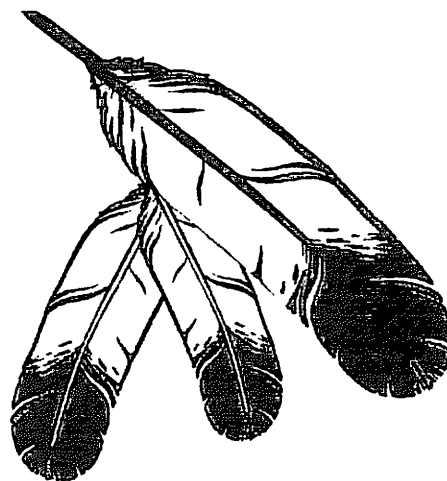
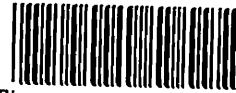


PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS
of
RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Compiled by

Gerry Marion





INTRODUCTION

The following stories are the personal recollections of a few of the thousands of Native people who went through the residential school system.

Names have not been used to protect the privacy of the people involved.

For some, this is the first time they have spoken about their experiences and the pain is still evident in their voice.

Property of
Mr. Gerry Marion
Nipissing First Nation

Residential schools and their affect on Native people.

My research is on the abuse and mistreatment that native people had to endure at residential schools for many years. My method of research is word of mouth rather than books. I believe it would be more detailed and true if I got my information from people who were there so I conducted interviews with native people from North Bay, Sturgeon Falls and the Nipissing Indian Reserve, and this is what they had to say. Names have been withheld from their stories to preserve their privacy.

Acknowledgements

I would sincerely like to thank everyone that took the time to speak with me about their experiences at the residential schools. Their memories are now part of our history.

Miigwetch

Gerry Marion
Gerry Marion

Chapter 1

As I spoke to this eighty-three year old lady about the school, she had tears in her eyes. Oddly enough they were not for herself and the hunger, cold and punishment she endured while she was there, but for her children who were also sent to the school after her husband's death.

She was very young when her parents died. In fact she was so young when she went to the school, she doesn't even remember how she got there. She knows it was sometime before nineteen-twenty. A lady friend who is in her nineties now was there at the same time, and remembers all the older girls carrying this little girl around.

She remembers the meals being the same everyday. Porridge with one spoon of white sugar, and one slice of dry bread was breakfast (no milk). Stew of fat meat and potatoes was served for lunch. Supper was watery soup with a slice of bread and diluted jam.

"We were forced to eat the food even though it would make me sick", she said.

She was always hungry, and she remembers eating chicken feed which was kept in a large bucket.

"The only time I ever had a piece of fruit was on Christmas. We each got one apple or an orange."

Everyone had a job to do, and they rotated every week. The barn had to be cleaned, livestock fed, and the girls even had to bring in the four foot long fire wood, besides working inside the school.

Even in bed she remembers always being cold. "We only had a top and bottom sheet and one blanket," she recalled.

She remembers one day being so cold she tried to get warm beside the rad, and they threw her outside.

"I can remember being beaten for wetting my bed. One time they put me in a tub of ice cold water for wetting my bed, and another time they made me sit on the toilet all night long."

She remembers some of the girls who tried to run away were brought back, and the punishment was to be locked in a room, and being given only dry bread and water.

"We had to go to mass every morning in the chapel, and on Sunday morning and again in the evening. I don't know how they could teach religion and say mass when they were so cruel," she said.

"It was more like a prison than a school. We were not allowed to leave the school yard, or even look next door at the boys school. If we were caught looking at the boys, we were given the strap."

"There was a rumour going around the school about one of the Brothers always beating this one boy. As he grew older and stronger he turned on the Brother one day. "It was said they brought in this guy from outside to fight with this boy, and he ended up being beaten to death."

She left the school in nineteen-twenty-nine, but went on to say what friends and relatives told her.

One relative said, "You wouldn't believe what happened in the boys school." He went on to say that one of the Brothers took him to his bed room.

She was told by another relative that her son was always beaten with the strap.

She gets very sad when she talks of what her son told her while he was at the school. He was very young and had his clothes taken away when he got there and was given a small summer jacket to wear in the winter.

They would make him stay outside in the winter, with only pants and this small jacket. They didn't have hats or mitts, and he remembers never having underwear or socks to wear.

He was stripped of his clothes and beaten with the strap everyday, and the other boys were forced to watch, but he also says it happened to other boys too.

One winter day he went for a walk along the frozen river, and he came upon an old cabin. He went inside, and there was a piece of dry mouldy bread, because he was so hungry he began to devour it.

Chapter 2

Too young to even attend school, this little girl was taken from her widowed mother and placed in the school in nineteen-forty-five at the age of five.

She doesn't remember too much about the earlier years when she was there, but she can remember crying a lot.

