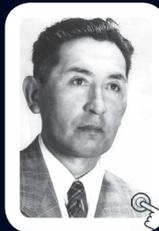


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Delmas Indian Residential School, ca. 1939, Pensionnat Indien Delmas, Les Oeuvres Oblates de la Ontario (Deschatelets Archive)



When the Thunderchild school burned down in 1948, John Tootoosis, a former student and well-known Cree leader, persuaded his community that "this was the best chance that they would ever have to press for the long-desired day school on their reserve."<sup>1</sup>(197). He was hopeful that a day school would provide an "education for the Indian children, geared to their special needs, designed to enable them to become whole, function and contributing Indian Canadians."<sup>1</sup> The local priest accused him of doing the "devils work," threatening to excommunicate him for his criticism of residential schools.<sup>2</sup> Indian Affairs official J. P. B. Ostrander noted, "The Indians of the Poundmaker, Meadow Lake, and Sweetgrass Reserves have all been asking for day schools," and he could see no reason why they should continue to be denied such schools. Despite Oblate requests to replace Thunderchild school, by the spring of 1949, the government decided not to rebuild at Delmas.<sup>3</sup> According to Ray McCallum, "Many of the people that attended Delmas were my relatives from Meadow Lake and after the fire they were sent to Beauval Indian Residential School."<sup>4</sup> (Photo: Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan/R-A7662) Click to read more about John Tootoosis

Scott, J. S. (2004). Residential Schools and Native Canadian Writers. In P. H. Marsden & G. V. Davis (Eds.), *Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Human Rights in a Post-Colonial World* (p. 237). New York, NY: Rodopi

<sup>2</sup> They Came For the Children, p. 50

<sup>3</sup> The History, Part 2: 1939 to 2000, Vol. 1, p. 306

<sup>4</sup> Online Message Board

# THUNDERCHILD INDIAN

The Thunderchild (Delmas/St. Henri) Indian Residential School operated from 1901 to 1948 at Delmas, outside Thunderchild Reserve in Treaty 6. The Roman Catholic Church Oblate missionaries (Oblates of Mary Immaculate) operated the school, which was founded by Fr. Henri Delmas. In January 1901, Chief Thunderchild wrote on behalf of his people to protest the building of a Roman Catholic school on his reserve. "We feel that as a majority of the Indians on the Reserve are Protestant there is no reason why it should be placed here ...The Roman Catholic Mission is situated immediately outside of the Reserve and we see no reason why the school should not be there..."<sup>1</sup> The Roman Catholic church agreed to build the school at their mission property instead.

## Fire Hazards

In 1936 new fire escapes were installed.<sup>2</sup> However, in 1937 Inspector Robinson reported "a recent addition containing a dormitory on the second and staff quarters on the third floor," was without a fire escape.<sup>3</sup> These fire escapes were installed. In 1939, the electrical wiring was reported as defective and was repaired.<sup>4</sup> In 1940, R. A. Hoey recommended that the government close [the] school because it was "in poor state of repair."<sup>5</sup> In 1948, the school was destroyed by fire<sup>6</sup> and was not

<sup>1</sup>Indian Affairs RG10, Vol. 6337, File 663-1, part 1, Chief Thunderchild's letter, Jan, 19, 1901(Read about Thunderchild's Day School: Read letter)

<sup>2</sup> Indian Affairs RG10, Vol. 6337, File 663-5, part 1, Minister of Mines and Resources to the Governor General in Council, Jan. 13, 1936

<sup>3</sup> Indian Affairs RG10, Vol. 6337, File 663-5, part 3, Inspector Thos. Robertson Report, Oct. 27, 1937

<sup>4</sup> Indian Affairs RG10, Vol. 6337, File 663-5, part 1, Report of the Saskatchewan Power Commission, May 1, 1939

<sup>5</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, pp. 463-464

<sup>6</sup> Indian Affairs RG10, Vol. 6337, File 663-5, part 3, Telegram to Indian Affairs, Jan. 14, 1948 (all pupils safely evacuated)

rebuilt. Several boys were investigated, and two were suspected of setting the fire though there wasn't enough evidence to convict them. Several boys had previously made threats to burn down the school.<sup>7</sup> According to a 1993 account of a former student, "the fire was set by four boys who warned the rest of the boys in advance. The girls were not told, because the 'girls' dormitories were on the other side and so they had lots of time to get out."<sup>8</sup>

