

RESERVATION DOGS

EPISODE 303: DEER LADY



PRODUCTION DESIGNER
Brandon Tonner-Connelly

ART DIRECTOR
Matt Hyland

SET DECORATOR
Tafv Sampson

GRAPHIC DESIGNER
Sarah Jenson

SET DESIGNER
Shana Burns

“...a true masterpiece...”

— VANITY FAIR—RANKED BEST OF 2023

TIME

“Groundbreaking, profound, and utterly original... **By depicting its characters’ world, without compromise, *Reservation Dogs* also honored and preserved the embattled communities it represents.** In just 28 episodes, without a weak one in the bunch, Harjo fleshed out three generations’ worth of characters in the fictional town of Okern.”



“The remarkable contribution of *Reservation Dogs* to an arguably indefensibly short list of authentic depictions of Native Americans on the small screen lies in the **breadth and specificity that it brought to its depiction of four Indigenous teenage friends...**it also keeps a focused eye on the sociological circumstances of their lives—tackling fatherless households, addiction, discrimination, and grief with aplomb; **a result, no doubt of the creative team behind it...**”

— Peabody Awards (2021 WINNER)

The New York Times

“**It would also be dishonest not to recognize that this was by far the best thing on TV...** And its finale capped three too-short but brilliant seasons that depicted a community as a living organism.”

“The most heartbreaking, life affirming TV you’ll ever see...a demonstration of high art...the final three episodes are some of **the most gorgeous ever to grace a television screen.**”

— THE GUARDIAN

“**There has never been a collection of stories quite like *Reservation Dogs*...**builds a world that feels as lived in and distinctive as any.”

— THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

Ranked Reservation Dogs Sixth Best Show of the Century



In one of the most powerful and stirring episodes of the entire run of FX's *Reservation Dogs*, the series takes on the horror of assimilation — “INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOLS” — an attempt by the government in the 19th and 20th centuries to **erase Native culture** from the country.

—VARIETY MAGAZINE

“Whatever you show onscreen **will not be as bad as it was in real life.**”

—DENISE LAJIMODIERE

Author of *Stringing Rosaries: The History, The Unforgivable, and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors*



Creating sets for such an emotionally charged, historically significant environment was a tremendous challenge. **Many of the cast and crew had family history with these places, and our work needed the utmost care and sensitivity.**

Logistical and creative issues are to be expected, but there was a **weight of responsibility** too—both in conveying the awful, dehumanizing experience of these boarding schools, and **in connecting them to the people who remain to tell their stories.**



It's been essential for us to work with as many people from the community as possible throughout the series. **What's on screen needs to reflect real and authentic lives**, and that goes beyond staffing up our department—it also means **joining up with working artists** from the community, including Johnny Diacon, Yatika Starfields, and Molly Murphy Adams.

This collaboration causes a unique shift in our approach. Our sets would first be seen by the **cast and crew**, some of whom **contributed photos and heirlooms** from their own families. **Neighbors** down the block would visit as we filmed, with some **becoming unexpected collaborators or cast members**.

The spaces have to feel right, and look right, regardless of where the camera is pointing. An **enthusiastic connection with the community** meant our show could tell *three dimensional stories*, comedic and tragic alike, **while flipping generations of tropes and cliches on their head**.

THE DORMITORY



THE DORMITORY

We started with research trips to the historical archives in Anadarko, OK (once the site of a boarding school) and **several consultations with scholars** on the subject—most notably **Denise Lajimodiere**.

We chose **Bacone College** for our location, since it offered **accurate architectural bones**, and it allowed us to stitch all the necessary set pieces into one campus. Despite the subject matter, we still had a standard TV timetable to turn around our work and two days to film the whole sequence.



THE DORMITORY

We milled, installed, and scenic'd period appropriate hardwood floors, with a **very high gloss to kick back highlights** and moonlight during the night scenes. This shadow and light play led to shots that augmented the on— and off-screen violence, on top of the crafted audio cues and bouts of near silence.



