

**Source: Edmonton Journal**

**Date: 2005.12.04**

**Byline: Ed Struzik**

**The Dunbow School: A blueprint for despair: The abuses of Indian residential schools have haunted aboriginal people in Canada for generations. Historical records of the first such school show how the experiment, created with good intentions by religious leaders, was doomed from the start**

DUNBOW - In spring 2001, a group of aboriginal elders gathered along the banks of the Highwood River in southern Alberta. They had come on this grey, chilly day to rebury the remains of dozens of children who died while attending St. Joseph's, the Indian residential school that once stood here.

Leo Cattleman, an elder representing the Montana First Nations at Hobbema, delivered one of the eulogies.

"We live in a spiritual world, and when we bury the deceased their bodies go back to Mother Earth, but their spirit lives on," Cattleman said. "Now these little children's spirits are in a peaceful resting place and they will have no more sorrow and no more hurt."

Four years later, Douglas McHugh isn't so sure.

The 84-year-old farmer says he still gets the creeps every time he looks at the new cemetery near the head of his long driveway.

"The fact is no one gave those kids much thought until my older brother, Pat, complained that some of the coffins from the original gravesite were popping out of the banks of the river and in danger of getting washed downstream," says McHugh.

"Only then did the government come down and move them over to this site. Nobody ever came back after the reburial to pay their respects or to even mow down the weeds. It's like those poor kids never belonged to anybody."

McHugh can still recall many of those who attended St. Joseph's Industrial School, also known as Dunbow School. One of them was Tom Three Persons, who won the world bronc riding championship at the Calgary Stampede in 1912.

"You can still see the cartoon that he scratched out in the wood frame up in the meat house," McHugh says. "It's of girls. Kind of indecent, the sort of thing you'd expect from young bucks. He and Maurice McDougall and Charlie Royal, they did all right after they left here.

"The rest of them? I don't know. When I was a kid, some of the students who once lived here would stop by with their horses on their way to the Calgary Stampede. Some missed the place. Others, well, I think it's fair to say they felt differently."

Built in 1883 for a modest \$12,420, St Joseph's was the first of three industrial schools in Western Canada that became the prototype for more than a hundred so-called **residential schools** that were set up across the country.

Situated in a lush, low-lying valley along what was once the Blackfoot Trail, far from the Indian reserves in southern Alberta, St. Joseph's was initially headed by Albert Lacombe, the legendary Oblate missionary. It and two others like it, at Qu'Appelle and Battleford in Saskatchewan, set the stage for one of the most tragic social experiments in Canadian history.

For a century after those first three institutions opened, aboriginal children of all ages were rounded up by Indian agents and Mounties and transported by boat, buggy, bus, train and bush plane to schools dozens, and sometimes hundreds, of kilometres away from their parents. There, they would be met by priests, nuns and laypeople who cut their hair, bundled up their Indian clothing and, in most cases, prohibited them from speaking their own language or from writing home.

For many of these children, the regimented days of early rising, chores, prayers, academic and practical learning in a world devoid of family and affection was agony. Hundreds ran away in those early years. The ones who were caught would sometimes return to the same kind of beatings other children received for speaking in their own tongue, falling asleep at their desk or wetting their beds at night.

Vulnerable to the diseases that European settlers brought west with them, an extraordinary number of children died at the schools. In all, 73 children perished at Dunbow during its 38 years of operation; 50 pupils died at Qu'Appelle in just its first eight years.

By the time Dunbow closed in 1924, it was, according to its Oblate principal, "in a sad plight," with many parts "entirely unfit for human habitation." Only 26 students, one-fifth of what the school housed in the 1890s, were registered. Conditions were so bad that an agent for the Blood Indians complained he could not in good conscience refer children to the school anymore.

One woman who had visited her two boys in the summer of 1914 was horrified to find their feet badly bruised and swollen because they had been without boots for three months. Another claimed that his two grandchildren were "being abused worse than animals."

Even newspapers weighed in on the controversy. On July 14, 1914, the Calgary News Telegram described Dunbow students as "running wild, eating gophers and without shoes, hats or clothing."

The toll of hard work and abuse was reflected in the records of 15 students who were tracked four years after graduation. Only one, James Rainy Chief, had made a good life for himself. Most of the others were well along a dead-end trail. Bob Plaited Hair and John Red Crane were in jail for the fourth time. Joe Crazy Horse, Peter Bruised Head, Frank Daly, Peter Black Rabbit, Percy Plain Woman and Sam Wolf Sitting all had prison records as well.

