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## Inside the Calgary Herald

- [News](#)
- [The Editorial Page](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [City & Region](#)
- [Calgary Business](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [Real Life](#)
- [SportsMonday](#)
- [Golf Weekly](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Energy](#)
- [Comics & Games](#)
- [The Stocks Pages](#)
- [30 days Archive](#)
- [Headlines Scan](#)
- [Newspaper Ads](#)
- [Special Sections](#)
- [Calgary RushHour](#)
- [City Traffic Cams](#)

## Weekly Sections

- [Real Life Extra](#)
- [Automotive](#)
- [Swerve](#)
- [Books & The Arts](#)
- [Life at Home/Gardening](#)
- [New Homes](#)
- [New Condos](#)
- [Neighbours](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Working](#)
- [Green Guide](#)

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- [Find a car](#)
- [Find real estate at Homes](#)
- [Find great stuff at shopping](#)

### Announcements

- [Announcements at Celebrating.com](#)
- [Obituaries at Remembering](#)

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- [Local classifieds](#)
- [Selling? Place an ad](#)
- [Meet a match at Connecting](#)

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- [National Contests](#)



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- [Advertising](#)
- [About us](#)
- [Contact us](#)
- [Privacy Statement](#)

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- [To the editor](#)



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## Rejection of native culture has hurt all Canadians

David Finch, Calgary Herald

Published: Sunday, June 15, 2008

Residential schools seemed like a good idea at the time -- and they were.

But history teaches us many lessons and none more far-reaching than that winners are not always winners, and losers can suffer a long time.

As part of the Gradual Civilization Act in 1857 and the Gradual Enfranchisement Act in 1869, the purpose of residential schools was to convert indigenous children to Christianity and to "civilize" them.



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**Tsuu T'ina Nation members gather to watch the official apology over Canada's residential schools.**

Ted Jacob, Calgary Herald

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Not as though the natives were not part of a civilization with merit, but everyone realized their nomadic way of life was over.

The fur trade and the buffalo were in decline and the Canadian government saw the schools as a way to create a smooth transition to an agrarian way of life.

The United States, Australia and New Zealand also had similar institutions. From the mid-1800s until the 1980s, aboriginal children in every Canadian province and territory attended these boarding schools, usually located far away from their homes.

Starting in 1920, attendance was compulsory for kids aged six to 15. They were separated from their families for months or years at a time. And they did chores and other unpaid labour at the under-funded facilities.

More than 14,000 Alberta residents living today passed through these residential schools.

Assimilation was the explicit policy until the 1950s. Most of the schools were operated by church groups -- today's United and Catholic churches. Later on some were operated by the government.

Forced separation from families and their languages and ancient ways was probably the most devastating for a people accustomed to community.

Kids were not allowed to speak their native languages at school, punished harshly if they did, and as a result lost contact with their culture.

Living conditions were as good as possible given the times and the budgets, but medical problems included tuberculosis, malnutrition and other life-threatening diseases. Many children died. Sexual abuse was a problem, too.

The schools began to close in the 1940s but the last one operated until 1998.

In 2001 the federal government created a department called Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada and several compensation packages have made token reparations to the people who attended these schools.

Money will never compensate for the damage done to these children, their families and the rich culture that sustained these people for generations. On June 21, 2008 the Indian Residential School Museum of Canada will open near Portage La Prairie, Man.

It's too soon to tell what, if anything, we can learn from this dark chapter in Canadian history.

But a core issue is our society's belief that progress is linear, that we have arrived at the apex of civilization as a result of a string of good decisions, and that our leaders are wise and thoughtful. And that everything works out for the best.

But our past is far more complicated. Though we have had good intentions, and have made many good decisions, we have also been incredibly ethno-centric and arrogant. We failed to learn from the aboriginals and integrate their wisdom into the society that developed in western Canada.

- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [next page](#)

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