

Rescued from the memory hole: Some First Nations people loved their residential schools

World-renowned Cree playwright Tomson Highway testified to having had good experiences at one such school.

Mon Jun 28, 2021 - 1:45 pm EST

<https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/rescued-from-the-memory-hole-some-first-nations-people-loved-their-residential-schools>

NOELVILLE, Ontario, June 28, 2021 ([LifeSiteNews](#)) — As Catholic churches in Canada are vandalized or burned down, it is worth remembering that two leading First Nations people have credited their residential schools for their success in life.

They include world-renowned Cree playwright [Tomson Highway](#) and the late Inuvik Dene band chief [Cece Hodgson-McCauley](#). In addition, a number of people have written accounts to the now-retired Senator Lynn Beyak, testifying to having had positive experiences or having heard first-hand accounts of good experiences at the residential schools.

In 2015, Tomson Highway told the now-defunct *Huffington Post Canada* that he spent nine of the “happiest years” of his life at a residential school. The school, called the Guy Hill Residential School, was run by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Born in northern Manitoba, Highway was sent to the residential school at the age of six, and remained until he was 15, going home for the two-month summer holidays. He then boarded with families of European origin while finishing his high school education in Winnipeg.

“All we hear is the negative stuff; nobody’s interested in the positive, the joy in that school,” [Highway told journalist Joshua Ostroff about Guy Hill](#).

“Nine of the happiest years of my life I spent...at that school,” he continued.

“I learned your language, for God’s sake. Have you learned my language? No, so who’s the privileged one and who is underprivileged.”

Highway suggested that there were as many “positive stories” about residential schools as the “negative” stories heard by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation investigation into the boarding school system that saw tens of thousands of children from northern communities carried far from their families for their education. He also credited his school his success, and other residential schools for the successes of other former students.

“You may have heard stories from 7,000 witnesses in the process that were negative,” the award-winning playwright said.

"But what you haven't heard are the 7,000 reports that were positive stories. There are many very successful people today that went to those schools and have brilliant careers and are very functional people, very happy people like myself. I have a thriving international career, and it wouldn't have happened without that school."

'The truth is eating at them because they are scared to speak out about the good side of residential school'

Cece Hodgson-McCauley was the first woman chief among the 23 band chiefs in Canada's Northwest Territories. A long-time columnist for the Northern News Service, in 2012 Hodgson-McCauley wrote a description of what she called "the other side of the residential school." When her mother died, the future chief was six and her brother was two-and-half. Her father was a trapper, and therefore had "no choice" but to send his children to the Fort Providence residential school, administered by nuns, to be cared for during the school year.

"I spent 10 years there, going home every summer for the holidays on the mission boat," [Hodgson-McCauley wrote](#).

"The nuns taught us so much. I only remember one nun who was very strict and one nun who made us pray [too] much. In every society you have people with personalities that are on the bad side," she continued.

"But I can swear on the Bible that my time in the convent was good. We ate three meals a day, not fancy but nourishing, a lot of recreation, every winter they built us a big slide and we would have fun sliding and we went on many picnics in summer time and in the winter we would go for hay rides, sleighs pulled by oxen."

"We set rabbit snares and ate rabbit. They had pemmican, that is pounded meat that natives love. They taught us how to knit stockings for ourselves, to do fancy beading for moccasins and to do quill work, from two quills up to 12 quills. We learned to make our own dresses, they taught how to cook and bake and clean."

"The boys had hockey and baseball. The native Indian boys used to always try to beat the Metis boys, lots of fun."

Hodgson-McCauley described her years at the school as the best of her life.

"My family says the same thing, my sister swears by it," [she told an interviewer](#).

"We were treated wonderfully."

The former chief – who died of cancer at the [age of 95](#) in 2018 – ruffled feathers by suggesting some people have lied about the residential school system for money. [When contacted by the CBC](#), Hodgson-McCauley insisted on the social value of the residential schools, saying "For a lot of poor kids, it was the only place people could get three square meals a day."

Hodgson-McCauley also said that elders had been contacting her about their fear of telling the truth.

“The truth is eating at them because they are scared to speak out about the good side of residential school,” she wrote—in capital letters.

