Introduction

Before the Survivor-initiated court case that led to the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, the Canadian residential school story has largely been told, to the extent that it has been told at all, through the documents and reports of the people who organized and ran the system. These documents describe the goals and methods of the federal government that founded and funded the schools, and of the religious organizations that operated them. Their written records contain the rationales for continued residential school operation, as well as internal, and occasionally public, criticisms of the schools. These have provided the basis for valuable histories.

Over the past thirty years, a growing number of former students have published their memoirs. In addition, Aboriginal organizations and individual academics have conducted research, and, in some cases, compiled and published transcripts of interviews and writings by former students, often with a focus on a specific school.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was mandated “to receive statements and documents from former students, their families, community and all other interested participants” and to recognize “the unique experiences” of all former students.

Over 6,750 people have given recorded statements to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Most of these were given in private settings. Others were given at the national, regional, and community events; sharing circles; and hearings organized by the Commission. These private and public statements form a key part of the Commission’s legacy.

The Commission recognizes that the essential voice of the former students must be given a central place in any history of the schools. Since statement gathering has been an ongoing process throughout the Commission’s mandate, it has not been possible to undertake a complete assessment and analysis of all the statements. This volume is based on a survey of the statements gathered from all parts of the country between 2009 and 2014. Almost all the statements come from individuals who attended schools after 1940. The volume begins with the students’ lives prior to attending residential school, and then describes their arrival at the schools, and their experiences studying, working, and living in the schools.

Commentary and interpretation have been kept to a minimum to allow the students to speak for themselves.
Life before residential school
“We were loved by our parents.”

When I think back to my childhood, it brings back memories, really nice memories of how life was as Anishinaabe, as you know, how we, how we lived before, before we were sent to school. And the things that I remember, the legends at night that my dad used to tell us, stories, and how he used to show us how to trap and funny things that happened. You know there’s a lot of things that are really, that are still in my thoughts of how we were loved by our parents. They really cared for us. And it was such a good life, you know. It, it’s doing the things, like, it was free, we were free I guess is the word I’m looking for, is a real free environment of us. I’m not saying that we didn’t get disciplined if we got, if we did something wrong, we, you know. There was that, but not, but it was a friendly, friendly, like a loving discipline, if you will.


I’m come from a long way, I came a long way. I’m from Great Lake Mistissini. That’s where I was born in the bush. It was a pride for me to say that because I was born in the bush in a tent. It’s something that remains in my heart going to the woods, living in the woods. It’s in my heart. Before going to the boarding school, my parents often told me what they were doing in the woods when I was born. What they were doing, we were in camp with other families. The stories my father told us, my mother, too.

— Louise Bossum, Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, La Tuque, Québec, 6 March 2013.

Many former students spoke of what their lives were like prior to going to residential school. These recollections describe the ways in which cultural and spiritual practices and values had been transmitted from one generation to the next before life in the schools interfered with that process. They are also a reminder that these practices—and the languages in which they were embedded—are not things of the ancient past, but, rather, are vibrant elements of the childhoods of people who are still alive. Whether the governmental
goal was assimilation, as initially stated, or, as the government later claimed, integration, the cultural practices described in the following section were under attack.

Before she was enrolled in residential school in Québec in the 1960s, Thérèse Niquay lived on what she described as “the family territory.” She had very positive memories of that part of her life.

I remember especially the winter landscapes, fall landscapes too. I remember very well I often looked at my father, hunting beaver especially. I admired my father a lot. And I remember at one point I was looking at him, I think I was on the small hill, and he was below, he had made a hole in the ice, and he was hunting beaver with a, with a harpoon, and I was there, I was looking at him and I was singing. And I remember when I was kid I sang a lot, very often. And I also remember that we lived or my, my paternal grandmother was most often with us, my, my father’s mother, and we lived in a large family also, an extended family in the bush. Those are great memories. 3

Jeannette Coo Coo, who attended the La Tuque, Québec, school in the 1960s, said she was a member of what might be the last generation of Aboriginal people who were raised in the forest.

In the forest, what I remember of my childhood was beaskin, which I liked. I was there, and it was the beaskin that my father put for us to sit on, that was it. That is why I’m pleased to see that here. And what I remember in my childhood also was the, my mother’s songs, because we lived in tents, and there was young children, and my mother sang for the youngest, and at the same time this helped us to fall asleep. It was beneficial to everyone, my mother’s songs, and that is what I remember, that is what I am happy to say that it was what was, I was raised with what was instilled in me, so to speak. 4

Albert Elias grew up in the Northwest Territories near the community of Tuktoyaktuk.

Yeah, when I first opened, like, when I first saw the world, I guess, we were outdoors and when I opened my eyes and started to, you know, and I was just a baby, I guess, and I, we were out in the land. The land was all around me, the snow, the sky, the sun, and I had my parents. And we had a dog team. We were travelling, I think it was on Banks Island, and I was amazed at what I saw, just the environment, the peace, the strength, the love, the smile on my dad’s face. And when I wake up he’s singing a short song to me of love. 5

In the 1940s, Paul Stanley grew up speaking Kootenai (Ktunaxa) in the interior of British Columbia. As he told the Commission, he learned the language from his father. “When you’re in bed with Papa, and he tells you about your first story, and it’s about how the chipmunk got his stripes, and it was so funny to me, you know that I asked him every night to say it again.” 6

Eva Lapage was born in Inuvik, in northern Québec, in 1951.
When I was a little girl, 'cause we live in igloo and we live in nomadic life and there
was no white people and we move around from camp to camp, depending on the
season. And we live with nature and our family and everybody looks after each other. And it was very,
very simple, living, just survival in the way, looking
for food and moving around. 

Bob Baxter was born on the Albany River in north-
ern Ontario.

So, that’s how I, that’s how I grew up, you know, and
knowing all that stuff where listening to the familiar
sounds of my dad’s snowshoes in the winter when
he came to, when he came back from trapping late
in the afternoon, towards, when it’s already dark,
and waiting for him to come home and tell us the
legends, because no TV back then.

So, it was great. My mom was great, too. She really looked after us, made sure that we
were clothed and fed. That was good times.

I remember eating wild game all the time. And ‘cause we had our grandparents that
really looked after us, too, that I have good memories of, until, ’til that day that we
were taken from there, taken away to school.

Prior to attending the Roman Catholic school in Kenora, Ontario, Lynda Pahpasay
McDonald lived with her family near Sydney Lake in northwestern Ontario in the 1950s.

We spent most of our time in the trapline, in the
cabin, and we’d play outside and it was really good.
There was no drinking. There was, it was, like, it
was a small sized cabin, and my parents took good
care of us. And they were really, I remember those
happy days, like there was no violence. We had a
little bit of food, but we always had a meal, like we
ate, the beaver meat or moose meat if my dad got a
moose, and deer meat, and, and fish.

She could not recall being physically disciplined
during this time. “They more or less just told me, you
know, don’t do this, you know you’ll hurt yourself
and what not, but it was all in Ojibway, all spoken in
Ojibway. And I spoke Ojibway when I was a child, and there was a lot of fun.” Her mother
would harvest plants to be used as medicine.

And we would, my parents would take us out blueberry picking, and my grandpar-
ents would always take us blueberry picking, or we’d go in the canoe, and we’d go,
you know, or my grandmother would always be gathering traditional medicines. She had picked the wild ginger, and I would go with her, and we’d go pick all the medicines that we needed.

And I also remember my mom picking up this medicine. It would, like, if we had any cut, or open wound, she would use this, like a ball, like, sort of a fungus ball, and she would open it, and she would put it on our wounds and whatever, and would heal, you know, real fast. And, and she knew all her traditional medicines.

And at the time, I remember my, my grandpa and my dad, they used to have a drum, and they would, you know, drum and they would sing, during certain time of the year.9

Mabel Brown had similar memories of her life growing up in the Northwest Territories.

You know life in the bush is really good. And when, when we were growing up we went, when my dad was alive, him and my mom brought us out into the bush. And we, we went as a family together. They taught us, when they’d teach us they taught us how to do things. They’d tell us first, they’d show us, and then we’d do it and then that’s how we learned that. And that’s how so many people now know when, when we see a snare or how to set it or set traps because my grandmother showed me how to set traps.

And how to tell what kind of trees are what and what the different kind of things you take off the gum, and things like that; what it’s used for and you know, chew and my mom and dad used to dig up roots from the ground and I used to just love that roots. Chew on it and all those things are medicine for our bodies too. And I still, I still, can’t eat just store-bought foods. I have to have caribou or fish or moose meat or something like that and to, to feel full; to feel satisfied.10

Emily Kematch was born in 1953 in York Factory, Manitoba, and grew up in York Landing.

My family is Cree in origin. My mom and dad spoke Cree and that’s my Native language is Cree and that’s the only language I spoke at home. And when I was six years old, I only understood basic, really like from my brothers and sisters when they came back from residential school. Like, “What is your name?” And I knew to say, “Emily” and not very much English. And I was very close to my mother. Her and I were, I was just attached to her like, I loved my mother and I knew she loved me. Same with my father, he showed it in different ways.

He was a very quiet man, but his actions spoke volumes. He hunted, he was a hunter, a trapper, a fisherman and that’s how we survived, my family because he didn’t work, he didn’t have a job and my father was a, what they call a lay reader in the Anglican faith. He led church services in my community and my family was Anglican in faith. My father ran the services in my hometown of York Landing. He did the services in Cree and that’s what I miss about our community right now, is that aspect is the Cree singing, ’cause it’s not around anymore.11
Piita Irniq was born near Repulse Bay, in what is now Nunavut.

I lived in an igloo in the wintertime. A very happy upbringing with my family, and both my mother and father were very good storytellers, and they would tell legends, and they would sing songs, traditional, singing traditional Inuit songs. They would, my father in particular, would talk about hunting stories.

My mother would sew all of the clothes that we had, you know, caribou clothing and things like that, sealskin clothing. I still wear sealskin clothing today, particularly my boots, you know, when I’m, I’m dancing, for example. So, my mother would sew, teaching my sister how to sew, so that she could become a very good seamstress when she grows up, or older.

And in the meantime, I was apparently being trained to be a good Inuk, and be able to hunt animals for survival, caribou, seals, a square flipper, bearded seal, Arctic char, you know, these kinds of things, including birds. And I was also being told, or being taught how to build an igloo, a snow house.

When I was a little boy, growing up to be a young boy at that time, my other memories included walking on the land with my father. My father was my mentor. He, he was a great hunter. So, I would go out with him on the land, walking in search of caribou, and I would watch him each time he caught a caribou, and I would learn by observing. As Inuit, I learned a long, long time ago that you learn by observation, and that’s what I was doing as a little boy becoming a young man at that particular period of time.

So, in the wintertime, we would travel by dog team. I remember travelling by dog team as early as three or four years old. Hunting, again, you know, hunting is a way of life that I remember when I was growing up for survival, and caribou hunting, and seal hunting, and fishing. And, and my, my father also did some trapping, foxes.¹²

Anthony Henry was born in Swan Lake, Ontario. “I was born in a tent in the woods so I was brought to the world in a very harsh environment, which I guess is a good thing because it made me the tough guy I am.” He said he was raised in a traditional lifestyle based on trapping, hunting, fishing and harvesting of edible plants, such as wild rice and other edible materials. Total, total traditional style is what I call it. My parents were extraordinary people. They prepared me to be an independent individual. They taught me a lot of things that I’ve used throughout my life as a traditional person. They taught me how to survive.¹³
As Albert Fiddler was growing up in Saskatchewan, his father taught him how to live off the land.

