Métis Memories of Residential Schools

A Testament to the Strength of the Métis

Dedicated
to
Métis survivors
of
Residential Schools

by

Jude D. Daniels

Dylan W. Thomas

Cover image courtesy of
Grouard-McLennan Archdiocese

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FOREWORD

To Métis Nation of Alberta citizens,

In 2021, the stories of Métis people and their attendance at Indian Residential Schools (IRS) remains eclipsed by the singular focus on the impact of these schools on First Nations. Few realize that Métis people attended residential schools in significant numbers: eighteen percent of those who attended residential schools in Alberta were Métis or what represents approximately one in five IRS survivors. Across Canada, that number hovers around nine percent or close to one Métis survivor out of 10 survivors. Our participation in residential and other colonial forms of schooling is an important historical experience that has influenced our community yet remains largely absent from national discussions. In some cases, these stories are even kept hidden from family members. Yet, the impact of these experiences has been profound - not only on the families of these individuals, but also as a collective Métis experience that reverberates across generations into the present day.

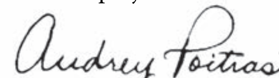
This dark chapter in our history is one that needs to be told - for the healing of our people and for those Canadians who remain unaware of this national truth. In sharing these stories, we can begin to address the intergenerational impact that this distressing legacy has had on our families and communities. For many Métis, these stories remain untold.

Our hope is that the stories shared in this book will help the children and grandchildren of survivors begin to understand the experiences of their parents, and how some of the family and community struggles we experience today are the result of residential schools.

I commend the survivors whose stories appear in Métis Memories of Residential Schools. Their courage and willingness to share this painful life experience helps to ensure this type of history will never be repeated. The strength and pride of Métis people endures and, the Métis survivors of residential schools, are exemplars of a resilient and determined nation.

I would like to also express my gratitude to the Advisory Committee: Sam Dumais, Dragonfly (Victor Giroux), Sarah Laboucane, Robert W. Smith, and Maryann Stepien, who set the direction for this project and offered their advice along the way, and special thanks to Jude D. Daniels and D. W. Thomas for their ability to listen deeply and respectfully, and for their thoughtful writing. Special acknowledgements to those who worked to create Ancestral Pain, Métis Memories of Residential School in 2003.

Finally, a special thanks to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation for their sponsorship of both projects.



Audrey Poitras
President
Métis Nation of Alberta 2021

February 29, 1880
Saskatchewan Herald

Mission Orphanages
Letter from Bishop Grandin
of St. Albert

I beg your permission gentlemen to the preservation and civilization of the poor Indians. That one hundred Indian, and halfbreed children be brought to the mission, when they leave, they will no longer be Indians, being able to become good citizens, earn their own living, and be useful to their country.

Should anyone doubt this, come to our orphanage at St. Albert, Lac la Biche, or Isle-a-la-Crosse, and he will see young men of Indian blood by birth, now quite civilized, and pretty good workmen. If instead of the one hundred orphans, I could receive a thousand. You will certainly confess, gentlemen, that it would be a great step towards civilization. I ask gentlemen that you sign the document I have handed to Rev. Father Le Duc Vital, St. Albert.

APPROVED

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CHAPTER 1
Introduction

This book is a collection of stories of Métis residential school survivors and is the second part of a project entitled "Ancestral Pain: Métis Memories of Residential Schools". The first part of the project involved a literature review of Métis students in residential schools which was completed in April of 2003. That report is a publication of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

No attempt has been made to analyze any of these stories. Firstly, the use of analysis would allow the reader to disassociate her or himself from the story. One purpose of these stories is to enable the reader to not only read of people's experiences, but also, to feel their experiences. Secondly, any analysis would, quite simply, rob the interview participants of their most compelling tool – their voice. It was decided that the best way to truly honour our residential school survivors was to give them back their voice. Voices that had been silenced, month after month, year after year, by the ugliness of cultural genocide perpetuated through the Indian Residential Schools (IRS). Therefore, the interviews published herein are, as much as possible, in the exact words of the Métis survivors of Indian Residential Schools. These stories, as you will come to see, are often grim, sometimes stark and always riveting.

The stories were gathered through oral interviews that were conducted between October 2003 and July 2004. The interview participants were asked a series of questions. The questions were drafted by the Project Advisory Committee. The interview was audio-taped and the audio-tape was then transcribed. Very little editing was utilized. The editing of the transcripts involved some construction of proper sentences, moving related content from one part of the interview to another so the story flowed seamlessly and deleting related information in another part of the story to edit out redundancies.

The interview participants are individuals who are currently living in Alberta or attended IRS in Alberta and are now living outside the province. The ages of

the interview participants ranged from 50 years to 90 years of age. Both men and women were interviewed. Some had attended IRS for only a few months, while the majority attended school on average of five years. One student attended IRS for twelve years. In total, the interview participants collectively had attended seven different Indian Residential Schools. All the interview participants attended a Catholic IRS, with the exception of one student that attended an Anglican IRS. While the schools were varied, there were many common experiences. It is remarkable the level of detail the interview participants retained – even after, in once instance, 75 years. With little exception, interview participants were given food that was of very poor quality and often there was not enough of it. Praying was required four times per day. Few received an adequate education. Males were unable to talk to females, including their sisters and cousins. The discipline was often harsh and sometimes abusive. Some students reported the use of a "steam bath" after which students were doused with ice water as a type of discipline. Many spoke of the use of a "clapper" and a strap.

For some survivors, this was the first time that they had told their story to anyone, including their own children. For most, telling their story was very painful. Still, for others, it was a cathartic experience. Rarely was the story telling experience a dispassionate one. Some had to draw upon all of their inner strength in order to finish the interview, while others were unable to finish. Some haltingly told their story and for others, it was something they wanted to do, but do so quickly. One interview participant was able to complete the interview, but later withdrew permission. Others agreed to an interview, but later chose not to have them published. While several interview participants wanted others to know who they were, others wished to remain anonymous. Those wishes have been respected.

It will quickly become clear to the reader that these powerful stories depict lives that were often shattered by the Indian Residential School system. The stories also clearly show that not only were the residential school survivors impacted by the Indian Residential Schools, but also their children and their children's children. Most often, that impact was negative, if not devastating. These impacts have often been referred to in the literature as intergenerational impacts.

At the same time, these stories exhibit a demonstration of strength arising from what was often a traumatic experience in forced assimilation. While the government's agenda of assimilation was not overly successful, it still had a significant effect on the identity and families of Métis students, and ultimately, on the Métis Nation itself. For we know that our families are the bedrock upon which our Nation is built.

It was decided to include some definitions to help the reader fully understand the story. These definitions are:

"Indian" means First Nations person.

"Clapper" refers a tool made of two pieces of wood attached together by a hinge.

"Indian Residential School" includes: Industrial Schools, boarding schools, homes for students, hostels, billets, and IRS with a majority of day students.

Brief History of Indian Residential Schools

Indian Residential Schools (IRS) tried several methods of teaching Indian and Métis children. During the time of the transition from industrial to residential schools in the 1920s, a vestige of the old school regime was carried over to the new IRS. That feature was the half-day program which existed until the early 1950s. During this period of time it was not unheard of to have Métis children attend IRS for 10-12 years and receive little more than a grade 1 or 2 education. Since the attendance of Métis children was not based on the per capita payment system, there were no federal funds given to the schools for the education and upkeep of the children.

For far too many children, this meant that they were used as virtual slave labor. There has been some documentation to suggest that the churches considered the Métis to be half-white and therefore they were already half-civilized. This apparently "justified" offering less education to the Métis students. Their labor went to financially support the school since much of what was produced in the farm programs was sold to business interests to support the schools and not used to feed the children.

With little exception, the Métis who shared their stories identified that during the time that they attended the school, there was no difference in the identification of who was a Métis and who was a Treaty Indian. One survivor commented that: "We were all the same that time—there was no such thing as Métis—that came later. It is a political definition." For the most part, the children were all treated the same way by the instructors and the school administration. Some noted that they were called sauvage (French for savage, wild).

During the period when most survivors in this book attended IRS (1920s-1960s) children were forbidden to speak their own language. Many schools forced students to pray several times a day and sometimes confess to "sins" that they did not commit. On some occasions when they did commit "sins", those acts were communicated back to dormitory supervisors, who punished the children, often very severely. This contradiction, that the confessions were, in fact, not confidential between the sinner and God, allowed children to

understand it for what it was, imprinted in their consciousness that they could not trust the church. For many, it led to lifelong alienation from the church. For others, the alienation was temporary as they returned to the church after deciding to forgive past transgressions. Still, for others, their experience was one in which they received an education and developed some useful skills that helped them in their lives after leaving the IRS.

While Indian Residential Schools were set up specifically to civilize and assimilate Indian people, they also took in Métis students when space allowed. Sometimes the Department of Indian Affairs would pay for their attendance at the schools on the per capita basis. This caused the churches to claim that Métis students were in fact Indians, in order to be funded by Indian Affairs. The churches focused on whether the families of students "lived the Indian mode of life." They went to great lengths to convince Indian Affairs that the Métis were hunters, trappers and spoke the Cree language. All of this was of course, true. By the late 1930s this practice ceased. Sometimes when Indian Affairs refused to pay, they were accepted as students and the churches paid for their attendance. Some parents, wanting their children educated and with no alternative, chose to send their children to an Indian Residential School. The parents who could afford it were required to pay for their children to attend schools. After the introduction of the Federal Government's Family Allowance Program, churches routinely garnisheed these funds to contribute to the children's upkeep in the schools. It was not until the 1950s that the Province of Alberta finally took responsibility for the education and schooling of Métis children. Prior to this time, there were few provincial schools in existence near Métis communities.

I can say no more about the experience of my people in Indian Residential Schools. These stories eloquently speak for themselves.

Judy D. Daniels
Ottawa, Ontario
October, 2004

CHAPTER 2

Magee Shaw, 71
St. Bernard IRS, 3 years
Red Deer
January 2004

I was about 11 years old I believe, when a couple of guys picked me up and took me to Grouard. I'm not sure why I went there. I stayed there until about my fourteenth birthday when my mom came to visit. She took me out for the day. We left there and went to B.C. to live.

While I was in Grouard it was horrible there, for all I can remember. The bathrooms were horrible—they were outside—they were filthy bathrooms. The food was terrible. The boys used to come across the road with the fish in big black buckets. It looked like they weren't scaled or anything—they were just black, big black pans. Breakfast was porridge, no milk, no sugar and you were always sitting in silence in a big room.

We were darning—darning these brown stockings—we wore woolen stockings—all the kids from about three years old to about 14 or 15. We sat in silence knitting these socks. If I ever spoke or said something in my language, the nun used that clapper on me many times, on my face. The clapper, she used to call us with it—if we were outside to call us to come in—she used that on me if I was a little bit slow. The nun cut my face once and made it bleed—it bled for days—she cut it with the clapper. It was very horrible being in there, you could never speak your own language.

We went to church in the morning about 5 o'clock when it was still dark. Every morning after church we'd come back to the school and then go and have our breakfast. We would sit in silence in the big room that we had there. All the kids had to sit in silence and if you ever spoke your language—like I spoke Cree—a few of the kids spoke Cree not all of us did, if we got caught, she used the clapper on both of us and not just me.

Q: What years did you go to school there?

A: I went there in 1944 or 1945 and it was in the summertime of June, I think. Being in Grouard, Sister Clara, was a very mean nun, she was very mean. When I became a young girl, I think I was 12 or 13, I started menstruating. I went up to her, all the girls were sitting in silence there in the big room and I was crying and I told her something was wrong. She pulled my hair and said "has the

Brothers been bothering you, have you been fooling around with the Brothers?" I didn't know what she was talking about and I'm crying and she got the scissors and just chopped all one side of my hair off in front of all the kids. I always remember that very clearly and it was Sister Clara that did it.

For some reason, I don't know why, but I always seemed to be a little afraid up there in the dorm where we slept. There were about ten little beds side by side in the dorm, about a hundred kids, I guess, up there and I used to crawl in once in a while, with the girl in the next bed to me. Julie I believe was her name, and I think she was an Eskimo girl. I'm not sure, but she used to move over and let me sleep with her. When Sister Clara came by one morning and saw me in that bed, she dragged me by the hair, put me back in my bed and Jules was moved to the other end of the dorm so I couldn't sleep with her no more.

It was a very lonely time, we did a lot of praying, I used to have to go to confession they called it, once a week. We lined up to tell the Father all your sins. There were no sins because you didn't go any place. You were locked up. What's there to tell? Then when you did tell him he'd ask you questions about your mom and dad. Every time I was in there confessing he'd give me 10 Hail Mary's, 20 Our Father's. "Don't you ever talk about those savages around here," he'd say…. that's my mom and dad. I told him I didn't have a father and he said "that savage" he used to call him that.

That stayed with me in my mind—this savage thing—even after I got out of the mission. It just seemed like when you talked about Indians, they were on welfare or drunks. I stayed away from them—I didn't bother with anybody because that's what I learned in the mission—that they were savages. When you come out and everybody's talking about them—they're drunks and they were lined up in the welfare office—their kids are on welfare. I just kind of stayed away from Native people as I grew up. I think it affected me being in the mission.

Still today I get nightmares like I'm upstairs somewhere, I dunno where and there's just a little hole that I look through. I can see people walking around down there and I try to holler through that hole and my voice won't come out. "Help, help, help me" you know, I try to say in that little hole to these people down there and then I can hear somebody running up the stairs and I always think it's Sister Clara and Sister Zelia coming up to punish me. That dream stays with me when I'm a little stressed, not feeling good, or upset about something. I get that dream but not as often as I used to; I used to get it all the time.

When I was there, they called my dad a savage and I thought that's why they put me in there—because my dad's a savage—it's his fault I'm in here. I never saw the guy again, my dad, but I hated him because it's his fault I'm in here. When the Brother used to stroke my hair and say what beautiful hair I had,

when the nun cut my hair, I thought it was his fault. You know, it was his fault, because she saw him stroking my hair, so she cut it all off so he couldn't do that any more. When I got out of there, the first thing I did was to get pregnant. When I tell the guy—he takes off—it's his fault. It just seemed like everybody was out to get me. What for?

You know, yet today I don't trust anybody really, I just don't. It just seemed like everybody you trust kinda hurts you or something. I'm close to my kids and my grandchildren, but it has affected me being in that mission. I think I was in there for three years and it was the worst time of my life. When I came out I stayed with my mom. She went and met some people and went to a party, I went with her. I wasn't drinking or anything but there the police came in and again they took me away, took me to Vancouver. I still remember the address and that's sixty or fifty-five years ago—800 Casseur Street, Vancouver. That's where they kept me for eleven months—they kept me upstairs for two months because at that time there was polio going around in Fort St. John—they didn't want me bringing the germ there. They pushed a plate under the door for me to eat—I'm just a young girl,—all these things happening to me. I think everything like that has stayed with me all this time. I'm lonely of course you know—you want somebody but it just seemed like I don't trust anybody—that's how I've been affected from being in the mission.

Q: How did that affect your relationship with your own children or others?

A: I don't think it affected me with my kids so much—it affected me with my relationships with men. It affected me and my husband because he started drinking. It seemed like I was picking guys that were losers. We'd get into arguments and stuff and it just seemed like I didn't trust anybody.

As far as my kids, we were pretty close, still are. I'm closer to my kids than anybody else in the world that I'll ever be, even my parents. We were very, very poor, my mother was very poor. She didn't have a husband and her common law husbands were all bums, useless good-for-nothing guys. They were all Native—they all drank and there was never any food in the house. When I got going with guys, it was never Native guys, all white guys. I didn't want to be around Native people because I learned that they were savages.

We're not affectionate—I'm not a loving person—I never was because there was nobody to love and that stayed with me. I do things for them and they know that I care and that's about it I guess.

Q: Do you think that your life at the residential school affected your ability to be a parent?

A: When I got out of the place in Vancouver, I was 16 and I got pregnant right

away and left home so I wasn't with my mom. My dad wasn't there anymore. My mom was alone except for her boyfriends. I was never with my mom too much after that and she was the only one that I ever talked Cree to. Yet today, I have nobody to talk Cree with, but I can still talk it, and that's 55 years ago since my mom and I talked. She and I used to talk but we were never terribly close. I didn't see her that often. I don't know if it affected me or not—it's mostly my dad that I kinda hated him because he was a savage—according to the priest.

Q: Do you still feel that way about your dad?

A: Well, he died years and years ago, but it just seemed like he must have been a savage or something. After I came out of the mission I was just never around anybody, so far as my relatives go, I was never close to them before I went to the mission. I still am not, we never phone each other, we never talk to each other, and I don't even know who they are or who their kids are. I think my way of life after I got out of there was more white than Native because I was with white people. My girlfriends were white, no Native girls. I never had anything to do with my relatives and they didn't have anything to do with me.

Q: What would you say about the quality of education that you received when you were in school?

A: The education I learned in the mission was to dislike Natives and I think that's the only education I got there. I was in church lots of the time and I learned how to say the gospel. I think it's called the gospel and I prayed. I prayed a lot every morning but now I can't, you know, I used to read that whole thing. Now I don't think I can remember any of it, but I prayed a lot.

Q: So you don't go to church anymore?

A: No I never go to church anymore, no.

Q: Have you had any counseling to help you deal with your experiences with the residential school?

A: Well, what's her name came and wanted my story, she wanted me to tell her my story in the residential school and that she wanted to be my friend. She said "I'd like to help you get over things that happened at the residential school." She came over and we sat down and I told her my story but I've never seen her again.

I don't see how anybody can help me with what happened 55 years ago, 60 years ago. I tried not to think about it myself. I don't talk about it to my kids. I don't talk about it to anybody. That's a long time ago—it happened and not just to me—it happened to a lot of kids and I try not to think about it.

The only time I think about it is when I have a nightmare—a bad dream

about being locked up—that's the only time I think about it. It's getting less and less that I have that nightmare…and that had something to do with the mission in Grouard. You wake up and you can't talk and you can't scream. I don't know if you have ever had that experience, it's an awful thing.

Q: What would you like to say to the church about your experience there?

A: I don't know—they say Christian people are good people—that's what they say—but by God my experience with Christian people was horrible. You know the priest and the nuns were horrible people to these poor kids some just two or three years old.

There was one little girl there, Maitom was her name and she was about two or three years old. They put us in this little room and what they call it sweat bath or some damn thing—they called it a steam bath and then she'd (the nun) hose us down with ice cold water. This poor little girl would scream standing in front of me—I'd pick her up and I'd cry with her—we'd both get splashed with ice cold water. That's not the way to treat people if you're a Christian… if you believe in God.

Q: What was the purpose of that steam bath?

A: To bathe, there were no bathtubs, we had no running water. We had outdoor, rotten filthy toilets that in the wintertime you couldn't even use them because the kids just went all over the floor. You had to go outside in the snow bank; there was no toilet paper, nothing. My bathroom is clean now obviously, that's another thing I learned, I always keep my bathroom very clean.

Q: What would you say to the government?

A: Well if I had anything to say to the government about that, it's that they wasted their damn money and they should never, never do that again to let kids go there and pay for the nuns and priest to look after them that's for sure. Never, ever, it was a horrible experience, believe me, it was an awful experience. You're lost—you're isolated and there's no kindness there—even the kids themselves were fighting.

Q: What would you like to say to your children about your experience?

A: I've told my kids about my experience at the mission and what happened to me there. I told them how horrible it was. They'll never go to a place like that because nobody would ever take them away from me. Even when I was young when we were very poor, nobody was gonna take them away and never put them in a mission like I was. They knew that.

Q: How about your grandchildren what would you say to them?

A: The same thing—they would never go—I would never let my grandchildren

go to a place like that. They would never go through what I went through. My grandchildren, I've got about 18 of them and about 10 great-grandchildren but none of them will ever go through that. When they start complaining now—you know they don't have this, they don't have that—if I'd have walked into your house when I was 11 years old—I'd say "holy God a millionaire lives here, you've got a phone, you got a toilet, a bathtub, a television, I'd say it's gotta be a millionaire who lives here." That's what I tell my kids now, they don't complain too much.

Q: Those are my interview questions, unless you have anything else to say.

A: I think that's about it yeah, it was a horrible experience, put it that way and I wish nobody ever has to go through that, ever. ■

Photo © Glenbow Museum

Red Deer Indian Industrial School, Red Deer, Alberta, [ca. 1890s]. Methodist school and students.

Anonymous, 63
IRS, 8 years
January 2004

I was two years old when I first went to the convent and my younger sister was ten or eleven months old. I was treated pretty well as a child but I didn't like the food. I didn't like eating that cereal because it looked like there were bugs in it and I used to get it kinda smacked and shoved down my throat.

My cousin used to help me and then she died. Anyway, as I got older I used to have to take care of another child younger than me, make sure she was dressed and ready for breakfast and everything. We had the same thing everyday, we never had toast, a girl used to come out with crusts of toast from the priest and the nuns and the kids would be all out there fighting for them or even orange peelings. We were hungry all the time. It seemed like the food was real greasy, soup with vegetables in it and we had to eat everything. Sometimes I would get sick to my stomach and then I'd get a licking after that for getting sick.

We used to all have to stand and these older girls used to wash our faces. A few times, there was a kid in front of me with a real dirty face, a mess coming down her nose and everything. They wouldn't even rinse off the cloth and then they'd wipe my face. I'd feel dirtier than I did before.

Another thing they used to say to me, "Oh, you have been such a good girl today she said, dear come up here for seconds" and I'd go to her. Then we would go out in the garden there and you would swipe carrots and tomatoes and stuff and try and hide them. If we got caught we would get a good strap. I didn't really get the strap as often as the other kids because the Superior, she really liked me. She used to take me out of the line up where the kids were getting the strap and she would make me scrub the nun's bathroom or stuff like that and give me some candies for me and my sisters.

Every morning we used to have to get up and go in the classroom there and sing to this priest "good morning Father, how do you do you do, we love you Father, we do we do we do" and he molested some of the girls. He never molested me but he tried to molest my younger sister.

My younger sister, she used to get a strapping every day from the Sister. She's dead now. She was treated so mean and I felt so bad, I couldn't do anything about it, I felt unloved. They would say "half-breeds and Indians, nobody loves you, if you'd been loved you'd be at home with your parents," and stuff like that, they would make us all feel very bad.

I used to know how to talk Cree a little bit but I've lost my language now. I still know how to talk a few words but the Native children were picked on more than white kids.

We had a lot of work to do. We had to work in the gardens weeding and everything in the summertime. They would send us outside in the real hot sun and we would get blisters on our faces and our arms were just swollen up with blisters. There was no shade and of course we had to pray six or seven times a day and go to mass in the morning. We had to go to confession and all we confessed that we used to steal vegetables to eat and that was a sin I guess, we thought it was then. Your thoughts were sinful so I grew up thinking that everything I did was a sin, so I sinned all my life I guess.

My way of raising my children, I tried to make them say the rosary and stuff, I even strapped them a couple of times, and tried to make them kneel down and say the rosary with me but they weren't interested in it. I let them go their own way after that and I joined the Pentecostal Church. They used to pick up the kids, take them to church, teach them how to baby-sit, manners, cleanliness and everything, so that worked better than the Catholic Church.

I am starting to feel kinda depressed right now talking about it because it was pretty hard. My mom would send us chocolate bars and stuff like that and we would share it amongst all the kids. We didn't always get the packages. I told my mom. The Sister said "I'll close that" and they'd write our names on it and then put it away and we'd never see it again. Even at Christmas time, we'd get toys and stuff, we'd be able to play with it for a few hours and then they would put it away and we'd never see it again.

My younger sister was treated the meanest. My middle sister, she was deaf in one ear, she fell off a bunk at school when she was two. They had her working all the time. She was always working in the kitchen peeling vegetables or working in the root-house. My mom would take us home for a while and I don't know, she would get fed up with us or I don't know what went on. She did quite a bit of drinking and we would wind up back in there again but she used to take me out most because I was the oldest.

The nuns hardly did anything, except this one nun, I liked her. She taught us all how to darn socks and stuff and do a bit of sewing but the rest of them were just mostly praying or making us work. We had a little playhouse outside there but they wouldn't open the door for us to play in it. We used to eat rose bushes and dandelions and all that stuff because we were hungry.

I was never thrown in the lockup but my sister was several times. She never did anything wrong. They used to make her go in the toilet with her bare hands, and pull all the mess out. She asked the nun what she should do and she said "well God made you hands. Use them."

Q: What was the healthcare like that was provided to you?

A: Oh I had a toothache and they wouldn't take me to the doctor, I would walk and walk the floors at night and I would have to be really quiet, like cry silently until finally my mom came and she took me to a dentist. I had trouble with my teeth when I was young.

Q: Have you been able to access healing services of any kind since you left the school?

A: A few years back I went to Sacred Heart Catholic Church and I got sweet grass because I hadn't gone to confession. I couldn't go to have communion but since then I finally went to confession after forty years so he had an earful. I would like to go back to church now. Yes, you know sometimes I don't even know what it is to pray because I prayed so much when I was very young that I think I did it enough to pray all my life, you know what I mean? When I do pray, I think of somebody that's dead or even someone, the people I don't like, and I say Our Father, for one you know, Hail Mary.

Q: What do you believe was the quality of education that you received in the school?

A: Well the welfare was coming this one time, they used to put table cloths on the table and give us bacon and eggs to make it look like it was really good food, you know. Then they were taking pictures and told me to go and sit with the sewing machine pretending they were showing me how to sew. The machine didn't even work. I learned though, but with those old fashioned ones. Here I was sewing away; the girls were dancing, playing the radio.

Q: How long were you in school and what grade level did you achieve?

A: I did grade 9 but I didn't write my Departmentals. I hadn't gone to school enough to learn everything.

Q: Did your time in the school affect your ability to be a parent?

A: My son he's in jail right now. He was on drugs and alcohol and they put him in for a charge two years ago. He thought he had it all cleared up. He went out and was in Remand in Calgary and somebody broke his neck. My youngest daughter is on crack cocaine, pot, and she drinks. I had quite a few parties at home as I was raising them although I kept a neat house and I made sure they had meals and that's one thing they can all say. I do blame myself quite a bit for my parties and my friends over and babysitting other kids and stuff. My kids used to get kinda jealous because I, well, when you are looking after somebody

else's kids, you wanna make sure they're first and extra special to this little stranger that comes into the house because I know how I felt when I was small. Then I raised my brother after my mom died and he was 12 and he's doing real well. He respects me and if I were ever stuck I'd just have to give him a call. My son stole my cheques, stole my bank book, and my bank card, cleaned out my bank book. I didn't even have enough money to pay my rent. That's twice he did it and I dropped the charges the first time because he promised to pay me back but he didn't.

Q: What you would like to say to the Church about your experience in the school?

A: I'd like, if I had enough guts, I would tell them that they should screen the nuns before they go into a convent to look after children properly. There was babies in there, they wouldn't let us in, we would hear the babies crying sometimes we would see them, they would be in their cribs all day, and here they had a beautiful yard outside where us kids that were nine and ten years old could have taken them out. There were enough nuns around to take a baby out and let them have a little bit of fresh air and a little bit of love and affection because I believe if you don't grow up with a little bit of love and affection, you have none to give when you get older.

Q: What would you say to the government about your experience?

A: They should look into things more closely, you know when the welfare workers would come and they'd put on a show. Why didn't they talk to some of the kids? But some of the kids would have been too scared to say anything anyway.

Q: What would you say to your grandchildren about your experience?

A: I don't think I even want them to know. ■

Anonymous, 65
IRS, 5 months
December 2003

Them teachers, talking to them, I learned quite a few things from them, like when something needs to be signed, I understand that. I don't know how to write or anything, I could have learned I guess, but I don't have any trouble though, like taking tests and that.

Q: Tell us about your experience and your family's experience with the residential school?

A: The only thing, I didn't like the basement of the building—they'd make it so hot in there and we'd sit all around—then they'd take turns and they'd call us up and then they'd just spray us with this ice cold water when you're sweating. Yeah, those poor little guys had to go in because there were some little guys in there with us. Those guys were hosed down with that cold water and they're just sweating. It was the only thing I didn't like in there really, those little guys would be crying. When I went back in January my dad took me out of there. My uncle—my dad's brother, helped with the trap line. After I turned 16, I started working because there were lots of sawmills around Slave Lake. So I worked in sawmills. As I got older, about 20, I think, I started working crushing gravel. The wages were only $1.25 a day. After thirteen years, I was getting $10.00 an hour.

Q: What was the education like?

A: I didn't go to school 'till I was nine years old. I only went there from September until near the end of January. Tell you the truth, all they did was give us more church like praying and such. I don't know how many times we would pray in one day—quite a few times. The only place we didn't pray was when we went to that other school. I don't know about the other kids or where they were going to school but we had a little wee building in one spot with the grade one's in the corner. I never got a licking in there, that's one thing.

Q: Did your parents or any of your family go to residential school?

A: I don't know. I guess they were more or less right in the bush. See my dad didn't have no schooling, or my mom.

Q: What was the food like at the mission where you lived?

A: It wasn't too bad, mornings was kinda awful. I wasn't used to that, to eat that, they used to cook that……?

Q: Porridge?

A: Yeah porridge, we'd have porridge once in a while but not all the time. The supper was good because they had their own cows there, they'd butcher the cows and that's what they'd feed the kids. It was usually lard and dry, hard bread and we had lots of milk because they'd milk cows there. It was okay.

Q: What would you say to the government today?

A: The things that they did—like when they first started this Treaty—everyone was supposed to be Treaty—nobody understands the Treaty. The government went and hired some guys to go around and buy these guys out. See some of the young guys didn't even know what a cheque was—they didn't know, maybe they'd burn it up—and they call that scrip. They more or less sold them guys out because the old people, they didn't know how to read nothing. That's how they got that scrip there, the government hired them, they used to go around and buy people out.

Q: I would like you to tell us the story you mentioned of the hospital.

A: When it started it was this sliver here (pointing to an old, still visible wound on his thumb), you can still see it. I was on a lumber truck and we must have hit a big bump—there was rough lumber in them days—I must have hit that thing there and got a sliver in there. It was okay for a while, didn't bother me. Then it got infected and the Sisters they started cutting my fingernails—that's as far as they cut it here—I got blood poisoning. In the meantime, I got pneumonia. I was really sick and they took me to the hospital in High Prairie. We passed some workers along the road who knew my dad. I guess they told him that they were taking me to the hospital. I was in the hospital when my dad came. Because the priest knew I was Métis, they put me there under my cousin's name because he was Treaty Indian. So my dad couldn't find me because I was there under a different name. He finally found me, and it was after that that he took me out of there. I'm 65 years old today. ■

Alphonse Janvier, 50
Isle-a-la-Crosse Residential School, 5 years
January 2004

I'm originally from the community of Black Point, born in Laloche, raised in Black Point. For the first seven or eight years of my life, I was restricted to living in the bush. My family lived off the land, basically trapping, fishing, gardening, raising cows and horses. The closest community from where I grew up was nine miles by lake in summer, and winter was easy travel. During freeze-up and spring break, travel was a little difficult. The only time that I recall going into the community was around Christmas and once in the summertime. However, a priest used to come visit us quite regularly. He used to invite church services to our small community; most of it was family with about six houses. My mother and father brought me up very traditional. The only language I knew was the Dene language. The church did provide some Roman Catholic services to our family and friends that came out, usually on Sunday.

