



Following the conviction of a former dormitory supervisor at the Port Alberni, British Columbia, school, former students successfully sued both the Canadian government and the United Church. *The United Church of Canada Archives, 93.049P510. (1941).*

In many schools, food was used to buy friendship or protection. Phil Fontaine recalled, “Some kids never got to eat any lard because they had to be protected during their entire time in school. Fruit was the same, you could buy protection with an apple.”²¹⁷ At the Kamloops school, Andrew Amos “learned to cope with the resident bullies who always picked on us and took our extras, such as apples, oranges, even slices of bread.”²¹⁸

The sexual and physical abuse of students by staff and other students represents the most extreme failings of the residential school system. In an underfunded, under-supervised system, there was little to protect children from predators. The victims often were treated as liars or troublemakers. Students were taught to be quiet to protect themselves.

The impacts were devastating, and continue to be felt today. Long after abuse stops, people who were abused as children remain prey to feelings of shame and fear, increased susceptibility to a range of diseases, and emotional distress. Those who have been abused run a greater risk of abusing, and have difficulty forming healthy emotional attachments.²¹⁹

Accomplishment: “My experience at the residential school was good.”

Although the residential school system was a destructive system, the schools were not absolutely destructive. Between 2009 and 2011, many students have come forward to express their gratitude to former teachers at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission events. Their testimony is a reminder that not all residential school experiences are identical. Although few students went to residential school willingly, once they were there, there were activities—sports, arts, reading, dancing, writing—that many students came to enjoy. Even after they were old enough to leave, some chose to stay in school and complete their education. In certain cases, students developed lifelong relationships with their former teachers. Others not only finished high school, they pursued post-secondary education. Some went on to take leadership positions in Aboriginal organizations, the churches, and in society at large. Despite the shortcomings of the system, some students were able to adjust to it, and others achieved significant accomplishments. These positive experiences stand in the shadow of



The Battleford, Saskatchewan, school cricket team in 1895. In 1899, an Indian Affairs official wrote of the Battleford school, “A noticeable feature of this school is its games. They are all thoroughly and distinctly ‘white’. The boys use the boxing gloves with no little science, and excellent temper and play good games of cricket and football with great interest and truly Anglo-Saxon vigor.” *Canada, Ernest Maunder, David Ewens collection, Library and Archives Canada, PA-182265.*

the system’s overall failings, but they are also part of the residential school story.

Children who faced difficult home situations sometimes have more positive assessments of residential schools. In 1944 twelve-year-old Rita Joe, an orphan, was living with relatives who alternately abused and neglected her. Fearful, she called the Indian agent and asked if he could arrange to have her admitted to the Shubenacadie school in Nova Scotia.²²⁰ Joe acknowledged that many negative things happened at the school, but she never regretted going there.²²¹ In 1956, as a young mother with four children under six years of age, she and her husband Frank decided to send their oldest daughter to Shubenacadie. “We knew she would get an education there, and would be cared for until we were better off.”²²²

Like Rita and Frank Joe, many other parents used residential schools as part of a family survival strategy. Louis Calihoo, a Métis man who went north to the Klondike in 1898 to make money during the Gold Rush, placed his sons in the Grouard school.²²³ During the Great Depression of the 1930s, a Chilcotin father wrote his son in residential school, “I didn’t make much money this year, just enough to buy grub to live on. You are lucky to be in school where

you get plenty to eat. If you were home you would get hungry many days.”²²⁴

Florence Bird was born to Métis parents in Fort Chipewyan in 1899. After the death of her father Joseph in 1909, she was raised in the Holy Angels Convent at Fort Chipewyan. A sickly child, she thought she would not have survived without the convent. “There were lots of pitiful kids in those days. The orphans were more pitiful than everybody else because they were badly treated by the people and even by the relatives sometimes.” Although the nuns were strict, she thought that with so many children to supervise, they had few options.²²⁵ Martha Mercredi was another orphaned Métis child who was raised in Holy Angels. “I was never lonely because I took to the nuns as my own relatives. Sister Superior was my grandmother and Sister Lucy was the teacher and she was like my momma, she’s the one that’s my guardian. So I have no complaint about the convent. I am very glad that they showed me how to read and write.”²²⁶

