

Author of Abandoned Manitoba explores site of old Birtle Indian residential school | CBC News Loaded Manitoba

Derelict, historical buildings across Prairie province gain new life in book by Gordon Goldsboroug

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Abandoned Manitoba launched in Winnipeg on Tuesday. (Great Plains Publications)

A new Winnipeg book that explores historical old buildings across Manitoba devotes one chapter to the site of a former Indian residential school.

In one section of Abandoned Manitoba: From Residential Schools to Bank Vaults to Grain Elevators, author and historian Gordon Goldsborough visits the old Birtle Indian Residential School, where he describes the derelict building and what went on behind its doors decades ago.

- ***New book uncovers places left behind in Manitoba's past***

The book, published by Great Plains Publication, hit shelves at McNally Robinson and other book stores Tuesday.

The following is an excerpt from the chapter "Birtle Indian Residential School."



A present-day photo of the old Birtle Indian Residential School. (Great Plains Publications)

I was sitting in the Birdtail Country Museum, in the village of Birtle in western Manitoba, perusing a thick scrapbook. It had been compiled by a woman named May Kenny and donated to the museum by her friend, Edith Rusaw, probably after her death. Miss Kenny had been born at East Selkirk and, in 1946, after teaching at public schools around Manitoba for 15 years, she came to Birtle to teach at the Indian Residential School on a hill overlooking the town. Over the course of the next 25 years, she taught, supervised, helped in the school's garden, and cooked meals, right up to the day before her death in 1968.

The scrapbook contains photos of children — some smiling, some not — and a group of staff members. There was Miss Kenny standing on the left, behind Edith Rusaw, who was the Matron. On the opposite side sat Martin Rusaw, Edith's husband, the school's Principal. In the middle was teacher Harry Shafransky, who would later serve for eight years as an MLA.

Are these the faces of evil people, I wondered, who could do unspeakable things to innocent children? I reminded myself that it is possible for good people to do bad things through ignorance. Perhaps that is what explains complaints from those who attended the school.

Yet, it was a different time, when justice was often brutally and indiscriminately dispensed, and attitudes were routinely coloured by racism, ageism, and sexism. Conflicting emotions fill me as I close the scrapbook and head off to look at the old Birtle Residential School for myself.

The Indian residential school system in Canada operated for roughly one hundred years as an initiative of the federal government. Children were taken from their home communities, away from family and cultural influences, and prohibited from speaking their native languages.

The expectation was that the education they received would integrate them as contributing members into the broader Canadian society. It is estimated that some 150,000 children passed through the system.

Persistent allegations of psychological, nutritional, and sexual abuses were finally addressed by a Truth and Reconciliation Commission appointed in 2008 by the federal government. Manitoba has played a major role in that process; the Commission was chaired by local Indigenous lawyer and judge Murray Sinclair, and the information amassed by the Commission during its five-year mandate led to the establishment of an ongoing National Centre of Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba.

At one time or another, residential schools operated at several places around Manitoba, in addition to the one at Birtle: Brandon (1895-1972), Camperville (1890-1969), Dauphin (1955-1988), Elkhorn (1889-1949), Fisher River (1874-1963), Fort Alexander (1905-1970), Norway House (1899-1967), Portage la Prairie (1891-1975), Sandy Bay (1905-1970), The Pas (1914-1933), Waterhen (1890-1900), and Winnipeg (1958-1973). Most were operated by churches, including the Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists (United), and Anglicans, usually with financial contributions from the government.



Students from the Birtle Indian Residential School. (Great Plains Publications)

The first facility at Birtle for the education of Indigenous children was known as the "Stone School." Built between 1882 and 1883, the two-storey stone structure was used for three years as a public school for the non-indigenous children of Birtle. Then, the government leased it as a boarding school for children from the Birdtail, Keeseekoowenin, Rolling River, and Waywayseecappo reserves. They used it for a year or two then, in 1894, moved into a newly-built, two-storey stone building on the north hill overlooking Birtle.

