

told me that my brother had just passed away. I went to the hospital with the principal. There lay my brother Jim in a room that was like a morgue.¹¹⁰

The school provided a coffin, but, since it was too short, it was necessary to break his knees to fit him into the coffin. When his grandmother came up to collect the body, she made the school order a new coffin.¹¹¹

Baker left the Lytton school at age fifteen, having completed Grade Eight. “I knew there was nothing to stay home for and I wanted to be with the boys at the school, my bed and the three meals a day that I was used to.” He told his grandmother that he wanted to continue his education, but she said, “Son, I don’t want you to go to white man’s school because I have been teaching you our way of living and I want you to be the leader of our family here on the Capilano reserve.” Although Baker was frustrated by his grandmother’s decision, he decided not to oppose her.¹¹²

Eleanor Brass

Eleanor Brass was born in Saskatchewan in 1905, the daughter of Fred Dieter and Marybelle Cote. Both of them had attended residential schools in their youth. According to family lore, both the Roman Catholic priest and the Presbyterian principal gave Fred’s parents money to convince them to send him to their respective schools. Eventually, he went to the Presbyterian school at File Hills because it was closer to his parents. Marybelle had been educated at the Presbyterian school at Kamsack. Both of them also attended the Regina industrial school.¹¹³

Eleanor’s father’s experiences at the Regina school became part of family legend. He passed on stories of swimming, skating, lacrosse, soccer, and baseball (which lagged far behind soccer in popularity). The school organized brass bands, as well as dances, discussion groups, and debates. Some of the school’s graduates were sent to the Hampton Institute in Virginia for further training in missionary and medical work. In her memoirs, Brass wrote that “those of us who are descendants of the pupils often wonder why this technical school and others like it were not kept open.”¹¹⁴

Her parents were married at the File Hills boarding school. Principal Kate Gillespie and her sister Janet Gillespie, the school matron, made the wedding arrangements and baked the wedding cake. The married couple then moved to a property Dieter had been farming on the Peepeekisis Reserve, a reserve that would form the nucleus of the File Hills Colony for former residential school students.¹¹⁵

Although his accounts of his experiences in boarding and residential schools had been positive, Fred Dieter wanted his own children sent to “the white day school.” However, in 1911, the local Indian agent informed him that his daughter Eleanor and her seven-year-old sister would have to attend the File Hills school, just over nineteen kilometres from the Dieter farm.

Brass herself painted very positive memories of the first principal she had there, the Reverend H. C. Sweet, whose name, she felt, suited him.¹¹⁶ His replacement was, to Brass's mind, "more like a hardened dictator," and, under his administration, the strap was in constant use. After being caught passing notes through the windows of the school hospital to fellow students who were being held in quarantine, Brass was locked in a room with nothing to eat for a day and no access to a toilet. When released, she was slapped by the matron for wetting herself, put to bed, and strapped across her back. Brass's cries were so loud they reached the boys in their dormitory, who called out to the matron to stop.¹¹⁷

One of her fellow students, Chief Pasqua's twelve-year-old son, who could speak no English, found the school very alienating and ran away, only to be brought back, stripped, made to lay face down on the bed, and beaten.¹¹⁸ On one occasion, one of Eleanor Brass's cousins and a friend ran away from the school. They too were strapped on their return. "Their hands were swollen and they looked like boxing mitts and their arms had huge welts. Then the principal chained my cousin's ankles together so that whenever she tried to walk she fell down." Fred Dieter, having caught sight of the poor shackled girl on a visit to the school, bounded up the stairs to the principal's office, grabbed him, and ordered him, "Take those chains off that child." He left with the warning that the principal was lucky he was getting off with a good shaking: "These are children, not criminals, and I don't ever want to see cruelty like this again."¹¹⁹

Brass's mother spoke *Saulteaux* and her father spoke *Cree*, but they chose to speak English at home, in large measure because they feared that their children "would be held back in school if they spoke nothing but Indian languages."¹²⁰ The children were not allowed to speak Aboriginal languages at the school. At the same time, Brass recalled, "The principal's wife told us girls who were brought up in File Hills Colony that we were no good because we couldn't speak *Cree*."¹²¹ The children tried to teach each other what they knew about Aboriginal culture. Sometimes, they would sneak off to the lake and, using a pail as a drum, hold secret powwows, always aware of the fact that they could be strapped if they were caught.¹²²

During the winter months, parents were not allowed to visit the school. Eleanor said that was "when we went through a lot of abuse and torture."¹²³ The lack of access could hurt in several ways. For instance, Brass was made to wear shoes that were too large for her. She was sure that if her parents had known of her need for proper shoes, they would have provided them.¹²⁴

Brass recalled that her first teacher at File Hills spent much of her time telling the children about hell and how they would end up there if they did not behave. A second, younger, teacher was more popular with the students, but she did not last. Neither teacher taught the children very much academically. In her final years at the school, as Eleanor was getting ready to go to a "white school," a Miss Hewett took an interest

in her: “She pushed me right along in my classes and even gave me extra lessons so I wouldn’t be too far behind when I entered the white school.”¹²⁵

According to Brass, the dinners at File Hills consisted “of watery soup with no flavour, and never any meat.” One winter, it seemed they ate fish every day.¹²⁶ Porridge at the school was either burnt or half-cooked, but students were punished for not eating their food.¹²⁷ Once, the students came across barrels of apples in the school attic. Over time, the students worked their way through the apples. When the deed was discovered, they were sent to bed without a meal and, over a period of days, the children were called down to the principal’s office one by one and strapped. When it came to her turn, Brass recalled, her cries were met only with the sarcastic comment that “the Cotes are good singers,” a mocking reference to the fact that her mother and sister were well known for their singing voices.¹²⁸ In fair weather, the boys would trap gophers and squirrels, and roast them over open fires to supplement their meagre diets. Sometimes, they would share these treats with the girls at the school.¹²⁹

At File Hills, the students would go for walks for exercise, even in winter. Brass said the clothing was not warm enough. The three- to five-kilometre walks were particularly hard on the youngest students: “The tiny children would cry and wet their underclothes which would soon be frozen stiff, and they would be spanked for it.”¹³⁰

She had two tragic memories from her time at the school. One autumn, Archie Feather fell through the ice on the local lake and drowned. She also recalled that a seventeen-year-old boy from the Carlyle Reserve hanged himself in the barn. “The poor youth was in some kind of trouble which wasn’t so terrible but apparently it seemed that way to him. The staff could make it seem that way for they were always ready to deal out punishment.” The young man was buried on the Peepeekisis Reserve, and his family came to visit his grave every summer.¹³¹

Her father took her out of the school in 1917 and enrolled her in the local school in Abernathy, Saskatchewan. It was a terrible experience for her, marked with racism. Later, Brass attended high school in Canora, and stayed at a boarding home run by the Presbyterian Church, where she made close friends with two young Scottish girls.¹³² Some of her brothers went to the Brandon residential school, where “the principal was very domineering and the children were afraid of him. My brothers said after they left school and happened to meet this principal they still feared him.”¹³³

After she had left the school, her brothers also attended File Hills. They all had a rough time. In her opinion, one brother, Russell, died of neglect. Their father had tried sending them to the village school in Lorlie, Saskatchewan, but had to send them to the boarding school when the discrimination the children experienced in the school culminated in the school board’s refusing to accept Aboriginal students.¹³⁴