She could not speak or understand the English language, but when she tried to communicate with someone in her Native language she was punished. She wasn't even old enough to understand why she was being punished just for speaking the only language she knew.

Breakfast was always one spoon of porridge with a spoon of white sugar (no milk) and a half slice of bread. "One time I looked in the pot of soup and there was fish heads floating around", she said.

She remembers getting sick at the dining room table, and having a hard time trying to eat because she wanted to vomit. She can remember someone standing behind her commanding "Eat".

"I was always cold and hungry," she says. "We were not dressed properly for the cold weather."

She had plenty of clothing to suit the different weather conditions, and she does not understand why they were not allowed to wear their own clothing.

"On Sundays after lunch we were sent out doors, and the school doors were locked. We were forced to stay outside all afternoon, it didn't matter how cold it was."

She recalls that the prefect who watched them outside wore a hat, gloves, and a scarf, while the children had none of this warm clothing.

"My mother told me she had sent me money, and an Easter basket at Easter, and I never received any of the things she sent me."

Horrible memories are when a few of the girls were brought into a room to watch two uniformed men returning two girls who tried to run away. They had their heads shaved, then they were stripped, and whipped with a belt until their bodies were bloody.

The girls were bleeding and were made to sit in tubs of steaming water to which salt had been added.

The group of girls who were made to watch were then sent to the chapel to pray for the two girls who had just been beaten, so that they would be forgiven for running away.

She recalls the girls screams and crying, "Please don't make me get in that hot water."

She also remembers the nun yelling at the girls in the chapel to pray louder, "louder so God will hear you". She thinks now it was to drown the sound of the girls screaming.

After everything was over she can remember seeing these two girls coming out of this room, and their entire bodies were red.

One time she recalls being punished for something she doesn't even remember. All the girls were called by a number that was assigned to them when they entered the school, and were called that number instead of their given name. She remembers having to kneel all day saying the rosary over and over, and if the teacher didn't hear her she would yell, "Speak louder forty-one".

She can also remember being sent to this dark room somewhere in the cellar as punishment. They would cuddle up in the corner to try to keep warm because there was no heat. They were there for several days only having bread and water to eat. It was hard to judge the amount of time spent there, because it was dark the entire time.

"One night I was coughing so much that the prefect sat me up at the head of the bed, and she finally tied me to the head of the bed so that I would stop coughing."

"Sometime we were taken to pick strawberries in the summer time. There would be a couple of the prefects walking around to see that you wouldn't eat any of the berries. If we were caught putting even one berry in our mouths we would be severely punished. We didn't get to eat any berries after we got them back to the school", she said.

They were assigned jobs such as cleaning the barn, milking the cows, and digging potatoes from the garden. This was on top of their school work and other chores.

She also learned to sew and mend socks and clothing.

She recalls one girl getting into some poison ivy one time, and she had an idea. She thought if she got poison ivy she would be sent home. She remembers rolling in the poison ivy, but she laughs now because she says, "I didn't even get a little itch".

Chapter 3

This gentleman was in the school around the year nineteen-forty-nine. He was about nine years old and this is his recollection of the years he spent there.

"The boys were each assigned different jobs such as cleaning the barn, feeding the animals, working in the field, and bringing in the fire wood. Saturdays were called "clean up day" when all the boys had to clean and scrub everything inside the school."

He remembers the meals always seemed to be the same everyday, and if you didn't like it, you were forced to eat it anyway, because there was no choice.

He use to wonder why the priests meals were so much better, but he did not ask why.

Sunday was movie day, but some of the younger boys were not allowed to attend.

"We had church everyday" he recalls. "On Sundays it seemed like church went on forever."

He remembers that the boys who tried to run away were severely punished when they were returned to the school and he remembers getting the strap for speaking Indian.

He also remembers trying to avoid certain priests and Brothers because he was afraid.

The boys were forced to play hockey or other sports. All of his spare time was spent playing hockey.

"About five years after I went to the school things started to get better" he recalls. "Boys and girls were allowed to associate with each other for the first time."

In his early years at the school he thought it was a reformatory.

After spending somewhere from eight to ten years in the school, his aunt brought him back home. She had heard stories from others who had been there, and no longer wanted him living there.

His relatives compared it to a prison and not a school.

He said even though things were getting better at the school, he would never send his children there.

Chapter 4

It was nineteen-twenty-eight when this gentleman was sent to the school. He was eight years old at the time, but so many terrible things are still every clear in his mind.

He says he'll never forget when all the boys were lined up to watch as one of them was to be punished. To make sure none of them got out of line there were three prefects walking back and forth, so that no one would intervene.

"The priest ripped off his white collar and kicked the living daylights out of the boy." He goes on to say he doesn't know if the priest felt like "God Almighty" for beating this lad.

