

[Buy photos from](#)



MORRIS SunTRIBUNE



[Subscribe Today](#)

Wednesday, July 01, 2009

Search:



- [Classifieds](#) [Northland](#)
- [Outdoors](#) [Agweek](#)
- [Home News](#) [Regional](#)
- [News](#) [Obituaries](#)
- [Regional Obituaries](#)
- [Weather](#) [Sports](#)
- [Community](#)
- [Entertainment](#) [Opinion](#)
- [Records](#) [Business](#)

- [Births](#) [Weddings](#) [Photo](#)
- [Galleries](#) [Calendar](#)
- [Politics](#) [Talk](#) [Outdoors](#)
- [Farm](#)

- [Archive](#) [Promotions](#)
- [Marketplace](#) [Personals](#)

- [Member Center](#)
- [Company Site](#) [Contact](#)
- [us](#) [Resources](#)
- [Subscribe](#) [Yellow](#)
- [Pages](#)

[RSS Feeds](#)

'If Only the Rod Had Been Round'

Morris Sun Tribune Published Tuesday, June 30, 2009

By Tom Larson

Sun Tribune

Just the title of the book recently published from authors Bridget Harris Volden and Ruth Thielke should send a shudder through any feeling person: "If Only the Rod Had

Star Tribune Newspaper
Find great deals and save! Compare products, prices & stores
www.Shopping.com



Bridget Harris Volden (left) at Don's Cafe in Morris, where her discussions of her life with Ruth and Neil Thielke (right) led to the book co-authored by Volden and Ruth Thielke, "If Only the Rod Had Been Round."

RELATED CONTENT

- [Fort Providence IRS](#)
- [Harris girls](#)
- [Bridget in the Twin Cities](#)
- [The Voldens](#)
- [Prime Minister's apology on behalf of Canada for Indian Residential Schools](#)
- [Article comments \(1\)](#)

on-going.

Text Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

- [Print this article](#)
- [Email this article](#)
- [Most popular articles](#)
- [E-mail News Alerts](#)
- [Purchase a print](#)

Save and share

- [Bookmark on del.icio.us](#)
- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share with Google](#)

Been Round."

It's a reference to the countless incidents of beatings and mental abuse Volden and other native kids suffered at the hands of cruel nuns in an indigenous residential school in Canada, where part of the overall program was the take the "Indian-ness" out of the children.

If you were an Indian in the Catholic schools, your braids were cut off and you were given a uniform to wear. If you didn't do as you were told – and, possibly, even if you did as you were told – you suffered beatings intended to blind you to what you were.

Volden's psyche was so traumatized and the abuse so pervasive that one of her childhood wishes was not for toys or sweets but that she could be beaten with a round stick. It would hurt much less than being beaten with a flat, wide paddle preferred by the nuns.

The start to Volden's life led to adulthood that also was equally painful in different ways. She struggled to make a living with little education, she struggled to keep her marriage to a Morris native, Bill Volden, intact. A life-long battle with alcoholism is

But Volden's story also is one of redemption, of discovering a solid foundation of faith that sustains her and has steeled her to open up about the story of her life so that it might help others while also healing her.

"Throughout it all, she's always had a sense that she was never living her life for herself," Thielke said.

A story to tell

Like many people, Volden always had a desire to write a book. She wanted to tell the story of her dreadful experiences in the Fort Providence Indian Residential School in the far reaches of Canada's Northwest Territories, and the subsequent years of alcoholism and despair that led her to a fruitful life in service to God and people also seeking to right their lives.

But, like many people, Volden wasn't quite sure how to make good intentions meld with reality when it came to the arduous task of putting a life on paper.

Then came happenstance. Or divine intervention.

Volden's husband died in 2004 and Bridget followed his instructions to have him buried in Morris' Summit Cemetery, next to his mother. Bill's nephew, Gary Gilbertson, met Bridget at the airport in Minneapolis and drove her to Morris.

