

CHAPTER TWO

School Days: The Residential School Experience



Girls at the Gordon's school in Saskatchewan being transported to church by truck in 1953. *The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, M2008-10 (P14).*

Group 1 → Arrival: "Now you are no longer an Indian."

In the 1940s, residential schools across the Canadian Prairies would send out battered trucks to collect students on the first day of school. The parents of children attending the Lestock school in Saskatchewan would bring their children to collection points, often the local farm instructor's office, where they would wait for the truck. According to George Peequaquat, "The size of the group increased as we went from reserve to reserve. It was not uncommon to have up to forty children ranging in age

from five to sixteen piled in the back of the truck."¹ In earlier decades, priests and ministers had brought students to school on wagon or by boat. In later years, they came by train or even plane. Few students ever forgot their first day at school.

On arrival, many students were overwhelmed by the sight of the residential school building. Simon Baker was excited by the imposing Lytton, British Columbia, school building.² Raphael Ironstand thought the Assiniboia school in Winnipeg "seemed enormous, with marbled floors and ceilings, and hallways about two hundred feet long. It smelled strongly of disinfectant, and our voices



Reverend Thompson Ferrier taking boys to school in Brandon, Manitoba, in 1904. The year before, the Methodist missionary James MacLachlan and six students he was taking from Berens River to the Brandon industrial school drowned in a canoe accident. *Manitoba Museum EP 347.*

echoed when we spoke. The whole place looked cold and sterile; even the walls were covered with pictures of stern-looking people in suits and stiff collars.”³ On her first sight of the Shingwauk school in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Jane Willis thought, “Nothing could ever go wrong in such beautiful surroundings.”⁴ Originally impressed by the chapel at Shubenacadie, Isabelle Knockwood later concluded it was “a place where a lot of children’s prayers did not get answered.”⁵

When six-year-old Anthony Thrasher was deposited at the Roman Catholic school in Aklavik in the Northwest Territories, he saw the grey-habited nuns, heard their voices carried on the wind, and turned and ran. With no place to go, he was caught, grabbed by his hood, and dragged into the school, where he was scrubbed and checked for vermin, and put to bed.⁶

The assault on Aboriginal identity began the moment the child took the first step across the school’s threshold. In 1893, at the age of six, Mike Mountain Horse was sent to the St. Paul’s school on the Blood Reserve. “My Indian clothes, consisting of blanket, breech cloth, leggings, shirt and moccasins, were removed.”⁷ The embroidered parka and mukluks that Alice Blondin-Perrin’s mother had made for her were taken on her arrival at school. She never saw them again.⁸ Once stripped of their clothes, students were roughly bathed.⁹

Braided hair, which often had spiritual significance, was cut. At the Île-à-la-Crosse school in Saskatchewan, Alphonse Janvier was put on an old barber’s chair. “I remember my head being shaved and all my long hair falling on the floor, and the way they dealt with my crying and the hurtful feeling was with a bowl of ice cream.”¹⁰

Charlie Bigknife recalled being told, after his hair had been sheared off at the File Hills school in Saskatchewan, “Now you are no longer an Indian.”¹¹ Students were given a new wardrobe—often used and ill-fitting.¹² Even though her grandmother had made her warm winter clothing, Lillian Elias was not allowed to wear it at the Roman Catholic school at Aklavik. Instead, all the students had to wear the same type of parka. “Maybe,” she later wondered, “they wanted us to dress like them!”¹³

A new Christian identity required the imposition of new names. The first boy Anglican missionary John West recruited to his school at Red River in 1820, Pemitewithinew, became James Hope.¹⁴ At the Aklavik Anglican school in the Northwest Territories, Masak became Alice—she would not hear her old name until she returned home.¹⁵ Charles Nowell got his name “because a Sunday school teacher in England wanted Mr. Hall to give me his name, and they say that he was my godfather when I was baptized.”¹⁶ Jane Willis had been raised to answer to Janie Matthews, but on the residential school register at Fort George (now Chisasibi), Quebec, she was Janie Esquinimau, a nickname that belonged to her great-grandfather.¹⁷ At the Qu’Appelle school in Saskatchewan, Ochankugahe (Path Maker) became Daniel Kennedy, named for the biblical Daniel, while Adélard Standing Buffalo was named for Adélard Langevin, the Archbishop of St. Boniface.¹⁸