I remember the priest talking to my parents about me going to school and it didn't really mean a lot to me what school was all about. I do remember too, my older brothers had gone off and I used to wonder where they went. Mom would mention once in a while that they had gone to school and I think it had an impact on my mother. As a result, I think it took my dad and the priest a little longer to convince my mom to let me go because I was the youngest. However, I ended up in a Métis residential school in the community of Isle-a-la-Crosse. It was probably the hardest experience in my life looking back on it. It did have an impact because you know, a seven or eight year old child put on a red plane—taxiing away from your mom standing on shore, crying. It seems like a long time ago, but it's also very fresh in my memory, and that was my very first experience of the feeling of abandonment.

I remember going to the residential school and how lonely it was. The very first thing I recall—it was like yesterday, how angry and hurt I was when we got to the residential school—I was put on this old barber's chair. I remember my head being shaved and all my long hair falling on the floor, and the way they dealt with my crying and the hurtful feeling was with a bowl of ice cream. The very first time in my life that I tasted ice cream was that very moment. In general, the residential school has done me some negative things, as well as some good things. I've tried to take the good things and tried to deal with the bad things that had happened in the years that I was there.

I've had some good experiences and I've had some bad experiences with employees—from the nuns that were there, to the priests, to the boy supervisors

to the school teachers—they've all had an impact on me. In general, my experience from that point on, I remember I felt comfortable and safe because I had two older brothers that protected me, they looked after me. There was quite a bit of rivalry between the residential students—the non-Natives, there were non-Natives there—there were some Cree students. In general we got along and most rivalry was with the community of Isle-a-la-Crosse itself. My experience in school was difficult because I did not understand the language—we were forbidden to speak our language in school—however, we were not forbidden to speak our language at the residence where we stayed.

The concept of Indian and white became a reality in my early years of school. I was taught that I was an Indian, at the same time being a Dene, was a very confusing experience for me for a long time. I started to understand the concepts of the various names that were attached to us by government and churches such as Indian, Métis, Dene and the various ethnic groups of Aboriginal people, along the way, but I've learned to adapt to most of that.

I've held books up above my head many times as a form of punishment. I've had to stand in the corner a lot of times or with a circle on the blackboard with my nose stuck to that for speaking a language that I did not know. It was a form of humiliation that was imposed by teachers, most of them were nuns. After awhile, you knew when to speak your language and when not to speak your language.

The other thing that I recall in the school which was very prevalent, at breakfast, lunch and suppertime was the loneliness you felt because of the way the residential schools were run. We were not allowed to intermingle with the females, and many of them that were there had some nieces or nephews. You were not allowed to talk to them because this playground had an imaginary boundary that we could not cross. We talk about it now and we wonder why we had to put up with that. We used to eat in the same dormitory with a wall dividing us and two doors and we used to wave at each other and that was the only way of communication with my nieces. That was an experience that I had to deal with and could never understand why that was allowed to happen.

In terms of education, I did get a good education up until grade six anyway. I went through the grade system, learned to write, read fluently in non-Dene language and I excelled. Things started to change in my experience at the residential school around 1967. That is the time I left.

The groups were categorized into what was known as peewees or little boys and the senior boys. We had certain rules for each specific group. I remember the little boys used to go to bed and you had to be inside the building by 7:00 p.m. and you had to be washed up by 7:15 p.m. and up into the dormitory by 7:30 p.m. and had to be ready for bed before 8:00 p.m.

That experience itself was something—having grown up in a traditional lifestyle and particularly in the summertime—it was really hard to be inside a building—you were asked to go upstairs while other kids played outside for

another hour or so. Then that group came in and so forth until the last group came in. You started to resent the things at that stage in your life about different treatment of age groupings was something that I had to deal with later on in life. There were difficult rules for all of us.

A daily routine at the residential school was getting up fairly early, I think it was at 6:00 p.m. in the morning, you washed up, you showered, there weren't many showers, some of us didn't get the opportunity to shower but we washed up. You had to be at church, there was always the morning service, a daily routine. You went home and you went to breakfast in a different building, which was at the convent. All three meals involved prayer and you went back to the residential school, made your bed, got ready and went to school.

The first thing you did when you went in there was, you sang O Canada, said the prayer, and at dinner time went back to the convent, did the prayer, ate, went back to school—same thing. At one o'clock you did your prayer and we were dismissed at three o'clock. There were certain chores that needed to be done at the school and also at the residence.

There was an evening service with time spent on a minimal amount of sports. In the wintertime we skated and played hockey, and in the summertime we played ball. Other than that there wasn't too much other sports going on. That was a daily routine in the residential school.

Some of the experiences that I had as a residential student, when I think back, make me angry about the amount of the control the church had. An example was when we used to get letters from my mom—my mom never wrote but I know somebody wrote letters for her—she used to send us the odd pair of moccasins—I also remember she used to say, "we sent you some money and she'd put an amount in there," but I've never, never ever seen the money. The funny thing about it, which I thought was normal at the time, was that all our mail was opened and there was a canteen that we got credit until your money ran out.

I realized later on that the Hudson Bay did that, and so did a lot of the other businesses in the north. Those are some of the experiences that I have had in terms of the control that people had over you—the powerlessness you have as a child growing up in an environment—that's known as a residential school situation.

I wanna talk about physical and verbal abuse. I experienced abuse in terms of physical abuse. I thought at that time it happened—I didn't think there was a call for it—I still think there was no call for it.

I was in the fourth or fifth grade. We used to go out in the summertime, usually around May or June out to what's known as the Point, where there's beaches and little creeks running there. We used to have fun and I had a pair of wraparounds and what's known as gum boots today. I specifically remember one of the rules was that we could not get any of our clothes wet. We went out there and we were trying to

catch some jack fish in this little creek. The jacks were running and it was obviously in the shallow waters and I remember slipping in and one foot getting wet. The thing about it was there were no supervisors around and I remember getting really scared. I remember taking my moccasin, my sock, and my gumshoe off and drying them. When we went back—late afternoon before supper—my moccasin, sock, and gumshoe were dry and didn't see any damage myself.

We went for supper and then went back to the residence. We were out playing ball—we used to play this game called "Indian baseball" with a rubber ball. I heard my name announced over the PA system and that was a bad sign. Getting your name announced over the PA system—I remembered right away that this was about my wet moccasins. I did not respond and finally a couple of the senior boys came and got me. I went back into the residence and I remember going upstairs. The supervisor instructed me to take my clothes off and I received a lashing with a conveyor belt which was known as "the belt." I remember receiving this on my bare body. It was explained to me the reason I was strapped was that I broke the rule; I wet one of my moccasins.

To this day, I still think that there was no call for that and I think it was a very strict way of enforcing their power over our lives. Those are some of the things I think about and get angry about at times. Verbal abuse was very prevalent in the schools. I grew up with the concept of Indians being very bad people. I remember in my earlier years, we were taught that all Indians did was raid farmhouses, kidnap women, and burn houses.

I've never experienced sexual abuse, but when I think about it, I know sexual abuse took place at the boys and girls residences. I've heard girls that were there talking about it. I don't think it happened among all supervisors but I know it took place and thinking back about it now my brothers when I first got there we had to sleep in different sections. I was in the little boys section, another brother was in the middle boys section and my older brother was in the seniors when I first got there. I remember my brother made me take a bed right next to his, as there were different sections with no dividers. I remember that, and I think back about it, and I guess I'm gonna have to ask him one of these days if that was the reason.

One of the things I remember about some of the resident supervisors was at night, some of the supervisors would take boys out of their beds and take them into the back room where they slept and I remember this happening with a couple students. At the time, I did not realize it was sexual abuse but when I think about it that's what happened. I know there was two particular individuals, and I know for a fact that they have come forth and one of them I know is receiving counseling at the moment for the abuse that they had received.

In terms of our chores, we did a lot of garden work, we had to. The church grew its own produce in order to cook a wider range of meals. We did a lot of potato

fieldwork. There were some cows that we had to attend to, I remember that.

I would like to talk about culture and language. The school did not allow us to speak our language which I could never understand why—later on in years I understood why they were doing it—they were trying to assimilate us.

In terms of culture, I have a lot of resentment towards the church and government, not so much towards the people that were involved in doing it. I was raised very traditionally in the country but a lot of that was taken away. I was told that those ways were dying and those ways were no longer prevalent in our society. At a point in my life I started to believe that it was true and I turned away from my culture, even my own language. There was a stage in my life where I thought I shouldn't be speaking my language and that had a direct impact on my children who lost their language because I chose not to speak fluently with them all the time, and that makes me sad sometimes.

I regained a lot of my culture you know, the tradition of the medicine that's out there, the berries….I was being taught that as a child, but that was never given back to me. I lost a lot because of the residential school syndrome and sometimes I really have a lot of hard feelings towards the church. One of the things that I really, really resent is the loss of culture.

I grew up in a situation where love was very, very strongly promoted. My mom hugged us a lot and my dad hugged us a lot, they spent all their time with us. After I left home, I don't ever, ever recalled ever being hugged or ever being told I was loved. I was told that God loved me. I always wondered who this God was—cause we Dene have our own God.

As a result, in my relationships after having left there was really, really hard. I did not trust people very much. I had a hard time getting close to people because the fear of abandonment is always there. I still struggle with it from time to time, even today, but I've learned to deal with it as I got older.

When I was growing up, it was made clear that my mother had a lot of power in our household, she controlled, was not controlled but she did have the power. Mom was like a silent power and there was a lot of respect between my mom and my dad and each had their own responsibilities in terms of our upbringing. What the church instilled in me was that the male figure in the Roman Catholic system had all the power while the female figure was to be a servant to the male. That was really, really conflicting and that showed up in my relationship, especially in the early stages of my life.

It wasn't until my late twenties, that I started to realize that I needed to move away from what I had been taught in school and try to go back to what we as Dene people believe. As a result of that I started changing my ways in terms of my responsibility and today I try to balance that responsibility when I'm in a relationship.

Another thing I want to talk about is, as a result of my residential school experience, I became very angry towards the establishment in two ways. It dominated my life and at the same time, the education they provided me contributed to that anti-establishment sentiment. Later on in years because they gave me a good education, I carried that education further and went to university.

As I read more of the literature and the history of what happened to Aboriginal people right across Canada, I understood that it was no different from what happened to us in our small little world of northern Saskatchewan. I became more and more angry. It goes from the Hudson Bay having their control over our people for economic purposes and I felt that was very, very unfair.

The churches having done what they did to our people and it's sad to this day that the churches have so much control over it. The church structures have changed and it's hurtful and hateful at the same time. It makes me angry that we are left to deal with a lot of the turmoil that has taken place because of those things. I wanna give you an example here. My parents grew up under a Roman Catholic regime and they strongly believe in it. They converted—it was their choice—from the traditional. My dad was born in the late 1800's and my mom was born early 1900's and they both experienced the traditional Dene way as well as the Roman Catholic Church. The church had such a very big impact on them.

My other family also experienced the same thing. The church played a prominent role in their lives and at the same time, having learned about our contact with the Roman Catholic Church in 1849. I remember reading that one of the things that the church did was that they burned our sweat lodges and burned our drums. As a result the Dene of the Laloche, Patuanak and all those other Dene communities, have lost the use of the sweat lodge and the drum, although it's coming back today.

There was a time that people shunned their own culture but about a year ago, I had an experience that made me really angry and sad at the same time because of what the church did. My sister who was very religious in terms of the Roman Catholic faith passed away and there was no resident priest in the community. My nieces asked me to see if we could recruit a priest to do the funeral services for our family. I contacted a couple priests and one of the priests I contacted was a priest that had spent 33 years in our community of Laloche. He refused to go to Laloche to provide services. I got angry at him and there was a lot of anger in that very short conversation that we had.

I contacted another priest from Fort McMurray which is only a half an hour flight across the border from our community. They also had a lot of influence in the community as far as church goes but their answers, their excuses for not

going to Laloche to provide services for my sister's funeral was that the church government changed: where they were not allowed to go from one diocese to another to provide services. I remember making a point because I was so angry, at one of the priests saying "when you made contact you burned our sweat lodges, you burned our drums, you threw our drums in the same fire and you converted our people. When we need you, you are shutting the door to us."

That made me so angry and one of the priests used an excuse of "I'm sick so I cannot go even if I wanted to." I remember saying to one of the priests, "why don't you just die too!" At the time I said it, I didn't, you know, I didn't feel sorry but after I thought about it, it was a very nasty thing for me to say to a human being because of what happened to me, and the anger that that created because I really feel like they abused us in terms of converting our people to a church system that we didn't know if there was a reality to it or not.

My education was very forceful; you learn how to read, to write and how to do math in a repetitive education system in residential school. You learned it by heart which was a good experience and I have to agree with it, it was a good experience. In 1967 after I was in grade 6, we came back in the fall, it was just me and my brother that were there. I wanna explain the reason why I ended up leaving the residence. We went for our supper at the convent—you had to go by the hospital coming back—there was a guy we knew from Laloche sitting on the steps because he was a patient at the hospital. So my brother, another student from Laloche, and me, stood and visited with this guy for fifteen, twenty minutes, tops. I don't recall exactly how long but everybody had returned to the residence.

When we got back to the residence, a supervisor was waiting for us at the door and I was the first to walk in the door. I remember him grabbing me around my neck and chucking me down the stairs. As a result of that, he and my brother got into a fight. From there on, I knew that I could not exist in that place anymore. We made attempts to run away a couple of times and finally my dad picked me up and I left the residence and that was in the fall of 1967.

After that I went to school in Laloche for a couple of years and then headed to Prince Albert to do my high school. I did my grade 9 and 10 in Prince Albert (staying in a boarding home) and I loved it. There were a lot of racial issues that I dealt with in Prince Albert but I did like going to school there. An interesting thing was, I finished grade 10 and I was to start grade 11. One of the counselors I remember asking me what I wanted to be in life, and I told that I wanted to become a lawyer and that was my dream to get into law. I remember him saying that "you're better off going to become a mechanic" and he talked me into going to a technical school the following year. I went to an eight month pre-employment training course as a mechanic, got a job, worked in that industry

for about five years until I realized that that's not what I wanted to do. I realized it long before that but I did not do anything about as a result of the residential school syndrome.

I chose to work in the community to improve things and I started bucking the establishment to make changes for our people in the north, particularly in Laloche. I made the decision while I was up there for a while, to return to school and went to university and received my Bachelor of Education degree. I have been working in the field of education in adult, elementary and secondary schools to improve the lives of our people. ■

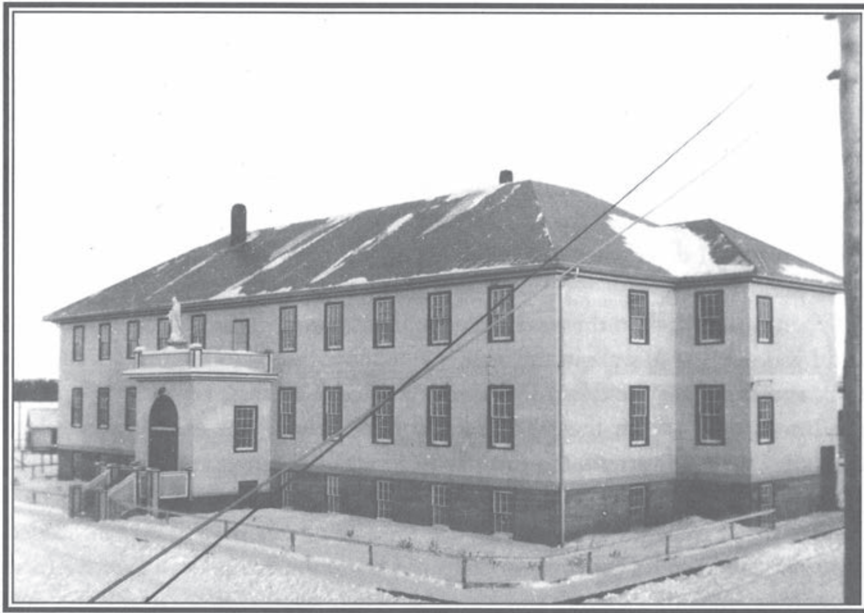


Photo © Glenbow Museum

Roman Catholic residential school, Sturgeon Lake, Alberta [ca. 1946].

Theresa Meltenberger, 79
Lac la Biche IRS, 5 years
January 2004

The reason I went to that particular school (Lac La Biche Mission) was that my parents had moved into the bush. To my mom, education was her main priority so there we went. This residential school was seven miles from Lac La Biche, but we were 20 miles from Lac La Biche. We went on the old train and a Brother picked us up there. This was in November in this sleigh and we arrived at the school, the mission. It was my first time away from home and this was all very traumatic in a way.

There was no electric lights or anything and a Sister met us at the door with a little coal oil lamp and we were to follow her and go upstairs. We get to the dorm, boys on one side and girls on the other and this was a big dorm. There was these little—we call them space heaters there—and that's what was heating the dorm. I'm put in one end and my sister put in the other end and this was kind of hard for me to accept. The Sister told me, "You'll go where I tell you and your sister is not gonna protect you." Protect me—from what?

Okay, so first thing in the morning bright and early, we get up and we're supposed to wash. The place where we were supposed to wash was a table, it had basins on it and these enamel jugs. The only thing with the water was that it was frozen, so it was kinda hard but we managed. Consequently, because of the lack of facilities and by the time we got home, my mother couldn't wait to scrub us clean because all we washed were our faces, and also they deloused us.

As far as the food was concerned, I don't mind eating fish as long as it's not rotten. 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 kinda of slimy. I couldn't swallow it, so for the most part my mornings were spent in front of my bowl of porridge—to this day I can't look porridge in the face.

The healthcare, well we were expected to be healthy. One time I was sick and I was allowed to be in bed and I had a hell of a fever and the Sisters were standing by my bed. They said, "You know maybe we shouldn't have made her eat that soup yesterday." It was sour, so there was nothing fancy about it, but our parents always sent us something.

Well we used to pick a lot of fruit in the summer and make nice canned strawberries and the whole bit and cakes. The only problem there was that you only got to eat dessert twice a week, which were Thursdays and Sundays. Needless to say, I very seldomly got to eat dessert because I was never as quick as I should be.

During the meals because I read well or because I didn't eat often, my chore was to read to the rest of the students. This reading consisted of the Lives of the Saints, so I'm well versed in the Lives of the Saints now. My mother called me Teresa. I guess hoping that I would emulate her but I somehow didn't manage that.

Recreation was what we made it, and we didn't have to be entertained like kids are nowadays. In the winter we built a snow fort, we had snowball fights and we played in the snow always. We had a nice yard—it would put a lot of igloos to shame. Then we had made a whole bunch of snowballs hoping that we could somehow miss somebody and hit one of the ladies there, but it never happened. Then in the summertime, we were by a lake, one of the nicest lakes, you know, before they polluted that nice beach. We'd build a raft, and in retrospect, I wonder how they got away with the lack of safety and that. You know, we'd take off on the raft and the raft was a way of our getting even with the one Sister we didn't like that well. It was driftwood, one side we'd had a big log and on the other, the logs got smaller. We built a seat on there for the Sister and we'd pole. Because of that large log on one side, we just moved and it upended our raft and I can still see the Sisters, they had this big starched thing around their glasses hanging on. "Oh we're so sorry Sister" and you know, we weren't, which taught us not to be truthful all the time, I guess, but we enjoyed it.

As far as abuse is concerned, to be doing without proper food is physical abuse. You know, not that there wasn't a lot of food there because they had a big farm, with cows, and big gardens. We'd pick in the fall, we picked and picked but we seldom saw any of it and we survived. I mean, I looked like something that came out of a concentration camp after the first few months but maybe it was intended to be that way.

All in all it was not that bad compared to what some other places had to be, I like to keep telling myself. For the times, it was, you know, children you feed them to keep them alive but food was not in, you know. It was the French Sisters who kept telling us how lucky we were because at home, meaning France, all they had most of the time was an onion and a crust of bread and they had to eat this behind the stove.

As far as the quality of education, I think we had one Sister who had a teacher's certificate. Not that they were illiterate by any means, but to this day I can spot a spelling error a mile away, and that spelling to me is vocabulary.

Once, we were at the Christmas dinner here with a whole bunch of us about my age and just about every one of us had gone to a residential school. You know, I could listen to another long story that's identical to mine. The way they taught us things in those days was that children didn't really need to be well fed you know, just keep us alive so we could work.

I noticed one thing when I went to that mission centenary this summer the young people, middle aged people were looking at the mission with wonder. We remembered those things were done and I noticed that the people my age none of them thought it was any great shakes. You know because we were viewing it from when we were there but to these kids it was all like visiting Chinatown or something. You know it was "oh, that's what they did" and I got to talking to one there and I said "you seem to feel the same way I do." She said she did. I wish they hadn't shoved it down our throats that we were lucky to get something to eat because at home you most likely don't have anything.

Christ, we had more vegetables and fruit that we picked and my dad got you to pick and we made ham and we had a lot of deer meat. We always had a deer hanging—if you wanted a steak—it forms that dry part on it—and it doesn't go bad—and boy, talk about tender and delicious!

Q: Do you know how long the mission existed, when they closed?

A: I would say maybe 15-20 years ago it closed because you know things are different with transportation. The students there, some came from Fort McMurray. A lot of the students there lived around there and they were day students so there a real mix of people. Some prominent men in Lac La Biche had been there because their parents wanted them to learn French and basically we had good education.

We had no aides that they have nowadays but you learned to spell by repetition, you learned to read. Now as far as reading is concerned, all our books were French-Canadian oriented. Consequently, the view we got of the history of Canada was not the same as the one I got when I was in high school, later you know. It was just like a different country and everything.

I never did like being called "*les sauvage*." In fact we lived in some place, Sturgeon Falls, Quebec, where they had a big building, Indian Affairs, and carved on the top was "*Bureau des Sauvage*." What do you think a *sauvage* is? It's somebody who is going to either behead you, boil you or something and they finally had to take that down.

As far as self-image is concerned, it's hard to find people who don't have Indian blood in them. Quite frankly, where I come from and I don't know how they measure it or what but you know, the person was dark or tanned or something Bois Brule, you know, and so and in those days they were Métis people. There was a hotel in Lac La Biche they were not allowed into the hotel, you know, because of the fact that they were Native I guess, which didn't make sense but anyways. Thank God my children inherited it, they don't know the word, well, they know what the word, "being looking down on other people" or what's the word I'm trying to.... that race doesn't matter to them, you know.

One day when we were down, my son was sitting on the steps crying and I said "well, what's the matter?" "I don't wanna be an Indian no more" he said. "What do you mean you don't wanna be an Indian no more?" What the problem was—is that they were playing cowboys and Indians—and the Indian always got shot.

Q: Did your time in the mission school have any long term impact on you as an adult?

A: I was aware of it one day we were driving by there with my husband and my kids. They had never seen the place and John (that's my husband) said "well, can we drive up?" I'm standing there and thinking of those fire escapes and the honey buckets and the picking veggies and hauling wood and that and not getting enough to eat.

So I'm standing there and I said, "Burn the son-of-a-bitch!" My husband says "mother?" And then Liz introduced me to one of her sisters-in-law. She said "Well, we're raising money to restore the place" and I said the same thing to her. Liz said to her sister-in law, "I told you what she'd say." You know, in those days there was no monitoring, there was no school inspector and you had no one to go to.

Well we had some good times there and I learned all about rafting and I learned how to make soap, great big vats of lye and I learned how to skin fish. We got lots of fresh air with the fresh air and outdoor life, which I prefer to anything else. It certainly has given me an understanding of life and I don't want to judge this by today's standards because the nuns most likely figured they were doing God's work you know. So who am I to assess blame to them, you know, but it took me a long time before I could come to terms with it. I think often it colors my comments and stuff.

Q: So what message would you have for the church today?

A: First of all, clean up their act, it's scary. You know it's kinda hard to preach to somebody considering your own behaviour. I really don't know—the only thing I can recommend is that once they are caught that they're not sent on from one place to the other. There doesn't seem to be any penalty for a breach of trust and you're letting them raise your children. In retrospect, I've been bitter at times but my being bitter is not going to change anything.

Q: What would you say to the government?

A: I wonder how the government's going to handle the money that they should be paying these kids. The church says it's the government, the government says it's the church so you diddle around like that long enough, the lawyers are

getting most of the money, you know and some of these people are going to be too elderly. I still think they should have a board of people with background and experience that would get the government up against the wall and either shit or get off the pot.

Q: What would you say to your grandchildren or to people who are going to read this?

A: I'd say it might be hard to believe all this, but I was there. I always took the opportunity to meet Indians—you know like Indian blood—what the hell color is Indian blood? In fact you cut yourself and I said, "Oh what color is your blood, the same color as mine." It's a state of mind more but I think the home has a lot to do with it. Like, these kids when we did an entry form in Corrections we ask, "When did you leave school and why did you leave school?" Often the answer was, "The teacher said I was a stupid Indian." Believe that—I heard it! Then they'd keep them after school to do detention and the parents don't quite understand if the kid is a stupid Indian who can't learn and they're keeping him after school. I'm sure they ask themselves, "Why doesn't he come home and do some work and help his dad?"

That's, you know, perfect reasoning. I think some of us were lucky to have gone to the residential schools because we were living in the bush and it was either that or be illiterate. So the good Lord says you are supposed to forgive but there's nothing in there that says you forget. No, but I get from my grandchildren "oh yeah grandma," when there's a little bit of hardship for them. They'd say, "We know you had to carry a honey bucket". They didn't even know what a honey bucket was for God-sakes! I always said we were made to go to confession. Can you imagine—poor priest—a whole bunch of us going in there saying I stole carrots or I stole turnips. That's pretty basic!

Q: Do you have anymore closing comments?

A: Well I'm very glad to have been able to express my conclusions and feelings and that I'm still able to not let it affect me in a negative manner. ■

Anonymous, 63
IRS, 9 years
January 2004

They used to feed us fish without cleaning them up. We didn't want to have our hair cut but they'd still cut our hair anyways. They gave us lickings for nothing too. You wouldn't believe it. Maybe once or twice a year we only had an orange. The Fathers and Sisters used to eat like kings and not the kids.

Q: Was there work involved for the students?

A: Yeah, but just after supper and you had to clean everything up; lots of dishes. Dust the floors, wash the floors, and wash the bathrooms. It appears there was so much there had to be done. It wasn't only me that had to do it but, others too.

Q: What was the discipline like?

A: They'd pull your hair take a strap or something, even a clapper.

Q: So how did the nuns treat you overall? Were they good to you?

A: No. Some of them were good but most of them were not. They were mean.

Q: How long were you there?

A: I was there from the age of six until I was 15. And I was happy to get out of there.

Q: What do you believe was the quality of education?

A: Nothing! You didn't learn anything. Just pray, pray, pray that's it.

Q: What was the health care like?

A: They would just give us something to drink like medicine. I don't know maybe aspirin, that's it. There was no doctor or care person.

Q: Did you speak Cree when you were at the school?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you go home for the summer?

A: Yeah, and for Christmas.

Q: How did you get there?

A: We walked.

Q: Did your parents go to a residential school?

A: I think so. I don't know for sure because they were old then.

MÉTIS MEMORIES OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters that went to school?

A: I had a sister who went, you know, but it's not nice to be in a convent. No, it's not nice.

Q: How many kids were in the school when you went there?

A: Oh quite a few. A hundred kids, maybe.

Q: They were from all over or just in your area?

A: From the area but then towards the end when I was out of school they started to bring in people from surrounding areas, probably all the places.

Q: What grade level did you complete?

A: Grade six.

Q: How were you treated by other students at the school?

A: Umm, not that bad but some of them were mean.

Q: Was it mostly Métis students that you went to school with or Indian students?

A: Yeah, all Natives.

Q: Did you notice the difference between Métis and Indian students when you were there?

A: No. Lot's of parents used to complain but you can't do anything. When we'd quit they'd come to get us and bring us back and give us the strap or something.

Q: How far did you live from the school?

A: Oh, quite a ways. From here, you see that bridge way up there, and we'd have to walk in the cold.

Q: What would you say to the church about your experience?

A: The church I liked. I didn't mind the church, but I didn't like going to church every day just to pray.

Q: Do you still go to church today?

A: No. Maybe that's why I don't go to church anymore.

Q: What would you like to say to the government about your experience?

A: They should pay us out. I mean we've been waiting for how many years? Over eight years now. They keep sending letters, but that doesn't mean anything.

Q: What do you say to your grandchildren about your experience?

A: I always tell them, even my kids I tell them. My grandchildren are too small to understand but I'll tell them. You know we used to have fish, not cleaned up but still with scales on them. They just put them in urine I guess, great big ponds. Who is going to eat that?

Q: Was there any food that you ate besides fish?

A: No. Soup mostly.

Q: Did you ever eat beef?

A: Not that much, just the Fathers and Sisters would eat like kings and queens.

Q: Did you have a hard time showing love and affection to your children when they were growing up?

A: No. Lots of people that went to school said they didn't get any affection and nobody loved me so I don't know how to love. Some people have been saying stuff like that.

That's true because my mother and dad were never home. They were out in the bush all the time trapping. They were happy to see us all the time when they came home.

Q: Did your parents have to pay for you to be at the school?

A: No, but they took all our Family Allowance (Federal Government program).

Q: If you had the opportunity to talk to a psychologist or anyone like that would you like to see something like that happen?

A: Ah…what for though? I know there is so many of them passing away right and left and they never had a chance to talk to you or anybody else. They used to cut our hair too, without asking you know, just cut our hair we didn't want that. We never wanted our cut hair. That's the Sisters that did that. There was so much that used to go on there.

Q: Did you see other kids get physically abused?

A: Yeah, for no reason too, sometimes I would see little ones with bloody nose.

Q: Would you say your experience there was mostly good or mostly bad?

A: It was bad, bad, sad, gee whiz. ■

Archie Larocque, 90
Forts Resolution IRS, 1 year
January 2004

My mother died in 1923, in April, and the kids, there were five of them, went to the Resolution Convent, and I was left out. I was over the age according to them. I came to stay with my dad in Fort Smith where he was cooking for the RCMP. I kept asking him, finally he went to the bishop, and the bishop agreed to take me for that one term. So it was October and I got on a mission boat and went to Ft. Resolution. I was there October, November, December, January, February, March, and April.

