

the residential school system

Over the course of 113 years, “an estimated 150,000 First Nation, Inuit, and Métis children attended residential schools”. With the intent to assimilate the children into Canadian society, this system forcibly separated children from their families, in turn, isolating them from the influence of cultural traditions. Stories of those who survived, describe the psychological trauma of the residential school experience, which was often permanently damaging for generations to come. As Canada’s settler population faces its history of colonization and racism, a framework for truth and reconciliation has been established. The Estevan Art Gallery & Museum has committed to promote truth and reconciliation through the inclusion of local Indigenous communities as collaborators and partners.



Lebret (Fort Qu'Appelle) Residential School

The introduction of missionary-operated schools with the intent to assimilate Indigenous children began as early as the 1600's in Quebec; however, it was not until the 1830's that the first government-funded education system took hold. The first government-run residential school opened its doors in 1883 with the last school to close its doors in 1996. “With the passage of the British North America Act in 1867 and the implementation of the Indian Act (1876), the government was required to provide youth with an



Kent Monkman, *The Scream* (2017)

Monkman's painting depicts the large-scale removal of Indigenous children from their homes; forcibly carried out by the RCMP to attend Residential Schools across Canada in what was known as the Sixties Scoop.

education and to assimilate them into Canadian society”. Based on the framework of industrial schools in the United States under the recommendation of journalist and politician, Nicholas Flood Davin from the Davin Report of 1879, the schools more closely resembled labour camps than educational institutions.

After 1894, children who had been enrolled in a residential school (or had been placed there by government order) but were refusing to show up at school, or ran away from school were termed to be “truant.” Under the Indian Act and its regulations, they could be returned to the school against their will. Parents who supported their children were liable to prosecution. From the 1920s onwards, enforcement became increasingly aggressive, particularly after 1933, when all Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers were appointed as truant officers. The 1951 amendments also gave the provinces jurisdiction over Indigenous child welfare. This eventually allowed for the “Sixties Scoop” to occur, a process by which provincial child welfare agencies chose to remove children from their homes rather than provide community resources and support. The RCMP were often sent to transport children to the schools as an added coercive measure. If parents resisted, they could be arrested.

Assimilation and isolation were underway at the onset of the children’s arrival. The children were separated from siblings to weaken family ties and segregated within the school by gender. Their hair was cut short, they were stripped of their traditional clothing and given new uniforms, and in some instances, given new names. In an effort to prevent any influence from their cultural traditions, children were forbidden to speak their first languages, to practice Aboriginal customs and traditions, and in some cases to write home to family. Excessive punishments were administered if violations were to occur.

For Indigenous people, it is understood that learning is a continuous process. As indigenous children mature, enter adulthood, and grow wiser there is an obligation to share and pass on knowledge, creating a cycle of teaching and learning. The systematic separation and isolation of children from their families to attend residential schools deeply fractured this connection to an education centred around relationships of exchange and reciprocity. Education under government and church policy were mechanisms to colonize and assimilate. In sharp contrast to the “cultural pedagogies of discovery and interdependency” the residential school pedagogy was “based on authority, control, and force”.

Until the 1950s, the schools operated on a half-day. Students would spend half the day in the classroom and the other half at work; the boys performed manual labour and the girls took care of domestic duties. It was said to prepare the children to earn a living as adults, in truth, this had more to do with “running the school inexpensively than with providing students vocational training”. The final report in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded that due to the federal government failing to set clear goals for education, develop a policy for ensuring teaching staff was qualified and implementing quality curriculum, that the education provided by residential schools was inadequate.

Although the federal government policies did their best to “kill the Indian in the child,” it was through the resiliency and strength of the people that Indigenous cultures continue to thrive.

In addition to the sorely insufficient education and vocational training outlined in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many students also suffered abuse, disease, and death. In 1922, the living standards Indigenous children endured were labelled by the medical community as a “national crime”. Survivor accounts recite experiences of beatings, poisonings, electric shock, starvation, freezing, and medical experimentation. Children were often underfed and malnourished making them particularly susceptible to disease. Chief Justice Sinclair stated, “according to the (TRC), at least 3,200 Indigenous children died in the overcrowded residential schools. Due to poor record-keeping by the churches and federal government, it is unlikely that we will ever know the total loss of life at residential schools.”

Despite the atrocities committed to the indigenous communities, it was clear to the government and missionary bodies that assimilation was not working; Aboriginal culture survived. In 1951 the half-day system was abandoned and children were allowed to live with their families when possible. Integration into the public-school system began and many Indigenous students faced discrimination and struggled to adjust to a Eurocentric system. In 1969 the Department of Indian Affairs took control of the system ending the church involvement. The process to close all residential schools was slow and arduous with Gordon Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, the last one to close its doors.

