

Stephen Maher: A 1935 letter found in shed reveals suffering and anguish residential schools created

Stephen Maher: You can't read the Truth and Reconciliation Report without crying. It's awful to read of the suffering of the parents as Mounties took their kids



STEPHEN MAHER

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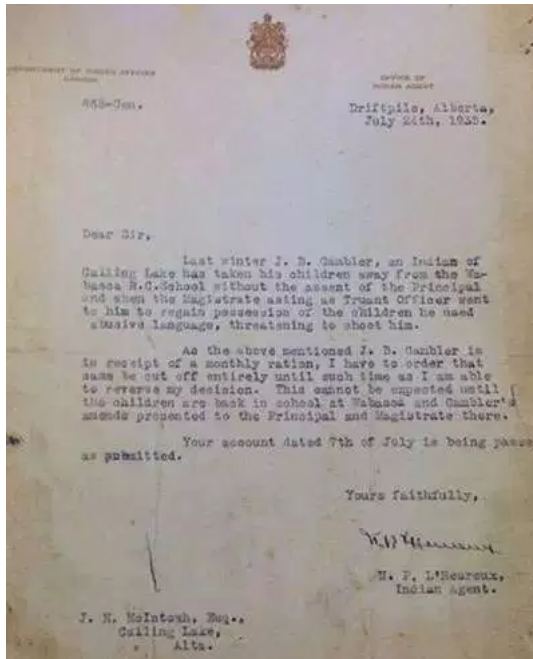
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J.H. McIntosh, Esq., Calling Lake, Alta. Driftpile, Alberta, July 24th, 1935 Dear Sir, Last winter J.B. Gambler, an Indian of Calling Lake, has taken his children away from the Wabasca R.C. School without the assent of the Principal and when the Magistrate acting as Truant Officer went to him to regain possession of the children he used abusive language and threatened to shoot him. As the above mentioned J.B. Gambler is in receipt of a monthly ration, I have to order that the same be cut off entirely until such time as I am able to reverse my decision. This cannot be expected until the children are back at school at Wabasca and Gambler's amends presented to the Principal and Magistrate there. Your account dated 7th of July is being passed as submitted. Yours faithfully, W.P. L'Heureux, Indian Agent.

In 2013, Gwen Schmidt found this letter in a shed that she inherited near Calling Lake, in northern Alberta. She showed it to Curtis Cardinal, who posted it online.



After it went viral, Cardinal told the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network that he thinks Jean-Baptiste Gambler, who died in 1957, likely found a way to keep from sending his children back to the school. Let's hope.

From the 1880s until the 1990s, many parents had to choose between starving and sending their kids to schools where they were terribly mistreated.

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

Recollections of parental anguish are some of the saddest parts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report issued this week.

Isaac Daniels told the commission that, in 1945, an Indian agent came to his home on the James Smith Reserve in Saskatchewan and spoke to his father in English, which Daniels couldn't understand.

"So that night we were going to bed, it was just a one-room shack we all lived in, and I heard my dad talking to my mom there, and he was kind of crying, but he was talking in Cree now. He said that, 'It's either residential school for my boys, or I go to jail.' He said that in Cree. So, I overheard him. So I said the next morning, we all got up, and I said, 'Well, I'm going to residential school,' because I didn't want my dad to go to jail."

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You can't read the report without crying. It's awful to read of the suffering of the mothers and fathers as the Mounties took their kids. It's awful to read the stories of children stripped naked, having their braids cut off, their homemade clothes discarded, how they were

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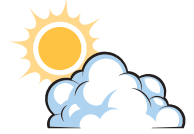
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beaten and sexually abused, punished for speaking their language, how lonely and sad they were.

Many were malnourished and, when they got sick, they didn't get proper medical attention, which the government ignored even after crusading medical officer Peter Bryce published a book in 1922 revealing that 24 per cent of children in western residential schools were dying each year.

TORONTO WEATHER

30°C



A few clouds

Feels like 33 °C

Tuesday	28 °C
Wednesday	27 °C
Thursday	29 °C
Friday	30 °C

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In the 1940s, as researcher Ian Mosby discovered in 2013, the government deliberately withheld food from children to study the effects of malnutrition.

When they died, often their parents weren't informed. In 1961, a principal at the Wabasca school, where Gambler's children were sent, found 110 unmarked graves. We have no idea how many such graves there are. After Bryce quit in disgust, the government stopped counting the dead.

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All of this was possible because the government had forced aboriginals off their land, as James Daschuk detailed in last year's *Clearing the Plains*, and broke treaties promising to feed them during famines.

Sir John A. Macdonald actually boasted in the House that he was keeping aboriginals on the "verge of actual starvation."

In his report, Commissioner Murray Sinclair describes what happened as cultural genocide. Some commentators think that he weakens his case by using that language.

They can only think that because they don't know their history.

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