Committed

Burch, Susan

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Committed: Remembering Native Kinship in and beyond Institutions.

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As was common on the Menominee Reservation in Wisconsin in the early twentieth century, three generations of the Bear family lived together. Elders Rose and Mose (Little) Bear spent much of their days with two grandchildren, seven-year-old Madeleine and two-year-old Luke. The youngsters’ mother, Agnes, and her spouse, George Caldwell, had likely grown up together and been married since Agnes was sixteen and George was twenty. Agnes’s siblings and their immediate families lived and worked nearby. Extended and intergenerational Menominee families interacted with one another daily, often sharing homes and other resources.¹

In their diagnosis of Agnes Bear Caldwell in 1917, BIA officials read ordinary features of Menominee kinship through a Western biomedical lens. An adult mother, her children, and her spouse living with her parents—in the observers’ estimation—indicated trouble. That Agnes had “always been dependent upon . . . her parents” especially concerned the white agents. They described the woman as “filthy in her habits and utterly incapable of being . . . independent of her mother.”² Implicitly, they pathologized Caldwell’s extended family. The elderly parents, according to this settler ableist framework, had failed to raise an independently capable daughter and were themselves decreasingly capable of managing her or her young children.³ The agency physician considered Agnes’s spouse, George, as similarly incompetent, describing him as “worthless and contributes very little if any thing to support of the family.”⁴ The configuration and day-to-day life of the Bear-Caldwell household, in other words, medically justified her institutionalization. In November 1917, she was taken, along with several other Menominee people, to Canton.

The medicalized form of family segregation and containment that Agnes Caldwell and her kin experienced fits into a pattern of other settler interventions. Intensifying during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, settler advocacy of boarding schools, adoption, and fostering into white families emphasized logics of Native peoples’ perceived inherent dependency and incapacities. According to Mark Rifkin, a gender and Indigenous studies scholar, settler policies propelled “processes through which a particular configuration of home and family is naturalized
This process discredited and sought to erase Indigenous kinship customs, including multiple generations living together, elders’ central role in childrearing, and interdependent caregiving. As evidenced across a vast array of archived government correspondence, BIA officials and medical specialists regularly judged Indigenous extended-family relationships and home life as unhealthy and abnormal, using these presumed defects to buttress interventions into family life.

The BIA’s narrow focus on Agnes Caldwell and her immediate household members obscured the larger conflicts between U.S. government agents and Menominee Nation members over self-determination, family, and home. Referring to the Native people on the reservation as “my family of 1700 children of every age and temperament,” field matron Mrs. H. P. Marble reported in 1916 that “home life was the crucible of Indian civilization and as such was a legitimate field for government investigation.” Her own investigations of Menominee homes found them wanting. According to Marble, most mothers were “not willfully neglectful of their child’s welfare, but through mistaken idea of kindness often permit[ted] the child to follow its own inclinations, as to food, habits, etc.” This problem could be corrected when the mother was “impressed with the extent of her own responsibility.” Without such changes, the field matron warned, there would be no “material progress toward intelligent citizenship.”

As the twentieth century began, many other assimilationist advocates, including social reformers, missionaries, and bureaucrats, similarly judged Native women’s progress according to white settler ideals of family and household. Often, nonconformity to this model was read as a biomedical deficit, as when Keshena Agency physician W. R. Bebout diagnosed Agnes Bear Caldwell as defective because he believed she was incapable of being “taught to live right.”

The overarching process of institutionalization that this Menominee family and many others experienced pursued fundamental settler colonial goals: erasing Indigenous cultures and families and replacing them with white settler models. Within an ableist framework, defectiveness always has to be eliminated. Pathological judgments that the Bear-Caldwell family members were permanently defective justified administrators’ choice to isolate them—and hundreds of others—from their Indigenous homes and communities. Simultaneously, this process affirmed that federal-medical oversight in the form of Canton Asylum was necessary.