Gilbertson did not know where to find the gravesite, so he called his friend, Neil Thielke, who, like Gilbertson, is a pastor in the True Bridge network of non-denominational churches based in Eden Prairie. Thielke and his wife, Ruth, knew Summit Cemetery but not where to find the gravesite. Once there, a caretaker was able to consult a map and direct them.

Bridget took time to weep at the gravesite and talk to her husband. Then, the Thielkes took Volden and Gilbertson to Don's Café in downtown Morris for lunch, and it wasn't long before the Thielkes became transfixed on Volden's stories about her colorful and tragic family life, the Indian Residence Schools, the abuse and the tumultuous and yet rewarding life that by then was approaching 90 years.

Divine intervention?

The story became more personal to the Thielkes than they could have imagined. They discovered that Bill Volden grew up in a home across the street from where the Thielkes now live. For 30 years, Ruth Thielke was Registrar at the University of Minnesota, Morris. Before UMM was founded in 1960, it was the West Central School of Agriculture, which was born out of the Morris Indian School, founded in 1887 by the Sisters of Mercy Catholic Order. Bill's father, Ed, was Business Manager and Registrar of the WCSA. While the Morris Indian School was forced to close, Congress ordered that Indian students were to be admitted free of tuition charges. Today, UMM still maintains a strong Indian tradition and the tuition waiver.

After her 2004 visit to Bill's grave, Volden returned each year and told the Thielkes more of her story but admitted she was having trouble getting started on a book. In May 2007, she agreed to let Ruth Thielke help her get the book underway. In one story, Thielke asked Volden about her father, known as the Famous Flynn Harris, a man of Irish descent who was renowned in his humor and his role as an Indian Agent in the Northwest Territories. Journalists hungry for stories about the wilderness life of the territories hounded him for interviews but he resisted: As is noted in the book's introduction, Harris replied, "If my story is to be written, it will be written by one of my children someday."

Doorstep of hell

In a nutshell, the book delves deeply into Volden's story to reveal that, at age 8, with 6-year-old sister Nora, she was separated from her parents and sent 250 miles to the Fort Providence school. Thielke believes that, in her heart, Volden is a tender caregiver and that that trait singled her out for extra helpings of abuse at the hands of the nuns. During her initial visit to Morris, Volden

showed the Thielkes her deformed left wrist. A nun had beaten her until the wrist was broken because Volden was left handed and the nun wanted to ensure she never used the hand again. The fracture wasn't set because there were no medical professionals at the school.

"Bridget had only known beatings in the Catholic Church," Thielke said. "She thought God was a harsh judge out to get you."

Trouble continues

That hellish life continued until age 13, but even then the torment that gripped her continued. Her mother, Josette, was a member of the Chipewyan Tribe in Alberta. A kind, gentle woman, she was a talented artist who worked with silk and leather, but when she died, Volden was left to care for her father and siblings. When Flynn Harris died, he left no will and the children were left with no money.

"She had never planned a funeral, she was very nervous, very shy and unsure of herself," Thielke said. "She had to put her three younger brothers in an orphanage."

Volden was a full-blown alcoholic in her teens, working menial jobs with no diploma or experience.

"She was told to get a nice husband and then to go get her brothers," Thielke said. "It never happened."

Her sister, Nora, married a military man from Minneapolis, and Volden ended up there. She met Bill Volden in a bar, but it wasn't the typical bar romance. The bartender did the matchmaking, telling Volden that Bill would show up after work as an accountant for a grain company, have a couple of beers, go home, and then come back later to help the bartender clean up, all to have a little companionship.

"She thought, 'Oh, there's not a man like that in the whole world,'" Thielke said.

But while the matchmaking ended in marriage, it didn't end Volden's drinking, which often was done unbeknownst to Bill and others.

"She was a closet alcoholic," Thielke said.

Problems swelled in the marriage until, one year, Volden left work at noon, got drunk and forgot about her husband's birthday and a dinner they had planned. Bill fumed and said he'd had enough. He went to dinner alone and the next day said he would buy her a ticket home, back to Canada. For the first time Volden turned to the God she once believed had nothing but contempt for her. She bartered with God for drinks.