I got to Ft. Resolution in October and it was kind of rough. There were about 36 boys in this one room. We had a dormitory with beds you know; that part was all right but the meals wasn't very much. You would get up in the morning and have a bowl of porridge, very little sugar, and one slice of bread dry, that was our breakfast. At dinnertime we used to get a bowl of soup made out of barley and some kind of vegetables, no meat in it or nothing, just a little bit of grease on top and one slice of bread, that was our dinner. Suppertime was about the same.

That went on until I went to Wrigley and I came back with a boat load of hung fish, we had fresh fish for quite a while, a couple of weeks anyways. The fish was hung the same as you would for putting fish up for dogs, you hung ten whitefish to a stick. That's all there was, whitefish—nothing else, no trout. It was a late fall, the fish didn't exactly spoil because they were dried. They would bring the fish out to the boys where we ate in great big pans. They would slice the whitefish into about three pieces if you got the centre piece you were lucky, if you got the head part it wasn't too much, and if you got the tail it was less yet because that's where the stick went through. We got one piece of fish each and a slice of bread. That was twice a day we got that.

Morning was straight porridge, no milk, just straight porridge. We done a lot of playing all the time and of course, young kids we were always hungry. It wasn't that bad, you know, it wasn't that bad we lived through it and didn't suffer from lack of vitamins. There weren't any kids that suffered from lack of vitamins. Now-a-days if you go on a straight fish diet you wouldn't last long. We were all in good health, very seldom sick, not like now. The nuns were real good, they were real good, done their best and they had to go to according what we were allowed. I guess things weren't that good but the government didn't help too much, I don't know, but we lived through it.

As far as I can remember we had a good time. Nine o'clock was strictly bedtime, we went upstairs and all went to bed. In the morning we had to get up,

wash and we went downstairs for breakfast. After breakfast, we were let outside to play and that went on whether cold or not. They had a big woodpile there and Swede saws. It was up to you if you wanted to cut wood. We would get on there and we would take turns and cut wood to beat the dickens just for exercise and kind of a game. They didn't force us to, it was there if we wanted to, we cut lots of wood, it was exercise. A nun would come out about ten o'clock and give us another slice of bread and at dinnertime we would all go in.

When school started we had a nun teacher and she was good, she meant business. When we went to school we went there to learn not to play or nothing. She was strict. We sat there and learned until time came for a fifteen minute break. We would all take a fifteen minute break and then after that go back to school again until quitting time. They were good school teachers. They knew I was only going to be there for that one term because I was over the age limit. So they drove all they could into me. I learned quite a bit in that six or seven months. The only thing I was short on was numbers and they didn't have time for both so they learned me how to read and write that was the main thing.

I left there on the 14th of May that's a month or so before school finished. I left there knowing how to write and read. I came back to Smith here and I stayed with my sister then until we moved to Waterways.

Q: What was the medical care like when you got sick?

A: Not too bad just cold once in awhile. We were well treated we were kept in bed—the nuns were good—a lot of the kids say they were not—that the nuns were mean—some kids are mean too. They were mean and fight and swear and the nuns would give them a little licking. But she never bothered me I never bothered no one. They were good, the nuns, I'll say that much for them. The Fathers never bothered me.

No vegetables. When we had that fish we had no potatoes with it, just straight fish, no never saw no vegetables. Funny how we never got sick and we pulled through in A-one-shape as far as I can see. Yeah, I am 90 now, if I had to do it over I would, I would go back there if I had to. Because that's the only schooling I had and they learned me lots.

If it wasn't for that I wouldn't have amounted to much. As it was, I had enough schooling but not enough because I was interested in radios.

Q: Even though you only had that much schooling do you feel you got the best out of life that you could?

A: I feel I got the best out of life through that schooling, if it wasn't for that I wouldn't have been half of what I am now. I wouldn't have known how to read or write. Yeah, I fully believe I was right when I wanted to go to that school and

they finally accepted me.

I got what I wanted in life after although I trapped all my life. It still helped me in a lot of things. My brother and sisters, some of them stayed in there six years. I have a sister in Fort McMurray I think she stayed in there about six or seven years. Got a brother in Yellowknife, he stayed there about six or seven years and I never hear them tick about it either. It wasn't really that bad. I'm satisfied with life. ■

J.F. Moran / Library and Archives Canada / PA-102086

Two Métis children standing next to an Inuit child (centre) at the Anglican-run All Saints Residential School at Shingle Point.

Anonymous, 63
IRS, 6 years
January 2004

I was raised in a residential school. It was a hard life in there because I was so skinny and small. I couldn't fight the other kids because the other kids were big. One thing I remember, it was summer and I was bleeding like I was dying, bleeding to death. I went to one of the nuns and I says, "I'm dying, I'm bleeding to death." She hit me so hard, she knocked me out. When I came to, she threw a rag at me and she explained what was wrong with me, (menstruation) and she says, "You put that under your panties and you wear it and when it gets dirty you wash it and you dry it." She gave me two: one to put on and one to keep clean. I asked the older girls what was wrong with me and they explained. When you start to form breasts, they gave you tight bras because it was a sin to have breasts. They push your breasts in to hide them.

The food, it was bad. In the morning, I didn't mind the morning because we had porridge, but no milk. We had bread but no lard and I used to put salt on it and I liked that, but the rest of the meals were no good. We had some kind of stew, we didn't know what the hell it was, some kind of slop. We all wore the same clothes and our hair was cut bangs in the front and straight down cut under our necks. I loved my long hair but I couldn't have it, and it was pure hell.

I prayed to God and I think it was him who helped me go through this. I still go to church but I'm confused right now, when I go to mass I go to the Catholic Church, that's all I know. I tried other churches but I feel guilty, like I'm doing a sin. So I just keep going to the Catholic Church. You think of the churches what they've done to you and it hurts. I still go to mass, not mostly every Sunday but I try to. I go to communion and I'm just trying to forget. I'm 63, I'm too old to try to change now, it's too late for me but maybe my kids can be helped.

When I first walked out of the convent I didn't know how to love and I hated the world. I came to be a prostitute. I met a guy who gave me a home, he was good to me and he was a white guy. He used me as a prostitute, I thought he loved me and I cared for him but I didn't know any better. Then after I left him, I found out that I got pregnant by him, I got a boy. After that I turned into an alcoholic to ease the pain and the hurt.

Then I met this guy, he was a good guy and he's still my friend but I'm no longer with him, we broke up and he stopped me from drinking. He helped me as a musician and he trained me as a drummer. I traveled all over the world. That was a good experience. I'm not sorry that we broke up. He did something bad, very bad to my family. I went on my own and raised my own children.

I've got two boys and two girls, my baby and I survived together. I put her through school. When she graduated, I was so proud but it was better than schooling in the convent. I didn't have any schooling.

Q: Did you suffer any abuse in the school?

A: One time the nun got us girls upstairs. We gotta go to each room and strip naked so I went in that room. She told me to lie down and she threw a little sheet on top of me and she says "spread your legs." She says, "We're checking you to see if you had any sex with boys." I was scared. How can you have sex with boys when you can't even see your own brother? One nun wore rubber gloves and she would look up there, feeling you inside while the other one is checking your breasts, feeling you up and they would take turns. The other one would feel you up and the other one would check you up again. They'd take about five minutes and they do that to you back and forth while they're talking in French. I didn't understand so they'd go to the next girl, they'd just tell you to get dressed and go. I went through that about four or five times.

I saw kids being beat up. They take them in this little room they beat them up good, they put about four or five big fat nuns in there, kicking these kids. You can't help them because you'd be the next one. I saw one girl there, beaten up so bad her jaw was smashed, her nose was busted, you can't do nothing. They have this clapper and oh you'd get it across the head. We were trained like dogs—clap you get up—two claps you go eat—three claps maybe you go outside. We were trained, no talking, just like animals you know. It was wicked and they would make us go to mass. If you did something bad the Sisters used to tell us, "You're savages, you don't know nothing we've got your soul" and "unless you behave yourselves you won't get your soul back." They used to scare you like that.

I was forced to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and go to mass. I did that for a week to make up for what I did. It was not only me, there were a lot of girls, kids in there going to mass. They wake you up and I saw a lot of times the nun, I could see her walking and getting one of the girls and taking her to her room or take them downstairs. I don't know why she'd take the kids. I was lucky she never got me or asked me to go to her room but she did a lot of kids. It hurts to talk about it because you bring all that back. I buried it.

The priest used to lie in the grass and let these girls follow him and he says, "Oh I can read you, I can read your eyes if you've been bad."

What kept me going was my kids, now my grandkids, but when all this came up suing, they've had to bring it back up. Now, they're not going to pay us, that's hard on everybody, they've got to bring back the past. We got this far, why did they have to bring it up again, why can't they just pay us? Everybody's in it to make money on us, we didn't get any money, only pain and hurt again. A lot of people can't even talk about it because it just hurts too much.

Q: What do you believe was the quality of education that you received?

A: I went to grade two because I was too big for my age they said. They used me in the kitchen and if I went to the kitchen, I didn't have to learn. I hated Sister Irene who was teaching, she was mean so I didn't learn anything. I'd go to the kitchen instead and go and help because I couldn't stand her. I'd go and help in the kitchen and work—peel potatoes or do anything that they would need. I helped them there but my life was, I just put everything away, I stored it like a little package and tied it, that's how I survived. I wouldn't let it destroy me.

Q: Did your time in the residential school affect your ability to be a parent?

A: I didn't know how to raise kids. The way I thought was best, I raised my kids the convent way—I beat them and I hit them—like I was hit. I abused my kids because that's how I learned and they suffered a lot through me. I tell them, I apologize now, I'm sorry but I don't tell them why because I don't want to destroy their lives. I don't want them to raise their kids like I raised them. I don't want the kids to be hit. I want the kids to be loved, to hold them on the quiet nights and be there for them. To hold them, that's important for me. My grandkids, that's what I live for now, they keep me going and I love them. There are a lot of things I'm not going to say because it hurts too much.

Q: Have you been able to access any help in dealing with your experience?

A: No

Q: Would you participate in something like that if the Métis Nation could get help?

A: Yeah, I would like to talk to somebody that knows what's happened to you, somebody like a psychiatrist. They can help you, they can explain to you why it's like that, why the pain there. You know I'm not healing myself someone's got to help me to be healed. Yeah, I would.

Q: What would you like to say to the church about your experience?

A: Not to hurt God's feelings or anything, but to them, they were phony, they hid behind those clothes. You're just as a human as I am, you know. You don't have to destroy everybody's lives, I would tell them you're just a phony, a phony, phony person, and you hurt so many, so many people.

Q: What would you say to the government?

A: I would tell the government thanks a lot for destroying our lives because you treated us as savages. That's what the convent thought of us as—savages—and that's what the government said, "Here take these savages and make them into

white people." They can't. God made us to have different skin, different nationalities, and you can't turn some person black when they're white. Maybe a Métis or whatever, you can't change them. You can't take away their culture. You can't take away anything from them. I think they're overall very bad you know.

Q: What would you say to your grandchildren?

A: I would tell them keep praying, which I do tell them. Believe in God, and pray a lot because he'll give you strength and help you. I tell them look at your parents and love them. When you get married be good to your children and always be there for them. I just want the kids to be helped cause a lot of those kids in the convent, they were abused and they throw their kids away, they drink. Don't do that, don't let the convent destroy your life, your children or your grandchildren, they have to stop it now. It's the ones that are young, to stop the cycle. The way I raised my kids, I don't want them to hurt their kids, to stop it. Yeah, breaking the cycle is really important because you are beginning to recognize what happened to you. You don't want that happening to your children or grandchildren. ■

Photo © Glenbow Museum

Cree children at residential school, Sturgeon Lake, Alberta, [ca. 1946].

Anonymous, 63
IRS, 3 years
January 2004

I'll tell you what I know. My parents were too poor to keep us so they decided for the Catholic mission to look after us. My mother was working for the hospital and my dad was working for the Catholic mission milking cows. Wasn't very good money, so they take me to this mission and it was run like an army. You know we had to get up a certain time every morning. Then we had to wash ourselves and everything. But first, we had to say a prayer and we had to kneel down. They forced you. So nothing like that was familiar to me. We were strong Catholics though, but we were never forced to do anything.

The school, everything was very strict. Most of us had a lot of energy, like when you went in you wanted to eat lots, but there wasn't that much. But whatever it was, you put it on your plate and you ate that first one. And if you wanted to go for a second helping you took it but you had to finish it. If you didn't finish it you were punished, like maybe go wash some dishes. We had to wash our own dishes. There were certain groups of boys that were selected that week to do washing. If you didn't finish your meal, well that's the punishment you got, you had to go help them wash. Ice cream would be served in a sealed bowl. Our ice cream would be really hard you would have to dig it out and that was your ice cream. Now that didn't happen very often—that was a special occasion.

Then at night again you would be forced to kneel down and say your prayers. You prayed quite a bit, there's lots of prayer involved. They didn't explain why you prayed or the meaning of the religion. I was too small I don't remember them explaining anything. You were just forced to say this and say this and do that. There was nothing that explained why we were saying these prayers. Why we were worshipping the Lord, there was not a full explanation, to me anyway. If you were out of line a little bit you got a whack. To me that was a rough life so I proceeded to run away. I did it a few times. They took me back and I ran away again. Finally, my parents took notice that I couldn't handle it there no more. Same with my sisters there were two girls involved. So we all decided that we were not going back.

Because it was too rough, whatever little our parents could offer us, we would take that before we go back to that place because we thought it was rough treatment. But we still continued to go to church and we went to the separate school. Then I became an alter boy and they taught us Latin. Like I said, you were kind of brain washed into it like, you know, sort of, it will always be in your

mind. You would say it in Latin and the priest would answer, but you didn't know what you were saying, but that's what you had to say. I didn't like it when we were forced into it.

After when it transferred into English, I started to like church. The singing especially. I always loved to sing. And the Father there, he tried to teach me to play the organ. He was a sportsman who liked to play ball, he supplied us at the separate school with baseball gloves. That's one thing he loved, and we were good at sports. That's one thing we may have been a little brain dead in school but we were good at sports. We liked to play ball, we liked to play hockey. We were all good at that.

There were some good things later as we went on. Of course my mother was a very strict Catholic and we had to go to church every Sunday. Life started to get a little better because my dad started to get a better wage so life was getting a little bit better. I ended up working for him. I quit school in grade nine when I was sixteen. Then I ended up working steady for them, $3.50 a day—that was my main wages. Thirty dollars a week, that's what you would get, the old Father came up and he said: "You go to church tomorrow and you donate $1 to the church." I said "Yes Father."

Q: Overall, how was your experience in the residential school?

A: Well actually it wasn't bad, not much to complain about. It was pretty rough off the start. I saw the treatment the other Native kids were getting. It was rough for them and I felt kind of sorry for them. It was more like a prison than anything else. When I did work (after I left the school) there I knew they had good meals, that I know, and I knew the Native boys and girls weren't getting that good of meals. I got offered a supervisors job. Then the meals were decent then, they were actually very good, better than I had when I was a student there.

As far as going to church and everything, when I was supervisor, they kind of forced those kids to go to church. They would say "It's your time to go to church." I didn't like that and I don't know why they were forced into a religion. To me wasn't fair.

I was always wondering why you go out there and say a bunch of prayers. I noticed the other boys they didn't like it either. They were forced into something that they didn't really like. As it was fully explained to me, "come follow the church, say your prayers." You were brain washed and taught over and over again how to say these prayers. I didn't like it even as a supervisor. I didn't like it.

But I knew I liked the boys, I got along with the boys, I knew how to play with them. I got a hockey coach for them and taught them basketball. I knew how to play basketball. I taught them all, and I had to organize everything.

There were two supervisors, one would be working at night, looking after

them to say their prayers and stuff. I knew that was my job. I had to make them say prayers, this is a job and this is what I had to do. They had to all kneel down and say prayers and some of them would kind of hesitate a little bit, but you would be punished if you didn't say this prayer.

They were forced into it like I was forced to. It was something I didn't really care for but I got to like it later on. I don't know how to say it, it kind of blends into you, something that you never did like as a youngster, but as you got older you got to know what it meant. It was too bad you weren't taught what it really meant when you were small, and what the religion was all about. You were just brainwashed into it and it didn't mean anything to us. The more it didn't mean anything to us, the more we were bored with it. We didn't like it. To me, that's the way the religion was, you were forced into it and it wasn't explained fully. That's the whole reason in those younger years I hated religion.

Now I like it I know all about it, learned all about it, even two different religions I went to an Anglican and a Catholic church. I got married there and I didn't like them and I couldn't understand them that's why I didn't like going to church. It was kind of boring and you ended up falling to sleep.

Q: When you look back at your life now, do you feel good about the life you lived?

A: "No" in a way, in a way not. The way I was brought up in that mission thing, in some ways it was pretty bad, I figured, and as I got older I ended up working there. I felt good about myself. I was doing something in the mission so to speak. Some Fathers were nice. I did like them; they weren't all bad, some of them were sportsmen.

One Father he was a good sportsman and got the boys together, kind of supportive in a way in sports. The kids loved basketball, especially baseball in the summertime it was really good they ended up playing ball before they went back home, or any place else for summer holidays. The kids mostly enjoyed summertime, but wintertime it was kind of rough unless you played hockey, if you didn't play hockey you had different duties to do.

The Fathers and the nuns had the best of everything. I knew that because I used to go help clean, then just before supper mealtime you would be around and you could see they're eating like kings and queens. Grapes, bananas, lots of nice fruit displayed on the dining table and you went to yours and there was nothing like that at all. Meat and potatoes, we were lucky to have meat and potatoes. Overall I didn't have it so bad as compared to some others.

It was just like a jail. It had cardboard all piled around about five feet high as a fence just like in prison. I guess it was worse in the older days before my time, I hear stories from the old folks, and it was pretty rough. I don't know if they got physically abused whatever, I don't know, they never did mention that. They just

mentioned they had a rough time. I did that first six months I had there, along with my sisters because we ran away, thank goodness my parents understood us. From there on we liked it, we kept on going to school (day school), as things went along it got better, they could afford to feed us, clothe us and everything else, so it got better. ■

Photo © Glenbow Museum

St. Joseph's Industrial School, High River area, Alberta, [ca. 1890s].
The school was commonly called Dunbow School. Father A. Naessens, standing, right foreground. Pupils and teachers on verandah, North-west Mounted Policeman, mounted, right.

Colin Courtoreille, 80
St. Bernard IRS, 6 years
December 2003

I went to the mission here in September, 1933. The priest came down there and they talked to my dad. There was a translator and this priest was talking to my dad saying, "We want the kids to come here to learn something." I was so happy. My dad he says "would you be able to? There are lots of kids there." Oh, I just couldn't sleep. A toboggan took us, a whole bunch of us, there was about six of us from Big Point. None of us talked English and we didn't even know when somebody said "hello" or "yes." It made no difference to me. I'd never seen nuns before, they had those white habits, I think they're called, and long dresses, I was kinda scared. No matter where you looked, you'd see them all over but they had cooks, had bread makers like in a bakery. We had a whole bunch, about six nuns in there. In school was only grade one and two, the next was grade three and four, and then there was five and six, and seven and eight. As far as you could go that time was grade 8 so you'd have four teachers in each class.

Right away, we had to take a bath and we don't really have long hair but the Sister just took the clippers to my head, shaved it all off. Why? She maybe figured we would be lousy, but Indians a long time ago they would look after that, they were not lousy even though we were Indians from the bush. Oh, I don't like that, the guys that were in there, they had long hair before. My brother started to cry and we couldn't sleep because now we had to go to school. That's the hardest part, they give you a pencil and a paper and now you write what they tell you in English.

What the hell am I supposed to do with this? The next person, you can't ask them, you're not allowed to ask them and that's the hard part because all people they were in there before and they talked English. We had no tutor at all. They came around—he (the Brother) grabbed my hand, you know, he talked and I didn't know what the hell he was talking about—I cried. There was this boy—he says write your name—but I didn't see what he was writing. Well, most of us cried because they didn't tell us what to do. They should have had somebody to sit with us.

Oh my goodness, now to eat, I figured white man food, you know gonna be different, it was fish boiled. I looked at it; I know I like fish but the way it was cooked, put in a wooden bowl and they told me to eat it. I just went quiet he said "It's better to eat it if you are hungry." I wondered why the white man eats that way, you know, because the fish was not properly prepared the way it should be but it looked little bit like it was a soup. That's how it was.

Finally a priest came there, he was a principal priest, that's a principal and ' talked Cree. He said nhitaway masinaheykiwin; it means to write something

you've seen where you come from. Well I started to pretend to draw a horse. He wrote something on the blackboard—our names—he should tell us to copy them—finally I lift my arm—I don't know what to do. He came up and he said, "What's written there—that's you." That's where I got the idea to write my name. I asked him again and he said the paper is good enough to write something. I asked him again, the bottom, second bottom line, it was a number and I can still remember that from 1933, it was number seven. He says, "Your name." Oh, okay, I put the seven so that was my number.

Anyways, everyday I practiced my name. The other guy didn't, I guess, and I told my brother—told him what's his name. Holy shit, I was somebody, so I started to learn. I started to ask the boys—the ones that talk English—that's how I survived—otherwise you don't learn anything in life. The Sisters didn't really help you with what to do, they just sat there and watched the boys in class. Finally, I could write my name and I grew up.

We used to have a lot of cattle there because they were big farmers and there were pigs and chickens. Well, we never bought eggs to eat but they killed the cattle, I was put to work. Now I could start to understand a little bit of English so they put me to work in the kitchen to help where they're cooking for the boys.

They made me a bunch of cattle tails. They got a whole bunch of people in there Sisters, Brothers, and workers to cook for over 200 kids—a big pot of beef—I thought, "Why do I have to skin these tails?" Every section—you know, the cattle tails—and throw them in a great big pot—that was our supper—cattle tails. You boil them and put potatoes and carrots in there, and a little bit of this and that. What the worst was—green peas you plant them, a whole bunch and you put little bits—god damn thing would start to go green, you know. You boiled it and green peas, oh my goodness. Now cattle tails, there's no fat, so you make flour dough and you throw it in there and that's the supper. Oh my goodness, when they start to put it in the bowls—cattle tails. Boy, the grub was terrible, terrible, and terrible.

Q: Did the nuns and priests eat the same as the kids?

A: Oh there was difference. The nuns would give us fish and there'd be the scales on it. At least my mom used to clean all the scales, clean fish. We used to feed the dogs the fish—you boil the fish—you don't have to take the scales off. That used to remind me like at home—that's how we used to feed Bobbie—my dog. You know, you were hungry but what you have to eat what's in front of you really. At least we'd get clean meat and potatoes and things like that at home. I was happy to come to a convent because I was going to eat like a white man! It was worse than the Indian way and that was a terrible thing.

Q: What was the discipline like?

A: Boy—three kinds of straps—one strap was not that long—hand out and you'd get that on the hand—it hurts not too much. Another one they had, I don't know who the hell made them, was a bunch of shoelaces, shoelaces like this (interwoven), all latched up, I don't know, about that long (eighteen inches). When you do something wrong, really wrong, they took your pants off, lay you on the table ("smack").

It's all knotted up like. Now you'd get that and you'd still kick like hell. I got caught one time smoking, I don't know why. This brother gave this cigarette to this boy and I didn't know what it was. The Sister came behind us and we were at the back of the school. Oh I took a puff—oh my goodness—you got the clapper they call it. I got that once and that's all. Phew—we were all up for punishment—great big Sister—they hit and that hurt. Another strap was flat—you get on the bum too but that's not bad—the next day it hurts but not like those things (clappers).

Now another thing I don't like, when my brother was smaller, he was about 3 years younger than I am, but sometimes they wouldn't let the little guys go to the washrooms. What happened? They'd piss in bed because they're scared to go. When you piss in your bed, honest, you know, they get that blanket and wash it. After its cold they put that over your head to dry it and sit. Did you ever see that happen? What are you gonna do, you're scared stiff to go to the washroom because the Sister won't let you go. Well we used to say, don't drink too much, I used to tell my brother, don't drink too much because you'll pee in bed, you know what happens to those kids. Discipline was so strong you'd get discouraged, as a grown-up man. The discipline wasn't terrible but it was strong, strong, strong—I learned something—don't do this—if you do, look out—you know what you're going to get. I always feared discipline.

I tried to tell my mother—"I think the discipline wasn't really set, like by my dad"—my mom said yeah, yeah discipline is pretty strong in there. My dad never saw that. He got mad at us, he said don't blame the mission because you guys gonna learn something. You're learning something, respect the Catholic way of living, like the Sisters and the Fathers. Now you're in the middle. You get a licking here and you're not gonna tell your parents because they're not going to believe you, because you're learning something.

I tell my dad one time, I said, "I don't like the grub and I don't like the way they treat us. I said sometimes you don't do anything wrong, you got your ears pulled or something." "Oh no, no, no, don't tell me that" he says, "that's why I put you in a mission to learn something, I don't wanna hear it." Well you got no backing, you just had to follow whatever they tell you. That's the way I feel

anyway because your parents are not going to back you up, what you gonna do? You've got to live with it and I toughed it out for five-and-a-half years.

Finally I start to realize—-I'm not going to do this, I'm gonna follow the rules. Discipline, you have to follow that. I was doing good, the first year when I went to school, I could talk a little bit English and I could write my name. If your nose got snotty or runny you were in trouble. After church they'd put a clothes pin on your nose. They're hard those clothes pins—you'd wear that until you go to bed because you gotta learn to look after your nose. If you don't listen, they'd put a clothes pin on sometimes, that hurt because those clothes pins, there used to be a hard spring on them. I don't know what kind of discipline you call that but putting clothes pins on your nose? Well, I asked him (the Father) one time, "Why do you put clothes pins on our noses after church?" "The next time you don't wanna clothes pin," he says, "You'll wipe your nose for good." One time, I don't know what happened, there were three boys. The Sister was clapping and the boys run inside right away—you gotta go in right away. They called those boys, they were late and that scared them. That means you got to do it right now when you're called. I didn't want to get them clothes pins for five years and that's about was the way it was.

Q: Is there anything you would like to say to the church?

A: No, but I learned that way and I still go to church; there's nothing wrong with that.

Q: Did they ever stop you from talking Cree?

A: Oh yes, oh yes, that's what I missed. In school my brother, like these guys, a bunch of us, we don't understand English, they used to warn us not to talk Cree or you get hit. They don't allow you to talk Cree. They just more likely wanna cut you off from your language. That's one of the hardest things that you had to whisper when you talk Cree that's why everybody tried to talk English. That's what I missed, that was another hard part. Even when we would play in the yard, it wasn't allowed.

Q: What was the medical care like?

A: Well, that I can remember. An Indian boy from Whitefish—he was in the next bed to me. He was coughing a lot—that was in February, about 1936. He got wet because he had a bad cold but we all had to play outside. He played in the snow and he got wet. At the time to go to bed—now we are in a dorm like in a hall—he was coughing and wheezing. I talked to the Sister—after I can talk a little bit of English, I always tried to help out—I said, "George is really sick Sister, what's wrong with him?" She comes there and I can see her make a ginger

in a cup. She gave it to him and sent him to bed. That boy died that night about 3 o'clock in the morning. He had pneumonia.

Well in the morning, the first thing I know he wasn't moving, and we couldn't hear him so we figured he was sleeping. They had a good nurse here, I figured she'd go help or take him to a doctor but no, they just sent him to bed. They gave him strong ginger but that's all. He died.

Q: Do you talk with your grandkids about what it was like in the mission?

A: Well I was a counselor for 9 years at the High Prairie School and also in Grouard. I know a lot of kids and I used to talk about it but I don't really tell them everything. I try to teach them what to respect, what respect means, try to live a good life and to try to learn something. And think about what you want to be when you get big. A lot of the kids would be listening to me you know, the bad ones, the ones that don't listen and I used to talk about how the discipline was. I tell them there was a strap and I used to say now you people are lucky you don't get that strap. I learned the hard way and that's why I became a counselor. ■

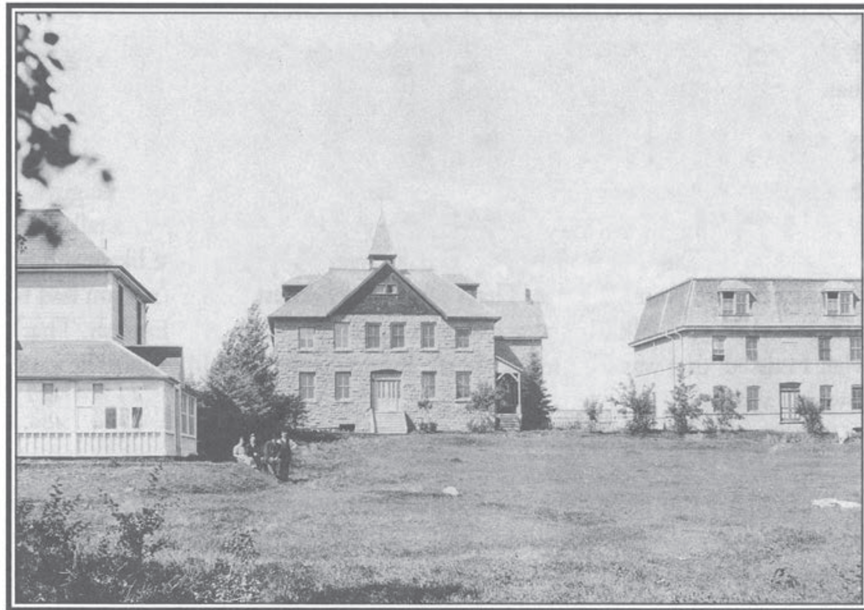


Photo © Glenbow Museum

Red Deer Indian Industrial School, general view, Alberta, 1923.
Used as a training school for Clandonald settlers.

CHAPTER 3

Donna Roberts, 58
St, Henri IRS, 10 years
November 2003

My name is Donna Roberts. I am a victim and a survivor. I would like to tell my story to other survivors who are out there and tell it the best way I can remember. I was brought into the mission at six years old. I was brought into the girls' recreation hall, and I can remember the girls sitting around the hall. The only face I can remember when I walked in, that I recognized is Mrs. Bishop, and they brought me to her and I sat beside her. I can still remember having long hair and then a few days later they cut my hair short.

We were taught by the nuns to get up in the morning and to kneel down by our beds and pray. Then we had to wash our face, brush our teeth and then we all marched downstairs to the dining room where we prayed again before we ate. After we ate we prayed again.