Another time he witnessed a boy getting an awful beating. He heard the priest saying "I'll beat the devil out of you". The boy was being punished for speaking the Indian language.

He tells me that even though he was punished very little, he saw too much to believe in what they had to say. "I could never believe in what those sons of bitches preached anymore", he told me.

The strap they used was a piece of rubber about two and one half inches wide, and about thirty inches long cut from a tire.

The boys were made to carry three foot logs as fire wood. He remembers the Brother who was in charge being kinder than most. As each boy brought in a piece of wood, the Brother gave him one peanut and, at the same time he would put a mark on that boy's sleeve. At first he wondered what the mark was for, but then he figured out that it was so the same boy wouldn't be given another peanut.

He realized early that by being "clever" (as he put it) you would not get beaten. He taught himself how to sew and worked as a tailor, making shirts and pants for the priest. He was also very good at making signs. There were five other boys working with him. This was done after being in class for seven or eight hours.

Everyday the meals were the same, and he could hardly wait till Thursdays when they had a treat of beans. "The food wasn't so good, but it managed to keep us alive."

He said he knew the priests food was much better, but never dared to ask why.

Sports were a part of their routine in the school. "There were four hockey teams, and we got to play against Cutler, Webbwood, and Spanish village." The boys hockey team was very good, because they would trounce the men's team in the surrounding towns.

He remembers being a very good boxer, and left the school undefeated.

He thought the boys were being brainwashed by all the religion. There was mass every morning, and church for about five hours every Sunday.

CHAPTER 5

At the age of eighty-four this gentleman told me what he recalls of his nine years spent in the school, It was in the early twenties when he was sent there, and he admitted to me he remembers very little of what went on, but this is his recollection.

The boys nicknamed the school Staalag Thirteen.

Working in the kitchen, in the barn, feeding the animals, and working in the fields are some of the chores he remembers.

His words were "they were very hard on the young fellows".

One morning it was his turn to work in the field, and after lunch he returned to the class. The teacher asked him a question he could not answer, because of the limited time he spent in school. When he said he did not know the answer he was called a dummy, and was hit very hard on the top of his head with the strap. So hard in fact that the hair on his head fell out in that spot.

"The strap was unbelievably huge. It must have been a belt cut from some machine or pulley" he recalled.

He also recalls the boys having to line up, and march into this room to get the strap every night, like a kind of ritual.

If a boy ran away, they had one side of their head shaved so everyone would know what they had done.

Chapter 6

I spoke with two sisters who were at the school, but the older of the two was there a few years earlier. They had mostly good memories, and spoke of being treated very well by the nuns.

Mass was at 6:30 every morning, so they would have to be up for six a.m.

The meals were okay and the younger sister remembers having fresh vegetables and fruit everyday,

They both remember watching a movie every Sunday, as well as concerts and plays on special occasions.

There were concerts and plays on special occasions.

During the winter months they learned to skate, and had skating parties. When the boys played hockey they were allowed to watch the game.

The younger of the two sisters remembers playing baseball in the summer, and going on hay rides.

They spoke of parties at Halloween, and dances to go to and even recall having a juke box in their recreation room.

They also remember that they were allowed to go into town, but they had to be back by 8 p.m.

One of them remembers getting five dollars from one of the teachers to come home.

They do remember some punishment, such as the time one girl ran away, and when she was returned her head was shaved.

The only disturbing thing the older sister remembers is something her brother told her that had happened to him during his stay at the school.

She said that when he came home he told of being sexually molested by one of the Brothers at the school.

Chapter 7

His gentleman spent most of his younger years at the school, He was sent to the school when he was nine years old, and he remembers some very brutal things about those years.

There was no special days at the school or no special meals on holidays such as Easter or Christmas. Every meal was the same.

He remembers always being hungry. The big meal of the day usually consisted of one potato, a slice of dry bread and a cup of green tea. On Thursdays, the menu changed to watery beans that had to be eaten with a spoon, and they only got one large spoon full. This was a treat for the boys.

He also remembers something they called "dunkers pudding". It was hard to tell what the ingredients were, but he says he could recognise chicken skin and fat, but to him it resembled slop that you would put in a pigs trough. He went on to say, that they had to eat it, because they didn't have a choice of food.

The boys had their usual chores to do. Every boy was assigned jobs and one of his jobs was to clean the priest dining room. One time he accidentally broke a jar of vinegar. He was forced to kneel there and pray for forgiveness and was then strapped across the wrist. He said his wrist was black and blue for days.

He remembered one good priest who gave him permission to eat the left overs when he worked in the priest dining room. One time he had a bowl of corn flakes, and another time a boiled egg and toast. This was considered a delicacy and a real treat because they never saw food like that on their tables.