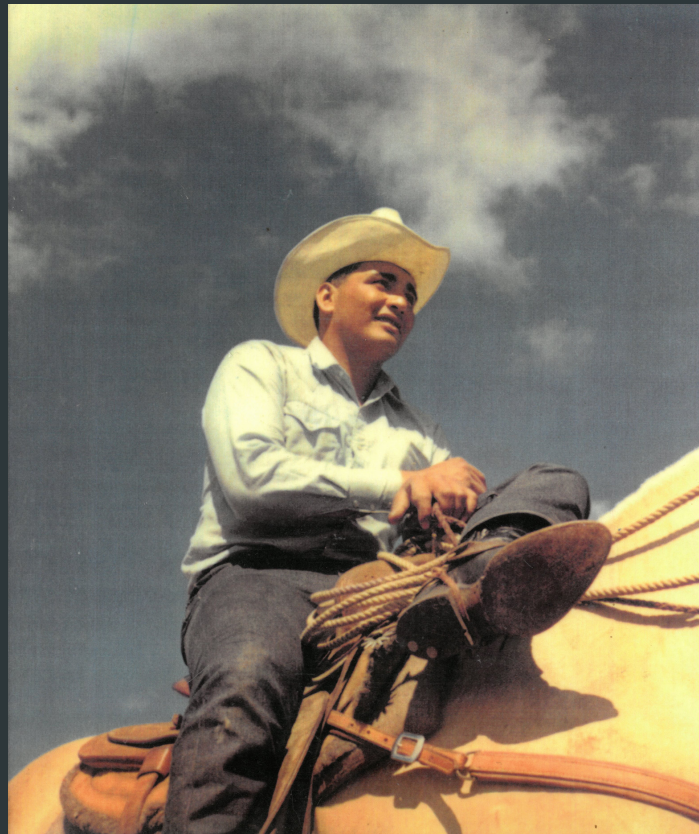
The closing of residential schools did not bring this story to an end. The legacy of the schools continues to this day. It is reflected in the significant educational, income, and health disparities between Aboriginal people and other Canadians. Although the federal government policies did their best to “kill the Indian in the child,” it was through the resiliency and strength of the people that Indigenous cultures continue to thrive. Since its closure, former students have demanded restitution, resulting in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement agreement in 2007 which led to the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2014. The legacy is also reflected in the intense racism and systemic discrimination Aboriginal people regularly experience in Canada. As stated in the TRC report, “reconciliation will require more than pious words about the shortcomings of those who preceded us.”

Bud McArthur

Bud McArthur is a negotiator for Pheasant Rump Nakota First Nations on Treaty 4 territory and co-author of the White Bear internal settlement agreement. He currently resides at Pheasant Rump Nakota reserve near Kisbey, Saskatchewan and remains an active force in the ongoing disputes over land claims. Bud has collaborated with us to re-evaluate historic and current events through an ethnohistorical approach. Bud has provided us with an oral history of his experience in Canada's Residential School System and its legacy.

In 1946, Bud McArthur attended the first of three Residential Schools throughout his childhood in Flensburg, South Dakota. Here, he learned to speak English in the first step towards assimilation; an attempt to eradicate his first language, Yankton Sioux. The following year at the age of six, he was sent to Fort Pelly/St. Philips Residential School near Kamsack, Saskatchewan. The harshest treatment he received at the school was a result of negligent/non-existent health care practices and violent abuse administered from the nuns and priests. At mealtimes, Bud was fed the typical menu lacking in nutritional value and void of cultural foods. He was also expected to drink milk but due to lactose intolerance, he was severely ill and furthermore punished for this perceived disobedience by the nuns.

Two years later in 1949, Bud attended Qu'Appelle Indian Residential School located in Lebret, Saskatchewan one of the first industrial schools to open and the last to close. The experience described by Bud, of the strict supervision, austerity, and brutal punishments can be likened to that of a provincial jail. The children that came from reservations furthest away were disproportionately victimized by the staff and often bullied by the children that lived in the area. Despite this and in congruence with Bud's relentless strength, he took up boxing lessons to manage the mental, emotional and physical challenges brought about by the living conditions and was awarded Provincial Champion in Junior 8. After nine years of enduring severe punishments, starvation, and negligence, Bud left Lebret travelling on foot until arriving one week later at his grandfather's in White Bear.



Upon returning to White Bear, he attended a Catholic day school on the west end. Due to the forced amalgamation of the Ocean Man, Pheasant Rump, and White Bear First Nations back in 1901, there was animosity between the children of the different bands and racism from the white children. After leaving the day school at 17, he launched an impressive career as a ranch hand, horse breeder, and riding saddle bronc in rodeos across North America. Years later, he earned a diploma in Range Management and another diploma in Agriculture and First Aid for Animals and began his 35-year employment with the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA).

Ten years ago, Bud won his case for the abuse and negligence he endured during his nine years in the Residential School System under the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history to date. Under the Common Experience Payment component of the settlement, he received \$10,000 for the first year of schooling and \$3,000 for each subsequent year. He also received payment under the Independent Assessment Process to resolve claims for serious physical and psychological abuse.





Image: Battelford Industrial School

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Re-evaluating Canada's
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