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# Residential school survivors cheer demolition of building

Quintin Winks, *Alberni Valley Times*

Published: Tuesday, January 27, 2009

PORT ALBERNI, B.C - For nearly 90 years, the Port Alberni Indian Residential School has cast an ominous shadow over the Alberni Valley, but that's about to change.

The dormitory building of the school complex is slated for demolition on Feb. 10, a move that may bring some closure to the many children who were forced to attend the school during its operation between 1920-72. Ben Nookemis and Elizabeth Bill are among the former students who have come forward with stories of abuse and neglect.



**Willard Gallic, left, a Tseshaht elder, and Elizabeth Bill and Ben Nookemis, both former students of the school, stand on the steps of the Port Alberni Indian Residential School.**

Quintin Winks

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"I feel mixed emotion in this building," says Nookemis, who attended the school for five years beginning in 1942. "A lot of abuse took place there. There was a lot of sexual abuse to the young boys

and girls. I saw these things happen and I know a lot of the women never came forward. So I'm happy they will take (the building) away."

Arthur Plint, the dorm supervisor, pleaded guilty to multiple sexual and physical abuse charges. In 1995, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison and died shortly after being released on parole in 2003.

For Nookemis there are many more painful memories attached to the squat blue-grey building. It was within those walls that he was strapped for speaking his own language.

He was also constantly hungry as officials tried to make a small profit on the pittance allocated by the federal government to the maintenance of each residential school student.

"When we were kids, all the things we were put through . . ." says Nookemis. "It's very sad. I don't think the public can grasp how bad it was. We were always hungry. They never fed us properly. They fed us the same food every day. Porridge seven days a week."

For Bill, who attended the school from 1946-58, memories of the food are also bad. If she didn't like what they gave her, she'd be forced to wait until the next meal. For such minor infractions as not making her bed properly, Bill would have her bed torn apart and be forced to remake it, causing her to miss breakfast.

"So you went to school hungry," she says. "I think I was one of the very fortunate ones who didn't get any abuse."

For Nookemis, the biggest shame about the residential school was the near-loss of his native language.

"When I went to school here I didn't know a word of English," he says. "I was fortunate because there were some who had been here a few years who would translate for us. If they caught us speaking our own language they would strap us and shame us into not speaking our language."

Going home for nearly three months for summer break is what kept the language alive for Nookemis. At home, he'd slip back into his mother tongue. Maintaining that language eventually became so important for Nookemis that he and his wife started a language program funded by the B.C. government. The couple record the language on paper and on CDs to teach it to the youth.

Despite all the humiliation, shame and painful memories associated with the school, both Nookemis and Bill give it some credit. For Nookemis, he says it taught him that he had no choice but to work for a living, something he did as a successful fisherman.

For Bill, she says life at the school taught her some essential coping skills.

"Seeing as it was my home I learned a lot of basics, like how to cope with the outside world," she says.

In June 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a formal apology to all former students of Canada's residential schools.

For Willard Gallic, Tseshah elder and spokesman for the demolition, that apology was a significant step toward healing.

Tearing down the school is another step in the right direction, he says.

"It's the end of an era, a sad part of our history," says Willard, whose brother, sister, mother and father all attended the school as students. "Part of what happened there was passed on from generation to generation. A lot of these kids who were dragged here screaming and crying where they got no love were critically changed. So we're taking this away to help these people heal."

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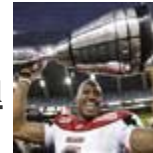
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