After we played outside for awhile it was time for school. When we got into class we prayed again and then we prayed again just before recess, then after 15 minutes when we came back in from recess we prayed again. For most of the day we did the same thing, after lunch we prayed again. This went on everyday, everything we did we prayed for. It seems that every time we turned around we prayed. We prayed before bedtime then the lights were shut down.

A lot of times I heard all the little ones crying, crying through the night but nobody was there and we were told to "be quiet, go to sleep, go to bed." It would end up like that, going to bed crying. Everyday was like that and after awhile you got used to it.

You didn't know any better because we were brought there very young and vulnerable. When we tried to talk Cree we were told not to talk Cree or you got beat if you did talk Cree. You have to remember when we were brought in there we all talked Cree, and when we started school we didn't know any English words. It was really difficult when we started school we had to learn the English language, and we had to get adjusted to a new way of life.

Q: How did the nuns treat you in general as a group?

A: Everyone was pretty well treated the same. Some got special attention, some were favoured, and some were not. But the majority had to follow the rules and live the same lifestyle. You all dressed the same and your hair was all the same.

Q: For those who didn't follow the rules what kind of discipline was used?

A: Those that didn't follow the rules rebelled, and a few did, they got a spanking, as did the ones that ran away from the mission. I witnessed one run-away. Two boys ran away in January —dead winter, cold—they ran across the river and the priest chased them. They got as far as the middle of the river and got turned around and came back.

We witnessed it, everybody sat around the hall, and there were two of them standing up there. They were told to stand up because they were going to get a spanking right in front of all of as an example not to run away. They got the spanking. After that, people didn't run away because they knew what they were going to get. At least a couple more times people ran away, but were always brought back.

Q: Did you end up losing your language while you were in school?

A: Yes we did after a while. We learned the English language and we lost our Cree language. We lost it—we lost our way of life—how we were brought up. What I could remember was that we had to learn how to live the white man's way and that's including the food, we ate different kind of food. We ate porridge every day. We also ate soup just about every day. At Christmas we would eat a little better.

Q: Did you have to re-learn your language?

A: When I got out of the mission I was 16 years old. When I moved back with my mom and dad it was a different way of life. It was more or less moving back in with strange people, people I didn't really know, but yet I knew they were my mom and dad. It was really strange to be out because you came out of there very naïve. Things were so different when I moved back home. My parents tried to make us feel like we belonged, but you didn't really feel like you belonged there either, you know, because they were strangers. I was brought up in the mission but when I moved in with my parents, it was no different from the mission because there was no love there either.

Q: Did your parents attend residential school?

A: My mom attended residential school but my dad went to school for maybe one year and he never went back. He had a traditional lifestyle—mostly the survival way—not able to reach out to us children, as a father. The father figure that we thought we'd have, we never did and we didn't know we were missing until later in life. I am still struggling with that today because he still hasn't really opened up. Never showed me he really loved to hug me or anything, even now.

Q: How did that affect your ability as a parent?

A: Well at the mission there was no parenting skills being taught. We were there to learn the English language and the religion, that's all we learned. I can't say that I picked up anything at the mission. When I got out at 16, I didn't know how to interact with other people because I was so sheltered at the mission. It was like being out in a different world because you had a different lifestyle. Now you could go wherever you wanted to go. We went to day school for a couple of years, me and my sister. And when we'd go home, we had nobody at home because my dad was out hunting and my mom was working for the mission. Then again, when we were left alone we fended for ourselves; we had to learn how to cook. We never cooked before and we made coffee in the morning and I spilled the coffee on my arm and ended up burning my whole arm and ended up in hospital. It was a very painful way of life.

As a parent I really lacked parenting skills because I didn't know how to be a parent. I believe my kids suffered because of my parenting style. I was rigid you know, and didn't know how to show the kids love because I never knew love myself. I never had love so maybe in a way I looked at anybody who paid attention. To me that was love but it wasn't. It was not a healthy way. I was just looking for somebody to say "I Love You," but it never was there.

Q: What are some of the things that helped you to improve life for your children?

A: Making a home. I got married and I got divorced after seven years, that's when my life started to change. I was on my own with four little kids and I knew I had to do something, but really didn't know what to do so I was still a very weak person. I started drinking. They probably suffered with my drinking for about ten years. I was really struggling. I was about 35 when I thought there is something I can do to better my life. That was in 1974 I went back to school started upgrading, I made it to grade 9. It was a very difficult time for me and my children. That little bit of education that I received was a good education because I wanted an education. I didn't have anybody who said "you have to go to school." This mission was always an obstacle for me. It hindered me because I was so ignorant—about my lost culture and I didn't know where I belonged, or who I was and all that time. I had lost my identity. I know that was the big part I was missing because I was this person with no direction.

Q: Did you suffer emotional or physical abuse when you were at the school?

A: In the mission I bonded with another girl, she was no relative of mine, we just bonded. If somebody was mean to either one of us we were sure that the other one was going to stick up for the other one. It was the mutual understanding that that was going to happen. We survived that way. You have to remember there were about

75 to a 100 girls there. I bonded with this girl and we grew up as sisters but in those times that we did get into trouble, you were kids, you would do things that weren't looked on as normal. If you teased or if you had a little struggle with another person the nuns get the ruler and they would hit our hands with it. We would get a spanking with the ruler. That went on through the years. Every time they thought we did something wrong we always got a ruler hit on our hands or knuckles.

Q: Have you been able to get any counseling services for helping you deal with your experience in the residential school?

A: At that time, I wasn't really dealing with issues at the mission because I didn't know there were issues. I didn't know there were scars—-scars that I was carrying around—that affected my life. Later on, I believe it was 1992, I started taking social work because I wanted to better myself, not because I wanted to be a social worker. I thought it was something I could do so I started going to school—during those two years I was in school—they did get us a psychologist in there because we had to deal with our issues.

I dealt with some of the residential issues with the psychologist—I was very angry. I carried around a lot of anger around all those years. I remember saying that if I could get all those nuns to stand out in the road I'd like to go by and go slap every one of their faces, I was so angry.

I dealt with my residential issues there, the parenting, the hurt, the marriage breakup, dealing with my drinking and dealing with the hurt that I received at the residential school. It really helped to understand that that kind of lifestyle was not normal.

Being taken away from parents at an early age and looking at what kind of pain my parents suffered because we had to go to school. That is a pain to me because I feel their pain as well as mine. To me the Catholic Church was wrong. It was a faith that was pushed down my throat. It was not my faith but yet that's what I was taught. Today, I ask myself what is faith? I don't think that's the faith of Native people, I think we had our own faith. It's something that I respect today the spiritual way of life and I think that's what's gonna pull me through. I really rely on it and I pray at home, in my own way. I don't go running to church anymore, I've been there but it hasn't helped me any.

Q: What would you say to the Church about your experience?

A: If I have an opportunity to talk to the Church, including the bishops, the priests, and the nuns that were there, I would ask "why did they do this to us?" Why would anybody take little kids from their home and start teaching them graphic pain? What gave them the right to abduct the kids and try to make them into white people when they were Indians?

You know we should have been Indians and learned their Indian way instead of stealing the kids out of their homes to be in the mission. That was not the right thing to do and, in fact, crippled a lot of people because of the faith. I think everybody should have the faith; whatever faith they choose. I think the Catholic Church is nothing but a bunch of crooks. They hid behind their religion to get to us kids and destroy our way of life and cripple us. We are still suffering to this day and who is going to be responsible for that? Surely we can do something about it ourselves but in the long run there should be somebody made responsible for this.

Q: What would you say to the government?

A: What I would ask the government today is they were dictators. They must have known the people had their own faith and their own way of life and yet they came and tried to change the Native children to their way for whatever reasons. I think they should be held responsible for what they've done to us because they've destroyed us physically, mostly mentally, and our way of life, and our identity.

Q: What would you say to your grandchildren?

A: To those people that are going to be listening and reading my story I would encourage them to talk about what they experienced in life and to tell their stories too. It might help because I had my own reasons to tell them my story because I feel that it is painful to talk about it. I also know that it might help me and help somebody else hearing my story because it is painful. They might start identifying their own pain instead of shutting down and not talking about it. It might help someone else with their pain.

Q: Is there anything else you want to say about anything on the subject?

A: I just like to say that being in a mission was not right. It's very painful. I can't say that it did me any good because it really destroyed me. ■

Anonymous, 64
IRS, 6 years
January 2004

Today I'm 63 going on 64. At a very young age we were told we had to go to the mission school. We had to stay there and we cried when we were taken. I still remember it was a scary place to go to because we saw so much going on while going to school how the kids were treated. But our mom and dad were told my sister and I had to go.

I remember we were taken there on a Sunday. The next morning they woke us up before seven when the bell rang. I didn't know what to do. I got hit on the head because I was supposed to get on my knees right away, which we learned through the years that we were there. I guess we were supposed to pray for our sins. I don't know what a kid can say because a child could not be a sinner. But we had to do this and then go to the chapel where the priest would talk. I couldn't understand him because most of it was a different language—Latin. I didn't know what he was doing up there or what we were doing we'd just go there in our night gowns.

The screaming at night, the crying in the morning, the kids being hit…I remember what they did (the nuns). Some of the kids were too scared to get up during the night to go to the washroom because it was too scary for them. They were punished in the morning with straps—or the wooden clapper thing—it was called. I'm not too sure but it was two wooden pieces that slapped together. They used that as a daily weapon.

And the treatment they gave there it was either with a stick, clapper, or anything that the nun could get a hold of and that kid would get it. Like if you were caught speaking your language, or you know if you made a mistake and said a Cree word, you were punished for it. It was either through a strap but, most of the time it was a clapper.

For other punishment they put us in a steam bath. They would hose us with cold water as we came out. In winter, in the snow, you were to stand out there in a little slip like a nightgown, that's it. She liked hurting kids, that one Sister. When my sister turned 11 she was beaten by this same Sister and I was there when this women wearing a great, big, black gown was beating and beating my sister. My sister was bleeding all over the side of her face and she walked out of the school. I tried to follow her but she said "no" because I'd freeze to death because she had to walk over two miles to the camp where dad and them were working.

That Sister had a habit of wanting to see us scrub our belly buttons until she saw blood. That was another thing; to this day I can't even let a doctor touch me

in my bellybutton. My sister has that same problem. She made it our problem by doing that to us. We kind of try to forget that mean, mean woman now.

Then there were the little kids too. They had one special building for them. There were two nuns there, to punish the little children, the small ones I'm talking about, the ones that—are a year old or about two. If they cried they'd be put in the cupboard. The odd times the nuns would forget about these little children until late, until the other children would go there to help. That was late, that was about four o'clock before supper, and all day those kids would be locked up in the cupboards. This went on for a few years while I was in there. It wasn't just something that happened once or twice.

I got punished because one day we all got suckers (candy) everybody except, for these three little children because they had wet their bed. They were scared to get up, that's what they told me. I found out I could pick the lock and I gave them each one sucker and that's it then I closed it. But it went on for quite a while and I felt bad because I was doing this, you know, picking a lock. They used to have long keys but I knew how to pick it. Then, I felt bad because I was doing something wrong I figured. So I went to confession. That same Thursday I was punished and I couldn't go to the theatre.

Instead I went running. Because I made my pair of socks that you had to make, one pair a week in between your work so we could go to a theatre as payment. When I went crying there was a nun there dying of cancer, she was one of the mean nuns of the people that were older; like my parents. She was the beater of boys. But she was dying of cancer and I used to run to her room if anything really bad happened, or if I accidentally broke something I used to run there. She told me that Father told on me when I went to confession about that key to the cupboard.

So when dad came to pick me up on that Friday I went running out to meet him and I told him that Father told on me when I went to confession. He didn't ask why. He just went to Father's office and beat him. Gave him two black eyes because when they brought me back Sunday I seen the black eyes. I was terrified, I thought he'd beat me but dad warned him because I could talk, that he would find out again. He told Father never was I to go to confession for anything, not after that. So from that day I never went and I was about 11 years old going on 12.

Every day you had to be on your guard. You were scared at night, you're scared in the morning, because then you have to face that whole thing again. But even as I got bigger I learned how to be more careful and I knew how to run faster.

When they promoted me from the dug-out I could clean up the Father's food. You know their kitchen or dining room, where I used to steal lots of food for myself. I'd eat it there. But I accidentally got caught one time and I smashed

some glass and I took off. I went straight for the Sister's room. I stayed there too. I wouldn't come out because I knew I was going to get it. You don't get away with it. No matter what, it's inevitable. That's why my head was so sore because of getting hit a lot with the wooden clappers.

Then we'd go downstairs to the second floor and that's where the children would be given porridge with no sugar. Sometimes milk but not too often. Then on Friday if they were good they'd get lard. Straight beans were mostly the daily diet right through from Monday to Friday. Every day we had to work and I ended up peeling spuds in the basement.

I was in this basement for four and a half years peeling spuds and the children I saw sometimes had no lunch. They were hungry. I used to steal a lot of potatoes, turnips and carrots for them. So I wouldn't get caught I would make sure they would wait for me right out the entrance in the back because I didn't want them to go hungry, but the best I could do was just raw vegetables. And there was times when there was dried bread left over, for say a couple weeks, and there were all kinds of pieces and crumbs in a big box. One Sister would open the window from the second floor and throw it down and all these little kids would be running to get these breadcrumbs, dried bread because they were hungry and they weren't fed enough. Most of them were hungry all the time.

They say you went to school to learn but you didn't have much time in there. I just didn't learn anything; well, they didn't teach me. As soon as class was over, which was very short because you would pray the first half-hour by the time you're done praying. After dinner too, you have to go back and you got to pray. A little bit of schooling, then you got to pray before you leave, then you go to work.

The nuns never worked. In the gardens we had to work and in the big fields every day and sometimes my parents couldn't come and get me. On the weekend I'd have to work, all weekend. And that's from early in the morning until you go to bed. There was no playing, no playing.

Q: Did your time in the Residential School contribute to a loss of your culture?

A: Yes. Well I remember they tore up my mom's bible. It was outlawed they couldn't have sun dances and pow-wows. I could hear and see all this stuff too as a child when I was younger. And going to school there I knew you could not talk to the creator like my grandfather did. The nuns told us, you know, Indians were bad. Now why would they be telling us Indians were bad? It doesn't matter how tiny bit of Indian or white whatever; they shouldn't say one nationality is so bad, why? We were little Indian kids, us Métis. They called us half-breeds. I hate that word but who are they to say. I felt bad about that when they called us half-breeds. I'm proud to be everything that I am like, Neheywak (Cree).

My grandfather's brother, he was a treaty but they educated him he lost his

rights. They called him a Métis. And my grandfather, they both had the same mom and dad, and their uncle was a signatory when they signed treaties (Treaty 8) in 1899. It's the white man, the Indian agent that hired the clergy to do this to us. When you do something wrong they call you nothing but an f'ing half-breed. I don't want my children to hate anybody. It's just a thing that I have to deal with 'till I die. If there's a way to erase that—I don't know and I try not to think about revenge or anything—it has to be told.

Mom was raised in a residential school from six years old and her mom died, so she in turn was raised in the residential school. She's never cared for us as her children. You know we cared for our brothers and sisters. We did all the work too. From day one my sister is the one that dressed me up. We had nannies like my two aunties, and uncles who used to come and work for mom. Mom didn't do anything.

Am I a good parent today? I don't know about everybody else, but I'm not. I can't forget the things that they have done to me there as a child, like the nun using a stick for her pleasures on me. It was at night at least once a week she'd come in. I was mad to think there was another human being like that. One Brother was raping my girlfriend in the laundry room. I couldn't go anywhere—who was I going to go tell? The priest who was doing the same thing or the nun that was watching it? I couldn't say anything.

If you think about that now, this thing what they did to my mom and myself too. I had babysitters because I had to work for a pay cheque. I had to raise my children. I had to work, you know; it was rough to leave them with babysitters. My daughter; when she turned 24 years old, no, 23, she sent me a letter, she said, "How could you do that to me?" She said, "You always left me with babysitters, you were never home, you were always working." I was always some place. It was just like they're not my kids. Like does everybody do that to their kids? I paid them every week. It was just a job to them.

Q: Has your relationship with your children improved as you've gotten older?

A: I get along with them. Well, at one time I didn't for awhile on account of my sister. I think I should have got training to be a parent because I sure did have to. They're boring kids. They never give me any trouble, nothing with the law, nothing. I love my kids though. I do love my kids. I only have three.

Q: Was there health care like?

A: There was nothing, nothing. I don't know it wasn't a year, but I got sick. I was coughing lots but nobody said anything. You have nothing, I was told. There was a lot of other sick people and kids there too you know with TB (tuberculosis). I must've got, it I don't know. But, with that treatment you can get anything. I was

taken out of there by my uncle. I rode on horse-back to leave that mission to go live with mom and dad. I didn't last too long about a year when my mom and dad had to bring me to High Prairie. They found out that I had tuberculosis. So I had to stay at the Aberhardt (hospital) in Edmonton. Sick for hours, I was always coughing and couldn't do the things that kids my age would have done.

Q: Have you had access to healing services?

A: I've been seeing psychiatrists for over 4 years. I went to sweat lodges a few times in my life. I went there to ask for forgiveness for them who did it to us because we're still here to suffer. It hurts mentally. It's pretty hard when you remember all the beatings that you went through. In the dormitories they have pictures of evil things, evil things from wall to wall, just devilish, scary looking things with horns. They said we were all these devils. How could they say we're devils unless they were, and they knew what a devil looks like? And that nun rocking early in the evening because we went to bed early and she'd be there with her big bonnet. That's the scariest thing to see when you have to get up at night (to use the washroom). You hold it or you just wouldn't drink anything before you went to bed.

Q: What would you like to say to the church?

A: Shit, as long I live on this Mother Earth, I hope they never have another mission, period! Never allow that to be done where kids are torn from their homes. Never, as long as we live could we have another one of these of any kind. If they want a mission let them learn how to be holy or how to treat people.

Q: What would you say to the government?

A: The done me wrong, they've done a lot of people wrong. There are a lot of other people out there; there are a lot of little kids like me that's suffering to this day. What they did when they paid the clergy to build them places to do this damage to us. I gave this to my children too, this damage; you know how I raised them up. They turned out good for some reason. I don't know what happened there. There's a lot of kids that did drugs, alcohol, jail time, whatever.

Q: What would you say to your grandchildren?

A: Well, I kind of told them a few things. I pray for them in my Native culture. I tell them I will go to Catholic Church. I found a friend though, who is a priest. I never thought I'd have a priest for a friend. My sister and I made friends with a priest. You know that's the first time she's ever walked into a church when it's not a funeral. And she got used to talking alone at lunch with that Father. He is a real man. He is a man, he's a friend, and he's everything. ■

Anonymous, 65
IRS, 11 years
December 2003

I was in the residential school for eleven years. I was put in a mission at two years old. There were eleven of us in the family and the four youngest were put in residential school. I was the youngest. At a young age I can't remember, I think from about five, I used to talk French. That's all the nuns taught me and as I grew older. When I started school at seven, I could barely talk English and I had a hell of a time at school. I had a lot of first cousins that looked after me. I had to laugh at them and I used to say "you guys talk funny," but pretty soon I started picking it up, until I could talk fairly good Cree. I was always talking to the boys in the yard and one day we got caught, me and my cousin. We got beat up. Well, we just got hit hard with clappers. Three times I got caught and after that I quit talking Cree. Most of us boys quit talking Cree because every time we got caught we got hit. That was the only abuse I had. I got hit, that's physical abuse I guess.

At times we went hungry, it was always the same food mush in the morning no sugar. They would just put a little bit on top to sprinkle it—the big boys got a little bit of milk, a little bit of brown sugar—three or four of the bigger boys they were the ones that got it. You could eat all the bread you want but you got one teaspoon of lard. You could eat all the bread you want but that's all the lard you got. But the food was all the same, it was always the same. Mush in the morning, stew for dinner or beans for supper in fact they used to call us "mission beans" because we grew up on beans.

Every Sunday we'd get cake, white cake and it always tasted soapy, I don't know why, every Sunday, soapy. You could throw it at a guy and it would stick on the wall. We never ate it because it was always soapy. I don't know if that's the way they made it. You can't eat soap. We would just crumple it up and throw it; and it would stick on the wall.

We fought a lot in the mission; we would fight each other. I don't know, it'd be anger I guess. You were always caged around by a big 10 foot high fence. You're sort of caged animals I guess. We were always fighting each other and we never got along that good. I remember three big boys, they were from up north. We had guys come all the way to our mission, it's funny they had a residential school over there and yet they came to Grouard. They were all bigger boys. There was three of us would gang up on one guy. But you sure got it when they got you alone.

I'm still small—I used to fight a lot—I fought one guy seven times. We fought each other he'd win one fight and I would win the next fight. The seventh time we were crawling around, we were about 12 at the time, we quit

fighting and we shook hands. Him and I, he's still around, we're the same age.

I never was sexually abused. I know guys that were—no names—I know guys that were. The mission was kind of good for me. It was only the two summers that I came home, the rest of the time I stayed there year round. I called it my home, I was raised there you know. I just had enough and I ran away when I was 13.

When we were lining up outside our school the nuns would walk down to one guy who was called George or Jimmy and say "go and work in the barn you're a big boy." George, to this very day can barely write his name, can't read for that reason. My cousin Jimmy passed away quite a few years ago. It was the same thing, he was a big boy. He was eight, they used to grab him and say "go work in the barn." Just like that. I remember George saying if he would have had grade six "oh, I would have been smart." ■

Photo © Glenbow Museum

Ladies of the community standing in front of first school, Paddle Prairie, Alberta, [ca. 1946-1947]
This building was originally a log but was covered with a siding. Back L-R: Mary Gaucher; Emily Houle; Mary Ann Larivier; Margaret Ghostkeeper. Front L-R: Alice Gaucher; Connie Houle.

Anonymous, 76
IRS, 4 years
December 2003

How I ended up in the mission was, my dad left my mom and my sisters. He took me to the mission where my sisters were working in the hospital. They had to look after me but I was such a nuisance there so I was locked up in the attic just about every day. I don't know how old I was in 1936. I was in the mission there for four years.

Q: Did they teach you how to read and write?

A: Yes and no because if you've made a little mistake or you tease somebody and they'd say face the wall or you'd get a strap. While these other kids are doing their homework, you're facing the wall. So far as being in a mission, I don't think we learned very much. They made us pray on our knees all the time and there wasn't too much to learn. As long as you're kneeling down, you're not learning very much. I didn't learn very much in the four years I was in there because I only went to grade two.

Q: What was the discipline like?

A: Oh, I used to get a strapping, yeah, yeah, because I had a habit of teasing somebody—all my life I always teased somebody—even 'till now.

Q: What was the health care like?

A: I was only 12 years old and one of the Sisters dropped a milk can on my toe. I had to suffer and live with that up 'till now—my toe's been broken and I really have a hard time—but I had to live with that. They put me upstairs in the dormitory where we slept, for a while. From October till April, I couldn't go out, I was very sick, now and then the doctor would come but they never took me to a hospital. You know they could have done better I suppose. They had transportation, they could have taken me to a hospital instead of leaving me there just to try and heal by myself.

Q: Were there Indian kids there too? How were they treated?

A: The treaty Indians were treated better.

Q: What was the food like in the residential school?

A: As far as I can remember it was terrible. I don't think I could ever say we had pork chops or roast or anything like that. We always had mush, that's what they called it, that was porridge because it was so bad. You have to eat it or you go hungry. They give you a lunch, not like today where you have apple, banana or

something. Theirs was cabbage, turnip, carrots, that's what we had to eat. You had to take it from the ground because they dumped it there for us, just like feeding cattle. That a person will never forget.

Q: Did the kids at the school grow the food and take care of animals?

A: Yeah, the boys did all the hauling. The boys had to do their share of the work and the girls had to do their own.

Q: What kind of work did you do as a girl when you were at school?

A: We had to clean the dormitory, that's make the beds and wash the floors and then they had to do the second floor, the nuns' residence. We had to do all the cleaning mostly and I used to be in the kitchen or in the Fathers' house. That's where we prepared their meals and laid the supper table for them, everything had to be done by the girls.

Q: Was there a difference between the food that the children ate and the food that the nuns and the priest ate?

A: Oh, it was different because they had everything nice and they must have had what we didn't have. They had roast and pork chops and stuff like that, they had the best.

Q: Did your time in the residential school affect your ability to be a parent?

A: Sometimes I'd blame my parents for splitting up and putting us in a place like that. My father was a trapper. He lived across the lake, but I couldn't come and live with my dad. I left school in1942 and I had to go out and make my own living. I worked in here in 1942 and I worked in the hotel here for 50 cents a day from eight o'clock in the morning to six o'clock in the evening. If we didn't run away at 10:00 o'clock, she'd still have us working. Then I met my husband and then I had to go home because I was only 15. I was told not to come back for a year. I came back the following year and I met my husband again and we've been together since then.

After I was with my husband, my mother tried to tell me, and you know what I said to her, I was rude. I said to her "don't tell me what to do now when you didn't raise me" but she had to go and work for her own meals, to get her clothing, and to get her place to sleep. That still bothers me today, saying that to my mother, I had no right to do that.

Q: Did you ever talk to her later about that?

A: I told her, of course she cried and I said, "Momma I'm sorry" I said in Cree because she didn't talk English. I said, "I'm sorry for making you cry." I knew enough then to never say anything like that again. I know because with my kids here, I raised ten and I had fourteen. My brother raised one. All my babies are eleven months apart. ■

George Amato, 64
St. Bernard IRS, 9 years
December 2003

Well, I'll begin a little further back even before I was born. I'll tell you a story about what happened to my mother, and we drank a lot because of the abuse the both of us went through. She was telling a story about how she met my dad. There were about seven girls that were too old to go to school so they were kept in the mission for cooking, cleaning, and sewing. One day a Sister came in and said to them "go up and comb your hair and clean up and put on the cleanest dress and come back downstairs." Mom was kind of excited because she thought maybe her dad was coming to get her to take her home.

So they all went downstairs and they were told line up against the wall. The door opened and the priest and short white guy walked in, the guy turned out to be my father, I found out. He started walking back and forth in front of the girls. He was looking at them and after he walked back and forth a couple of times. Finally he stopped in front of my mother and put his hand on her shoulder and said "I'll take this one." My mom still did not know what was going on when they left.

She said that they went and he negotiated with my grandfather. My mom used to tell me that she knew for sure that there was a rifle and a couple of horses were involved but she never really knew whether or not there was any money exchanged. A couple of days later and she was told to pack her things, which wasn't very much, and she was put on the back of a pack horse, along with one of her uncles to make sure she didn't run away. Her and my dad and one of my grandfather's brothers went to the trap line. That's the story my mom told me of how she met my dad.

I was born in a little village of Kapown and when I was two-and-a-half years old my dad died. To this day we don't know what the cause of death was. The RCMP and a priest came to our place one day and said they were going to take us because my mom had no way to support us. Mom protested but they said if she didn't let us go they were going to arrest her. My older sister ran away so she never went to the mission. It was just me and my two brothers and my other sister who were brought to the Grouard Mission. One of my brothers ended up with tuberculosis. He didn't spend too much time there. We were separated and weren't allowed to play together or talk, for fear that we might be planning to run away. I don't know how they expected me to run away.

I can recall getting beaten with a thing they called the clapper. They didn't use belts back in those days. They had these things that were made out of wood with a hinge in the middle and they snapped them together to summon the kids when

they needed them for something. They drew it like a gun when they needed and WHAM! You got it across the knuckles or across the head or across the back anywhere at all. Some of their favorite sayings they used to say were you (Cree words) which meant "you goddamn savage."

My cousin ran away one time and they lived way up in Whitefish and that's about forty miles from Grouard. At that time there was nothing but a wagon road. They gave him a day's head start then the priest jumped on his horse and took after him. He was just getting home when the priest caught him, tied him to the back of that horse and made him walk all the way back. Then he took him down to the basement and stripped his clothes off and they tied him to a post—the pillars in the basement—they tied him to one of those bare naked. They took all of us kids in to watch and he used a belt, a strap, and he beat that kid until that kid went unconscious. Then he turned around and looked at all of us and he said, "anybody have any ideas of running away?" You're asking me if I have something nice to say about that place!

My sister Lucy, she was in the mission, she snuck off and went to a dance in Grouard. The priest went and caught her and brought her back and they tied her to a chair and they shaved her hair off. She hit the nun, or the Sister, and she ended up in Edmonton in a reform school for girls. She came home after we were out of the mission for a couple of days and then she was gone. She didn't want to come back here because of all the memories and garbage that we had to go through. I never saw her for 43 years and I kept searching. I even hitchhiked to Winnipeg one time looking for her.

I lost my wallet in this car when I was hitchhiking. I was standing on a street corner in Winnipeg and I didn't' know what to do. I had 27 cents in my pocket. I went to a cop, I told him what happened and he said, "I'm going around the block once, if you are still here I'm going to arrest you." I hitchhiked for about three days, I guess, with nothing to eat. I came to a little community in Saskatchewan and I went in a pool room there and asked if there was any work? There was no work so I went to the railroad station and there were cream cans there. I had 27 cents, and at that time a loaf of bread was 17 or 18 cents, so I bought a loaf of bread. I dipped cream out of these cream cans. I went back to the pool room and I thought I was looking at the place and I thought I'm going to break in here tonight, and if I get caught I'll go to jail and at least I'll have a place to eat and sleep, but I got a job. A farmer came and hired me, two weeks I worked for him, he paid me $20 but anyway that's so much for family you know.

At one time I almost lost it, but I think at that period of my life, I think I could have killed someone and it wouldn't have bothered me. I don't know what happened but I snapped and I took a rifle and I went to this guy's place and I wanted to kill them all. All I could think of was nuns and priests and that's all

that was going through my mind as I shot up the place. A cop shot at me and just missed my head. I was doing nine months in jail. Life had just been a total disaster. I tried to straighten out, but there would be times I'd think, you know, I'm gonna do this or I'm gonna do that. When you don't have an education it's pretty hard because you're always working with your back, never your mind. If you don't have an education what the hell can you do?

They had them clappers. I'd like to get a hold of one of them clappers so they could put that in the book to show what kind of weapons they used. When you stretch it out it's about oh maybe six inches long and right in the middle there's a hinge, they used to pull it over and they used to snap them together. It sounds like you're rattling your false teeth, you know, only louder and that's what they used to use.

Our beds were all lined up, four rows of beds in the boys' hall. At one end of the hall there was a cubicle, or an office where the Sister used to sit and watch us just like a jail guard. I know. I was in jail and I used to see that. Every half hour, she would make her rounds, checking to see if the kids were fooling around or talking. We had to sleep with our hands folded on the pillow not under the blankets. She would walk by and she would reach under the blankets and start feeling me up. If I moved or anything she would say she was checking to see if I had wet the bed.

