

CHAPTER 4

LIFE AT RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

Shock WATCH THE VIDEO

The shock was immediate for children taken away to school. They were suddenly surrounded by white faces speaking a foreign language that they often didn't understand. Once at the schools, their hair was cut and they were stripped of their own clothes and forced to wear European-style uniforms. They were fed a diet of unfamiliar food. Speaking their own language was strictly forbidden and harshly punished. Boys and girls were separated from each other, which meant that often brothers and sisters rarely saw each other.

 Watch a dramatization of children entering residential school at <http://tinyurl.com/rcwresidential028>



Hopelessness

Fifteen-year-old Ziewe is pictured here shortly after arriving at residential school. Her look in this photo reflects the sadness that many students felt.



Compulsory Haircuts

Upon entering the school, children had their hair cut, often for the first time. Since hair was culturally important, the authorities decided that cutting the hair would also help sever ties to the students' heritage.

Campbell Papequash:

"And after I was taken there they took off my clothes and then they deloused me. I didn't know what was happening but I learned about it later, that they were delousing me; 'the dirty, no-good-for-nothing savages, lousy.' And then they cut off my beautiful hair. You know and my hair, my hair represents such a spiritual significance of my life and my spirit. And they did not know, you know, what they were doing to me. You know and I cried and I see them throw my hair into a garbage can, my long, beautiful braids. And then after they deloused me then I was thrown into the shower, you know, to go wash all that kerosene off my body and off my head. And I was shaved, bald-headed."



Losing Identity

This illustration by Liz Amini-Holmes of an Indigenous girl having her braids cut off comes from the picture book *Fatty Legs: A True Story* by residential school Survivor Margaret Pokiak-Fenton and her co-author Christy Jordan-Fenton.



Shirley Williams

“When I saw [the school] it was grey. A brick building when it rains is dark and grey, you know. It’s an ugly day but the feeling was . . . of ugliness. [T]he gate opened and the bus went in, and I think when the gate closed . . . something happened to me, something locked, it is like my heart locked, because it could hear that [clink of gates].” Shirley attended St. Joseph’s Girls School in Spanish, Ontario, from the age of ten.

Isabelle Knockwood

Isabelle Knockwood, pictured here, and her sister Rosie were students at the Indian Residential School in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, from 1936 to 1947. She was only five years old when she was put in school.



Isabelle Knockwood:

“Our home clothes were stripped off and we were put in the tub. When we got out we were given new clothes with wide black and white vertical stripes. Much later I discovered that this was almost identical to the prison garb of the time. We were also given numbers. I was 58 and Rosie was 57.”



Assimilation

As Peter Irniq recalls, the school wasted no time trying to erase years of traditional upbringing. “We had overnight become white men and white women, little children. We were beginning to be taught to become like a European at this particular school.”

New Clothing

Peter Irniq attended Sir Joseph Bernier Federal Day School in Chesterfield Inlet, in what is now Nunavut. “There they took our clothes, our traditional clothing. I was wearing sealskin boots. They took all of our traditional clothing and for the first time I saw and wore shoes. For the first time I saw a pair of jeans. For the first time I saw a short-sleeved shirt and that’s what we were wearing.”

“ Taken from their homes, stripped of their belongings, and separated from their siblings, residential school children lived in a world dominated by fear, loneliness, and lack of affection. ”



WATCH THE VIDEO




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Before and After

This telling pair of images conveys clearly the objective of the residential schools. The two photos show Thomas Moore. On the left, he is dressed in his traditional clothing before going to the Regina Indian Industrial School in 1891. On the right is Thomas Moore in a school outfit. The pair of images was intended to show that the goal of assimilating children into European society was being successfully achieved.

 Watch a 1955 school propaganda video at <http://tinyurl.com/rcwresidential025>



Losing Their Language

In the classroom, only English or French could be spoken. Students were beaten or even had needles stuck through their tongues if they were caught speaking to each other in their own language.



Dormitories

Isabelle Knockwood recalls, "The dormitories were kept spotless, with polished hardwood floors, which were always cold. I was never warm at school. There were never enough blankets. Sometimes at night I would get up and put on my stockings. Sometimes I kept my stockings on when I went to bed. I missed my nice warm bed at home. Rosie and I had always slept together. It was always warm in our house."



