

THE MÉTIS RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCE IN SASKATCHEWAN

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Île-à-la-Crosse convent (residential school) and hospital, ca. 1939, St. Boniface Historical Society, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Keewatin—Le Pas /N3539



Girls at residential school, Île-à-la-Crosse, ca. 1913-14, Glenbow Archives, Thomas Waterworth/ PD-353-22

"For 'half-breeds' or 'Métis,' the federal government did not consistently provide funding. They were considered the responsibility of the provinces and territories. Thus, Indian Agents were often instructed to remove Métis students from residential schools. For many years, provinces failed to ensure that there were schools in Métis communities, nor did they ensure Métis children were admitted in public schools. After World War II, the provinces began to provide residential schools for Métis children. Their histories have not yet been documented." (Canada's Residential Schools: The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 4).

ÎLE-À-LA-CROSSE RE

The Roman Catholic Church operated residential schools for boys and girls at Île-à-la-Crosse from 1821 to 1976 in what became Treaty 10 territory. "Île-à-la-Crosse [*Sakitawak* in *Michif*] is one of the oldest, most culturally homogenous Métis communities in the Canadian subarctic."¹ The Order of Sisters known as the Grey Nuns of Montreal arrived in Île-à-la-Crosse in fall of 1860. Within a month, they had set up St. Bruno Boarding School, with 15 students attending. The girls used the classroom for their sleeping quarters, and the boys stayed in the rectory with the priests.² After the mission house burned in 1867, another boarding school was established, built for 33 children. Sara Riel, sister of Louis Riel, served in the school from 1871 until her early death in 1883. A 1905 flood forced the school to relocate to Lac la Plonge (Beauval Indian Residential School). In 1917, Father Marius Rossignol opened the School of the Holy Family for 22 children and 4 boarders in Île-à-la-Crosse. Over time, additions to the school allowed for more students. Métis students lived in these residences and the First Nations students attended Beauval Indian Residential School.³ In 1944, a report on the state of education in northern Saskatchewan called the provincial government to open two residential schools, with one located in Île-à-la-Crosse. Due to lack of federal funding and resistance from the Catholic Church, the schools were not established. However, in 1946, after renting classroom space from the mission school, paying the mission school teachers' salaries, and assisting with student board for a time, the Saskatchewan government agreed to open a

¹ MacDougall, B. (2009). *West Side Stories: The Blending of Voice and Representation Through a Shared Curatorial Practice*. In S. Sleeper-Smith (Ed.), *Contesting knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives* (p. 161).

² http://216.174.135.221/documents/The_Story_of_A_Dream_by_WJDuffee.pdf

³ From <http://metis.tripod.com/flora.html> (However, the Beauval institution continued to have a high number of Métis students.)

school for Métis children and "by 1947, there were 168 students in 5 classrooms, 124 of these were boarders."⁴ By 1959, a new school had been built to accommodate 231 students, 113 of which were boarders.

Fires and Tragedies

In 1964, the boys' boarding house burned down. At that time there were 331 students with 100 boarding at the school. In 1972, 12 classrooms were destroyed by fire. After this fire, a group of local residents/parents petitioned the provincial government for "greater local control over education in the community." As a result, an order in council passed for the establishment of two autonomous elected school boards: the Île-à-la-Crosse School Division Board and the Northern School Board. This change caused turbulence in the community because not everyone supported the idea. In 1976, the boarding school was closed and replaced by locally administered Rossignol Elementary and Rossignol High School.⁵

Funding Issues

From 1889 to 1937, the federal government's admission policy for Métis and "non-status Indian" students at residential schools had been inconsistent and disorganized. Métis children attended the Indian residential schools: "Per capita funding of residential schools made it advantageous for Indian residential school administrators to admit Métis students when numbers of First Nations students were low, to move them from one school to another to adjust enrolments, or to exclude them altogether."⁶ During Duncan

⁴ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 33

⁵ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 33

⁶ Logan, T. (2012). *A Métis Perspective on Truth and Reconciliation*. In *Speaking My Truth*. http://speakingmytruth.ca/?page_id=690

Campbell Scott's administration of Indian Affairs, a letter classifying the Métis was sent out, which categorized three classes of "Half-breeds" in order to determine which class would qualify for federal funding: "Those who live, in varying degrees of conditions, the ordinary settled life of the country; those who live, in varying degrees, the Indian mode of life; and those who are the illegitimate offspring of Indian women, and of whom white men are not the begetters."⁷ Those Métis considered closer to the First Nation communities (geographically or culturally) were to be considered for admission to Indian residential schools.⁸ Thus Métis experiences with residential schools were varied. "The Métis generally fell outside any plans or provisions made by the federal government for either the new settlers or the First Nations people included in the treaties. This resulted in Métis people having less involvement with residential schools than First Nations."⁹