In Agnes Bear Caldwell’s life story, the process of erasure often targeted home as well as family. Eugenic judgments of flawed families and households interlace across generations: her parent Rose was viewed as unfit because
she maintained Menominee customs and instilled these ways of being in her daughter. Caldwell also was found deficient for failing to cultivate settler values and behaviors in her own children. BIA representatives and others invoked the prospect of new generations of nonconforming people across Indigenous nations to justify their removal and containment, pulling many of their members into the Canton Asylum. Among those ensnared were sisters from the Southern Ute Indian Tribe.

The women referred to as Jane and Susan Burch, the eldest daughters of Steve and Ruth Bent Burch, came of age as focused attacks on Southern Ute Indian Tribe families and self-determination intensified. According to U.S. government documents from 1900, the parents had held out against some assimilationist efforts, residing in a wickee-up (teepee) and speaking only Shoshoni. Federal pressures mounted, and within a decade, the younger Burch children had been taken to boarding schools. In contrast, Susan and Jane remained on the reservation and near their parents. For them and for many other Southern Ute people, family was the center around which daily life moved. Often together, the sisters had helped tend to their younger siblings, shared the work of gathering and preparing meals, listened to elders’ stories, and started their own families.

In 1910, BIA representatives honed their attention on the elder Burch siblings. In letters to the commissioner, Agent Charles Werner emphasized that Jane had born a child out of wedlock and that the baby had died within the month. The child’s father, the agent continued, was “a partly demented unallotted Ute from Navajo Springs, who wandered over here some time ago returned again to Navajo Springs, Agency.” Jane’s status agitated the agent: she had “good” allotted land “valued at $1500” but was, in his estimation, irresponsible. As an unmarried mother, she challenged mainstream white cultural norms. Her child’s death and her sexual relations with a man judged “partly demented and unallotted” were viewed as evidence of incompetence and as a threat to broader settler society.

Kinship ties undergirded Werner’s concern. Jane’s sister Susan was married to James Allen, whom the agent described as “a well meaning Ute.” In the same letter to the commissioner, he explained that Susan, too, had valuable land (worth $2,000). She also recently had given birth. Werner characterized her son as “born disfigured; the upper lip is cleft and the nose is turned to one side.” He added, “The mother is unable to care for this child.” Despite the assets conveyed by being married, and to a “well-meaning”
husband, Susan, according to Werner, should be removed from the reservation. Specifically pairing Jane and Susan, the BIA representative asserted that they evidenced “insanity to some extent.” Their offspring further cemented his judgment: “I did not realize the consequences of letting these two women remain at large until those children were born.” He closed his letter with a plea: “Could not they be removed to the Canton Insane Asylum?” Over the next two years, Agent Werner sought to institutionalize the sisters. In 1912, his request was granted. Jane and Susan Burch were forcibly dislocated to Canton that fall. At the time she was stolen from her family, Susan was in the second trimester of another pregnancy.

Five months after their incarceration began, on March 9, 1913, Susan Burch gave birth to a daughter. Superintendent Hummer offered a bleak assessment in his report to the BIA commissioner: “The baby is premature by a month or six weeks and its prospect of living are not particularly bright at this time.” A month later, the Southern Ute mother was noticeably ill, coughing, congested, and dealing with fever and headaches. Her infant, according to Asylum reports, was “doing as well as can be expected.”

Federal documents offer few other details about Burch’s baby daughter during this time. Correspondence from Ute Agency superintendent Stephen Abbott to the commissioner in May 1913 suggest that there had been concerted efforts by the extended Burch family to unite the child with her father, James Allen. The superintendent rigorously fought this: “I regard it is absolutely impossible to provide for the child of Susan Burch here at Southern Ute,” he began. The earlier assessment of Allen was now eclipsed by a new label—incapable. “It would be almost the same as murder to let the helpless father have the child,” Abbott contended, offering an alternate option: “It seems that the only possible solution is to put the child in a charitable institution. The Office probably has had such cases before.” His conclusion cast Canton and unnamed “charitable institutions” as more appropriate settings than Allen’s home or those of other relatives. “While I realize the burden that the child is at the Insane Asylum, I believe almost any other place would be better for the child than this isolated and new country.” Ultimately, Superintendent Abbott lost his campaign. The infant was brought to Colorado that summer, where her grandparents and other family members raised her. The daughter of Susan Burch and James Allen grew up surrounded by Jane’s two surviving sons and other kin.