He talked of stealing food even though he knew he would be severely punished if he was caught. He told me he and a few other boys stole bread and cream to eat. He remembers the garden having a fence around it and the first row near the fence was turnips. Rather than getting caught going over the fence to steal vegetables to eat, they would pick the turnips through the fence and eat them raw.

There was only cold water for the boys to shower, and if they didn't want to shower in cold water, they were pushed in. There was this sort of trough like thing filled with cold water and every boy had to wash his face and hands in it. Most times the water was filthy, but they were made to wash their face and hands anyway.

"I was always cold," he remembers. "I didn't have socks or underwear. Our clothes were taken on us when we arrived at the school. We were given a pair of overalls, a shirt, and a pair of boots."

He recalls seeing young boys who wet their beds getting strapped and having to sit in ice cold water. There was one time when a group of boys had to drop their pants to get the strap across their bare butts.

One day a boy was caught smoking and he was whacked across the hand with what the boys called a tigers stick. It was a broom stick with stripes. His hand was swollen and his fingers were broken.

"The next day he was given chocolate cake and cigarettes to keep quiet."

One day they had a fire drill and they had to slide down the fire escape, which was like a fireman's pole. Because one boy was afraid of heights he wouldn't slide down so a priest shoved him, and he fell to the floor below. He was hurt badly because his body was shaking all over. He can remember seeing him after and his head would be constantly shaking.

In both these cases neither boy was sent to the doctor or hospital to be checked for injuries.

One frightening thing he recalls is having to constantly watch out for this one Brother. He was always after the boys, and some of the boys who were caught told of being sexually molested by him. "He caught me one time, but I managed to escape from his grasp," he said.

"We were not allowed to speak our native language," he said. "The priest drilled it into us that it was the devil's language."

All the boys had their heads shaved.

He remembers thinking, as he stood at the back of church that their heads looked like rows of coconuts.

During Mass the priests were supposedly working for God. but he thinks they were working for the devil.

He remembers once or twice a year a man came to the school for one day. They were not allowed to speak with him and on those days they were treated better and given a little more food. He realized later it must have been the school inspector.

The girls school was next door and if they were caught even looking at the girls through the window, they were strapped.

There were some very smart boys in the school. He can remember one boy built a steam engine from junk he found lying around. Another boy built some sort of periscope. This was so he could look outside at the girls and not be noticed by the priest.

“When we were allowed to write letters we were not to mention anything that went on at the school. The letters would be destroyed if we disobeyed these orders” he said.

“Now when I think back on my days spent at the school, it was more like a jail. If anyone tells you they liked being there, they have to be lying,” he said.

Chapter 8

This girl remembers and calls the time she spent in the school “a living hell”. She never remembers any happy or good times. She felt they were nothing more than slaves.

“About two hours a day was spent in the classroom. The rest of the day was spent working in the barn or the many chores there were to do around the place. There were chickens and cows to feed and tend to. Some of the girls had to bring in wood, as the building was heated by wood furnaces. There were also many chores inside to be done.”

She recalls abuse and strapping. “When the girls were being beaten, you could hear them screaming.” Her younger sister sometimes was punished for things she didn't do. If someone told the Sisters she did it, then she was punished or strapped. It seems as long as someone was blamed, it didn't matter if they really did anything wrong. She could remember one girl being punished and not seeing her afterwards.

Her older sister had beautiful long curly hair and they shaved her bald. One time this same sister had an operation to have her appendix removed. She was back up and sent to work soon after that and even though still feeling weak she was forced to work. She fell down stairs and her incision ripped open and had to be stitched again.

The girls were also beaten or punished if they spoke the Indian language, but that was the only language that most of the girls could speak.

She once wrote a letter to her married sister and brother-in-law (her younger sister sneaked it out to mail) begging them to come and get them before they were killed. She even threatened to kill herself if they couldn't come.

Her family sent gifts but they never ever received any. Even when they went home they were never given those gifts.

It was so terrible at times that she and her older sister thought that the only way they would get out of there or relieve the beatings was to kill one of their superiors. Many times they planned how to do this.

She can't forgive them and still feels so much hate. By being forced to speak the English language instead of her Native tongue, she can now only remember a few words. She speaks only English and thinks by being punished for speaking the Indian language is what stopped her from picking up and speaking Indian today.

Chapter 9

An elderly lady told me her story of when she was a girl growing up on a reserve north of Temiscaming.

Losing her mother at a young age she was brought up by her uncle and aunt. She told me her uncle was very strict but her aunt was orally excellent.

She told of going to a one room school which had one nun as a teacher. During these few years in school she says it was very tough.

One day she said the nun walked by her and she felt a hard blow to her head and she thinks she was hit with a stick. She said her ears were ringing for days. She also talked about a huge strap the nun used for punishment. She could remember some of the punishment was to stand in front of the class all morning or kneel for hours at a time. At times she thought getting the strap would be better because it would be over with.

