

## St. Joseph's Mission on list of mass graves

By Sage Birchwater - Williams Lake Tribune - April 15, 2008



Aboriginal leaders from the Lower Mainland are launching a tribunal to investigate children who died in Indian Residential Schools whose deaths were not reported.

A group called the Friends and Relatives of the Disappeared (FRD), which released a list of 28 mass graves across Canada holding the remains of aboriginal children. St. Joseph's Mission residential school near Williams Lake is one of the sites identified.

FRD spokesperson, Eagle Strong Voice, said the International Human Rights Tribunal into Genocide in Canada (IHRTGC), a non-governmental body established by indigenous elders, is commencing its investigations today, April 15. It will present the list of mass graves to the United Nations on April 19, asking for the protection and monitoring of the mass graves as part of a genuine inquiry and judicial prosecution of those responsible.

Eagle Strong Voice says elders estimate there are hundreds and possibly thousands of children buried in these grave sites.

Joe Alphonse, director of government services for the Tsilhqot'in National Government, says elders from his community talked of mass graves at St. Joseph's Mission.

"A tribunal would be a good thing," Alphonse says. "We did a unity ride last summer and it was to bring that kind of stuff forward, and to help some of our people get past that issue."

Alphonse says a lot of bad things happened at the residential school.

"I think this would be a good thing for our people and a way of dealing with acknowledgement of what happened."

He says this experience lies at the root of many problems aboriginal people are still dealing with today.

"We need to get past it and come up with programs to give pride back to our people. It would be encouraging to give our elders a voice and a chance to talk about what happened and be heard."

Agness Jack of Canoe Creek First Nation says in the Cariboo Chilcotin people are just starting to deal with the reality because there wasn't the same residential school investigation project in Williams Lake as there was in Kamloops.

Jack had the advantage of seeing St. Joseph's residential school through different eyes after she contracted tuberculosis during her first year there.

"I was fortunate to have been away for four years. I was in Coqualeetza in the TB sanatorium for four years. When I came back it was a shock to me the way we were treated there."

In Coqualeetza she says the administrators made sure the children were good to each other.

She says at the Mission it wasn't like that. There it was Tsilhqot'in versus Shuswap versus Carrier.

"For myself I came from a hospital where there were so many tribal groups and we were encouraged to get along. When I came back I didn't understand that rivalry between the tribes, and I got into a lot of trouble because of it from my older siblings."

Jack isn't sure how big an issue the unreported deaths are in Williams Lake.

"I know there were drownings that weren't reported back to the families.

"Boys could go freely to the lakes and go skating and stuff. That's where some of the guys drowned. I don't even know if they retrieved their bodies or what happened."

According to FRD, the grave sites at St. Joseph's Mission are reported north of the school grounds and under the foundations of a tunnel-like structure.



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