



St. Barnabas School at Onion Lake, ca. 193-, The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, MSCC/P75-103-S7-103



Above: The gates of St. Barnabas IRS remain. Photo by Ann May Assailly. Saskatchewan Anglican newspaper, December 2012



Left: Cadets of St. Barnabas School, ca. 1926-1943, The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, A. H. Sovereign/M2006-08

# ST. BARNABAS INDIAN

St. Barnabas (Onion Lake) Indian Residential School opened in 1892 and was destroyed by fire in 1943. The school was operated by the Anglican Church of Canada at Onion Lake, in Treaty 6 territory on what is now the Saskatchewan/Alberta border. The then lay catechist (and fluent Cree speaker) John R. Matheson started the school in a Mission house that he and his wife had paid for and constructed. It initially held 10 children but grew substantially over time.

Besides being a missionary and principal, Matheson was a rancher, farmer, and trader, often using income from his business enterprises to support the school.<sup>1</sup> Two of the Matheson children died at Onion Lake, Edith (1901-1904) and baby Jack (1910).<sup>2</sup> The school administration was a family affair. Rev. John Matheson was principal<sup>3</sup> until he died in 1916.<sup>4</sup> During his illness (from about 1911) and following John's death, his wife Dr. Elizabeth Matheson (first woman doctor in Saskatchewan) became principal (with 29 students) until 1917 when Rev. Henry Ellis became the third and final principal. Elizabeth's brother, James Scott became the farm instructor while she was principal.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth's daughter, Letitia, and John's niece, Anne Cunningham, were teachers at the school. Edward Ahenakew became the assistant principal in 1912. Ahenakew remained a lifelong friend of the Matheson family, eventually presiding over the funeral of Elizabeth, in 1958. A Matheson daughter, Ruth M. Buck, edited Ahenakew's memoir, *Voices of the Plains Cree*.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 715

<sup>2</sup> <http://saskhistoryonline.ca/islandora/object/ourlegacy%3A38316>

<sup>3</sup> John Matheson's brother Edward was principal at the Battleford school during the same time. (The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 722)

<sup>4</sup> "John's salary, paid by a government grant, was three hundred dollars annually."

<sup>5</sup> See Ruth M. Buck's, (2003). *The Doctor Rode Side-Saddle: The Remarkable Story of Elizabeth Matheson, Frontier Doctor and Medicine Woman*.

<sup>6</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 734

The school was destroyed by fire in 1943 and students were moved to St. Alban's College in Prince Albert.

## Parental Resistance to Enrolment

In 1906, Principal Matheson wrote: "The teacher or Missionary is entirely powerless in the matter of persuading or forcing the parents to send their children to school. The Indians either simply laugh or point blank refuse, or in some instances take the children away or coax them to run away after they have been in the school for some time, and all efforts to get them back are utterly futile." He questioned government officials, who he said were "afraid to enforce the law, or there is no law for them to enforce. Which is it?"<sup>7</sup>

Despite resistance, parents sometimes enrolled their children in the schools out of financial desperation. "Charles Constant of the James Smith's Band applied to have his [11- and 13]-year-old daughters admitted to the ... school ... in 1929, even though there was a day school near to his home. As he explained to the Indian agent, 'I am poor, hard up and cannot feed my children properly and I think it will be better for my older girls to be in a boarding school.'<sup>8</sup>

## Métis Students

"In the early 1890s, most of the children at the ... school ... were of mixed ancestry. Principal Matheson taught the children at his own expense, only twice seeking government support in the form of food or a per capita grant. In 1898, he persuaded the government to pay the per capita grant for two children whose mother had status but whose Euro-Canadian father had deserted them. Indian Affairs warned Matheson that this was an

<sup>7</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 260

<sup>8</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 281

isolated case and should not be considered as a precedent. Two years later, only 14 of the 34 students had Treaty status." (At the St. Anthony's Catholic school, also at Onion Lake, 49 of the 62 students had status.)<sup>9</sup> "Into the 20th century, ... Principal Matheson continued to seek funding for 'a large number of half-breeds and non-treaty children.' He had been keeping them in the school at his own expense, and was having 'difficulty in filling up his school with Indian children.' The Indian commissioner ruled them to be non-grant-earning students, saying that most of them were 'orphans, children of Indian mothers by white or half-breed fathers, who had deserted them.'" Principal Matheson argued they had no one to care or provide for them. "They were also 'living on the reserve and brought up as Indians.'<sup>10</sup>

"In February 1928, three 'half-breed' children were admitted to the ... school after the death of their mother. This was done without the Department's permission. In December 1929, Commissioner Graham reported that the Indian agent was still trying to have the children removed from the school, into the custody of either their father or the provincial Department of Neglected and Dependent Children. Graham wrote that it had been 'a hard struggle to keep halfbreeds out of our schools and if we are going to make exceptions and admit a few we are going to have a lot of trouble.' The following year, there were six Métis children attending the two residential schools in Onion Lake. Graham concluded that rather than remove the children, the Oblate provincial intended to let them remain there as long as Indian Affairs allowed them to stay."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 14

<sup>10</sup> The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 22

<sup>11</sup> The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 27

The construction of both a Roman Catholic boarding school (St. Anthony's) and an Anglican boarding school (St. Barnabas) at Onion Lake was a result of the interchurch competition that plagued the residential school system.