Her aunt told her father of the blow she received over the head, and he was furious. The next day he went to see the nun and told her not to ever hit anyone on the head again.

She talked of being very poor, with hardly any food to eat. Most lunches were bread and mustard.

She remembered walking into town and the people would be saying "maudit sauvage". They would be called names and have rocks thrown at them. "I guess it wouldn't be very hard to see who were civilized and who were the real savages."

Thinking she could do better, she left home at an early age. She went to work at a tourist camp somewhere around Temagami. During her stay at the camp she met a couple who were doctors, and she moved to Toronto to keep house for them.

The doctors were very kind to her and she would pretend they were her parents.

She worked there for many years before she met her husband to be and she went on to raise a lovely family.

Chapter 10

This lady was seven years old at the time and this is her recollection of the two years she spent at the residential school. After arriving at the school she was separated from her two older sisters and was not allowed to associate with them. What she could remember is that they were not allowed to speak Indian but that was the only language they knew. She said she would get beatings if she was heard speaking her language or caught with her sisters. She said she got beat with a strap that resembled a beaver's tail.

One night a young girl ripped her sheet and tied it together to escape out the window but was captured. She could hear her scream and could not remember ever seeing her again. She also said when someone got punished you wouldn't see them for a week or two.

They had to eat the food they were served and it seemed the meals were the same everyday. Some of the food made her sick, but she was forced to eat it or be punished with this thing she called a beaver's tail.

She was allowed to walk around outside and walk to the store that was a half mile up the road. One day her sister gave her a letter to mail and she was told not to get caught with it, so she ran up to the store to mail the letter. Seeing the letter in her hand the storekeeper told her to hurry before someone saw her because she would be punished.

As far as she could remember there was a lot of abuse going on and the only thing she got out of the school was hatred for all that was taught at the school.

Today she blames the school for her losing most of her language because in school they were beaten for using it. Even after she left school she was afraid to speak her native tongue.

Chapter 11

This young man told of going to the school when he was only five years old. He can remember being very lonely, especially at night.

Two years seemed like such a long time. He doesn't recall having to do any work.

Health care was very poor and times were very difficult. His older brother was also a resident of the school where he contracted tuberculosis. He also could remember most of the boys at the school had scabies and lice.

He remembers getting the strap and being slapped around but doesn't know what for. "Some boys were strapped for wetting their beds."

He remembers one kind Sister and one he called "the enforcer". The enforcer was the one who applied the strap. He thought of her as a giant of a woman.

He can't think of anything good happening because there was never any special occasions at the school. "Everyday was the same," he recalls.

"I have met the enforcer since leaving the school," he said. After seeing her he couldn't believe how puny she was. He told me that the resentment he felt towards the people at the school has long been forgiven.

Chapter 12

A disabled girl tells of her nine years in a school. Having twelve brothers and sisters, and after her father deserted the family, her mother could no longer look after them alone, so she and one sister were taken away to the school.

When they arrived she was separated from her sister. They resided in dorms, something like army barracks with rows of beds. "The rooms were so cold in winter," she remembered.

The girls were kept separate from the boys, even though some girls had brothers in the boys school. They were not allowed to associate with them or speak to them.

She tells of poor eating conditions. They were all given a deep tin plate (similar to a pie plate) and a tin cup. They ate every meal from these two dishes.

"Meals were porridge for breakfast with one spoon of white sugar (no milk) and dry toast. Lunch was watery soup and dry bread, and supper was some kind of stew with very fat meat." She realized later it was probably what was left from the meat that could not be served to the nuns. "We never got fruit or fresh vegetables."

Every girl had jobs in different parts of the school. Sometimes she worked in the nuns' dining room and realized what different eating conditions they had. The nuns had china, silverware, white linen table cloths and napkins, while the girls ate at bare wooden tables with their tin dishes. There were always big bowls of fruit at the nuns' tables, and sometimes she was tempted to steal a piece, but she knew the punishment would be too severe if she was caught.

The punishment was severe if she was caught talking when she was supposed to be working. She was beaten with a strap. If it happened again she would be sent to this dark windowless room and not get a meal till she said she was sorry. She tells of being in this room for days and having only a piece of dry bread and a bowl of water. Sometimes she wouldn't eat it knowing she would eventually get so weak that they would have to take her out. Sometimes after being taken out of there she would be very weak for days.

Once she saw a girl being dragged down stairs by the hair. Sometimes the strapping was so severe she would hear a girl screaming and sometimes they would never see the girl again. "I often wondered what happen to those girls," she said.

There were prayers morning and night, but she didn't mind that part. On Sundays they weren't allowed to do anything but read their prayer books.