With the signing of Treaties 6 and 10, a new era began, in which Canada extended its legal and political structures into the North, arbitrarily creating distinctions between Status and non-Status First Nations and "Half breeds," with First Nations signing treaties and "Half Breeds" issued scrip, and with First Nations governed by the 1867 Indian Act and Métis considered citizens of state. However, it wasn't until the provincial government of Saskatchewan was formed, and had obtained authority over natural resources, that these distinctions were felt by the region. For generations, Métis livelihood had been based on hunting, trapping, and fishing, and in a cash-strapped region, the cost of being licensed to do so in

⁷ *Forgotten: The Métis residential school experience. Legacy of Hope.*

⁸ *Métis History and Experience and Residential Schools in Canada, p. 65*

⁹ *Métis History and Experience and Residential Schools in Canada, p. 99*

"Daniels Decision": On April 14, 2016 the Supreme Court of Canada declared that Canada's Métis and non-status Indians are indeed "Indians" under the Constitution.

What Does the Daniels Decision Mean?



PANow News articles: Île-à-la-Crosse residential school to be torn down and Île-à-la-Crosse Residential School torn down [boys' residence] (Photos courtesy of PANow)



Louis Riel's sister, Sara Riel worked at the Île-à-la-Crosse school. [Read more...](#)



Tony, a survivor from Île-à-la-Crosse residential school, and other former students share their stories in this Métis National Council video, "Métis Residential and Day School Survivors Speak: Nobody's Children" (Photo: Métis Flag, Carmen Pauls Orthner, June 2006, Île-à-la-Crosse)

In 2014, the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples stated, "reconciliation [with Métis groups] is necessary in order to provide a solid foundation for present and future generations of Métis in Canada... Canada should develop a reconciliation process to support the exercise of Métis section 35 rights and to reconcile their interests."

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their own homeland, was often too great a financial burden.¹⁰

In 1982, the Métis were officially recognized as one of three Aboriginal societies in the Constitution Act. Still, Île-à-la-Crosse former students (and [Timber Bay/Montreal Lake Children's Home](#), which housed Métis students who attended the local public school) were excluded from the [compensation payments](#). However, the TRC did conduct [a hearing in Île-à-la-Crosse](#) in November 2012.

Sexual Abuse

According to an unidentified former student, physical and sexual abuse was common in the school with older boys molesting younger boys at night in the dormitory and priests and supervisors molesting their "favorite boys." In addition to physical and sexual abuse, cultural abuse was also prevalent.¹¹ Robert Durocher said that some staff preyed on students' loneliness. "Clement Chartier, a student for 10 years at Île-à-la-Crosse, said that 'many, many of us suffered physical and sexual abuse.'"¹²

"Mike Durocher, who had been abused, said he was expelled at age 15 for putting up posters that identified abusers. The principal called him a liar, and his parents and grandparents refused to believe his story."¹³

Language and Culture Loss

Île-à-la-Crosse is a Cree-Michif speaking community and this language was banned in the school. A former student stated that much of the loss of traditional culture and language was a direct result of the residential

school and its treatment of Métis communities. Former student Alphonse Janvier remembers the anger and hurt he felt on arrival: "I was put on this old barber's chair. I remember my head being shaved and all my long hair falling on the floor, and the way they dealt with my crying and the hurtful feeling was with a bowl of ice cream."¹⁴

"For lapsing into the wrong language, Janvier was made to stand holding books above his head, to stand in a corner, or to stand at the blackboard, pressing his nose within a chalk circle. He felt that he was also taught to be ashamed of his heritage: 'We were taught that all Indians did was raid farmhouses, kidnap women, and burn houses.'"¹⁵

"Robert Derocher, who called the time he spent at Île-à-la-Crosse 'the worst year that I ever lived,' recalled being punished for speaking Cree. 'It was so hard, you know, not to be able to communicate with other native children there.'"¹⁶

"Yvonne Lariviere, an Île-à-la-Crosse student from 1947 to 1955, recalled, 'I didn't know why I was being hit because I didn't speak English. I was seven years old and I had never been hit before in my life.'"¹⁷

Loneliness and Separation from Family

Alphonse Janvier spent 5 years at the school. He had grown up in an affectionate, love-filled home. His mother had hugged him a lot, but after he went to the school, he doesn't recall ever being hugged.¹⁸ Janvier said that being

separated from his parents was "the hardest experience in my life." He remembers being "a 7- or 8-year-old child put on a red plane—taxiing away from your mom standing on shore, crying. It seems like a long time ago, but it's also very fresh in my memory, and that was my very first experience of the feeling of abandonment."¹⁹

"Even Sister Thérèse Arcand, who reported being 'happy' [as a student at Île-à-la-Crosse, and who] went on to become a Grey Nun herself, observed that 'at the same time, I was very, very lonesome. I should have come to school the year before, I guess, but I couldn't decide to leave my mother.' She described returning to school after holidays as emotionally wrenching: 'We stayed there the best part of two months. At the middle of August we had to come back to school again, and, I just cried! I never found it easy to leave home. Never! I went home for the summers of '22 and '23 and then I didn't go back home again.'"²⁰