It took me a long, long time to be able to talk about this.

One day the Sister told me you have to go help the Brother downstairs. He took me down in the basement, into the boiler rooms where he sat down in a chair and undid his bib overalls, pulled them down and he exposed himself, and forced me to fondle him. He told me if I ever said anything....the only reason I remember that basement so well is because they had a room there that they used to make us kids take our clothes off and go in there and sit. In time they would take us out. It looked like a coffin standing up. They would tell us that the devil made the Indian people and they were sent there by God to take the devil out of us.

I was a wife abuser. I was in prison. I am a survivor and I know I'm not alone because I went to a seminar with other survivors. They were from all across Canada. The survivors met to tell their stories. The stories that were told there—it was just like they were trained specially to treat us the way they did—because everything was so similar for people that talked about things that happened to them. What happened in the Yukon was the same damn thing that happened to us over here in Alberta.

I'm just hoping that it ends, because you see we were never parents, we never had parents of our own. How are we supposed to know how to be a parent when you don't have any guidance from anybody? All I had in me all my life was anger. All I did was fight. I didn't care how big, or what colour, or who it was. I just

wanted to hurt somebody because all I had felt all my life was pain. I wanted to give it back. I could be getting a hell of a licking and I didn't feel anything. Seemed like when I beat somebody I didn't know how to quit. All I could see in front of me all the time was nuns and priests. I'm not an atheist. I believe there is a higher power. I believe that there is a God but I can't understand this God. He took two of my grandchildren. The little man was only six years old when he drowned. My granddaughter, 15 months later, was three years old when she died of a heart attack. I'm scared to get attached too, for fear of losing those I dare to love.

It's the same thing with this family violence. These kids see that in the home so they figure that's the way of life. It was the way with us. That's why I had a hard time raising my kids because you know, it continues. You go to the schools here, I subbed a couple of times and those kids swear at the teachers. When I was on the school board we'd try to discipline the student and then the parents would come down on us. They would say "don't tell me how to raise my kids."

How are you supposed to make things better? I think the best thing is to try and educate the parents so that they can educate their kids. How can they educate their kids when they've never had a decent upbringing? I came from an alcoholic family and I used to watch my mom get beat up. I beat the hell out of my wife a lot of times—not that I'm saying that I'm proud of it—I didn't know any damn better. She finally walked out. These women they don't forget either no matter how well you try and treat them after, the damage is already done. You know they never forgive you, they never forget the beatings that they took. It's the same with me.

I've been an Indian all my life. I've always been proud to be an Indian. One of the beliefs that I have is one day I will be with my little bear and my granddaughter. If I commit suicide, the life that God gave me ,I will never see them. We're told that we were only put here for a certain length of time and we never know when we're gonna go but when we do go is it to a better place? It's not something we have any control over. Man-given-power is something that will never equal heavenly power. One thing we can be a sure of that they are in a better place now.

We question ourselves everyday of our lives why we live the life that we do live. There were times that there was nothing we could do about it. Today, us stronger and older men, we can change that. That's what I do now. I do a bit of counseling with kids at schools hoping that we can make a difference and try to end this bloody thing now. I never learned how to be parent. How are my kids gonna know how to be parents if I wasn't a parent and how far down is it gonna continue? I thought that's where it was gonna end with my grandson because he was so loving and understanding and he respected everybody. Maybe I was being selfish, I don't know and trying to be good grandfather because I wasn't a good parent.

With my children, one of them, the other one's not too bad, but one of them he always says, "You gave us lickings and sometimes we didn't understand why."

Métis Memories of Residential Schools

I said "I got lickings and I never knew why." But I says, "I always thought what I was doing was right because that's the way I was brought up in the mission." You know now he doesn't come right out and say that he hates me but he has no respect for me and I raised him since he was a year old. I fed him. I've clothed him and I gave him an education, everything. I loved him like a real father but the only way I knew how to love, which wasn't love.

I mean, I've never had anybody, even my wife of 35 years—my common law, 35 years I was with her—I never once had her come up to me and say "I love you." For the longest time I could not say " I love you" to my daughter, my sister, or my mother for the fear of people would think that I was having an affair with my own daughter or my mother because I didn't know about love. The way it was with me growing up with all the anger and the alcohol, the only time I said "I love you," to a woman was when I wanted to take her to bed. Now it's easy for me to go up to my daughter and put my arms around her and say, "I love you baby." My mom died at 83 and I never once told her I loved her.

There are 192 survivors in this area that are dead now to date, 192. How many more are ready to go? Two of my brothers, one was my stepbrother and that's how we got out, oh, I didn't tell you that part about how we got out of that place. My mom remarried, that's how I ended up here, as she married a Whitehead, there's a lot of Whiteheads here. They were supposed to come and get us out of the mission but they never showed up. My brother gathered us up and we took off and he swam two rivers with me on his back to escape that hell hole. We caught up to mom and them just, oh, maybe five or ten miles past where I was born in Kapown.

The school here hired me to teach kids how to hunt. I used to take them out to Spirit River, and a friend of mine had a cabin over there. I had 16 year old kids that couldn't even load a single shot 22 and yet parents were saying what the hell he is getting paid for, I can teach my own kid how to hunt, you know. Those kids, I taught them the different types of animal tracks, what kind of habitat different animals liked, the difference in the running, how to respect an animal, and not to shoot things that you won't eat. I taught them that when you took out of a moose you used everything right from the nose to the hooves, everything. At nights they'd all gather round me like an old grandpa and they'd say, "come on Mr. Amato, tell us some stories," and I'd tell them about the old days, how we had to survive and I was 13 years old, I was out on the trap line.

Like I said, I was 13 when I left home. And I started working. And when I'd come home I'd reach in my pocket, take my money out and put it on the table because I didn't know the value of money. Never had any, so I didn't know what it was. I used to give it all to my mom and she'd maybe give me five dollars back. But my mom would know when I was coming home from a job some place. She wouldn't have a big supper waiting for me. She'd have a big party waiting for me,

wine, beer, and whisky. So that was her way of showing me that she loved me. It was the same with me. I didn't take my mom a bouquet of flowers or box of chocolates. I took her a bottle of brandy cause that's what she used to like to drink. That was my way of showing her I loved her. It's wrong! If I had the chance to do it over again I would take my mom a bouquet of flowers. I would go on up to her and put my arms around her and say "I love you mom." But, it's too late!

Like I said, I was 13 and I went to grade five then you know, I worked my way through life, I worked at every kind of a job that was manageable. I washed dishes, I was a plumber's helper, an electrician's helper. I was a welder, mason, roofer, rig hand, truck driver, cat skinner, forklift operator—you name it, I did it.

Then I don't know what possessed me to go back to school, I was 62, went back to college, I graduated. I got two levels of English and two levels of math which I hate. That's what made me drop out was that bloody algebra, I couldn't do it. I'd like to go back, I'd like to go back and become, I don't know. Like I said, I go to schools now and I talk to kids and that and I'd like to be able to do more, but like I said earlier, sometimes our people are our biggest enemies.

I only stand five foot three inches, I weigh 140 pounds and you should have seen some of the guys that I fought. It was to get that anger out. I still get emotional about some things but its easier now for me to talk about it. I've talked about it in public before. You know, right here, we were having a meeting and we were talking about the different things that happened to us. I mentioned what happened to me down in the basement at Grouard. A so-called "survivor" said "Oh, gee, you must be good at milking cows now then, eh." When your own people ridicule you for the abuse that happened to you, I mean who can you turn to? Who can you trust? I don't care, let them talk about it. Let people know what really happened in that place. You know there are people that don't believe there was such a thing as the holocaust! How in the hell can you deny six million Jews were slaughtered. What about our people?

There are people out there, I don't what kind of life they had before they got in there, but when you eat half rotten fish and porridge with nothing but big lumps in it, it's disgusting. That's why I ended up calling us "mission beans" because we ate so many bloody beans when we were in there. Yet there are people out there that think I had it good in there because I ate and I had a place to sleep.

Q: Did you find that you were treated differently than other kids in the mission?

A: Yeah, because my dad was white and most of the kids that were in there were pure Indians. They knew my dad was white so I was kind of an outsider, like I was picked on by other kids being that I was the smallest one there too. I was separated from my siblings. In fact, when my brother, my oldest brother, died I didn't feel anything cause I didn't really know him. My other brother, now he's trying to get close, he's starting to phone me.

Q: Was the health care that you received adequate?

A: Adequate? There was no bloody healthcare there. There used to be kids, remember I was telling you about that room where they used to put us in (steam bath). There were kids dying of pneumonia.

Q: Have you been able to access healing services to help you with your residential school experience?

A: The only one that actually helped me was in Peace River. What we used to do there we used to have these healing circles and it really helped people speak of their experiences and it helped because you felt like you weren't alone. Here you're scared to say something like I mentioned there that woman said "well you must be good at milking cows," you know, I went home that night and I felt so dirty because now people knew and how many others were laughing about it? They figured it was a big joke, so you know it's not healing, it's just making it worse. I asked those people when they were here from Ottawa, what their payroll is over there compared to my $249 a month. I'm not saying that money heals, but why should people make money off of somebody else's pain and suffering?

Q: What do you believe was the quality of education in school?

A: Yeah, I was taught how to be mean. I was taught how to hate people. Well, like I said earlier we were treated different because I was part white.

Q: Is there anything that you would like to say to the Church?

A: No, they made life a living hell so when I die, I'm going to heaven. If there's such a thing as heaven and hell, I've lived in hell. I don't know really if you were aware of what you put us into. All the compensation in the world is not going to erase what we went through. I just wanted you to know that yes, we are Indians but we are also children of God, we are no different from you or anyone else. We eat, we sleep, we cry, we hurt the same as you do. All we ask is that we be treated as equal, no different, no better or no worse.

Q: What would you like to say to your grandchildren?

A: I just want to say that I'm sorry I couldn't be a better parent. If I had it to do all over again I would be better and for my grandchildren, they are happy now that I can say "I love you". Before, that was never in my vocabulary. They honestly do feel not only the words but the feeling that I do love you. One thing I would like to add is that if any of them kids out there reads this, it was real life, its not fiction. Its things that really happened to your own people so don't repeat it, don't do it yourselves, learn to love not hate. Don't drink, don't do drugs. ■

Elmer Cardinal, 61
St. Henri/Edmonton IRS, 8 years
February 2004

I'm Elmer Cardinal and I'm 61 years old. I was born in Peace River and shortly after my mom and dad broke up when I was a baby, we moved back to Fort Vermillion where my mom was from. I didn't start school 'til I was eight years old because in those days we had to live with our grandparents for a time, and maybe the most rewarding part of my life was that I did live with my grandparents.

When I was eight years old I remember when the priest, Indian agent, and RCMP came up to the cabin saying that I had to go to school. It was around 1952 or '53. Most kids were forced to go to school and so a lot of the Indian people living in the bush moved into the community for going to school. By the time you were 16 in those days they sort of told you school was over because you were cut off from Family Allowance and the Welfare people (social workers) didn't want to look after you anymore. I didn't get much education because we were automatically kicked out in those days if you weren't accomplishing anything in school, especially if you weren't well liked.

I didn't know how to speak English, didn't know how to speak Latin, and I didn't know how to speak French. That was part of the curriculum those days. It made it very difficult for me because I didn't know how to speak any of those languages. So I think this is where a lot of the abuse came in. The ones that were abused the most were children like myself that weren't very smart and not very intelligent and not learning fast enough for them. I felt that many of the people like the nuns, the priests, and the Brothers that helped out there didn't have much patience for some of the children like me.

Right now I'm quite happy about what's been said, and what's been done. I was a Catholic one time and happy because they changed so much. They changed their language, Latin is obsolete. I remember when the priest had his back to the people all the time right through their mass and now he turns around and looks at the people. They say prayers in different languages, which is good. In a way I've sort of forgave the church for the pain and suffering that children like myself endured.

I would like to say to the government today that maybe they should just settle this thing once and for all and quit giving the money to all the lawyers. Because by the time they're finished with this inquiry and compensating the people for the abuse that endured, they'd be dead by the time they talked to us. Either that or the money would be all gone.

To my grandchildren all I can say to them is, I don't think they'll understand any of this. Maybe one day they might read some of it and that's why I want to say what I can for them just to focus on education. I was sort of robbed of my culture and education and they shouldn't be because the world has changed so much. It's changed so much that they'll never experience what we experienced as children in schools. They have to stay in school and just focus on reaching goals.

How was I treated by the employees in the residential school? Well you were a marked person once everybody knew…and I feel maybe it started from a confession because I used to steal and lie and swear at one other kid and that's all I used to confess to. I think the priest probably let everybody know that I had a foul mouth and to watch out for me. So that's why I was abused by all the other staff when I was at St. Henri's School in Fort Vermilion.

Then when I attended the other school in Edmonton, and I felt that I was a marked sort of kid. I wasn't allowed to get away with too much. So I was pretty well mistreated by everyone and the staff. Once in a while one of the staff would be nice and give me a candy or say hello to me and that felt good. But, that didn't happen very much.

The type of discipline…what bothered me…I got used to the beatings. Like a dog, I think many of us were treated like dogs. I think if you beat up a dog enough times it will learn to speak as well, and I always felt like I was treated like a dog because of the beatings I endured. But, I got used to them and I did benefit from those beatings. I did become a very tough person throughout my life. Today, after all my accidents and pains and things I went through, I felt that it was probably because the severe punishment that I got, I sort of got used to it.

What bothered me the most about the discipline? The worst was that I missed out and I never got to go to any of the movies. They had movies like Roy Rogers, Gene Autrie, and Hop-Along Cassidy and of course we all liked them. I just loved those movies. Because I wasn't up to par with my school work and my behaviour, I don't remember going to a movie in the two years that I was in the Edmonton school. That bothered me the most. Not getting to do anything. I was always disciplined for everything.

You know, I sort of didn't believe what the culture was then, because my own culture was sort of looked at as some sort of voodoo, or some kind of devil worship stuff. Then we were forced into this other culture called the Catholic Church, and dressing different. But I got used to that and I got to like some of it. I didn't mind a lot of it. I learned how to dress in the residential school and I enjoyed dressing up. So for my culture, I lost it but I knew I'd regain it and that's what I did. I regained my culture simply by going to Sweat Lodges and talking to Elders. I regained my culture. In a way I didn't really lose it and it just came back to me quite easily, especially my language, which is Cree, came back to me

very fast because my mother didn't speak English. I still could speak it when I went back and saw her again. So my Cree came back very fast. That was one of the reasons I moved back up north in 1980, to regain my culture. I got involved with the prisoners and Action North (rehabilitation centre) and learned a lot with them. I think that's what helped me heal so well and did so well in my life because of regaining my culture.

I was brought up by German people back in the 50's and they taught me a different culture, a very rich culture. Different church, different food and I got married in a Lutheran Church because I learned through the Germans that you can go to any kind of church, so I got married in a Lutheran Church.

The food in the residential school…I only got one thing I can say about the food in the residential school I went to. It was rotten. It was rotten and we were treated like slaves to feed and cater to the supervisors like the nuns and the priests and they ate good. They ate like kings and queens and we always wished that we could eat just part of that food. And some of us did sometimes. We got caught and severely punished for grabbing a piece of potato or a piece of meat or something. But the food, I think particularly in St. Mary's it was pretty bad. It was worse than when I was in Fort Vermilion.

The health care provided was…I think it was adequate enough because many of the nuns were nurses themselves. I think they did their best and attended to anybody that was injured. I myself was beaten up by a priest and taken to a clinic and had my head sewn up with about 12 stitches where the priest had punched me. The only thing he said, "There, that will teach him for picking on bigger boys than him." There's this holy man, he beat me up and then he lied about it. I think that's where I lost thinking these are God's people. It was shortly after that, that I went back to St. Mary's home and I was going to get another beating by the same priest. I beat him up and the only thing I regret is that I didn't kill him. I meant to kill him, he didn't die. I beat him up pretty good; he didn't die. I kicked him in the head, I smashed his glasses and the boys gathered all around me and nobody did anything. I think they were glad. I never asked any of them but that's when I left the school.

My ability to be a parent…what did I learn from…well you know one of the things the residential schools never did to any kid that I know is teach them parent-hood. They didn't have any kind of program for parenthood. They would just simply discipline in an abusive way or in a nice way to the kids that were nice. They weren't taught because a priest was never a parent and the nuns were never parents. So how could they ever teach us how to be a parent and that's the way I always looked at it.

I was physically and emotionally abused. I was never sexually abused. I think that's why I'm here today sitting here doing an interview and talking about it.

And that's simply because I was never sexually abused. I lost five brothers to alcoholism, death through alcoholism. I always wondered but never asked them whether they were sexually abused because they never even tried to straighten out their lives like I did. They didn't even make an attempt. One of my brothers was warned by the doctor, if he didn't quit drinking immediately that he wouldn't last long and he didn't quit or last very long. So I always thought a lot of these people took something to their grave that we never knew. Sometimes I wonder about the alcoholism. If it was the reason why many people died because some of the effects and something they endured in some of these residential schools, especially the sexual abuse.

Many of the students looked a little more Indian because a lot of the Métis students weren't really recognized as Natives. And of course there was a lot of discrimination those days from Métis because a lot of them had blue eyes, gray eyes, different features of white people their hair and even their dress. And yes, they were a lot smarter. Most Métis students knew how to speak English. A lot of them knew how to speak French because the Métis had a lot of settlements and those settlements spoke French quite a bit already and their leader was a very influential Frenchman. Louis Riel, he spoke French very well. So I think that's why the Métis students worked harder and gained more than the Native student because of the racism. The Indians endured more and they had to learn more because a lot of Native students didn't know how to speak any other language than their own Native tongues.

There's healing services to help you deal with your residential school experience. Yeah I did a lot, and today there's a lot, but back then right after I got out of residential school they didn't know of such things as healing services and I think that's where a lot of people went on to live a misguided life. Unfortunately the government or any organization didn't really have any kind of facility for a healing service. But Poundmaker's (rehabilitation centre) always had some but they certainly didn't have what they have today in healing and dealing with residential school syndrome.

Yes, I attended an anger management program through Grant McEwen College. It was a two-month program, which helped me a lot. Then I started working and talking and dealing with a lot of Natives. So I had a lot of help. Not only did Native people help me but the German people where I was fostered taught me a lot too. They taught me a lot about life and looking after myself and eating and education. Lo an' behold I always thank all these different people that helped me out to be where I am today.

The quality of education that I received in residential school I would say was nil because much of it came through a lot of abuse. One of the worse incidents that I remember experiencing abuse while I was in school was when I was about

13 years old and Elvis Presley just came out. And the only magazine we ever got in the residential school was a nice thing called *Junior Scholastics*. And there was little picture of Elvis Presley in there and I've already heard about Elvis Presley.

Somebody had a cassette radio and always hid it on himself and he gave me this radio so I used to listen to Elvis in bed a lot. It was a little radio and you had to use a little earphone and it was a tiny little device for listening to the radio. That's where I heard Elvis and I just enjoyed his music so much. But he was marked as the devil already then and especially by the different churches. I had this little picture that I cut out of Elvis out of this magazine. And I remember really well, I put it in my history book, I used it for a marker. I was studying for something and the priest walked by beside me and nailed me on the side of the head and knocked me right out of my desk. He was a big priest. I just fell onto the floor and picked myself up and I always wondered why that happened. But my picture of Elvis Presley was gone out of my book and I guess that's why I got such severe shock from this priest.

My head rang all day from that shot in the head. And it was because I had the picture of Elvis. So that's one of the things that still bother me today. Why did I have to get hit for carrying a picture? Well I know why, I guess, I was supposed to have a picture of God in there, not Elvis Presley. But I think about that a lot.

After the severe beating that I gave that priest which, I was very, very proud of, and I should have done sooner, I roamed the city. I lived by the river for a couple days and then I wandered downtown because I was lost. I think that it had been reported that I had run away from the school. What they did those days was immediately report it.

It took three days for them to catch up with me. I dealt with suicide there for a day or two and didn't know what I was going to do. I even laid on a railroad track but because it was a hot day, my neck was burning. I had a mark on the back of my neck from laying on the railroad track waiting for a train to come and it didn't happen so I just walked away. I walked downtown and this police lady came up to me from behind me and said, "Are you Elmer?" I said yes and so she said, "Well, you have to come with me" so I went with her. She was very nice to me.

People that were best with me and people that I was always scared of were the policemen. But this lady was nice to me and they said they knew I was missing for a couple days and that they had to get me back to wherever. I said, "No don't take me back there" and I begged her not to take me back because I'll just get more beatings. But somehow she took me in and I was placed in a detention home.

I spent about three, four months there and I loved it there. Life had just changed for me there. We ate with the staff, we ate the same food and I just couldn't believe it. And we had the option of going or not going to church and

I just loved that. It just made me feel like a human being that I wasn't forced to pray, I wasn't forced to do anything in church and I just had a different look at life. I think maybe if I hadn't changed to that, I probably would have committed suicide. It made me see that life was good and there were human beings there because I was treated like a human being by all the staff.

I remember particularly this one lady always wanted me to help her and her name was Mrs. Campbell. I'll never forget her. She was old and she was the cook there. She always asked me to help her cook in the kitchen. So I helped her a lot. She used to let me lick the cake bowl and I thought I was on top of the world just to be able to do that and have somebody treat me that good. She thought I was a human being.

I didn't think Indians were human anymore because of my experience in a residential school. The abuse I saw not only by priests, but by different people, white people and Métis people. I think that was probably a turning point in my life. At the detention home, they said I was human being, that I was okay and that I'll get somewhere. They even told me that I was a smart kid there and nobody ever told me that I was a smart kid in residential school. I was hated so much.

Today I'd be, I guess, a good artist. I remember when I was in a residential school I'd draw pictures. I think I was a born artist like many people were. But my work, the nun would tear it up or say that it was ugly and I never got a prize. I never was rewarded for any things that I did in the residential school.

I just drew one picture one day. I was just scribbling in this detention home and they hung the picture up. They hung it up so that everybody could see it. I couldn't believe that they were so proud of this picture. But I never carried on with my work. I did a little bit in later years. I did some carving. I guess that was one of the turning points in my life after leaving the residential school. If it had not had been for this detention home… I think if many of the Indian boys that were abused in school had went there they would have a different outcome in their life as well because it just a place like that, that can save someone's life like myself and behavior.

After that, I went to a foster home, a German foster home. I got treated like anybody should be treated today. I was treated very well. The lady that took me in Mrs. Amasybard back in 1956, she's still my mother to me. That's probably one of the proudest things in my life was that I survived residential school and being a foster kid to a German culture, language. I even learned to speak a little bit of German, I used to pray in German, I attended a German church and I even got married in a German Lutheran church. Today I can say I'm a proud person. Despite of what I went through in life. I'm very proud today of my achievements and accomplishments. Just through a lot of help, different people and Elders, I'm proud to be here today doing this interview. ■

Harold Flett, 53
Boarding homes, 9 years
January 2004

My dad worked for the Hudson Bay Company as a store manager. They had no schools up in the northern parts of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. I think we were the last family to move out of the community. I was probably about six years old. My dad was transferred. He took his annual leave to go to Pine Falls and Powerview in that area (Manitoba) where my grandfather retired from the Hudson Bay Company also. I guess we basically spent our summers in Powerview and I still have quite a few relatives around there.

When we were about to go north, my brothers and sisters, they are older than me, and they always stayed in The Pas or Pine Falls. At one time they lived without seeing parents for five years. We spent ten months of the year at school and it was kind of a funny way how I got into school. I thought I was going with my parents back up north. I was on the train with everybody else. When The Pas (town) came about, I guess they unhooked the boxcar from the passenger train and we coasted into The Pas. When I woke up, I was wondering where my mom and dad were, but I guess they jumped into the other passenger train and took off towards Churchill. I didn't realize that I was to start school with my brothers and sisters.

We stayed with a lady that looked after foster children. The Hudson Bay Company provided us with an education because we weren't Catholics. We were Anglicans and there were no residential schools around The Pas area. Apparently my brothers and sisters were going to school in The Pas for five years prior to my grade one when I started. I was seven years old and I barely knew English, but I was able to get by on my English.

This one man took me to register me in school, and the first day of school I got spanked on the bum from my teacher. I didn't know the procedures of the school day, and for recess I thought that was home time and I wanted to be the first one home just to see if I knew my way home. I ran out of the school yard and I was wondering why everybody was sticking around and playing around in the school yard while I was running home. When I did get home, the lady that looked after the house sent me back to school. It was kind of embarrassing to walk into school. I got a little swat on the head. I guess I had a rough time not knowing English that well. I learned how to count to ten, that was about it when I started school. All the other children were able to count to 50, 100, 200, and beyond while I was able to count to ten only, so I was the dummy.

It was kind of tough to be apart from my brothers, especially when I needed them like this in grade one. The older lady in the boarding home, was of Ukrainian background and she did a lot of cooking, stuff like perogies, noodles and all types of bakery goods. She provided a lot of food for us. I really enjoyed the food, but the foster children, I saw them starving all the time. They didn't have enough so they kept on going downstairs to see if they could sneak a slice of bread or something like that. She would have one ear open all the time so man, if they got caught, man, they really got a good licking. You remember those barbershop straps where they used to sharpen their scissors and blades? That is what she acquired somehow, two of them. There was one in the kitchen and one in her bedroom so she was always in reach of one of them. The kids would crawl underneath the table so she wouldn't be able to hit them.

On Sundays we had to go to two churches: one was the Salvation Army, one was the Gospel Mission, and she went to her own church which was an Anglican Church. Even though I was Anglican I wasn't allowed to go to that church, for what reason I don't know. We would receive two pennies each for the Salvation Army to drop into the collection plate. I found out later the children had no allowance, no money whatsoever, so they used those pennies to drop into the bubble gum machine rather then into the collection plate.

Education became pretty easy in spelling, reading and math, my exams were in the nineties, mostly one hundred percent. I would bring home my tests to show, we called her Auntie Trynacity—-she made us call her auntie. "So Auntie here is my test. I got a one hundred percent". Her response was, "it's just too bad you're a thief now!" It really brought my esteem way down low, so I found a partner that was in my grade that was getting bad marks in his spelling and other tests. I used to give him my tests and he would take it home and he would get rewarded by receiving a dollar bill each time he got one hundred percent and I would help him spend it. I didn't think there was anything wrong with it, this was a money making proposition. I guess when we were returning our report cards the parents of that child erased the mark that he originally got and put one hundred percent. Something was wrong. The teacher must have made a mistake and I guess the teacher questioned him about it and we were in trouble.

I did manage to get home to see my parents after being away ten months. I felt like a stranger to my parents. The whole community would come down to see who was on the plane. The third year I refused to go back to school. It was time for a change, so my dad asked the Hudson Bay Company to look for a place in Saskatchewan. It was a different situation there. It was room and board for construction workers, all types of career people who didn't have a home and it was their place. A lot of workers would go home for the weekend, so we grew up with construction and Department Highways workers. There was a lot of

freedom. The landlady, she pretty well let us do what we wanted, as long as we got up for school, went to school every day. My chore was to take out the garbage every day, she gave me a dollar a week for that and I had no curfew. She never complained either as long as she was getting the money from the Hudson Bay Company for our stay there.

I was a sports minded person, good in sports, soccer, baseball but I could never get onto a team. I had to pay a fee of a dollar or something like that. I noticed that there were only about four or five of us Indians in that school so it was pretty tough for us to try and get into a baseball team or softball team, any kind of team sports. I could be a soccer player anytime as long as I paid for the fee. I was a pretty good star on our team. They wanted me to represent Saskatchewan in the Expo 67 but that was in the summer holidays and I wanted to go and see my parents rather than going. My friends and parents knew that I was going to be somebody in the soccer, because each time *Harold Flett* would make a goal in soccer it would be announced on the radio on SKPI TV.

Another form of making money during my stay in Prince Albert was going up and down the main streets selling papers. My brother acquired a paper route and I helped him out in third grade. After awhile when the money started getting good we started spending it.

I realized that I was in a white society school and I guess after a while I became a bully in the school in my class and the upper grades too. If I was in grade five, I was bullying kids that were in grade seven and I could get away with it so I didn't mind being a leader of my group. I realized that the friends that I was hanging around with were mostly all white students and when I went to their house they found out that I was not a white person. They were told not to play with me or if I did play with them in the house, I would get body searched before I left the place.

I lost my friends when they started reaching their teens and they hung around themselves. I had to find some other form of friends and went downtown and found people that had day passes from the residential schools. I started meeting friends, Indian friends, at restaurants and hanging out with them.

Once I reached my teens, I quit at grade 12. I was doing my work and hung around with older friends who were into bar life and of course I got further behind. Rather than getting kicked out, I got released. So I went to the co-op stores and lasted there for about three to four years. After six months of being a clerk there I was in training to become a store manager and I was a store manager for three years and that was my life.

I got married when I was 2l years old. I went to school every summer to take courses and later on acquired the Bachelor of Education. I felt much better, comfortable having a Bachelor of Education and being an administrator.

Then I had three children and I have to tell you, I was more or less a real stern parent. People may say that I looked after my children and brought them up well. To me I think I was too strict because of the upbringing that I had in my earlier grades.

My dad and my mom never were strict to us, never spanked us and when I entered school I sure learned the difference of being without my parents and I thought that was the way to bring up my children was to be strict. I'll swat you the way I was swatted and so that was my way of parenting and now that they are on their own. They said "hey dad you were really strict, you were very strict, and mother was strict too." I thought it was the right thing to do to bring up my children in a strict manner. Now that I have grandchildren, I tell my children to go easy on them, don't be like me, I'm not the right parent that you thought I was, I want you to be a parent by loving the children.

By the time I got old enough, my children were in their teens, and I realized that I was parenting them all wrong. I'm grateful that most of them have received their grade 12 or university degree. My only daughter, she's still trying to get in nursing but she has two children of her own and she is doing a great job of parenting her children.

I'll give you a good example of being the good parent that I thought I was. My wife and I were very young parents we were at a big restaurant and there were other children in the restaurant besides our children. We had the children sitting at the table and they were nice. They weren't doing anything, weren't speaking out, or wanting to go washroom. They were doing well as far as we were concerned and when we were about to leave, other people have noticed the childrens' behavior. They would come and praise us, pat us on the back saying "boy you have nice children." When would get back home and say "yeah, we were good parents" but ten years down the line, you know we thought about it, and we were not good parents. We didn't let these kids open up and voice their opinion or talk so we kept them quiet and we actually put them in a shell. ■

Anonymous, 53 of age
IRS, 2.5 years
November 2003

I attended the residential school and this is my story. When I first went to the residential school I felt I was in jail. I was treated different and I always felt I was different just by the way we were dressed. We were all dressed all the same and we were called "mission beans" to this day. I still don't know the meaning of this. I was in the residential school for two-and-a-half years. Being inside of the residential school they were really strict and we were looked after by the nuns and priests. The priests looked after the boys and the nuns looked after the girls. They were our mothers and fathers that we didn't see everyday.