Not only were children renamed, they were assigned numbers that corresponded to their clothes, their bed, and their locker. In some schools, they were expected to line up according to their numbers. “We were called by number all the time. The nuns used to call, ‘39, 3 where



Girls at the Shingwauk school in Sault Ste. Marie, dressed for church in 1941. The federal government and the churches used posed photographs to promote the residential school system across Canada. The image that they give of life at the schools was not always accurate. For example, in 1936, a government inspector noted that at the Birtle, Manitoba, school "all the children have good clothes but these are kept for Sundays and when the children go downtown—in other words when out where they can be seen, they are well dressed." *The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P2004-09 (63).*

are you?' or '25, come here right now!'"¹⁹ A student who attended the St.-Marc-de-Figuery school in Amos, Quebec, felt stripped of her identity: "I was number one hundred and sixteen. I was trying to find myself; I was lost. I felt like I had been placed in a black garbage bag that was sealed. Everything was black, completely black to my eyes and I wondered if I was the only one to feel that way."²⁰

Boys and girls were strictly segregated. After the first day of classes, Raphael Ironstand did not see his sister for the rest of the year. "I still remember her looking apprehensively over her shoulder as she was led away."²¹ At dinnertime on her first day at the Anglican school at Aklavik, Alice French, seeing her brother looking lost and lonesome, started over to comfort him, only to be put back into line. During the years they spent at the school, they rarely spoke, only shouting out to one another at mealtime, or on the schoolyard or in the dining hall.²²

A girl from the Kamloops school recalled, "I remember seeing my brother in the back of the class. I went to talk to him and he was really nervous. He said, 'Don't come

over and talk to me.' I asked, 'Why, I want to talk to you.' And he was saying, 'You're not supposed to.' I told him. 'Why, you are my brother.' And right away I was taken to the front of the class and I was given the ruler on the palm of my hands."²³

Student life was highly regimented and disciplined. "During certain periods of the day we were not allowed to talk, which only led to hand motions and sneaking around in secrecy."²⁴ Inez Deiter, who attended the Onion Lake school in Saskatchewan in the 1930s, recalled, "We used to have to use this sign language to communicate."²⁵ A girl from Fort Hope, in northern Ontario, recalled that in the 1970s, "there seemed to be bells everywhere. There was the morning bell at seven, when a nun came into our dormitory clapping her hands. She would make us say prayers, like *Deo Gratias*, on our knees beside our beds. Then there was a bell for breakfast, one for classes at nine, one for ten when we would play outside, one for lunch, and others too. The nun in my class also had a small bell that she rang to signal us when we should stand up and sit down."²⁶



Students outside the school in Shingle Point, Yukon, in approximately 1930. *The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P9901-570.*

At the Shubenacadie school in Nova Scotia, Rita Joe was told “when to go to the bathroom, when to eat, when to do this and that, when to pray. We were even told when to yawn and cough. Children can’t help themselves when they cough, but we were told, ‘Stop your barking!’”²⁷ The feeling of being under constant surveillance continued for years. It was, former Spanish, Ontario, student Basil Johnston concluded, the sort of treatment that would be given to felons.²⁸

Children were crushed by loneliness. A note in the 1888 High River school journal said that since he had been enrolled in the school, Lawrence Faber “has done nothing in school for the last few months and cries nearly every day.”²⁹ On arrival at the Onion Lake school, Elise Charland had to deal with both her own loneliness and that of her younger brother. “There was no one there to help us, to love us, to take us in their arms and take the hurt and tears away. That loneliness was unbearable. No one cared whether we lived or died.”³⁰ Former Beauval, Saskatchewan, student Maria Campbell could recall “little from that part of my life besides feeling lonely and frightened when I was left with the Sister at the school.”³¹ Another former student said, “Little kids used to be homesick for their homes. Oh, yes, they used to cry at night.”³² Millicent Stonechild felt that living at File Hills was the same as being sent to Siberia. “We were so totally isolated in this boarding school. All around the schoolyard, there

were fences, beyond which we didn’t set foot. Bells were ringing all day long.”³³