Students involved in sports, music, drama, and dance found that these activities helped them maintain a sense of their own value, and were sources of strength in later life.²²⁷ Andrew Amos recalled that at the Kamloops



A student at the All Saints School in Aklavik, Northwest Territories, taking his Cub Scout oath. *The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P7538-832.*

school, “The treatment was good as long as you excelled in sports.” He went on to become a provincial boxing champion. Travelling to fights and games allowed students to leave the school and see other parts of the province. Amos recalled, “It was through competitive sports, and the girls with their dancing and travel, that we were able to cope and survive the daily routine of life at the residential school.”²²⁸ Even if they were poorly equipped, residential school hockey, football, and baseball teams provided many students with a refuge and a source of pride. Alex, a student at the St.-Marc-de-Figuery school in Amos, Quebec, said, “At the residential school, if it wasn’t for hockey, I would have gone crazy. Sport became my support. Until I was thirty years old, I played and when I was on the ice, I would let it all out.”²²⁹ The prejudices of the day meant that girls enjoyed fewer athletic opportunities. The Kamloops school was known for its dance program. Vivian Ignace, one of the dancers, had mixed feelings about her experience, noting that dancers were not allowed to participate in sports for fear of injury. Despite this, she concluded that “through that experience with the Kamloops Indian Residential School Dancers, I learned some assertiveness skills. I learned to smile even



The Old Sun school School softball team in the 1940s. *The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P75-103 (S7-202).*

when I wasn’t happy. I learned to get along and talk with people and that was good. I learned a lot through that Irish nun.”²³⁰

Some students were grateful for the religious instruction they received. Edna Gregoire, who attended the Kamloops school, for example, said, “My experience at the residential school was good. That’s one thing I’ll tell you, it was really good to be able to go to school and to learn how to read and write. And the other thing, the best of all, I was happy to learn about God.”²³¹ Margaret Stonechild recalled the File Hills, Saskatchewan, principal as a very good religious instructor. “I am eternally grateful for that because I have a firm standing in Christian beliefs to this day.”²³² Bernard Pinay said that at File Hills, he never felt religion was being forced down his throat.²³³ Some parents, at the urging of missionaries, sent their children to residential school specifically for a religious education.²³⁴

In some cases, strong personal relationships developed between students and staff. Eleanor Brass’s parents, Fred and Marybelle Dieter, were married at the File Hills boarding school where Kate Gillespie, the principal, and her sister Janet (the school matron) made the wedding arrangements, and baked the wedding cake.²³⁵ Shirley Bear recalled one principal of the Prince Albert school as a tyrant. However, “The next principal, Rev. A.J. Serase, was an angel. After he came, the whole system changed. He was just like a father to the students. He was the minister who married my husband and me.”²³⁶

Many students, either on their own or with the encouragement of a well-remembered teacher, developed a love of learning. Jane Willis, at the Anglican school at Fort George on James Bay, credits her decision to complete



The girls' marching band at the Cardston, Alberta, school, 1952. *The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P2004-09 (143).*

her education to one of her teachers, who worked hard to develop students' self-confidence. "Learning was a pleasure with Mr. Woods as our cheerleader and coach. He urged us to ask questions, to take an active part in class instead of sitting back and taking his word for everything."²³⁷ At the Moose Factory School in Ontario, Billy Diamond became a voracious reader. When the time came for him to move on to high school in Sault Ste. Marie, he saw it as an opportunity for adventure, learning, and meeting new friends. Once there, he helped form an Indian student council. Diamond went on, as leader of the James Bay Cree, to negotiate the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, Canada's first comprehensive land-claims agreement.²³⁸ While the residential school experience left him feeling embarrassed about his culture, Peter Irniq described the education he received in Chesterfield Inlet as "top-notch." "As much as that particular teacher used to call us bloody dodos and no good for nothing, a bunch of hounds of iniquity, he taught us pretty good in terms of English."²³⁹