I learned some things from them but I didn't like the discipline. You kinda got used to it because it was the same as my parents, mom and dad. They were there from the time they were seven years old until they were 14, 15, or 16 years old so they spent most of their life in residential schools. The discipline itself, especially being the oldest, I had to look after my younger brother and younger sisters. I used to cry with them because of the way the nuns were treating them.

We couldn't speak our language which is Cree and I was too young to understand about my culture but I knew I was missing something. Now I realize that I lost a lot. I guess we have to go on with life because times are now changing. We have to try and hang on to whatever is left our culture, our language and our way of life.

As for the food in the residential, it wasn't too bad, I guess. My mom and dad, they had it harder than we did. I look back and hear stories that my dad told me but my mom wasn't so open to talk about the residential school. She kept that part inside but my dad opened once in a while. I guess it hurt so much for them. They never talked about the residential school, just once in a while when he had a drink in him, he'd talk about that.

Q: When did your mom and dad attend the residential school?

A: I guess it was probably in the 1930s.

Q: What was the health care like for you?

A: They took good care of us, yeah. I can't complain about that.

Q: Did your time in residential school affect your ability to be a parent?

A: My time in the residential there it really affected my life as a parent because my mom and dad taught us the same way that the priest and the nuns treated them as parents. They didn't know how to be parents. They were very strict with

us. There was no loving at home, no hugging, no words like "I love you" because they were dirty words. They were taught not to show affection. The priest and nuns took that out of you. I know I was in the mission I couldn't even talk to my brother and we never spoke our language either.

Q: Were the boys physically separated from the girls?

A: Yeah, yeah. I couldn't talk to my brother. They had a fence that divided the girls and the boys so they had no contact with their older brothers just with the younger ones like my sisters. I hung around with my sisters as much as I could—with my brother—every chance I had I used to talk to him. My youngest sister was five years old, maybe six. Mom died when she was only 33—her youngest son was only 10 months old. Just lately in the past, maybe five or six years ago—now I'm strong in my affection—you know, to show it. With my brothers, sisters, my kids, and my grandkids—now I show them that I love them—it's okay to give them a hug. It's okay now because like I said, there was no affection before. I'm learning to show that in my own time.

Q: Were you physically or emotionally abused in the residential school?

A: I was not physically abused, just emotional abuse. I'll continue working on my emotional abuse because it started from mom and dad and the cycle has to stop and I feel that it's up to me to stop the cycle. I felt myself very limited with what I could do and what I couldn't do, therefore, even like I said in my relationships too. Even my relationships were really affected by that because I was taught to listen to the men, first with my dad and then with my husband too. I had to cater to them but later on in life realized that I didn't have to cater to nobody but to myself and to do what I wanna do.

Q: Have you had access to healing services to help you deal with the abuse you suffered in the residential school?

A: I never had real access to healing services—I've been doing it on my own. I go to healing circles for women in here, I take that in and I try and get as much help I can, on my own time. I really have a hard time with alcohol because I am called an alcoholic, but I'm trying to live whatever life I have left on this earth and I pray lots and meditate. I go to church but not to the Catholic Church.

I never went for years because I was forced to go to church. I guess that where there was no love, no affection or anything in the home, starting from my parents again, that's coming back from the priest and nuns. I got pregnant when I was 16 years old because I was looking for love. I didn't even know what love was but I was looking for it anyway. So I got myself pregnant when I was in residential school and that's when I left and never went back.

I was supposed to go to Edmonton, give up my baby and go back to residential school but that's a choice I made instead of giving up my son, I gave up my school.

Q: Is your use or abuse of alcohol a result of your experience in the school?

A: I think it's from the abuse from my first marriage because I used to see my dad beating up my mom. As I got older I got into an abusive relationship because of seeing that and I thought it was okay. I had to live like that because that's all I'd seen. You know, I stayed drunk on weekends, my husband never saw me in town, other than the bar, because I knew that I'd probably get a licking and I'd get knocked around later. Therefore, I stayed drunk so I wouldn't feel the hits and the slapping around or whatever. Then I went into a Poundmaker's (rehabilitation centre) and that's how I found me. Today, I'm not the people pleaser as I used to be. I'm still getting stronger. You know, all I can do is to live for myself and better whatever's left of my life.

Q: What gave you the strength or the courage to do something about the abuse that you were suffering?

A: I don't know what made me go to Poundmaker's. I just knew I was drinking way, way too heavy. I was talking to other people that were attending AA meetings in Edmonton. I was living in Edmonton for about a year-and-a-half after I left my abusive marriage. I thought, you know, that lifestyle is so good, and that's the kind of life I want.

That's when I went to Poundmaker's. I knew I had to keep working on the abuse because it started from mom and dad and the cycle has to stop. I felt that it was up to me to stop the cycle. The number one problem in my life was alcohol and I had to get rid of it because I knew that my kids were going to follow me. Like I said, I'm still healing today. I don't want to die a bitter old lady.

Q: What was the quality of education you received in the residential school?

A: The quality of education? I don't know. When I was in Fort Smith I was in grade six and mom died in April so I had to stay home so I didn't finish my sixth in Fort Smith and I started a month of grade seven. My mom and dad drank so much and I was the oldest so I had to stay home and take care of them and my brother. Me and my brother are really close because we went through so much being the oldest, being the oldest of the boys and I was the oldest of all the family. I wanted to have a grade six education although I could have continued, I guess, on my own time but I didn't. I didn't feel I needed education at that time to be a parent. I'm still learning everyday today to be a good parent.

Q: Have you taken any parenting classes or academic upgrading?

A: Yes, I went back to school, I don't know how many times I went but they never gave me my certificate. I went to Fairview College and to the other colleges and I never got anything out of it. Grant McEwan, they still have my credits there. I had a stroke in '98 so I had to relearn to read and to do my numbers that's why I went back to school to see how much I lost. I have a grade 10 now.

Q: What would you like to say to the church?

A: About the Catholic Church? If any of the priests or the nuns that were working at the residential school, I would probably tell them that I forgive them because they didn't know better. That's probably why it's easy for me now to go to church because I can do it. I go to church on my own time like I know that I'm not forced anymore. I forgive them, the priest and the nuns on behalf of my mom and dad for the way they were brought up.

Q: What would you say to the government?

A: To the government—they're controlling us. We never go to a white man's house and say "you are gonna be like us" and I feel that's wrong. To this day I really have hard feelings for the government. It's totally wrong what they did because all our lives we have been controlled by white people—government or whatever—they have no right, they're not God. They should just have let us—our ancestors you know—they should have just let us alone. There wouldn't be hard feelings towards government and white people. There are few white people that I trust; I still have a lot of hard feelings towards the government for what they've done to us.

Q: What would you say to your grandchildren?

A: As for my grandchildren—my grandchildren are small now—that's the next step that I have to work on. I have to explain to them what residential schools were, because they don't have a clue what happened and the effect it has on us. I'm the only grandparent left now for both sides. You know, my kids never grew up with grandparents. Even my ex-mother-in-law was raised in a residential school too, from the time she was six years or something till she was about 16. With her too—she doesn't ever show the affection—she doesn't know how to be a parent. I wanna love. I love all my grandkids and I always pray to the Creator for my grandkids, before they're born, that they're healthy. I'm just still learning to be a grandmother because, I've only just got over being a mother and the way I look at it, I'm getting a second chance to be a parent. Being the oldest, my brothers and sisters look up to me as a mother. With my own kids, they have a lot of respect for me. My grandkids are easy to hug. That's about all I have to say to you about the residential school. ■

James Thomas, 80
St. Bernard IRS, 10 years,
December 2003

My mother died when I was about four years old and there were six of us in the family. The old man couldn't look after us and go to work. He met Mr. Laird (Treaty 8 Commissioner). Mr. Laird told them about the school there at Grouard that he would look after us down there. He said that he would have to bring us down and put us in the mission. He bundled us all up and brought us down, the one sister, she's the oldest, she kinda looked after us there. We were there on to ten years, I think. I went through grade eight and they sent me back home, and the rest of them stayed at the mission. One brother he went to Saskatchewan, to the priesthood, and took his training down there. The other two girls, one went to BC, she was a nurse. I went home and I stayed on a farm worked up in that area.

At school there, we didn't like the grub—some days it was good—other days it was horrible. There was an old fisherman out of Canyon Creek he used to bring boat loads of tullybee fish. They just put on a great big casserole—great big pan about 3ft long by about 2ft wide—throw the tullybee in there, half boil them, half bake them, that was some good grub.

Then we worked, and I worked with Brother Nicole in the shop there, and we'd have to look after the big motor to produce the power for lights all over the place. Then in the blacksmith shop we'd shoe their horses and the carpenter shop, we'd fiddle around there. In the summer time we'd have acres of potatoes, carrots, turnips, and we'd have to get out there and weed them. Takes some time to do that. We didn't go home because it was so far to go home and cost too much money in them days. The old man didn't have any money to look after us. I think he had to pay for being us at school but it took all that he earned to keep us down there. He run his trap line and did a bit of prospecting on the river. The Peace River run right besides our place and he'd get out there and try and to find a little bit of gold there.

Different times we got a licking for doing things you weren't supposed to but it didn't seem too bad at the time. One time in school, I got it from a teacher, called Sister Mary. She was a big, husky girl, who was in charge of the boys. She come over and give me a haircut, shaved me right down, bald head. We used to call her "Bulldog" because she was mean all the time, not only to me, but to everybody else. She hit me on the side and front of the head here with her clappers and left a little scar there, there is still a scar there today. Maybe it shook up my brains or something.

Other than that there were some good days, some bad. We played football, baseball in the summer. We never did get a skating rink going there so we didn't have too much skating. After about ten years that's when they shipped me home and I guess the school it kinda helped me out.

Q: What about the health care, when you got sick were you treated?"

A: We were treated right there at the school, they at one time had their own hospital there right on the grounds or they'd take us to High Prairie. One time there they loaded a bunch of us kids in the sleigh with a team of horses and took us to High Prairie. They took our tonsils out and loaded us back in the sleigh to haul us back to the mission.

Q: What do you believe was the quality of education that you received?

A: It was a pretty good school in my time. I guess that's about it. ■

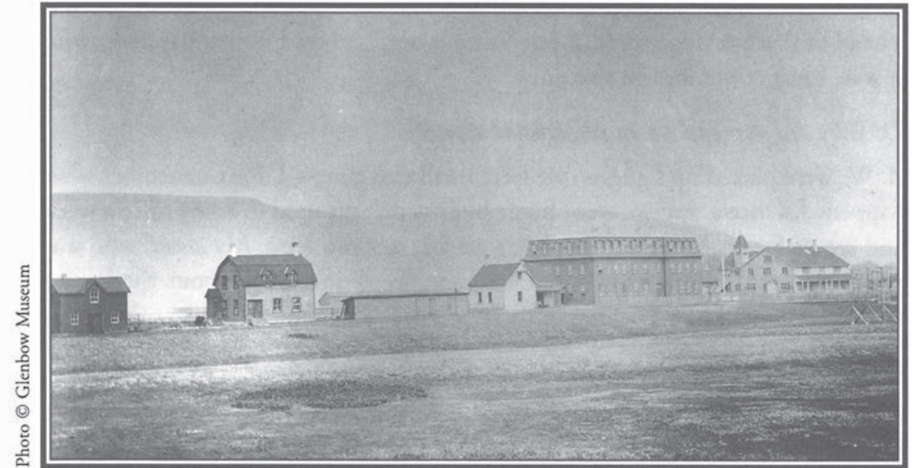


Photo © Glenbow Museum

St. Joseph's Industrial School, east of High River, Alberta.
The school was commonly called Dunbow School.

Métis Memories of Residential Schools

Anonymous, 66
IRS, 10 years
January 2004

Well, first thing first, I guess my mom was the first one to be in that residential school until she was 15 and she got married. All my brothers and sisters were way older than me. I don't remember how many sisters I had, some were still new babies I guess, I don't really know how many were in the family. Mom didn't say much, about a long time ago when she was there. After that it's just two of us, my sister and I went to school when we were small about six or seven. We're the last ones in the family.

Q: What was the food like?

A: Just can't remember, already been a long time ago. One thing I didn't like was a bowl of that porridge cereal. I just threw it out, oh boy. I remember how awful it was. I just remember all that so.

Q: Why did you end up in residential school?

A: We were picked up I guess—we were small that time—I don't remember what happened. Once a year we went home but my parents used to come once a week and see us for an hour, just one hour maybe, not too long. My sister, who was younger, stayed longer than me. Of course, we didn't know about the law or anything, didn't know nothing in there, we were just kept there like prisoners.

Q: Did you suffer any type of abuse in the residential school?

A: One day there was a dentist coming there, a dentist, I don't recall his name. He checked our teeth and that dentist was just fondling me all over like this, "Oh you've got nice white legs," up to here (crotch area) he was just fondling me. I don't know why he was doing that, with my skirt (up) like this. I didn't know why he was trying to touch me all over like this. All kind of stuff I can't remember, we all didn't know what was happening. It was a long time ago but you remember all of it. It's been a while.

Q: What was the discipline like?

A: I remember I had the strap maybe once for nothing. Just the strap, like that. The boys, I've seen them getting strapped all the time. Some were bad, but you know how it is.

Q: How did they treat you if you spoke your own language?

A: Might slap you or push you away "don't talk Cree." We'd talk just silently but

we all talked Cree but not right in front of them. When I had my period that first time, I told a nun, "I'm bleeding." She said, ""Why don't you just go and wait in the bathroom, wait for me there." She told me what to do after that but it was an hour or more that I had to wait there in the washroom. I was so scared I was bleeding to death maybe or something. I couldn't even use all the paper, just one little fold, they were real thin, you can't use more—another person will tell you all about it.

Q: What was the health care like?

A: Oh it was awful and there were no painkillers at that time for teeth. This one Sister, she was a small little nun and she was so mean. She tried to pull my teeth—she pulled it hard—it hurt—she didn't do anything—she's too small—she can't even pull it out—there's no freezing and that's painful. It was a long time ago. There was a hospital but nothing much.

Q: Did your time in residential school affect your ability to be a parent?

A: I don't drink yeah. I'm a sober person. I never drink. I used to drink when I was first married and just few months when I went out from residential school at about 18. For me I'm proud of myself.

Q: Did you learn anything useful that helped you later in life when you went to school?

A: Just sewing stuff—do your own stuff household—it was alright—we learned lots about home care. Books all that stuff, that's alright. We learned lots.

Q: What do you believe was the quality of education?

A: I only went to grade seven, that's all, we stopped right there. After that, the other kids, I guess they were all like 15 years old when they left. They finished their grade 12, some of them, but not all. They got married I guess.

Q: So how long were you there?

A: Up to 15 years old. I was there for 10 years.

Q: Did you have to work hard when you were there?

A: Everyone works hard. Cleaning, cleaning, washing clothes, there were two washing machines there, big ones. Garden stuff too, we did all that stuff.

Q: Did the students get to eat the food that you grew?

A: I don't think we ever ate peanut butter! It's hard. I don't remember what kind of meat we used to have, not much. Just on Christmas.

***Q:** Have you had access to healing services?*

A: No, no. I'll never forget the experience I had, you know, never. Healing doesn't work; you just have to heal yourself, you know.

***Q:** What would you say to the church about your experience?*

A: When we were small why did you treat us like that?

***Q:** What would you say to the government about your experience?*

A: Why put us there like that?

***Q:** What would you say to your grandchildren about your experience?*

A: I talk about if they're interested to know. It's not a good place. ■

Photo © Glenbow Museum

Edmonton Indian Residential School, Edmonton, Alberta, 1924.

Martha Mercredi, 83
Holy Angels, 8 years
January 2004

When I was in the convent I was four years old because I was an orphan. I have no complaint about the convent. I was treated very well. I didn't talk the language that I was supposed to talk, (Cree) but I learned it from a friend when I was in the convent. We'd talk Cree because the nuns didn't understand Cree, so we were being naughty, but the Sisters never knew that we were talking about them. A lot of the people said they were stopped from talking the Cree language—not in my time.

There was lots of opportunity for Fond du Lac people who talked Chipweyan. The nuns they taught us, if other girls were smaller than us we could take care of them but we didn't learn their language. But it was pretty hard because if you don't understand the language, how do you make a person understand. Some of them were lonely. I understand they were lonely because they had their mom and dad, but me, I was never lonely because I took to the nuns as my own relatives. Sister Superior was my grandmother and the Sister Lucy was the teacher and she was like my momma, she's the one that's my guardian. So I have no complaint about the convent. I am very glad that they showed me how to read and write. When I was 14 years old, I learned how to cook and sew and that's why I have no complaints about the convent.

The only thing that I didn't care much is when they had to look for a husband for us. They said it was Mr. Mercredi, and said I was going to be a housekeeper for his son. I was talking French and the nun told me when Father asks you if you want Mr. Adolph Mercredi, for your husband, you say "Oui, Oui." Oh my God I got a heart (attack), so I got married and I thought I was going to be a housekeeper to clean up and you know, cook. Well, it was not like that, it was like I was to just produce a family with him. I found it very hard, that's the time I cried when I left the convent.

When my little sister's going to get married I told her what was happening. I said you're going to be housekeeping, you're going to....well I said you'll find out. I was not unhappy with my husband, he was a good provider and I had five children. I had three girls. When I was pregnant my husband always used to say to me I was stingy because I had three girls first and then I gave him only two sons and that was it. I had five children and that was good enough you know. I have two girls and a son now but I never regretted marrying my husband. I asked the other girls who were in the convent same time as me if they regretted to leave the convent. They say "yes, we regret to leave the convent but they chose a good

husband for us. They were good providers and it's not right away that you fall in love with a person, you are devoted to them."

I didn't talk English those days; I only talked French since my grandmother talked French at home. I used to see my husband, but never talk with him because we were not supposed to talk with the boys anyways. I was working in the chapel and I used to decorate the church. I heard my husband's father say, "I thought there were twelve girls. There's one missing." He was a principal in school. I thought —"What did I do? Something might be wrong?" As soon as he sees me, he says, "That's the one". After the Sister Superior says "come here, he chose you for his son—his older son to be a housekeeper for him." What can I say?—you listen to your Sister Superior or Father when they say something. You can't say "No, I can't do that."

So anyways, he says in the month of June, we will be married. When June came they prepared us good, the nuns. I had a big trunk, with dishes, what we needed. It was hard for me because I didn't know his family, his mother. I used to see them going to church but that was about all. I found it very, very hard, supposed to be a housekeeper but it wasn't the housekeeper. The Sisters used to come and visit to find out how we were getting along.

They treat me the very best. I listened to them but they punished you if you talked back at them like some children were doing. They had to be sitting in the corner but they never hit the children. The Sister never strapped even my hand—nothing—I was treated the very best there. I have no complaint at all which I'm very happy that my grandmother put me in a convent. Although, now, my children when they ask me about my family "what am I going to say—I don't know nothing—I just know my family was the nuns, that's all I know."

Q: What was the education like that you received there?

A: It was hard because the nuns did talk English and we had to learn to talk English. The children that didn't want to talk English, they wanted French in school, so it was easier for me to understand my schooling than in English. Mostly, it was my husband that showed me how to talk English.

Q: What would you say to the church about your experience in the Convent?

A: Well I would say to them that they should have explained to us since I was in the convent, never been with a family, like you know because we just barely knew my grandmother. They should have explained to us properly, not tell us we were going to be housekeeper. What was married life? In my time, from the time I was just...we never heard anything about sex, we didn't know, you had to learn the hard way, you know what I mean?

Q: What would you say to the government?

A: Sister Marie; she's the one that used to support me, sent me clothes and I guess she used to send me some jam, butter, sugar, and flour. I was supposed to go and see her in the month of May and she died on the first of May so I never had a chance to see her, but she used to write me letters. She was like my...like she kinda adopted me. I used to send a picture to her as I was growing up.

Q: Do you have a message for your grandchildren about your experience?

A: Well they ask me a lot of things about my child life. I can't say anything because I don't know my family at all. Like I had another sister, an older sister, but she wasn't right with us. She was adopted. She was different raised, —- we're not so close, not like me and Eva. My older sister she's still alive. I lost my sister Eva, she's passed away two years now. But the other sister, to tell you the truth, we are not really like close family.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to say?

A: I feel sorry for my children and my grandchildren that they cannot communicate with my family as half of my family has all passed away now. Now it's no use to try and dig them out because I never knew them, even my dad. I don't even know what he looks like. The only one that was really close to me was my uncle Jerry. He's the one that told me about what was my dad's name and when he was alive I should have asked him more. Now as I'm getting older, why should I be looking for them when they never knew that I existed to tell you the truth? The convent was my home, my relation and I loved to stay here.

In the olden days if your neighbour, her husband killed a moose or a caribou, they always shared this and your door was always open, anybody walks in, it was charitable. Today it's not like that, my dear, it's not like that. Like I always tell my children, "Its dog eat dog." You know it's not the same, people don't seem to be charitable as they used to. In the olden days there was no such thing as people that were lazy. Today you ask one of your grandsons go empty my garbage—they want 50 cents. They won't do anything for nothing and I tell them when you get married who's going empty your garbage? You think your wife is going to give you 50 cents? They say "Oh grandma. You're old fashioned." That's what they tell me."

Q: Do your children or grandchildren believe you when you tell them your stories?

A: Well, they ask me if I had a washing machine. No, just a tub—you heat up your water on a stove and you had a washboard. I said maybe you don't know

what kind of board, but I showed them, you wash all day.

But you know we never punish our children, we just talk to them. You scold a child and they see that you aren't very happy and they'll start crying, you didn't even hit them. I never raised my voice to my children but I showed them I was not very happy and they knew it and they wouldn't repeat it.

Today you can't even strap a child and you're going to go to jail. How can you discipline your children? I love my grandchildren, I've got lots. I'm the fifth generation and sometimes I wonder what is going to happen to the new generation. Everything is so, you know, money, money. Children don't work no more. It's true they go to school, they have education, they don't learn like us when we were young mothers. I showed them it's a lot of work but you have to have a lot of patience, you have to understand a child, why he is doing that. You know, you try to get the meaning why they are doing that, why are they swearing, why are they lying. It can be something that disturbs them that they do things like that, but they wouldn't do it if they were happy in the family you know. You are wasting your time yelling at them, or swearing at them, sometimes you say things that it hurts them because you're mad. You don't think right and then sometimes you hurt and that person doesn't forgive.

Q: Did your husband come from a family where he had both parents?

A: Yes he had his mom and dad, his grandfather, his grandmother, yeah, but I've learned lots, not from him but from his grandfather. He was a good man and he knew I was an orphan. He used to come and talk to me. He says if a person needs help to help, that's how you make good friends. And I really listened to the old man, he made sense.

The grandmother was not too much …I used to play tricks on the old lady because she was stingy, the old girl, but the old man was a wonderful man. I was never sorry that I married my husband. I was devoted to him and after he got Alzheimer's, they lose their mind, and all the family suffered with him.

It really bothered me very much to see my intelligent husband and all the grandchildren they still talk about him today and how he was good to them. If he was mean they would have forgot about him but they still talk about him how kind he was and he used to tell stories. Sometimes they said "papa is that a true story?" He was a good story teller, he would sit down with us there and you could hear a pin when he used to tell stories. He had good stories about long time ago when he was young.

I guess, well me, I was raised strict and then I went with him. His family was strict people so I didn't mind to be in a family where strict people were, you learn a lot from them as a person. That's it. ■

Anonymous, 85
IRS, 8 years
October 2003

When I was at school everything was okay. The food they had was alright and I never had any kind of abuse or anything from anybody. The nuns were looking after us.

Q: How old were you in the school.

A: I was about eight years old, I think, when they stuck me in the school. My dad was the only one that could take care of us but we were put in the Anglican school. That's where they kept us for a while and I liked it, it was alright until I got out. Where did I go next? They came and got us and they brought us to Grouard mission and we stayed there until I was about 16 or 17. I think when I went out, I was 17 years old and I came here, because that's where my dad lived. He married a woman and we stayed here.

Q: How much education did you get in school?

A: It was only to grade eight, there was no higher grade than that. They showed us how to sew and cook. That's what I had to do—sew all the time and cooking—like you know we used to peel potatoes and all that. We learned quite a bit, oh yeah.

Q: Were you treated differently because you were Métis?

A: I didn't know the difference, they never told us.

Q: Did you lose your language as a result of being in residential school?

A: No, I never lost my language.

Q: How long were you there?

A: Oh, about 10 years. Yeah, about that.

Q: Did you have relatives in the mission school?

A: Oh, I had a brother who was there but he took off, he went home and so there was only myself. My sister came to the convent—she didn't stay very long because my auntie was looking after her and I was treated alright.

Q: One of the things that the residential schools did was that they kept you away from your family and as a result you…?

A: You lose contact with them and you don't know what their life was like when

they grew up either. Now you're not letting them know how you grew up and what you went through except through this book. Oh, I was never drinker in my life. That's one thing I never did.

Q: Being away from your family all the time, did it affect your ability to be a parent?

A: Well, yeah, I know—where did I learn that from—my auntie and uncle? I stayed with them off and on, you know, they were curing my lungs, my uncle. When I was small I stayed with my dad and my uncle and we used to travel with dogs and horses. They used to call *"Nistow, Nistow"* and they'd talk and I'd listen, you know. Ever since then I used to call my uncle Nistow. That's what they called me when I grew up. Nistow is Cree and it means brother-in-law but I called my uncle Neestow—that was funny.

Q: You mentioned that you learned how to sew and cook at the school. Does that mean you went to school half time and then worked part-time?

A: No, that was after the school was over when there was nothing to do for children my age. There were other kids who weren't good enough (seamstresses) and they used to send me upstairs to the dormitories where they had the sewing machine. I used to sew there: sew pants, shirts, and sheets. I used to sew them and only used to go when I was finished school. When I finished that I would go back to the mission. They taught us how to do embroidered work. I did a lot of that.

Q: What was the discipline like?

A: There were some girls I guess, they took off. I didn't know why but they told me to follow them. You know when you're smaller, they tell you, "Come with us" and I went with them. I said, "where you going?" I don't know where we were and I was crying and crying. This one girl climbed a tree and she said, "Oh man we're not too far from the road, they were lost too." There were some guys that were out looking for us from the mission. They were sent to come and look for us on horseback, and they'd listen if we would holler or something.

We went to my aunt and uncle and they came and got us there and they took us back to the mission the next day. Some of the older girls were asked why they did they run away? I wasn't with them when they were asked and they got a good licking. They got a strapping—boy—it was in the dormitory too. They put them on the bed and give them a licking and I was there because I was with them. I had to get a licking too—not that I was bad—he give me a licking twice. I never did anything wrong.

I also remember one girl, she was the oldest girl or one was the oldest girls. And she was big and we were all lined up, two rows. The eldest ones were first

then the youngest. We were all standing there waiting and they brought that girl in and they made her stand right in the middle of the room and we were wondering why, we didn't know. I guess the other girls knew but I didn't know anything. This priest had to give her a licking because the nuns couldn't, they didn't have the strength. She had to have her dress over her head and she was standing there—her panties on and there was the strap—oh we didn't like that. I always remember that. And they told her, "If you don't stand still you are going to get a hard licking." That's what they said to her and she stood there and the priest had to give her a licking with that big strap.

Q: What was the food like?

A: I was always chosen as the one to go out with them, by the two nuns that were looking after the priests. They have their own place to eat, and their own place to stay. After every mass we had in the morning, when it was it just about over, they used to come and get me. They used to come and tap my hair and I would have to go with them because they'd have to go and feed breakfast to the priest and bishop. I had to go along. I don't know why they always took me. I would just go with them.

That was another time that we were cleaning up the Father's place and the older girls, I was the youngest, and they wouldn't let me go in with them. They'd clean up the house and say, "We'll clean it up. You just wait for us here." I waited outside and I looked through the peep-hole in the door—you know the little hole in the door and looked at them—I saw the priest holding up the panties and the bras to them. When they came out I said, "Why didn't you get me something like that. I'm sitting here and you didn't buy me anything." "Oh, you're too small, you're too young," they said. He was buying them to take them out I guess. See that's the kinda of stuff that may have happened in schools.

Q: What would you like to say to the church?

A: I'd tell them about this, what I told you.

Q: You wouldn't be angry with them?

A: No I wouldn't.

Q: What was the health care like?

A: I was hardly ever sick. I know they used to take cod liver oil, that's what they used to give the children all the time before our dinner, before they ate. I used to run downstairs to get away from drinking that stuff. I never drank it, you know, because every time I drink it, I just threw up. That was good medicine for some of them I guess.

I'm 85 years old. There's one thing that saved me, I must have been about 18 or 19 years old and I was walking down the road. This old lady, she was in the window, she saw me and said to another, "This lady here, this young girl here walking, she's gonna be six feet under the ground." I was skinny and small and there was a lady sitting and waiting and she didn't say anything, she heard the other woman. She got up and went and told my dad about it. I didn't know anything about this. My dad said, "You get ready, tomorrow you're going to wash all the clothes, all my clothes and my baby's clothes there, my oldest daughter." I was wondering why?

I left and they made the Indian medicine, that's what cured me. My lung was just about gone, there was a big scar on my lung and that Indian medicine cured it, I was cured. Now when they take X-rays they still see that spot on my lung. They told me to ask my uncle if he could show them what he used but my uncle said "no." They said they would give him all the money he wants and my uncle said, "No, I can't." They don't know what he used but I know some of it, the medication he gave me. I had to drink that, no other drink, liquid, no juice, no tea, no coffee, just that medicine until it was finished and they cured me. That's Indian medicine I used.

Q: Indian medicine was better for you than the white man's medicine?

A: Oh yeah, that's for sure, I can say that. Also, this one girl I knew, I don't know if she is still living, I used to see her in Edmonton. I was about six or seven years old that time and she died. She was sick in hospital and they thought she died so they put her in the cooler. She stayed overnight and the next morning she was to be buried. We left there to pray on each side of her coffin, all of us, one side the boys and one side the girls. Well you know, the bigger ones, the older ones first and then the smallest ones. We were always the last ones and we'd pray.