Separating Brothers and Sisters

Boys and girls were kept strictly separate. In many cases, brothers and sisters didn't see or speak to each other at all.

Starvation

After being raised on a diet of freshly caught fish, fresh and dried meat, berries, and bannock, children were expected to eat porridge made of cracked wheat, dried beans, and processed meat, which had very little nutritional value. Children were never fed enough to feel full. Staff sometimes used the funds allocated for students' food to buy themselves steak and potatoes, while the children were forced to eat mush and rancid meat. Children were forced to work in fields, gardens, and barns to produce fresh vegetables and milk that were not used to feed them, but sold instead. The objective was to reduce costs, with no concern for student nutrition or health.



Mealtime

There was not enough food and children never felt full. Porridge was a staple of the residential school diet. Made from cracked wheat, it often became lumpy and slimy. George Manuel, a student at the Kamloops School, remembers, "Hunger is both the first and the last thing I can remember about that school . . . Every Indian student smelled of hunger." This photo was taken at the Qu'Appelle Industrial School, Saskatchewan.

“ The federal government knowingly chose not to provide schools with enough money to ensure that kitchens and dining rooms were properly equipped, that cooks were properly trained, and, most significantly, that food was purchased in sufficient quantity and quality for growing children. It was a decision that left thousands of Aboriginal children vulnerable to disease. ”



Stealing Food

Hungry children took potatoes that they were harvesting and roasted them in the fire. Frederick Loft attended the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario. "I recall the times when working in the fields, I was actually too hungry to be able to walk, let alone work."



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Starvation

Government officials were aware of the inadequate food at residential schools. Although expected to serve the teachers healthy dinners, the students were left with meals consisting of rancid food or mush that they were forced to consume or starve. This letter was written September 16, 1953, to P. E. Moore, Medical Director of Indian Affairs. "Children at the Brandon Indian Industrial School are not being fed properly to the extent that they are gargaging around in the barns for food that should only be fed to the barn occupants."



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Below: letter written Sept. 16, 1953 by
J.W. Breaky to P.E. Moore, Medical
Director of Indian Affairs: "Children at
the Brandon Indian Industrial School
are not being fed properly to the extent
that they are garbaging around in the
[sic] barns for food that should only be
fed to the Barn occupants."

ore, Ed...
Director of Indian Affairs,
ario.

It had been brought to my attention that the
at the Brandon Indian Industrial School are not being
erly to the extent that they are garbaging around in
is for food that should only be fed to the Barn occupants.
This information has been given to me by carpenters
re been working at the School and to say the least they
amply disgusted.
I would respectfully suggest that this condition be
ated and if yourself or any member of your department checks
n this condition, I will personally see that they can meet
ible witnesses.

Hunger

The children often had the same meals daily. Porridge with skim milk was breakfast. The midday meal was mush or a sort of stew with a slice of bread with no butter. Supper was the same mush and some sort of vegetable. For children who were used to a healthy diet, the change to processed meats, cheese, and cooked vegetables was drastic.

“Hunger is both the first and the last thing I can remember about that school . . . Every Indian student smelled of hunger.”

Education in English and French

A typical day for children at residential school was broken into two parts. Only two to four hours were spent in class. The rest of the day was spent working, to reduce the need to spend money on school facilities and staff. Students worked at farming, carpentry, and domestic chores. The daily routine was strictly regimented, a difficult adjustment for many.



The Kamloops, BC, School Day

The boys typically got up at 5:30 a.m. to do barn chores, such as milking and feeding the animals. The girls rose at 6:00 a.m. and got dressed and ready for the day. Three hundred sixty-five days a year the children attended morning Mass, followed by breakfast and morning chores. The school day began with an hour of religious studies, followed by two hours of regular classes like math and reading. The rest of the day was filled with chores. Girls would sew, do laundry, cook, or clean. The boys worked outside gardening, farming, or learning carpentry. The rest of the day was filled with study time, dinner, cleaning, and some recreation time before prayers and bedtime.



Classroom Time

Morning classes would typically take only a couple of hours during the day. With so little classroom time, few students progressed past the first few grade levels.