As they welcomed the child home, the Burch family continued to seek a reunion with the two institutionalized sisters. Canton’s superintendent and the BIA fervently resisted their efforts, insisting that their release would be
The administrators prevailed, and both Burch women spent their remaining days in the locked wards. Susan died within a few months of her daughter’s discharge. The BIA returned her body to Colorado for burial. Jane died four years later and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Asylum cemetery.

As with the Burches, U.S. authorities consistently targeted families with their medicalized interventions of containment and elimination. Part of the government’s rationale to place Susan and Jane at Canton was that they came from a family with presumed inherent mental defects. This viewpoint, anchored to eugenics and Western medicine, emphasized biology as the determining factor in people’s behavior and in their fundamental worth. The hereditary relationship between the sisters drew settler authorities’ attention. Medical interventions, including sustained containment of multiple generations of the Burch family, BIA agents and physicians believed, were necessary measures for the health and well-being of U.S. society.

The collective removal of Susan and Jane Burch was unexceptional. BIA officials frequently ordered Native relatives to be institutionalized at the same time or sometimes within one or two years of a family member’s initial incarceration. References to multiple sets of institutionalized parents, siblings, and spouses appear frequently in reports and medical files and in officials’ correspondence. These recognized kinship connections appear to have contributed at least in part to many peoples’ placement and retention at the institution.

Unlike a growing number of state facilities in the twentieth century, administrators at the federal Canton Asylum did not surgically sterilize their incarcerated wards. Sharing the standard eugenic belief that unfit people should not procreate, however, Superintendents Gifford and Hummer spotlighted their responsible management of the facility and its close supervision by staff. As at all asylums, the employees managing the Indian Asylum tacitly surveilled and disciplined people on the inside to ensure and enforce a strict prohibition on sexual reproduction. Women of all ages, including Susan and Jane Burch, were segregated physically from the men. Following a eugenic logic of biological elimination within this particular institutional setting, no new marriages were sanctioned. Also by design, the Indian Asylum was intended to hold the Burch sisters, and many others, indefinitely. For the Southern Ute siblings and nearly half of the others in the locked wards, confinement at Canton typically lasted until death.
The various rationales to detain—and continue detaining—Susan and Jane Burch reflect overlapping concerns about Native kinship and especially future generations of families. Repeatedly, government representatives referred to Susan and Jane collectively, their status as sisters compounding the justifications for removing each of them. Emphasizing their shared experience of pregnancies and loss of infants, agents projected the eugenic idea that the Burch sisters both carried and transmitted hereditary flaws. In this judgment, Susan’s and Jane’s children became evidence of their mothers’ inherent defectiveness and social threat. Jane’s relationships outside of marriage, understood by Superintendent Werner as a moral failing, also tainted Susan, even as a married spouse. The prospect of growing generations in this family motivated Werner’s medicalized intervention. As he explained to Superintendent Hummer in 1912, Susan was “about to become a mother for the third time,” and he believed that “it [was] deplorable that such conditions should exist.” Pregnancy—previous, current, and future—was among the reasons why the Burch sisters had to be removed to the Indian Asylum.

The larger project of elimination hung over the birth of Susan’s daughter on the inside of the institution. None of the staff at Canton or at the Colorado Agency expected the baby to survive. When she did, the Colorado agent advocated that she stay at the Indian Asylum or be transferred to an orphanage or similar institution, not sent to her family. That the child ultimately was discharged from Canton was unusual, but her family’s fight to salvage their home, as well as the damage wrought by removals and deaths on the inside, were common. A presumption that institutionalized people and their relatives on the outside could not sustain settler forms of families permeates BIA and Indian Asylum records. This viewpoint encouraged agents and others to remove adults like the Burch sisters. Many younger people, including little children, also were ensnared in this practice. Amelia Moss was one of them.

