



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."

→ group a start here

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 Saulteaux-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

“to be going around seeking, and in many cases, begging, and often begging in vain, for pupils from indifferent, and often opposing parents.”²⁴⁹ Over sixty years later, in the fall of 1948, the principal of the school in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, travelled over 1600 miles, recruiting students.²⁵⁰

Often the only way principals could recruit children was to pay parents. In the 1880s, Father Lacombe offered gifts and presents.²⁵¹ In 1906 Brandon school principal Thompson Ferrier was giving parents gifts if they sent

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Mabel James, former student

their children to the school.²⁵² Fred Dieter's parents took money from the principals of both the File Hills and Qu'Appelle schools in Saskatchewan, before deciding to send their son to the closest school.²⁵³

Parents and grandparents often withdrew children from school if they thought they were not being well treated. When, in the 1870s, Charles Nowell ran away from the Alert Bay, British Columbia, school after being beaten and locked up for swearing at the principal's wife, the principal followed him to his grandfather's home. There, his grandfather, alerted by Charles that he was facing another beating, grabbed a piece of wood and chased the principal away. Charles returned to school only after his grandfather extracted a promise from the principal that the boy could be physically punished only if he had been very disobedient.²⁵⁴ Angela Sidney's father took her out of the Choutla school in the Yukon in its early years. “That

was because my sister died there, so my father blamed the school because they didn't get help soon enough.”²⁵⁵ When a child from the Old Crow community died at Choutla in the 1920s, the community stopped sending children to the school for twenty-five years.²⁵⁶

In 1922 the Mounted Police and the local Indian agent were drawn into a conflict between anxious Haisla parents and the administrators of the Elizabeth Long Home in Kitimaat, British Columbia. The death of a young girl had prompted the parents, already concerned by previous deaths and illnesses at the school, to pull their children from the school. The walkout ended only when the parents succeeded in getting a written assurance from the matron that “the children got all the food they wanted, that they would be well cared for, and be supplied with sufficient clothing.”²⁵⁷

In 1959, eighty years after Charles Nowell's grandfather protected him from the Alert Bay principal, Mabel James's grandfather rescued her from the same school. When the plane came to her community to collect students to return to school at the end of summer, she told her grandfather she hated the school. “He sent me to hide in the woods. He told the Indian agent I wasn't home which was true. I was hiding in a hollow stump. I waited until the plane left.”²⁵⁸

Sometimes parents fought back. When visiting his daughter at the File Hills school in Saskatchewan in the early twentieth century, Fred Dieter noticed that a girl's legs had been shackled together to prevent her running away. He bounded up the stairs to the principal's office, grabbed him, and ordered him to “Take those chains off that child.” He left with the warning that the principal was lucky to get off with a good shaking. “These are children, not criminals, and I don't ever want to see cruelty like this again.”²⁵⁹

Parents also resisted by campaigning for the establishment of a local day school. In 1921 all the school-aged children in the Whitefish River Reserve in Ontario were sent to residential school. The following year, the band petitioned to have a day school on the reserve. After being initially turned down, the request was granted in 1924.²⁶⁰ When the Delmas, Saskatchewan, school burned down in 1948, there was local controversy as to whether it should be rebuilt or replaced with day schools. John Tootoosis collected names on a pro-day-school petition, and the local priest, who had already threatened to excommunicate him for his criticism of residential schools, accused Tootoosis of doing the devil's work.²⁶¹



Pupils and staff of the Elizabeth Long Memorial House in Kitimaat, British Columbia, in 1922. In that year, parents pulled their children out of the school following the death of a student. *The United Church of Canada Archives, 93.049P458.*

Parents also wrote letters of complaint to Ottawa about food and health in residential schools, starting as early as 1889.²⁶² In voicing these complaints, parents had to overcome their worries that by speaking out, they would be making matters worse for their children.²⁶³

When Aboriginal people began to organize politically, criticism of residential schooling always emerged as a key issue. In Brantford, the Six Nations formed the Indian's Rights Association, which hired inspectors to ensure the public school curriculum was taught in the Mohawk Institute in the early twentieth century.²⁶⁴ In 1909 E.O. Loft, a former residential school student and future founder of the League of Indians of Canada, wrote a series of articles in *Saturday Night* magazine, in which he described the residential schools as death traps, and recommended their replacement with day schools.²⁶⁵ At its 1931 meeting, the League of Indians of Western Canada passed a resolution calling for the creation of more day schools to replace the residential schools. The following year, delegates called for improvements in the qualifications of residential school teachers.²⁶⁶

Parents also sought legal help in their conflicts with the schools. In 1921 the Grand General Indian Council of Ontario hired a lawyer to act on behalf of parents who claimed that children at the Chapleau school were

being punished cruelly and worked too hard.²⁶⁷ A former Shubenacadie student used a lawyer to lobby, successfully, to prevent his siblings from being sent to the school in 1936.²⁶⁸ Parents of students at the Birtle school hired a lawyer in 1938 because they believed their children were not learning practical skills at school.²⁶⁹ In 1943 parents of children at Mount Elgin brought their concerns over the behaviour of the school principal before the local justice of the peace.²⁷⁰