The system's overall educational success was limited, but throughout its history, numerous determined individuals pursued their education beyond residential school. Daniel Kennedy, who described his introduction into residential schooling as being "lassoed, roped and taken to the Government School at Lebret," went on to study at Saint Boniface College. By 1899 he was an

interpreter for Indian Affairs. In 1906 he helped local First Nations overcome the opposition of local Indian Affairs officials and successfully petition the federal government to be allowed to hold feasts and sports days.²⁴⁰

Kennedy did not enter the priesthood, but other residential school students did pursue religious careers. Edward Ahenakew, who attended Emmanuel College in Prince Albert, was ordained as an Anglican minister in 1910.²⁴¹ Peter Kelly, a graduate of the Coqualeetza Institute in Sardis, British Columbia, became a United Church minister, eventually serving as president of the British Columbia Conference of the United Church of Canada. He also played an important role in presenting First Nations land concerns to the federal government in 1911 and 1927. Kelly was not uncritical of the church's Aboriginal work, noting in 1958 that in too many cases, the church was sending misfits, who did not make the grade elsewhere, to work as ministers and teachers in Aboriginal communities.²⁴² Stan McKay, who attended the Brandon school, became the first Aboriginal moderator of the United Church of Canada in 1992.

Ahab Spence's career bridged religion, government service, and First Nations politics. After attending Anglican schools at Elkhorn and The Pas, Manitoba, he became an Anglican archdeacon, an employee of both the Saskatchewan and federal governments, and, in 1974, the president of the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood.²⁴³



The student cast of the play *Isle of Jewels* at the Coqualeetza, British Columbia, school. *The United Church of Canada Archives, 93.049P424N. (19--?)*

Many other Aboriginal leaders attended residential schools, and while they may have developed leadership skills in the schools, they often also became the system's harshest critics.

The Roman Catholic Grandin College in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, had one of the best reputations of any school. Established in 1960 as a preparatory school for Aboriginal priests and nuns, Grandin College's first director decided to turn it into a leadership training centre. The use of Aboriginal languages was common throughout the school, and students were encouraged to excel. Ethel Blondin-Andrew, the first Aboriginal woman to serve as a federal cabinet minister, said she was "saved" by Grandin College, where she "learned that discipline, including physical fitness, was essential."²⁴⁴ She was just one of a number of Grandin graduates who went on to play leading roles in public life in the North. Others include former Northwest Territories premiers, ministers, Dene Nation presidents, and official language commissioners.²⁴⁵

The individual student's ability to succeed within the residential school system, and the positive difference that individual teachers and school staff made in some students' lives, are important parts of the history and legacy of the schools and deserve recognition.

Resistance: "I don't ever want to see cruelty like this again."

It was at Aboriginal insistence that provisions for schools were included in the treaties. They wanted on-reserve schools that would give young people the skills to help their people in their dealings with settler society. They never envisioned a school system that separated children from their parents, their language, and their cultural and spiritual practices. In some cases, they bluntly told Indian Affairs officials they did not want their children to become like white people.²⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, many Aboriginal parents opposed residential schooling from the outset.

First, they simply refused to send their children to residential school. An 1897 Indian Affairs official's report said a Sauteaux-Cree chief "will not allow his children to be sent to school, says he would sooner see them dead, and on every chance he gets speaks against education and the Industrial Schools provided by the Government."²⁴⁷ For much of the system's early years, principals spent much of their time and energy recruiting students. Father Albert Lacombe, the founding principal of the High River school in Alberta, lamented his difficulties in recruiting students.²⁴⁸ The principal of the Shingwauk school complained in 1888 that it should not be necessary for him