## Enrolment

The school struggled with enrollment for its first few years, due to being limited to 15 students, though it felt it had been promised 25. Frequent requests for an increase in students was flatly denied. In 1904, in response to the school's request for more money to help pay for the buildings the church built for the operation of the school, Martin Benson wrote "there was never any good reason for establishing this school in the first place, which was started contrary to the express wish of the Department." By 1911 20 students were allowed and the school requested an increase to 30 students. However, Deputy Minister Mclean wrote, "there were 42 children in attendance at this school, 20 Indian and 22 other." To have an increase of 10 students, the administration was instructed to discharge ten of the non-grant earning children (Métis).<sup>9</sup> Mclean wrote in 1912, "there are now only Indian Children in the Class Rooms." In 1923, an addition made it possible to house 100 students. In 1924, a report from the Indian

<sup>7</sup> Indian Affairs RG10, Vol 6337, File 663-5, part 3, RCMP report, February 16, 1948

<sup>8</sup> The History, Part 2: 1939 to 2000, Vol. 1, p. 323

<sup>9</sup>Indian Affairs. School Files. RG10, Vol. 6337, File 663-1, part 1. Mclean to Indian Agent Day, June 7, 1911

Agent Macdonald states that the school had been a mix of White and Indigenous students (some of whom were Métis). The White students had been housed in the South wing but the newly appointed Principal Portier had discharged the White students, to make room for First Nations students.<sup>10</sup>

## Lack of Farming Instruction

Starting in 1923, the government (D.C. Scott and W. Graham in particular) placed a great deal of pressure on the school to teach the older boys farming. However, the school did not have farming implements, nor did it have enough land. The Sisters were against teaching farming for several reasons outlined in this letter.

## Student Deaths

The school had a troubled history. It was overcrowded and students suffered and often died from a wide range of illnesses including typhoid, peritonitis, scarlet fever, tuberculosis, jaundice and pneumonia. Investigations into deaths at Thunderchild school began in 1990 when a former superintendent with the Department of Indian Affairs wrote a paper on Thunderchild IRS that alleged incidents of severe punishments and physical abuse (including an incident of a boy, Robert Lonesinger, beaten to death by IRS staff). An inquiry into Robert's death concluded the boy had died of pneumonia. However, many believed the investigation was not handled properly. Father Gaston Mointmigny, an oblate archivist, said that an RCMP officer told him

<sup>10</sup>Indian Affairs. School Files. RG10, Vol. 6337, File 663-1, part 1. Indian Agent Macdonald Report , Dec. 17, 1924



Photo: Thunderchild, ca. 1939, Les Oeuvres Oblates de l'Ontario (Deschatelets Archive). At the Delmas School, students were taught: "English by Sisters who came from Quebec and spoke only French. [...] They were punished for speaking Cree and punished if they made mistakes in English. To overcome these situations the children adopted two lines of defence. They would cast their eyes down and say nothing or they learned to use the Indian sing language so they would communicate among themselves." Source: Jaine, L. (Ed.). (1993). *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years*, pp. 75-76, Saskatoon, SK: Extension University Press, University of Saskatchewan.



Delmas, ca. 1939, Les Oeuvres Oblates de l'Ontario (Deschatelets Archive)

Theresa (Bear) Sapp, 77, a survivor of Thunderchild Indian residential school at Delmas, ... also experienced problems after leaving residential school, "I drank a lot," she said. "They cut our hair off, when we talked Cree they could put something in our mouths to burn us, slap us, trying to kill the cultural spirit... It was a difficult life, a horrible life." Source: [CBC News Indigenous, Crystal Green, March 19, 2014](#)

Bishop Smith Catholic School students in Pembroke, Ontario commemorated the children who died at Thunderchild IRS



St. Luke's Elementary students in Saskatoon commemorated the children who attended Thunderchild IRS