DAY & NIGHT RENDERINGS

THE DORMITORY

Denise answered our many, many questions on **everything from plates and spoons to bedding and desks**. When we asked her about corporal punishment or depicting other types of abuse, she told us “Whatever you show on-screen will not be as bad as it was in real life.”

We dug through historic injustices for clues about set dressing and building materials, which carried an emotional weight that remained throughout the process. **Many of the Art Dept crew had surviving relatives with their own boarding school experiences.**



BEFORE: BACONE COLLEGE

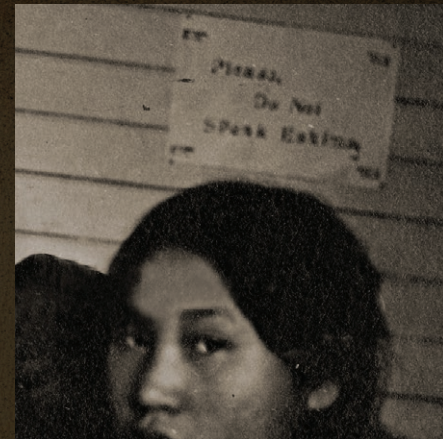
THE DORMITORY



THE MESS HALL



THE MESS HALL



"PLEASE, DO NOT SPEAK ESKIMO"

We wanted to ensure the episode had **its own identity** within the three-year series. In collaboration with Danis Goulet (Director) and Mark Schwartzbard (Cinematographer), **we worked to support a 70's horror visual aesthetic**—long lenses, slow zooms, deep shadows, and a **palpable sense of dread**.



PHOTO CREDIT: MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

THE MESS HALL

Using a clear genre aesthetic gave the weighty subject matter a **more digestible visual language**. Rather than lean on gritty documentary details, the episode employs **fantastical and dream-like qualities**.

Everyone in the Art Department felt the importance of the episode, and **went above and beyond to do it justice**.

One asset in choosing Bacone College was the unique, **sculpted rock hearth in our mess hall**. The hearth was built from stones sent from dozens of army bases and boarding schools around the country, and it *served as a monument to the horror* of these schools, as well as a focal point for the massive space.



BEFORE: BACONE COLLEGE

THE MESS HALL



THE CLASSROOM



THE CLASSROOM

The Set Dec team scoured Oklahoma and the Great Plains to find pieces that worked for the period and **brought everything to life down to smallest detail, including the chalk boxes and pencils.**



THE CLASSROOM



RENDERING

THE CLASSROOM

For the classroom set, the available space had **raw and damaged plaster walls**, which led us to **wall paneling and chalk boards** that were accurate to the period.



THE CLASSROOM



DRESSED CLASSROOM SET

THE CLASSROOM



We also faced an entirely unexpected challenge: **a catastrophic fire** in the middle of the night, in the building that housed our Construction, Scenic, Set Dec, and Special Effects shops. This happened **a day before we were meant to load into the sets.**

The building's structure was almost destroyed in the blaze, which meant much of the **historical dressing was gone** before it could even reach the set, not to mention dozens of kits and personal tools were lost in the middle of production. **Things that hadn't been burned were soaked by water from the firehoses.**



Thankfully no one was hurt, but it was devastating, and it happened at a time of intense emotional work. The next day we rallied together, started rebuilding, and proceeded with gusto. **Production continued** without a costly change in the schedule, **which is a testament to the sense of responsibility we felt towards this story and this series.**