Students expressed their resistance in a variety of ways. Some, like Billy Diamond at the school at Moose Factory, Ontario, protested the change from a traditional to Euro-Canadian diet by not eating.²⁷¹ Others supplemented their diets with kitchen raids. At the Lytton school in British Columbia, Simon Baker convinced a group of hungry and overworked boys that the only way they could improve their rations was to threaten a strike. Baker told the principal that since they were being worked like men, they should be fed like men. If the students did not get an improvement in diet, Baker warned, they would steal the food. The principal complimented Baker on his honesty, and agreed to their demands.²⁷²

In some cases, students lobbied for changes. When supervisors at the Edmonton Methodist school refused to listen to student demands for change in the school



Parents brought their complaints about the principal of the Mount Elgin, Ontario, school before a justice of the peace in 1943. *The United Church of Canada Archives, 90.162P1167N. (n.d.)*

routine, the students rebelled. According to Rosa Bell, “They broke into the kitchen and threw pork everywhere. They also destroyed the supervisor’s supply of food, which was different from the food given to us. Some older boys brought us ice cream during the raid. We had never tasted ice cream! The rebellion was successful and a meeting was held to discuss the changes.”²⁷³

From the very beginning of the residential school system, children ran away. During the 1885 Northwest Rebellion, all the students left the Battleford and High River schools. In 1900 Tom Longboat, perhaps Canada’s most well-known runner, ran away from the Mohawk Institute twice. After the second time, he never returned.²⁷⁴ Sometimes, students engaged in mass escapes: in 1953 thirty-two boys ran away from a Saskatchewan school; a decade later, a dozen ran away from a school in north-western Ontario.²⁷⁵

Runaways often took tremendous risks. In 1902 nine boys ran away from the Williams Lake, BC, school. Eight were captured, but the ninth, Duncan Sticks, an eight-year-old boy from Alkali Lake, froze to death.²⁷⁶ In 1941 John Kicki, Michael Sutherland, and Michael Matinas ran away from the Fort Albany school; they were never found.²⁷⁷ Two girls drowned trying to get away from the Kuper Island school.²⁷⁸ In 1966 twelve-year-old Charlie

Wenjack died trying to make his way back to his home community from the Cecilia Jeffrey school in Kenora.²⁷⁹ Joseph Commanda died when he was hit by a train in Toronto after running away from the Mohawk Institute in 1968.²⁸⁰ In 1970 two more boys who ran away from the Cecilia Jeffrey school died.²⁸¹

Almost every child dreamed of going home. Some, such as Raphael Ironstand at the Pine Creek school in Manitoba, stayed only because they were too far from home.²⁸² Others thought about running away, but were too frightened by the punishments given to runaways. Donna Roberts, a Métis student at the St. Henri school in Alberta, said all the students were required to witness the punishment that was given to two runaway boys. “After that, people didn’t run away because they knew what they were going to get.”²⁸³ Geraldine Sanderson, who attended the Gordon’s school in Saskatchewan in the 1960s, recalled that she and some other students “took a pony from a farmer’s yard and rode it for several nights trying to get home. We hardly ever made it home, we were usually caught.” Once caught, the students’ heads were shaved. “It was awful. I felt very ashamed. We also had to scrub the stairs with a toothbrush.”²⁸⁴

One of the most dramatic forms of resistance was to burn the school down. There were over fifty major fires



Charlie Nowell ran away from the Alert Bay school in the 1870s after he was beaten by the principal. This photo was taken at the school in 1885. *George M. Dawson, Geological Survey of Canada collection, Library and Archives Canada, PA-037934.*

at residential schools. Students were responsible for fires at Saint-Paul-des-Métis, Alert Bay, Kuper Island (students burned the school down when holidays were cancelled), the Mohawk Institute, Mount Elgin, Delmas, and Lac la Ronge. In commenting on the safety of the St. Alban's school in Prince Albert, an inspector wrote, "More than one disastrous Indian school fire has been started by the pupils themselves in an effort to obtain their freedom from a school which they did not like." Given the large number of students who were running away from the school, he worried that a dissatisfied student might try to set the school on fire.²⁸⁵

Some students fought back. In 1902 a federal government inspector said that at the Red Deer, Alberta, school, the older students swore, disrupted prayers, and threatened teachers. The situation was so out of control that one teacher successfully prosecuted a student for assault.²⁸⁶ Near the end of her stay in a Roman Catholic residence in the Northwest Territories, Alice Blondin-Perrin found herself in a conflict with a nun, who was demanding that she and a fellow student get down on their knees and beg God for forgiveness. As the confrontation heightened, she grabbed a broom and swung it at the nun, narrowly missing her. From that point on, she felt that the girls were

treated more fairly. "That year I learned to stand up for myself and the other girls."²⁸⁷

Resistance was continuous throughout the life of the system. Parents lobbied for day schools, for on-reserve boarding schools, for better food, less discipline, more education, and less drudgery. Students looked for ways to frustrate their teachers, get more to eat, ease their workloads, and get back to their families. Much of their resistance was passive, ranging from dawdling when returning from chores to refusals to do assignments. But it could also be aggressive, as students and parents physically confronted staff, and even, at times, destructive and dangerous, such as those occasions when students burned down the school. Resistance may have led to improvements in the system, but never overturned the balance of power. This resistance—the refusal to be assimilated—was shown in the community, in the classroom, in the playground, in the kitchen, and in the fields. It was a central force in driving federal officials finally to recognize that residential schooling had been an irredeemable failure.