, the Anthropology Department of the fair staged an “anthropological athletic meet” in which “natives from the four quarters of the globe” engaged in track and field events. “Won” by the American Indian contingent, this “meet”—rightly described decades later as “the lowpoint of the entire summer”—was, at the time, hailed by Dr. W. J. McGee, head of the fair’s Anthropology Department, as having demonstrated “what [scientists] have long known, that the white man leads the races of the world, both physically and mentally” and that the Native American more closely models the white man’s achievements than does any other aboriginal.⁷¹

The “anthropological games” and the comments they evoked were widely publicized and could not have escaped the notice of the Fort Shaw girls, who must have considered themselves lucky, for once, to have been excluded

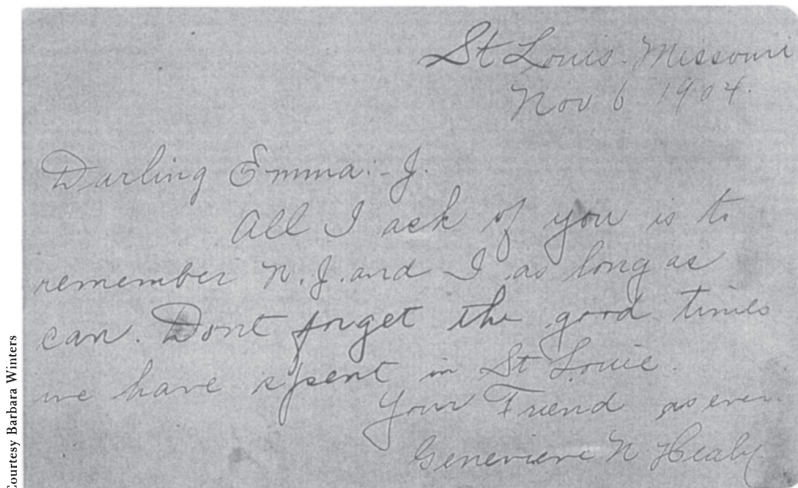
from the field of play. Their moment was coming, however, for an “authority on basketball” in Missouri, one Philip Stremmel, had decided there had to be some way of defeating the Indian girls from Fort Shaw. Early in August he began putting together a St. Louis “alumnae team” made up of young women who had played for that city’s Central High over the course of Central’s reign as the champions of Missouri and Illinois. By month’s end Stremmel’s challenge to Fort Shaw had been issued and answered, and the teams prepared for a three-game series that was to determine the championship of the World’s Fair.⁷²

The pending face-off drew the immediate attention of the St. Louis media. Apparently, James Sullivan had stood by his earlier judgment requiring that all official World’s Fair competitions be played in a public arena, for the *St. Louis Republic* announced that “for the first time in the [city’s] history” a girls’ basketball game would be played in the open—at Kulage Park on Saturday afternoon, September 3. Ironically, the article’s phrasing effectively dismissed the demonstration games that had been played all summer by the “Indian girls



Courtesy Barbara Winters

The team’s rendition of “Song of the Mystic,” a rhythmic dance performed in white robes at the World’s Fair “dazzled” a St. Louis reporter. In the top row (from left) are Emma Sansaver, Rose LaRose, Sarah Mitchell; in the middle row (from left) Katie Snell, Belle Johnson, Minnie Burton, Genevieve Healy; and kneeling (from left) Nettie Wirth, Genie Butch.



Courtesy Barbara Winters

In what must have seemed an instant, the tour ended and the team returned to the daily chores and challenges of boarding-school life. The memory of their accomplishments, however, would endure with the players and their descendants. This page inscribed by teammate Genevieve Healy is from Emma Sansaver's autograph book.

team . . . that [would be] representing the Louisiana Purchase Exposition."⁷³

The Fort Shaw lineup that afternoon was a familiar one: Nettie Wirth at center, Minnie Burton and Emma Sansaver at forward (though Emma was still suffering the effects of the ankle sprain), Belle Johnson and Genie Butch at guard. The weather was described as perfect, "delightfully cool, [with] a cloudless sky and a gentle breeze," by Fort Shaw teacher Lillie B. Crawford, who filed a report of the game with the *Great Falls Tribune*. "The referee ordered everybody back from the lines," Crawford wired, "the umpire tossed a coin to decide goals and the game was on." Nettie controlled the tip. And the Fort Shaw girls controlled the game. Minnie finished the first half with two free throws and three field throws. Emma, as if to discount the effects of the sprained ankle, "nonplussed her opponents . . . by dodging here and there with the rapidity of a streak of lightning." Nettie made "four brilliant field throws,"

