



# FORGOTTEN

The Métis Residential School Experience



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The Legacy of Hope Foundation (LHF) is a national Aboriginal charitable organization whose purposes are to educate, raise awareness and understanding of the legacy of residential schools, including the effects and intergenerational impacts on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, and to support the ongoing healing process of Residential School Survivors. Fulfilling this mandate contributes towards reconciliation among generations of Aboriginal peoples, and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada.



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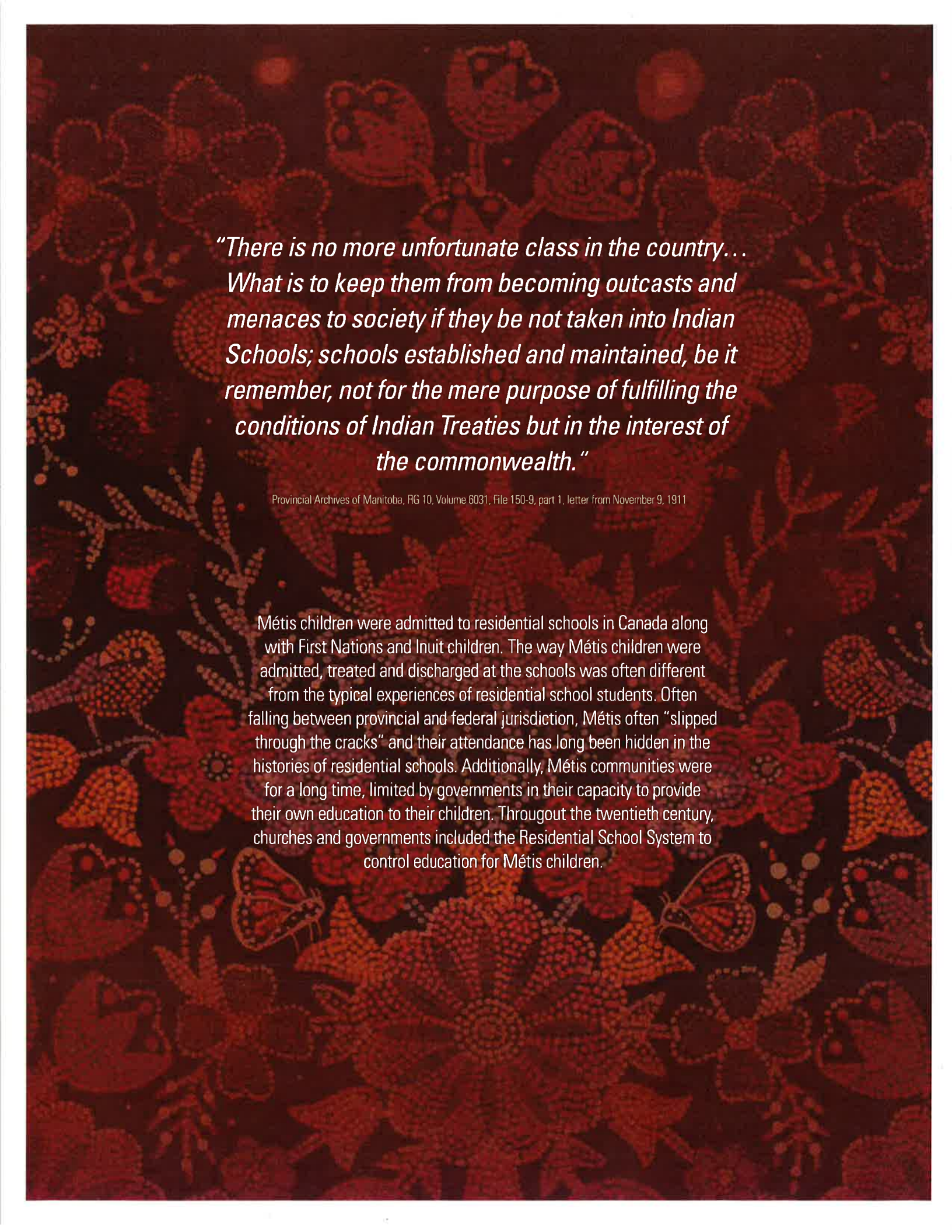
## Acknowledgements

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Artwork titled *Maynaatchitewin* by Christi Belcourt. Used with permission.



*“There is no more unfortunate class in the country... What is to keep them from becoming outcasts and menaces to society if they be not taken into Indian Schools; schools established and maintained, be it remember, not for the mere purpose of fulfilling the conditions of Indian Treaties but in the interest of the commonwealth.”*

Provincial Archives of Manitoba, RG 10, Volume 6031, File 150-9, part 1, letter from November 9, 1911

Métis children were admitted to residential schools in Canada along with First Nations and Inuit children. The way Métis children were admitted, treated and discharged at the schools was often different from the typical experiences of residential school students. Often falling between provincial and federal jurisdiction, Métis often “slipped through the cracks” and their attendance has long been hidden in the histories of residential schools. Additionally, Métis communities were for a long time, limited by governments in their capacity to provide their own education to their children. Throughout the twentieth century, churches and governments included the Residential School System to control education for Métis children.



