

Confessing the Past: Mennonites and the Indian School System

“Embrace the truth, and the truth will give you freedom.”

-Jesus (John 8:28)

Between 1870 and 1996, hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children in Canada and the United States were separated from their families and forced to attend Indian residential, boarding and day schools that were run by government and various Christian denominations. The goal of these schools was to assimilate Indigenous children into settler society; as the heads of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (U.S.) and Department of Indian Affairs (Canada) put it, “to kill the Indian in the man” and “to get rid of the Indian problem.” Indigenous languages, histories, religions and cultures were routinely suppressed and condemned. Indigenous children were often beaten and sexually abused. Many ran away from the schools. Many died and their bodies were not given proper burial.

Mennonites (from various conferences and assemblies) were a part of this colonial education system. Though imbued with good intentions, we too were touched by paternalism and racism as we sought to bring a “civilizing gospel” to our host peoples. As one Mennonite leader regrettably said in 1963, “We feel that saving the Indian out of his squalor, ignorance and filth is step one in bringing him to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.”



Teachers and students at the Mennonite Boarding School at Cantonment, in Indian Territory (later known as Oklahoma), established in 1883 by the General Conference. The first Indian Boarding School began in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Dates

1880-1889: Mennonites begin the Darlington Mennonite Mission (Boarding School) among the Cheyenne and Arapahoe in Indian Territory (later known as Oklahoma).

1883-1901: Cantonment Mennonite Mission (Boarding School) is started in a former U.S. Military Base along the North Canada River among the Cheyenne, north of Canton, in Indian Territory (later known as Oklahoma).

1885-1896: Mennonites run the Indian Industrial School in Halstead Kansas. The school was started with 15 Native children brought from Indian Territory. In 1896 the government discontinued its contract with the Mennonites and the operation was closed.

1939-1945: During World War II, Mennonite Conscientious Objectors were placed as teachers in Manitoba Day and Residential Indian Schools.

1948-1968: Mennonites operate Day Schools on the Sunchild Cree Reserve and at Fort Vermillion in Alberta, and in Pauingassi and Bloodvein in Manitoba.

1951: Mennonites establish a day school on the Hopi Reservation in Arizona.

1955: An official in the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs estimates that between $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of all teachers in the 'unorganized territories' (land located outside the boundaries of settler governance) are Mennonites.

"As Christian Missionaries, the first and highest end we have in view is to impart the truth of the Christian religion to these benighted people...

it is the most important factor in the daily school-room ... to change the heathen indians and evolve them into civilized and christian men and women."

*-S.S. Haury, Mennonite Missionary,
1886 Report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*

1962-1989: In Northwestern Ontario three Residential Schools are operated by Mennonites: Poplar Hill, Wahbon Bay Academy/ Stirland Lake and Cristal Lake. More than 600 children in 18 First Nation communities living in the far north were affected.

1973-1990: Mennonite volunteers serve at the Montreal Lake/ Timber Bay Children's Home in Saskatchewan. The home was for indigenous children whose parents were away on the trap lines; children were legally bound to attend school by the Canadian government.



Poplar Hill was one of three Mennonite residential schools in Northwestern Ontario. The lives of more than 600 children in 18 First Nation communities were affected. These schools are included in the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement.

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