Belle Johnson made "one of the finest plays . . . ever seen," and Genie Butch "covered herself in glory" by holding the St. Louis girls to a single basket. The final score was 24-2.⁷⁴

Miss Crawford's superlatives aside, the final score spoke for itself, and the local press was equally fulsome in its praise. "To the great surprise of several hundred spectators . . . the girls from Fort Shaw [were] . . . more active, more accurate, and cooler than their opponents," the reporter for the *St. Louis Dispatch* wrote, concluding that they simply "outclassed the girls of St. Louis in every way."⁷⁵

Perhaps Coach Stremmel had come to that same conclusion, for he and the St. Louis alumnae team failed to show the next Saturday for the second game—technically forfeiting the series. However, on Saturday, October 8, in response to a last-minute plea from the St. Louis players, the teams faced off again, this time on the plaza in front of the Model Indian School, the

73. *St. Louis Republic*, August 24, 1904; *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, September 9, 1904.

74. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, September 9, 1904. The St. Louis team was composed of Flem Messing at right forward, Pauline Fisher at left forward, Lillian Randall at center, Laura Strong at right guard, and Birdie Hoffman at left guard. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 27, 1904.

75. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 4, 1904.

76. The St. Louis team failed to show for a second time before the captain of their team finally phoned to arrange the October 8 meeting. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, October 14, 1904.

77. "Basketball Champions," undated *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune* article in Nettie Wirth scrapbook.

78. S. M. McCowan to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, October 15, 1904, Letters Received, 1903-4, entry 72479, RG 75, NAW; autograph book in the possession of Barbara Winters.

79. William Reedy, "The End of the Fair," *The Mirror* (December 1, 1904).

80. Dr. C. I. Jones, as quoted in *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, August 16, 1904.

81. The return to campus routine was so swift that years later Genevieve Healy Adams would recall that, with no fanfare whatso-

ever, the world champions, like every other Fort Shaw student, "went back to work tending the school's pigs . . . and digging weeds." *Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune*, April 3, 1977. For the team's experiences in Portland, see *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, September 5, 1905; *Portland Oregon Journal*, August 21, 1905; Bye, "'Shoot, Minnie, Shoot'" *Montana Post*, Montana Historical Society's newsletter, August 1965, 1.

82. Bye, "'Shoot, Minnie, Shoot,'" *Montana Post*, Montana Historical Society's newsletter, August 1965, 1.

83. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, April 18, 1910; Greer, "Brief History," 58. The school was closed under the superintendency of John B. Brown. Fred Campbell was later superintendent of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation and subsequently held several posts in the Indian service, including district superintendent of Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota. *Great Falls (Mont.) Daily Tribune*, October 25, 1908; "F. C. Campbell, Veteran Indian Worker, Retires from Service," undated news clipping in family scrapbook in the possession of Fred DesRosier. See *Anaconda (Mont.) Standard*, March 25, 1904, for the context of the reporter's prophetic comment.

84. Turtle Woman [Jessie James Hawley], letter to authors, March 26, 2001.

“home court” for the Fort Shaw girls. Despite the short notice, so many people thronged the site that game officials had to call upon the Jefferson Guard, the fair’s security police, to push back the spectators so the game could begin. Again, Lillie B. Crawford wired home a colorful dispatch, full of descriptions of Nettie’s phenomenal leaps, Belle’s skillful passes, Minnie’s field throws, and Genie’s steals. The crowd seems to have been a factor in this match, for early in the game when Emma “made quite a brilliant field throw” the St. Louis team seemed “disconcerted at the applause.” Indeed, each time the Indians made a basket the audience “went wild with enthusiasm.” There was plenty to cheer about as the score at the final whistle stood at 17-6, leaving no doubt as to the superiority of the Fort Shaw team.⁷⁶

The girls from Montana were the official champions of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition and, in the eyes of their supporters and Montana journalists, “the undisputed . . . world’s champions.” Coach Stremmel was gracious in defeat. As a team, the Fort Shaw girls “play[ed] a wonderful game,” he conceded. “They are so skillful, so fleet, and . . . their powers of endurance

are simply marvelous. . . . My girls . . . [were] unprepared to cope with such formidable opponents.”⁷⁷

With the championship secured, the girls from Fort Shaw were soon joining their classmates at the Model Indian School in the task of closing down the classrooms and workrooms, for despite its magnificence, the school building, like most of the other structures on the fairgrounds, had been built to last but a season. Now, with no way to heat the facility against the late-autumn chill, Superintendent McCowan reluctantly announced its imminent closure. The students would be on their way home before Thanksgiving. The news was bittersweet. Eager as they were to take home the trophy declaring them basketball champions of the World’s Fair of 1904, the girls from Fort Shaw were reluctant to say good-bye to the friends they had made in St. Louis. Addresses were exchanged and autograph books were passed around to be filled with reminders of the friendships formed and experiences shared at the fair.⁷⁸

The mixed emotions of the students at the Model Indian School were similar to those of the citizens of St. Louis. The closing of the fair meant an end to noise and congestion, but it meant as well an end to the Pike

“Old school” basketball looks little like today’s game, but training and practice have always had a part. Here, Fort Shaw students line up for a basketball drill in a “physical culture” class.



