

Survivors call for demolition of former residential school in Birtle, Man. | CBC News Loaded

Manitoba

Survivors call for demolition of former residential school in Birtle, Man.

Owner of the property says he's willing to sell the site to interested buyers.



[Riley Laychuk](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jun 22, 2021 5:00 AM CT



Survivors who attended the school say it brings back horrible memories each time they drive past it in Birtle, Man. (Heather Reimer/For CBC News)

On Birdtail Sioux Dakota Nation in western Manitoba, a healing garden is under construction.

A place for residential school survivors to gather, to reflect and to share their stories. But just 25 kilometres north — the Birtle Indian Residential School — the place that caused that harm still stands.

"I would like to have that place demolished," said Ernest Noel in an interview at Birdtail Sioux, which is about 95 kilometres northwest of Brandon.

Noel was forced to attend the school at Birtle when he was five years old. He spent 11 years there.

"I tried to walk across the dining room to see my sister and I got beaten up all the way back," he said. "You don't have family anymore. You're all by yourself."

A lot of what happened, he says, is still too tough to talk about today.

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"It's too hard. It's too hard to explain everything," he said. "I can't talk about it. I couldn't even tell my children about it."

The school site is now privately owned. The First Nation would like a say in what happens to it now.

It's something Terrance Wasteste, who was also forced to attend the school as a youth, would like to see.

"It's the first thing we see when we go to town," he said. "A lot of memories. I think I've dealt with most of the things that I needed, primarily the anger that I felt."

He still remembers the first few nights staying at the school.



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"It was a tough time," said Wasteste. "I knew I was going to go and told my mom and sisters that I wouldn't cry and ended up hearing all of the children crying at the first couple nights and shared my own tears of loneliness being ripped away from my family.

"It wasn't easy," he said. "It made me a very angry person. I did finish high school in Brandon for my last couple of years and went on to university and didn't do so well there because of the shock of being in the city, right.

Wasteste said he would like to see something else built on the site.

"Given the shape of the building, I think something else could be constructed in that space to help people who want to come and visit and maybe get themselves together, perhaps a healing centre or information centre of some sort," he said.

Owner willing to sell property

The owner of the site tells CBC News he is willing to sell the property. Dylan LeForte lives in the principal's residence with his grandmother.

"We just want to get out what we've put into it, not including my time cleaning it up, removing asbestos and tons of debris," he said. "Just what we paid for the property and the value of what's been stolen from us over the years in break and enters."



The owner of the school site says he is willing to work with anyone who wants to buy the property. (Heather Reimer/For CBC News)

He said the buyer can do whatever they want with it, including tearing it down.

LeForte said trespassing, theft and vandalism have all been issues over the years. But, now he's willing to work with interested buyers.



The school has seen vandalism and break-ins over the years and has fallen into disrepair. (Heather Reimer/For CBC News)

LeForte said he's been told the grave detectors are expected on the property, but isn't sure when. It's believed anywhere between 19 and 31 students died over the lifetime of the school's three structures.

Chief wants search of grounds

Birdtail Sioux Chief Lindsay Bunn said searching the site for potential graves is something he would like to see happen, in light of the unmarked graves found in Kamloops, B.C.

- **[Author of Abandoned Manitoba explores site of old Birtle Indian residential school](#)**
- **[Province commits \\$2.5M to fund investigations of residential school burial sites in Manitoba](#)**

"The government should look at doing every residential school in Canada, because there is going to be a lot more numbers than that, and that's just the beginning," he said.

"That's just the icing on the cake. And then they'll eventually find more. And us as leaders, we're going to have to take that step and push for these things."



Lindsay Bunn was elected chief of Birdtail Sioux Dakota Nation in 2021. (Riley Laychuk/CBC)

Bunn said he also wants to see the building change hands back to the First Nation or federal government. His family, like many in Birdtail Sioux, have connections to the residential school.

His grandparents attended the school. He said it's something they rarely spoke about.

Feds open to working with communities

Crown-Indigenous Relations minister Carolyn Bennett said that's something the federal government is open to working on.

"I think everything is on the table and we will work with the community to see what is necessary for them to move on their vision of what's necessary for the healing in that community," she said.

- **IN DEPTH**

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"I would hope that any private owner would understand how important this is to communities and for them to be part of the solutions, when they recognize really how painful this is for that building to still be standing," said Bennett.

Healing garden under construction

For now, Bunn said Birdtail Sioux will continue work on its healing garden.



Work is underway on a healing garden at Birdtail Sioux Dakota Nation. (Riley Laychuk/CBC)

"This is the main core of our community," he said. "For elders to come sit here and help with this garden and the traditional medicines, it'll eventually work out to be a great benefit for our elders," said Bunn.

The space for healing is set to be ready later this summer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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With files from Katie Nicholson and Heather Reimer

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<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/birdtail-sioux-dakota-nation-birtle-residential-school-1.6074748>

Not surprising, that Canadian authorities would have mixed tribes here. Dakota (Sioux) were thrown in with mostly Anishnabek/Saulteaux. For administrative reasons, Sioux Valley children were likely sent to Brandon Residential School. (Standing Buffalo further West in SK along the Qu'Appelle would have been even more out of consideration.)

All bands were intermarried in a multitude of ways as the “Keeseekoowenin Ojibway First Nations Anishnabe/Ojibway” admit in their ancestral bloodlines. (<http://www.keeseekoowenin.ca/history/>). Notice too that these Anishnabe, like the Federal Government, keep taking shots at the Dakota as interlopers with a hint of suggestion that they shouldn't be here or treated with full rights. Given the historical fluidity of Indigenous movement on the Great Plains, this is patent nonsense. The Medicine Line never really meant anything until it was fully surveyed, comprehensively policed, and significantly settled. If the British/Canadian Army had gone after the Indians the way the US Army did the Sioux after Custer's Last Stand, the American West would have been full of “Canadian Indians.”

Birdtail has a different Chief now; Ken Chalmers is back as Chief. However small, Birdtail too has had its political dramas.

A woman from here (now deceased), Laurene Anderson (widowed Park, maiden name Harrison) wife of my father's friend, Lloyd Anderson, worked fresh out of high school as “the cook” at the Birtle Residential School. This makes sense as Presbyterians ran the school at this time (early 1940's) with Rocanville's largest church being United (formed by the merger of most Presbyterians and Methodists in 1925). I imagine labor was in short supply during WWII. TJB