



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.<sup>136</sup>

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.”<sup>137</sup> 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.”<sup>138</sup> 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.”<sup>139</sup>

**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.”<sup>140</sup> Four years later, an inspector said the half-day system was “very tiring for any but the grown up pupils.”<sup>141</sup> In 1918 the same official said students were “worked too hard and taught too little.”<sup>142</sup> In 1902 it was observed that while the students at Mount Elgin were working hard, they were not learning any skills.<sup>143</sup> 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.<sup>144</sup>



The laundry room of the Brandon, Manitoba, school in 1946. *National Film Board of Canada, Photothèque, Library and Archives Canada, PA-048572.*

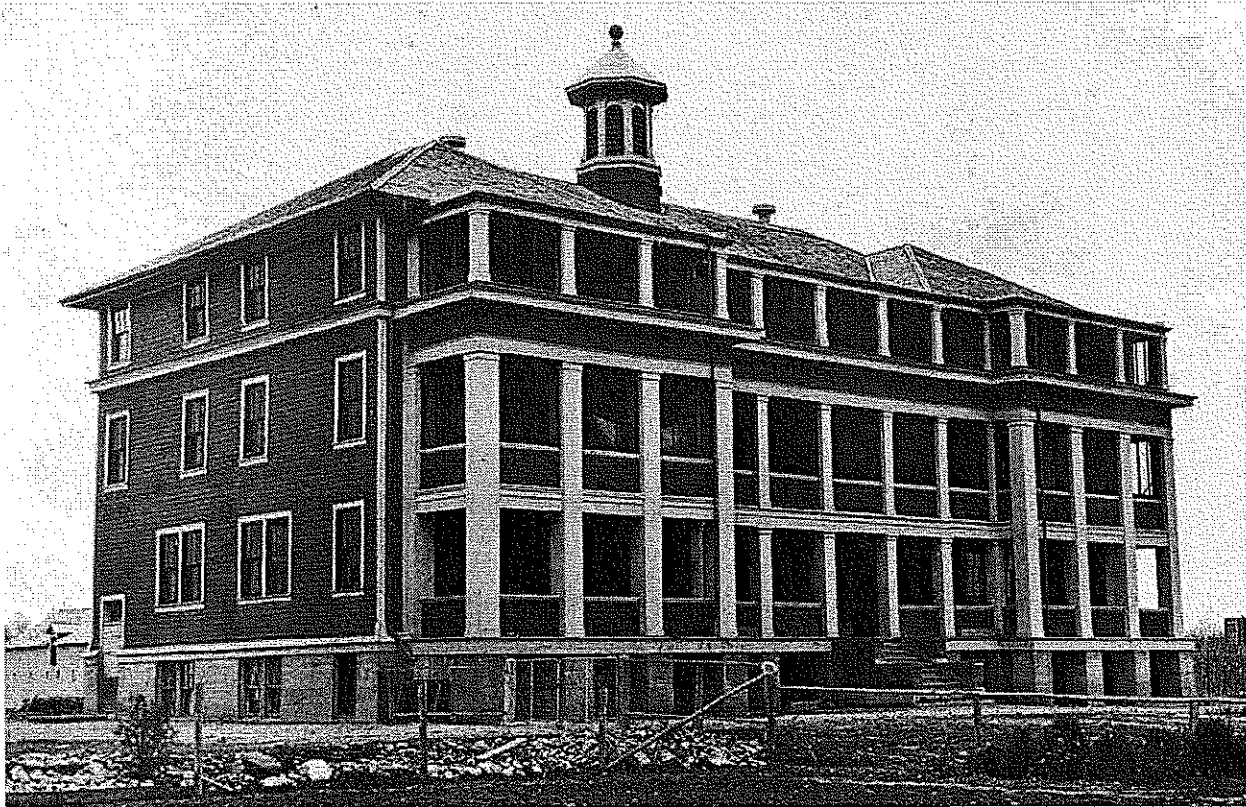
In Saskatchewan, Indian Commissioner W.A. Graham concluded that by 1916, the Qu'Appelle school had become little more than a workhouse. Over a forty-two-day period, the boys had attended class for only nine days, spending the rest of their time in the field.<sup>145</sup> Fourteen years later, he observed that at two Alberta schools, "The boys are being made slaves of, working too long hours and not receiving the close supervision they should have."<sup>146</sup>

