

## **Study Background: *Goodbye Buffalo Bay***

For use by teachers and students.

. Canada's residential school system and its relationship to *Goodbye Buffalo Bay* by Larry Loyie [From *Goodbye Buffalo Bay* by Larry Loyie with Constance Brissenden, Theytus Books]

Cree author Larry Loyie attended St. Bernard Mission residential school in Grouard, Alberta, Canada, from age nine to thirteen. For photographs of Lawrence (Larry Loyie) and other students, the Boys Dormitory, Girls Yard, schoolhouse, the ice rink and other activities at residential school, please go to **Larry Loyie's website:**

**[www.firstnationswriter.com](http://www.firstnationswriter.com)**

### **The effect of residential school on Aboriginal children and their families**

*Goodbye Buffalo Bay* is the true story of Larry Loyie's experience in residential school and his return to the world outside. It tells of the emotions children felt when they were taken from their families and shows how other emotions, such as anger, developed. His book honours the friendships that helped children survive. It also shares his adventures, both dramatic and comical, as he enters the working world.

Larry and tens of thousands of other First Nations, Inuit and Metis children experienced harsh treatment at the schools. Poorly funded by the Canadian government, they were run by the United, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Anglican churches. With little or no professional training, the staff provided inadequate education. Abuse in many forms was common. The children faced constant punishments, ate unhealthy and poorly prepared food, and worked hard at daily chores (such as hauling wood, picking potatoes, washing clothes and sewing) that kept the school running.

Time in the classroom was limited. Teachers and supervisors such as Sister Denise were often untrained to do their jobs. Isolated from their families, the children lived a life of uncertainty and fear. They were constantly told what to do. Above all, they were forbidden to speak their birth language. If they did, they were severely punished, including washing their mouths with soap, by being beaten and by being ridiculed. Criticism of their families, cultures and languages was a belittling, daily occurrence. An encouraging teacher, such as Sister Theresa, was a one-time experience for the author.

*Goodbye Buffalo Bay* also explores how a child felt when he or she returned home. Children like Lawrence came home as strangers. Before entering the residential school at nine years of age, he could already provide food for his family by fishing and hunting. After years in the school, he questioned his role at home, in his culture and in the community. The author tells of his struggles and adventures as a teenager as he finds a place for himself in the outside world.

After attending residential school, the majority of children no longer spoke their Indigenous language or valued their culture. This helped to widen the divide between

family members. Larry's grandmother, Kokom Bella, for example, spoke only Cree. She could no longer talk to most of her grandchildren or teach them traditional ways. Larry refused to forget his language in spite of punishments at the residential school.

### **A brief history of residential schools**

In the 1600s, missionaries ran small schools to teach Indigenous children to act as translators for the fur trade. The first Indian boarding school in Canada -- the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario -- opened in 1833 to teach industrial arts. Its daily routine was based on harsh army training.

In 1879, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald of Canada sent journalist Nicholas Flood Davin to visit Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, the first such school in the United States. Davin was impressed. He encouraged Macdonald to support these church-run industrial or manual-labour schools. The name was changed to residential schools in the 1920s.

The goal of the schools was to assimilate Indigenous people into mainstream society, destroying their family and cultural ties. John A. Macdonald told his government that the schools would "do away with a tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion, as speedily as they are fit to change."

The first of more than 130 schools run by the four churches opened in 1892. The schools stressed practical training, such as agriculture and carpentry for boys and sewing and cooking for girls. In 1920, an amendment to the Indian Act made it law for Indigenous parents to send their children to residential school. Parents who resisted could go to jail. In 1949, a Canadian Senate report questioned the residential school system and recommended that the children attend mainstream schools. In 1969, the federal government of Canada assumed responsibility for the schools and began shutting them down. The last of the schools closed in 1998.

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada and the leaders of the Opposition apologized to First Nations, Metis and Inuit people for the residential schools. The apology was an important step to recognizing the sad history of residential school system and its long-lasting negative effect on children and families.

*Goodbye Buffalo Bay* honours the children who attended residential schools and helps to ensure their stories will never be forgotten.