I remember my dad teaching me how to hunt, and learn how to snare rabbits, learn how to take care of horses. I was riding horses already on, four years old, and I'm riding with a bareback, and I enjoy that thing. I still remember that because I was a fairly decent cowboy, you know, like little beaver, as they used to call him in the comic books. I used to hang on onto just the mane. I didn't, I didn't even have a bridle.

His father also taught him to hunt.

And it's funny sometimes, you know, and some of it was fun. Some of it was kind of patience, and pretty chilly sometimes when he was telling me when, how to snare chickens out of the, out of the willows. We're using this, a little wire, and a long stick, and standing on the dark side of, and waiting for the chickens to come and feed on the willows, and now we'd snare them down, yeah.¹⁴

Doris Young attended residential schools in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Her early childhood was spent in northern Manitoba.

The family that I had, my mother and father, and my brothers and sisters, and my grandparents, and my aunties and uncles. The community that I lived in was a safe one. It was a place where we were cared for, and loved by our parents, and our grandparents, and that community that I lived at we were safe. We were, we were well taken care of. We lived off the land, and off the water, meaning by fishing. My dad was a chief, but he was also what we would call a labourer in those days, but he was also a hunter, trapper, and fisherman, and that's how he supported us. And my mother spoke only Cree, and that's the language that we spoke in our household, and she, thought it was very important for us to, to have that language because, it was the basis of our culture, as I came to understand it later in life. And she was the one that enforced that, that language that we spoke in our house.¹⁵

Delores Adolph was born in 1951 and grew up in a self-sufficient Aboriginal family in British Columbia.

Before I came to residential school, our, our families fished and hunted for our food. Our mother, she grew our own vegetables, because we were quite a ways from the stores, and because we lived in the remote area where, where there is no stores. And you know there was, our means of travel was canoes, so that's how we travelled.

And our, our home life, it was not the greatest, but what our parents were trying to teach us how to, how to be, to keep busy, and then, and for us not to say there's nothing to do.
So, we, we packed water, and we packed, we packed our wood. Sometimes we had to roll our wood up, up the dike, and then roll it down the other side, and, and we had to learn how to cut our, our wood, and make kindling for the fire, and that was our way of life.

And, and my grandfather was busy trying to teach us how to build canoes. Build, make paddles. Build a bailer, to bail water out of our canoe. And, and then they were trying to teach us how to, how to race on those old fishing canoes, and we always beat the boys. And they didn't like that, because we, we beat them all the time. So, that meant that we were, that we were strong at that point, before we came to residential school. And my life has been upside down since I came to residential school.16

Rosalie Webber, who later attended a boarding school in Newfoundland, spent her early childhood with her parents in Labrador in the 1940s.

My father was a fisherman and my mother also worked with him and they worked together. He was a trapper and my mom trapped with him. Also my mom made all of our clothes and all of his clothing. And they knitted and they cooked and my mom was a midwife.

It was very happy. We were always busy with the family. Everything was a family thing, you know. I remember gathering water from the one little brook that ran through Spotted Islands, where I was born. I remember, you know, the dogs. I remember my brothers and I had one sister and, I had another sister, a step-sister, but she lived in Newfoundland and I didn't know her.

We were quite happy, you know, and my mother was a hunter like my dad. They'd go out in partridge season and, and always in competition and with a single .22 she'd come in with about 150 and he'd be lucky to make the 100. [laughter] And then the community would take it and it would be bottled and canned for winter provisions, 'cause being, being a trapper in the winter time, they all had their own trapping areas. So they, many of them went in their own tralines and as we did and my father trapped in Porcupine Bay. And so we would journey there when fishing season was over.

I was just a small child so I remember happy days.17

Martha Loon was born in 1972 in northwestern Ontario and attended the Poplar Hill, Ontario, school in the 1980s. Stories were a large part of the education she received from her parents.

They were stories that, you know, they, they taught us how, how to behave. You know they taught us our values. We even just, you know how, you know you hear stories
about the beaver, and I always used to wonder why my mom would every time she
was skinning beaver, she’d always set aside the, the kneecaps separately. She’d put
those aside. And then afterwards she’d go, she’d go, either paddle out to the water
somewhere, like a deep part, and that’s where she threw them in. And, and I always
know, wondered why she would do that. I’ve never questioned. It wasn’t until I was
older I asked her, like, “Why do you do that?” She says, you know, “This is what we’re
supposed to do, to respect and honour the beaver, to thank the beaver for giving its
life so that we could eat it, use its pelt. This is what the beaver wants us to do.” The
same thing as you treat a duck, a duck, the duck bones a certain way. You know all
that’s got, got purpose and a reason for it.\textsuperscript{18}

Grandparents played an important role in raising children in many communities.
Richard Hall, who went to the Alberni, British Columbia, school, recalled with deep affec-
tion his pre-residential school upbringing and the role that his grandparents played.

And my grandmother she taught us to be orderly. She taught us to go to church. She dressed us to go
to church. She loved the church. My playground was my friends, with my friends was the moun-
tains, streams, the ocean, and we’re raised in the ocean because we went fishing all summer long
and we travelled to the communities, the fishing
grounds because at the mountains where ... the
places where we spend our days, times, the rivers,
from in playing in the river, no fear and that was
normal. With my grandfather, he took me with him
at the young age, he took me, he taught me to work
in the boats with him. He taught me how to repair
boats. He will take me to talk to his friends and all
I did was to speak their language and speak their Native tongue while they prepared
fish around the fire. He took me wherever he went and I later learned that he was my
lifeline. He helped me and guided me the best he could.\textsuperscript{19}

Before going to the Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan, school, Noel Starblanket was raised by
his grandparents.

I attended ceremonies, I went to Sun Dances. I picked medicines with them. We did
medicine ceremonies. We did pipe ceremonies. We did feasts. We did all of those
things with my grandparents, and I spent time with my grandfather in those ceremo-

\textsuperscript{18}  
Richard Hill.
I would spend time with my parents, but not a whole lot. So, mostly my grandparents raised me. My parents never hit me, my grandparents. I didn’t know what, what it meant to be hit, physically abused. All I needed was one stare, or one look from my dad, or my grandfather, and my grandmother or my mother would always say “wâpam awa”20 [look at that one], then I would stop what I was doing, because I knew how to respect my grandfather and my dad, didn’t have to hit us, just, just took one look. [laughs] And so I grew up with that. And if we were acting foolish, or anything like that, or misbehaving, or whatever, they, they would just, they would just tell us in a good, kind way not to behave like that, and or if we were acting too silly, or whatever, they would tell us to calm down. They would always tell us that if you’re gonna hit a high like that, you’re gonna hit low, and I’ll always remember that teaching, ’cause I tell my grandchildren the same thing. When they get too excited, or too animated, or laughing too hard, or tickling, or whatever on an emotional high, I’ll just tell them what my grandparents said, and I’ll never forget that.21

Patrick James Hall was born in 1960 and grew up in what is now called the Dakota Tipi First Nation.

And, I remember, I remember a lot of times, I guess, with my grandfather, my grandmother. One of them in my mind, I remember. My grandfather used to haul wood on a sleigh. He had horses. And, so, my older brothers would go with him, too, and we just, he’d take us for horse rides. And, he used to talk with us all the time in Dakota. I mean, we used to, we used to remember what he said because we’d always be laughing, having fun, and.... My grandpa was very, very active guy. He, he always made sure, you know, he made sure that we had everything for the family. We used to go hunting, deer hunting and fishing, trapping. And, my mother, too, she was a very hard worker ’cause she used to be hauling water, cutting wood. And that was just during the winters. It was very hard ’cause we have to cut wood, and break the ice for water, and heat it up for the stove.22

Growing up in Sandy Lake, Saskatchewan, Leona Martin learned how to live off the land.

But my granny taught us some valuable lessons on, I didn’t really know what they were until I got older, that she would. And my dad too, used to wake us up at 5:00 in the morning and we used to go snaring rabbits. He told us, “You have to get up before the animals,” he said, “and you’ll, otherwise they’ll take your whatever you snared the rabbits or hogs ... the prairie chickens;” that, “you had to get up early, don’t be lazy.”
And then we'd go back to bed and my mom would make the breakfast and we'd go off to school. My granny taught us to go picking berries and then she would can them for the winter, and she would give us some at wintertime.\textsuperscript{23}

Andre Tautu, one of the first students to attend the Chesterfield Inlet school on the Hudson Bay coast, said,

In 1949, we started being told we had to go to school in Chesterfield Inlet. I came from a happy home and we had a good life when we were living on the land with my mother, my father, my grandfather, my grandmother, and my siblings of which I was the eldest. When I first went to school, I didn't know one word in English.\textsuperscript{24}

Some students had very different memories. By the 1940s, decades of poverty, poor health, and social marginalization had disrupted many Aboriginal communities and families. Disrupted family life is, in fact, part of the continuing legacy of the residential schools themselves, and some families were already living with the impacts of the schools on older siblings or other family members who had gone to school before them. Many of the former students identify themselves both as "Survivors" of the schools, and as "Intergenerational Survivors," the children of parents who were also former student Survivors.

One former student, who attended residential school in the Northwest Territories, recalled that her home life was violent and frightening.

There was a lot of violence. There was a lot of, we were very afraid of my father. He was a very angry man. And, my mother used to run away on him and he used to come home to us kids and then, just really verbally abuse us and make us really scared of him. We used to be, I, I used to run to the neighbours and hide behind their door because I was so scared of him.\textsuperscript{25}

Another former student said that the Kuper Island, British Columbia, school was better than being in the chaotic home life that we had. My parents went to residential school system, and they didn't know how to parent and suffered alcoholism. There was physical abuse at home, just the chaos of an alcoholic home.\textsuperscript{26}
Forced departure
“I didn’t want my dad to go to jail.”

For many students, the trip to residential school began with the arrival of an official letter. When Josephine Eshkibok was eight years old, a priest came to her home in northern Ontario and presented her mother with a letter. “My mother opened the letter and I could see her face; I could see her face, it was kind of sad but mad too. She said to me, ‘I have to let you go,’ she told us. So we had to, go to, go to school at Spanish Residential School.”

Isaac Daniels recalled one dramatic evening in 1945, when the Indian agent came to his father’s home on the James Smith Reserve in Saskatchewan.

I didn’t understand a word, ‘cause I spoke Cree. Cree was the main language in our family. So, so my dad was kind of angry. I kept seeing him pointing to that Indian agent.

So that night we were going to bed, it was just a one-room shack we all lived in, and I heard my dad talking to my mom there, and he was kind of crying, but he was talking in Cree now. He said that, “It’s either residential school for my boys, or I go to jail.” He said that in Cree. So, I overheard him. So I said the next morning, we all got up, and I said, “Well, I’m going to residential school,” ‘cause I didn’t want my dad to go to jail.

Donna Antoine was enrolled in a British Columbia residential school after a visit from a government official to her family.

It must have been in the summer, the, the Indian agent came to, to see my father. I imagine it must have been the Indian agent because it looked pretty serious. He was talking to him for some time, and because we couldn’t understand, we, we couldn’t even eavesdrop what they were talking about. So after some time spent there, Father sat, sat us down, and told us that this Indian agent came to tell us, tell him that we had to go to school, to a boarding school, one that is not close to our home, but far away.

