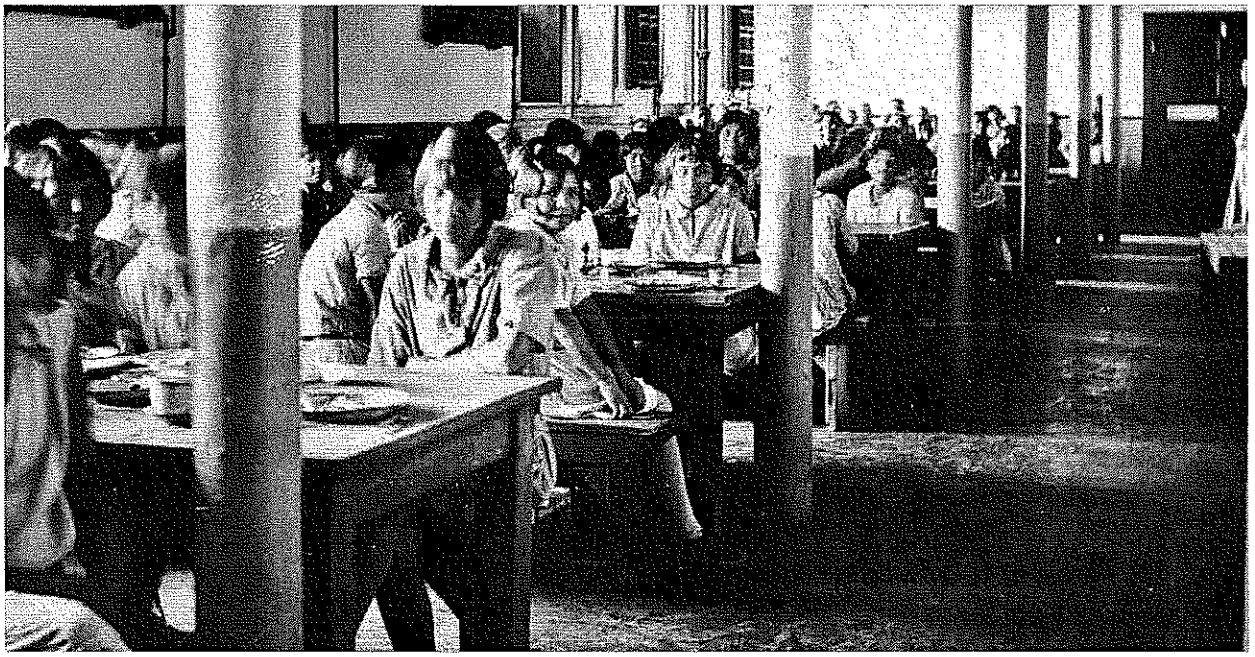
The Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, school dining room in 1900. In 1891, when the government accused the churches of spending too much on food, Qu'Appelle school principal Father Joseph Hugonnard responded that, at the end of a meal, students would complain "they had not had enough to eat and upon enquiry have found that it was never without good reason." *St. Boniface Historical Society Archives: Father Joseph Hugonard, Oblates of Mary Immaculate Fonds, SHSB 23107.*

Hunger: "The first and the last thing I can remember."

Frederick Loft, who went on to establish the League of Indians of Canada, one of the first Canadian Aboriginal political organizations, attended the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario, in 1873. Many years later, he wrote, "I recall the times when working in the fields, I was actually too hungry to be able to walk, let alone work."[96] Fifty years later, George Manuel, who eventually helped found the National Indian Brotherhood and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, attended the Kamloops school. Of his time there, he wrote, "Hunger is both the first and the last thing I can remember about that school.... Every Indian student smelled of hunger."[97] It was a problem that refused to go away. Mabel James, a student at the St. Michael's school at Alert Bay, British Columbia, from 1951 to 1959, was haunted by the same memories as Frederick Loft and George Manuel. "I always felt hungry. We didn't get big helpings of food. There wasn't much variety."[98]

Pauline Creeley recalled that at File Hills, "We were hungry all the time." Porridge with skim milk was the standard breakfast. "At dinnertime, we'd have some kind of mush, a stew of some sort, a pudding and a slice of bread, no butter. At suppertime, we'd have the same kind of mush, some vegetables.[99] Magee Shaw's memories of breakfast at Saskatchewan's St. Bernard school were of "porridge, no milk, no sugar and you were always sitting in silence in a big room."[100] Theresa Meltenberger, who spent five years at Lac la Biche in the 1930s and 1940s, recalled, "The mainstay of our diet was a porridge which was actually cracked wheat that sat on the back of the stove all night, ended up with a bunch of lumps and kind of slimy. I couldn't swallow it, so for the most part my



The dining room of the Edmonton residential school (sometime between 1925 and 1936). *The United Church of Canada Archives, 93.049P871N.*

mornings were spent in front of my bowl of porridge—to this day I can't look porridge in the face."[101]

