

Lost Children

Of The Residential School System

The Memorial at St. Andrew's United Church

This exhibit presents a selection of the hundreds of pairs of shoes that accumulated on the steps of St. Andrews United Church in Moose Jaw, SK, from May 30th to June 7th, 2021. The memorial was initiated by local Indigenous sisters, Cassidy and Kayleigh Olson, to honour the lives of 215 children of the Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation, whose remains were found buried at the former site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in Kamloops, BC.



Residential school memorial, St. Andrew's Church in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, June 7, 2021.

At a ceremony on May 30th, 2021, Cassidy and Kayleigh Olson laid a pair of children's shoes on the church's steps as a sign of remembrance and reconciliation and asked the community to do the same.¹ The numbers of shoes increasingly grew over the nine days of the memorial at St. Andrew's and included other offerings, such as childhood toys, flowers, candles, gifts of sage and tobacco, and many notes of support, condolences, and solidarity for the Indigenous community. The memorial not only created a space for mourning and tribute, but through a candlelight vigil and flash mob event, it became a space for the community to come together to listen to the voices and truths of Indigenous people. It also offered a space for acknowledgement, reflection and dialogue for all people on the ongoing impacts of the Residential School System, recognizing the intergenerational-trauma that this system has had on Indigenous individuals and communities across Canada. Having multiple relatives who attended residential schools, Cassidy and Kayleigh Olson have seen first-hand how the trauma can travel through the generations. *"We've seen our families struggling with the path of mental health and addictions,"* explains Kayleigh. *"The pain didn't just stop when they left the residential schools and it won't stop until we get people educated. As hard as those conversations are, we need to have them. That's our goal."*²

Since the discovery of the Kamloops site, the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan announced on June 24, 2021 the findings of potentially 751 unmarked graves at a cemetery near the former Marieval Indian Residential School. On June 30th, 182 unmarked graves were discovered at the former site of the St. Eugene's Mission School in Cranbrook, BC, holding the remains of children, and possibly adults, from the member Bands of the Ktunaxa Nation and the community of ʔaq'am. These discoveries, made within weeks of each other, are likely to be the first of many, as the grounds of former residential schools across Canada are searched for potential unmarked burial sites with ground-penetrating radar.³

Similar displays of memorial have taken place across the country. We hope that this presentation of the memorial at St. Andrew's United Church will open space for listening and learning about the truth of Indigenous experience in Canada, contributing towards discussion and reflection on Canadian accountability, for the trauma and atrocities of its colonialist systems, and commitment to making real change towards Truth and Reconciliation in support of the healing of Indigenous people across the nation for the benefit of our future generations.



Regina Indian Residential School, students and school personnel, Saskatchewan, 1908. Library and Archives Canada / Department of the Interior fonds / e010949763.

The last federally-run, residential school, Gordon Indian Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, closed in 1996. According to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, the number of Indigenous children who died while attending residential schools, identified by name as well as unnamed in death records, is approximately 4,200. It is estimated that about 150,000 Indigenous children were removed from their homes and forced to attend residential schools in Canada.

*"For over a century, beginning in the mid-1800s and continuing into the mid-1990s, Indigenous children in Canada were taken from their homes and communities and placed in institutions called residential schools. These schools were run by religious orders in collaboration with the federal government and were attended by children as young as four or five years of age. Separated from their families and prohibited from speaking their native languages and practicing their culture, the vast majority of the over 150,000 children that attended these schools experienced neglect and suffering. The impacts of sexual, mental, and physical abuse, shame, and deprivation endured at Indian Residential Schools (IRS) continue to affect generations of Survivors, their families, and communities today. Remarkably, in the face of this tremendous adversity, many Survivors and their descendants have retained their language and their culture and continue to work toward healing and reconciliation."*⁴

- From the Legacy of Hope Foundation's exhibition, *Generations Lost: Healing the Legacy of the Residential Schools*

The Regina Indian Industrial Residential School (1891-1910), formerly located on Wascana Creek, four miles outside of Regina, was one of 20 documented residential schools that collectively operated in Saskatchewan between the years of 1865-1996. The proximity of this former site in relation to the city of Moose Jaw provides a stark and somber reminder that these events are not only part of our nation's identity, but acutely and directly relate to our local and provincial history.⁵

Photographs for the exhibit are provided by Murray Crandon, VE5 Photography.

¹ Daniel McElroy, Shoes at St. Andrews: Remembering the Lives of 215 Children Lost to Residential School, *Discover Moose Jaw*, May 31, 2021, <https://www.discovermoosejaw.com/local/shoes-at-st-andrews-remembering-the-lives-of-215-children-lost-to-residential-school>, accessed June 29, 2021.

² Ibid.

³ The discoveries noted were made at the time of writing this text on June 30, 2021.

⁴ Legacy of Hope Foundation, <https://legacyofhope.ca/generations-lost/>, accessed June 29, 2021.

⁵ List of Indian residential schools in Canada, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Indian_residential_schools_in_Canada, accessed June 12, 2021.