Courtesy Terry Bender, restoration by Clearwater Photo, Great Falls

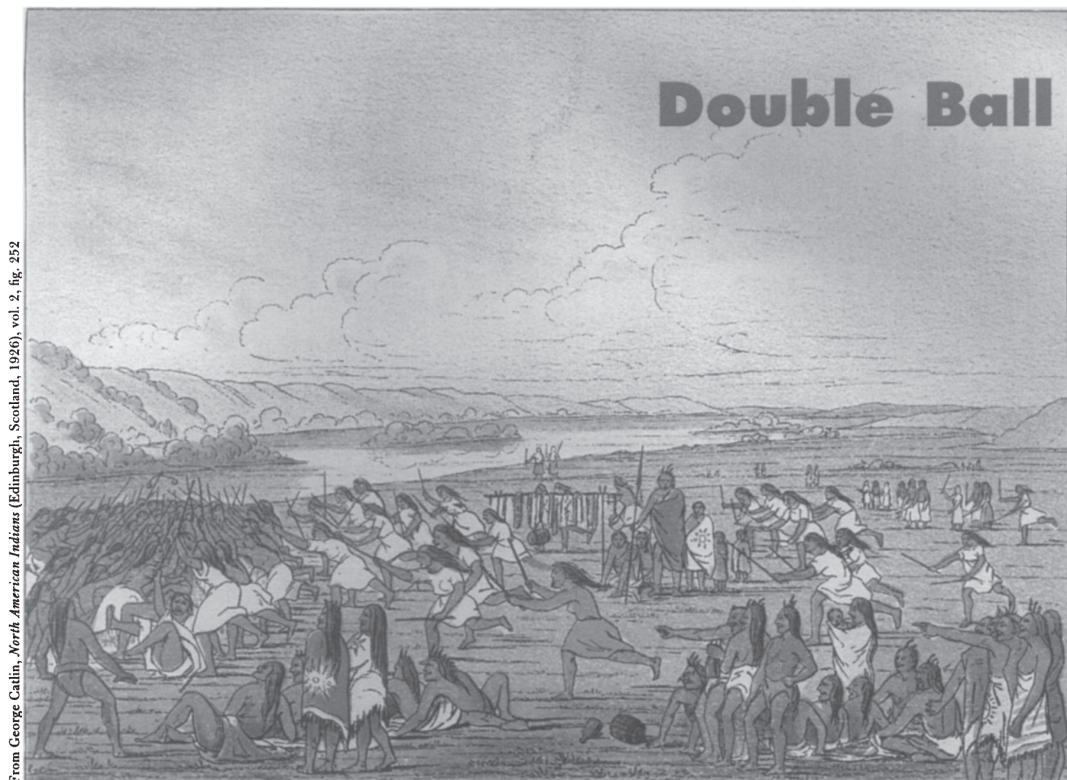
and the Palaces, the Ferris Wheel, the fairy-tale world that had for one short season seemed even more real than life beyond the exposition's borders. So much of what had been grand and glorious would be gone forever, and yet, as William Reedy of St. Louis editorialized in his popular magazine *The Mirror*, on December 1, 1904, "[I]t is over—the Fair—Yet much of it remains with us, . . . [including] a broader tolerance [and] a keener appreciation of the good in all the world. . . . We have learned to be humble before the achievements of other peoples whom we have fancied we long ago left behind in the march of progress."⁷⁹

Perhaps no other group at the fair had contributed to that appreciation as much as had the students at the Model Indian School, including the young women from Fort Shaw, Montana, who had gone to St. Louis to prove their abilities in the concert hall and on the playing field. Though they were but one small part of the "Indian Exhibit" as a whole, they had developed a loyal following among visitors from around the world, many of whom would have agreed with one Montanan's as-

sertion that "the Fair just wouldn't have been the same without them."⁸⁰

The girls were no longer in St. Louis when Reedy's editorial appeared in print, having left for home some weeks earlier, taking with them the gleaming trophy that signified their status as champions of women's basketball. Welcomed home by jubilant classmates, they quickly settled back into campus routine. But they had their stories. And their memories. And the promise of still more challenges. The very next summer, they set out for Portland, where they planned to take on all comers at the Lewis and Clark Exposition of 1905. Their reputation had preceded them, however, and the competition was thin in Oregon. In fact, the girls were able to pick up only one contest in that state—a game against Chemawa Indian School outside Salem. Said to be the only game they ever played against another Indian team, that match-up ended as had so many others, in a clear victory for the girls from Fort Shaw.⁸¹