## Forgotten: The Métis Residential School Experience

With funding from the Museums Assistance Program, Canadian Heritage, this project documents and gives voice to the experiences of the many Métis children who were forced to attend Indian Residential Schools. Guided by a small, expert Métis advisory group, the Legacy of Hope Foundation created this exhibit and associated resources to shed light on the history and legacy of the Métis residential school experience.

Curated by Métis poet Gregory Scofield, and guided by advisory group members Christi Belcourt, Maria Campbell, Guy Freedman, and Brenda MacDougall, the exhibit explores Métis identity, Métis experience of residential school and cultural reclamation and healing.



## The Métis

Known as the, Free People, Halfbreeds, Apeetokosisan or, in Cree, Otipemsiwak, lii Michif; the Métis of Canada connect their origins to the first meetings of European men and First Nations women. Métis people formed communities with distinct social, political and economic systems as well as their own languages and cultures across Canada. Métis people were recognized in 1982 as one of three groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada along with First Nations and Inuit.

Métis communities are found across Canada and have a significant role in determining their membership and the identities of Métis.

## Residential Schools

According to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, Residential Schools are defined as:

*[a] school system in Canada attended by Aboriginal students. This may include industrial schools, boarding schools, homes for students, hostels, billets, residential schools, residential schools with a majority of day students, or a combination of any of the above. At the request of Survivors, this definition has evolved to include convents, day schools, mission schools, sanatoriums, and settlement camps.<sup>1</sup>*

A primary objective of the school system over a century of operation was to aggressively assimilate children into "mainstream" Canada. The Residential School System operated alongside a number of policies meant for the assimilation and control of Métis, First Nations and Inuit.



Mohawk Institute, Brantford, Ontario, Anglican Church of Canada, General Synod Archives



## Attending Residential School

Each person who attended one of the schools in the Residential School System has a unique experience and personal story about the schools. While some remember their time at the schools positively others recall traumatic memories of abuse and neglect. Whether it was for days or for decades, children were taken from their parents, families and communities, often forcibly. In the The Indian Residential School Settlement report, a Métis survivor who went to day school stated he did not,

*“even remember having pencils or a scribbler or anything - you just prayed” adding that “no matter what we did, when we die, we’d go to hell.”<sup>ii</sup>*

During the late eighteenth and nineteenth century in Western Canada, Métis had their own system of educating their children and communities through transfer of language and knowledge from their own Elders, parents and teachers outside of the church-run school system. Alongside their own laws, social, political and economic systems, Métis communities were able to determine how their children would be educated. Nevertheless, some of the first schools in Western Canada were built to educate Métis children. Fur companies built schools for the Métis children of their employees. Both Catholic and Protestant missions sent teachers and clergy to what was known at the time as the North West Territories, in present-day Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Métis had a long history connected to denominational schools and a distinct form of education for their children.

Métis resistances in 1869 and 1885, led by many groups of Métis including Louis Riel, fought for recognition of their existing rights to land and governance including the rights to educate their children on their own lands.

Children from Métis homes were not always admitted to residential school in the same ways that First Nations or Inuit children were. Métis were often considered to be outside of federal government jurisdiction and when the schools opened, policies were created by the department of Indian Affairs on how to admit Métis or “Halfbreed” children, if they would be allowed to be admitted at all.

The Department would categorize the “Halfbreed Children” according to three “classes” of “Halfbreeds” and would instruct residential school administrators to admit only those that were of a certain class. This is an excerpt from a letter signed by a team of school officials from Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta which is meant to classify the Métis.

*Halfbreeds may be grouped into three fairly well-defined classes.*

- 1. Those who live, in varying degrees of conditions, the ordinary settled life of the country.*
- 2. Those who live, in varying degrees, the Indian mode of life.*
- 3. Those who – and they form the most unfortunate class in the community – are the illegitimate offspring of Indian women, and of whom white men are not the begetters*

*Those of the first class make no claim upon the Government of the Dominion for the education of their children; nor has any such claim as far as the knowledge of the undersigned goes been made on their behalf. The third class are entitled to participate in the benefits of the Indian schools. . .*

*That policy appears to have been adopted to discourage illegitimate breeding. As to the second class of Halfbreed the undersigned at once admit that they present a difficult educational problem, but the very difficulty effects a strong reason against drawing a hard and fast line such as it drawn. This second class of Halfbreeds may be divided into three groups:*

- 1. Those who live apart from Indians but follow somewhat Indian mode of life*
- 2. Those who live in the vicinity of Indian Reserves*
- 3. [Those who] [l]ive on the Reserves<sup>iii</sup>*

Creation of policies that discouraged “illegitimate breeding” were applied to the Métis. Control over the biological, moral, physical, sexual and social lives of students took place through educational and religious training at the schools.


Official documents from the schools often reveal the government position on Métis. In another letter from the department:

*Not only are our schools every day removing intelligent Indian children from evil surroundings, but they are often ministering to a class which would be outcasts without such aid; I refer to the illegitimate offspring of white men and Indian women who are thrown upon their mothers for support, and who have no legal status as Indians.<sup>iv</sup>*

School administrators were often conflicted between creating a financially efficient school system, a system for assimilation and the care of students. It is clear from the testimony of Residential School Survivors that care of students was rarely a priority in the schools.