The official had told her father that he would be sent to jail if he did not send Antoine to residential school. “We were sort of caught in, in wanting to stay home, and seeing our parents go to jail, and we thought, we must have thought who’s gonna look after us if our parents go to jail?”
In the late 1940s, Vitaline Elsie Jenner was living with her family in northern Alberta. “My, my mom and dad loved me, loved all of us a lot. They took care of us the best that they knew how, and I felt so comfortable being at home.” This came to an end in the fall of 1951.

My parents were told that we had to go to the residential school. And prior to that, at times, my dad didn’t make very much money, so sometimes he would go to the welfare to get, to get ration, or get some monies to support twelve of us. And my parents were told that if they didn’t put us in the residential school that all that would be cut off. So, my parents felt forced to put us in the residential school, eight of us, eight out of, of twelve.30

Many parents sent their children to residential school for one reason: they had been told they would be sent to jail if they kept their children at home. Ken A. Littledeer’s father told him that “if I didn’t go to school, he’d go to jail, that’s what he told me.” As a result, he was enrolled in the Sioux Lookout, Ontario, school.31

Andrew Bull Calf was raised by his grandfather, Herbert Bull Calf. When he was enrolled in residential school in Cardston, Alberta, his grandfather was told “that if he didn’t bring me, my grandfather would be ... would go to jail and be charged.”32

When Martha Minoose told her mother she did not wish to return to the Roman Catholic school in Cardston, her mother explained, “If you don’t go to school, your dad is going to go to jail. We are going to get a letter written in red that’s very serious.”33

Maureen Gloria Johnson went to the Lower Post school in northern British Columbia in 1959.

I went there with a bus. They load us all up on a bus, and took us. And I remember my, my mom had a really hard time letting us kids go, and she had, she had a really hard time. She begged the priest, and the priest said it was law that we had to go, and if we didn’t go, then my parents would be in trouble.34

In the face of such coercion, parents often felt helpless and ashamed. Paul Dixon attended residential schools in Ontario and Québec. Once he spoke to his father about his experience at the schools. According to Dixon, “He got angry and said, ‘I had no choice, you know.’ It really, it really hit me hard. I wasn’t accusing him of anything, you know, I
just wanted some explanations. He said, ‘I, I will, I will go, I would go in jail, I will go in jail if I didn’t let you go.’

When she was four or five, Lynda Pahpasay McDonald was taken by plane from her parents’ home on Sydney Lake, Ontario.

I looked outside, my mom was, you know, flailing her arms, and, and I, and she must have been crying, and I see my dad grabbing her, and, I was wondering why, why my mom was, you know, she was struggling.

She told me many years later what happened, and she explained to me why we had to be sent away to, to residential school. And, and I just couldn’t get that memory out of my head, and I still remember to this day what, what happened that day. And she told me, like, she was so hurt, and, and I used to ask her, “Why did you let us go, like, why didn’t you stop them, you know? Why didn’t you, you know, come and get us?” And she told me, “We couldn’t, because they told us if we tried to do anything, like, get you guys back, we’d be thrown into jail.” So, they didn’t want to end up in jail, ‘cause they still had babies at, at the cabin.

Dorothy Ross recalled how unhappy her father was about sending his children to residential school. “As we got older, I remember Dad, I knew Dad was already angry. He was angry at the school for taking us away, for taking myself and my siblings. He couldn’t, couldn’t do, he couldn’t do anything to help us. Either, same thing with my mom, ‘There’s nothing I can do to help you.’

Albert Marshall hated his parents for sending him to the Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, school. Many years later, he asked his brother what the family reaction had been to his being sent to school.

He didn’t answer me for a while, a long time. He says, “Nobody said anything for days,” because my father was crying every day. Finally my father told the family, “I failed as a father. I couldn’t protect my child, but I just couldn’t because you know what the Mounties, the priest, the Indian agents told me? They told me, if I don’t, if I resist too much then they would take the other younger, younger brother and younger, younger children.” Then he says, “It was not a choice. I could not say, take them or take the three of them. But I couldn’t say nothing and I know I have to live with that.”

Jaco Anaviapik’s parents opposed his being sent to the Pond Inlet hostel in what is now Nunavut.

When they started taking kids off the land to attend school the RCMP boat would pick us up. There is no doubt that our parents were intimidated by the police into letting us go. They were put in a position where they could not say no. Even though they
did not want us to go they were too afraid of the police, too afraid to stand up to the police. I am one of the lucky ones because my father did say no when they wanted to take me. He told them he would bring me himself once the ice had formed. I was brought here after the children who had been rounded up by boat had already started. That first year my parents came several times to take me home but they were refused by the area administrator. My sister told me that my parents were very sad at that time.

Rather than be separated from their children, his parents moved to Pond Inlet. "After two years had passed my family decided to move to Pond because they knew I had to go to school."36

In some cases, parents reluctantly sent their children because the residential school represented their only educational option. Ellen Smith’s father attended the Anglican residential school at Hay River in the Northwest Territories. She believes that his experiences at the school led him to oppose her being sent to residential school. However, her grandfather believed it was necessary that she get an education.

My dad reluctantly let me go to school because my grandpa said that “in the future she will help our people; she needs to go there.” And that struggle occurred with my dad over the years. For eleven years, that I went to residential school. But my grandpa was the one that said, “They have to go. She has to go.”40

She was sent to the Anglican school in Aklavik in 1953. She eventually attended three other residential schools.

Some parents wanted their children to gain the knowledge they believed was needed to protect their community and culture. When Shirley Williams’s father took her to catch the bus to the Spanish, Ontario, girls’ school, he bought her an ice cream and gave her four instructions: "One was remember who you are. Do not forget your language. Whatever they do to you in there, be strong. And the fourth one, learn about the Indian Act, and come back and teach me. So with those four things, he said that 'you don’t know why I’m telling you this, but some day you will understand.'"41

One student, who attended the Gordon’s, Saskatchewan, school, recalled the ways in which the churches competed against one another to recruit students.

But when we look at the residential schools, you know, and the churches we recognize, you know, at least I’ve seen it, you know, that we’ve had these two competing religions, the Anglican and the Catholic churches both competing for our souls it seemed. You know, I remember growing up on the reserve here when they were looking for students. They were competing against each other. We were the prizes, you know, that they would gain if they won. I remember they, the Catholic priests coming out with, you know, used hockey equipment and telling us, you know, “Come and come to our school. Come and play hockey for us. Come and play in our band. We got all kinds of bands here; we got trombones and trumpets and drums,” and all that kind of stuff. They use all this stuff to encourage us or entice us to come to the
Catholic school. And then on the other hand, the Anglicans, they would come out with what they called “bale clothes.” They bring out bunch of clothes in a bale, like, a big bale. It was all used clothing and they’d give it to the women on the reserve here, and the women made blankets and stuff like that out of these old clothes. But that’s the way they, they competed for us as people.42

Some children wanted to go to school, at least initially. Leon Wyallon, who attended the Roman Catholic residence in Fort Smith in the 1960s, said he looked forward to residential school “because I wanted to learn; learn to talk English and learn, so I can learn both languages at the same time.” He hated his first year at the residence, particularly the restrictions on speaking his own language. But he said, “My mom and dad didn’t listen to me; but they still sent me back.”43

In other cases, missionaries convinced students of the benefits of going to school. Anthony Henry said that a priest named Father LaSalle convinced him to come to residential school at Kenora. According to Henry, his mother did not want him to go to residential school, but LaSalle, who spoke fluent Ojibway, convinced him it would be beneficial.44
A place of refuge
“They’d be in a good place.”

Poverty and the inability to feed and clothe their children forced some parents to send their children to residential school. When Ivan George was enrolled in the Mission, British Columbia, school, his father was a single parent with six children under the age of fourteen. When the time came to return to the school after his first summer holiday, Ivan told his father he did not wish to return. “He says, ‘You have to. I can’t provide for you, or nothing to feed you, clothes on your back, education.’ So, I went back, and I said, ‘Oh, I better,’ because you know where, what, what’s going on, all that. So, I stayed the whole year without running away.”

Cecilia Whitefield-Big George said her mother was not able to support her family when they lived in Big Grassy in northwestern Ontario.

She would go and clean, work for people, eh, like do their laundry and clean their floors and clean the house for them and that’s how she fed us. They’d give her food, eh. And then when the priest arrived he told her, you know they’d be in a good place if they went to school. And so that’s how that happened. I, my little sister, she was only four years old. So that’s how we first got picked up.

One former student, whose grandparents had also attended residential school, placed his daughter in residential school when she was thirteen.

I didn’t have a wife at the time and I felt that was a good place for her, so I wasn’t really fully aware of the, you know, the negative parts of, the parts, negative, negativity of residential school ‘cause really, I guess, when I look at the residential school issue, you know, I saw, you know, physically, I guess, better than what I experienced at the reserve. On the reserve I had a very abusive dad, my dad was abusive, physically abusive, and we lived in a little log cabin and we didn’t have regular meals.

Ethel Johnson said she and her siblings were sent to the Shubenacadie school when her mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis.

My father couldn’t look after us. I was ten years old, there was another one, there was five of us, and the youngest was about nine months old, at the time. So the three of
us were old enough to go to residential school; I never even heard about it 'til then. 'Cause my father had to work and he had to maintain a house, fix our meals, he just couldn't do it. So I don't know where he found out or how this was possible, but we ended up going over there anyway. This was in '46.\(^4\)

Dorothy Jane Beaulieu attended the Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories, school after the death of her father.

And they seemed to pick on orphans, you know. My father, I lost my father when I was, in 1949 we lost him. And I stayed here in a mission eleven and a half years, and I never went home for seven years. I had no, no, nowhere to go, you know. My sisters were living in Yellowknife, but they were all, you know, they were all married, and had children of their own. So you know I would, my sister Nora and I, we just stayed there, you know.\(^4\)

Illness and family breakup meant that in some cases, children were raised by their grandparents. After Hazel Mary Anderson's parents separated in 1972, her grandmother took care of her and her two siblings. They lived on the Piapot Reserve in Saskatchewan until her grandmother was in her early seventies. At that time, the children were sent to residential school.\(^5\) Prior to going to the Shubenacadie school, one student was being cared for by his grandparents. "I went there basically because I felt sorry for my grandparents who were trying to look after me and trying to keep, maintain, and they were struggling."\(^5\)

One former Blue Quills, Alberta, student said:

We have, at that time, there was six of us who are older, who were living at the house, but there was three others, younger ones, who were from another father, but they lived with us. So, now in our family currently, we had twelve. But the oldest ones, the six of us, had to see and witness a lot of, a lot of violence, especially abuse with my mom and dad. We had two sisters, and four, or three brothers, and myself, that's six. I was the youngest of the siblings of that bunch.

But there was times when, you know, drinking would be to excess, so, so my moshum and my kokum would take us in to protect us from, from the fighting, and the pain and the struggles.

