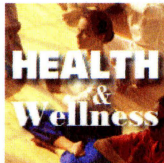


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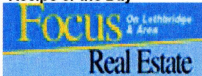


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Burying the past

Written by Gerald Gauthier
Friday, 07 November 2008

As mistreated as many were at Indian residential schools across Canada, many of those children may have suffered the ultimate disrespect in death.

There is evidence suggesting the bodies of possibly thousands of residential school children were buried — without the knowledge or consent of their families — in unmarked or anonymous graves at or near their schools. Although there's nothing definitive to suggest students at residential schools on the Blood Reserve suffered a similar fate, no one is ruling out the possibility either.

The Working Group on Missing Children has recommended the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission examine the number and causes of deaths, illnesses and disappearances of those students as well as the locations of burial sites.

Those recommendations were accepted by the commission. While its progress has stalled after the resignation of a co-chair, plans had called for the development of a strategy to uncover the facts. Should that ultimately lead to an inspection of every community where residential schools once sat, Blood Tribe officials say they would co-operate.

Blood Chief Charles Weasel Head says they're aware of past allegations that small children and babies could be buried in unmarked graves at church cemeteries on the reserve. They've inquired with tribal elders and former pupils at the St. Mary's and St. Paul's residential schools on the reserve but have found no firm evidence to support those suspicions.

"While we cannot say that it did not happen, and there have never been any records kept regarding those buried in our cemeteries, we would support an investigation into those allegations. If this has occurred on other First Nations' reserves, it is very unfortunate and should be of great concern," he says. "What is of greater concern right now is the healing of our people who were impacted by the residential school experience."

The Working Group on Missing Children includes native leaders, former pupils, church officials, federal government staff and historians.

"Let's be clear that what they have identified is that there was a large number of graves, many if not most, unmarked, apparently associated with the residential schools," says Jim Miller, a University of Saskatchewan historian who has done extensive research into Indian residential schools.

"Unfortunately, in too many cases, (parents) really never knew what had happened to their child at all. For any number of reasons, whether it was insensitivity, lack of concern, distance or language, they just were never told. It's been a subject of considerable anguish, as you can well imagine for lots of people," he says.

It's been well documented that residential schools were notorious for physical, emotional and sexual abuse of aboriginal children by staff. Largely ignored were the appalling, filthy conditions in which native children often lived at those schools.

Many of the government- or church-run boarding schools were breeding grounds for dreaded diseases such as tuberculosis. According to some researchers, death rates among residential school children sometimes reached more than 50 per cent.

The death rate among aboriginal children in residential schools in the early 20th century, says historian John Milloy, was higher than among Canadian soldiers during the First World War.

"That schools had graveyards, we knew," says Milloy, one of Canada's foremost experts on Indian residential schools and a member of the working group. "We didn't know how many children died and we didn't know where they were being put."

There are at least six cemeteries on the Blood Reserve, some dating as far back as the mid-1880s. Many graves are unmarked and overgrown with prairie grass, weeds or bushes.

"The reserve cemeteries are a mess," says Wayne Plume, 77, who in the past dedicated himself to the upkeep and preservation of reserve cemeteries. There are likely unmarked graves on the reserve, he says, but it's hard to know where they are.

A former residential school student himself from 1939-1947, Plume says he was aware back then of the deaths of fellow students, but he had no idea where they were buried.

Although no one seems certain there's a problem with missing children on the Blood Reserve, a lawyer representing more than 600 residential school survivors from the Blood and Piikani reserves has very definite doubts.

Vaughn Marshall says he would be "very surprised indeed" if children at any of the residential schools in southern Alberta had been buried anonymously without the knowledge of their families.

"We have talked to at least 2,000 or 3,000 people from both the (Piikani) and Blood reserves and also from other parts of the Treaty 7 area in the last 12 years, and I can tell you nobody has mentioned this as an issue," says Marshall, co-counsel for the survivors with his Lethbridge law partner Rhonda Ruston. "I've gone through literally tens of thousands of pages, and I have seen no indication whatsoever that something like that happened here."

He points out the scenario would seem unlikely since the residential schools here were actually on the reserves where the individuals lived and in most instances their families would only have been a matter of 15 or 20 miles away at most.

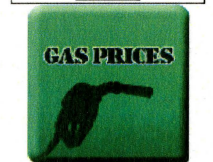
"Having said that, I just don't know."

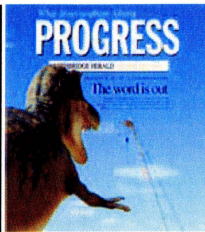


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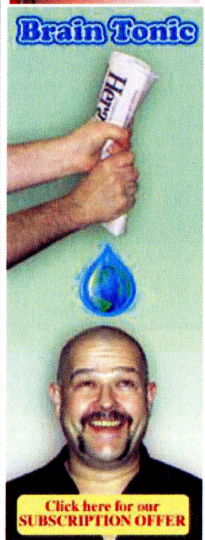
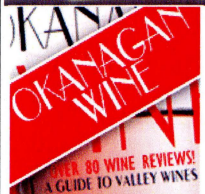


The \$60-million, five-year truth and reconciliation commission into residential school abuse was derailed recently, only months after it began, when its head, Justice Harry Laforme, suddenly resigned. Since then, however, lawyers participating in the commission have tabled a proposal aimed at moving the stalled process forward. "A lot of us really do want to see reconciliation, and reconciliation is certainly a very important component of this," says Marshall. "We hope that a new chairman is selected soon and it gets its integrity back, and that we can move forward from there."

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