

Report finds egregious examples of 'forced labour and slavery'

Students or slaves? Work at residential schools under fire

OPINION

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TEN years ago, I asked my French, non-Native grandmother if she had ever heard of residential schools.

She was born in 1920, and grew up in The Pas. MacKay Indian Residential School was located about 10 kilometres northwest of the Manitoba town, operating from 1914 to 1933, when it was destroyed by fire.

"No," she told me, "but every year, young Indian girls would come doorto-door selling clothes and mitts they had sewn while in school. I remember because they were my age."

According to new findings by Manitoba-based researchers, what she witnessed was evidence of something much worse.

In studying local residential schools (1888-1950), Anne Lindsay (University of Manitoba PhD candidate) and Karlee Sapoznik Evans (in the office of Manitoba advocate for children and youth) have concluded children were forced to perform so much unpaid labour to keep residential schools afloat it constituted slavery.

"As evidenced in the stories of IRS pupils in Manitoba," Lindsay and Sapoznik Evans report, "forced child labour and slavery, framed as 'educational training,' was foundational and central to the residential schools system operated by the Canadian government and churches."

Virtually every residential school was underfunded by the federal government, who had a legal obligation to provide education to First Nations children under treaties. To make up the shortfall, schools ran farms, sewing businesses, and sent children into the community to work, with much of the money going to pay for the operation of the school.

For many, this meant long, hard days doing work under dangerous, often unsupervised, conditions.

Lindsay and Sapoznik Evans found evidence First Nations leaders complained to government agents their children were treated like “labourers” instead of students, and children ran away from schools because they felt they were being worked to death.

During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada hearings, one survivor of Birtle Indian Residential School, Sam Ross, told commissioners throughout the 1950s he had to work 16-hour days in the barn and boiler room.

When he turned 18, well past the legal age when students could leave the school, Ross asked the principal if he could go home. He was refused.

During the 20th century, government officials increasingly commented this overwhelming amount of labour had little educational value.

While visiting Portage la Prairie in 1943, school inspector Eldon Simms wrote the students spent a large amount of their day working at jobs “which should rightly be done by hired help... The girls are employed largely in scrubbing and the boys in farm chores, and I question the value of this as educational training.”

Touring schools throughout northwestern Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan in 1946, Indian Affairs official A.J. Doucet reported “little organized training is taking place.”

Canadians were informed students were suffering like slaves and nothing was done.

Kenneth Thompson ran away from the Brandon residential school in 1936, and told police: “I ran away from school because I have to work too hard, in fact I do not study at all. I am working around the school all the time.”

● STUDENTS, CONTINUED ON A2

STUDENTS



FROM A1

At the Elkhorn residential school, there was a shop that printed the local newspaper, a carpentry business and a boot shop that prepared high-end orders from “many well-known people in the West.”

At Norway House, the principal of the residential school petitioned the Department of Indian Affairs to force students to stay until they were 19 because: "(Older students) are able to carry our heavier tasks and so take the place of help that would have to be hired from the outside. The present financial condition of our schools will not allow the engagement of much outside help on current wages."

In some cases, Lindsay and Sapoznik Evans document, child labour provided up to 20 per cent of the funding of a residential school.

This constitutes a model that resembles slavery plantations in the southern U.S. and fully meets the criteria of "forced child labour and slavery," as established in 1920s international law.

By the 1940s, Canadian officials recognized residential schools had little to no education and most had become what the final TRC report called "child labour camps."

As the report stated: "It is clear from the record that rather than being given training that helped them develop employable skills, students spent their half-day doing repetitive chores that helped subsidize school operations."

It not only means the residential school system was evidence of openly practised slavery, but Manitoba's economy was built on this servitude.

Worst of all, many Canadians knew what was happening.

Final proof of this came in 1950, when the federal government mandated residential school students spend full days in the classroom — similar to their Canadian counterparts.

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