

EPISODE 3: FORCED ASSIMILATION

EDITOR'S NOTE: This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity. For media inquiries related to *Survivors*, or to obtain a copy of this podcast and/or its transcripts for broadcast or educational purposes, please reach out to news@cjsw.com.

DISCLAIMER / CONTENT WARNING: Please be advised: the following program contains stories and accounts of true events from the lives of residential school survivors. Due to the sensitive subject matter, some participants decided to remain anonymous.

These testimonials may include accounts of physical and sexual abuse and may be triggering to some listeners. If you or someone you know is experiencing pain or distress as a result of the residential school experience, you're not alone. Please call the Residential School Crisis Line at 1-866-925-4419. They are there to help and they're available 24 hours a day.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: Oki nikyokowawaa. Kiitkanakyimatyinohpowawaa. Nohkkyistyikoyii nitakokapayanakippa kitawasinnonii. Anakaa asiksikkapoyiwaa. Anakaa siksikaityitapiwaa. Anakokaa siksikawaa kainaiwaa pikanii. Oki aniksyii matsyitopikskii. Anikaa innestyokakstyimanii. Siksikainnestyisinii. Anikyokoyawaa saahsiwaa sahsahsokitakiwaa. Anikyokoyawaa nityiyanakipaa nohkakyistyiyii.

Welcome, my relatives. I'd just like to acknowledge the land that we reside in: the land of the Blackfoot-speaking nations at Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, and also, after Treaty Number 7, we also acknowledge Stoney Nakoda and Tsuut'ina. A rightful acknowledgement of the people and the land that we reside in.

CAMERON SIFERD: This is *Survivors*: an eight-episode podcast made in partnership with CJSW and the Department of Canadian Heritage, providing insight into the lived experience of residential school survivors and their families.

The residential school system ran across Canada from 1883 to 1996. Throughout its lifetime, over 150,000 Indigenous children were removed from their homes, stripped of their cultures and forced through a system created to destroy their senses of identity. The lasting negative impact of the residential school system continues to devastate communities of survivors.

My name is Cameron Siferd. I'm a Métis individual studying the topics of sociology and international Indigenous studies at the University of Calgary.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: Oki, hello, my name is Grace Heavy Runner. My Blackfoot name is Poksikainaki. I am from Kainai First Nation, Alberta. I'm a residential school survivor who attended the St. Mary's Residential School, which operated from 1898 to 1988. This is my story, but also the story of many.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: All students got into the habit of attending Mass once or twice during the week. The nuns looked old and frail, and they lived beside the residential school. They taught an evening class to only the students who wanted to learn all about Christianity. You were either Catholic or Anglican during that time. I remember one weekend when we were able to go home and have a visit.

I told my mother, "Why don't you speak Blackfoot to me and my brother?"

My mother responded, "Because I don't want you to get punished for speaking Blackfoot."

I thought to myself, "Why is our language so bad? And why are we looked down at because of [the] color of [our] skin?"

I was even told that my ancestors' ways were evil and wrong, and we would all go to hell if we were to practice our way of life. When you're a child, you're imaginative, curious, ambitious, adventuresome. When the supervisors and nuns weren't looking, we all would play tag and hide and seek inside the chapel. I wasn't afraid to go inside the chapel to hide.

DALLAS YOUNG PINE: We had to get up and go to church. Being altar boys, stuff like that. Roman Catholic, praying in that way. I guess at that time I had lost my culture, my tradition. Whole thing was, you know, a young child being traumatized all the way around.

BETTY LOU CRAZY BOY: When all the damage was done and everything and they let us go, there was so much damage done. You know, our language, our spirituality, we're forced to pray on our knees in some kind of, you know, damn language I didn't understand and kneel for hours. And then we had to repent our sins. Well, what sins do we have? We didn't have any! It was just that, our sins of -- probably -- our sins of talking

in [our] language, or believing in something. And then they all said we're all going to go to hell. And so the spirituality was based on fear.

CAMERON SIFERD: Residential school began with children's hair being cut, delousing, along with the removal and often destruction of anything they brought with them from home. The hair was cut for a few reasons. On the surface, these reasons were bigotry towards someone who the administration believed was born lesser, and lived in an uncivilized way. The government, as well as missionary organizations, placed a heavy emphasis on the dress of Indigenous peoples. As they saw this as a measure of successful assimilation. They paid attention to the slightest details and would note with enthusiasm to superiors when they saw an increase in European attire being worn on reserves and on children when they were outside of school.

