

Fall 2021

Orange Shirt Day

Every Child Matters.
Commemorating the residential school experience
and committing to the ongoing process of reconciliation.

about ORANGE SHIRT DAY

Orange Shirt Day is a legacy of the *St. Joseph Mission Residential School (1891-1981) Commemoration Project* that took place in Williams Lake, BC, Canada, in May 2013.⁵

Orange Shirt Day is designed to commemorate the residential school experience, to witness and honour the healing journey of the survivors and their families, and to commit to the ongoing process of reconciliation.

her story:

PHYLLIS WEBSTAD



Source: Province of BC, Members of the Legislative Assembly and the Orange Shirt Society say 'Every Child Matters', September 21, 2017, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/bcgovphotos/36561672343>, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Phyllis (Jack) Webstad is the Executive Director of the Orange Shirt Society. She is Northern Secwepemc (Shuswap) from the Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation (Canoe Creek Indian Band). Phyllis was born in Dog Creek and now lives in Williams Lake, BC.⁵ Below, she shares her story of her first day at residential school when her new orange shirt, bought by her grandmother, was taken from her:

I went to the Mission for one school year in 1973/1974. I had just turned 6 years old. We never had much money, but somehow my granny managed to buy me a new outfit to go to the Mission school. I remember picking out a shiny orange shirt.

When I got to the Mission, they stripped me, and took away my clothes, including the orange shirt! The color orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn't matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing.

I went to a treatment centre for healing when I was 27 and have been on this healing journey since then. That the feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the mission, affected the way I lived my life for many years.

I am honored to be able to tell my story so that others may benefit and understand, and maybe other survivors will feel comfortable enough to share their stories.⁵

THE LEGACY

September 30th was chosen as the date for Orange Shirt Day because it is the time of year in which children were taken from their homes to residential schools. The date also allows for an opportunity to set the stage for anti-racism and anti-bullying policies for the coming school year.⁵

Orange Shirt Day aims to lead a global conversation on all aspects of Indigenous residential schools, creating meaningful discussion about the effects of residential Schools and the legacy they have left behind. It is a day for survivors to be reaffirmed that they matter, and so do those who have been affected. Every Child Matters, even if they are an adult, from now on.



Source: Province of BC, Orange Shirt Day 2018, September 30, 2018, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/bcgovphotos/43208129180>, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

"KILL THE INDIAN, SAVE THE MAN."

According to the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, there were 367 Indian Boarding Schools across 29 U.S. states in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁴

Indian Boarding School Policy expressly intended to implement cultural genocide through the systematic destruction of Indigenous cultures and communities. In an attempt to "civilize" Indigenous people and assimilate them into dominant white culture, the federal government and Christian churches collaborated in the inception of missionary schools aimed to "Kill the Indian, Save the Man."⁶

Between 1869 and the 1960's, Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in boarding schools hundreds of miles from their reservation homes. "Civilizing" the children meant stripping them their ancestral traditions and customs. They were punished for speaking their native languages and, like Phyllis Webstad, were removed of traditional clothing, hair, and personal belongings.

FATAL CONSEQUENCES

Many students suffered and died in the schools from diseases such as trachoma, smallpox, and tuberculosis.¹ Some students committed suicide, unable to bear the lonesomeness, abuse, and psychological trauma of being denied their identities.¹

To hide the high mortality rates of the schools, thousands of students were buried in unmarked graves. The fatal consequences of the boarding schools have received renewed attention in recent months, as new findings of mass graves have been discovered in Canada. As of August 2021, more than 1,300 unmarked graves have been found across the sites of five former Canadian residential schools.⁷

ACROSS NORTH AMERICA



Source: BiblioArchives, A group of nuns with Aboriginal students, Port Harrison, Quebec, circa 1890, May 27, 2014, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lac-bac/14260482006>, CC BY 2.0

As the recent discoveries of mass graves in Canada have indicated, the United States was not unique in using government-sanctioned schools to assault Indigenous cultures. Schools all across the North American continent were established to assimilate Indigenous people into dominant white culture.²