‘We are only given one side of the story,’ ‘shame on our government’

The now-retired Senator Lynn Beyak was not afraid to canvass Canadians for their beliefs, good and bad, about the residential schools and published 104 of them on her website in 2017. Five of them were deemed racist and thus got the lion’s share of the media’s attention. However, some of the other 99 contained positive views of residential schools, and these views were recorded by journalist Robert MacBain in his April 16, 2018 article [“Letters to Senator Beyak, Uncensored”](#) in C2C Journal:

- “As retired educators ourselves, with a combined experience of 26 years in Aboriginal and Metis schools, we witnessed first-hand the positive anecdotes and experiences of those who gained from their attendance at Residential Schools. Unfortunately, current orthodoxy forces their ‘voices’ to be silenced.”
- “As the brother of a nun who worked in the system, and the nephew of a Jesuit who worked there too, I categorically refuse to believe that all the people who worked in these schools were as evil as they are being portrayed to be. Indeed, they were seeking, under the social rules that were generally accepted at the time, to do good and to help these children.”
- “I worked with Chipewyan people as an employee of the Catholic Church from 1991 to 2001 I heard many positive comments by native people who had attended residential school in Fort Resolution.... One woman, a Chief of her community for some years, said, ‘I couldn’t wait to go back to residential school. You were clean and you had good food.’ I knew another family, eight children. The Dad was a trapper who spent the winter on the barren lands. His wife contracted TB and was placed in the isolation hospital in Ft. Res. The children were taken by the Dad each year to the school to keep them safe. It was very hard for the youngest who was only 4 yrs at the time – traumatic even to be separated from parents and older sibs. However, the child survived where otherwise he may not have. The schools must be viewed in the context of the social and economic circumstances at the time.”
- “My husband has worked and lived in several aboriginal communities in the north which greatly benefited from these schools and where the people speak very highly of the care and instruction they received. We are only given one side of the story.”
- “I spent over ten years living and working on reserves and northern settlements. And I remember, as a teacher, how often we had to convince the population to keep their children at home and go to the Day School, rather than to send them to a residential school. If the residential schools had been so bad why were parents insisting that their children go? I personally saw a lot of good emanate from these schools. I do admit mistakes were made but those same mistakes also existed in the population at large. Yes, most people were well intentioned and worked with the knowledge they thought best.”
- “I have lived and worked in Prince Albert, SK, for a number of years and had the opportunity to meet retired teachers of residential schools, and listen to their experiences as well. Those I met, were all good, hardworking and well-intentioned people. I also had the opportunity to meet First

Nations people, teachers and lawyers, who are now effective leaders and advocates among and on behalf of their people, exactly because they received education in those residential schools.”

- “I attended a First Nations Art Exhibition in Fort McMurray and I met a native artist who told me how grateful she was to the nuns and priests in her community who ran the school because for her it was a place of refuge. She said that her parents would go out on the trap-line and leave them to fend for themselves and she would go sit on the steps of the school and hope someone would help her.”
- “I myself am a product of a Catholic convent school and while some people who attended that school with me will now say that the nuns were racists and treated them unfairly, that was not my experience. Yes, they were strict, but the principles of kindness and consideration for others were held in high esteem and they instilled in me values that successfully took me through more than 40 years in the business world.”
- “My mother has a cousin who attended a residential [school] and whenever she is asked about it, she tells [her] that her experience was a good one, in fact she credits the residential school system with having provided her the opportunity to have a good education. Her experience in residential school was so good that when the federal government offered a blanket cash settlement to all former attendees, she refused to take it.”
- “I know from first-hand experience that the Residential schools provided a lot of good and back in the fifties it gave children from the reserves the opportunity to witness life off the reserve, to be educated in more than a one room school house for all, and to join in social programs to broaden their experience.”
- “I think of the many people who provided clothing and funding to help ensure the children had a good experience at the Residential school while away from home. I am not naive enough to suggest that in some areas there were[n’t] some serious problems which should never have happened but you cannot tarnish the whole system with the same brush.”
- “Having worked for and with Aboriginal people in northwestern Ontario – many who are my friends – I support what you have said. Are there not two sides to this story? Why is only one side being expressed? Shame on our government.”

Beyak was kicked off the Senate Committee for Aboriginal Peoples in April 2017 for asserting that there were good aspects the residential schools and retired from the Senate in January 2021.

Today someone who works with Canada’s First Nations people told LifeSiteNews under condition of anonymity that it is very difficult for the happy Catholics among them to speak about their positive experiences of the Church.

“The Catholic indigenous who are fond of the Church are being bullied into being victims,” he said.

“It’s some strange thing where the government and culture is convincing the indigenous that they’re victims again.”