There was, as far as I can recall, one day there was some lady or social worker that just came to our house at my kokum's place, Jenny's, and they told us we were just going for a ride in a big, fancy car. And of course, you know, we were poor, we didn't have any of that stuff, so we thought it would be kind of nice, but nobody told us where we were going. So all I could remember was my auntie, my kokum, we are at the, the house, and waving goodbye, and all I remember was just peeking out the window in the back, and not understanding why, you know, Grandma crying. But we went, and they brought us to a big school, just out by the Saddle Lake Reserve. It was the Blue Quills school. And I was only five, so you know I was youngest of the six.\(^5\)
In some cases, parents placed their children in the school to protect them from violence in the community. Both of Dorene Bernard’s parents had attended the Shubenacadie school.

My father spent eleven years in a residential school, from 1929 to 1940. My mom spent around seven years there during the 1940s. Whatever would have made them think that it had changed, that it was better in 1960s than it was when they were there? I don’t know. But I could tell you that our lives outside the residential school was bad enough that she felt she was alone to make those decisions, that it was better for us to be there than with other family members, with our extended family. We were safer in her eyes to be there than at home.53
Arrival

"I’ve always called it a monster."

Nellie Ningewance was raised in Hudson, Ontario, and went to the Sioux Lookout, Ontario, school in the 1950s and 1960s. Her parents enrolled her in the school at the government’s insistence. She told her mother she did not want to go.

But the day came where we, we were all bussed out from Hudson. My mother told me to pack my stuff; a little bit of what I needed, what I wanted. I remember I had a little doll that my dad had given me for a Christmas present. And I had a little trunk where I made my own doll clothes. I started sewing when I was nine years old. My mom taught us all this though, sewing. So I used to make my own doll clothes; I packed those up, what I wanted.

I guess I had mixed feelings. I was kind of excited to go away to go to school. My mom tried to make it feel comfortable for me and I know it was hard for her and hard for me. But when the time we were ready to leave, they had a bus; and there was lots of people with their kids waiting to leave. And I made sure I, I was the last one to board the bus, ’cause I didn’t want to go.

I remember hugging my mom, begging her, getting on the bus; waving at them as they were going, pulling away. I don’t remember how long the ride was from Hudson to Pelican at the time, but it seemed like a long ride....

When we arrived there, again I was, I made sure I was the last one to get off the bus. And when I arrived there, a guy standing at the bottom there helping all the students to get off the bus, reaching out his hand like this; I didn’t even want to touch him. I didn’t even want to get off. I’m hanging to the bar; I didn’t want to get off. To me he looked so ugly. He was dark, short, and he was trying to coax me to come down the stairs and to help me get off the bus. I hang onto the bus and they had to force me and pull me down to get off the bus.

The next three days I guess was sort of, like it was like floating.... I remember crying then calming down for a while, then crying again.... When we arrived we had to register that we had arrived then they took us to cut our hair. The next thing was to get our clothes. They gave us two pairs of jeans, two pairs of tee-shirts, two church
dresses, they were beautiful dresses; two pairs of shoes, two pairs of socks, two pairs of everything.

And we had a number; they gave us a number and that number was tied in our, in all our clothes; our garments, our jackets, everything was numbered. After that we were told to be in the, go in the shower; at least fifteen of us girls all in one shower. We were told to strip down and, with all the other girls; and that was not a comfortable feeling. And for me I guess it was violating my privacy. I didn’t even want to look at anybody else. It was hard.

After that, they gave us our toothbrushes to brush our teeth. And they asked us to put our hands out and they put some white dry powder stuff on our hands. I didn’t know what it was. I smelt it, but now today I know it was baking soda. I didn’t realize what it was then.²²

Campbell Papequash had been raised by his grandfather. When his grandfather died in 1946, Papequash “was apprehended by the missionaries and taken to residential school.”

When I was taken to this residential school you know I experienced a foreign way of life that I really didn’t understand. I was taken into this big building that would become the detention of my life and the fear of life. When I was taken to that residential school you know I see these ladies, you know so stoical looking, passionate-less and they wore these robes that I’ve never seen women wear before, they only showed their forehead and their eyes and the bottom of their face and their hands. Now to me that is very fearful because you know there wasn’t any kind of passion and I could see, you know, I could see it in their eyes. When I was taken to this residential school I was taken into the infirmary but before I entered the infirmary, you know, I looked around this big, huge building, and I see all these crosses all over the walls. I look at those crosses and I see a man hanging on that cross and I didn’t recognize who this man was. And this man seemed dead and passionate-less on that cross. I didn’t know who this man was on that cross. And then I was taken to the infirmary and there, you know, I was stripped of my clothes, the clothes that I came to residential school with, you know, my moccasins, and I had nice beautiful long hair and they were neatly braided by mother before I went to residential school, before I was apprehended by the residential school missionaries.

And after I was taken there they took off my clothes and then they deloused me. I didn’t know what was happening but I learned about it later, that they were delousing me; ‘the dirty, no-good-for-nothing savages, lousy.’ And then they cut off my beautiful hair. You know and my hair, my hair represents such a spiritual significance of my life and my spirit. And they did not know, you know, what they were doing to me. You know and I cried and I see them throw my hair into a garbage can, my long, beautiful braids. And then after they deloused me then I was thrown into the shower, you know, to go wash all that kerosene off my body and off my head. And I was shaved, bald-headed.
And then after I had the shower they gave me these clothes that didn't fit, and they
gave me these shoes that didn't fit and they all had numbers on them. And after the
shower then I was taken up to the dormitory. And when I went to, when I was taken
up to this dormitory I seen many beds up there, all lined up so neatly and the beds
made so neatly. And then they gave me a pillow, they gave me blankets, they gave me
sheets to make up my bed. And lo and behold, you know, I did not know how to make
that bed because I came from a place of buffalo robes and deer hides and rabbit skins
to cover with, no such thing as a pillow. 

Marthe Basile-Coocoo recalled feeling a chill on first seeing the Pointe Bleue, Québec,
school.

It was something like a grey day, it was a day without sunshine. It was, it was the
impression that I had, that I was only six years old, then, well, the nuns separated us,
my brothers, and then my uncles, then I no longer understood. Then that, that was a
period there, of suffering, nights of crying, we all gathered in a corner, meaning that
we came together, and there we cried. Our nights were like that. 

Pauline St-Onge was traumatized by just the sight of the Sept-Îles school. She fought
back when her father tried to take her into the school. "I thought in my child's head I said:
'you would... you would make me go there, but I will learn nothing, nothing, nothing."

Louise Large could not speak any English when her grandmother took her to the Blue
Quills, Alberta, school in the early 1960s.

My grandma and I got into this black car, and I was kind of excited, and I was looking
at the window and look. I'd never rode in a car before, or I might have, but this was a
strange person. I went to, we drove into Blue Quills, and it was a big building, and I
was in awe with the way it looked, and I was okay 'cause I had my grandma with me,
and we got off, and we went up the stairs. And that was okay, I was hanging onto my
grandma, I was going into this strange place. And, and we walked up the stairs into
the building, and down the hallway, going to the left, and there was a room there, and
two nuns came.

As was often the case, she was not used to seeing nuns dressed in religious habits. "I
didn't know they were nuns. I don't know why they were dressed the way they were. They
had long black skirts, dresses, and at that time they looked weird 'cause they had these
little weird hats and a veil, kind of like a black bridesmaid or something, and they were all
smiling at me."

She was shocked to discover she was going to be left at the school. The nuns had to hold
Louise tight to stop her from trying to leave with her grandmother.

And I wasn't aware at that time that my grandma was gonna leave me there. I'm not
ever sure how she told me but they started holding me and my grandma left and
I started fighting them because I didn't want my grandma to leave me, and, and I
started screaming, and crying and crying, and it must have been about, I don't know,
when I look back, probably long enough to know that my grandma was long gone. They let me go, and they started yelling at me to shut up, or I don’t know, they had a real mean tone of voice. It must have been about, when I think about it, it was in the morning, and I just screamed and screamed for hours. It seemed like for hours. 76

Rachel Chakasim and her friends were excited about the prospect of going to residential school from their home community of Moosonee, Ontario. They all ran down to the water’s edge to get on the float plane that would take them to school. On their arrival, they were taken to the school by the same truck that was used to haul garbage to the local refuse site. From that point on, the experience was much more sombre.

And I can still recall today the, the quiet, the quiet, and all the sadness, the atmosphere, as we entered that big stone building. The excitement in the morning was gone, and everybody was quiet because the ... senior students that had been there before knew the rules, and us newcomers were just beginning to see, and we were little, we were young.

I remember how they took our clothes, the clothes that we wore when we left, and they also cut our hair. We had short hair from there on. And they put a chemical on our hair, which was some kind of a white powder. 77

Linda Head was initially excited about the prospect of a plane trip that would take her to the Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, school. “My dad kissed me, and up I went, I didn’t care [laughs] ’cause this was something new for me.” The plane landed on the Saskatchewan River. “There was a, a car waiting for us, or the truck. But I got into the car, and the boys were in the truck, like an army, an army truck. They stood outside the, outside, you know, at the back, not inside.” The students were driven to the school, which was located in a former military barracks.

And we all, there was a crowd when we got there, a crowd of, you know, other students, and we went to the registration table. They gave us, told us which dorm to go, and, and there was a person standing, but the kids were, you know, lining up, and this person took me to the line. And when the line was full, I guess when we were, they took us to the dorm.... We had our numbers, and a bed number. And she told us to settle down. Well, I wasn’t understanding this ’cause it was English, but I followed, you know, watch, watch everybody, and ... she took my hand, and guided me to the bed, and the number showed me what number I was, number four, and we had to find number four. So that’s how it was then.

My stuff, I had to set it down, then I, I was under, under the bed, not the higher up, I had the lower bed. So, I was just lying around there ... the music was loud, the radio.
Everybody was talking in Cree, some of them in Cree, some of them in English, well a little bit of English. And my cousins ... we were in together some of them, some of us at the same age, so they came over and talked to me. I said, "Well, here we are." Here I was missing home already.78

Gilles Petiquay, who attended the Pointe Bleue, Québec, school, was shocked by the numbering system at the school. "I remember that the first number that I had at the residential school was 95. I had that number—95—for a year. The second number was number 4. I had it for a longer period of time. The third number was 56. I also kept it for a long time. We walked with the numbers on us."79

Mary Courchene grew up on the Fort Alexander Reserve in Manitoba. Her parents' home was just a five-minute walk away from the Fort Alexander boarding school.

One morning my mom woke us up and said we were going to school that day and then she takes out new clothes that she had bought us and I was just so happy, so over the moon. And, she was very, very quiet. And she was dressing us up and she didn’t say too much. She didn’t say, "Oh I’ll see you," and all of that. She just said, she just dressed us up with, with no comment. And then we left; we left for the school.

When the family reached the school, they were greeted by a nun. Mary’s brother became frightened. Mary told him to behave himself. She then turned around to say goodbye to her mother but she was gone. Her mother had gone to residential school as a child. "And she could not bear to talk to her children and prepare her children to go to residential school. It was just too, too much for her." Courchene said that on that day, her life changed. "It began ten years of the most miserable part of my life, here on, here, in the world."80

Roy Denny was perplexed and frightened by the clothing that the priests and sisters wore at the Shubenacadie school.

