

Still, the atmosphere in the schools clearly varied from place to place, depending on the era and the administration. Times improved from the early Methodist schools, when children were sometimes shackled so they wouldn't run away. Rev. Bernard Lee, principal at Norway House in Manitoba from 1958 to 1967, says that "no one was punished for speaking their language" in his time, although he remembers being shocked by conditions at the junior school in Brandon, where "it seemed like a scene out of Dickens." Much, he explains, depended on the principal. "We had some very dedicated people." He "occasionally had to strap boys for running away in winter. They could have frozen to death." It's an action, he says now, that has "always bothered my conscience. It may have been wiser to give a warning" that the boys would be expelled.

As for allegations of sexual abuse which haunt some Roman Catholic institutions, Lee recalls only one incident at Norway House: a boy came and asked to be sent home, even though he had only an elderly grandfather to take care of him. When Lee inquired why, the boy said he would commit suicide if he wasn't allowed to leave, because the Boys' Supervisor was trying to "treat him like a woman." The staff member was immediately dismissed.

But just as in institutions today, sometimes the administration didn't hear everything. "When I was 10 and went to Alberni Indian Residential School," Alvin Dixon, British Columbia Conference's minister for Native ministries explains, "my 16-year-old cousin was there. He pointed to one of the staff and said, 'If he tries anything with you, hit him in the gut and run for me.' So we dealt with these things ourselves."

Conditions varied in terms of food, too. Government funding for the schools in the '30s and '40s was low; even later, when funding improved, "we received less money to feed students than was given for inmates in federal penitentiaries," says Lee. "We had to manage carefully." Dieter remembers that, although the meals were not bad, "we never got enough to eat, especially when we had to

work half a day, sawing wood, cleaning barns, digging potatoes, any kind of harvesting and planting."

But the children at File Hills were inventive in their attempts to feed themselves, escaping to hunt small game and build a fire to cook it. "We used to steal anything we could to eat, we'd even run for miles on a Saturday to raid homes for a bit of food. At school, every room that had food in it would have a lock. We always managed to pick it. Once in a while the staff would come and search us. This was any time, without warning; they



DONNA SINCLEAR OBSERVER PHOTO

Researcher Linda Bull: sharing the hurt.

would find brown sugar, bread or fruit on us, any kind of contraband."

**There were those** who attempted change. "I noticed that the staff that were good to us were released by means of too much compassion and loyalty to us," says Dieter. "But I must say our classroom was a peaceful place, because the teachers I remember were very good."

A young teacher named Lucy Affleck at Round Lake Indian Residential School near Stockholm, Saskatchewan in 1929, is one example. "The children lack completely the mothering that only one could give them who lived close enough to them to know their individual dispositions," she wrote to the Superintendent of

Indian Missions in Toronto, Dr. A. Barner, after she had been there just over a month. "Mrs. Ross is a strong disciplinarian, wonderfully so, but the discipline they are receiving is *not* the result of training or the rule of love."

Her anguished letter illustrates many of the difficulties at the schools. In what was a windy, wet October there was no heat in the residence, and "they are still wearing their summer clothing, the boys without underwear of any kind, and the result is that we have a bad epidemic of coughing." Although "90 percent of these children are TB suspects—a few are rather more so—there is no care to prevent serious colds."

Hygiene was a problem. "Bath tubs don't work and the boys have to bathe in laundry tubs. . . ." Toilets don't flush, and "sweeping in the boys' dormitory—you will know what a dust an unoiled floor makes—is done seven days in the week by four girls, three of whom are from families with *bad* TB records."

She points out that although there is enough food, "it is not well chosen. As there is a great number of pigs on the farm, much of the milk must go to them." Furthermore, underfunding and consequent overcrowding for the sake of government grants meant "we have 10 more girls than beds in the girls' dormitory, and more coming." The principal "keeps in his office apples and oranges bought by the crate which he sells to the children at five cents apiece,

and exhorts them to come and buy when he knows they have received money from their parents."

But for her, the main problem was that Round Lake, with its small, uncared for children "not knowing what else to do with themselves, running wild in the cold and dark," was simply the opposite of what a school run by the United Church should be. "The religious knowledge these little Indians get is a matter of form only. Of a Gospel of love and light they hear nothing."

It was the same fact a small Wilf Dieter would discover four years later at File Hills, and he echoes Affleck's letter with his memories. "One thing they did was teach us to pray, and we got a lot of Bible teachings. But it was