'We wanted the pope to say that he was sorry...We heard that very clearly today.'

Anger about Canada's residential school system, which was founded in the 1840s and not closed down completely until 1996, [flared up again in May](#) after the discovery of 215 unmarked graves on the site of a former residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia. It is unclear as yet from when the graves date or to whom they belong, let alone the cause of death. The residential school was put into the care of the Catholic Church from 1890 until 1969, when the government took over its management. It continued as a day school until it closed in 1978.

Although the residential school system – which is widely known among Canadians today to have been severely flawed and a product of the paternalist, racist pre-war era – was founded and underfunded by secular governments, fury is being whipped up by mainstream media against the Catholic Church, in particular, for her role in administering the schools. This week two Catholic churches on First Nations land in British Columbia [were torched](#), and a Catholic church in Mississauga, Ontario was daubed with blasphemous obscenities. Yesterday St. Paul's Catholic Co-Cathedral in Saskatoon was also vandalized after over 700 other unmarked graves were found alongside another residential school's cemetery.

One of the “fake news” items being pushed by the mainstream media and politicians is that the Catholic Church has been reluctant to apologize or make amends for abuses within the schools she administered. Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took care to slam the Church publicly, saying, “Make it clear that we expect the Church to step up and take responsibility for its role in this and be there to help in the grieving and the healing, including with records that is necessary. It's something we are all still waiting for the Catholic Church to do.”

In fact, the Catholic Church in Canada – and in Rome – has long acknowledged some Catholics were at fault in the government-mandated residential school system.

In April 2009, Pope Benedict XVI met with First Nations representatives and apologized for the abuse children suffered in the schools. Phil Fontaine, then-national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, emerged from the meeting satisfied.

“What we wanted the pope to say to us was that he was sorry and ... that he deeply felt for us,” [Fontaine said](#).

“We heard that very clearly today.”

Subsequently, the Vatican Press Office confused the issue slightly by saying that the pontiff had “expressed his sorrow.”

“Given the sufferings that some indigenous children experienced in the Canadian Residential School system, the Holy Father expressed his sorrow at the anguish caused by the deplorable conduct of some members of the Church and he offered his sympathy and prayerful solidarity,” [it stated](#).

“His Holiness emphasized that acts of abuse cannot be tolerated in society. He prayed that all those affected would experience healing, and he encouraged First Nations Peoples to continue to move forward with renewed hope.”

The Catholic Church in Canada took part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission dealing with the residential schools from 2008 and 2015, and several bishops, including Bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories, and religious orders, including the Jesuits, offered apologies to Canada's native peoples.

Some Catholic apologies were offered before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 1991, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, who staffed the largest number of residential schools, made a full apology for its participation in the system, [including the words](#): “For the part that we played, however inadvertent and naive that participation might have been, in the setting up and maintaining of a system that stripped others of not only their lands but also of their cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions we sincerely apologize.”

Subsequent to the discovery of the 215 unmarked graves in the grounds of the former school, there were renewed expressions of solidarity with Canada's indigenous people from Pope Francis, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Edmonton's Archbishop Smith, and Vancouver's Archbishop Michael Miller.

Also being lost in the mainstream media's account of the residential school system is the Canadian government's [refusal to provide proper funding](#) and improve the sanitary conditions in at least 35 of the schools. In 1907, Dr. Peter H. Bryce, the Medical Inspector for Canada's Department of Interior and Indian Affairs, conducted a special inspection of 35 Indigenous residential schools and wrote a detailed report on their subpar conditions.

His recommendations were not published by the government, however, because they found the report too embarrassing. Both report and recommendations were subsequently leaked to the press, and Bryce's shocking discoveries were published in a 1922 book entitled “[The Story of a National Crime](#).”

Bryce [described](#) the schools as being in a “defective sanitary condition” that included irregular exercise, insufficient ventilation, and the admittance of students “already infected with contagious diseases.”

It was “almost as if the prime conditions of the outbreak of epidemics had been deliberately created,” he wrote.

In the early 20th century, Canada suffered a high child mortality rate; in 1900 [the death rate](#) for children under 5 was 296.75 per 1000 births, and deaths among children did not become a rarity there until after World War II. Even so, Bryce reported an “excessive mortality” in the children he studied, noting that infection – particularly TB – was primarily contracted in their family homes and then spread in the schools. The First Nations people themselves have historically been [noted](#) to be less resilient against infectious diseases, such as influenza epidemics, measles, and smallpox.