And we were greeted by this man dressed in black with a long gown. That was the priest, come to find later. And the nuns with their black, black outfits with the white collar and a white, white collar and, like a breast plate of white. And their freaky looking hats that were, I don’t, I couldn’t, know what they remind me of. And I didn’t see, first time I ever seen nuns and priests. And they, and they were speaking to me, and I couldn’t understand them.81

He had not fully understood that his father was going to be leaving him at the school. "So when my father left I tried to stop him; I tried, I tried to go, you know, tried to go with him, but he said, ‘No, you got to stay.’ That was real hard."82

Calvin Myerion was sent to the Brandon, Manitoba, school. He recalled being overwhelmed by the size of the building.
The only building that I knew up to that time, that moment in my life was the one-sto-rey house that we had. And when I got to the residential school, I seen this big mon-ster of a building, and I’ve never seen any buildings that, that large, that high. And I was, I’ve always called it a monster, I still do today, because of not the size of it, but because of the things that happened there.83

Archie Hyacinthe said he was unprepared for life in the Catholic school in Kenora.

It was almost like we were, you know, captured, or taken to another form of home. Like I said, nobody really explained to us, as if we were just being taken away from our home, and our parents. We were detached I guess from our home and our par-ents, and it’s scary when you, when you first think, think about it as a child, because you never had that separation in your lifetime before that.

So that was the, I think that’s when the trauma started for me, being separated from my sister, from my parents, and from our, our home. We were no longer free. It was like being, you know, taken to a strange land, even though it was our, our, our land, as I understood later on.84

Dorene Bernard was only four and a half years old when she was enrolled in the Shubenacadie residential school. She had thought that the family was simply taking her older siblings back to the school after a holiday.

I remember that day. We went down there to take my sister and brother back. My father and mom went in to talk to the priest, but they were making plans to leave me behind. But I didn’t know that, so I went on the girls’ side with my sister and she told me after couple hours went by that they had already left. I would say it was pretty dif-ficult to feel that abandoned at four and a half years old. But I had my sister, my older sister Karen, she took care of me the best way she could.85

When parents brought their children to the school themselves, the moment of depart-ure was often heartbreaking. Ida Ralph Quisess could recall her father “crying in the chapel” when she and her siblings were sent to residential school.

He was crying, and that, one of the, these women in black dresses, I later learned they were sisters, they called them, nuns, the Oblate nuns, later, many years after I learned what their title was, and the one that spoke our language told him, “We’ll keep your little girls, we’ll raise them,” and then my father started to cry.86

Vitaline Elsie Jenner resisted being sent to school.

And I didn’t want to go to the residential school. I didn’t realize what I was going to come up against upon being there. I resisted. I cried and I fought with my mom. My mom was the one that took us there and dragged, actually just about dragged me there, because of my resistance, not wanting, I hung onto everything that was in the way, resisting.

The separation at the Fort Chipewyan school in northern Alberta was traumatic.
And so when I went upon, when we went into the residential school, it was in the parlour, and there was a nun that was receiving the students that were going into the residential school, and I, you know, like I hung onto my mom as tight as I can. And what I remember was she had taken my hand, and what she did, what my mom did, I, I don’t remember the rest of my siblings, it’s just like I kind of blocked out, because that was traumatic already for me as it was, being taken there, you know, and this great big building looked so strange and foreign to me, and so she took my hand, and forcefully put my hand in the nun’s hand, and the nun grabbed it, so I wouldn’t run away. So, she grabbed it, and I was screaming and hollering. And in my language I said, “Mama, Mama, kāya nakasin” and in English it was, “Mom, Mom, don’t leave me.” 'Cause that’s all I knew was to speak Cree. And so the nun took us, and Mom, I, I turned around, and Mom was walking away. And I didn’t realize, I guess, that she was also crying.87

Lily Bruce’s parents were in tears when they left her and her brother at the Alert Bay, British Columbia, school.

And our parents talked to the principal, and, and then Mom was in tears, and I remember the last time she was in tears was when my brother Jimmy was put in that school. And her and Dad went through those double doors in the front, and the principal and his wife were saying that they were gonna take good care of us, that they were gonna treat us like they were our new parents, and not to worry about us, and just bringing our hopes up, and so Mom and Dad left. And I grabbed my brother, and my brother held me, we just started crying. [audible crying] We were hurt because Mom and Dad left us there.88

Margaret Simpson attended the Fort Chipewyan school in the 1950s. She was initially excited to be going to residential school because she would be going with her brother George.

I was happy I was going with him and my dad took us and there we’re walking to the, to this big orange building. It was in, and we got there and I was so happy ’cause I was going to go in here with George and I was going to be with him but you know this was far as it was going to go once we made it in there.

He went one way and I was calling him and this other nun took me the other way, so we separated right there. Right from there I was wondering what is happening here? I was so lost, I was so lost. And they brought me downstairs and then I looked and all of a sudden I seen my dad passing on the other side of the fence, he was walking. I just went running I seen the door over there and I went running I was going to go see
my dad over there. But they stopped me and I was crying and I was telling my dad to come and he didn’t hear me and I was wondering what is happening, I don’t even know.89

The rest of a new student’s first day is often remembered as being invasive, humiliating, and dehumanizing. Her first day at the Catholic school in Kenora left Lynda Pahpasay McDonald frightened and distressed.

And I had, I must have had long hair, like long, long hair, like, and my brothers, even my brother had long hair, and he looked like a little girl. Then they took us into this, it was like a greeting area, we went in there, and they kind of counted us, me and my siblings. And I was hanging onto my sister, and she told me not to cry, so don’t cry, you know, you just, you listen. She was trying to tell me, and I was crying, and of course me and my sister were crying, there’s three of us, we’re just a year apart. Me, Barbara, and Sandy were standing there, crying. She was telling us not to cry, and, and just do what we had to do.

And, and I remember having, watching my brother being, like, taken away, my older brother, Marcel. They took him, and he had long hair also.

And we were taken upstairs, and they gave us some clothing, and they put numbers on our clothes. I remember there’s little tags in the back, they put numbers, and they told us that was your number. Well, I can’t remember my number.

And, and we seen the nuns. They had these big black outfits, and they were scary looking, I remember. And of course they weren’t really, they looked really, I don’t know, mean, I guess.

And, and we, they took us upstairs, I remember that, and they gave us these clothes, different clothes, and they took us to another room, then they kind of, like, and they took our old clothes, they took that, and they made us take a bath or a shower. I think it was a bath at that time.

After we came out, and they washed our hair, and I don’t know, they kind of put some kind of thing on our hair, like, you know, our heads, and they’re checking our hair and stuff like that. And then they took us to this chair, and they put a white cloth over our shoulders, and they started cutting our hair. And you know they cut real straight bangs, and real short hair, like, it was real straight haircuts. I didn’t like the fact that they cut off all our hair. And same with my brother, they had, they cut off all of, most of his hair. They had a, he had a brush cut, like.90

When Emily Kematch arrived at the Gordon’s, Saskatchewan, school from York Landing in northern Manitoba, her hair was treated with a white powder and then cut. “And we had our clothes that we went there with even though we didn’t have much. We had our own clothes but they took those away from us and we had to wear the clothes that they gave us, same sort of clothes that we had to wear.”91
Verna Kirkness attended the Dauphin, Manitoba, residential school. On arrival at that school after a lengthy train trip, she said, she was stripped of all her clothing.

They didn’t tell me that they were gonna do that. And they poured something on my head, I don’t know what it was, but it didn’t smell too good. To this day, I don’t know what it is. But from my understanding, from people explaining it to me, it was coal oil, or some, some kind of oil, and they poured that on my head, and then they cut my hair really, really short. And then, and when we, we sat, I remember sitting, I don’t know it’s, it looked like a picnic table. It was in the corner, I think it was in the corner, and I sat there. I was looking around, and I was looking for my sister.

And then I, and then I think we were given a doughnut, or some kind of pastry, and then we were sent to bed. And I remember my first bed. It was right by the door. And then as when you walk in, it was on your right-hand side, and I was on the top bunk, the first bunk bed, I was on the top bunk, and that’s my first, my very first night there.  

At the Blue Quills school, Alice Quinney and the other recently arrived students were told they were to be given a bath.

I had never been naked in front of anybody ever before, except my mom, who would give us a bath in, in the bathtub at home, in a, in a round tub, you know the old round tubs that they had, the steel tubs, that’s the kind of, you know. And so that was hard too, they told us before, when we went down to the bathroom, we all had to strip, and they put this nasty smelling stuff in our hair, for bugs, they said, if we had brought any bugs with us. So, they put all that stuff, and some kind of powder that smelled really bad. And then we were, we had to take off all our clothes, and, and go in, in the showers together.

On her arrival at the Alberni, British Columbia, school, Lily Bruce was separated from her brother and taken to the girls’ dormitory.

I had to take a bath, and it was late at night, and I kept crying, and she was calling me a crybaby, and just kept yelling at me, and said if I woke up anybody, I was in deep trouble. “And if your mother and dad really cared about you, they wouldn’t have left you here.” [audible crying]

And then she started pulling my long hair, checking for lice. [audible crying] After she checked my hair and shampooed my hair, I had to have vinegar put in there, and being yanked around in that tub, too, had to wash every part of my body or else they were gonna do it, and I didn’t want, I didn’t want them to touch me.
Helen Harry’s hair was cut on her arrival at the Williams Lake, British Columbia, school.

And I remember not wanting to cut my hair, because I remember my mom had really long hair, down to her waist. And she never ever cut it, and she never cut our hair either. All the girls had really long hair in our family. And I kept saying that I didn’t want to cut my hair, but they just sat me on the chair and they just got scissors and they just grabbed my hair, and they just cut it. And they had this big bucket there, and they just threw everybody’s hair in that bucket.

I remember going back to the dorm and there was other girls that were upset about their hair. They were mad and crying that they had to get their hair cut. And then when that was all done, we were made to wash our hair out with some kind of shampoo. And I just remember it smelling really awful. The smell was bad. And this is, I think it had something to do with delousing people, I’m not sure.95

In 1985, Ricky Kakekagumick was one of a group of children who were flown to the Poplar Hill, Ontario, school. On arrival, the boys and girls were separated and marched to their dormitories.

When we got there, there’s staff people there, Mennonite men. They’re holding towels. So, we just put our luggage down on the floor there, and they told us, “Wet your hair.” I had long hair, like, I was an Aboriginal teenager, I grew long hair. So, they told us, “Wash your hair.” Then they had this big bottle of chemical. I didn’t know what it was. It looked like something you see in a science lab. So, they were pumping that thing into our hand, “And put it all over your head,” they said. “So, it will, this will kill all of the bugs on your head.” Just right away they assumed all of us had bugs, Aboriginal. I didn’t like that. I was already a teenager. I was already taking care of myself. I knew I didn’t have bugs. But right away they assumed I did because I’m Aboriginal.

So after we washed our hair, everybody went through that, then we went to the next room. Then that’s where I see a bunch of hair all over the floor. I see a guy standing over there with those clippers, the little buzz, was buzzing students. I kept on moving back. There was a line there. I kept going back. I didn’t want to go. But came down to the end, I had no choice, ‘cause everybody was already going through it, couldn’t go behind anybody no more. So, I made a big fuss about it, but couldn’t stop them. It was a rule. So, they, they gave me a brush, and they gave us one comb, too, and told us this is your comb, you take care of it.96

As a child, Bernice Jacks had been proud of her long hair. “My mom used to braid it and French braid it and brush it. And my sister would look after my hair and do it.” But, on her arrival at residential school in the Northwest Territories, a staff member sat her on a stool and cut her hair. “And I sat there, and I could hear, I
could see my hair falling. And I couldn’t do nothing. And I was so afraid my mom ... I wasn’t thinking about myself. I was thinking about Mom. I say, ‘Mom’s gonna be really mad. And June is gonna be angry. And it’s gonna be my fault’.”97

Victoria Boucher-Grant was shocked by the treatment she received upon enrolment at the Fort William, Ontario, school.