Metis Traders, 1872-74. Archives of Manitoba Boundary Commission 164(N14100)/ Sharon Foley Metis



Residential schools were funded on a per-capita basis and were notorious for their financial mismanagement and under-funding. Treatment of children was often affected by this critical lack of funding and general negligence at the schools.

Indian agents and church officials were able to manipulate school attendance in order to benefit from the per-capita funding system at the schools. In most large schools, funding for the schools depended upon the attendance at the school. Schools would admit more or less Métis children in order to fill a school or manipulate the numbers at another. It was clear from government correspondence that they rarely did this with much consideration for the needs of Métis children or Métis families.

Some government correspondence indicates that Métis or “Halfbreed” children would sometimes be moved to or from a school in order to regulate the numbers at a school. The churches, especially the Catholic churches had a great deal of influence on whether or not Métis children would be allowed to attend the schools. Since many Métis families attended church some families would make case-by-case requests to the schools and ask that their children attend the residential school.<sup>v</sup>

Control of education for Métis children, for most of the twentieth century, fell between the churches, federal and provincial governments. For the most part, provincial schools were meant to educate Métis children. The school boards of provincial schools would also monitor attendance of Métis children. They were judged by their homes and their appearances, often according to the province’s standards. A report from the province of Saskatchewan concluded with this note:

*The above report includes all the so called Métis. Included therein are all shades and degrees. No doubt but some would not admit their category and are steady reliable families. While on the other hand there are those of the squatter type – here today and gone tomorrow.”*

Métis children remember being the “outsiders” to the residential schools. In some cases told they were too “white” for the “Indian Schools” or in other cases told they were too “Indian” for the provincial school system. Métis education was not covered by treaty or a federal department so Métis attendance often came at a cost to Métis communities, the schools or the churches.

*In them days there was no bus, no nothing, we had to walk through the bush three or four miles to go to school and when we did get there... you won’t get in, in the morning, if you’re too early. We had to have our lunch outside... we sat outside and our lunch was frozen. We were outsiders; they called us ‘externs’, whatever that meant.”<sup>vi</sup>*

The residential schools did not provide adequate or healthy food for any students. It is important to note that Métis were asked to bring their own food and some were not allowed to use the same dining halls or student residences as other students. Since they were often not admitted officially and their attendance hidden, they often had to be kept separate from other students, almost like a lower class of student in some cases.



## Apology, Truth and Reconciliation

In 2006, the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement* was settled between First Nations and Inuit representatives, churches and the Government of Canada. The Agreement provided: compensation for most of the former students of residential schools, compensation for individuals who were physically or sexually abused at the residential schools, a commemoration fund and it created the mandate for the Truth and Reconciliation commission in Canada. As well, it negotiated terms of an apology that was presented to Residential School Survivors and to Canadians in June 2008.

Unfortunately, many Métis Survivors felt excluded from these processes. Since much of the Métis attendance at the residential schools often went unrecorded there were no consistent records kept on their time at the schools. Compensation could only be paid to those who could produce a record of their attendance. In addition, the "official" list of schools that accompanied the settlement agreement omitted a long list of day schools where Métis children attended. Métis individuals and communities lobbied and continued to lobby to add schools to the official lists and records, in order to acknowledge their time spent at the schools as well as being eligible for compensation.<sup>viii</sup>



The Trotter Family at Fishing Lake, Alberta, 1936. James Brady, photographer. Glenbow Museum Archives, PA-Z218-122.



Often falling into a “grey area” between federal and provincial jurisdiction, the Métis time at residential school is remarkably mirrored in the administration of compensation for former students and the reconciliation processes in Canada. Métis often have unique stories to tell and distinct experiences.

Like many generations before them though, Métis have proved resourceful and have found support in their communities, families and have found comfort in their own ways whether or not they have obtained “official” support from government or church. Métis families and communities continue to support one another and contribute to groups of Survivors and address the legacy of the schools on their own terms.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Provincial Archives of Manitoba, RG 10, Volume 6031, File 150-9, part 1, letter from November 9, 1911
- <sup>ii</sup> Reimer, G., Bombay, A., Ellsworth, L., Fryer, S., Logan, T., *The Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement's Common Experience Payment and Healing: A Qualitative Study Exploring Impacts of Recipients*, (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2010), 22
- <sup>iii</sup> Provincial Archives of Manitoba, RG 10, Vol. 6039, file 160-1, part 1
- <sup>iv</sup> Library Archives Canada, RG 10, volume 6031, file 150-9, Headquarters – Admission of Half-breeds to Residential Schools, 1894-1938.
- <sup>v</sup> Chartrand, L., Logan, T., Daniels, J., *Métis History and Experiences and the Residential School System*, (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation), 74
- <sup>vi</sup> Provincial Archives of Manitoba, RG 10 Vol 6031, File 150-9, part 1
- <sup>vii</sup> Reimer, et al., 20
- <sup>viii</sup> Reimer, et al. 11