In 1922, the Kiowa Agency superintendent in Oklahoma began petitioning for five-year-old Amelia Moss’s institutionalization. Initial requests specifically presented Amelia’s mother, Ruby Moss, as seeking appropriate care for her disabled daughter “in a government institution.” No evidence remains from the parent, child, or other family members to corroborate this. According to the agency physician, the little Caddo girl had a pattern of biting and fighting with others; she also attempted to run away, which, he claimed, required others to regularly supervise her. Suggesting that Ruby Moss could not adequately parent her daughter, Dr. W. C. Barton recommended that Amelia be institutionalized
Asylum superintendent Hummer responded favorably to the request, presenting Canton as a suitable solution. J. A. Buntin, the Kiowa Agency superintendent, quickly accepted his offer. The anticipated presence of Amelia Moss and other children, however, were conspicuously absent from Canton Asylum plans. Historically in the United States, architects and advocates of psychiatric institutions assumed that only adults would inhabit the locked wards. Across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, settler society viewed most children as innocents, legally dependent, and temporarily incompetent, but having the potential to become fully engaged citizens. Rhetoric like “danger to self and to others” rarely attached to most young people in white settler imaginations. The Canton Asylum (and similar places designed to contain people believed to have disordered minds, violent tendencies, uncontrollable habits, or deviant desires) emphasized symmetry and order, control and protection. The material contents carried the same cultural DNA. Dining halls were lined with linear tables and benches, while unadorned bathrooms and showers offered limited privacy or freedom of movement. Seclusion rooms with tiny—if any—windows were built within dormitories distinguished by rows of iron bedsteads. Conspicuously absent from Canton’s architectural designs were birthing rooms, nurseries, children’s playrooms, or classrooms—standard settler architectural features for babies and youth.

In Amelia Moss’s Caddo Nation community, and in many other Native and non-Native cultures, children were understood to be the living embodiment of the past, present, and future. Dee BigFoot, a Caddo psychologist, has described it this way: “Children were gifts. When a child was born . . . however a child came, that would be accepted. Family and extended family took care of them.” Then and now, children are the hope of their people. Uprooting and institutionalizing Amelia and dozens of other children sent a message that American Indians were irredeemable within a settler nation. In the early twentieth century, pathologizing young girls and boys, in particular, galvanized the white American belief that Native people were destined to vanish. The sustained detention enforced this settler worldview and materially pursued its realization.

Across the many years of Elizabeth Faribault’s detention, Superintendent Hummer offered widely varied justifications for keeping the Sisseton woman at Canton. “Personally I feel that danger would attend her release that she is incapable of looking after herself, let alone looking after her mother,” the
doctor informed Assistant Commissioner E. B. Merritt. He later claimed that Faribault had recently sustained an infection in her right eye (“possibly trachoma”), which made her “very greatly depressed and emotional” about the possibility of “total blindness.” Discharge from Canton, Hummer suggested, could harm her whole family by exposing them to a contagious disease as well as having to care indefinitely for a mentally unstable person. On another occasion, he assured the BIA that Elizabeth had “practically no chance for ultimate recovery and this is about as good a home as she could possibly find.” Longstanding battles with the extended Faribault family over her institutionalization also became a justification: “On many occasions,” Hummer reminded the commissioner, Faribault and her relatives had written to them both, and every time the “results has always been to keep her here.” Inferring that these repeated efforts lacked credibility and perhaps even reflected inherent deviance within the family, Hummer concluded his critique of Faribault by recommending her continued detention. The federal office—following its usual practice—upheld the doctor’s advice to keep Elizabeth Faribault at Canton.

Facing mounting challenges from Elizabeth’s husband, the Asylum superintendent pivoted, now offering a diagnostic assessment of Jesse Faribault. “The husband impressed me as being either very ignorant, or possibly imbecile,” Hummer opined to the BIA in 1918, raising doubts that Elizabeth would be “properly taken care of at home.” Extending eugenic reasoning, the Asylum administrator warned that the couple also might produce more children. “In all probability the offspring from such a union would be defective and the entire number become charges upon your Office,” he told the commissioner. Hummer and the BIA concluded that Elizabeth must remain incarcerated because of Jesse’s presumed defectiveness as a father and husband.