Different schools had different policies for family visits. Some had family rooms or porches where parents could visit their children on weekends. Some parents or grandparents were able to take their children on picnics. However, in other cases, distances were too great, travel costs too high, and school policy too forbidding for parents to have any contact with their children. In 1919 Edward Elliot travelled to Kuper Island, British Columbia, to see his son. “When I got there I could not see my boy and the priest who was the principal would have nothing to do with me.”³⁴ Ralph Sandy went to the Kamloops school in the 1940s. To him, “That was the saddest part of all, missing your moms and dads. You don’t see them, maybe, ten months at a time.”³⁵ Letters home—or to anyone else—were read and often censored by teachers.³⁶

The Indian Affairs program of studies of 1896 stated: “Every effort must be made to induce pupils to speak English and to teach them to understand it; unless they do, the whole work of the teacher is likely to be wasted.”³⁷ The schools had differing language policies over the years, but the message most children received was ‘don’t speak your own language.’ “If we were heard speaking Shuswap, we were punished. We were made to write on the board one hundred times, ‘I will not speak Indian any more.’”³⁸ At Shubenacadie, “The most enduring and unyielding



A mother bringing her children to the St. John's School in Wabasca, Alberta, in the 1920s. *The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P75-103 (S8-242).*

law was the one that forbade the speaking of Mi'kmaw even during play."³⁹ At the St.-Marc-de-Figuery school in Amos, Quebec, which did not open until 1955, French was the language of instruction. One former student recalled being "forbidden from speaking to my sisters and we were prohibited from speaking our language."⁴⁰

For some, school was exciting, the clothing novel, and the food an improvement, but for most students, residential school was an alien and frightening experience. Loneliness and hunger were constants. While many former students point to a teacher who took an interest in them, helping them learn, develop a skill, or excel at a sport, the reality is that, in most schools, there were too few teachers and too many responsibilities. Children rebelled or withdrew into themselves. The schools responded with more rules and more discipline.

Mary John's recollection of the Lejac school captures the atmosphere that would have been familiar to many students: "Within the school itself, the missionaries and the nuns had to deal with one hundred and eighty Native children who were always hungry, always homesick. The

boys were openly rebellious, many of them stealing or running away or getting the girls off in some corner alone with them. Unlike the boys, the female students were seldom openly rebellious. Instead they were sullen and depressed."⁴¹

Education: "Lots of copying and memorizing."

→ Group 2 start here

From the outset, the government's educational expectations for residential schools were not high. In 1889 Hayter Reed, a future deputy minister of Indian Affairs, wrote that residential school children should not be educated to "earn their bread by brain-work rather than by manual labour."⁴² Fifteen years later, Clifford Sifton, the minister of Indian Affairs, asserted that "the Indian cannot go out from school, making his own way and compete with the white man.... He has not the physical, mental or moral get-up to enable him to compete."⁴³ In 1917 an Indian Affairs official questioned whether the Fort Providence school in the North-West Territories was giving students too much education. How much time, he wondered, was needed to give children "sufficient education to fear God, honour the King, and respect the laws of the country."⁴⁴

Although students sometimes attended the schools until well into their teens, it was not until after the Second World War that the schools began to offer courses at the high-school level. In 1960 the percentage of First Nations students—in any type of school—who went beyond Grade 6 had increased from 3 percent in 1930 to 22 percent. The average for the non-Aboriginal population was 37 percent.⁴⁵ Into the 1960s, the people who ran the system still saw their goal as overseeing the assimilation of Aboriginal people, who were viewed as being adrift "in a sea of cultural transition."⁴⁶ Nor was there any meaningful Aboriginal curriculum: in 1965 the government acknowledged that any reference to Indians in its curriculum had been either romantic or misleading.⁴⁷

The Lejac, British Columbia, school was typical of many in the system. Classes were large—between forty and fifty students—and included students of all ages. Given these constraints, teachers fell back on recitation and drill. Memorization and parroting the "right" answer were staples of this approach. The school lacked readers, textbooks, and a library.⁴⁸ Florence Bird's education at Holy Angels at Fort Chipewyan in the first decade of the