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many colonial and imperial powers believed schools were essential for controlling Indigenous nations. Canadian residential schools, like American boarding schools, were "part of a growing international trend"⁶ in heavily colonized regions of the world where subduing Indigenous populations was crucial to imperial stability.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa), April 10, 2016, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_Eastman_\(Ohiyesa\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_Eastman_(Ohiyesa).jpg)



Source: Wikimedia Commons, Charles Eastman, November 18, 2006, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_Eastman.jpg

"I am an Indian. While I have learned much from civilization, I have never lost my Indian sense of right and justice. Nevertheless, so long as I live, **I am an American."**¹ – *Ohiyesa*

RESISTANCE & RESILIENCE

Within the Schools

Despite the horrific circumstances in which they found themselves, Indigenous students within the confines of the boarding schools found ways of resisting the educational assaults meant to completely transform them. Whether through outright rebellion against authority, building community amongst themselves, or actively finding ways to sustain their languages and cultural beliefs, students were determined to find solidarity and turned boarding schools into sites of cultural contests¹.

While these acts of resistance should by no means downplay the cruel and militant environment of the schools, it is important to recognize the incredible resilience of Indigenous children in the face of cultural genocide.

Re-Purposing Education

While boarding schools were purposed with eradicating Indigenous existence, many Indigenous people re-purposed their boarding school education into new forms of resistance by working from within the systems that oppressed them. They used their new English facilities, knowledge, and understandings of American institutions to advocate for tribal nations.

There is no neat divide between assimilation and resistance, and many Indigenous activists occupied the grey area in between. Prominent Sioux reformer Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa) is one of many boarding school graduates who acted as a bridge between Indigenous communities and white policymakers by using their education and access to wider audiences to lobby for changes.

" WE CALL UPON HUMANITY TO LISTEN TO
THE STORIES OF SURVIVORS AND
REMEMBER THOSE THAT DID NOT MAKE IT.⁵ "

Reconciliation & Advocacy Today

For centuries, Indigenous people have survived various manifestations of settler colonialism. This pamphlet has focused particularly on the history of Indigenous boarding schools, which were one aspect of brutal assimilationist policies.

Orange Shirt Day and the Orange Shirt Society are contemporary Indigenous-led movements purposed with supporting Indian Residential School reconciliation and creating awareness of the individual, family, and community intergenerational impacts of Indian Residential Schools.

It is critical for non-Indigenous people and institutions to recognize the long-lasting effects of these boarding schools and to support Indigenous strategies for healing. Restoring tribal control to education, centering Native languages in schools, offering diverse therapeutic conventions and healing programs rooted in Indigenous epistemology, and supporting Indigenous practices of traditional activities are examples of promising strategies for healing today.⁶



Educate

yourself on the history of violence against Indigenous bodies, land, and culture

Reciprocate

by participating in mutual aid funds, volunteering to meet needs articulated by Indigenous communities themselves, and amplifying Indigenous voices

Donate

if you can to the Orange Shirt Society on their official website

Citations

¹ Calloway, Colin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*. 6th ed. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2019.

² Hanson, Erin. "The Residential School System." Edited by Daniel P Gamez and Alexa Manuel. *Indigenous Foundations*. Accessed October 17, 2021. https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_system/

³ Hoxie, Frederick E. "Introduction: American Indian Activism in the Progressive Era ." Essay. In *Talking Back to Civilization: Indian Voices from the Progressive Era*, 1–28. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2001.

⁴ Nabs. *The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition*. Accessed November 1, 2021. <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/>

⁵ "Orange Shirt Day." *Orange Shirt Day*. Accessed October 17, 2021. <https://www.orangeshirtday.org/>.

⁶ *Trigger Points: Current State of Research on History, Impacts, and Healing Related to the United States' Indian Industrial/Boarding School Policy*. Boulder, Colorado: Native American Rights Fund, 2019.

⁷ Voce, Antonio, Leyland Cecco, and Chris Michael. "'Cultural Genocide': The Shameful History of Canada's Residential Schools – Mapped." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2021/sep/06/canada-residential-schools-indigenous-children-cultural-genocide-map>.