Edward Ahenakew (1885 - 1961), grandnephew of Chief Poundmaker, was born at Sandy Lake (Ahtahkakoop First Nation) in what is now Saskatchewan. He attended Atahkahkop 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...”

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 peoples, travelling by dog sled 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.” 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.4 He worked with Archdeacon Fairies in preparing a Cree-English dictionary5 (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.2 He was also privately pessimistic about the government’s management of Indian Affairs, thinking it malevolent and manipulative.6 In 1947, Ahenakew was honoured with a degree of Doctor of Divinity by Emmanuel College.6

Ahenakew passed away in 1961 on a trip to Manitoba where he was helping to establish a summer school.7 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!”8

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

Edward Ahenakew Legacy