And they, they took my braids, and they chopped my, they didn’t even cut it, they just, I mean style it or anything, they just took the braid like that, and just cut it straight across. And I remember just crying and crying because it was almost like being violated, you know, like when you’re, when I think about it now it was a violation, like, your, your braids got cut, and it, I don’t know how many years that you spent growing this long hair.98

Elaine Durocher found the first day at the Roman Catholic school in Kamsack, Saskatchewan, to be overwhelming.

As soon we entered the residential school, the abuse started right away. We were stripped, taken up to a dormitory, stripped. Our hair was sprayed.... They put oxfords on our feet, ’cause I know my feet hurt. They put dresses on us. And were made, we were always praying, we were always on our knees. We were told we were little, stupid savages, and that they had to educate us.99

Brian Rae said he and the other boys at the Fort Frances, Ontario, school were given a physical inspection by female staff.

You know, to get stripped like that by a female, you know, you don’t even know, ’cause, you know, it was embarrassing, humiliating. And, and then she’d have this, you know, look or whatever it was in her eyes, eh, you know. And then she would comment about your private parts and stuff like that, eh, like, say, “Oh, what a cute peanut,” and you know, just you know kind of rub you down there, and, and then, you know, just her eyes, the way she looked. So that kind of made me feel, feel all, you know, dirty and, you know, just, I don’t know, just make me feel awful I guess because she was doing that. And then the others, you know, the other kids were there, you know, just laughing, eh, that was common. So, I think that was the first time I ever felt humiliated about my sexuality.100

Julianna Alexander found the treatment she received upon arrival at the Kamloops, British Columbia, school demeaning.

But they made us strip down naked, and I felt embarrassed, you know. They didn’t, you know I just thought it was inappropriate, you know, people standing there, watching us, scrubbing us and everything, and then powdering us down with whatever it was that they powdered us with, and, and our hairs were covered, you know, really scrubbed out, and then they poured, I guess what they call now coal oil, or whatever that was, like, some kind of turpentine, I’m not sure what it was, but anyway, it really stunk.101
On their arrival at residential school, students often were required to exchange the clothes they were wearing for school-supplied clothing. This could mean the loss of home-made clothing that was of particular value and meaning to the students. Murray Crowe said his clothes from home were taken and burned at the school that he attended in northwestern Ontario. When Wilbur Abrahams’s mother sent him to the Alert Bay school, she outfitted him in brand-new clothes. When he arrived at the school, he and all the other students were lined up.

They took us down the hall, and we were lined up again, and, and I couldn’t figure out what we were lined up for, but I dare not say anything. And pretty soon it’s my turn, they told me to take all of my clothes off, and, and they gave me clothes that looked like they were second-hand, or but they were clean, and told me to put those on, and that was the last time I saw my new clothes. Dare not ask questions.

John B. Custer said that upon arrival at the Roman Catholic school near The Pas, Manitoba, all the students had their personal clothing taken away. “And we were dressed in, we were all dressed the same. Like, we had coveralls on. I remember when I went over there, I had these beaded moccasins. As soon as I got there, they took everything away.”

Elizabeth Tapiatic Chiskamish attended schools in Québec and northern Ontario. She recalled that when she arrived at school, her home clothing was taken from her.

The clothes we wore were taken away from us too. That was the last time we saw our clothes. I never saw the candy that my parents packed into my suitcase again. I don’t know what they did with it. It was probably thrown away or given to someone else or simply kept. When I was given back the luggage, none of things that my parents packed were still in there. Only the clothes I wore were still sometimes in the suitcase.

Phyllis Webstad recalled that her mother bought her a new shirt to wear on her first day at school at Williams Lake. “I remember it was an orange shiny colour. But when I got to the Mission it was taken and I never wore it again. I didn’t understand why. Nothing was ever explained why things were happening.” Much later, her experience became the basis for what has come to be known as “Orange Shirt Day.” Organized by the Cariboo Regional District, it was first observed on September 30, 2013. On that day, individuals were encouraged to wear an orange shirt as a memorial of the damage done to children by the residential school system.

When Larry Beardy left Churchill, Manitoba, for the Anglican school in Dauphin, he was wearing a “really nice beautiful beaded” jacket his mother had made. “I think it was a caribou, a jacket, and she, she made that for me because she knew I was going to school.” Shortly after he arrived at school, “all, all our clothes were taken away. My jacket I had mentioned was gone. And everybody was given the same, the same kind of clothing, with the old black army boots, we used to call them, and slacks.”
Ilene Nepoose recalled that the belongings she took to the Blue Quills residential school were taken away from her upon arrival. “I even brought my own utensils [laughing] and I never saw those things again, I often wonder what happened to them. But I remember at the end of the first school, the first year—they take our personal clothes away and they give us these dresses that are made out of flour sacks.”

When she was to return home at Christmastime, the staff could not find the clothes she had worn to come to school.

I saw them on this other girl and I told the nuns that she was wearing my dress and they didn’t believe me. So, that girl ended up keeping my dress and I don’t remember what I wore, it was probably a school dress. But, that really bothered me because it was my own, like my mom made that dress for me and I was very proud of it and I couldn’t—I wasn’t allowed to wear that again.109

Nick Sibbeston attended the Fort Providence school for six years. He was enrolled in the school after his mother was sent to the Charles Camsell Hospital in Edmonton for tuberculosis treatment. The only language he spoke was Slavey (Dene); the only language the teachers spoke was French.

On arrival was you’re given a bath and you’re de-liced and you’re given a haircut and all your clothes are taken away. I know I arrived with a little bag that my mother had filled with winter things, you know, your mitts ... but all of that was taken away and put up high in a cupboard and we didn’t see it again ‘til next June.110

When Carmen Petiquay went to the Amos, Québec, school, the staff “took away our things, our suitcases, my mother had put things that I loved in my suitcase. I had some toys. I had some clothing that my mother had made for me, and I never saw them again. I don’t know what they did with those things.”111

Martin Nicholas of Nelson House, Manitoba, went to the Pine Creek, Manitoba, school in the 1950s. “My mom had prepared me in a Native clothing. She had made me a buckskin jacket, beaded with fringes.... And my mom did beautiful work, and I was really proud of my clothes. And when I got to residential school, that first day I remember, they stripped us of our clothes.”112

Frances Tait was sent to the Alberni, British Columbia, school in 1951 when she was five years old. For her, as for so many students, the moment of arrival was a moment of tremendous loss.

And even right from day one, I remember they took everything I had. I went to that school with a silver teapot that my mother had left for me, and my family made sure
that I had it. As soon as I walked into that school, they took all my clothes, and they took the teapot. And I never saw it again. And I got a haircut; I was issued school clothing.\footnote{113}

When Dorothy Ross went to school at Sioux Lookout, her clothes were taken from her and thrown away. "I was hanging on to my jacket really tight. I didn’t want to let go. So once I set my jacket somewhere, I lost it. 'Cause what if my mom comes, I was looking for my mom, I need my jacket. They took that away from me."\footnote{114}

On her arrival at the Presbyterian school in Kenora, Lorna Morgan was wearing "these nice little beaded moccasins that my grandma had made me to wear for school, and I was very proud of them." She said they were taken from her and thrown in the garbage.\footnote{115}

The schools could not always provide students with a full range of shoe sizes. Geraldine Bob said that at the Kamloops school, "you got the closest fit whether it was too big or too small; so your feet hurt constantly." In the same way, she felt the clothing was never warm enough in winter. "I just remember the numbing cold. And being outside in the playground and a lot of us would dig holes in the bank and get in and pull tumbleweeds in after us, to try to stay warm."\footnote{116}

Stella August said that at the Christie, British Columbia, school, "we all had to wear the same shoes, whether they fit or not, and, and if they didn’t fit, if we were caught without our shoes, we’d get whacked in the ear with our shoe."\footnote{117}

Other students recalled the school-issued clothing as being uncomfortable, ill-fitting, and insufficient in the winters. William Herney said that at the Shubenacadie school, the students would often huddle together in an effort to keep warm.

It was, it was just like a circle. The inner circle was the three-, the four-, five- year-olds and seven-year-olds in that circle, small ones, and the older you are, the outer circle you were, and the oldest ones wanted the outest, and the, the outer circle, the farthest out. We would huddle up in there, just huddle in close together to give that body heat. And the young ones were protected from the elements. And, well, we huddled up around there for maybe an hour, an hour and a half, and until suppertime, when, when the bell rang, you were all piled in there.\footnote{118}

Margaret Plamondon said the children at the Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, school were not dressed warmly enough for the winter recess periods.

And then it doesn’t matter how cold it is, at recess, and you can’t wear pants, you have to wear a little skinny dress, and it doesn’t matter how cold it is, you were out there, and they wouldn’t let you come in, even if you’re crying and you’re cold. You
had to go play outside during recess, fifteen minutes, you can’t get in, they lock the
door on you, even if you try to go in, and same thing on weekends. There’s no, it
doesn’t matter how cold it is in the wintertime, we have to ... sometimes we’d stand
there by the door, freezing, freezing to death, a whole bunch of us, you know, just
little kids, don’t understand why we can’t go in to warm up.\textsuperscript{119}

The students’ wardrobe at the schools was also limited in terms of quantity. Joanne
Morrison Methot said that the students at the Shubenacadie school had a minimal supply
of clothing.

And we didn’t have a lot of clothes. We only had maybe two pair of pants, two socks,
like two bras, two panties, and maybe two nightgowns, that’s all we had. Sundays, it
was a dress-up dress, like, for Sundays. We only wore that to go to church, and patent
leather shoes, and little white socks. After church, we had to go back upstairs and
change our clothes.\textsuperscript{120}

Students spoke of the time they spent caring for
their clothing. Shirley Ida Moore recalled that as a child
at the Norway House, Manitoba, school, she used to
get into trouble because she could not keep her clothes
as neat and clean as was expected.

We had these uniforms, they were, they were, we
had a white blouse and then these tunics and I
think they had like, three, three of those big pleat,
pleaty things all around it. And every Sunday we
had to iron those things razor sharp; like the pleats
had to be sharp. And, and your shoes had to be pol-
ished and they had to be like glass. And, that’s what
I, that’s what I got into trouble; that’s why, because
like, I was only little and she expected me to be able to iron those things like that well,
and I couldn’t and nobody could help me; so I would get punished. Just punished,
and punished and punished.\textsuperscript{121}
Contact with parents

“I would hug her and I would kiss her.”

Students keenly anticipated visits from their parents. Gerald McLeod recalled that when his parents visited him at the Carcross, Yukon Territory, school, they brought him candy and treats. When they left, the staff made him share it with other children. “They’d put it away, and they said, ‘No, you can’t have it. You got to share it,’ and stuff like that. And it was just, you know, they had so much control over us.”

Because Nellie Ningewance’s parents lived close to the school, they were able to visit her regularly. “They’d come in by cab; stay over for the weekend Friday night and Saturday night and away they go again. They give me fruit, they buy me candy, bring me new clothes I couldn’t even wear.” They would also bring baked bannock. “We’d smuggle that under our pillows and have bannock, after the lights go out.”