## Read former student stories



Left: Eight-year-old Joseph Sanderson, ca 1925, The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, MSCC/P7538-376

Right: Students of Onion Lake School, ca. 1932, The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, T.B.R. Westgate/M55-01



A group of girls, ca. 193-, The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, MSCC/P7538-346



Young Scouts seated in front of Boys' House, ca. 192-, The General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, MSCC Fonds/P7538

# RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

## Early Instruction in both Cree and English

An 1898 report from Principal Matheson indicated that the children were taught to "read and write both Cree and English."<sup>12</sup> This school was one of the few exceptions. (One year earlier, St. Anthony's the Roman Catholic school at Onion Lake reported "The Cree language is not heard in the school, not a word is spoken among the pupils"<sup>13</sup>)

## Inadequate Isolation Facility/Improper Health Care

In 1921, there were reports of inadequate isolation facilities at the school. A boy came down with smallpox in 1921. "He was kept in a small dormitory with a sheet hung over the door that was regularly sprayed with disinfectant until a doctor could confirm his diagnosis and put a quarantine into effect. In 1924, the Mission school put up two buildings to use as an isolation hospital after an outbreak of diphtheria and smallpox."<sup>14</sup>

In 1931, Mrs. W. F. Dreaver refused to send her daughter Mary to the boarding school "because of the poor medical treatment her son had received there." Her son had been admitted in September 1930 in good health, but became ill by December the same year. Principal Henry Ellis assured the parents the boy would recover. However, the parents paid to have their son returned home and the same local doctor who had pronounced him in good health, announced that the boy was "far gone with TB." Their son died a few months later. Mary was discharged and attended Mistawasis Day School instead.<sup>15</sup>

## Nutritional Deficiencies

In 1921, "after receiving reports ... that students ... were being served poor-quality bread and only water to drink, Duncan Campbell Scott instructed the Anglican Missionary Society ... that 'the children be provided with good, substantial and well cooked food.'"<sup>16</sup>

In 1923, the parents of student Edward B. received the following letter from their son: "We are going to tell you how we are treated. I am always hungry. We only get two slice of bread and one plate porridge. Seven children ran away because there [sic] are hungry,.... I sold all my clothes away because I am hungry too. Try and send me some money, \$2.50, please to buy something to eat and send me pictures those I left in the wagon." The parents gave the letter to a parliamentary press gallery reporter, who sent the letter to Deputy Minister Duncan Campbell Scott. Scott "brushed off the complaint and said the student had 'no cause for complaint.' He also wrote, 'Ninety-nine per cent of the Indian children at these schools are too fat.' Indian Affairs eventually identified the boy and informed his father that 'your boy is being well fed and clothed.' In reality, there had been ongoing concerns about the quality of food at the school, and Scott knew that.... It does not appear that a news story on the issue was ever published, despite the fact that the parents, or their acquaintances, had taken the issue to the press."<sup>17</sup>

## Running Away

Two boys ran away on May 17, 1941. They found work with a local farmer, but were located by the Mounted Police a few days later on May 20 and returned to school.<sup>18</sup>

## Abuse

In 1919, Bishop Jervois Newnham recalled [in a letter to Duncan Campbell Scott] a dismissed court case regarding three girls who were lured away for "immoral purposes" from St. Barnabas school by a young Roman Catholic boy. The Bishop alleged that the police had mismanaged the case.<sup>19</sup>

"According to one former student, a boys' supervisor was fired from the school in about 1943 for sexually molesting a boy."<sup>20</sup>

## Staff Turnover

In 1926, two young women—18 and 20 years of age—were in charge of 88 students. One teacher, Kate Beanland, was described as "very energetic and is doing good work." The other, Elizabeth Turner, was described as "a strong teacher, clear and careful in presentation and maintains a good standard of work."<sup>21</sup> Two years later, both women were gone, replaced by two other women in their mid-twenties.

## Fire

A fire broke out in 1928 (proven deliberately set) and in 1930. Two male students who set fire to the school in 1928 "gave warning to other students, ensuring that they were able to escape safely."<sup>22</sup> The boys were sentenced to five months in jail.<sup>23</sup> The school was destroyed by fire in 1943 and in 1944 students were moved to St. Alban's in Prince Albert.

<sup>12</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 622

<sup>13</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 622

<sup>14</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 443

<sup>15</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 444

<sup>16</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 489

<sup>17</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 507-508

<sup>18</sup> The History, Part 2: 1939 to 2000, Vol. 1, p. 339

<sup>19</sup> nctr summary

<sup>20</sup> The History, Part 2: 1939 to 2000, Vol. 1, p. 449

<sup>21</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 322

<sup>22</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 483

<sup>23</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 486