JAMES MINOR RANCH



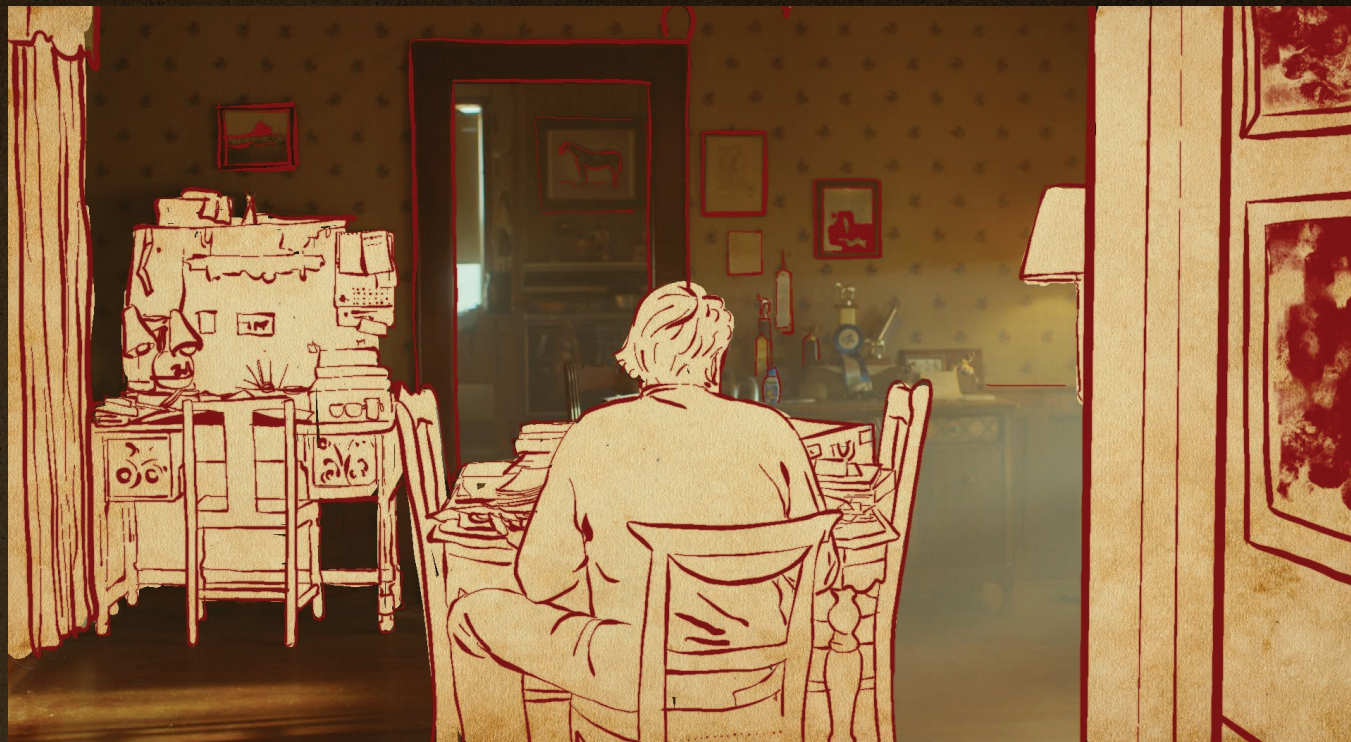
JAMES MINOR RANCH

On the shoot day, community elders who had survived boarding schools in their youth spoke in a ceremony. All cast and crew were gathered in the Mess Hall to listen.

What followed was a tearful morning, with crew beginning work alongside dozens of small children in period costume, recreating events that had done irreparable damage to their communities.

By the end of the shoot, long before audiences would see the episode, a sense of pride was growing from the work itself, and the importance of telling these stories authentically.

It was a uniquely emotional episode, in a series that we're all **extremely proud to have helped craft.**



LOCATION SCOUT PHOTOS

JAMES MINOR RANCH



JAMES MINOR RANCH



“Before we can heal we need to tell the truth.
I say let the truth telling begin.”