They were allowed to write home but couldn't mention anything that went on at the school or the letter would be destroyed.

Finally after she had stayed nine years at the school, her oldest brother took her out. Because she was disabled they would not let her leave on her own.

She said this experience didn't turn her against her religion, but the hatred she felt for the nuns and priests running the school never left her and made her bitter for years.

Chapter 13

This lady from Duck Lake Saskatchewan remembers her years at the school as being pretty good.

"I went to the school when I was seven years old, and remained there for ten years," she said.

She remembered learning many things while she was there. "Sewing, knitting and weaving were some of the things we were taught," she said. "We also learned how to cook and work in the school bakery where we baked our own bread."

"Meals were very good, and the boys and girls got to sit in the same dining room at meal time."

They were never forced to stop speaking their language, and were allowed to talk to the boys.

"The nuns were kind and they would play games with the girls, and take us for walks," she remembered.

"There was always sports you could participate in."

She recalls having plays on special occasions, and families were allowed to visit on holidays.

"Sometimes we got the strap, but only when we deserved it," she said.

"We went to mass everyday and were allowed to say our prayers in Cree, and we also sang the hymns in Cree. High mass was said in Latin and sometimes we had to go to church two or three times a day."

The school remains open today, but it is not a residential school. It is run by the surrounding reserves, and many native children still attend the school she told me.

Chapter 14

This lady attended the school in 1934-35. It was very hard because she could not speak a word of English. During the two years she spent there she was known as number fifty-one.

One time she overheard the prefects talking, and they were saying that the reason the girls were not allowed to speak Indian was that they could make plans to run away.

"We got the strap for the least little thing," she recalls. If they were caught looking at the boys they would receive a slap, given with tremendous force. She remembers one time in church, one of the girls happened to look at the boys, and she was slapped across the face right in front of everyone by the prefect.

She remembers one girl furtively making her way outside to meet a boy. She was caught and received the strap across her bare back.

One time one of the girls didn't drink her tea at meal time so all the girls in that row were punished and for the next meal they only got bread and water.

She recalled one day climbing the stairs two steps at a time. One of the prefects caught her and struck her across the knuckles with a pointer.

"Young girls who wet their beds would be punished by having to stand in the play room with the wet sheets over their heads."

Jobs were assigned to everyone, but the one she remembers most is lining up and walking back and forth and carrying wood. Cleaning inside was probably the hardest because everything had to be spic and span. The prefect would come around to examine the cleaning the girls were doing and she can't imagine what would have happened if she ever found any dust.

They were allowed to write letters, but they would be censored. Once a month they got to watch a movie.

She remembers seeing the boys outside and they all had shaved heads.

The girls had to go to the chapel every morning to pray. On Sunday there was mass in the morning and vespers in the afternoon.

She said the school would have been pretty decent if they were more lenient.

Chapter 15

Learning to speak English was one of the hardest things for this woman when she was sent to the school at six years of age. She began to stutter when she was forced to speak English, then she was made fun of by the teacher in front of the class. She thinks now the taunting by the nuns is what caused her to stutter in the first place.

She was at the school from the mid 40's to the early 50's and number 50 is what she was called for the six years she spent there.

The girls were up by six a.m. everyday to go to mass before breakfast. On Sundays there was high and low mass and benediction in the evenings. Mass was said in Latin at that time and many of the hymns were also sung in Latin. She remembers learning how to sing the Latin hymns even before learning to speak English.

At the early age of six she always wondered what she had done wrong at home to be sent to this place where she didn't want to be. She didn't realize then that it was not her mother's wish that she was sent there. The Indian Agent ordered her to be sent to the school after her father's death.

"It just felt as if everything I loved was gone. I didn't even realize that my father was dead and never coming back until I was nine years old," she recalled.

"My favourite room in the whole school was an attic room where the beautiful costumes were kept. The costumes were used for the plays the girls put on once or twice a year." There was always a big audience at the play, so she assumed it must be the people from the community invited to the concert.

Christmas was not much different from any other day except they had an orange and six hard candies. "This was really a treat for us," she remembers.

She recalls being smart in school. Just after completing one half a year of grade five, she was advanced to grade six. The earlier grades were harder for her because she was left handed and the nuns forced her to use her right hand to write. This was confusing and resulted in messy work, then she would be punished for not being neater. If she was ever caught using her left hand she was whacked across the knuckles with a pointer.

She loved the sewing classes they had once a week and the embroidering lessons. The older girls were also taught to knit. The best part of the sewing class was the left over remnants of cloth.

"We were allowed to use these scrap materials to make little things for ourselves, such as a rag doll or a braided skipping rope. The dolls were our prized possession. It was the only thing we had that really belonged to us," she remembers.

