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## Residential schools archive set to open doors

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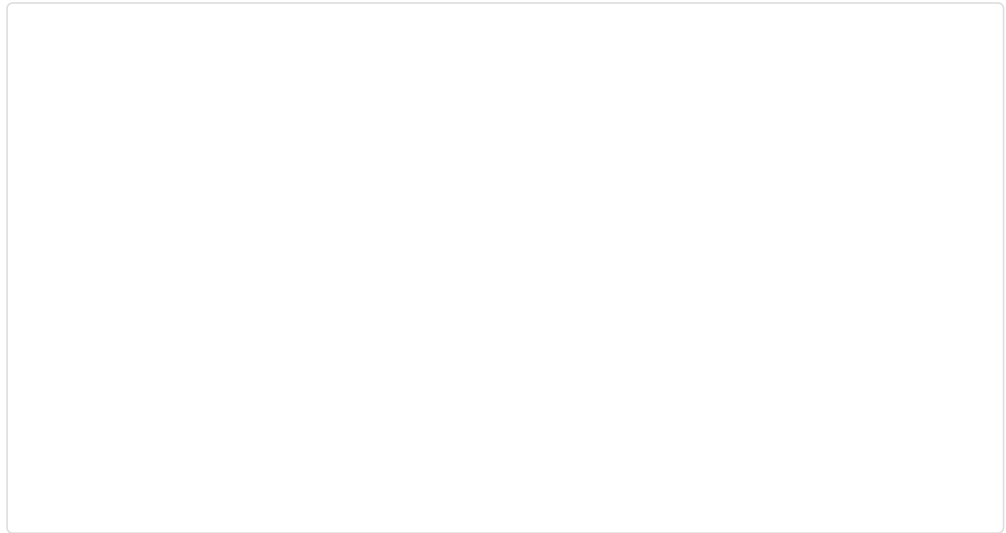
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### The Canadian Press

**WINNIPEG**—An archive housing the national memory of residential schools is set to open its doors, but must balance concerns from survivors with educating the public about one of the darkest chapters in Canadian history.

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba will house millions of records collected by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The records \_ some of which were sealed for decades \_ include everything from school inspection reports to heartbreaking testimony from survivors who detailed graphic accounts of sexual and physical abuse.

For survivors from across the country who have met with centre director Ry Moran, the archive is deeply personal and threatens to revictimize them if it isn't handled carefully.

Survivors who testified before the commission were allowed to dictate what part of their stories they wanted to be part of the public record. But government and church records in the archive contain personal medical information, racist language, details about family relationships and the names of survivors and their family members.

“While we have a very pressing and very real mandate to make as much of the collection available as possible, we're also being told to do no harm in the release of the information and do things in as respectful a way as possible,” Moran said in an interview.

“What we're hearing from survivors is, ‘We want Canadians to know what it was like for us in those schools, but we don't necessarily want

Canadians to have access to all of our personal, intimate details.”

About 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Metis children were taken from their families and forced to attend the government schools over much of the last century in a bid to “take the Indian out of the child.”

The last school closed outside Regina in 1996.

The \$60-million commission was part of a landmark compensation deal between Ottawa, the Crown and residential school survivors. It visited hundreds of communities and heard testimony from 7,000 survivors.

The archive’s opening ceremonies are to be held next Tuesday and Wednesday. At the beginning, Moran said, the centre will be cautious about what records are publicly available.

Public access may change over time but, for now, the wound of residential schools is still very raw, Moran said.

“These, in many ways, are their records first, and it’s time to put them in the driver’s seat in terms of what happens with this material. For so long, they weren’t in the driver’s seat. It was disclosed by government agencies or not. It was locked up by the church archive or not.”

Commissioner Marie Wilson said the centre’s goal is to further reconciliation—something that “can’t happen in sealed vaults.”

She said there is no rush to immediately disclose all the commission’s government or church records. Names can eventually be redacted from government documents and the testimony from survivors will speak for itself.

“Repeatedly, people say the most compelling part of all was hearing first-hand from survivors,” Wilson said. “We’ve got 7,000 statements. There is plenty there to satisfy the appetite of people just beginning to learn about all this.”

Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson, who represents northern Manitoba First Nations, said centre is an important part of the journey toward healing. But it will take time and care must be taken not to revictimize survivors.

“There is healing in looking at atrocities right in the face and then moving past it,” said North Wilson, whose mother went to a residential school. “I hope that this will help a lot of people heal.”

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