



Edward Ahenakew, ca. 1910, a former Prince Albert boarding school student. Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan/R-B11359

Edward Ahenakew (1885 - 1961), grandnephew of [Chief Poundmaker](#), was born at Sandy Lake ([Ahtahkakoop First Nation](#)) in what is now Saskatchewan. He attended Ahtahkakoop Day School until the age of 11, when he went to Indian Boys Industrial School (Emmanuel College), an Anglican boarding school at Prince Albert. "I shed no tear, but the pain in my heart was great, as I watched my father walking away. He did not look back once. I was much depressed....Then two who were my cousins ran over and took charge of me. They had been in the school for more than a year, and they told me about it..."¹

After graduating in 1903, 18-year-old Ahenakew worked as a teacher with his father at a missionary school on the [James Smith Reserve](#). He began producing a monthly handwritten newsletter in Cree syllabics, which he continued with the rest of his life.² In 1905, he went to Wycliff College in Toronto and then to Emmanuel College (University of Saskatchewan) in Saskatoon where he graduated with a Licentiate of Theology and was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1912.³

Once ordained, he moved to Onion Lake to assist Rev. J. R. Matheson (who had taken ill in 1911) at [St. Barnabas Residential School](#). He spent much of his life as a missionary to northern Indigenous people, travelling by dogsled in the winter and canoe in summer to visit remote northern communities. During the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic at Onion Lake, Ahenakew said, "the church was piled high with bodies. On the reserves so many people were dying that mass funerals and burials were being held."⁴ With a desire to care for the sick, he enrolled in the Faculty

of Medicine at the University of Alberta, but after three years of study, withdrew due to a nervous breakdown in 1923. While recovering he recorded Chief Thunderchild's (Peyasiw-awasis) stories along with his own stories, an unfinished manuscript that would be [published later](#) through the efforts of [Ruth Matheson Buck](#), daughter of Onion Lake Principal John Matheson. After his recovery, Ahenakew returned to missionary work, making use of the three years of medicine to further assist those who had no access to health care. During his life he collected and transcribed many legends and stories, which were published in 1929 as the [Cree Trickster Tales](#).⁵ He worked with Archdeacon Fairies in preparing a Cree-English dictionary⁶ (which had been started by Archdeacon J. A. Mackay). In 1933, Ahenakew privately expressed anger at a bishop who gave him no choice but to resign his vice-president role in the [League of Indians for Western Canada](#).⁷ He was also privately pessimistic about the government's management of Indian Affairs, thinking it malevolent and manipulative.⁸ In 1947, Ahenakew was honoured with a degree of Doctor of Divinity by Emmanuel College.⁹

Ahenakew passed away in 1961 on a trip to Manitoba where he was helping to establish a summer school.¹⁰ His book, published posthumously in 1973, is entitled *Voices of the Plains Cree*. It includes the memoirs of Chief Peyasiw-awasis as told to Ahenakew and the memoirs of Old Keyam, a fictional character created by Ahenakew. Old Keyam is a boarding school graduate who at one time had been energetic, but who had slackened and taken on a name that means "What does it matter?" or "I do not care!"¹¹

The book sheds light on the effects of residential school education. "On returning to his home community from school, [Ahenakew wrote,] a former residential school student 'is in a totally false position. He does not fit into the Indian life, nor does he find that he can associate with the whites. He is forced to act a part. He is now one thing, now another, and that alone can brand him as an erratic and unreliable fellow' who sits on the fence dividing the white and Aboriginal worlds, but belongs to neither! He thought the residential school might make sense in certain remote areas, [but 'for most Indian children, I hold that](#)

⁵ Treat, J. (2003). *Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era*. Palgrave Macmillan US

⁶ U of R Canadian Plains Research Centre. (2004). *Saskatchewan First Nations: Lives Past and Present* (p. 10).

⁷ Stan Cuthand's preface to Ahenakew, E. with Ruth. M. Buck. (1974). *Voices of the Plains Cree*, xviii.

⁸ Stan Cuthand's preface to Ahenakew, E. with Ruth. M. Buck. (1974). *Voices of the Plains Cree*, p. xviii.

⁹ <http://portal.usask.ca/index.php?sid=661305836&id=18285&t=details>

¹⁰ Stan Cuthand's preface to Ahenakew, E. with Ruth. M. Buck. (1974). *Voices of the Plains Cree*, p. xix.

¹¹ The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 180.

boarding schools are unnatural, that they are contrary to our whole way of life.' He said that, thanks to their highly regimented life, former students were like old style cars that required cranking before they would start. The residential schools, he said, have taken from their students 'all the initiative there may be in an Indian. He will work only when he feels like it. He will never take advice from his elders amongst us.'¹²

"He described the File Hills Colony as a tribute to its founder, Indian agent William. M. Graham, but also as a continuance of the residential school model of telling First Nations people what to do. In some cases, the return to the reserve had an even more tragic outcome."¹³

Old Keyam said, "Again and again I have seen children come home from boarding schools only to die, having lost during their time at school all the natural joys of association with their own families, victims of an educational policy, well-meant but not over-wise." Old Keyam contemplated taking responsibility for Indian education away from the churches, whose only merit was in the fact that they "voluntarily undertook work that no one else was willing to do."¹⁴

Ahenakew suggested that by making each reserve a school district and equipping each with enough resources to hire qualified teachers, the problem of poor attendance at day school could be addressed. "Old Keyam was also critical of the quality of the education offered at day schools, asking why First Nations people should be saddled with unqualified teachers. 'The Indian has paid more than any school tax. The Treaty stands as witness to that.'¹⁵

In 1921, Ahenakew wrote of the day school on Little Pine Reserve, which had been closed by the government, that he "had never seen a more desolate looking place." It was "the pitiful ruin of a government educational enterprise—the result of inefficiency, indifference, and want of inspiration." He reopened the school with the help of the community and Archdeacon John Mackay. "He played a similar role on Thunderchild's reserve, working with the elderly chief to open the day school on the reserve in 1923."¹⁶

¹² The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 181.

¹³ The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 181.

¹⁴ The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 181.

¹⁵ The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 181.

¹⁶ The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 180.

¹ http://library.usask.ca/indigenous/history_essays/edward-ahenakew.php

² Stan Cuthand's preface to Ahenakew, E. with Ruth. M. Buck. (1974). *Voices of the Plains Cree*, p. xi.

³ <http://portal.usask.ca/index.php?sid=661305836&id=18285&t=details>

⁴ http://library.usask.ca/indigenous/history_essays/edward-ahenakew.php#_ftn1