Beans were such a staple of residential school meals that some Métis students in Alberta found themselves being labelled "mission beans."[102] Geraldine Schroeder remembered that at Kamloops, the younger students cleaned the dry beans and sometimes did not remove all the stones. "You know how you're eating and all of sudden you'd bite down on a rock and it would crack a tooth."[103]

Not only were they hungry, many students had difficulty adjusting to a diet that was different from what they were used to at home. At Lejac, Mary John "missed the roast moose, the dried beaver meat, the fish fresh from a frying pan, the warm bread and bannock and berries. Oh, how I missed the food I used to have in my own home."[104] The children coming to residential school had little exposure to cooked vegetables, macaroni, eggs, cheese, or processed meats. As a student at the Roman Catholic school at Aklavik, six-year-old Anthony Thrasher was not used to cooked food, and, along with other boys, would sneak into the kitchen to steal frozen meat to eat. When one of the nuns realized that the boys liked raw frozen meat, she used to give it to them as treats.[105]

Peter Irniq (who became the Commissioner of Nunavut), originally from Repulse Bay (now Naujaat), recalled the food at Turquetil Hall in Chesterfield Inlet on Hudson Bay as "terrible." Although school staff served Arctic char, "they left the guts in the artic char so that food just tasted horrible. And yet we had to eat it. We had no other choice but to eat the arctic char with guts."[106]

At the Fort Alexander school in Manitoba, Phil Fontaine, the future National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, often refused to eat. "As a result of that I started being called 'King'. King was something that wasn't acceptable in there. If kids didn't like the food it was thrown on the floor. I was forced to eat off the floor a couple of times and the kids were told to watch the King eat, so the King ate. I felt horrible and humiliated. Eating became a real psychological terror."[107]

The residential schools were meant to be self-supporting. For much of their history, the older boys at the schools spent a good part of each day farming. In some cases, the land was poor, the weather was bad, and the boys simply too young to farm successfully. But in other cases, to raise money, the schools sold a portion of the food the students had raised. At the Lytton school in British Columbia, butter from the creamery was sold with the vegetables and fruit the school farm produced, and at Carcross school, milk and eggs were sold to the local community.[108] In many schools, milk was separated and the cream was sold, leaving the students to drink the skimmed milk. One government inspector thought student health would be improved by simply banning cream

Staff and students making butter at the Old Sun School in Alberta, in 1945. *The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P7538 (1006).*

separators from the schools and allowing the children to drink whole milk.[109]

Not surprisingly, students began to fend for themselves. At prairie schools such as File Hills, the boys would trap gophers and roast them over open fires to supplement their diets, occasionally sharing these treats with the girls.[110] At the Anglican school at Aklavik, students were given muskrat traps. They were allowed to keep the money they raised from selling the furs, while the meat was served, roasted, at the school.[111] Kamloops was one of the schools where students supplemented their diets with dandelion roots, rosebuds, and green leaves. These were acts of desperation, not a return to traditional diets.[112] If they were burning weeds and leaves, students might throw a few potatoes in the bonfire on the sly, in hopes of getting a half-cooked potato when the fire burned down.[113] At the United Church school in Edmonton, prairie boys taught Art Collison, who was from British Columbia, to hunt with homemade slingshots. "When we were hungry we would hunt for rabbits and later roast them over an open fire before eating them. We also boiled the rabbits and porcupine in a one-gallon pail on an open fire and this was our Indian treat."[114]

For many students, the only memories they have of being well fed are associated with visits from their parents. Isabelle Knockwood, at the Shubenacadie school in Nova Scotia, recalled the relief she felt "every Sunday when Mom and Dad came to see us and brought food—mostly home-made blueberry pies—and we'd get to be a family for an hour."[115] At Christmas and Easter, George Manuel's grandparents would visit, bringing "deer meat and bannock and other real food you could get full on."[116]

Memories of illicitly taking food from the kitchen, the storeroom, or the garden run through residential school memoirs. In the 1910s, File Hill students discovered barrels of apples in the school attic that were meant for the staff. Over time, the students worked their way through the barrel. When the deed was discovered, the students were strapped and sent to bed without a meal.[117] William Brewer could recall risking a strapping by going down to the root cellar to take apples at Kamloops. "They were good. When you're hungry, anything's good."[118] Ralph Sandy echoed this sentiment: "In order to survive in that school we had to learn how to steal, too. If you didn't steal, boy I'm telling you, you'd starve."[119] In the 1960s, a group of older boys began to take food from the kitchen and distribute it to other students at the Kamloops school. According to a former Kamloops student, "We would break into that kitchen and lock it up the same way we broke in. We would get oranges, apples, and all these other goodies. We would sneak down to those kids, give them an apple and tell them to eat everything right to the core."[120] Even at far northern Aklavik, the principal kept a vegetable garden the students would raid, at the risk of a spanking.[121]

The Elkhorn, Manitoba, school kitchen staff in the 1930s. *The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P7538 (902).*