These officials often argued that people already institutionalized must remain confined because their kin on the outside were defective. Superintendent Hummer had offered nearly identical responses when Agnes Caldwell’s family sought her release. Referring to one note written by George Caldwell in October 1919, the Canton administrator suggested to the BIA that Agnes’s spouse likely “was not mentally alert,” thus his wife should remain at the Asylum. Hummer pointedly added, “Another potent argument against her discharge is that she is well within the child-bearing age and any offspring must be defective.” Although the Menominee woman “wants to go home and care for her family,” the doctor insisted that she was “mentally unable to . . . and the great danger of increasing the number of defective offspring
should outweigh her wishes.” Institutionalization, Hummer argued, was best for all the individuals held at Canton, their families on the outside, the federal government, and settler society at large.

When BIA agents and Canton administrators repeatedly asserted that Amelia Moss, Agnes Caldwell, Elizabeth Faribault, and Susan Burch’s baby were “burdensome” to their kin and communities, they reaffirmed a familiar story of settler interventions in Native peoples’ lives. Indigenous families were depicted as too overwhelmed, incapable, and often unwilling to correctly care for especially vulnerable members. Following this settler worldview, the BIA justified committing Caldwell in order to “relieve” her family “of the burden of the care” they believed she required.

Cast as objective observations, phrases like “nuisance,” “a considerable burden,” or “menace” appear regularly in diagnostic processes for many individuals, including those of a four-year-old Menominee boy and a sixty-three-year-old Menominee man. Officials believed that federally managed asylum settings would alleviate the burdens created by such individuals. BIA commissioners regularly complied with physicians’ and reservation superintendents’ recommendations in these instances.

Western medical professionals and BIA employees also consistently claimed that Native individuals were “better off” at Canton Asylum, an opinion anchored to the belief that they themselves modeled benevolence, expertise, and cultural superiority. “She is well taken care of here,” Dr. Hummer wrote to Faribault’s relatives, fending off discharge requests. To Caldwell’s family he regularly insisted, “She has a splendid home here in every respect.” Superintendent Gifford had offered nearly identical claims to petitioners and bureaucrats during his tenure at Canton as well. Following this cultural logic, their settler institutions similarly represented a better option to Indigenous homes. Even as the Burch relatives on the outside sought their baby’s return, the Ute Agency superintendent told the BIA commissioner that keeping the child in virtually any institution would be preferable to her living in her father’s Colorado home.

Inherent in administrators’ position was the belief that the institutional family (staff) and the institutional home (the asylum) were better than Indigenous ones. In his diagnostic assessments of Faribault, Caldwell, the Burch sisters, and many others, Harry Hummer presented himself as head of the institutional nuclear family and household, resembling what historian Cathleen Cahill has described as “federal fathers” and a “surrogate family” to Native people. In the context of the Canton Asylum, this paternal oversight emphasized active, sustained containment. Both Superintendents Gifford
and Hummer discouraged relatives from visiting, and other forms of contact, such as letters and packages, were closely scrutinized by administrators. Canton and BIA representatives implicitly expected the institutional family and home to replace Indigenous ones. They regularly made fundamental decisions that would have otherwise involved Native kin, from prohibiting marriages to arranging the funeral services when people were buried in the Asylum cemetery.

At the same time, upkeep for Canton relied largely on coerced labor of its institutionalized population. Across the campus, Native people routinely cleaned, cooked, farmed, sewed, and tended to others—among many other tasks that sustained the Indian Asylum. The maintenance of the superintendent’s quarters and caregiving to the extended Hummer family, in particular, expanded in the early 1920s. It appears that Agnes Caldwell worked for a time in the Hummer family’s bungalow, although the details of her experiences there were never recorded. As his own parents aged, Superintendent Hummer assigned Elizabeth Faribault to work in the cottage. Demands on her increased after Georgiana Murphy Hummer, the psychiatrist’s sixty-six-year-old mother, died. Faribault likely was expected to provide care and support for the grieving family, including Hummer’s widowed father and children, in addition to cleaning and laundry work.

