



Residential schools were established in both Canada and the United States of America in the late 1800's. In Canada, Indigenous children were taken from their families and sent to government funded boarding schools that were run primarily by Catholic churches. There was an amendment to the Indian Act of 1894 making it mandatory for all First Nations Children to attend these government funded schools from 1894 to 1947.<sup>2</sup> Many children were rounded up and taken from their homes to these remote schools for months at a time. Duncan Campbell Scott, Head of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932, famously said in 1920, 'the goal of the Indian Residential School is to kill the Indian in the child'.<sup>3</sup>

Sadly, in many cases, this goal was accomplished. Children were not allowed to speak their language and had to give up their cultural practices, beliefs, and any connection to their Indigenous way of life (Wilson, para. 1 of 22). Residential schools were used to assimilate Indigenous children into English language, cultures, and beliefs. A report done by Reconciliation Canada documented that of the 150,000 Indigenous children taken from their families; 90 to 100% suffered severe physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; there was a 40 – 60% mortality rate in Indian

residential schools; and over 130 residential schools were located across Canada, with the last school closing as recently as 1997.<sup>4</sup>

*Indian Horse* came out in 2017, and the plot of the movie follows a young boy, Saul, who is forced to go to a Residential School. The first scene shows how the children at said Residential school were forced to speak English. The scene takes place in a group therapy session in which two characters, whose dialog overlaps says, 'When we spoke our language, we were punished...would hit me with a broom... always punished for, um...for speaking our language' (1:38:45-1:38:40). The kids would have to speak English all the time or else fear some sort of reprimand. The teachers were swift and ruthless in their punishment; they treated the languages of Indigenous people as if they were curse words. In this movie, the children were depicted as having no contact with parents at all; not even writing a letter. Even if the children were able to write home, the parents would not be able to read the letters, as they would have been written in English.

The beginning of the film takes place in the 1950's in Northern Ontario. The residential school Saul was sent to was hours away from

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Conrad and Alvin Kinkel, *History of the Canadian Peoples: 1867 to the Present*, Vol. 2, 5/E, (Ontario: Pearson Education Canada, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Kory Wilson, *Residential Schools* (2021), *Pulling Together Foundations Guide* <<https://opentextbc.ca/indigenizationfoundations/cha>

pter/residential-schools/>, (para 1 of 22), subsequent references in parenthesis.

<sup>4</sup> Tabitha Marshall and David Gallant, 'Residential Schools in Canada', *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools>.

his home and was quite isolated. The film suggests that the isolation of Indigenous children was so they could not be influenced by their own community and learn about their culture; this was done to assimilate them into the dominant Canadian culture. This is the reason the residential school system was created, and this section of the movie is an example of this. This is the first of multiple instances in this film that illustrate how Indigenous people sharing their culture and simply living as Indigenous people would result in punishment and physical abuse.

The second scene chosen from the movie takes place around a fire where Saul and his family set up camp as they travel north to get a blessing for Saul's dead brother. Saul's Nookmis (grandmother) says in the Ojibway language, 'The spirits of the lake are pleased we are here' (1:35:14 - 1:35:11) and Saul's mother says in English "That's blasphemy. We've gotta give thanks to Jesus" (1:35:11-1:35:07). Saul's Nookmis responds in Ojibway, 'Your Jesus never fished these waters' (1:35:05 - 1:35:00). Because Saul's mother and father were forced to spend much of their childhood in residential school, they will only speak English, not Ojibway. This was a lasting part of their Residential school education. Even after they were back 'home' they still felt that they must speak English and be practicing Christians or something bad would happen; in this case, their deceased son would not enter Heaven. This scene in the movie highlights the separation of culture

through language and religion between Saul's parents and his Nookmis; the Euro-Canadian culture was seen as superior and the Indigenous people's culture as inferior in the eyes of the government. It is possible that the parents, when they returned from their time in the residential schools, had been indoctrinated into believing that the way of life of Indigenous people was more difficult and that assimilation would make their lives easier.