In 1904 an Indian Affairs study showed that students at the Regina school were not being fed according to the government's allowance, while the principal was buying luxury foods including sardines, lemons, oranges, chocolates, and canned salmon.[122] Although most staff did not eat luxury food, many students recalled that the staff was better fed than the students. John PeeAce, a former student at the Lestock school in Saskatchewan, remembered "walking past the staff dining room and noticing that they were having steak and chicken. It looked like a king's feast. We had baloney sandwiches."[123]

The quality of the food improved when outside inspectors and other visitors were present. A Métis student from Alberta recalled, "The welfare was coming this one time, they used to put tablecloths on the table and give us bacon and eggs to make it look like it was really good food, you know."[124] In his memoir of his days at the boys' school in Spanish, Ontario, Basil Johnston wrote of how, in the presence of outside inspectors, the boys got butter rather than lard, the soup seemed thicker, and boiled eggs accompanied the mush. When they explained to the inspectors that this was not their regular fare, they were not believed.[125]

At the 1902 inquest into the case of a boy who froze to death after running away from the Williams Lake, British Columbia, school, several students testified they had run away because the food at the school was poor. Ellen Charlie described the food as being "fit only for pigs, the meat was rotten, and had a bad smell and taste."[126] According to Christine Haines, "they gave me rotten food to eat and punished me for not eating it—the meat and soup were rotten and tasted so bad they made the girls sick."[127] The dead boy's father said his son had run away the previous year because "he did not get sufficient food and that they whipped him too much."[128]

These are not just childhood memories of children sick for home and their mothers' cooking. Dietary studies carried out by agencies such as the Red Cross in the 1940s confirm the students' recollections.[129] Furthermore, the inadequate quality and amount of food available at the residential schools was an acknowledged problem from the very beginning. In 1897 Indian Affairs official Martin Benson described the food at one school as "monotonous,"[130] and fifty years later, another inspector, A. McCready, found the food at eight schools inadequate in both quantity and quality.[131] In 1918 an Indian agent, J. Smith, described the meal at the Kamloops school as "very slim for growing boys."[132] The government not only was aware of the problems, it was aware of their continuity. A 1945 nutritional study of the Spanish, Ontario, school commented on the "unusually large quantities of beans which they consumed every other day."[133] During the 1940s, the Canadian Red Cross conducted a number of surveys of food quality at the residential schools, and concluded the food at the Chapleau school in northern Ontario was "distinctly unpalatable,"[134] while at Mount Elgin, meals were "simply appalling."[135] In 1956 limited rations at the Moose Fort school in northern Ontario had

Students at All Saints School in Lac la Ronge, Saskatchewan, carrying wood in the 1920s. *The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P7538 (231).*

led to embarrassing reports of children scavenging for food in garbage cans.[136]

Some students had more positive memories. Edna Gregoire, who went to the Kamloops school in the 1930s, said "the food was nice, we had home-baked bread, and they would make toast out of it, and they had cereal in the morning with nice fresh milk, because they had milk cows there. So I was happy with the food."[137] At times, improvements were made. In Alice Blondin-Perrin's opinion, the meals improved dramatically when the students were transferred from the dilapidated St. Joseph's school at Fort Resolution to the brand-new Breynat Hall at Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories in 1957. "The dinners were always delicious, with mashed potatoes, meat, meatloaf, or fish, and vegetables. I could now eat cooked carrots, beets, turnips, and peas which I used to hate the taste of, but now loved."[138] In the 1970s, Nathan Matthew, a Secwepemc (Shuswap) man, became a senior administrator of the Kamloops residence, and initiated what former students recalled as a "revolution" in the dining hall. According to Eddy Jules, "In three days he changed that place just like you would snap your fingers. We were having waffles and boiled eggs, bacon and eggs, you name it. We thought we had just died and went to heaven. Milk was real milk, you know. It was wild, it was totally wild, he was a godsend. To this day I have so much respect for that man."[139]

Work: "Worked too hard and taught too little."

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For most of their history, residential schools depended on student labour to survive. Until the 1950s, the schools ran on what was called the "half-day system." Under this system, the older students spent half a day in class, while the other half was supposed to be spent in vocational training. In reality, this training often simply amounted to free labour for the school. The girls prepared the meals, did the cleaning, and made and repaired much of the student clothing. The boys farmed, raised animals, did repairs, ran tailor shops, and made and repaired shoes. In many cases, the students were not learning, but performing the same laborious tasks again and again.

Government inspectors were well aware of this problem. An 1893 report on the Rupert's Land school in Middlechurch, Manitoba, describes the students as being simply "drudges to the staff."[140] Four years later, an inspector said the half-day system was "very tiring for any but the grown up pupils."[141] In 1918 the same official said students were "worked too hard and taught too little."[142] In 1902 it was observed that while the students at Mount Elgin were working hard, they were not learning any skills.[143] At Coqualeetza, British Columbia, in 1906, the school matron complained that due to a lack of staff, the children were being taken out of class to do drudge work.[144]