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Aboriginal apartheid

Residential schools haunt a community decades after their demise

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PHIL HOSSACK / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

A home-made plaque, dedicated to former students of the Brandon Indian Residential School, lies tucked in the rubble of the building.

For more than a century, Indian residential schools were Canada's way to teach aboriginal children the English language, the Christian religion, Canadian values and work skills.

The state-sponsored, church-run network of 80 schools peaked in the 1920s with an enrolment of more than 17,000 children. In the early years — decades before reports of student abuse and mistreatment — inspectors reported overcrowding, disease, death and hunger in the schools.

Graves are not an uncommon sight on the old school grounds. At least three children are buried at the grounds of the Brandon Indian Residential School; more may be lost in the undergrowth. Tuberculosis epidemics that swept the Prairies like grass fires a century ago exacted death tolls as high as 24 per cent in some schools, say reports from the era.

Saturday Night editors who read the reports at the time registered their shock in response: "Even war seldom shows as large a percentage of fatalities as does the education system we have imposed on our Indian wards."

More recent reports by churches and government have condemned the institutions for the generations of children who suffered sexual, physical and psychological abuse in addition to the loss of aboriginal identity, family, culture and languages.

In the summer of 2006, Free Press reporter Alexandra Paul and photographer Phil Hossack set out to document the last vestiges of Manitoba's residential school system. The schools that still stand are crumbling; survivors are aging.

Former Grand Chief Dennis White Bird, now the treaty commissioner for Manitoba, linked the pair up with residential school survivors.

Here are their stories

http://media.winnipegfreepress.com/documents/aboriginal_apartheid.pdf