The world champions played as a unit only one more year, going undefeated through the 1906 season, a sea-




From George Catlin, *North American Indians* (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1926), vol. 2, fig. 252

George Catlin observed a fierce game of double ball at Prairie du Chien played by Dakota Sioux women.

son that once again included games against the women from the university in Missoula and the college in Bozeman as well as against high schools across the state. By 1907, of the girls who had gone to St. Louis only Emma Sansaver and Genevieve Healy were still playing basketball for Fort Shaw, the others having left school to begin their adult lives. At season's end Emma and Genevieve followed suit. That same year, having served the school for nearly a decade, Superintendent Campbell himself left Fort Shaw to take up duties as special allotting agent for the Fort Peck Indian Reservation.⁸²

In 1910, facing declining enrollment, Fort Shaw Government Industrial Indian Boarding School closed, and over the course of the century, the institution itself, along with the basketball team that had given the school a moment of international fame, was largely forgotten. Yet the legacy of the team lives on, for, in the prophetic words of a young *Anaconda Standard* reporter, the “particularly entertaining” style of the Fort Shaw girls had “much to do with making the

game so popular in Montana.”⁸³

Evidence of the broader implications of the team's legacy was expressed in spring 2000 by Turtle Woman, a descendant of Genevieve Healy, who spoke for many when she noted that the Fort Shaw girls were “more than a skilled basketball team. . . . They were a rare gathering of young female warriors who, facing the same . . . [barriers] that caused many Indian people to become discouraged and defeated, chose a path that made them victors.”⁸⁴ 

LINDA PEAVY and URSULA SMITH, formerly of Bozeman, Montana, are independent scholars currently residing in Vermont. They are coauthors of several books on western women's and family history, including *Women in Waiting in the Westward Movement: Life on the Home Frontier* (1994), *Pioneer Women: The Lives of Women on the Frontier* (1996), and *Frontier Children* (1999). This article is drawn from their work-in-progress, a book-length study of the Fort Shaw team.

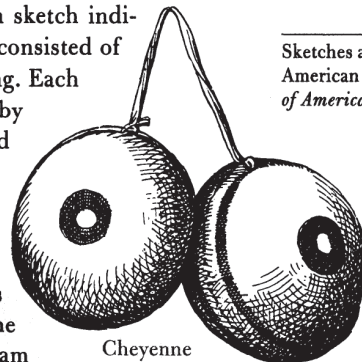
Unlike their non-Indian opponents, the girls on the Fort Shaw basketball team were from cultures for which women's participation in team sports had long been a given. Among the Plains Indians and most other tribes west of the Mississippi River, “double ball” was known as a “woman's ball game” and was played exclusively by women—perhaps by the grandmothers and great-grandmothers of some of the Fort Shaw girls. Requiring endurance, accuracy, teamwork, and a willingness to leap high, collide with opponents in midair, and take one's share of hard knocks, the game was as physically demanding as the Fort Shaw brand of “basket ball” and was based on similar principles of play.

As this 1851 George Catlin sketch indicates, the “double ball” itself consisted of two objects attached by a thong. Each player tried to catch the ball by hooking the thong with the end of a curved, knobbed, or forked stick, then immediately propelling it upward and forward toward a teammate and, eventually, toward one of two goals located at opposite ends of the playing field. Each time a team sent the double ball through the opponent's goal a point was scored, play returned to the center of the field, and

competition resumed. As the sketches indicate, the two objects connected by the thong differed in basic design and ornamentation from tribe to tribe, with most Plains tribes using sand-, dirt-, or hair-filled buckskin balls of varying sizes and shapes.

As in the case of other Indian games, double ball was often played for stakes such as moccasins, leggings, or vermilion. Frowned upon by missionaries and Indian agents opposed to all “primitive” games, especially those involving wagers, the sport fell out of favor for a while, though it enjoyed intermittent revivals in the later years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century and has now become a favorite among participants in modern tribal games.

Sketches and description from Stewart Culin's “Games of the North American Indians,” in *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C., 1907), 647-64.



Cheyenne



Cree