BETTY LOU CRAZY BOY: I'm still putting the pieces together for myself, you know, residential school, destroyed our image, destroyed who I was. I was just a number. I wore the same skirt and dress as all the other women, all the other girls. We dressed the same, ate the same way. We prayed together the same. Like, everything was the same as everyone else. And if you didn't do it, you were so controlled in that environment and if you didn't do it, you got punished for it. So, like, damned if you do and damned if you don't.

GABRIELLE LINDSTROM / TSAPIINAKI: Oki, nisto nitaanikko Tsapiinaki nyomhtoto kainaiwaa. My name is Gabrielle Lindstrom or Weasel Head. My Blackfoot name is Slanted Eye Woman. That name was given to me by my dad when I got my master's degree.

Both my parents attended the Indian residential school. My dad went to the St. Mary's Indian Residential School. Then my mom went to St. Paul's. My [paternal] grandma was raised by the nuns at the St. Mary's Indian Residential Schools. Grandpa didn't attend the Indian residential schools but grandma did.

On my mom's side, my grandpa Alan thinks he was born in, like, around 1924 or something, but he was in the residential schools. Same with my [maternal] grandma. They only went so far as grade three, then they were working after that. Grandma, my grandma was working. So they would go to these farms just outside of the reserve, they'd work there. And then my grandpa was working on the potato fields and just a little

boy, they'd get up, they'd go to work and then they'd come home at dusk, so it was pretty much a source of free labour.

CAMERON SIFERD: Children who were allowed to go home only got to spend part of the summer with their families. This would be the only time that many families got to spend together and would be the only opportunity for a student in the residential school system to learn lessons and experience a traditional way of life. Many children craved going home and seeing their loved ones, only to find themselves feeling the effects of separation and isolation. Many children would feel like a stranger in their own home. By the end of the 1940s, generations of children, families and entire communities had been attacked, abused and infantilized by the government.

GITZ CRAZYBOY: Oki, nikyokowa nitahnikko Paahkyikoyii... My name is Gitz Crazyboy. I am Blackfoot and Dene.

It's okay to be lost and messed up and angry about all the stuff, the things that happened to you. The children that are taken away, your brothers and sisters that might have taken away. The family we lost to this life -- it, that's, you're supposed to be messed up. The one person that gets you out of that is yourself. And one of the most powerful things that we have that a lot of the colonizers essentially don't have is we have our culture. And we have our songs, we have our ceremonies, we have our stories. And when you begin to familiarize yourself with that, when you begin to think as an Indigenous person as those you know, so they always say, they say think in Indian. When you're able to think as a Siksikaytyitapii or a niitsitapi person, like a real human being, and you go back into those old ways, the ancestors are there waiting for you. They're there to take pity on you, they're there to help you. And they can help you in ways that you can never imagine.

CAMERON SIFERD: As far as the institution was concerned, Indigenous languages were the languages of Satan. Celebrations, music, any gatherings or observances like potlatches, or the Sun dance, were works of evil. Children were taught that their families were chanting to the devil. Historians relay experiences of children being hurried inside to pray for their blasphemous families on the occasion that drums could be heard coming from the reserve.

From the first day of arriving, children had their last physical reminders of home, taken and often destroyed. On a day to day basis, speaking Indigenous languages was

grounds for physical punishment. Imitating tradition remembered from home would cause the child to face the same, if not worse, punishment. The church and government wanted assimilation, and that meant erasing who the children were. If they couldn't practice languages and ceremony, those languages and ceremony would be forgotten and replaced.

ANONYMOUS: Yeah, my father was one of the first ones, I guess, way back in the day that attended in Calgary, and that was the Dunbow School. Back then, they only went up to ... they only allowed them to stay in residential school till they were 16. And they were just taught mostly farm work. And they weren't really educated. My mother, she went to Anglican school. She went to the St. Paul's Anglican Church here on the reserve. And then, as for myself, yeah, like I said, I went from kindergarten, day school, and then spent a few years in residential in the earlier years. And then, after that, went to day school and then I went back to residential school, I think the last four years of my high school and junior high. Really had a negative impact on me. Because by that time, I was probably out of high school, by the time I was out of high school, I could, I could honestly say I was already an alcoholic. Because I, every chance we got we just friends, everybody, we just drank, we just partied. I think we drank because we were trying to cover up some of the stuff that had happened to us.