The school was also in a financial mess. By 1924, unpaid bills had reached a staggering \$4,324.19. The Oblate missionaries and Grey Nuns who ran the school were owed by the government more than \$8,000 in salary that they had deferred in order to keep it going. Students were kept so busy doing farm work to help the bottom line that in 1917 they went four months without picking up a pencil.

Today, all that is left of the school is the gravesite, a huge, sagging red barn, the ice and slaughter houses, and the shell of a wood-frame cabin that once housed the carpenters and tradespeople who worked at the school before it closed.

The school registry, however, remains. It and dozens of letters the school's principals sent to the federal government painfully demonstrate why St. Joseph's, and other schools like it, failed so miserably in educating and assimilating Canada's aboriginal children.

Albert Lacombe never envisaged any of this when he and Vital Grandin, the bishop of St. Albert, developed a plan in the early 1880s for educating Indian children in Western Canada. Having lived with the Blackfoot, Cree and other tribes when they were prosperous hunting cultures, both priests were mortified to see how the Indians had been reduced to catching gophers and mice and killing their own dogs to feed their starving families after signing treaties and settling on reserves.

Realizing the great buffalo herds that had sustained the Indians' nomadic ways would never come back, Lacombe and Grandin felt it was their Christian duty to provide them with the skills they needed to take part in the new, white man's economy. This was in keeping with the philosophy of Charles-Joseph-Eugene de Mazenod, founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Lacombe and Grandin regarded the destitute Indians of the Prairies in the same light as de Mazenod saw the poor of France -- as valuable but uncherished members of society who had to be saved.

The "poor redman's redemption" was the "dream of my days and nights," according to Lacombe, writing in his unpublished memoirs.

The blueprint for their education plan took shape in 1880 following Grandin's visit to a reformatory school for young offenders in Citeux, France. Grandin was impressed with the way the boys were educated, and he and Lacombe envisaged a similar program in Canada in which Indian children at Oblate-run schools built with government money would be "continually under the moral and civilizing influences of devoted teachers."

Though well-intentioned, the Oblate plan was doomed to failure. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald never really warmed to the idea of the federal government building the schools and giving the Oblates, or any other religious group, exclusive control over their administration.

But with the signing of treaties in the 1870s that legally committed the government to providing aboriginal children with an education, he had no choice. He also had to find a way to curtail the rising costs of feeding the starving Indians on the reserves. And so, as a national goal,

Macdonald embarked on a plan "to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people ... as speedily as they are fit to change."

Macdonald, however, did not go to the Catholic or Protestant leaders who had some experience and very strong ideas on education, the cornerstone of any plan for assimilation. Instead, he commissioned Toronto journalist Nicholas Flood Davin, a former British war correspondent, to go to the United States in 1879 to see if the industrial school system for Indians there could serve as a model for Canada.

Davin had no expertise in this area, but Macdonald had a penchant for hiring and rewarding his friends with political appointments.

Davin's was not the most comprehensive of inquiries. After meeting with the American commissioner of Indian affairs, a few other high ranking officials and some Cherokee leaders in Washington, he briefly visited an industrial school in Minnesota.

Swayed by what he had seen and been told, Davin returned to Canada convinced that day schools close to or on reserves were not the answer. "The child who goes to day school learns little," he wrote, "and what little he learns is soon forgotten, while his tastes are fashioned at home, and his inherited aversion to toil is in no way combated."

Davin headed West for a first-hand look at the so-called "Indian problem" and consulted with Lacombe and Alexandre-Antonin Tache, the bishop of St. Boniface, whom he considered the only clerics "who could speak with authority" on the subject.

Initially, Tache was reluctant to buy into Davin's plan, not because it was cruel to separate young children from their parents but because he didn't want the government interfering in missionary work. Ultimately, Lacombe and Grandin got him to reconsider. They argued that the future of their missionary life in Western Canada would fail if they forfeited this opportunity to promote their cause through the schools. Lacombe convinced Tache that, in time, the government could be persuaded to do the right thing.

Time proved Lacombe to be tragically wrong.

No one in government, it seemed, cared much for Lacombe's vision of getting the most talented and dedicated people teaching at **residential schools**. In fact, Lawrence Vankoughnet, the deputy superintendent of Indian Affairs, made it clear he would not allow residential school teachers to be paid as much as their public school counterparts for fear that they would attract good ones away from the city.