Even though her parents lived only a five-minute walk from the Fort Alexander school, Mary Curchene saw them for only one hour a week.

The parents were allowed to come into, to visit their children using the back door where the, where the boys’ playroom was and the basement and that’s where they would, they would wait. And then our names would be called in the, in our playroom across the way, in across the long corridor. And my, when my name would be called I’d be so happy. We’d line up and then we’d, we’d go walk, we had to walk, couldn’t run. Walk to the, to the playroom and there was my mom and dad. They always sat on that side of that, on the left. And I would go rushing to, to my, to my mom. I would jump on her knee and I would hug her and I would kiss her.

At some schools, the visits were closely monitored. Ben Sylliboy recalled that a nun was always present when his parents came to visit him and his siblings at the Shubenacadie school. “The nun told us to speak English so ‘I can understand you.’ So we couldn’t tell them what was really going on in our world in that residential school.”

Loretta Mainville went to school at Fort Frances, Ontario, which was located near the reserve on which her parents lived. From the school, she could see her parents’ house. On occasion, she caught sight of her parents.

And I remember one time we were, we were always in lineups all the time, and, and one time we were going by a hall, and I saw him. He had work boots
and his work clothes, and he was talking to a nun, and apparently later on I found out that the nuns refused him a visit, but he tried to visit us all the time, but they wouldn’t allow him.346

Madeleine Dion Stout had a vivid memory of her parents visiting her at the Blue Quills school.

I remember looking out the window, look, thinking they were going to appear anytime, and so they did drive up, and I remember my father tying the horses to the posts at the school, and my mother getting out of the wagon. And I really, I looked harder at my mother for some reason. I saw her getting out of the wagon. She had, I can’t remember what she had on, but I remember her red tam, and I remember how she wore it. Today, I’d probably describe it as very coquettishly, you know, sort of slanted. And, and [audible crying] I started crying then because I was missing them already. I knew they couldn’t stay.347

Students were often encouraged to write home, but incoming and outgoing letters were read. One of Tina Duguay’s letters to her parents was blocked because she had mentioned another student in the letter, and a second letter was blocked because she described school activities. “So, I used to wonder, ‘what in the heck am I supposed to talk about?’ You know I want to write letters to Mom and Dad, ‘what am I supposed to say?’ So, letter writing started to dwindle, and they didn’t hear from me that often.”348

Leon Wyallon felt terribly isolated from his parents when he lived in residence in Fort Smith. He also thought he could not describe what he felt in letters home. “Every time you write a letter they read it, and then they, I don’t know what they do with it.” 349

Doris Young said that when she attended Anglican schools in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, she never received letters and parcels that her parents had sent her.

My mother would, would write us letters, and my dad, and we never received them, or they’d send parcels, and they were opened, and we, we just don’t know what happened to them, but I know that my mother when I, when I would, we’d come home, and said she would write to us. Her English was limited, but she still wrote, and my dad send, would send us money, but we never received it either.350

Because the staff read all outgoing letters, Josephine Eshkibok attempted to have a school employee smuggle a letter out for her.

And one day I wrote a letter to my mother and it was that lady, an Indian lady that worked in laundry. I went to the laundry and I gave her that letter. I said, “Can you post this for me?” you know. I didn’t want to tell anybody, just her. So she took that letter; I was so happy she’s gonna post it. ‘Cause I was writing to my mom, told her to come and get me; they’re too mean over here, at the school; strap all the time.

The next day, she was called into the office. “There and on the table there was my letter. Then she opened it up you know, ‘Is this your letter?’ and I, I had my head down. And she
read it, eh.” The principal tore up the letter. According to Eshkibok, “I got a strap, as usual. I got the strap for sending that letter out.”

Given these restrictions, parents and children lost contact with each other. The problem was exacerbated if parents were not informed that their children were going to be transferred from one school to another. This happened to Doris Judy McKay in Manitoba in the 1950s. “I found out that I was transferred to Birtle without them letting my parents know or anything they just transferred us. Then my mother didn’t find out ’til later on that we were in Birtle, when we wrote her a letter from there. She was pretty upset about it.”

Holidays provided some families with an opportunity to reconnect. However, Geraldine Shingoose’s home in northern Saskatchewan was too distant from the Lestock school for her to return at Christmas and Easter. She stayed in the school for ten months out of the year.

We didn’t go home for Christmas, spring break, like all the other kids did, ’cause we lived so far. We lived up north in Saskatchewan. And, and then when I’d see my parents, it was such a, a beautiful feeling, just going back home to them for those two months. And, and then when September would come, I would, I would dread it.

At the end of every summer, Ula Hotonami would try to talk her mother out of sending her back to school.

And every summer when they’d go home for holidays for a couple of months, then I didn’t really want to go back, you know, I’d want to stay out, but then, then my mother asked me why, and I told her, “’Cause I don’t like getting lickings all the time,” I told her. And I was getting lickings for no reason. Well, well I still, I used to get lickings for nothing. I don’t know.

Some children stayed at the schools year-round. Frances Tait recalled that every June, the school supervisor at the Alberni school would come with the list of students who were going home for the summer.

And I remember hoping, crossing my fingers, crossing my toes that my name would be on that list, but it never was. And finally, one, one summer, I guess when I was about ten years old, I guess, in a way, I bet that I was thinking that maybe if I had a suitcase I would go home. So I went into the cloakroom, and I stole a suitcase and didn’t put my name in it but put my brother’s name in it and waited. And still, my name was not on that list. But because I stole the suitcase and because I had gone into the cloakroom without permission, I got punished. And it was to scrub the stairs from top to bottom with a toothbrush.
Don Willie recalled how hard it was on students at the Alert Bay school as they waited at the end of the school year to see if their parents would come to take them home. “Kids would take turns sitting by the window, waiting for somebody to pick them up, pressing their faces against the window, and they were all happy if somebody came to pick them up, but pretty sad when nobody came.”

For students whose families had fallen apart, life at the school was particularly lonely. One former student recalled that at the Chapleau, Ontario, school, he never got letters from home.

Other kids on holidays, going home, everybody’s supposed to be good. I knew I wasn’t going home; and my mom was drunk. ’Cause one brother said, “Your, your mother’s drunk right now drinking.” They phoned the store that’s in Mober. “She’s incapable of accepting,” taking his call or something. There was no phone to the house, but I mean there was phone that goes down to the store. And, he said, I guess the brother said, “No, your mother’s not in the condition right now.” I knew right away what was happening, I’m not going home man.

Wilbur Abrahams and his sisters were not sent home from the Alert Bay school for the summer holiday.

I remember the first year that, summertime, just before the summer holidays they had, they had a list of names, and the students that were going home for the summer. My name never came up. Must have been hard on my sisters, too, because they, they had the same list up on that side. I don’t know, maybe there was about a handful of us that never went home. And it, it was a little, a little more freedom.

Victoria Boucher-Grant attended the Fort William, Ontario, school. She was one of the children who did not get to go home in the summer.

But in those times that I, when my uncle wasn’t there, there was three of us that our, our families never came to get us in the, in the summer. One, the other was a boy, and two girls. And everybody used to think we were orphans, but we weren’t orphans. It’s just that our big family never came to get us.

Ben Sylliboy, a student at the Shubenacadie school, was not able to go home for the summer holidays. “Some people were lucky, they went home in June; June 30th was known as Freedom Day for all the boys that were fortunate enough to go home a couple of months of the summer. But there was quite a few of us that didn’t go home. We stayed at the residential school all summer. It was hard.”
Julianna Alexander recalled that at the Kamloops school, the “girls that were allowed to go home, or the boys that were allowed to go home were only allowed because their parents could afford to take them home, and the majority got left there for the holidays. And that was kind of like hell, because the load of having to do all the dirty work there.”

William Francis Paul said he enjoyed staying at the Shubenacadie school in the summer. “There was no school. We were outside all day. It seemed like that was the only time we had a lot of fresh air. We got to be outside most of the day, and we got to mingle with other kids, instead of your teacher, where I was outside.”

Darryl Sahia said that some of the summer activities that were organized at the Mission, British Columbia, school were the best part of his residential school years. “But the best part was, we weren’t, we couldn’t go to our homes for the summer, we got to stay here for a while and go on camping trips, and we were canoe pulling and stuff, hiking up the cross up here in the mountain was good.”

Mary Teya said the summers with her parents were the best memories of her life.

For two months our parents would take us right out, back out to our fish camp and that would be one of the best memories in my life. Where we would be able to speak our language and live our way of life. For two months we stayed out there. We never came into town. And that’s how come I think today I still have my language and I still have my way of, my way, my culture and my tradition and all the wonderful values of being a Gwich’in person, I still hold that. And I thank God for that.

For some students, visits home had their own unique stresses. When Kiatch Nahanni and her sisters returned home from residential school in the Northwest Territories, they found that they were estranged from their father.

He would talk to us in Slavey, and we would answer him back in English; because we understand what he said. And so when I was in Grade Three I, I came home and he, he talked to me in Slavey and I opened my mouth, nothing came out. I was, and I answered back in English and so that summer my cousin talked to me and slowly I got the language back. But it was like that every summer for the longest time.

Residential schooling left Rosie Kagak completely unprepared for a return to her home community, and forgetful of traditional ways and foods.

Finally, we’re on our way home and I’m looking at everybody in the plane wondering where we’re going. We land in Kugluktuk, originally Coppermine, and my parents travelled to Coppermine from their outpost camp to pick us up. One of my older
brothers came with a dog team to where the plane had landed on the ice. He took me and my brothers to the tent and this lady looks at me and tells me to sit beside her. I’m looking at her, and beside her was a man. She said something to me I could not understand. So I looked at my older sister, and I asked her, “What is she saying?” And she picked up a piece of frozen char and had her hand out with the char for me to have. I looked at her, I looked at her, I looked at my older sister, and I asked her, “Why does she want me to eat raw fish?”

After years of separation, many family connections were broken. When Dorothy Hart returned to her home in northern Manitoba after six years in residential school, she discovered that her mother had remarried.

We were so happy to knock on their door; but this man appeared. And I called my mom, and she saw us, but she couldn’t do anything. That guy said, “They’re not staying here.” He shut the door. So I took my sisters to my granny’s, that’s in Hart’s Point. And we just got home after all these years. [audible crying]

Going away to residential school in the Northwest Territories brought Frederick Ernest Koe’s home life to an end.

I said that year had a monumental effect on my life and my relationship with my family because I came, spent a year here, went back, everything that I thought I owned was gone and a month or so later my family moved over here because my dad moved with the armed forces, and you know, we lived here. And from that day on, the day we moved here, I never, ever went hunting with my dad again.

Mollie Roy said that her years at the Spanish, Ontario, girls’ school left her struggling with a sense of abandonment.

I think the thing about the school more than anything else is the feeling of abandonment. Why was, why was I there, and why didn’t you come to see me? Because all of us, with the exception of few, were just, parents were, like, ten miles down the road, ten miles, and the people wouldn’t even come. You know it’s not that my parents didn’t have a car. My dad worked at Denison, and made good money, and, like, there was no, you know, you’d wait and wait, and nobody showed up, and I think that’s the thing more than anything else that bothered me. It’s not the school, it’s the fact that I wasn’t wanted.