Alphonse Janvier recalled not being allowed to speak to his own niece: "You were not allowed to talk to them [girls] because this playground had an imaginary boundary that we could not cross. We talk about it now and we wonder why we had to put up with that. We used to eat in the same dormitory with a wall dividing us and two doors and we used to wave at each other and that was the only way of communication with my nieces."²¹

[Read more stories on supplementary page](#)

¹⁰ MacDougall, B. (2009)

¹¹ Métis History and Experience and Residential Schools in Canada, p. 21

¹² The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 49

¹³ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 49

¹⁴ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 46

¹⁵ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 49

¹⁶ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 46

¹⁷ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 49

¹⁸ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 53

¹⁹ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 46

²⁰ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 46

²¹ The Métis Experience, Vol. 3, p. 53

PROJECT OF HEART BRINGS HOPE, HUMILITY, AND HEALING TO SUNTEP



Armed with Sharpie markers, small wooden tiles, a legacy to honour, and the “heart” to make a difference, SUNTEP (Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program) Regina students went to work to preserve and reclaim the memory of the many Métis and First Nations children who attended and lost their lives in residential schools. All SUNTEP students participated in the artistic social justice project entitled Project of Heart (POH) over the past 2 semesters.

Project Coordinator Sylvia Smith, a high school teacher from Ottawa, describes Project of Heart as a “hands-on, collaborative, inter-generational, inter-institutional artistic endeavour. Its purpose is to commemorate the lives of the thousands of Indigenous children who died as a result of the residential school experience.” After learning about the truths of Indian residential schools in Social Studies class, Sylvia Smith’s students wanted to do more to bring greater public

awareness to the large number of deaths that had occurred in residential schools across Canada. Along with their teacher’s help, they developed a social justice project that is now growing in recognition and has recently been awarded the Governor General’s Award for Excellence in Teaching.

A key objective of POH is to encourage “ownership” of this historic injustice by the non-Indigenous community. By doing so, non-Aboriginal Canadians can then be moved to take responsibility for the continued oppression of Indigenous people in Canada, and be inspired to take action. Smith also explains that the project “commemorates the families and communities to whom those children belonged. It is designed to bring awareness both to the settler community of predominantly European Canadians and communities of new Canadians from other parts of the world.” Many students of all ages, all across Canada have been involved

in the project, by decorating tiles, doing research, visiting with Elders and becoming more aware of the effects of residential schools on generations of Indigenous people.

Project of Heart also seeks to expand the opportunities available for the wisdom of Aboriginal Elders to be heard within mainstream, educational/religious institutions. By joining with other groups who are making a space for Indigenous knowledge, institutions can help to change attitudes and behaviours—hearts and minds—as Elders give voice to the traditions that were suppressed by residential schooling.

During their involvement in this unique social justice project, SUNTEP students shared stories of people and relatives they knew who attended the residential school. Some were stories of pain, some were stories of relationships that developed while in residential school and some were humorous

anecdotes passed down from grandparents and great-grandparents. Through the sharing of stories, we gathered together as students, teachers, artists, and activists to remember the forgotten and to piece together this influential, yet poignant part of Canadian history. Being able to talk about the residential school experience has been painful to some students, but in some ways it started a healing process aided by research, the sharing of the experience with family members, the smudging of the tiles, and visits with an Elder/residential school survivor.

On this journey for understanding through heart and spirit, SUNTEP students decorated 10-12 tiles each (400 in total), with imagery, words and symbols created in memoriam to the Aboriginal culture, language, and self-esteem stripped away by assimilation and racism embodied at residential schools. Through their art, SUNTEP commemorated Île-à-la-Crosse, a Northern Saskatchewan community with a high Métis population. As evidence of the project's lasting impact, as the social justice activism component of the project, SUNTEP students have developed lesson and unit plans to use in their field placements so Project of Heart will continue to be shared and honoured.

The project's goal is to have 50,000 decorated tiles, each one representing a life lost in the many residential schools across Canada. Although the future and final resting place of the tiles is still uncertain, there is a possibility of an installation of the tiles as a part of the new Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg. This is only a small gesture of reconciliation for the past and continued oppression of Aboriginal people in Canada.

Art has the power to bring together people from all ages and all walks of life. It can bring about awareness and understanding, promote critical thinking and can also work towards healing. Drawing on tiles will, of course, never erase the horrors of residential

schools or reverse the damage done to families and communities, but it can bring about hope—hope that we can someday eradicate the perils of hatred, racism, and ethnocentrism. Sylvia and her students had the vision to bridge the emotional and spiritual power of art to bring about healing to communities who are still in crisis despite governmental “apologies.” This art project is a demonstration of the resiliency of Aboriginal people and their resistance to the cultural collision between Canada’s Aboriginal

peoples and European colonizers. We are still valiantly fighting to reverse the devastating impact that years of oppression has had on Canada’s Aboriginal cultures and traditions. We hope that the inter-generational damage will not be forgotten but used as a reminder that this cultural genocide must never happen again!

Story and photos by
Christina Johns. (First printed in
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