When Lacombe and Tache proposed instead to use the Sisters of Charity to make up for the teacher shortfall they knew would inevitably result, Vankoughnet reluctantly agreed, but only on condition that the nuns' pay did not exceed the meagre sums that went to the matron and cook.

Another policy that doomed the **residential schools** from the start was basing their funding on the number of pupils enrolled.

Getting children to attend St. Joseph's and other **residential schools** proved to be a constant challenge. Neither Lacombe nor Grandin foresaw the possibility that the Blackfoot, the Bloods, the Stoney and the Sarcee might not want to give up their children to distant institutions where they would be placed under the care of white people who had treated them so terribly.

Nor did they realize the blunder of bringing Hayter Reed, the assistant Indian commissioner, along on their first recruiting drive. As a former military man who had risen from drill instructor to garrison adjutant of the entire force in Western Canada, Reed was not well regarded by prairie Indians.

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For example, when Indian Commissioner Edgar Dewdney ordered the closing of Fort Walsh in southwestern Saskatchewan in spring 1883 with the aim of getting Big Bear and his followers to settle on reserves, Reed cut off their rations to get them to capitulate. And when told to deal with destitute Indians on the reserves "as economically as possible", Reed insisted that every Indian work for rations no matter how desperate their health or circumstances.

Among prairie Indians, Reed came to be known as Iron Heart, and his boss, Dewdney, became Man With Four Tongues.

Not surprisingly, the Bloods on the Peigan reserve wanted no part of what Lacombe and Reed proposed on that first trip south.

Still, Lacombe was optimistic when he returned to St. Joseph's after his old friend, Crowfoot, the great Blackfoot chief, promised to do what he could to get Indian children into the school.

Unfortunately for Lacombe, Crowfoot's influence with his people had waned. In 1878 he led the Blackfoot across the American border on horseback searching for buffalo that had largely disappeared from Western Canada. Three years later they returned on foot, hungrier and more desperate than ever. More than 1,000 members of the Blackfoot Confederacy had perished in that time, and many who were still alive were appalled by the way they were being treated by both Canadian Indian agents and the Americans who got the contracts to distribute food to them.

Not only were some families not getting the food rations the government had promised, others were being subjected to the indignity of having to bid on the offal and steer heads that were supposed to be distributed to them for free. Each time the young warriors tried to retaliate, Crowfoot lost face by insisting on keeping the peace.

Ultimately, all Crowfoot could send Lacombe were eight boys who, according to the school registry, were much "too big and too well acquainted with the Indian fashion to remain in an Institution like this."

Still, Lacombe did his best to make the students comfortable.

Initially, the boys revelled in the strange design of the school and furniture. Most of them had never seen the inside of a building like that and they had trouble fathoming what stairs, desks and big mirrors were all about. Things were actually looking up on the third night of their stay when Lacombe made them "sore with laughter" with his "Magic Lantern" entertainment.

But it was all downhill after that.

First, the building had structural problems. Lacombe got nowhere begging government officials to fix the toilets that were backing up into the school and contaminating the water well.

"I must repeat again what has already been named to you before; the urgent necessity of having the indoor water closet put in good order," he wrote in January 1885. "They are utterly useless. You can understand how ... detrimental to health it is for the boys to have to use the outside closets at night -- especially in winter weather."

Then it was the challenge of getting instructors, books and enough food for the pupils. When Lacombe complained what the government was allocating wasn't nearly enough, officials instructed him to cut food rations to make ends meet.

"Received your letter of the 13th in which you advise me to alter the sugar ration," Lacombe stated after complaining many times that the students did not have enough to eat.

"All right! I will arrange it this way. Sundays and Thursdays, I will give the full ration of sugar and other days serve tea without it because the small quantity from one source gives no taste at all. If I am going against the rules and wishes of the Dept., please let me know."

The government, in fact, was so miserly that at one point officials demanded Lacombe account for the bags of oats he had bought that first winter to feed the horses that transported supplies from Calgary.

Officials also refused to spend a penny to furnish the chapel in the school.

"You say that it is more than doubtful that the Department will furnish anything!!" wrote Lacombe in an uncharacteristic show of anger. "Very strange indeed!. Well, never mind, in my official report, I will state that I was obliged (with my own salary) to furnish what was absolutely necessary from the beginning."

By spring of that first school year, Lacombe was still waiting for plows and other agricultural equipment he needed to put in the crops he hoped would help feed students and staff. Nor had the books arrived.