In their various correspondence from this time, Agnes Caldwell and Elizabeth Faribault repeatedly pleaded to be discharged. For Faribault, “working for the doctor’s folks” and the daily interactions with the Hummers inside their home contributed to her own suffering. As the Dakota woman explained to the BIA commissioner, she longed to be back at Sisseton, taking care of her aging parent and her children. Caldwell echoed this sentiment in her own letters, lamenting, “I . . . need to go home.” The institutionalized women and their families drew attention to what gender and sexuality studies scholar Sau-ling C. Wong has called “diverted mothering,” contexts in which “time and energy available for mothering are diverted from those who, by kinship or communal ties, are their more rightful recipients.” Tending to their own parents and children, not Hummer’s, was a familial obligation Caldwell, Faribault, and many others expected to meet. They did not want others to replace them at home, and they did not want Hummer’s home to replace theirs. “I don’t see why he couldn’t let me go home,” Elizabeth Faribault complained in a letter to the BIA. She asked Commissioner Burke to intercede: “kindly help me out some way” with Hummer, and “look after this.” But continuing the practice of deferring to Asylum administrators, Burke declined her repeated requests. The greater isolation of the cottage
and the particular demands on Faribault and Caldwell magnified the complicated circumstances they each faced in the 1920s.

As family correspondence described illness sweeping through her house and community in early 1920, Caldwell’s insistences for a discharge intensified. Noting that her mother and husband could no longer provide full care for other family members, she pleaded with federal authorities to be allowed to look after her siblings, parents, and children. “We all want to see are children,” she told the BIA commissioner, “We all want to see are folks.”

Death took her daughter first. The grieving mother wrote again to the commissioner: “I was sad to hear the my little girl die . . . at the Hospital . . . Yes if I was there . . . I would took good care of her I will. Never. See her again.” Caldwell believed her absence contributed to the loss. “I was all good hands to my girl. I know my little want me to come home that why she got sick and now she die and I will never see her. Again.”

Within weeks, her son also died, followed by her father later that year. In the wake of this
pointed heartache, Caldwell focused her energies into renewed petitions for her release to tend to her elderly mother, but she remained in Canton.

Elizabeth Faribault, like many others inhabiting the close confines of the locked wards, would have been aware of Caldwell’s poignant circumstances. Much of their worlds were intimately familiar. Assigned the same tasks, they both inhabited remote locations on the campus: the basement laundry and the superintendent’s bungalow. The distinctive power of places weighed heavily on the women. Walls and miles separated them from their spouses, parents, and siblings. The ache of missing sons and daughters lodged into their memories, bones, and heartbeats. Their sustained absences from home and assigned work for Hummer’s family pulsed loudly.

The kind of domestic service Agnes Caldwell and Elizabeth Faribault provided the Hummer family was readily found at similar institutions, and Canton’s superintendent was accustomed to female servants cleaning, doing laundry, and providing other household support. During the early years of Hummer’s tenure, the family had relied on Asylum staff—always female—to tend to their quarters. Archival records show that between 1912 and 1915, Clara Christopher, Ione Landis, and several other kitchen and dining staff members at various times had been expected daily to clean the superintendent’s residence. Some of the women claimed that they were threatened with dismissal if they did not comply. None received additional compensation for their labor. Hummer asserted that the work was appropriate and did not interfere with their other duties. Unpaid and underpaid domestic work was common. Women in settler contexts often were expected to attend to housework—their own and that of more affluent families. This support directly reinforced the broader familial structure upon which Canton Asylum was based, enabling the head of household—the superintendent—to focus his time and energy on management, employment, and civic engagement.

Institution, family, and household sustained one another in other ways. Upon her arrival to Canton, Norena Hummer, the superintendent’s wife, was made matron, a position she held for two years until pressure from the BIA over accusations of negligence forced her resignation. By 1910, the couple increasingly sought greater physical distance from the locked wards and campaigned for a separate cottage on the Asylum grounds. Congress approved the request several years later, and a Craftsman-style bungalow was constructed. The Canton administrator subsequently brought his elderly parents, Levi and Georgiana Hummer, to live with his family in the
new home. Levi, then in his seventies, was added to the Asylum payroll as a gardener. When sons Francis and Harry Junior were teenagers, they also earned incomes at Canton. The younger Hummer men continued to hold the position of laborer when they returned home from college during summers.  