They said prayers and they'd come out and then the others would do the same thing. We were the last ones praying for her body. Well, I don't know how it happened, I couldn't say whether she was in a coma or something, but after we prayed they were just going to nail her box shut, and she hit the box on top, just before they started nailing. They didn't have coffins, they used boxes. Well, they had homemade coffins. When she hit that one, they looked and she was just awake, like she was awake like us you know. What you gonna do? She was pretty sick so they put her back in the hospital and she lived for a long time. I don't know where that place is where she lived, she had four girls. ■

CHAPTER 4

Mary Louise Halcrow, 63
St. Bernard IRS, 9 years
December 2003

Q: How old were you when you went to residential school?

A: I don't remember the first time I went.

Q: How old were you when you left the residential school?

A: I was 16 but I went to school at Whitefish (day school) for a couple of years after that.

Q: How were you treated at the school?

A: Pretty fair; I wasn't treated badly. We were told to be quiet when we were doing our schoolwork and things like that.

Q: Were you allowed to speak Cree?

A: Yeah.

Q: What would you say to the church about your experience?

A: I guess I'd thank them for everything they did for me when I was in the mission. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to write my name. If I hadn't stayed there, like some people I know, they can't read because they didn't want to go. I felt more pain there in my younger days. I don't know, how lots of other people I've heard being bothered by what they say happened, I can't find anything about that that's supposed to bother me.

Q: What would you say to the government?

A: I'd tell them that I hoped there was another residential school like where I used to be so the kids would learn how to listen. They need to learn what discipline means because we had to listen to the nuns. They wouldn't give you the strap if you were sitting quiet, only when you didn't listen. You got punished for something because you didn't listen.

Q: What would you say to your grandchildren?

A: I told them about it lots of times, about when I was in the mission. There was one Sister—one nun in the classroom—everybody does their work—and here at this school you have a whole bunch of teachers who can't control the kids.

Q: What do you feel is lacking?

A: Discipline. Parents don't talk to their kids. They take their children's side when teachers try to tell them something. I see them, parents at the school, where kids talk back to the teachers.

Q: What was the health care like at the mission?

A: It was okay. The only thing I can think of that was kinda bad for us was one woman used to have a steam bath, in a little building, like real hot and you were sweating, and then you'd go in the next room and they would hose you down with real cold water. That's the only bad thing. Otherwise, everything was okay but that thing there, the steam bath, the little kids used to cry.

Q: Did your time in the residential school affect your ability to be a parent?

A: I was strict with all my kids. They didn't go running around like nowadays. I didn't let them go out and get into trouble. I raised four girls and an adopted son. They understand now, they're adults and they understand why I was so strict with them. They didn't go running around, drinking around or anything like that. They thank me for that.

Q: Did you show your children affection?

A: Yeah, when they were small. Now that they are big, I don't do that. Maybe a person can still do that but I didn't hug my children for a long time now, we've been together for 45 years now. If you can't hug them there's other ways that you can show them every day. You can kiss a baby but not an adult. ■

Rita Evans, 72
St. Bernard IRS, 4 years
January 2004

I went to the mission school at Grouard. It wasn't so bad, only the food and leftovers. I worked in the kitchen and we weren't allowed to bake fresh meat or anything for us kids. While the Brothers and Sisters had leftovers and we had some old stuff, mind you. I used to tell the Sister Joseph, "why don't you give us fresh meat to eat" and she'd say "if I was the boss I would". You know her too, she was under orders, I guess. I don't know. I think the way I had heard about these convents, I was there seems like, we were forever praying and not learning anything and when I came out of grade six, my goodness, I didn't know nothing you know except work, work. Very few made it to grade eight.

Some of the Sisters were good and then there were some that were really mean. I remember this little girl, I don't know where she came from but she was only two years old or a little bit older. There was this other girl that was in the convent year-round because they had no parents. Anyway the Sister takes a strap, I don't know why, and they would hit that little girl. I grabbed that belt from that Sister, that one big Sister constantly beat the same little girl. By the end I was holding her. After, she lay off them. I guess maybe other places were even worse, I dunno. She's only a baby. You know we saw that so much yet you didn't expect it and things like that.

The orphan kids used to like it in the summer, plus they went to another place where they had a good time and they thought that was good. Because when we were all together we were pushed around all the time. The Sisters that were there were not the way they were when they had the rest of the kids in the convent.

When we really got sick or almost died then they would take us to High Prairie. I was sick a lot. One Sister, she was a nurse, she looked after me, and I had double pneumonia. She used to like chocolates, for years I used to send her a box of chocolates where-ever she went. I remembered one day she didn't really write to me or anything. I quit and I figured maybe she had passed away or something, that's the one I thought a lot of and one in the kitchen. Sister Andrews, she was nice to kids.

The thing was a lot of kids were wearing things, galoshes, snow pants and a pair of socks and those things just cool you off. The ground was so cold that we're all huddled up in this little porch – they're nice and warm. I think one day a girl died from getting sick with pneumonia and they booked her to High Prairie and they sent her back because she wasn't making it there. The boys, they were just as mean with the boys too. I told my mother I didn't want to go back

to school there and I was sick a lot, not only me, other kids too. We were not dressed up warm.

As I say, we ate the leftovers because I worked in the kitchen. A lot of times I took things from the pantry when they weren't looking. They had all kinds of stores, like one of the Fathers' that was loaded with food and down in the basement.

The orphans, like I was saying, they weren't treated nice them last two summer months but they moved to a place called Shaw's Point, or something like that, so they had fun over there. But when school starts, it's like, well, I couldn't say army, because I never knew what army was, but you have to move when you're spoken to and if you answer back, you were slapped on your hand or your hair was being pulled. My mother put me there of course, but that's where they were put because they were orphans.

Q: How long were you there?

A: I wasn't there very long. I was quite young, I was eight or nine. I was with my grandparents and my mother took me away from them, and put me in a convent. In the summer I'd go and stay with my grandparents on Slave Lake, they lived in a small village there. I always got a ride but I guess my mother didn't actually know how to look after a kid either because she was an orphan. They were put in a convent when their mother died. I don't know what's happened to them, they're both dead now.

Q: Did your time in the residential school affect your ability to be a parent?

A: I was strict and this and that. The kids used to tell me: "You're just like a nun always telling us what to do." I said: "How do you know? You've never been there." They'd say "I heard you telling other people." Yeah, there were certain things. I was strict with my kids. I asked my mother why she put me there. I guess being an orphan, she figured that was a good place.

Q: Do you have a good relationship with them as they got older?

A: Oh yeah, when they were leaving home, that was a heartbreaking thing but they've got to go, eh, they go to work or they get married. I raised two that weren't mine, for my husband. When she, his first wife left, he got re-married. When she came to Canada, I don't know, some people talk, told her I guess Indians are the lowest breed, or whatever, and she had two kids. So I raised them after I met my husband.

Q: What was the quality of education that you received at the school?

A: It was actually to me like we never learned anything. Oh I can read and I write

but I couldn't speak very well. We were not allowed to talk our language, but the Sisters spoke a lot of French and English and they didn't want us to talk our language. While we were there it seems like we were praying steady, as we get up, at meal times, after meals, go to school, we'd pray after school, we'd pray and then we'd have supper and then we would go to benediction and we're praying again and we'd go to bed.

Q: Did you learn things in the residential school that helped you later in life after you left the school?

A: My mother was just like a nun herself, you know, strict, very strict and we would have to go to church all the time, I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with the church. I still go every chance I get, but we were tiny little kids. We're crying, why didn't they just leave them in bed with one girl looking after them? They don't know what mass is and that was just horrible.

Q: What do you say to the Church?

A: If they were to live the way they treated us, I don't think they would have been very happy and if they can't feel bad about it, it's very sad. I liked two nuns who were really good, and then there were these nuns that pull your hair.

Q: What would you like to say to your grandchildren?

A: Oh it wasn't pleasant, but that's the only place I had to go. But I knew right away I wouldn't put them in a convent anywhere. You should always be nice to people and respect them even though they were so mean. It's a long winter when you put up with something like that, eh, while you go to school. One teacher, there must have been something wrong with her, somebody had made a mistake, she would be jumping there, pulling her hair and almost crying. Oh God, I'm telling you, I think that one, she should have been in a nuthouse or whatever. She was just mean, and she might have been sick or something. There was no excuse the way she treated the kids at school. ■

Anonymous, 61
IRS, 3 years
January 2004

We went to the residential school, taken by social services, it was in 1952, 'cause my mom passed away 1951. We got to stay with our dad a year and we were taken to Edmonton. We were there about a year-and-a-half and that was an okay school. I didn't see any abuse there, but we had to go to public school. From there they took all the Métis children to Grouard and we were there, I think, until 1955. All I remember there were decorations of blue and white. I don't know if the Queen was getting her coronation or what, that's what I remember.

We were brought up a very close family; we were together all the time. I think that was the hardest part—losing our mom when the kids were small. You see my mom's death didn't affect me as much as my younger siblings because I wasn't close to her, but I was with my dad all the time. I went hunting with him and we'd trap. He didn't have any boys; he had six girls and at the end he had a boy and that was hard for the little ones because we were always ignored. We were always together and then being separated, that was the sad part hearing your brothers and sisters crying, that was really hard.

So far as the food went, I enjoyed all the food. My sister remembers fish that was boiled with the heads on. Me, I don't. I don't remember that. The only thing I don't like about fish is the bones, but everything else I didn't mind. I couldn't drink milk so I would bribe the students to drink my milk because we had to clean up whatever we were handed, no food left over, or drinks.

They worked us hard and that affected me. I'm cleaning all the time. It irritates me today when I notice my co-workers don't clean up after themselves. Sometimes they get irritated with my cleanliness. I don't know, maybe it's because they had us working and cleaning all the time that I have to keep busy all the time.

When we first went in the convent, I didn't know any English, it was all Cree spoken. At Grouard they wouldn't let us speak to one another. They'd separate us. I remember we were at a summer camp—this Native guy was selling blueberries—I went to speak to him in Cree and I couldn't. All he said was, "I knew being there would take that away from you." See, I was 12 when I couldn't speak anymore Cree.

Q: Did you re-learn Cree later in life?

A: I started to, I would listen to my step-mother and my dad how they spoke it, but when they spoke to me it was in English. I didn't pick up that much because

I didn't get along with my step-mother so I moved to my aunt's. She's my mom's sister and I lived with her. She spoke to me in Cree. You know, she would tell me what to do or ask me stuff but she wouldn't translate. She just wanted to see how much I could figure out on my own. She would say, "Make fire and make us some tea." I'd be sitting there trying to figure it out and then eventually I did. I picked up quite a bit from her and then, I got married and went away. When I went back to her, she only lived another year or so and then she passed away. I didn't get that chance to learn more because I married a Frenchman and I wasn't around Cree to pick it up.

Q: Did your time in residential school affect your ability to be a parent?

A: I couldn't have children. I used to ride horses a lot and I used to trick ride. I had a fall and I was paralyzed from my waist down for a while but I got cured. Then I fell off the top of a tree, so they don't know if was from the horse or from the tree. I was raised by the nuns, and it affected my marriage a lot. We were brought up to hide our body so I had a habit of looking for clothes that were like big nightgowns to your neck. My husband, you know, we had a lot of trouble in that area because of that.

Q: Were you emotionally abused in the residential school?

A: Physically, oh yes, I took my share because I would cover up for my sisters. Twenty-four hours a day, I would watch out for them, you know, the little ones. If they got into trouble I would take the blame because I could handle it, they couldn't. I got a licking every other day.

Q: How many of your brothers and sisters were in the school with you?

A: One sister was raised by my grandma, who came and got her, right after my mom passed away. My grandma took her and there were seven of us there, five girls and one boy, and me. The oldest one, she left right away, she wasn't with us that long. She was already, I figure around 15 or 16, and she was with us maybe six months and then she was gone. That was hard because we leaned on her.

Q: What do you believe was the quality of education that you received at the school?

A: We went to school, like in our time, from 9:00 till 4:00 p.m. They were long hours. I was good at math but I had a lot of trouble in English, really a lot. We did have catechism, I can't remember, I think it was in the morning for a period but we didn't have gym or stuff like that. We did social, math, English, like those were your main courses.

***Q:* Have you been able to access any healing services or counseling to help you?**

A: I went back to school in Grouard in 1978 to do upgrading and that was the best thing I could have done, because my husband did everything. He drove, he did our banking. When we divorced, I didn't even have a bank account. I didn't even know how to write a cheque. Another sister helped me, so that was the best thing for me, I got educated again. I took courses in life skills. First time it was—-they didn't know I went to a residential school, but these skills helped me deal with it. The second course I took, they didn't want me, but I talked them into taking me again because I was healing, in my own way without them knowing. When I was married, my husband used to make me go to counseling. I didn't know what was wrong so I didn't change. I didn't change until I started taking life skills. I must have taken four courses and they really helped.

***Q:* What would you like to say to the church about your experience?**

A: I would like to choke them—no—I would like to tell them that they ruined our culture. They brought alcohol into my family, suicide into my family, and I'd like to let them know that they did more damage than good. Sure they put a roof over our head; they used to say, "We're here to put a roof over your head because nobody else wants you." Sure they did that but we paid, we paid with our lives for what they did. I'm sure they got big money for it too.

***Q:* What would you say to the government about your experience?**

A: I'd like them to know what happened because all in all, it's the government that got the Catholics to open up these convents to take Natives. I think they should pay. They should answer to what they did to the Aboriginal peoples.

***Q:* Do you have any message for anyone who might read your story?**

A: I would like them to teach children their culture, to speak their language and to take care of their children. I know there's a lot of alcohol abuse even to this day, probably from effects of the residential school with students passing it on. ■

Anonymous, 63
Saint Martin's IRS, 8 years
January 2004

***Q:* Which mission were you in?**

A: Saint Martin's Indian Residential School in Wabasca.

***Q:* Was that Catholic?**

A: Yes, Roman Catholic church. In the fall of 1948 I was about eight years old when I went there. It was my birthday on December second and I would have been eight years old when I went. I was really confused. I cried and I wanted to go back home. I was in a strange place.

***Q:* Did you have brothers and sisters?**

A: I had a brother who was in school at the time.

***Q:* Did your parents go to school?**

A: Yup, my dad was in school for I don't know how long, he was born in 1897 and he said he was in school for a while, in the Anglican school in Wabasca. My mom never went to school. He didn't really speak good English but he got his message across when he wanted to.

***Q:* What do you believe was the quality of education?**

A: I think there were over 40 of us. But I got used to it in time. I mean the environment of school, just a little learning to start off with. I would've preferred to stay at home I guess. But then I decided to get educated, when I finished when I was 16 years old. I had some grade nine education, but I didn't finish it. I got out in April I remember that.

***Q:* What was the food like?**

A: Where to start? The jack fish, there was a big pan this high, square maybe 3 feet square. The fish were all not gutted and the jack fish weren't gutted. The nun would just cut it, we had beans on Friday it was basically the same. In the morning bacon grease, no lard, no nothing, just bacon grease and that was it just in the morning. On Fridays we used to have butter. We used to do everything. Some of us even used to work in a barn, helping them work on the chickens. I liked one teacher there, she was strict all right, but she taught us good I liked her; her teaching skills were good.

Q: Did you suffer any kind of abuse in the school?

A: It wasn't only the nuns who were abusing the boys. It was the bigger boys also abusing the smaller boys. I would say on a 50% basis it wasn't the nuns doing all the bigger boys. Then they used to make us fight. The big boys used to make us fight the boys of the same size. I know I use to cry when I was fighting one guy, we didn't get along.

Wabasca at that time was called Stony Point. So basically, they didn't quite get along. Parties, that's the way it was, every weekend there was somebody who had a wild time. In those days you had to fend for yourself—no law, no court at the time—you have to go back to residential school.

I passed maybe a few grades, skipped one or two grades, to eventually when I was fifteen years old I got to be in grade nine. There were two of us that were in grade nine. I could have passed my grade nine, and I didn't, because I didn't finish it.

In the morning as soon as we got up we used to kneel down on the side of the bed and say a morning prayer. Then each one of us was given a task to do chores for one month at a time. I remember I used to go up in the dormitory, sweep the floors, fix the beds, as soon as we got up we used to make our beds in the morning. There was still some that were not made properly so they had to be made properly. If you don't, you go stand beside that corner, facing the corner for hours at a time. That was the way, but now you can't hit your own children. You can't do that. I say child abuse and discipline are two different things. I've sat on the committee here for fourteen years, Child Welfare. They used to say child abuse and discipline are two different things to a certain extent. Some good things come out of it and you have to experience it in order to know what went on at the time. They thought they knew the Indian, nobody knows the Indian but the Indian. The Indian knows the Indian. The nuns used to say all kind of things to us sometimes in French. I don't know what the hell that means "*Mon Dieu! Les sauvage!* (My God! The savages!) We used to ask the Brother, there was a Brother there that was really good to the boys.

Q: Did you learn some good things there that helped you later on in life?

A: Yeah. But at the time also, come Mother's Day, the nuns never used to mention our parents. They never would mention our dads, it was the Father, the priest, that's his feast. And also Mother's Day that's the Mother Superior's feast. Never once did I hear the nuns mention our parents. They should tell us it's your Mother's Day, but no.

Whenever the Indian Affairs inspector came, we had to dress up nice and we had to sit still and wait for him to come. We had a big fence and we used to lie

Métis Memories of Residential Schools

there and do penance face down. It wasn't all that bad. Like I said, 50% of the abuse came from the boys. I learned a few things out of it. I can read and I can talk for myself. When I was sixteen years old I was very shy, maybe it was that residential school. Maybe that's why I was very shy. As a matter of fact, I was 22 years old when I got out. Even eating in a restaurant I was very shy and I couldn't look at people. I couldn't even talk to people, to me that was hard, but then I broke out of it.

Q: The work that you were required to perform at the school did that help you to develop good work habits for later in life?

A: Yes, to an extent, I didn't work that much over there. I picked the potatoes in the fall that's a good part of it I learned. Get up early, make my bed, I still maintain those old habits, but they are good habits anyway.

Q: What would you like to say to the church about your experience?

A: I really don't have anything to say about the church, they taught me to how believe in God anyway and I still do. I really don't want to say anything about the church. It's not the church that was doing this, it was somebody else.

Q: What would you like to say to government?

A: Well, yeah, lots. I would say that they should stop stalling with the people that experienced abuse by rights they should get compensation. I am really against the way they are approaching it. They say they gave 360 million for the people, the lawyers are getting most of the money and the people that experienced it are given a small chunk. How much is the individual going to get? Probably not even a thousand? The lawyers are getting all the money. I saw a grid system where they go by points. If you were slapped or had your ears pulled or something like that, they would start at a certain amount of dollars, say a thousand, but the grid points could go up to two hundred and ninety five thousand dollars if you were sexually abused. Yes, I went through some of that—had my ears pulled—got lickings with a wooden clapper.

Q: Would you like to say anything to your grandchildren?

A: They wouldn't believe me anyways. Sometime I tell them and they don't believe me, what I went through. But still I tell them anyway, mind you, most of them, they don't talk Cree now. They talk English and that's the part that should be taught at home—- Cree, your home language. If a child is not talking his or her language, well, of course they are talking to them in English when they go home they are talking to them in English and they want them to learn it in school.

Q: Were the Métis treated differently than the treaty Indian students?

A: There were a few Métis that were in school and we were treated a lot different. We had no resentment. That's the way we thought and that was the way it was. Someone used to send them clothing from, I don't know where, from Edmonton I guess. That was for them and that is why that it still is going on. Discrimination today—that is how it started I would say anyways—I could be wrong. Well, even today here amongst us, you're a Métis, you're an Indian, you're white, you're yellow, you're green or whatever, and that's what creates animosity. Every program they put in the communities they say this is just for those people, they should just give to the community to be one. Not this money is for you or for this government but it will always be like that.

Q: Were you allowed to speak your Cree?

A: No, but we did anyway.

Q: Were you ever caught?

A: Oh yeah a lot of times. Well we were punished that's why we stand in the corner over there or kneel in the corner or lie face down on a bench. Then they could speak French that didn't bother us. How come they were bothered by us talking Cree? We never used to talk about them but that's the way it is when somebody else speaks another language they figure they are talking about them. ■

Anonymous Brother and Sister, ages 66 and 68
IRS, 12 and 10 years
January 2004

Sister:

I was nine years old when I went to the convent. I can remember the day the Father came for us. We didn't even know where we were going. They just put us in this thing, and took us to the convent. There, my life was bad. I was there since I was nine years old and to this day I think I'm still upset.

It was very hard to be there with Sisters always after you, swearing at us, calling me "*sauvage*" which meant "savage" in French or "*le chien*" that meant "dog." That's what they used to call us when we didn't listen. I knew what it was because my mom and dad spoke French and the other kids didn't know what it was; they didn't know the French language. My dad spoke French.

Another bad thing was that we didn't have a dentist there and they never had any sterile instruments. One of the Brothers used to hold our heads and they had some kind of a clamp to keep your mouth open and the Father would pull your teeth without freezing. Can you imagine how much pain that was? You would scream, cry, and they used to tie you to the chair so you couldn't move. They would tie your hands together. It was so many years ago I guess but I remember it was very, very bad.

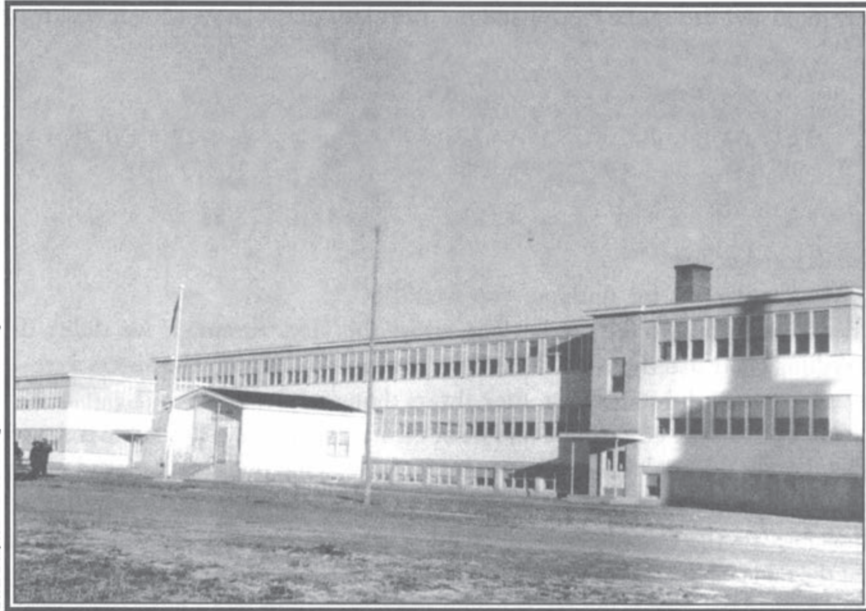
We got slapped for nothing; you would be talking to somebody, maybe a friend, and you would get it right across the face. Although we didn't do anything really bad there—well I didn't anyways—it's the way the Sisters were—every time you did something, they always thought it was bad.

They put a little table in the middle of the hall where the girls used to stay and they'd make us stand there to know that we were being punished or stand in the corner. If you moved you'd get it a whack on the back of your head. Standing on the table was the worst because if the priest came in there and saw you standing on the table he knew that you were in trouble. When he saw you standing there, he whacked you across the ass. It would sting. It was just like a burn right across your legs or something. It burned because they hit you so hard. I remember I got quite a few of those things and for what?

They'd give us what looked like brown bread when it doesn't rise and when it was dropped and it was just hard and it made a loud sound like that (rapping her knuckles on the table). That's what they used to give us in the morning. Porridge with blue milk—that was they gave us to eat—the same thing every morning. It was blue milk and this little piece of hard bread with tallow on it. Well you know what tallow is like when it's hard you can't spread it. That was bad. Dinner was mostly watered soup with vegetables in it with no flavor, nothing. We had that brown bread again. Always that brown bread.

Brother:

I agree with what my sister says. The thing I remember most about my experience is how lonely it was. When our mother passed away, they came and took us away. I remember the cops telling my dad that if we didn't go to the convent that he would be thrown in jail. I guess he had no choice. I was in there for 12 years and I never went home, even in the summer. Our house was just across the river. In the evenings I could see my dad light the lamp on the kitchen table across the river. I never went home even in the summer. ■



Ron Hayter/Edmonton Journal/Library and Archives Canada/PA-185649

The $1,500,000 Desmarais Indian Residential School at Wabasca, 250 miles north of Edmonton, was officially opened on Thursday, December 8, 1959. The modern five classroom school, shown here, has dormitory accommodations for 150 children.

Tommy Clarke, 65
St, Henri IRS, 5 years
January 2004

Yeah, how I came to being in a mission there in Fort Vermilion was my mother died in June 1947. Well there was a big family of us, eight boys and two girls. My dad had a bunch of young ones and there were six of us that he had to put somewhere. We were too small for him to raise by himself while he was working, and he did lots of traveling. We ended up going up there that fall of 1947 and ended up staying in the mission there for five years up until 1952.

Well, they were kinda hard on us on at the start, with it being the first time us being away from home. I can't say it was my dad's fault that we were there. My uncle and aunt, we saw them periodically. So it was kinda sad and lonesome, lots of crying and that for a while. As far as being beat up and that, I really never did, like maybe get slapped or grabbed by the ear a few times, that was all just minor, as far as I was concerned.

As the food goes, we had our three meals a day. I guess it was sufficient; we all survived. It was fairly good food because they grew their own grain and animals, chickens, beef, pork and all that. Everybody had their own job to do there. Well, I guess you'd call it child labour but everybody had a duty to do at the mission. Certain ones would peel potatoes, pile wood and carry the wood in, stuff like that. We'd have to get up fairly early in the morning at six o'clock. Praying, we did a lot of that—we had to go mass at 7:00—pray before we ate—pray after we ate—pray before we went to school—and the same thing at suppertime. Later on that evening, we'd have benediction and then we'd pray some more. So we did a lot of praying when we were there.

Q: What was the healthcare like?

A: Everything was provided because they had their own hospital; the nuns were nurses. Doctor, well we didn't get a doctor. I guess there was a local doctor who would come in periodically. After they built their own hospital—I think it was 1949—it made things a lot easier but I really didn't require any major hospital care. One of my relatives, he had to get his tonsils out while he was there.

As far as our health—I know they looked after us because there was a lot of TB (tuberculosis) going around then—that's how my mother died— from that TB. The few that had it were sent out to the Charles Camsell (TB hospital) in Edmonton.

Q: Did your time in the residential school affect your ability to be a parent?

A: So far as my ability as a parent from being in a residential school, it never

bothered me. Well, I don't think it's really bothered any of us, because we all got along pretty good with all the other children. We were part of the same clan, everybody got along okay.

Q: Did you suffer any form of abuse in the school?

A: We weren't sexually abused I know that for a fact. I don't think anybody was in that particular mission anyway. Physical abuse, well I dunno, like I say, some got pushed around and slapped or had your ears pulled.

Q: Your father paid for your upkeep there?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: So he was paying for five kids to be there?

A: It was all of us that he had to pay for. Yeah that was no freebie there, I think and the government paid for all the treaty Indian kids.

Q: What do you believe was the quality of education that you received at the school?

A: I'd say it was fairly good for them days, I mean it's altogether different now-a-days what they teach.

Q: What grade did you obtain?

A: Grade eight.

Q: Do you have a message for the church about your experience at the school?

A: Like I say everything was pretty well okay with me as far as what you call it, discipline. Well, I think it was no different what you'd get at home.

Q: So your experience in the residential school was okay?

A: Well I wouldn't say okay—it was fair anyway—they treated us fair. I think as to what could be expected —like being mean and beat up—well sure there was some of that. Some Sisters were mean but they were strict more than anything. Some of them would talk pretty rough to you, and well you might think they were mean. My granddaughter calls me mean; sometimes I give her heck.

Q: How did you come to leave the school?

A: After my dad moved he quit his job. He was the forest ranger in Fort Fitzgerald so he moved back. That's where he was from originally, Fort Vermilion, so he moved back there. I guess he married in Fort Smith. After he had settled in, we were discharged from the convent so we went and stayed with

my dad. I went to school after that for a while. Then I think when I was 17, I was working on their big farm (residential school) and they had hundreds of acres.

Q: Did they feed you better there as a worker than as a student?

A: Oh, they sure had a lot of food. They had a variety. Yeah, at least I had a choice. Like, as a student in the mission they'd dish you up and that's what you had. As a worker it wasn't like that. Mind you, pay wasn't very good them days—$4.00 a day—ten hours a day—six days a week. Well it was good for the experience. I learned quite a bit working there; I learned to drive a tractor and other equipment.

Q: Where would you say that you learned your work ethic?

A: Probably mostly from the mission, I learned my work ethics. I worked for them, for I guess, about four years. ■

Library and Archives Canada / PA-040757

Wood supply for Indian Residential School, Vermilion, Alta.

Anonymous, 69
IRS, 7 years
January 2004

My mother died in 1940 and my dad was left with four of us children. I was six years old, and the baby was three months old so dad didn't know what to do with us. So he put me and my brother in the school. Two brothers went to our great aunt and they lived with her until dad re-married. We were in the convent in a mission school in Fort Chip.

Some of the things that we went through in there, you know I think about that and I just shake inside, because I don't have anyone to talk to about it. We had running water—hot and cold water—why did they put three tubs in the center of the floor? They put kids that wet the bed, in those tubs, and poured iced water over their heads. That was every morning that happened and we all had to stand there and watch that. Oh my God, it was just terrible.

We had to eat whatever they gave us, porridge, beans and bread in the morning, soup and bread at noon and fish and they never even gutted it. They'd just throw it in a big can there and roast it that way and we had to eat that—scales and guts and everything in there—that was every day.

School, it was okay, the kids that used to come in from Conklin; you knew them all so it wasn't too bad. From the time I was six until I was nine years old, my dad would come. He had re-married by then. We'd go and spend the summer with him for two months and then we'd go back to the school again close to the end of August and stay there for the next ten months.

Then we would have to get up at six o'clock in the morning, go to church whether you wanted to or not to pray; it's a wonder I'm still Catholic. Anyway, we went to school and we had little jobs to do after breakfast. The language was another thing. They wouldn't allow us to speak our own language; I used to be able to talk Cree but I can't do it now. I understand it but you think I'll talk it? No, I won't because of that. They beat us if we tried to talk our language. They thought, "That dirty language with dirty people you don't have to talk that language, talk English or French." So I lost my language.

When I was 13 years old I'd had enough—I couldn't take it anymore—I ran away from there and dad brought me back, so I ran away again. I ran all the way from that old mission to my dad's house. I ran all the way over there with just a sweater on and this was in November. He (the priest) would lock me up in a room all day and then one day the nun came and asked me "you hungry, you wanna eat?" I said, "No, I'm not hungry." She said, "Okay, I'll go and get you a nightgown" but she didn't lock the door.