Read more stories from Thunderchild

# N RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

that the allegations were ridiculous.<sup>11</sup>

Death rates at this school were high: 10% of students died in 1908; 15% in 1928; and 7% in 1931. "Death rates were up to five times higher than for non-native students attending provincial schools. Deaths were not discussed; most often the child simply disappeared, and other children were forbidden to ask questions. It could be months before parents were notified, often only finding out when a child did not return home at the expected time."<sup>12</sup> The accounts of some survivors...point to the practice of burying some of the dead children in a common grave on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River and the bones of others being discovered during excavation in the town itself.<sup>13</sup>

## Financial Inducement and Coercion as Solution for Truancy

In 1930, Principal N. C. D. Dubois "objected to the directive that principals 'should not allow annual leaves to children who have had to be brought in under escort upon the expiration of former vacations.' Dubois responded, that 'to keep such a bunch of sad delinquents at school like prisoners during vacations would necessitate special and continual watching from the part of the staff because they would run away upon the very first occasion. Imagine what trouble it would be for the principal and teachers of having such a disagreeable task to perform.'" When fall arrived, 19 students had not returned from their vacations. Dubois'

<sup>11</sup> Kruzenga, L. (2007, April 12). Media Clips: "An unfinished business: Records and accounts of deaths must be made, say survivors"

<sup>12</sup> *Needs and Expectations for Redress of Victims of Abuse*, Sage Research Redress, p. 40

<sup>13</sup> Kruzenga, L. (2007, April 12) Media Clips: "An unfinished business: Records and accounts of deaths must be made, say survivors"

discussions with the parents were unsuccessful in convincing them of the school's value; he wrote it was "impossible to convince them of the necessity and great advantages of having their children at the school." Still he "did not think it 'fair or practicable' to force those students to stay at the school over the next summer if he was ever able to persuade them to return to school."<sup>14</sup>

"In 1931, Mrs. John Chakita (alternately Tchakta) ... removed her daughter, Mary, [from the school because she believed] she was suffering from poor health." Indian agent, S. L. Macdonald, ordered the principal to have the girl returned. "When the principal's efforts failed, the Indian agent obtained a court summons ordering the mother to return the girl to school." In 1932, the Indian agent sent a letter to a member of the Moosomin Band for the return of a male student. "The father was told, 'Please see that this boy is taken back to the school at once, as if it is found necessary to use the Police, you will be liable as well as have to pay the expenses of the action.'"<sup>15</sup>

In February 1935, Principal J. H. O. Allard, "offered parents between \$1 and \$3 to offset the expense of bringing their children to school. By August, he reported, 'Our savages did not need coaxing to come for the promised three dollars. Last year at the same time, we had 12 entries; this year, we have 60, including five new recruits.' The degree of success in recruiting students through financial inducements "is a sign of the widespread poverty among Aboriginal people,

<sup>14</sup> *The History, Part 1, Origins to 1939*, Vol. 1, pp. 608-609

<sup>15</sup> *The History, Part 1, Origins to 1939*, Vol. 1, p. 286

a condition that was largely the result of the federal government's failure to live up to what were supposed to be legally binding Treaty promises."<sup>16</sup>

In October 1937, the police visited the Poundmaker Reserve on behalf of the school, and told the parents of seven children ... to send their children back to school. Within five days, all the children were back in school."<sup>17</sup> Also in 1937, a father removed two of his children "following an incident in which he alleged that the Sister Superior slapped both children across the face in front of him."<sup>18</sup>

## Positive Reports on Education

"In 1924, Inspector W. M. Veazey gave the ... school a very positive assessment. The three teachers were 'energetic and untiring in their efforts,' the children were 'good at word recognition,' the school was 'splendidly equipped,' and, while there was 'some difficulty in teaching the English perfectly [sic],' he felt that 'practical education was excellent.'" In 1926, "a different inspector said, 'I do not see how the work could be done much, if any, better and the entire staff deserves commendation.'" A 1936 inspection "gave a similarly positive assessment: the rooms were well lit and airy, the teachers showed excellent leadership, and the pupils were orderly, anxious to do well, and thoughtful."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *The History, Part 1, Origins to 1939*, Vol. 1, p. 283

<sup>17</sup> *The History, Part 1, Origins to 1939*, Vol. 1, p. 286

<sup>18</sup> NCTR school summary, p. 8

<sup>19</sup> *The History, Part 1, Origins to 1939*, Vol. 1, pp. 321-322