Operated later by the Women's Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the school's mandate was to provide a general education as well as vocational training at a model farm next to the school. The farm raised dairy cattle, pigs, laying chickens, sheep, and turkeys; grew a variety of root vegetables in gardens around the campus; and cultivated cereal crops and livestock hay on some 600 acres of land, all to offset food costs for the staff and students. In 1935, the federal government provided a grant of \$144.50 for each student attending the school. The remaining funds were raised by the Women's Missionary Society.

In June 1930, construction of a brick replacement for the 1894 stone structure was undertaken by the Claydon Brothers Construction Company of Winnipeg. It had a steel skeleton, reinforced concrete floors, and walls made of red bricks and concrete blocks. A full basement contained washrooms, dining hall, kitchen, and laundry. There were offices, classrooms, and dormitories on the upper floors, and a one-storey gymnasium / assembly hall on the back. The floor layout of the dormitory space allowed for strict segregation of the sexes.

A two-storey residence for the Principal and his family was attached on the west end. After the building was completed by March 1931, the former school building was demolished, although a pile of gray stones from its foundation are still visible. At some point, a one-room schoolhouse was constructed or brought to the site, adjacent to the main building, and used for lower-grade classes.

Several of the Principals (who were invariably male) were Presbyterian clerics and their wives would serve as Matron. They were responsible for overall operation of the facility, including hiring and managing staff, supervising and disciplining the student body, overseeing maintenance, and managing the daily finances. Teachers were recruited from the ranks of public schools around the province. Most appear to have had no special training to work with Indigenous children.

The number of students who resided at the school was variable. From the time the new school opened in 1932, to 1950, the total hovered around 120 per year, with instruction in grades 1 to 8. In the 1940s, one teacher had classes in grades 1 and 2, another had grades 3 and 4, and a third handled grades 5 to 8. There was a dedicated music teacher, sewing instructor, teacher-counsellor, and nurse. Until 1943, students spent a half day in the classroom and the rest in vocational training. Boys worked on the farm — milking cows, cleaning barns, and harvesting crops — while girls learned sewing and cooking, and helped with the laundry.



Birtle Indian Residential School in Birtle, Man. (Gordon Goldsborough)

Around 1950, the number of students jumped to around 160 and peaked at 178 in 1956 when the school expanded to include grades 9 to 12. In addition to the three to four teachers, the school had several non-teaching staff members who, along with the Matron, supervised the girls and boys outside the classroom. Other staff made the meals and supervised the kitchen, maintained the physical plant and grounds, did the housekeeping and laundry, and supervised farm operations.

In testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, some former residents of the school described abusive experiences there. Girls reported being observed by the Principal while they showered. Boys working in the farm complained about being overworked. In 1942, a provincial official was incredulous when he learned that a school truck involved in an accident had been carrying 70 boys. (Luckily, only two were injured.)

Discipline in the classroom was tough, with wrong answers eliciting pulled ears and shaken heads. Girls and boys, especially the older ones, even siblings, were strictly segregated from each other. Sometimes, students would be transferred to other facilities without asking or informing their parents.

It is impossible to know the exact circumstances of each case but it is likely that cultural insensitivity of non-Indigenous teachers affected the way they treated the children under their care. Verna Kirkness, an Indigenous person who taught at Birtle in the 1960s, recalls:

"The high-school students often dropped in for a chat. This kind of closeness was frowned upon by the school administration. Instead of being happy to have an Indian teacher in their midst with whom the children could identify, the administrators tried to discourage them from spending time with me. I did not feel welcome at the school."

Locals say they never witnessed abusive behaviour. Then again, abusers would likely be on their best behaviour if they were under scrutiny. After Ms. Kirkness witnessed a student being humiliated by the Principal for taking food from the kitchen, she contacted the Women's Missionary Society who dispatched an inspector. During the week of that visit:

"[T]he staff, in general, were perfectly behaved and the principal, in particular, was the most charming person one could wish to have working with the Indian children. I saw him one day skipping down the hall with a couple of the little grade one girls on each hand."

Occasionally, some students ran away from the school or left it in other ways. In 1959, a runaway complained to an Indian Affairs official that he was essentially an unpaid worker who put in four hours a day in the barn, and stoked the furnace with coal before going to bed, in addition to attending classes.