And then when I did go to college after I had to take a whole year of upgrading because when I got into college, there was nothing that I academically could, you know... It was so embarrassing and so hurtful that we weren't even -- I was probably in a grade nine level when I got into college, because of the way they taught us at St. Mary's school. There was nothing that we were never taught about some Indians by the name of Hiawatha, or something like that one from Ontario or someplace, I don't know. Indians and the Iroquois and all this other stuff. But we were never taught about our own stuff. And there was just a little bit of that in our school. But, the long-term effect was my self-esteem was always so low that if anybody even said some kind of smart remark my first thing was just to retaliate by getting even or getting drunk and [going to] party for the week or the weekend. We weren't really taught to, you know, to set long-term goals [like] you want to be you want to be a policeman, lawyer or some kind of big career.

CAMERON SIFERD: The entire way of learning was shifted from the way First Nations people raised their children. Traditional methods of teaching emphasized children learning through stories, by example, or through recreation and games. Children who

misbehaved were shown through stern, but valuable stories or lessons, how their behavior had affected those around them, and would teach them the reasons not to repeat their behavior.

The schools attempted to teach with repetition, and maintained order through fear. The material being taught to the children itself was of foreign origin: people, places and events that were taught to the children were worlds away and unfamiliar. Essentially, Indigenous children were forced to learn a foreign way of life in a foreign language, in a manner unrecognizable to what they or their family had known. This complete culture shock of life in the institution, combined with the inadequacy of the system to accomplish its destructive goal lead to increased racist attitudes of officials towards Indigenous people.

GABRIELLE LINDSTROM / TSAPIINAKI: We don't even know what we're doing when it comes to raising our kids. I was raised by two residential school survivors. And so we have that kind of experience. What keeps us together is our spirituality and, and culture, you know, and, and that responsibility to at least try and live the best that we can, according to our peoples' teachings, trying to learn the language and then, at the same time, trying to educate a very racist society. And a lot of times, it's like, I feel like I'm spinning my wheels and trying to convince people that we're good people; that -- what happened to us? Like, it's frustrating, because I shouldn't be in a position where I have to teach people about the Indian residential school. Like, how is that possible, that people don't even know? And I've been struggling with it a lot lately, really, like, a lot. And I know that my sisters are struggling with it, too. But it's like, trying to come to terms with, like, what happened to my dad, and what happened to my other older relatives at St. Mary's. That wicked abuse. I sometimes will have panic attacks, like, thinking about my dad, when he was a little boy and getting abused.

CAMERON SIFERD: There were individuals on both sides of the church and government who realized the value of Indigenous languages. Of the seldom bright spots in the memories of residential school survivors were the reminders of home. Some schools would have an occasional Indigenous demonstration, which would feature dancing, singing, or stories.

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CLARENCE WOLFLEG / MIIKSIKA'AM: Oki, nistowonnakoka Miiksika'am. My name is Red Crane. That's my Blackfoot name. My name is Clarence Wolfleg. I'm from Siksika Nation, not too far from Calgary.

Even though they didn't want us to practice our dancing, our singing, our language, you know, one day, I think when I was about, oh, nine years old, one day we [were] all told to -- there's going to be a dancer that's going to come to our... I think I was in grade four or grade five. They said okay, the big boys are making -- and we would be watching -- and they were making a round circular place over on the south side of the school. In this dugout there, we used to play there, a sand dugout. And just over the fence, with railway ties, they were making, similar to a fence, a circular place with an entrance. I told them, "What's going to happen?"

And he says, "We're going to have a dance."

"Oh, I thought we weren't supposed to dance."

"No, our big brother's gonna come and dance in our classroom."

"Oh, gee, that's really something."

So, they had this record player and they were playing this -- they must have got them from the museum or something. But they had a record out of Chicken Dance songs. And our big brother Bruce came in and he was dancing to this record player. Oh boy, he danced. Oh, for the first time, we were so happy to see somebody dancing in this place. Wow. So we all went around that side, girls around this side. And they had a few dancers come in. These were -- they allowed them to have their outfit on. In those days, there was not much to an outfit, could have robes, little bustles, there's no feathers, some little mirrors on the shirt, some plumes here and there, cuffs for the arm and a stick for the fan. Then the girls just had their shawl. They didn't -- they just danced in their runners.