"She just recited prayers and God spoke to her," Thielke said. "She started bartering with God: Do I have to give up this drink? That drink? That went on for two hours. Every time God said no."

Both Bridget and Bill quit drinking and Bridget found solace and support in Alcoholics Anonymous.

"She found that Jesus loves her and that was a big thing for her," Thielke said.

Through the Bethany Community, the Voldens grew in their faith. Bridget started the American Indian Bible Fellowship in Minneapolis in the mid-1960s. They moved to Montana, first to Great Falls and then to Helena.

There were times along the way when Volden turned back to alcohol, especially when Bill was sick and dying.

"She told me, 'If I could say the entire Serenity Prayer, I would be all right,'" Thielke said. "'But if I would meditate on how lonely I was, I couldn't and I'd slip.'"

Help all around her

For now, with the help of her friends in AA, Volden, now 90, is keeping her life together. That's not to say that she didn't feel trepidation at taking her life public in a book. Throughout the writing process, Volden continually pressed Thielke to explain why certain details needed to be in the book. Thielke would let Volden work through her feelings and misgivings. In the end, Volden seemed to know that a story about a woman's faith being tested constantly, from her very first memories and beyond, would be a benefit to so many.

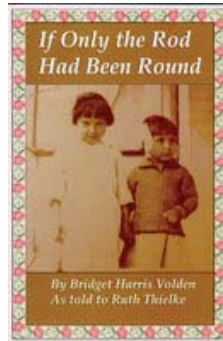
The Canadian government believed it could play a part, too. Last year, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a public statement of apology for the treatment indigenous people suffered in the IRS school programs. The apology brought out others who told their stories of abuse at the hands of those running IRS programs.

But it doesn't erase everything. Recently, Volden again suffered a slip and drank. She was devastated and turned to Thielke. And then to herself. She still feels the pain of the rod, but the pain doesn't last long.

"I wasn't surprised when the call came from Bridget," Thielke said. "When she called a told me she was struggling, I wondered if she was going to make it through all these times – she felt like she let everybody down and she was afraid to go back to God. But then she said, no. I knew he would forgive me."



Ruth Thielke sketched the Fort Providence Indian Residential School from a photograph. Bridget Harris Volden and other students endure constant abuse at the school, where nuns were charged with taking the "Indian-ness" out of the indigenous students.



On the book cover are Bridget and her sister, Nora.



This photo of Bridget Harris was taken about the time she moved to Minneapolis. She later met and married Morris native Bill Volden.



Bridget and Bill Volden at about the time of his retirement. Bill Volden died in 2004 and is buried in Morris.

[Share your comments](#)

Comments posted on this page do not reflect opinions of Forum Communications Company. Forum Communications Company does not endorse and is not responsible for any statement, opinion, advice given or made. All replies are subject to approval and must follow Forum Communications Company guidelines concerning statements of libel, personal attacks or defamation of character. Replies in the "Talk About It" section that criticize a person by name

may not be posted, unless that person is openly involved in a public issue. Comments written in all capital letters or bold print will not be considered for inclusion in the forum.

 <p>deal of the DAY</p> <p>view all deals sign up for email deals add your business</p>	<p>TODAY'S DEAL</p> <p>Get \$100 off and a \$100 cash card from Culligan of Western Minnesota Culligan</p> <p>Deal expires on 07/30/2009</p>	
---	---	---

[News](#) | [Weather](#) | [Sports](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Business](#) | [jobsHQ](#) | [carsHQ](#)
[Comments/Questions](#) | [Advertising Information](#) | [FCC Careers](#) | [Privacy Statement](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#)
[Archives](#) | [Make Us Your Homepage](#)

[Forum Communications Company](#)

© 2009 Forum Communications Co. Fargo, ND 58102 — All rights reserved

Morris Sun Tribune
607 Pacific Avenue
Morris, MN 56267