"I have the honour to inform you that I have received in due time one Map of the World and one of the Dominion of Canada as promised in your letter of January 14th," Lacombe states facetiously in a letter to Vankoughnet on March 18, 1884. "I have not yet received the school books promised in the same letter."

Without the books, agricultural equipment or instructors the government had promised, students had little to do that first year but cause trouble.

Just two weeks after the first boys arrived, a group of Indians showed up at St. Joseph's, taunting the new pupils and trying, according to the school registry, "to demoralize them." Three of the students ran away with the troublemakers, only to return the next day cold, hungry and promising to be good.

The peace, however, did not last long. After three more boys were delivered in late November, the registrar of the school noted things were getting out of hand. One angry young man, for example, showed up to take his young brother home just before another student "who is too bad to keep" ran away.

By December 1884, Lacombe was so frustrated he finally expelled three of the worst troublemakers.

It didn't do much good. With every new batch of boys brought in that cold, nasty winter, another departure or expulsion soon followed. To make matters worse, many Indian families began setting up camp around St. Joseph's so they could get food for their hungry children or visit those who were enrolled. When some of these parents tried to take their children away, Lacombe resorted to bribery.

"I bought with my own money more than \$100 worth of candies and toys etc. to make them pleased and fond of the place," he wrote. "So ignorant and stupid of what is for their good."

By the time March 1885 rolled in, Lacombe was at his wit's end and begging the government for help. Knowing he had to expel more of the older boys if he was ever going to regain control of the situation, he called in the Mounties to make sure there would be no serious incident when he sent the troublemakers away.

The police remained at the school for five days before the threat of a Metis rebellion led by Louis Riel compelled them to go back to Calgary.

As a man who could only see the good in people, Lacombe never seemed to grasp that neither Dewdney nor any other government official had any intention of providing meaningful financial support for the school.

Dewdney was hardly empathetic to the plight of the Indians. Trained as a civil engineer, he emigrated from Great Britain in 1859 hoping to cash in on the gold rush in the British Columbia interior. Macdonald, his friend, offered him the job of Indian commissioner in the winter of 1879 after two other candidates rejected it.

Loud, pompous and ambitious, Dewdney only took the job because his get-rich-quick schemes had failed to elevate him to the lofty status in society he so much desired.

Throughout his tenure, Dewdney regarded the Indians as "worthless and lazy." The only way of getting them to work, he believed, was to withhold food and rations, no matter how desperate they were. Even Macdonald expressed concern at one point about the way Dewdney allowed Reed to starve out Big Bear and his followers from the Cypress Hills in 1882 so that he could scatter them across a number of reserves.

That Dewdney was "self-seeking, brusque and tyrannical," as the opposition Liberals charged, was never debatable. Yet Macdonald refused to fire his old friend.

Dewdney liked reserves not because they offered any hope for the Indians but because he knew that in them "no place of rendezvous will be found where food can be had without a return of work being extracted."

It was Dewdney, not Vankoughnet, who outlined to the last flake of pepper what the government was willing to provide each student at St. Joseph's and other schools.

Dewdney dictated that for each month of attendance, students should be limited to one pound of flour, one pound of beef, a half pound of bacon, eight ounces of tea, two ounces of sugar, a half ounce of rice, one ounce of dried apples, three ounces of oatmeal, a half ounce of pepper and three gallons of syrup.

One senses that Lacombe was actually relieved the day he received a telegram from Prime Minister Macdonald asking him to go to Blackfoot Crossing to dissuade Crowfoot and his people from joining the Metis rebellion.

The school was in chaos by that time. With news of a possible insurrection, many of the children at St. Joseph's had either run off or had been taken away by their parents. Those who remained were "about as much at home as wild cats in a beaver lodge," according to the acting principal.

In the end, Lacombe succeeded in securing a pledge that the Blackfoot would support the government in the war on the Metis and Cree.

While Lacombe did not return to St. Joseph's, he never stopped trying to get the government to properly fund the schools, even though Dewdney and other officials gave him little hope that things would change. Each time he wrote, he would get a polite, but negative, response.

"The Department does not desire that any loss to the Church should occur," Hayter Reed wrote Lacombe as late as 1893. "But it was expected that (residential) schools would employ officials at less wages and buy the necessary provisions at a cheaper rate."

On and on it went like this until the day St. Joseph's closed for good in 1924.