The third scene that highlighted how the characters were forced to speak English takes place when Saul is forcibly taken to a residential school. Saul and another boy, Lonnie, are asked their names by a priest. Saul is able to understand what the priest is asking him, but the other boy does not understand English and says, 'I want to go home' (1:20:53-1:20:51) in his mother-tongue. The priest tells him to speak in English and repeats the question; waits a few seconds before asking Saul if he knows what the boy's name is, to which Saul answers 'Lonnie'. The priest groans in distaste and says 'You'll need something more suitable than that. All right, from now on, your name is Aaron' (1:20:39-1:20:30). Lonnie says 'I have a name. My father's. Lonnie' (1:20:25-1:20:19). After Lonnie is told that his human father is worth nothing and that the Lord Father is his only father now, Lonnie is told he must speak English. Lonnie tries to leave, but the nun keeps the door closed, leans him over the desk, and starts laying blows on him with a leather belt. This scene illustrates how the teachers of

Christian faith running the school thought the Indigenous people and their ways were inferior and they felt justified in their mistreatment and physical violence; a force which these institutions thought was necessary to cause the children under their 'care' to change their ways.

The Canadian government also felt justified in taking children away from their parents and forcing them to assimilate. They did not want the children to learn their culture from their families, individuals who were not seen as true citizens of Canada in the eyes of the law. This mandated education and language would be seen as superior to what they would have learned if they were living with their families.

The fourth scene that highlights the children being forced to speak English takes place when Saul and Lonnie are in a religious class in the residential school. Lonnie tries getting Saul's attention by saying 'Anish' twice, in which the nun teaching says 'Stand up. This is the third time this week I've heard you speaking Ojibway. Come here' (1:16:33-1:16:24). She then takes him to the front of the class and says 'The Good God gave you this mouth. He gave you language. It is a very grave sin to corrupt these sacred gifts with falsehood and deceit' (1:16:17-1:16:08). She

proceeds to take a bar of soap from her desk drawer, tells Lonnie to open his mouth and forces it in as he gags. The film makes note of the fact that the methods in which authority figures of residential schools 'taught' Indigenous students were based on white supremacy and Catholicism. According to *The Globe and Mail*, the Catholic Church ran about 60 percent of residential schools in Canada.<sup>5</sup>

The last scene that depicts characters that were forced to speak English takes place in the very last scene of the film before credits roll. In this last scene of *Indian Horse*, one Residential School survivor says, 'to this day, there's a lot of us that don't know our native tongue' (6:02 - 5:58) and this closes out the movie. It is the final commentary of one of the long-lasting impacts of residential schooling and the loss of language. It is common knowledge to a large portion of Canadians that most of the stories and lessons of Indigenous people are taught through the spoken word, called Oral Tradition. So, this seems incredibly sad that their languages, which are so intertwined with their cultures, have been harmed through many generations of residential schooling.

Even though the schools are now closed, the lasting effects of residential schools are not only felt by the people who were forced to

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<sup>5</sup> Tavia Grant, 'Catholic Church ran most of Canada's residential schools, yet remains largely silent about their devastating legacy', *The Globe and Mail*,

<<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-catholic-church-ran-most-of-canadas-residential-schools-yet-remains/>>.

attend, but also by younger generations who have family members who were affected by residential schools. Transgenerational trauma is defined as ‘a collective complex trauma inflicted on a group of people who share a specific group identity or affiliation—ethnicity, nationality, or religious affiliation [and] the legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations’.<sup>6</sup> Transgenerational trauma affects groups because of their cultural identity. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) gave an estimate that 80,000 survivors of residential schools are alive all throughout Canada today.<sup>7</sup> Residential schools have been linked to issues within Indigenous communities today such as post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, substance abuse, and suicide.

The themes of the film involve physical violence, forced religion, white supremacy, and the attempts of erasing Indigenous people’s culture. The scenes in the film *Indian*

*Horse* illustrated how Indigenous children struggled to keep their culture, specifically language; how non-Indigenous individuals interacted with Indigenous people, what happened in the time of residential schools, and how all of this translates into 21st century Canada. Most Canadians only learned a little bit about Residential schools as part of a social studies curriculum in secondary school. Films such as *Indian Horse* that discuss the atrocities that took place during this dark part in Canadian History are incredibly important as they highlight how essential it is to remember that the effects that these events had do not stay in the past. Indigenous people, not only those who suffered within the Residential School system but also their descendants, have had to fight to keep their culture. Lost culture does not suddenly come back because younger generations are not forced to stay in residential schools. The past will always affect the present and future.

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<sup>6</sup> Fariba Kollahdooz, Forouz Nader, Kyoung J. Yi and Sangita Sharma, ‘Understanding the social determinants of health among Indigenous Canadians: priorities for health promotion policies and actions’, *Global Health Action*,

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3402/gha.v8.27968>>.

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’, *Government of Canada*, <<https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525>>

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