Sometimes some of the girls would use rags to curl their hair. "I remember one time I had put the "rag curlers" in my hair at night and when I got in line to go to mass in the morning with my curly hair the nun gave me this very dirty and disgusting look. If looks could kill, I sure would have been dead that morning."

The nuns and prefects had ways of tricking the girls sometimes. "I remember one day they lined us up and said if we didn't want to go outside we would be allowed to go to our rooms instead. A bunch of us elected to go to our rooms because we were always so cold outside. Later we learned that the girls who stayed to go outside were allowed to stay indoors and play bingo. They had all kinds of "goodies" such as chocolate bars, candies and we were hurt that we were not told and allowed to play also."

"I can remember my younger brother telling me when he left the school that he hated and could no longer trust priest, because they didn't do as they preached."

"I remember the older girls telling me that the boys called the one priest a "beelzebub". In the bible this means the prince of demons."

"When I finally was allowed to leave the school, I found I didn't fit in anywhere," she recalls. "Back home everyone spoke Indian which I had almost completely forgotten while at the school. I didn't know how to act when in mixed groups as we were told all these years at the school that it was bad to associate with boys. It was very hard to adjust on the outside."

"One thing the residential school did for me was to make me a stronger person and very determined to go ahead with life which I have accomplished today."

Chapter 16

This native elder was ten years old when she was sent to the school. She spent seven years there - from 1914 to 1921. At that time she resided in Cochrane. She was known in school by the number eighty-five.

She says she really appreciates the things she learned in those seven years. Things like knitting, quilting, embroidering, and sewing. She also learned how to make braided rugs.

She enjoyed taking music lessons, and eventually played the organ in the chapel.

"The girls had to go to mass every morning."

"The meals were fair," she recalls. "For breakfast there was porridge, and there was choice of either sugar or milk, but not both. Lunch was a sandwich and dinner consisted of meat, potato and carrots. We never had tea, coffee or milk to drink. No desserts were ever served."

There were one hundred and two girls residing at the school at that time. "If we had brothers or relatives at the boys school, we were allowed to visit once a month," she said.

They used to have a play once a year just before going home for the summer.

She doesn't remember any abuse at the time she spent at the school, but she does recall not being able to speak the Native language. She talks of the time one of the girls ran away. It was in the winter and when she was found she was frozen to death in the kneeling position as if in prayer.

Some of the chores assigned to her were working in the kitchen, doing laundry, milking the cows, and feeding the chickens. "We also learned to make butter and to cook."

After leaving the school she met a wonderful gentleman whom she married in 1923. After her marriage they moved to the small community of Temagami.

She said she went trapping with her husband, and she learned how to skin and stretch the hides, besides raising five children.

Between the years of 1950 - 58, she worked for the O.N.R. as expense clerk, and in shipping and receiving.

From 1969 - 95 she worked for the Toronto Board of Education, travelling to different reserves all across the country teaching native crafts and the art of tanning hides.

Chapter 17

This gentleman was older than most boys when he went to the school in the early 50's. He wasn't sent there but was persuaded to go when the Indian Agent described the school as being very good. The agent told him he'd have a lot of fun there. By this time he was anxious to go to the school thinking of the nice place it would be to stay, with sports and other exciting things the Indian Agent had told him about. It was all the things a fourteen year old boy would enjoy.

"The meals were not very appetizing," he recalls. "Breakfast was always porridge which was cooked in a huge pot. Sometimes the oats in the centre of the pot weren't even cooked. You might get a spoonful of dry oats, but you couldn't dare complain. We ate it raw. Lunch was watery soup which was flavourless and supper was a potato and a piece of meat."

He felt like he was slowly starving to death.

Saturdays the boys had to clean inside the school. The worse job was stripping the wax off the hardwood floors. All of this was done by hand with steel wool. Then it had to be washed, waxed over, then polished. All the floors in the whole school were the same and they all had to be done every Saturday.

The kitchen was his favourite place to work. There he could eat the left overs which would ease the hunger somewhat.

One bad experience he remembered was while cleaning the dining room. He picked up a cup that happened to have a bit of coffee left in it, so he emptied it in the sink. He didn't realize one of the priests was standing behind him till he felt a powerful punch to the back of his head. He imagined it felt like being hit by a cannon ball.

He knew that the priest had much better meals than the boys did. Their food was fit for a king, but he never dared to ask why the boys couldn't have meals like that.

During his two years at the school he felt like a prisoner of war. "I was always cold and hungry, and we were always being told to line up for one thing or another. There was so many terrible things I had to endure while at the school."

"I really felt sorry for the smaller boys having to put up with all the hunger, cold and punishment in this place, just as the older boys did," he said.

He remembers one certain priest beating the boys. He thinks this priest got a thrill out of "hammering the shit out of the kids" as he puts it.