“ . . . Most of the residential schools operated on what was referred to as the ‘half-day system.’ Under this system — which amounted to institutionalized child labour — students were in class for half the day and in what was supposed to be vocational training for the other half. Often, as many students, teachers, and inspectors observed, the time allocated for vocational training was actually spent in highly repetitive labour that provided little in the way of training. Rather, it served to maintain the school operations. As educational institutions, the residential schools were failures, and regularly judged as such. ”



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Road to Learning

Shirley Williams attended St. Joseph's Indian Residential School in Fort William, Ontario (now Thunder Bay). “In school we learned many different subjects such as English, science, math, writing, geography, history, and home economics. The home economics consisted of knitting, cooking, and sewing.”



The Sewing Room

At Lejac Indian Residential School in Fraser Lake, BC, the girls spent most of the afternoon in the sewing room. In one year they made 293 dresses, 191 aprons, 296 pairs of underwear, 301 undershirts, and 600 pairs of socks.

“ Of her experiences at the Baptist school in Whitehorse and the Anglican school in Carcross, Rose Dorothy Charlie said, ‘They took my language. They took it right out of my mouth. I never spoke it again.’ ”



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Harvesting

Theodore Fontaine recalls, "In my third or fourth year, I was one of the boys to help in the fall harvest. The boys in grades four to eight were pulled out of classes for this."



Kitchen Duties

Students were required to work in school kitchens making bread, churning butter, cooking, and cleaning.



Mending Clothes

Isabelle Knockwood shares, “Everyone I interviewed liked the sewing Sisters, Clita and Rita, because they never yelled or scolded, but taught sewing in a calm and patient way. Both were gentle souls and allowed us to talk and laugh as long as we were reasonably quiet.”

“ Inspectors viewed the continued use of Aboriginal languages by the students as a sign of failure. ”



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Recreation

If students managed to finish their chores, they were given recreation time to socialize and play with the other students. This staged, propaganda-style photo shows a group of girls at Shingwauk Indian Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, around 1960.

“ The churches placed a greater priority on religious commitment than on teaching ability. Because the pay was so low, many of the teachers lacked any qualification to teach. ”



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“ . . . These children were sent to what were, in most cases, badly constructed, poorly maintained, overcrowded, unsanitary fire traps. Many children were fed a substandard diet and given a substandard education, and worked too hard. For far too long, they died in tragically high numbers. Discipline was harsh and unregulated; abuse was rife and unreported. It was, at best, institutionalized child neglect. ”



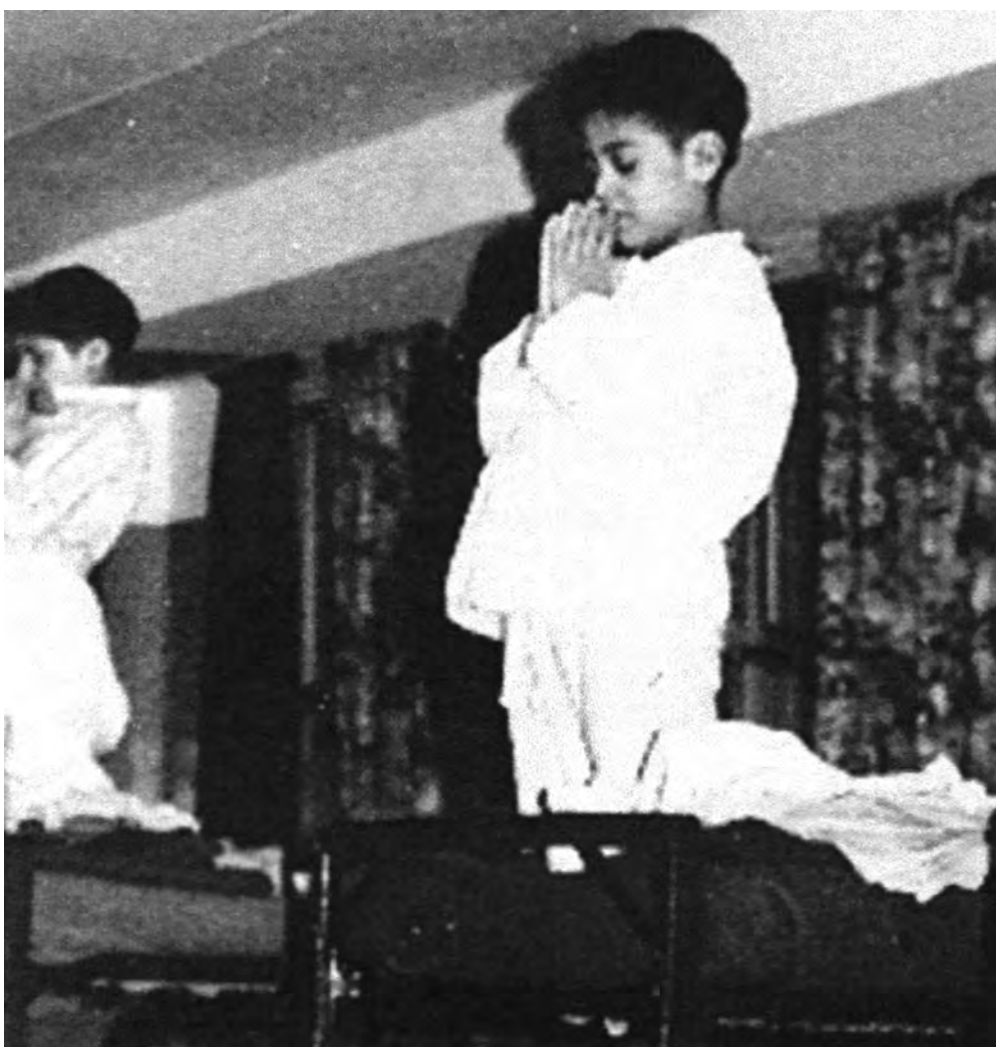
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Boys' Dormitory

