

# NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION FOR ALL RESOURCES

Partnership of IllumiNative and the National Indian Education Association



ILLUMINATIVE



Grade Level

6-8

Subject

Social Studies

Lesson Title

(PART 1) The Power in (Re)Telling History: A Look at Jim Thorpe's Life

**Activity Description:** One tool used by dominant culture is to write and rewrite history, particularly Native American history. Many consider Jim Thorpe (1887-1953) to be the greatest athlete to ever live. His life is not only filled with amazing athletic accomplishments but also traumatic events due to historical racism toward Native Americans. However, history does not always tell that side of his story. Part 1 of this activity set uses Jim Thorpe's early life to explain the effects of boarding school and the discrimination toward Native Americans in society during the late 1800s to early 1900s. This is an activity that families can do together for rich discussions about *assimilation*.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Wifi (recommended)
- Pencil & paper (optional)
- Print or digital version of [Jim Thorpe's Bright Path by Joseph Bruchac](#)
- Print or digital version of ["Jim Thorpe \(Sac and Fox\) 1887 - 1953"](#)

## STEPS

James Frances Thorpe, commonly known as Jim, is remembered by many as the greatest athlete that ever lived. A member of the Sac and Fox tribe, Thorpe was born at a time when Native Americans were being pushed off their lands and forced into assimilation. This activity is the first of two parts about Thorpe. The links below will tell you the story of Thorpe's early life including the impact of boarding school and how he learned to play sports. Use the information and stories to understand how Native Americans were treated at the time that Thorpe lived. This will help you better understand how many times history is told from a perspective that covers up the painful truth. Many people do not discuss the truth behind Jim Thorpe's difficult career as an athlete. Your role as the historian is to complete both Part 1 and Part 2 of the activity set to identify the "truths" of Thorpe's life that history sometimes hides.

### Activity Steps:

Before you read, think about what you already know about Indian boarding schools. You can also ask your parents or elders what they know about boarding schools. You will also need to know this definition of *assimilation*: the process by which one group/race of people become like another group by using their language, beliefs, customs, foods, etc.

1. First, read the story [Jim Thorpe's Bright Path](#) by Joseph Bruchac. You can also listen to [Jim Thorpe's Bright Path read aloud](#) on YouTube.
  - a. How did Jim's father have a strong influence on Jim's life?
  - b. Why were the Indian boarding schools so unhealthy for Jim and other students?
2. Next, read this brief summary [US Indian Boarding School History](#) on how boarding schools became a legal way to assimilate Native Americans.
  - a. How does this summary help you understand why Jim's father's decision to send Jim to boarding school was so difficult? Why do you think he still sent Jim anyway?
3. Now, read this public biography of Jim Thorpe's accomplishments in life from the National Resources Conservation Services by the US government. ["Jim Thorpe \(Sac and Fox\) 1887 - 1953"](#)
  - a. Even though the Carlisle Indian School is mentioned, what type of information is left out of this biography? Why do you think that information is missing from this public biography?

### Discussion Questions:

With a family member/elder, discuss the questions found in the "Helpful Tips" section on the next page.

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## HELPFUL TIPS

**Parents and caregivers:** Because this activity may raise questions about the discrimination of Native Americans and the traumatic experiences in boarding school, we recommend that parents/caregivers/elders support young people while doing this activity. Here are several questions to discuss after completing the activity above:

1. Do you think boarding school had more of a negative or positive impact on Thorpe?
2. Why were the Indian boarding schools such a traumatic place for young Native children and families?
3. What does your knowledge about the Boarding School Era tell you about how Native Americans were viewed and treated by American society at that time?

This is a critical topic to share with your child but it can also stir feelings of pain, confusion, and anger. If you or your family have been directly impacted by the boarding school era, reach out for support through an organization such as [The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](#)

## WANT TO LEARN MORE?

**Families and educators:** It is important to teach not only the resilience and accomplishments of Jim Thorpe but it is also critical to address the trauma he experienced because of boarding school and federal assimilation policies. The effects of historical trauma are very real for Native American communities today. These effects are felt in classrooms across the nation. For support in teaching lessons like the ones linked below, visit [The Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](#) and/or ["Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom"](#) by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Below are additional teaching resources:

- In 2009, Moira Productions produced a more accurate full-length film portrayal [Jim Thorpe: The Worlds Greatest Athlete](#). Filmmakers also provide a printable [curriculum with a teacher guide and full-text resources](#) for students about Jim Thorpe and related topics such as American Football, Sac and Fox tribes, American Indian Hollywood portrayals.
- The National Park Service offers a lesson plan series on the Carlisle Indian School which Jim Thorpe attended: ["The Carlisle Indian Industrial School: Assimilation with Education after the Indian Wars."](#)

### Activity Resources:

- *Jim Thorpe's Bright Path* by Joseph Bruchac [http://mrswebb4.weebly.com/uploads/2/0/4/9/20499204/jim\\_thorpes\\_bright\\_path.pdf](http://mrswebb4.weebly.com/uploads/2/0/4/9/20499204/jim_thorpes_bright_path.pdf)
- *Jim Thorpe's Bright Path* read aloud on YouTube posted by TMO Learning Journey <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcQIS9NQ0wU>
- "US Indian Boarding School History" by *The Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition* <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education/us-indian-boarding-school-history/>

### Additional Resources:

- The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/>
- "Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom" by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/PDFs/FINAL-Race-and-Trauma-in-the-Classroom-Factsheet.pdf>
- *Jim Thorpe: The World's Greatest Athlete* by Moira Productions <https://www.jimthorpefilm.com/>
- *Jim Thorpe Study Guide* by Moira Productions <https://www.jimthorpefilm.com/guide/index.html>
- "The Carlisle Indian Industrial School: Assimilation with Education after the Indian Wars" lessons by the National Park Service [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/teachingwithhistoricplaces/lesson-plan-163\\_carlisle-school.htm](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/teachingwithhistoricplaces/lesson-plan-163_carlisle-school.htm)