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Residential school horrors haunt Native Americans

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Guest essayist

STORYCHAT: Post Comment

(December 11, 2007) — Count yourself lucky if you are a Native American who never had to experience the trauma of being placed, against your will, in one of Canada's residential schools.

I saw the beatings, listened to the students weeping and saw many incidents of sexual abuse. While initially shocking to a 11-year-old, I learned to suppress my outrage at adults who had unrestrained power.

Canada has begun to issue checks to cover its shame — but no formal apology for the lives its policies destroyed or the legacy of self-hate that has become the most powerful, negative force in aboriginal life.

In January 1967, my brother Dean and I were shipped off to the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario, more than 350 miles from our Akwesasne (St. Regis) home. We were told by the Indian Affairs social workers that the school would provide us schooling, a warm, safe place to live and good food. We should have realized the magnitude of the lie when we waited at the train station for many hours, far past midnight, for one of the "house fathers" to pick us up.

The Mohawk Institute consisted of five large buildings: a four-story residence with attached dining hall, a fairly new school and two barns that housed livestock and hay and a shed for farm equipment. 1967 was the last year the institute had an operating farm but it would continue to plant crops and maintain an orchard until its closing 21/2 years later.

I am pleased to state that our arrival led to a series of events that forced the federal government to investigate the institute and force its closure; I am angry that the investigation stemmed, in part, from the death of our great friend, a 12-year-old Algonquin from Golden Lake named Joey Commanda.

On the first day of our 18-month stay, the housefather found narrow, metal bunk beds for us to sleep in but we did not rest. Our fear was raw and made worse when a harsh bell sounded to awaken us, followed by the turning on of brilliant fluorescent lights.

Dozens of thin Cree boys stared at us, the newcomers. The Crees, the largest group at the institute, had been bused from hundreds of miles away, most from the James Bay region in Quebec. Their names were Happyjack, Otter, Gull, Ottereyes. A small contingent of Akwesasne Mohawks also was there, as were a few Iroquois from Oshweken, one Anishnabe boy from Christian Island, another Mohawk from Tyendingaga and our Golden Lake pals: Joey, Rocky and their brother Guy.

Across a closely guarded hallway was the girls dorm with housemothers as overseers. Many very bad things happened there, abuses beyond our imagination initially but all too common as the months dragged by.

The housefathers controlled the boys in our section by organizing us into platoons with the biggest boys in charge of the smallest. We learned from the first day to stand at attention, march at the sound of a whistle and take our assigned place in a basement which contained the kitchen and our dining room.

We were fed burnt toast, powdered milk and mush, a watery porridge that slid through the stomach and bowels, hence the institute's nickname, "mushhole." Other meals were as bad. Forty years later, I still feel the shadow pains of hunger whenever I think about the institute.

The military structure carried over into other areas and activities. We marched as squads the few times we left the school as a group. We responded to bells and whistles. We were beaten with the same straps used for corporal punishment in the Royal Navy.

That we — the notorious, thieving, fighting, runaway "St. Regis boys" — were the only collective group ever to be expelled still is a source of pride. However, Joey Commanda was struck by a train near Toronto as he fled the hell hole from which his friends had been thrown out.

But Joey's family made a lot of noise and compelled others to look at the entire residential school system. So while Joey died, he saved many others from the horrors of the mushhole and the clutches of child rapists.

The amounts that Canada is paying out — \$10,000 for the first year of confinement and \$3,000 for the rest — are trivial, especially compared with the lawyers' fees of \$45 million. That triviality compounds the anger and rips open wounds that no amount of money can heal.

But I wonder: How much will Canada pay for Joey Commanda, walking in fear along an isolated stretch of train tracks, shuffling his way homeward over hundreds of miles, wishing his Akwesasne pals were there to show him the way?

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Maybe the lawyers can chip in and buy him a decent memorial. Or perhaps they can stop the train rumbling in my mind before it hits Joey and drives his nearby brother Rocky insane.

George-Kanentiio, an Akwesasne Mohawk, lives in Oneida territory.

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The forced segregation and "education" of American native Indian children has an equally disgraceful history. As the Indian wars of the West receded the American government's Indian Bureau decided that the pacification of the tribes should included the "education" of children to accept the culture of the white man. This included the formation of similar schools referred to by the author of this article. I visited one such education factory in South Dakota. It was originally a fort erected to protect the railroad being built in the 1850's. By the 1880's Indians no longer were a threat and the fort was converted to educating Indian children. Their education consisted of stern discipline, refusal to allow native dialects to be used or the practice of any native rite deemed a danger to western intergration. They were Christianized in the most callous method possible by people ignorant of the culture they were attempting to obliterate. Not until the 20th century did American Indians begin to receive a real education in American schools. Jim Thorpe the celebrated athlete was an early product from one of the schools that accepted native Americans

Gadfly
Posted: Tue Dec 11, 2007 4:36 pm

\$10k/year certainly seems meager. Most restitution for such things is, but I don't know how much money would be needed to assage bad memories.

This issue has more notoriety in Canada than the US (I doubt many/any south of the northern tips of the US have even heard of it), but it is well known in Canada.

JWilliams
Posted: Tue Dec 11, 2007 6:05 am

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