Métis Memories of Residential Schools

When she went out—I ran and took off outta of there—the way I was dressed. I ran all the way across that bay, not on the main road because people were coming in to see a movie that night. I didn't want to meet anybody, so I ran all along the shore in the deep snow. When I got home and I was peeking in the window and dad spotted me. He came and got me and said, "Where did you come from?" I said, "From the mission." He said, "Like this?" I said, "Yeah."

They sent two boys to come and get me and dad said, "No, I'll take her back myself." The next day he took me back to the mission. "Stay there," he said, "just this one trip and then I'll take you out." I stayed there, but then again I ran away before it was Easter.

We used to go home for the day, eh, my brothers and I. I had bought a skirt but it was too wide so mom told me to stop at the Bay to get a smaller size. I told my brothers wait for me you know—don't go without me—but they didn't wait for me. They went ahead of me about 20 minutes or so. When I got there, they thought (the nuns) I was with some man. I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing because I was only about 14 then anyway. This nun was just yelling at me and screaming she was going to throw me down the stairs, so I got a hold of the railing.

Then, I went up to the room where we stayed and she locked me in there. They all left and they went to a movie that's why the boys went ahead of me. They wanted to see that movie. She locked me in and she said, "You are not going anywhere." I thought, "I don't care how I get out of here but I'm going." I packed up all of my clothes and left with my suitcase—my key in my pocket and the skirt I had exchanged—was underneath my pillow in my bedroom. I tried to get out the door but it was locked. There was a great big huge window and you know—how they'd tape right around so the cold air wouldn't come in—I ripped that about half-way and I tried to open the window about four inches. I tried some more and pulled that tape right off that window and I opened the window just enough for me to squeeze out. I left my suitcase in the closet.

I went all the way home and I told mom what happened. She said, "You aren't going back there again." Now, I was gonna go back to school, and the Brothers said, "No, you can't come to school." So I went to see a teacher for the public school. I went to see him and he said, "Sure I'll take you in." So I went to school there until just about the end of June. The priest, I guess, spotted me coming out of that school. Oh, man. There they'd come along again—two nuns to talk to mom—to send me back the Holy Angels School. Mom said, "Okay. She can go, but you don't mistreat her when she's there." "No, no, we'll be good," they said, and that was the end of that. I left when I was 14 and I never went back there again.

Q: Did you have other brothers and sisters who also attended?

A: Yeah, yeah, two, and one was six years old when he went in there too. One day we were all in the rectory, eating. All of a sudden the door flies open and there's this nun was just throwing my brother around. What the heck was going on? He had said a rhyme: "Georgy Porgy, pudding and pie, kiss the girls and make them cry," and that's what he was saying to one of the boys and the teacher heard this—I mean the nun. Oh my God, she just grabbed him and started throwing him around. Saying, "No that's bad, you can't say that," and she threw him all the way down the hall to where we were. She starts yelling and telling us that he was saying all this. But there was nothing wrong with saying what he said, but to her it was evil.

Q: Did your parents spend anytime in a residential school?

A: Let me see, my dad did, and the things they did to him. He said he got caught smoking a cigarette so they hung him up upside down and then the priest came and beat him with a whip. He said all the kids were there too—all around in a circle and they had to stand there and watch all of this—they beat him until he was bleeding on his back. 'Till the day he died, he had marks all over his back, you know from that whipping.

He dug a tunnel and that's how he got out of there, dug a tunnel underground, not just him but some other boy. He went away and he had no mother, no dad. What he did was—he used to go haul wood and cut wood—and haul water for people. Wherever he finished that day that's where he stayed and the next day he would go on from there. He did that until he was 12 years old and then he moved in with a foster parent. He learned carpentry, and when he was living, he was a carpenter. When he told me that story, I just thought it was terrible.

Another time, I don't know who the boy was, but he was inside a burlap bag. There was two big boys pulling this bag and there was this nun there. She started dancing and maybe that's how she got her kicks, I dunno. Anyway I was only just about six-and-a-half maybe. I had been in the mission for a while then and a nun told me to go to my room and get a book from my table. Anyway, I got the book and I came back—this door was open—I thought what's going on? There were two nuns pulling this burlap bag.

They bought it down at the top of the steps and they kicked the bag and down went the bag. They brought the burlap bag at the top of the stairs and there was somebody in the bag. Those two big guys just kicked the bag and down went the bag, whoever was in there, I dunno. Anyway, I was standing there in shock because I never saw anything like that before. I was just little so I opened the door, I went into the room there and I gave her (the nun) the book. She said: "Why did it take you so long?" I couldn't tell her what I saw, I never did, and I never told anybody. Oh my God, I dunno if anything happened to that boy who was in that bag you know, there were about fourteen steps down there.

Q: What was the health care like?

A: Yes, I had bad eyes all my life, they tried everything but I finally lost the eye. The other one—I still have it and I had an operation on it—there's nothing they could do because I hemorrhaged. So now I can't see. I do see a bit of light, eh, on a bright sunny day. I do have light perception, I guess, you'd say but to see a face, no, I can't see anything.

Q: Were you able to access any kind of counseling services to help you?

A: No, no, there was nothing like that out there.

Q: Have you had the opportunity to go to a psychologist or an Elder?

A: No, I used to tell momma what it's like, but she died two years ago so…

Q: Do you think you could benefit from talking to somebody to help you deal with your experience?

A: Yes, that would be okay, you know, but I didn't talk to anybody, I just kept everything bottled up. I saw many, many other things too, but right now I can't seem to think. I used to be able to speak Cree but after I left the mission I couldn't speak it anymore. I can't even teach my children how to talk the language because I don't know it anymore. There are five of my children, they don't know the language, and I have seven grandchildren, see they're missing all that too.

Q: How old were you when you finally left the school for good?

A: For good I ran away when I was 14 and never went back there again so I went to work because I already had bad eyes and there was nothing they could do about it. I just had one eye—it was good and then when I was 17—I lost the right eye. I went to Edmonton and they took this eye out because there was nothing they could do.

Q: What do you believe was the quality of the education that you received?

A: It was good, it was okay. I didn't like that French, we had to take French. I didn't like that but it was only 15 minutes a day. They used to have it for half an hour, but they cut it down to 15 minutes because there wasn't enough time for the rest of the work that we had to do.

Q: What would you say to the Church now about what you experienced at the school?

A: It's all in the past, what the heck can I do now, you know. All they do is they say "oh, we apologize," and that's it, you know.

Q: What about government, what would you say to them?

A: I haven't talked to any of them

Q: What would you like to say to your grandchildren?

A: I wished I had kept my language so that I could teach them all this, I always felt that I was lost, my God. ■

Anonymous, 60
IRS, 5 years
December 2003

I just turned 60 on October 21st, 2003. My parents enrolled me in residential school when I was almost eight years old. They kept me at home two years longer than they should have and I was at that mission for five years between 1950 and 1955. There were few, very few happy memories I can recall, most of them were pretty bad.

I used to get lickings from the nuns for talking Cree. I think, for three years, the last time I saw my parents each September, and we went home for Christmas. The next time I saw my parents would be at school again in June. If we were lucky, we saw them during the winter but it was hard traveling rutted gravel roads. My parents kept me at home because they knew what I faced and they could have gotten themselves in trouble if the authorities had found out that I was of age and was still at home.

When I was first there I only knew very few English words, probably just hello, goodbye, yes and no. For some reason when I was still at home my parents never allowed me to serve myself whenever we had meals—they cut up my vegetables—cut up my meat. I would clean myself up.

The first day that I arrived at the residential school, my brother was comforting me as was my father and mother. I think at that time, I was more mad than I was sad to see them go because they didn't tell me I was gonna be staying at the mission when they went home. I remember my brother was standing beside me trying to comfort me because I was crying and then very soon afterwards they called us inside for supper. We were served our food and we were assigned to a table. I really didn't know what to do so I got up and talked to my older brother. I asked him what to do and he kinda whispered to me to feed myself. Before I reached my table, the nun was screaming at me. I didn't know what she said but I knew the tone and it wasn't nice. I broke her rules. I got up from my place and I was talking Cree.

I've never forgotten that but sometimes it's pretty difficult to recall all the bad stuff because you kinda put it out of your mind. It's gotten a little bit easier because I had two sessions with a psychologist there just in the last two months or so. I still resent some of the things that happened to me.

Q: What was the discipline like?

A: I had straps on both palms at the same time, one after the other. If it was for swearing, they gave you a thinner strap about one inch wide and about a quarter

inch thick and sometimes it's not. I felt it was intentional that they would hit you with it on both of your wrists too, where it would hurt the most as opposed to being on the palm. The other strap was about two inches wide and the same thickness. The strap was made of the old threshing machines—they had these straps that they go round the pulleys to make the machine operate—so they were pretty hard things. I think they were woven leather and I mean two pieces of leather that were interlaced.

One time, I don't know why I did, but we were upstairs making our beds after breakfast and somehow or other I got the nun mad. She locked me up in this clothes closet they had and she said, "I'll turn the light off." While I was inside this darkened room she would give me the strap so I don't know how long I stayed in there, it was quite a while anyway. I know I missed the play period before classes.

Q: Is there anything you would like to say to the church about your experience?

A: The treatment that they gave me certainly didn't endear me to their religion. I think that's basically the reason why I quit going to church, I haven't gone to church since I was about 19. Each time I attend church now it's not for the service, it's out of respect for someone who has passed away.

I've always had a problem with alcohol and I ended up drunk. I've had four drunk-driving charges. If ever I get caught, the next time its straight jail I'm told. The last time I got an impaired driving charge was 1984. I have been trying to get my driver's license back and I did pay a reinstatement fee.

Q: Was your problem with alcohol related to your experience at the residential school?

A: I think so, because of the way the nuns treated us. It was fairly easy to please them if you followed the rules but when you have your lapses and get yourself in trouble, you'd get a strap.

The nun that taught me in grade one was the kindest little nun that they ever had. Her name was Sister Alicia and she was really kind. She was a little old lady, I bet you she was about 70 years old and she wasn't a very tall person. I think the biggest person in our grade one class was taller than her but she was very kind. One time, I think it was in grade three, we were moved to another class, middle class they called it, and I got in trouble there too. I was daydreaming, looking out the window and all of a sudden I was brought to my senses with a yardstick smashed across my back, just right about where my shoulders are. It didn't really hurt, it was the shock of it, you know. Other times, if you were caught doodling they'd use these government issue rulers, one side was bigger and the other had a sharp edge but they'd use the blunt end and they'd rap your fingers.

Q: Did your time in a residential school contribute to the loss of culture?

A: Yes. When I first entered the mission I spoke very good Cree and now I can maintain a simple conversation. Some of the words, translating English words into Cree, I find that difficult and I can't remember how to pronounce it. I try especially when I talk to an Elder. I ask them what this word means and how to pronounce it and then I try to remember it, but it's difficult. It's so easy to carry a conversation with the Elders and sometimes you're mispronouncing words but they won't let on that you're mispronouncing but you'll see a smile. I think I speak better Cree now than I ever did because of my surroundings, because I lived here for a long time now.

Q: How was the food at the school?

A: Well, it was acceptable but our hall was directly across from the nuns and the priests' dining room. Those who delivered the food upstairs to them knew what they were going to eat and you kinda compared with what you just finished eating, it wasn't the same. I remember distinctly that every time the Bishop visited the mission, the food was better. It could have included pork chops or chicken or something better than what was the usual fare. The only other time that happened was when the Inspector of Indian Affairs came and also on those occasions you were given better clothing to wear. Incidentally that closet that I was locked in, had brand new clothing stacked right up to the ceiling but we had to make do with patched-up clothing. I think when we did get some decent clothing when it came time for us to go home in the summertime. I think we were also given clothing every time any of those officials visited and but after they were gone you had to go upstairs and change. When it came to bath time, they made us wear these skirts with an elastic band at the waist. I hated those.

Q: What was the medical care like?

A: I think it was okay if you got really sick. I never had any serious illness. I remember one time, I had a stomach cramp in the middle of the night and rather than the nun being sympathetic towards me, she told me: "Go to bed." She had no understanding at all—I couldn't say cramp—I didn't know what it meant at that time—or what the word was. I tried to explain you know in Cree like here, something is pulling me right here. I tried to say that but I couldn't say because I didn't know the word "cramp".

Q: What would you say about the quality of education that you received at the school?

A: I don't think it compares to what you would receive in a public school because

I found that out in 1955. 'Cause in 1955 the new school opened so we didn't have to go back to the mission after that date, but then it only went up to grade six so I only got to stay there one year. In 1957 I had to transfer here to another school. I think towards the end of October, the school burned down so we had to transfer to another school. That bus was packed and stopped everywhere. There was very little light during the winter, it was almost dark by the time you got home and I had my little trap lines so I had to really run before I could eat supper.

Q: What would you like to say to the government about your experience?

A: I think it would have helped matters if we were allowed to go home during the holidays like Christmas and Easter. That would have helped lots rather than keeping us cooped for ten months of the year, and at least we should have been allowed to talk Cree. We would be scolded if they heard us speak Cree and that's why I say, who is the hypocrite? I realized when I was growing older, it kinda made me mad.

Q: What would you like to say to children or young people now about what you experienced in residential school?

A: First off, I think they are very fortunate that they never have to leave their home. They wouldn't have to go through what we went through. On the other hand, some of the problems that we have—especially from the people in my generation—their children aren't disciplined very well. I think that stems from the fact that we were living on their (church's) harsh rules and when they had their own children, they didn't want to discipline them as much as we were disciplined. All of us came out of the residential schools with one stigma or another and that has stayed with us for the rest of our lives.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to say regarding life at the school and how it's affected your life?

A: Other than my alcoholism—see it's even put me in jail—it's kinda ironic because I used to work at the jail that I went to.

Q: Did the children that you went to school with have their own entertainment?

A: Yeah we did, we used to tease each other about the girls that we couldn't touch because of that invisible line that divided us. I wasn't even allowed to talk to my sister.

Q: How many of your family went to the school?

A: All of us did. My mother and father went to different missions but they

experienced that too. My father was kicked out because he knocked a nun's headgear off completely.

Q: How did your parents experience affect you as a child?

A: I was spoiled, I know that. I had a younger brother that passed away shortly after birth so I became the youngest and I was doted upon. I was given pretty well much anything that they could afford to buy me. I had my own bicycle when I was maybe two, no one else could afford that kind of thing. We were well off then—we had our farm—we had pigs—cows and horses. We were one of the first families around here to have a vehicle which was brand new but all that changed when my mother started getting sick. ■

Angie Crerar, 68
Fort Resolution IRS, 10 years
July 2004

Good afternoon. I'm here to tell my story—I'm starting to feel the pain already—because it's something that I had buried for so many years. As a child I was raised in a Métis community with my three sisters and four brothers. We had a happy life, my mother did a lot of gardening, and she did a lot of herbal medicine. My dad worked at the Hudson's Bay Company and also as an interpreter. We had a very happy childhood and my dad instilled of us the value and the pride of being Métis. I lived a very happy life—was a happy child—we all were. My mother did a lot of lot of sewing and we always had new parkas, new mittens, and mukluks, and so on. We always had adequate food as my mother was a very good cook. She could cook from scratch and that's something she taught me which I brought down to my own children.

On January 15, 1948, that all came to an end. My mother had TB (tuberculosis) and she was on her death bed. So the priest took us to the convent at Ft. Resolution. I was nine, my younger sister was six, and the other one was three. We walked into that room on that cold day. We walked right into gray sheets hanging in the hall and the smell of fish. We went upstairs where all the girls were and we were introduced to about 115 children—-girls at that time. That first week—my mother died two days after we got there—we only heard about it a week later. A nun took us into a room and told us: "You are now orphans. Your mother is dead." I remember holding my sisters. I remember crying. I remember feeling so alone and so lost and so very lonely. Before we had left Yellowknife and my mother, we went to visit her and she told me at that time: "Angie, look after your family." I have done that till today.

It was brutal, it was humiliating. I don't have the words to express how I really feel about those years that I and my sisters spent behind those convent doors. It was surrounded by a fence and we were not allowed outside of it except Christmas and Easter when we all paraded to church. It was not easy when you are Métis and you are surrounded by First Nations. We were ridiculed, we were punished for things we didn't do. We were accused and the nuns themselves didn't believe or didn't listen or didn't hear a word we said. We were called—I was called savage—I did not have a name I had a number—my number was six. The only time I was called by name was when I got in trouble which I am sorry to say was quite often cause I always stood up for myself and for the other girls.

Food, I could tell you the menu for the ten years that I lived there. For

breakfast you had porridge and beans and cod liver oil. For dinner you had soup and buffalo meat. For supper you had hung fish. This only varied at Easter and Christmas where you got cornflakes and you got turkey. We all looked forward to those two days because they were so special to us. I hate rice pudding 'till today because that's the dessert we had. Rice pudding or bread pudding.

And the way they dressed we were not allowed to wear our own clothes although my dad paid for us to be there, we were not government—- we were not attached to government in any shape or form though we were treated worse than the others.

As far as I can remember, the nuns and the priests and the Brothers, they were all hypocrites. One minute they tell us: "We come here to answer the call of Jesus. We were sent up here to educate you savages with the love of God," and they treated us worse than dogs. I have witnessed many, many brutal things that happened to the girls and boys in those ten years. Some were beaten so badly that they couldn't walk. One lost an arm and some of them ended with humpbacks because of the brutal beating they got from a ruler with an edge. I myself had my hands cut and my sister was punished so severely one time that I got in a fight with the nuns. I had a whole world against me and the other girls got involved—that was the first riot. I have nothing good to say about the nuns.

I have nothing, no good memories except the memories that we made among us girls. We formed an alliance, we formed a friendship, we formed a strengthening. I don't know what we would call that now. I am trying to think what we called it: "You are my strength, you are my friend, you are my trust." We tried to look after the little ones and tried to avoid some of the beatings that were not necessary. There was no such thing as respect but we taught ourselves to have respect.

There are so many stories about that residential school. How many kids have died from beatings? How many girls were raped? How many children were born to these girls and given away? How many priests were taken out of there because they were found by another priest molesting the little boys and girls? They're all true. They're all true. I lived it. I saw it. By the grace of God it didn't happen to me. I guess I was too strong-willed for them. But what I saw there will live with my memory forever because nobody, nobody has the right to treat you like you're not human. Nobody has the right to take away your identity. Nobody has the right to put pressures on you and say you are going to go to hell. They intimidated us and they tried everything to control us.

Many of them didn't make it. There are some very strong survivors. We still communicate and we formed a bond sixty years ago which is still working for us today. Many of us will not tell our stories. Many of us will not go in for the

healing because it's not what they want. It's not what we want. We know what we want. All these healing foundations, all these workshops they are putting on, and the money being spent is spent wrong. I don't want anybody to tell me how I'm going to heal or bring me a psychiatrist or bring me a priest. Who put me there to begin with?

Yes I'm bitter, I admit it because I'm hurt and I have a lot pain. I don't usually bring stuff out, I bury it, but I know its important, and I am doing it for the others, for the survivors of the forties, the fifties, and the sixties who walked that path and took that long journey that had no end, that had nothing, no goal at the end, there was nothing for us. There was no such thing as warmth. No hugs, no love except what we gave each other. We made ourselves survive. We gained strength from each other—in that world there was nobody, there was nobody.

Today I feel so hurt and angry and so much pain when I heard that the government was going to give the Catholic Church so many million dollars to help cure us. Cure us? That's a slap in the face. I really believe that if it wasn't for them my life wouldn't be what it is today. I struggled, and struggled and struggled for many years just to get back my Métis identity, to bring back my pride, to get my spirit going again and make sure my children will never have to go through what I went through. My children know my story and they have cried many times with me, and I am glad that I was able to share some of this story because it's important.

How many times, the government in its knowledge and wisdom said: "Oh, we're going to take children and we're going to give them better life, we know what's best for them." They take away; take us away from our family. Many children were just literally taken right out of their mother's arms. Many of them were born there, many of them came in there as babies and with never a touch of love, a touch of affection or the idea that somebody cares for them. So many have committed suicide! So many have lived a life of destruction! So many of them looked for happiness in the wrong places!

And they say today: "We're going to heal you." I'd like to know how in the heck they are going to heal us. How do they heal something that you endured? How can they make it up? There is no way you can make up for those thousands of boys and girls that are buried, who never knew a smile, never knew a hug, never knew those simple words that we all say to each other "I love you," and to heal. What is your version of healing? What is the government doing now? They spend a bunch of money mostly on that administration and you are supposed to heal yourself. They say: "We are going to heal you." I'd sure like to know how they are going to do that.

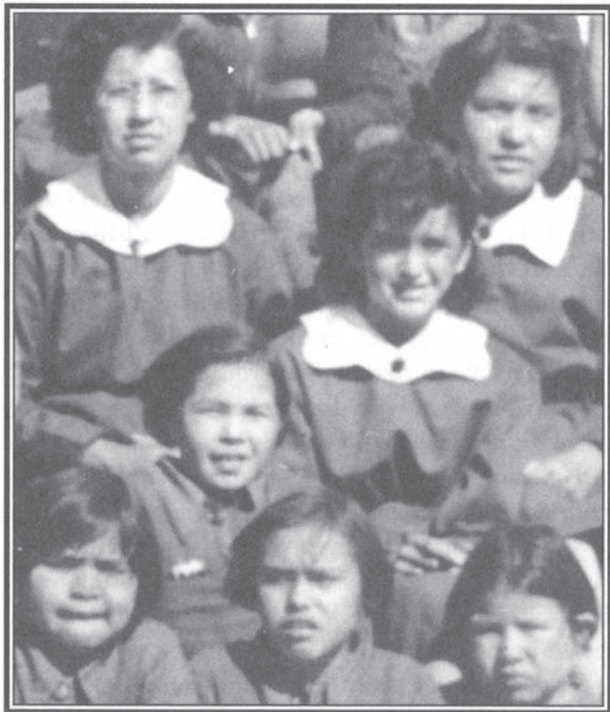
I did not go for the money. I know that some of our people indeed deserve it. I don't believe money will ever make me happy. Will it clean me? Will it get rid

of this garbage that I have been carrying? It won't do anything for me, except maybe its blood money—I'll have no part of that. My sisters, one sister has never married, she has never been happy and I can't help her. My other sister has done alright but made bad choices. We stick together and God willing we're all taken a good path and we're going to make something worthwhile with the rest of our lives.

I cannot express in any language the horror that I lived. I cannot express or try to explain how I feel about the government, the church and everybody that was involved. I thank God that there's no more and I realize that after they finished with residential schools, after they closed the doors they finally realized that it was not the answer. Then they created child welfare—the welfare system that's the same thing—it's not helping.

I don't know what the answer is for me. There's no answer for all the others. As far as my life and my memory goes I love more now then I've ever loved before, because love is precious and if you lived the same kind of life that I did, it is the only thing you got to cling to.

Thank you. That's it. ■



Anonymous, 68
IRS, 5 years
June 2004

I was eleven when we were put there in the Indian residential school. My sister, she must have been around eight or nine and my brother was seven when dad put us there because they had to move. Dad used to talk in English at home but we always talked Cree and mom talked Cree. When we got there we got in to a lot of trouble when talked our language.

Q. Why did you end up in school there?

A: Well, because dad had a logging outfit and he had to move. They sold everything we had, cattle and horses, and put us there like boarders. We used to go home on the weekends and dad used to pick us up. All we used to eat was potatoes and beans, never meat. We never seen butter, they'll give us lard on Fridays. You were good, otherwise we don't get lard.

Q. What was discipline like?

A: Well I got beat up because I couldn't write, you know, because I wasn't feeling right. The nun there, she said kneel right and I couldn't. I thought maybe she was just going to punish me by not having dinner, you know. She sent me upstairs where we sleep. I walked in the dorm like all of a sudden I heard the door bang and she had big wooden clappers, them days. They used to use them for calling kids when they were in the yard. She started hitting me mostly in my hips. She knocked me down and when I was going down I grabbed her habit. I must have grabbed that because it came off and she was going to kill me then. That's when I got hit in the head and lost my hearing.

Q. Tell me a little bit more about the food.

A: They used to make us work in the field even when they were butchering the pigs. We used to help there while they were killing the pigs. They had them tied in their back feet and they pulled them up with a hoist. The priest and one of the Brothers I think, they used to call them, they killed the pigs, just cut their throats and you had to put the pail there. That used to be my job until the pig, you know, got all the brains out.

I used to help in the kitchen lots, the priests and the nuns, they had everything. They ate everything, bacon, meat, pork and beef. But we never seen beef, or bacon, nothing just beans and potatoes and bread, turnips, those were our snacks— turnips. Those I used to just throw in the yard. Carrots sometimes, carrots and turnips, not often carrots either. We never saw one egg, never.

Q. Did your time in residential school affect your ability to be a parent?

A: Yeah, lots, even my marriages, they didn't last. Seems I'd never trust anybody.

Q. What kind of education did you get as a result of being there?

A: Grade three, because they put me down. They just didn't care. Thank god, I got my education after I was older. But there, you have to pray every morning. They used to wake us up six o'clock in the morning to go to the chapel. You'll hear bawling; fainting — getting up early and kneeling there for so long.

Q. How were you treated by other people that worked at the school?

A: We seemed to get along, but were very strict with us too, we couldn't really talk whenever we want to talk. My brother, we never talked to him when he was there.

Q. So you two were separated?

A: Yeah they were in another building, we weren't allowed.

Q. When you ran away, did you know where you were going?

A: I knew the directions, I knew where I thought my dad would be, but it was an open field. I could remember 'cause (her sister) and I went back to see how far I walked. It was quite a way. I would never have made it out.

Q. Where you subjected to that steam bath?

A: Yeah, it was a little room. It wasn't big—we were just crowded in there, and you wouldn't believe what they did—just the steam. You couldn't even breath—you couldn't, it was just so hot and after that she (the nun) stood there and just sprayed us with ice cold water.

Q. Why do you think they did that?

A: To clean, to clean our bodies. I guess to clean our whatever, 'cause we were the sinners. We were the bad people. We heard that every morning, every day, we're bad.

Q. What kind of things did they say?

A: Well like they used to show us this great big, great big chart—twelve pages or something like that. And it was all colored with the devil and bad people. I'll never forget this man was standing there on a rock and he had a fork and horns and there was just like a lake but it was fire, and there was heads sticking out of that fire they told us that's how we were going to end up.

MÉTIS MEMORIES OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Q. If you had the opportunity today to talk to someone about your experience would you, would you participate?

A: Oh yeah, if there was somebody that can help.

Q. What would you like to say to the Church today about your experience?

A: Well I often wonder what I would say—why did they do that? We weren't evil, we were just kids.

Q. What would you say to the government if you had an opportunity?

A: I would ask: "Why did they do that?" Why I think the government done that them days, they just wanted to get rid of the Natives. They wanted to get rid of them.

Q. What would you like to say to your grand children about your experience?

A: Well, I tell them what happened and they just don't understand why that happened.

Q. Anything you'd like to say to someone who might read your story?

A: All I can say is I hope that will never happen to other kids. There is so much, so much, that happened there, a lot of abuse, mentally and physically, and why did they do that? The archbishop told me when I mentioned the nun's name, he found her for me, but she died a few years ago. He said she was a very stressed-out person, but if she was stressed, why did they put her there to look after the kids? ■

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

It takes a lot of courage to relate the stories of a traumatic and repressed part of the lives of Indian residential school survivors. It is difficult enough to open up about the experience with friends and family let alone a stranger. The courage expressed by the survivors who granted interviews was done so with the belief that it was important for others to know what it was like to attend residential schools. Many who spoke of their experience were doing so for the first time. It was very difficult for most survivors to relate their story and it was almost as difficult to listen to their experience. I was brought to the verge of tears many times. As a survivor myself, I felt that I had experienced a difficult time in IRS. As I quickly learned, the time I spent there (1959-1967) was a picnic compared to what the survivors in this book experienced in the three decades preceding my attendance. Many nights at the end of the day I had to retreat to secluded areas, in Northern Alberta and let my own tears flow—not for myself—but for the people whose stories I had just recorded.

Most survivors who related their stories chose to do so anonymously for a variety of reasons: because of pending litigation, names of friends and family members mentioned in their stories may still be alive, wishes to respect the anonymity of their children, some had never spoken to their children about their experience, and others felt it would provide further divisions in their communities because many of their neighbours are still staunch, church-going people. Their wishes have been respected. Others chose to let their names stand, also for a variety of reasons. Their wishes have also been respected.

If you are able to read the stories of our residential school survivors, that says something about you as a person. It says that, at a minimum, you have an interest in the issue. If you have a parent or grandparent who survived

residential school, you are likely one of the many who have experienced the intergenerational impacts of residential schools. The concept of intergenerational impacts of residential schools is not one that has been explored or addressed in any great depth. As a result, many people do not even realize that intergenerational impacts are part of the dynamics of their family. And yet, many causes of the dysfunctional behavior exhibited by people in our communities can be traced back to the intergenerational impacts of residential schools. For example, the trauma experienced by many of our people led them to alcoholism, drug additions and family violence, as a way of covering up the hurt from their experience. In the case of family violence, they were simply treating there children as they had been treated. The opposite of that treatment was neglect or being too permissive as parents to avoid treating their children as they were treated. Children who witnessed this behavior saw it as normal. As adults they tended to behave as their role models had behaved and they in turn passed these behaviors on to their children.

It is critical to peel back the layers of our family dynamics, such as: roles within our families, communication patterns, how discipline is dealt with, how decisions were made and other aspects of our families. It is time to start asking the question: "How did these family dynamics come to be?"

It is hoped that, you are seeking to either begin, or continue on your path of healing, if you have experienced or are experiencing the intergenerational impacts of residential schools. One way to start is by beginning a dialogue within your family. This may help you and your families together and walk the path of healing.

To begin the dialogue, please consider asking yourself and maybe other family members some of the following questions, or use the questions as a way to open a discussion with the person in your family who is a residential school survivor.

1. If you were raised in a residential school, how do you think you would learn how to be a parent? What would you have learned about parenting in residential school?
2. If, year after year, you were isolated from your family, how would you learn to be part of a family?
3. If you were raised in an institution and unable to depend on others to meet more than your basic needs, would this impact on your ability to trust others?
4. If you were raised in a residential school and often there was not enough food to eat – how would this affect you as an adult?

5. If you went to school for eight years and yet only had only a grade three education, how would this affect the way you see yourself?

It is very possible that journeying down the path of healing will be a painful experience. Please remember that it is sometimes of benefit to speak with a trained counselor. Reach out and talk to others in your community. It is in this way that our Nation will grow stronger. It is only by throwing off the chains of the past that we can truly look forward to the future.

D.W. Thomas
Ottawa, Ontario
October 2004

MÉTIS NATION
of ALBERTA