

Confronting residential school abuse

# Searching for ways to heal

*It will take yet another generation before he is accustomed to life under the new conditions, and before the benefits of agriculture and industrial education combine to make of him not a reformed Indian of the past, but an entirely new product, qualified for the duties and rights of Canadian citizenship.*

— Mary M.C. Cavell, first president of the Woman's Missionary Society of the United Church.



**File Hills Indian Residential School, Balcarres, Sask., 1928: Lingering scars.**

**R**ev. Wilf Dieter was seven years old when he was taken from his home on Saskatchewan's Peepeeskis Reserve (about an hour's drive from Regina) to File Hills Indian Residential School near Balcarres. It was the end of August 1933. "My first days," he says, "were lonely days. The institution was strange to me. There were many children there. The dormitories were so big, everything was strange. The first thing they done was cut your hair to the scalp."

Dieter was a student at File Hills until 1942. When you ask what he learned there, he pauses briefly. "I think it taught me how I would not want to treat people. I was called no-good, that I would never make anything of myself, that Indians didn't need an education."

Linda Bull, from Goodfish Lake Reserve in Alberta, had heard similar stories from her elders. Once, for a

misdemeanor, her father and two other boys had their heads shaved, leaving only the letters ID, for Indian Department. Humiliated, they decided to walk home to Saddle Lake from their Methodist school near Edmonton, refusing to take off their hats even when offered rest in farmers' homes. "But then they weren't allowed to stay home," says Bull. "They were shipped back. Their parents had no say in this."

Appalled by what she was hearing, Bull began her master's thesis on the schools, seeking out more stories. "Our elders were not allowed to voice their oppression. They were shut up completely. But to start the healing process, you have to begin sharing."

The residential schools are gone now, closed one by one throughout the '60s and '70s, and the sharing Bull seeks has begun. At a recent Indigenous Peoples Conference in London, Ont., attended by Native people from all over Canada, the schools emerged as a powerful sym-

her from speaking her language."

Later, Wilson looked slowly around the chapel in which his seminar on land issues was being held. "I am very uncomfortable in this place," he admitted. Then he looked at the non-Native people present. "But I will defend your right to worship as you please."

**What happened** in those schools? "They let you know that fooling around wouldn't be tolerated," says Dieter. "A taste of the strap usually convinced you. One thing that enters my mind is hearing and seeing someone else punished, it seems to hurt more than if you were receiving the strap."

Children were sometimes beaten simply for slipping into their Native tongue. "The whole government church, Indian Affairs, they were all in it together," says Dieter. "If the abuse was reported today, the strap marks on our rear ends, they would be charged."

bol of the attempt by Canadian government and churches to destroy Native culture and spirituality. British Columbia Native chief Bill Wilson, for example, described how "they took my mother when she was eight to an Anglican school in Alert Bay. She still bears the scars of a cat-o-nine-tails, administered by an Anglican nun, who thought she could stop

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