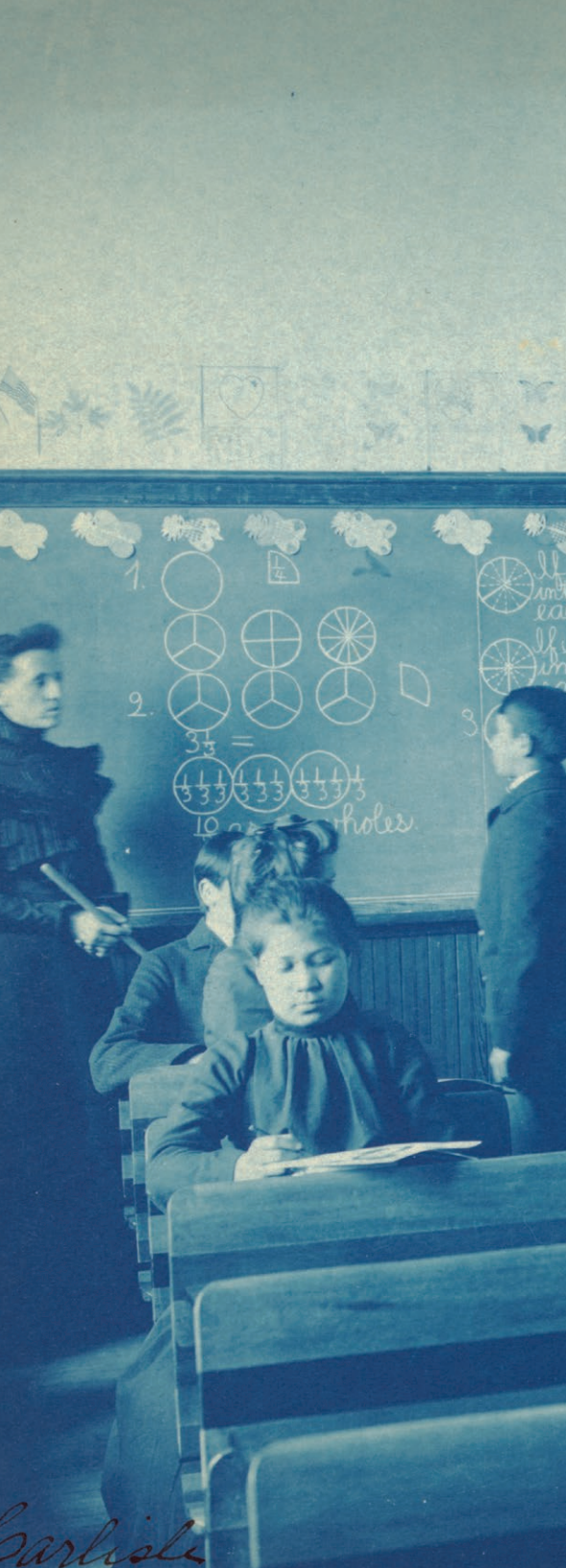
—DENISE LAJIMODIERE

Author of *Stringing Rosaries: The History, The Unforgivable, and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors*

For the third season of *Reservation Dogs*, Sterlin Harjo and the other creators decided they wanted to continue breaking new ground and showing audiences new aspects of the Native American experience by being **the first show or film to depict the reality of American Indian Boarding Schools**. These institutions, run by the federal government and the Catholic church, were *designed to forcibly assimilate Native American children in the late 19th and early 20th centuries*.

A 2022 Department of the Interior report found that the U.S. ran or supported **408 boarding schools** and that students endured “*rampant physical, sexual, and emotional abuse*.”

The report noted the **deaths of more than 500 Native American children** at the schools.



Carlisle

“

We have an opportunity to tell some truths, and that's what the show has been about — ***telling the truth about who we are.*** I just wanted to make something that represented that experience, to show people what the reality was. To show people what it felt like sitting in those cafeterias and having people **yell at you for speaking your language.** Instead of reading it in a history book, I wanted to put it in this way so you could understand what it might feel like... reminding people that these were **young kids that were abused and sometimes killed.**”



STERLIN HARJO
CREATOR & SHOWRUNNER

“The work is better when you **let the world
inform the work**”

—LILY GLADSTONE