

**Residential School Experience at Nbisiing
Nbissing Nishnaabeg Gaabinaadziwaad Gamig (NFN Culture Center)
Nipissing University – Katrina Srigley**

Introduction:

This part of the newsletter speaks about histories that are filled with sadness and violence. They are difficult to comprehend. If you need support, please reach out to those in your circle who provide you with support, to Elders in our community skilled in counselling, and community health services at Nipissing First Nation or in your surrounding community.

Contact information for those able to provide this support include:

Giyak Moseng/Right Path Counselling and Prevent Services, Nipissing First Nation, 705 753-1375

Giwedno Mshkikiiwgamig/Indigenous Hub, North Bay, ON, 705 995-0060

The events of recent months that have uncovered the unmarked graves of children at institutions called residential schools, do not surprise many people in nations that have long listened to and learned from the stories of grandmothers, grandfathers, parents, siblings, cousins, aunties, and uncles who experienced these places. They have encouraged some Nbisiing Nishnaabeg to ask the Culture and Heritage department to share more information about the Nipissing experience at these institutions.

As we shared in our last submission to the newsletter from our work for *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing*, commitment to and advocacy for teaching and learning plays an important role in the history of Nbisiing Nishnaabeg. This includes fights for educational rights, schools, Nishnaabemwin and culturally-grounded teaching and learning, and to ensure the truth of the past is understood that have been led by Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewag and Nishnaabeniini for more than one hundred and fifty years. We hold these stories close, while also holding space for histories that include experiences of learning that were not about education at all, but rather about genocidal violence, indoctrination, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and the intent to destroy families, nations, and ways of life.

In response to requests from Nation members and as we look toward Orange Shirt Day on September 30, 2021, we will expand the histories available on the Culture and Heritage website related to the history of these institutions, including personal reflections, historical documents, and photographs. We will share a reading list. We also intend this to be a living page and hope that those who want to share family and related histories, or responses written, artistic, or recorded to what they learn, will reach out to Glenna Beaucage in the Culture and Heritage department at 705 753-2050. We begin with a submission from life-long educator and historian, Randy Sawyer.

Reflections on the Experience of Residential “Schools” at Nipissing

Randy Sawyer

While the colonial agenda and genocidal intent that structured residential schools — “kill the Indian in the child” — was consistent across this country, the Indigenous residential school experience varied greatly. Several factors influenced this including the length of colonial incursion, land theft, government policy, and location on Turtle Island. For instance, the residential school program intensified in the west alongside a desire to control and steal land. There were more residential schools out west than in the east.¹ Personally, I don’t consider residential schools, schools or educational institutions. They were mostly assimilation institutions

Indigenous communities sometimes established their own colonial schools on their territory. This was one way to resist sending children to the residential schools, though it was not always a successful form of resistance. Indigenous communities that had their own schools sometimes did not have to send their children to residential schools. These schools are known as Indian Day Schools. This was the situation with Bear Island, Dokis Bay, Rama, Nipissing and other communities. The same rules for assimilation, such as discouraging the use of their languages and practicing cultural ways of life, were applied in the Indian Day Schools.

At Nipissing, there were three different Indian Day Schools operating at different times. The first school built on the Nipissing Reserve was at Neyaaba’aakwaang (Duchesnay/Couchie Point) in 1884 by my great-great grandfather Jocko (Ganibinoke) Couchi for \$500.00. It was a school for about 10 years when it closed because not enough students attended. The second school was built at Mskwaawaabikang (Beaucage) in 1888 and was in operation until 1919. The closing might have something to do with the Spanish Flu that was circulating throughout the communities at that time. The third school was built at Gtigaaning (Garden Village) in 1905. It was in operation until late 1950’s / early 1960’s (approximations)

An example of how experiences in these institutions, Residential Institutions and Indian Day Schools, affected my family. My mother was the last one in her family to attend the Spanish Residential School. When she first went there she could not speak English only her first language of Nibisiing nishnaabemwin. She is the last fluent speaker in her family; all her younger siblings understand our first language thoroughly but they don’t carry on conversations in the language. The residential school experience ended the fluency of nishnaabemwin in my mother’s family. My father’s experience was different. He attended the Rama Indian Day School. They were discouraged from speaking our first language at school; however, when school was over for the day he went home and became Nishnaabe again. Everyone in his family is fluent in their language (Ojibwe/Chippewa), even the grandchildren raised by my grandparents.

Language repression happened for several reasons, all of which supported cultural genocide. As our language speakers remind us, our way of life is embedded in our language. English and French were the languages of the colonizers. The role Nishnaabemwin played in teaching and

¹ To see the location of these institutions across this country visit:

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools-in-canada-interactive-map>

learning relationships shifted in time and place. The missionaries who came to the shores of Lake Nipissing or whom our ancestors met while visiting our Wendaki allies learned our languages. They had little choice if they wanted to be welcomed in our nations. The intensification of the colonial project and land theft by the end of the 19th century, meant that language destruction became a cornerstone of genocidal colonial policy. Interrupting the use of Indigenous languages helped “kill the Indian in the child” because it severed connections between children their families, nations, and territories, their way of life. The repression of the language was also necessary from a functional standpoint for the teachers of the Indigenous children because they did not understand Indigenous languages and had no incentive to learn them. Rather than learn indigenous languages they forced the children to learn English or French in support of their civilizing agenda. In fact, education was not really the mandate of these institutions.

The residential school experience for the Nbisiing Nishinaabeg is also quite varied. Not everyone attended residential school or they attended at different times. The residential school that the Nipissing children attended was in Spanish, Ontario. This was a Roman Catholic school. The Roman Catholic Church was quite territorial so only Roman Catholics could attend. On the Nipissing Reserve there were families that were not Roman Catholics and, as a result, their experiences were different. Frank Commanda’s family is one example. Frank was from Nipissing and so like most Nbisiing Nishinaabeg was Roman Catholic. Frank married Priscilla Snache, Nishnaabekwe from the Rama Reserve. Most Rama Nishnaabeg were Protestant, United Church. As a result, some of Frank’s children were Catholic and some were Protestant. The ones who were Catholic went to the Spanish Residential School. ²

While Protestant and Anglican churches also ran residential schools, Shingwauk Residential School in nearby Sault Ste Marie for instance, the focus of the Nipissing Indian Agents and colonial officials was Spanish. This might explain why the residential school experience on the Nipissing Reserve was quite varied. My grandparents never attended residential school but their children up to my mother did. That is when my grandfather told the Indian Agent that his children didn’t want to go to residential school anymore but would attend school in North Bay. They were lucky that in that time and place and with that Indian Agent it worked.

Sources of Knowledge

Visits with my mother, Delma Sawyer

Public Archives of Canada, Record Group 10, Chiefs and Councilors – Nipissing Band-Robinson Huron Treaty, Ontario.

“Nipissing Indian Reserve dates back to year 1850”, Nugget, [North Bay], Friday, June 30, 1967

² Gchi-miigwech to Sue Commanda for reviewing and providing us with information for this paragraph.