But, boy, that day... and this only lasted for a few hours, sitting there watching these people dance. There were three singers, these guys that went on to be good singers in groups later on. I used to sing with them, too, later on. Oh, it was nice to hear them. Just for one day we were back in the happiest place we could be watching these people dance.

Then all of a sudden, "Okay, that's it!"

Oh, that little structure stood up for a long time. We used to sneak over there and we'd sit in there and we'd sing. We knew a few songs and we would be tapping on our knees and singing and somebody would look over the top to see if the supervisor's

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coming. Boy, just reminiscing about the one time we had a powwow, a grass dance for maybe a couple of hours.

CAMERON SIFERD: In 1884, the Potlatch, a ceremony practiced and celebrated by the First Nations people living on the west coast, was outlawed. This was a fundamental ceremony that celebrated the strongest communal values in their society. Dancing and music traditional to Indigenous ceremonies were completely dismissed by government officials.

Father of the residential school system, Duncan Campbell Scott, felt that Indigenous ceremonies were only "senseless drumming and dancing." And he wanted agents on the reserve to try to encourage what he felt were "reasonable amusements." The government even stepped further in 1914: laws were made against wearing traditional ceremonial regalia, dancing, and any sort of performance without permission. More and more aspects of Indigenous culture, tradition and way of life were criminalized. These laws were not removed until 1951.

ANONYMOUS: Because I was just... during my studies in Mount Royal in 1992, I found out that the best child-rearing ways were the Indigenous peoples'. They raised their children really well but over the years, the parenting was broken up. And I mean, even for myself, we got a lot of strapping, we got a lot of belts because we didn't listen. And that was the discipline. It wasn't, they didn't teach us, just beat on us.

GABRIELLE LINDSTROM / TSAPIINAKI: It's reverberating throughout our community in a way [that] makes me feel really panicky. I don't know, are there gonna be any Indians left? You know, when we're gone? I guess there's just such a sense of urgency that I have for cultural preservation, but yet I struggle because I'm still learning about who I am. Because of what was taken from us. There's a sense of guilt that I have that -- here I am, I'm not on the rez anymore. I'm, you know, I guess living this kind of my own sort of middle-class white life. You know, where I'm a homeowner, I'm not drinking anymore, because I had the ability to move away from my reserve, where there's so many of our people that don't have that, you know, I was able to finish my schooling. So there's also that guilt that I feel that I should be suffering more.

CAMERON SIFERD: The official separation of the church and the residential school system approaching the 1970s meant new problems. The government was taking on the

total costs and responsibilities of the schools. In 1970, the government took control of the last church-run school in Ontario from the Catholic Church. Despite taking over the system, and the widespread reports of failure and abuse, the Department of Indian Affairs did not request to have the schools investigated. However, they began to increase requests that the government investigate the homes the children would be living in when they left the schools. This concern for the children's living conditions was a veiled attempt to show that they cared for the children's well-being while they were still removing them from the homes. These removals were a strong arm of what is known as the Sixties Scoop.

The Sixties Scoop was the practice of removal of children from their homes into foster care or adoption. Children would sometimes be advertised in catalogs across the country, sometimes internationally, to colonial-minded, usually Christian families. This was a strategy the government used to force enfranchisement and assimilation on Indigenous peoples without the work required in boarding schools. As Angus summarizes, "the Department believes that moving the children into foster care could eradicate Indian identity more effectively and cheaply than maintaining the residential schools."

SKIP WOLFLEG / AKAINIHKASIMI: My name is Clarence Wolfleg Jr. People call me Skip. These songs belong to the Blackfoot A1 Club Singers. Okay, now I am actually a child member of the Blackfoot A1 Club and every chance I get to honor the Blackfoot A1 Club, I try to do my best to sing their songs. But there's actually a lot of pride that goes into these songs. They are one of the two songs they sing to honor a new membership, to initiate new members into our club. We're trying to create the sound of our mother's heartbeats, because that is the very first rhythm that we hear as human beings.

CAMERON SIFERD: This podcast was produced by Grace Heavy Runner, Cam Siferd, Hannah Many Guns, and Jasmine Vickaryous, with music by Matthew Cardinal and Skip Wolfleg. Special thanks to all those who shared stories about their residential school experience. This podcast was made in partnership with CJSW and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

JASMINE VICKARYOUS: If you or someone you know is experiencing pain or distress as a result of the residential school experience, you're not alone. Please call the

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