



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."<sup>39</sup> 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."<sup>40</sup>

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."<sup>41</sup>

### 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."<sup>42</sup> 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."<sup>43</sup> 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."<sup>44</sup>

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.<sup>45</sup> 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."<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup>

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.<sup>48</sup> Florence Bird's education at Holy Angels at Fort Chipewyan in the first decade of the



Sister McQuillan and students at the Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories, school in 1923. *Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba, 1987/363-1-47.111 (N60-2).*

twentieth century was similar: "School in my time was mostly memorizing, not much teaching and talking. Lots of copying and memorizing. The sisters were not really teachers but they did their best."<sup>49</sup>

At Shubenacadie, according to Isabelle Knockwood, during tests, "everyone sat at their desks with folded hands." Individual students were asked questions that "they answered according to the book. Written tests or exams were never given."<sup>50</sup> Of her early education at Kamloops, Pauline Arnouse said, "When we couldn't get our additions and subtractions right, I remember her using the whip on our knuckles. I remember my knuckles being black and blue and sore."<sup>51</sup> At that school, a frustrated Ron Ignace found that the harder he studied, the less he learned. "I remember even going to the priest and saying, 'Look father, I really want to learn but my grades are getting worse, and worse, and worse. I don't know what to do.'"<sup>52</sup>

George Raley, the principal of the Coqualeetza, British Columbia, school, emphasized academic achievement, ensuring that even under the half-day system, students completed a grade a year. His was the first school to offer Grade 9 on the full-day model. When the government closed the Coqualeetza school in 1940, many staff

believed the measure was taken because of Raley's commitment to Aboriginal education.<sup>53</sup>

The system attracted many idealistic and hard-working teachers. Nevertheless, Indian Affairs officials were aware that during much of the system's history, many of the teachers would not have been able to get jobs in the regular school system, and that the churches assigned to residential schools people who, as one federal official put it, "have not been too successful in other fields of activity."<sup>54</sup>

For many of the most committed teachers, religion was the fourth "R," and of greater importance than reading, writing, or arithmetic. According to Janice Acoose, the daily routine at Cowessess, Saskatchewan, in the 1950s was "early rise, prayers, shower and dress, meals premised by prayers, school premised by more prayers, rigidly programmed exercise time, catechism instruction and bedtime, which was premised by excruciatingly painful periods of time spent on our knees in prayer circles."<sup>55</sup> Solomon Pooyak observed, "All we ever got was religion, religion, religion. I can still fall on my knees at seventy-two years of age and not hurt myself because of the training and conditioning I got at Delmas."<sup>56</sup> A former Kamloops student, Cedric Duncan, had a similar memory: "Seemed like they just wanted us to learn about praying and all that



The message on the blackboard of this Anglican-run school in Lac la Ronge, Saskatchewan, in 1945 is "Thou Shalt Not Tell Lies." Bud Glunz, *National Film Board of Canada, Photothèque, Library and Archives Canada, PA-134110.*

stuff quite a bit. They didn't really care about our school-work, you know and help us with that."<sup>57</sup> In 1912 a federal government Indian agent wrote that teachers tended "to devote too much time to imparting religious instruction to the children as compared with the imparting of secular knowledge."<sup>58</sup> Attracting and keeping good teachers was an ongoing problem throughout the system's history. At one point, when public school teachers in the West were earning between \$500 and \$650 a year, Indian Affairs was allowing residential schools \$300 a year for teachers.<sup>59</sup> In the 1950s, the federal government began hiring and paying teachers directly, leading to long-needed salary improvements.

Aside from the low pay, the workloads in the schools were staggering. In the 1920s at Mount Elgin, there were two teachers and 148 students.<sup>60</sup> Sixty years later, the workday of a childcare worker at the Prince Albert school, who was responsible for twenty-four girls ranging in age from six to sixteen, started at 6:45 in the morning when she

prepared lunch for a girl who was returning home for a funeral. Over the next hour, she woke the rest of the girls, supervised their breakfast, and ensured they took appropriate medications. By 9:00 she had to get the girls dressed and ready for school, while fitting in a conversation with two girls who had not been attending scheduled Al-teen meetings. With just three and a half hours of break scattered throughout the schedule, her workday, which would include two more meals, and the supervision of a study period and of playtime, did not end until the 10:00 p.m. bedtime of the oldest girls.<sup>61</sup> In the system's early days, many staff worked year-round without a day off.<sup>62</sup>

Richard King, who taught at the Choutla school in the Yukon during the 1962–1963 school year, concluded that the school's record-keeping system "would be unacceptable in any well-run stock farm, where at the very least, parentage, production records, and performance characteristics of each animal are minimal records to be maintained." In the case of one sixteen-year-old girl, who had



Sick student at the Edmonton school (sometime between 1925 to 1935). *The United Church of Canada Archives, 93.049P870N.*

been at the school for eight years and was still only in the fourth grade, her school record consisted of a single page of test scores.<sup>63</sup> As Bernard Pinay philosophically summed up his educational experience, "I have nothing against File Hills School. The only thing is I didn't get much schooling because I spent a lot of time working on the farm."<sup>64</sup>

*Group 3* → **Health: "My kingdom for a nurse."**

During the period the residential schools were in operation, no matter how bad health conditions were for the general Canadian population, they were worse for Aboriginal Canadians. From the outset, death rates at residential schools were high. In the Qu'Appelle school's first decade of operation, 174 students (out of a total enrolment of 344) were, to use the school's term, "discharged." More than half these students died either at the school or shortly after being sent home. In 1887 the Battleford school, down to an enrolment of fifteen, lost two children to spinal meningitis.<sup>65</sup> In 1909, nearly all the High River school's sixty students were diagnosed with tuberculosis.<sup>66</sup>

Seven years later, an entry in the school's journal plaintively read, "A nurse! A nurse! My kingdom for a nurse."<sup>67</sup> A 1900 report showed that twelve of sixty-six former students of the Red Deer school were dead. Three years later, six students at the school died of tuberculosis.<sup>68</sup>

Disrupting a people's relationship with the environment, and increasing their stress levels, can leave them susceptible to illness and epidemic. In the 1880s, the Canadian government altered the Aboriginal relationship to the environment in western Canada in two profound ways. First, people who had long been hunters were confined to reserves where they were expected to become peasant farmers. Reserve housing was poor and crowded, sanitation inadequate, and access to clean water limited. Second, many of their children were placed in crowded, poorly ventilated residential schools. In these schools, students were subjected to the intense stress of separation from their families, and the requirement to learn a new language and new culture. The result was tragic: from the 1880s until well into the twentieth century, smallpox, measles, influenza, dysentery, and tuberculosis cut