The students were aware they were being worked, not trained. Of his days at the Kamloops school, George Manuel said, "Industrial training consisted of doing all the kinds of manual labour that are commonly done around a farm, except that we did not have the use of the equipment that even an Indian farmer of those days would have been using."<sup>147</sup> Clayton Mack attended the Alert Bay school in the 1920s. In addition to caring for the livestock, he "also helped look after the farm, helped with the potatoes, and helped cut the hay. I tried to go to school but there was not enough time. I worked most of the time. I went to Alert Bay for school and instead they put me in a job!"<sup>148</sup> Schools often competed for older students. When they could not get them, they put the younger students to

work. In 1945 Mount Elgin principal Reverend S.H. Soper pointed out that most of the students were under ten years of age. It was impossible, he wrote, "for these wee children to earn" what was needed to feed and clothe and warm themselves, and pay for repairs to farm equipment.<sup>149</sup>

The limited farm training the students received often was not appropriate for finding work when they returned home. For example, schools in British Columbia provided little training in fishing, even though many Aboriginal communities had active fisheries. Parents from northern Manitoba complained their children were not getting the training they would need to hunt and trap. As Martin Benson, an Indian Affairs education official, observed, the schools were actually making it harder for students to earn a living.<sup>150</sup> At some schools, it was not uncommon to keep female students on after they had graduated, until a suitable marriage had been arranged. During this period, they became full-time unpaid staff.<sup>151</sup>

The girls were worked hard as well. At the Lejac School, the girls spent most of the afternoons in the sewing room. In the 1927–1928 school year, they made 293 dresses, 191 aprons, 296 pairs of drawers, 301 chemises, and 600 pairs



In 1924 an Indian Agent in northern Manitoba said that a boy at the Mackay school in The Pas had been beaten "black from neck to his buttocks."  
*The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P7538-954.*

of socks.<sup>152</sup> From the age of fourteen, Rita Joe spent much of her time working in the kitchen at the Shubenacadie school. "For that, you had to get up at four in the morning. We'd bake bread and—oh my God—every second day we'd bake about thirty-five or forty loaves. Holy Lord! And we made soup in a huge pot that was very high and very round. We'd make porridge in the morning, in a big, big porridge pot and we'd boil over two hundred eggs. It was a lot of hard work that we did in the kitchen and the cook could be cruel."<sup>153</sup> Domestic work could be dangerous. At Shubenacadie in 1930, two girls were taken to hospital when a dough mixer they were cleaning was started. In 1941 a girl at the same school was hospitalized when her hand was caught in a laundry wringer.<sup>154</sup>

For boys, the one advantage of fieldwork was that they were not supervised closely. They could speak their own language and be with their friends.<sup>155</sup> Arthur Ledoux recalled that during the planting and harvest seasons in Saskatchewan, "we were often obliged to spend the whole day at our work place, usually a welcome relief from the drudgery of classroom studies. Some of my fondest memories to this day are from the time spent working with my friends at the residence."<sup>156</sup>

Despite the fact that the half-day system was brought to an end in the 1950s, many schools retained their farm operations for several years. Its legacy was lasting: poorly housed and poorly nourished young students spent their time doing back-breaking, monotonous work to support schools that could not afford to educate them or train them. The experience of one former student, Solomon Johnston, speaks for thousands: "We cut wood, picked stones—all the worst jobs. We didn't learn anything. We didn't know anything. I read only a little now."<sup>157</sup>

**Discipline: "He never should have gotten a licking like that."**

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In 1887 High River school principal Father Charles Claude reported that to impose order at the school, he had resorted to a system of military discipline, under which no breach of regulations went unpunished.<sup>158</sup> Those who violated the rules were subject to solitary confinement, the withholding of food, and, if necessary, beatings.<sup>159</sup> This regime was not out of step with an 1899 federal government directive that "corporal punishment