The failure of St. Joseph's eventually drove Lacombe to write a letter -- a manifesto of sorts -- outlining what the government needed to do to make the schools succeed.

"When willing, (Indian children) are fit to learn," he wrote to Dewdney.



But if the government wanted these schools to work, he advised, agents would have to stop bringing in older boys who could not change their ways.

He suggested that no child over the age of eight be allowed in for any reason. He also recommended that parents be bribed or rewarded in some cases to give up their children and then be prohibited from camping near the schools.

"The Indian Department must at once well understand and put in mind, that among the four tribes of Blackfeet, Bloods, Peigan and Sarcies, no one is willing to depart with the small ones," he wrote. "It is impossible to make them understand that it is for their welfare."

Evidently, Lacombe was willing to go to extreme measures to ensure the schools' success. Should the Indian parents persist in keeping their children at home, he advised, it might be "necessary to bring pressure in some way to bear upon them as by threatening and deprivations of rations."

And if a child ran away, he added, "the principal will inform the agent of the reserve to which the child belongs, and they shall bring him back, willing or not willing, (and) to call for the police if necessary."

Finally, Lacombe wrote it was "a great mistake" to believe that schools like the one at St. Joseph's could succeed without the power to punish students who misbehaved. Some form of "coercion" was essential, he said.

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Given his gentle nature, Lacombe would have been appalled by the extremes to which the government eventually adopted his recommendations.

While corporal punishment was universally regarded at the time as an acceptable way of dealing with unruly school children, it was evident that over the next century, many residential school teachers were overzealous, even sadistic at times, in the way they administered it. Charges of sexual abuses in some cases proved to be true as well.

The sad truth is what happened at St. Joseph's during its 38 years was tame compared to what went on at other **residential schools** right up until the 1960s. David Laird, a government education official, said as much in 1907 in his report on the residential school at Norway House in Manitoba.

In one case, a boy named Charlie Cline was whipped so many times for bedwettings over an eight-year period that he finally ran away "in weather so severe that his toes were frozen and he will lose them."

"The severity of the punishment" Laird wrote, was not "in accordance with Christian methods."

In another case, Indian agent D.L. Clink refused to return one child to a residential school in Red Deer after the boy was hospitalized because of repeated beatings.

"Such brutality should not be tolerated for a moment and would not be tolerated in a white school for a single day in any part of Canada," he wrote.

Frank Oliver, the powerful Alberta MP, was one of the few politicians of the time who questioned the morality of ripping Indian children from their families and putting them in **residential schools**. "I hope you will excuse me for speaking but one of the most important commandments laid upon the human by the divine is love and respect by children for parents. It seems strange that in the name of religion a system of education should have been instituted, the foundation principle of which not only ignored but contradicted this command."

Oliver's grave doubts notwithstanding, the Canadian government amended the Indian Act in 1920, making it mandatory for aboriginal parents to send their children to Indian **residential schools**.

The legislation dictated that "every Indian child between the ages of seven and 15 years who is physically able shall attend such day, industrial or boarding school as may be designated by the Superintendent General for the full periods during which such school is open each year."

By 1935, the Oblates pretty much conceded that **residential schools** were failing to do what Lacombe and Grandin had hoped. Gabriel Breynat, the Oblate missionary of Mackenzie, suggested that to prevent the "Indian language and Indian life from passing into oblivion," schools should "introduce Native languages in the Indian schools together with courses in syllabics."

The Department of Indian Affairs rejected the idea.

As became the pattern over a century, bureaucrats like Dewdney, Reed and Vankoughnet clung to the same philosophy that guided the government when St. Joseph's was established in 1884.

By 1950, **residential schools** were so starved for resources and teachers and so far behind the public school system in Canada, according to one study, that "over 40 per cent of the teaching staff had no professional training. Indeed, some had not even graduated from high school."

Only one out of 10 aboriginal children by that time had gone beyond Grade 6. So miserable were the conditions in many of these schools that one department superintendent wryly noted that if he "were appointed by the Dominion government for the express purpose of spreading tuberculosis, there is nothing finer in existence than the average Indian residential school."

Albert Lacombe and Vital Grandin's plan for educating the aboriginal children of Canada may never have worked. Separating children from their parents was not the way to solve First Nations problems. But the fact is that from the outset, the federal government never gave the churches the resources they needed to evolve and adapt a better system of educating Canada's aboriginal people.

Inevitably, the "dreams" of Lacombe's "days and nights" never had a chance to succeed.

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