“We had a very large dormitory where they had about forty beds, or maybe a little bit more. The beds were all lined up. I was used to a 14-by-12 tent,” recalls Peter Irniq.



Prayer

Since the residential schools were run by the churches, there was a lot of emphasis placed on prayer. Children were expected to pray first thing in the morning and then attend Mass and religious studies. They had to pray before bedtime every night, as well. This photo shows children kneeling in prayer on their beds.



Morning Mass

These children and many others were required to attend morning Mass every day of the year.



Bedtime

Children pictured on the left are getting ready for bed by brushing their teeth and getting washed up at a school in Aklavik, Northwest Territories.

Daily Routine

Janice Acoose of Cowessess, Saskatchewan, recalls the daily routine at her residential school. "Early rise, prayers, shower and dress, meals premised by prayers, school premised by more prayers, rigidly programmed exercise time, catechism instruction and bedtime, which was premised by excruciatingly painful periods of time spent on our knees in prayer circles."



Child Labour

There was a wide range of work that children were expected to do at residential school. Kitchen work could include cooking and baking or cleaning up after meals. Girls worked in the laundry, where they were expected to operate machinery that was often bigger than they were. They also sewed clothing for the students. Boys worked tending to the furnace, raising animals, or caring for crops.



Carrying Wood

Students at All Saints in Lac la Ronge, Saskatchewan, are pictured here in the 1920s. Boys were required to gather wood and do other outdoor tasks, such as farming.



Kitchen Work

Nora Bernard attended the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia. She recalls, “We served a month in the kitchen. I didn’t mind going to Mass because it was a break away from the kitchen area.”

Harvesting

Harvesting time required extra hands and children were taken out of class for the duration of the harvest season. Every type of vegetable was grown to be sold for profit. Often the only produce held back for the children were potatoes, beans, and turnips. The same crops were grown for the animals.



Kitchen Chores

Rita Joe, a Mi'kmaw poet, spent much of her time at school in Nova Scotia in the kitchen. "For that, you had to get up at four in the morning. We'd bake bread and — oh my God — every second day we'd bake about thirty-five or forty loaves. Holy Lord! And we made soup in a huge pot that was very high and very round. We'd make porridge in the morning, in a big, big porridge pot and we'd boil over two hundred eggs. It was a lot of hard work that we did in the kitchen and the cook could be cruel."

“We’d bake bread and — oh my God — every second day we’d bake about thirty-five or forty loaves.”



Workplace Danger

Isabelle Knockwood remembers laundry room accidents. "One cold afternoon, I heard an inhuman-sounding scream. It went through me like cold bellowing wind and chilled me right to the core of my bones. I knew immediately what had happened — one of the girls had got her hand caught in the mangle."



Hard at Work

"Both boys and girls swept, mopped, waxed, and polished all the floors in the school on Saturday morning. The wood floors had to be polished until we could literally see our faces in them," remembers Isabelle Knockwood.