As many as four percent of the children who attended residential schools across Canada died at them. In Manitoba, there were cemeteries at the Brandon and Elkhorn schools, and possibly elsewhere. None of the graves were marked. In 1990, a reunion of former staff and residents at Elkhorn erected a monument in memory of those interred there. At Brandon, a monument has

the names of eleven people buried in an overgrown cemetery although a recent study suggests there may be many more graves.

A second, older cemetery nearer the Assiniboine River is completely unmarked, as a commemorative monument erected in 1972 by local Girl Guides has disappeared. I have found no evidence of burials at the Birtle site, which of course does not mean that no deaths occurred there.

There were positives along with the negatives. Ms. Kirkness recalls that the school's reputation for being superior to the Brandon Residential School was well founded. At Birtle, children were very well fed with the same food as the staff, much of it produced by the school's farm.

But we have little quantitative data on which to base an assessment of conditions at the school. Basic statistics do not reveal anything out of the ordinary. For instance, from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s, each teacher had between 30 and 40 students in their classes. This would be considered much too high by modern standards — the average province-wide value in 2013 was 17 students per teacher — but such numbers were typical for public schools in that period.

The number of residents at Birtle dropped as changes to the Indian Act in 1951 enabled construction of on-reserve schools. By 1954, residents in grades 11 and 12 were walking into Birtle to attend the public school there. By the early 1960s, those in grades 6 to 10 also attended public school and, as of the 1962 school year, students in grades 1 to 3 were sent to Brandon.

Responsibility for the Birtle Residential School transferred to the federal government in March 1969. The farm operation ceased and its equipment and livestock were sold. By the time the facility closed in June 1970, there were just 41 residents. The main building was sold, in the late 1990s, to a young couple from British Columbia who held a "cleanup auction" and converted the Principal's residence into their home, with plans to renovate the rest of the building. They lived there for eight years before returning to BC, their plans unfulfilled. In the mid-2000s, a proposal to develop a cultural centre never got off the ground.

Consequently, the building has been sitting vacant for more than ten years. In 2015, the owners attempted to sell the 26-acre property, mostly for its land and salvage value. Finding no local realtors willing to take on the sale, they listed it on the internet. News that a former residential school was for sale, coming just before the public release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report, made national headlines. Two prospective buyers, both offering less than the \$79,000 asking price, were dissuaded when they saw the state of the site.

Approaching the building in the spring of 2016, what I saw did not look like the product of gradual decay. Frankly, it looked like it had been the site of a battle. The once-carefully manicured lawns and flowerbeds were overgrown, and the building was obscured by unpruned hedges and trees. Derelict vehicles and hardware were strewn about the grounds, along with bricks from walls that had fallen.

The one-room schoolhouse by the entrance road was filled with piles of jumbled garbage. There was not an intact window in the place. Inside the main building, large, gaping holes in the walls showed where concrete blocks had been forcibly removed. Ceilings had been charred by fires lit on the floor below. If I was unfamiliar with the male anatomy, the abundant graffiti throughout the building would certainly remind me. Some hallways had at least a foot of miscellaneous rubble on the floor. Either vandals had had a lot of fun wreaking havoc, or they had exorcised personal demons through willful and wanton destruction.

I vacillated on whether or not it would be possible to repair the damage, if anyone ever wanted to. Certainly, the structure of the building was intact and a lot of the damage seemed superficial. But it would be a major (and costly) undertaking.

Some have suggested that the Birtle Residential School should be demolished so those with painful memories of time spent there may get some measure of relief knowing it no longer exists. That is what happened to the Brandon Residential School which, for over 70 years, overlooked the Assiniboine River before the building was finally demolished in 2000.

Other residential schools, such as the one on the west end of Portage la Prairie and the one on Academy Road in Winnipeg, have been turned to other uses; in the former case, as a facility of the Long Plain First Nation, and in the latter by a national child welfare agency.

I can understand how removing the evidence would be appealing. On the other hand, conspicuous reminders can be a powerful way to prevent recurrence. For example, the Nazi atrocities toward Jews during the Second World War will never be forgotten as long as places like the Auschwitz Concentration Camp remain standing. My own view is that the old residential school at Birtle should survive, whether in its present dilapidated condition or with some restoration, as an ongoing reminder that Canada has not always been as accommodating and congenial a place as we would like to believe.

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