The Hummer household became a flashpoint of conflicts during the superintendent’s tempestuous administration. An array of accusations thread across Hummer’s tenure: harassment, inappropriate touching, verbal abuse, and extramarital affairs. One of the employees, Ione Landis, provided a detailed account of sexual harassment and an assault that occurred in 1914. According to Landis, Hummer ordered her to work in his private quarters after he propositioned her during a drive. She claimed that Norena Hummer intentionally humiliated and menaced her while she cleaned the bungalow. Within a year, Landis was dismissed from service by Dr. Hummer. Commissioner Cato Sells gently chided Hummer afterward, writing: “It is suggested that you keep a more careful watch on your conduct and especially control your temper so that this Office may not be subjected to the necessity of investigating charges of that character. You must be aware of the fact that, while charges of immorality may not be proven, the fact that such charges are made should indicate to you the necessity for an extremely careful watch on your conduct in relation to the female employees of the institution.” Seeking to eliminate problems for the superintendent, himself, and the BIA, Commissioner Sells counseled Hummer, “Your actions should be so carefully under the control of a well-balanced judgment that such charges, if made, would naturally fall of their own weight.”

Over the nearly twenty-five years of Hummer’s tenure, BIA administrators repeatedly reprimanded him for his conduct as superintendent. Ultimately, the supervisory gestures themselves fell of their own weight: most of the systems and structures that undergirded Canton Asylum, including unpaid and underpaid domestic service for the Hummer household, remained unchanged. The BIA eventually insisted that government staff should not be required to provide private assistance. The Hummers then used incarcerated Native people—Agnes Caldwell and Elizabeth Faribault—to fill this role. The BIA tacitly endorsed this.

At the same time Elizabeth and Agnes tended to the superintendent’s home and family, correspondence from their relatives rippled with distress, frustration, questions between the lines. The attempted erasure of their own families wrought by institutionalization was shared by Caldwell and Faribault kin within and outside of the Indian Asylum. Nested in this process was
the Hummer household and the expectations placed specifically on Agnes and Elizabeth to maintain it. But home, these women and others detained at Canton insisted, was with their own families, far beyond the institution’s walls. They wanted to be with them there.

On a mild winter evening in January 1920, Elizabeth Faribault escaped from Canton. Having permission to walk the Asylum grounds, the Sisseton-Wahpeton woman probably had spent time beforehand exploring the perimeter of the campus, gazing at the open expanse beyond the gates. Upon leaving the grounds, she headed east as the stars rose in the night sky. Staff informed Superintendent Hummer the next morning, and a search began. His report to the commissioner fused a diagnostic process with a resolution to the new context. Assuring him that Faribault’s condition had been “fairly comfortable” before she “left without permission,” Hummer then offered a different treatment: if the Dakota woman reached her home, and if her family wanted to “keep her,” he would recommend that Faribault be “discharged” from the institution that she had already left. The commissioner supported this plan. We can only wonder what Elizabeth thought about as she ran, walked, hid, slept, woke, and distanced herself from the Indian Insane Asylum during the next three days. Her descendants understand Faribault’s act as resistance, escaping from the Asylum and institutionalization and returning to her home and family.

After covering twenty miles, apparently all on foot, Faribault was apprehended. Superintendent Hummer personally drove to Alvord, Iowa, to retrieve her. It is unknown whether Jesse Faribault or her children ever knew that Elizabeth had escaped or stayed at large for days. In a subsequent report to the BIA, Hummer now invoked her failed escape as justification for keeping her institutionalized, concluding, “It is much better for Elizabeth that she remain here.” Faribault vigorously disagreed. In her own letters to the BIA then and for years after, she argued again that she should be with her family in Sisseton. Ultimately, a return to her family was not to be.