Florence Horasssi said that at the residential school she attended in the Northwest Territories, she was made to feel ashamed of being Aboriginal.

When I was in residential school, then they told me I’m a dirty Indian, I’m a lousy Indian, I’m a starving Indian, and my mom and dad were drunkards, that I’m to pray for them, so when they died, they can go to heaven. They don’t even know my mom had died while I was in there, or do they know that she died when I was in there? I never saw my mom drink. I never saw my mom drunk. But they tell me that, to pray for them, so they don’t go to hell.
Agnes Moses said that her time in residential schools in northern Canada left her wanting “to be white so bad.”

The worst thing I ever did was I was ashamed of my mother; that honourable woman, because she couldn’t speak English, she never went to school, and we used to go home to her on Saturdays, and they told us that we couldn’t talk Gwich’in to her and, and she couldn’t, like couldn’t communicate. And my sister was the one that had the nerve to tell her. “We can’t talk Loucheux [Gwich’in] to you, they told us not to.”

Cecilia Whitefield-Big George said that at the Catholic school in Kenora, she was “taught that my parents were drunks. Not being taught but being told, my parents were drunks. And to this day I wondered, how did they know a drunk if they were so holy?”

By belittling Aboriginal culture, the schools drove a wedge between children and their parents. Mary Courchene recalled that in the 1940s at the Fort Alexander school in Manitoba, she was taught that

my people were no good. This is what we were told every day: “You savage. Your ancestors are no good. What did they do when they, your, your, your people, your ancestors you know what they used to do? They used to go and they, they would worship trees and they would, they would worship the animals.”

She became so ashamed of being Aboriginal that when she went home one summer, she

looked at my dad, I looked at my mom, I looked at my dad again. You know what? I hated them. I just absolutely hated my own parents. Not because I thought they abandon me; I hated their brown faces. I hated them because they were Indians; they were Indian. And here I was, you know coming from. So I, I looked at my dad and I challenged him and he, and I said, “From now on we speak only English in this house,” I said to my dad. And you know when we, when, in a traditional home where I was raised, the first thing that we all were always taught was to respect your elders and never to, you know, to challenge them. And here I was eleven years old, and I challenged.

Her father’s eyes filled with tears. Then he looked at her mother and said, in Ojibway, “I guess we’ll never speak to this little girl again. Don’t know her.”

Feelings of shame complicated many parental visits. At the Amos, Québec, school, Carmen Petiquay felt ashamed of her parents also.

And I was ashamed of my parents because I was told Indians smell bad and they don’t talk, and I said to myself, “As long as they don’t come,” ’cause I was ashamed I hoped they wouldn’t come because I, I hoped that they would come sometime. At, at one point my parents came and I was happy. I was pleased to see them, and I hoped that they would leave soon. Because it hurt so much to be taken away from one’s parents like that, and it hurts to say things about one’s parents and to be ashamed of them. I had believed because I was told that Indians smell bad and that they don’t
wash. And my mother brought me an orange, and I kept the orange for the long time, I never even ate it, I kept it because it came from my mother. This is something that I now regret having thought that of my parents, that they smelled bad.374

After six years at the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario, Jennie Blackbird came to see the English language as being superior to her family’s language.

When I returned home, I heard my grandparents and my family around me, only speaking our language. I was a very angry person when I heard them speak the Anishinaabe, our language. I remember telling my grandparents, don’t you dare talk to me in that language, and feeling superior to them, as they did not know how to make the English sounds. This, I now regret having said that to my loved ones.375

When Vitaline Elsie Jenner went home for the summer holidays from the Fort Chipewyan school in Alberta, she was ashamed of her ancestry. “In the summers, when I went home from the residential school, I did not want to know my parents anymore. I was so programmed that at one time I looked down at my mom and dad, my family life, my culture, I looked down on it, ashamed, and that’s how I felt.” [audible crying]

She tried to deny who she was.

I didn’t want to be an Aboriginal person. No way did I want to be an Aboriginal person. I did everything. Dyed my hair and whatever else, you know, just so I wouldn’t look like an Aboriginal person, denied my heritage, my culture, I denied it. I drank. I worked as well. I worked and partied hard. When I had that opportunity on my days off, I would party.376

When he returned home after spending three years at the Anglican school in Aklavik, Albert Elias no longer fit in with his family.

I was a different person, you know. I had, I kind of knew everything after being in residential school. I couldn’t, I couldn’t, you know, get along and cope with life in Tuktoyaktuk ‘cause I was rebelling against my parents and didn’t listen to them and I was changed. I, and I had lost my language, but, you know, I’m very lucky, in those days everybody in Tuktoyaktuk still spoke Inuvialuktun, so it didn’t take me long to learn my language back, so, and I know lots of people that are, don’t have that experience.377

When Betsy Olson went home after three years at the Prince Albert school, she had difficulty adjusting to reserve life.
And, the food we had the first day was a rabbit, a rabbit, and I couldn’t eat it. I told my sister, “I can’t eat this. This is Peter Rabbit. I can’t eat Peter Rabbit,” I told her, ’cause Peter Rabbit was our favourite story in our books there, and I couldn’t eat Peter Rabbit. All the wildlife we had for about a month, Mom had to buy white man’s food to feed me ’cause I couldn’t eat our, our way of eating back home. I couldn’t eat soup. I couldn’t eat fish. I couldn’t eat bannock. Couldn’t eat nothing. I had to, so Mom had to get extra money to try and buy extra food just for me.378

Ellen Smith, who was born in Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories, found that residential schooling made it impossible for her to fit back into her home community. “I can’t sew; I can’t cut up caribou meat; I can’t cut up moose meat; work with fish and speak my language. So I was starting to become alienated from my parents and my grandparents; everything.”379

Raphael Victor Paul spent ten years at the Beauval, Saskatchewan, school.

I thought for a long time that I was better than my parents. That’s the thought that they gave you, because my parents didn’t talk English, but I did. My parents were very Catholic, and I was very Catholic, but I knew both languages, the catechism and all that. So, you get, I got the feeling that maybe I know more than my parents.

His father believed that the residential school education had prevented his son and his friends from learning the skills they need to survive.

He said, “You know you guys that went to residential school are useless, because you don’t know how to survive like they did.” ’Cause they never taught us that, you know, how to. At that time, there was no welfare, there was, there was no running waters or lights, so we had to do all those things by ourselves, but we didn’t know how. So, the people that went back had to relearn how to survive. And at that time, survival was fishing, hunting, and trapping. To this day, I don’t know how to hunt. I can trap, I can fish, but I don’t know how to hunt, ’cause I, I was never taught that.380

Some people never adjusted. Although she had not enjoyed her time at the Alberni, British Columbia, school, Frances Tait discovered she could not find a place for herself in her home community when she returned. “I couldn’t survive in the village. I was different. I was an outcast. And my brothers weren’t there.” As a result, she asked to be sent back to Alberni, where she boarded with a Euro-Canadian family.381
The end

“The doors are closing for good.”

Most students left residential school when they turned sixteen. Some students, however, contrived to leave earlier. At the end of one summer, Roy Denny hid in the woods so he would not be returned to school. When the Indian agent came to visit his grandmother, she told them he would rather be at home helping her. According to Roy, “They said, ‘okay,’ and jeez, I was real glad; real happy.”

Rebecca Many Grey Horses’s parents successfully withdrew her from the Anglican school in Cardston after another student broke her collarbone. “I was taken to the hospital and spent a few days there, my parents came, and so, it was at that time that I asked that, you know, not to be put back in there.”

Many of the students in the hostels in northern Canada in the 1960s and 1970s were well over the official school-leaving age. But they had come from remote communities to finish high school or take vocational training. As they grew older, some found the curfews and limits on personal freedom difficult to accept. When she was in her late teens, Lena McKay snuck out of Breynat Hall, one of the Fort Smith residences in the Northwest Territories, to spend an evening with a friend. She was caught sneaking back in later that night. The event left her frustrated with the limits on her freedom. “I was just sick of it, so I said no, it’s not for me. I can’t stay. So, and I said, ‘I’m not gonna sneak around, and yeah, I’m not gonna do that again.’” As a result, she left.

Many students could remember their day of discharge. Roy Johnson was glad when the day came when he could leave the Carcross school. “And when I left, I was, you know, well, abused, psychological damage, illiterate. I was very happy the last day came along when I left Carcross. Jump on that bus, that’s your angel is the bus driver, ’cause he’d be taking you home, really.”

William Francis Paul vividly recalled the day he was discharged from Shubenacadie. He said he was woken up in the middle of the night and informed that he was going home. He was driven to the local train station and placed on a train to his home community. While on the train, he befriended an Aboriginal woman with a son his age. Instead of continuing on to his home, he got off the train and lived with them for a while. Eventually, the Indian agent located him and returned him to his family in Membertou, Nova Scotia.
For some students, the last day of school was also the last day that the school itself was open. Rose Marie Prosper said she would never forget the day the students were told that the Shubenacadie school was going to be closed. One day in early 1967, her teacher, Sister Charles Marie, came into the classroom.

She went up to her, her desk there, and she just stood there, and she, she was looking at us, like we were all just talking among ourselves, and she was just standing there looking at us. And, we were like, ‘Okay, she’s going to flip out pretty soon. She’s going to snap her yardstick on our desk and tell us to be quiet or something.’

And she didn’t say anything. And I was sitting at my desk and I was looking at her. I wasn’t talking because I, I get strapped for everything, so I kind of learned, not to talk. So, I was sitting there and I was looking at her and she was standing there. She had her hands like this up to her mouth and she was looking at all of us. And, she said, “Okay,” she said, “I want everyone to quiet down.” So we were sure we were all going to start our work.

So she sat on her desk in the front there. She said, “I have something to tell all of you.” And she said, “After I tell you,” she said, “I want you all to stay in your desks, stay in your chairs, and not to make any noise; to be very, very quiet.” So we didn’t know what was going on or anything. And then she said, “When you leave here in June, you’re not coming back.” She said, “The doors are closing for good.”

It was the happiest news; it was the happiest thing we ever heard. I mean, at the time you’re not supposed to touch a boy or nothing, but we had boys in our classroom, and when she said that nobody was coming back in June, that you’ll never see each other again; you’ll never see any of the nuns again, you’ll never see the school again, nothing. She goes, “When you go home, you’re staying home for good.” When she told us that, we all jumped out of our chairs, we banged our desks, our books went flying, we hugged each other, we grabbed the boys. And we were crying, we were laughing; it was the best thing we ever, ever heard.729

Doreene Bernard was also at the Shubenacadie school when it closed in 1967.

Remember my last day walking out of the residential school at the end of June 1967, and we were the last ones to leave because we were getting on a plane, so we had to be, we were the last ones to leave that school, me and my brother and my sisters. My mom was going to meet us at the airport in Boston. We were waiting for a drive to come take us to the airport. And it was just like an evil place, it was empty, you hear your echoes walking through and talking, like this place, you could hear your echo everywhere you went.
And I could remember getting into the car, looking back, and Sister came running down the stairs, and she said, "You forgot something. Dorene, you forgot something," and she passed me that Bible missal. And I took it and I threw it, I threw it away and told her to keep it, "I don't need it where I'm going."

And my sister was even scared when we were getting ready to leave. "Don't do that. Don't say that," she said. I said, "What can they do to me? They're not going to do anything to us now. We're outta here."