One time he saw three boys forced to lean over a bench, and get strapped across their bottoms.

He ran away three times during his two years at the school. The first time he was brought back his head was shaved as punishment. The second time he left with a friend. This time on his return he was strapped seventy-two lashes across his arms and wrists. "I think they wanted me to cry, but I wouldn't give them that satisfaction," he recalls. "I counted the sound of the strap as my friend took his punishment, and counted fifty-two whacks," he said. "My arms had purple welts up to my elbows."

The third time he ran away with his friend it was in early spring. They were out for a week. They walked along the railway tracks and through the woods. He remembers falling through the ice on the river but managed to pull himself out. During that week they had no food and it was still very cold. "But we managed to stay alive," he said.

Finally one day their journey was over. They were picked up by the police and placed in a jail cell until one of the priests arrived to pick them up. He remembers telling the police he would rather stay in jail than go back to the school.

He remembers there were movies to go to, but if your school work was not up to par you were not allowed to go.

He thinks there was too much religion forced on them because they were always praying or going to mass.

Today he has no use for the catholic religion because of how he was treated by the priest while he was attending the school.

He tells me if he ever met one of those priests today he would "kick the shit out of him" even if he was a hundred years old.

Sometimes, even today when he meets a priest somewhere, it makes him very uncomfortable because it brings back memories of the abuse he endured while at the school.

Chapter 18

This young lady told me of her husband's experiences at the school. He was sent there at an early age when his mother died. He was there from the early fifties to the mid sixties, and this is what she had to say.

He was always hungry and when he would ask for more food the nun would dig her finger nails into the back of his neck. This would happen constantly and he ended up having bruises and scabs where they were pinching him.

He would always try to steal food even though he knew he would be severely punished.

One time during lunch he saw a boy throw up in his food and the boy was forced to eat it anyway.

Once he was very sick and his father visited him. He brought his son some gifts but after he left one of the nuns took his gifts and give him a slap across the head.

One day he witnessed a boy being beaten with a stump outside. He was thinking to himself "why doesn't one of the older boys jump in to stop it".

When some of the boys were punished, occasionally they went missing. When others asked where they were, the priest said they ran away or must have got lost in the forest.

Every so often a plane would pass over the school and drop off boxes of things for the children. One time the boxes contained skates and all of the kids were happy because they thought they were able to go skating.

As soon as the nuns found out they made the children line up and toss their skates into the furnace.

He also told her that one time they went camping and at nightfall the nuns took some of the boys into their tents.

The nuns told the boys to never look at the girls. Upon leaving the school he went into the city to enter high school. Once he started high school he was surprised to see all the girls, especially in the same class.

She told me he didn't know what it felt like to be loved or hugged by anyone. She thinks it was caused by the mistreatment and all the horrible things he had to endure while being at the residential school.

She says he was very intelligent but the constant abuse got to him, and she thinks this is why he lives the way he does today.

Chapter 19

"War stories" is what this young gentleman said when I asked him about the school. He resides in North Bay, but originally he was from British Columbia. He was six years old at the time he was sent to the school and he remained there for five years, from 1966-71. The school was called Kamloops Indian Residential School and it was the largest school in the province.

He told me, "This wasn't a school, it was a prison".

"As soon as you entered the school your head was shaved right off the bat," he remembers.

"The strap looked huge back then, but I only received it once."

There were other boys punished by being locked in a dark room, but he does not know what went on in that room.

"It was rough! The boys were fighting amongst themselves." It was even worse for him. Being a half breed the other boys would pick on him.

They were whipped if they were heard speaking Indian.

"By attending the school and being forced to speak only the English language I lost the Native language," he recalled.

The boys were put into groups to work cleaning inside and outside.

One half of the building housed the boys and the girls occupied the other half, but they were not allowed to speak to each other.

There was three floors, and each floor held fifty to sixty boys.

He remembers being hungry all of the time. He said, "The meals were the worst of everything. You had to eat even though the food wasn't any good, and at most meals there was always a few boys vomiting".

Sundays there was mass all morning and again after lunch until supper.

He told me the priest and nuns that were sent to the school to teach had to be the best of the worst. He thought they acted more like convicts or the meanest people they could find on the street, instead of the religious people they were supposed to be.

The reasoning for the severe discipline at such an early age was so the children would realize that the priest and nuns were in control.

After leaving this school he had some terrible experiences because he did not know what to do with all the freedom.

CONCLUSION

These are only a few of the thousands of Native children forced to attend Residential schools between 1913 and the 1970's.

For a fortunate few the experience was pleasant. For the majority the experience left a lasting legacy of pain.

We cannot change the past but we can learn from it.

We cannot end the pain but by breaking the silence we can help the healing.

These individuals have opened the hearts that we may all learn from their past so that someday soon we may all live together in harmony.