



WHAT LIES BENEATH

AS
ARCHEOLOGISTS
START SEARCHING
UNDER ST. ALBERT,
TWO SISTERS
SEEK OUT
STORIES FROM THEIR
FAMILY'S PAST

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ST. ALBERT MISSION SITS ON TOP OF A LARGE HILL OVERLOOKING THE CITY.

There's a big Catholic church, a retirement centre and a chapel, built in 1861, that is Alberta's oldest known wooden structure – the church of Father Lacombe. When I visit the site, there is construction where an old parking lot is being replaced.

Along the walkways on Mission Hill is the Founders Walk, a series of signs that describe the people who settled the area or made significant cultural contributions – such as Father Lacombe, Bishop Taché and Marguerite d'Youville, a widow who worked with friends in Montreal to set up a congregation to help the poor. Over the next 100 years, the Sisters of Charity of Montreal, who were also called the Grey Nuns, became a major provider of social services and expanded westward into the prairies.

But, not mentioned along that same Founders Walk, the bitter legacy of residential schools, and the pain of the Indigenous children who were sent there.

The residential school in St. Albert was named for Marguerite d'Youville.

Today, as we start to reckon with the history of residential schools, there are often stark reminders in the forms of buildings and meadows. In the case of the Poundmaker's Lodge in St. Albert, the land has been given back to Indigenous people and the facility is used as a healing centre.

But the number of potential similar graves, their precise locations, and the identities of those who may fill them remain largely a mystery at the site of St. Albert's other residential school, the former Youville Residential School site. It was located on the east side of St. Albert, on what is now St. Vital Street between Mont Clare Place and Madonna Drive. This residential school grew out of a Roman Catholic mission school that was established for Métis children. It closed in 1948.

Kisha Supernant, who is the director of the Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archeology at the University of Alberta, has been fielding calls from all over the country since the news broke in May of 215 bodies being discovered at a residential school site in Kamloops, B.C. She says the process of finding unmarked graves needs to be methodical and include the communities that may have youth buried there.

To peel back the layers of history and examine them takes time. In addition to the consultation with the community and giving time for ceremony, the ground-penetrating radar process can be slow.

IT WAS LOCATED ON THE EAST SIDE OF ST. ALBERT, ON ST. VITAL STREET BETWEEN MONT CLARE PLACE AND MADONNA DRIVE. THIS RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL GREW OUT OF A ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSION SCHOOL THAT WAS ESTABLISHED FOR MÉTIS CHILDREN. IT CLOSED IN 1948.

“Under ideal circumstances, we might be able to cover 50 by 50 metres in a day,” says Supernant.

Her team was on site to monitor a new parking lot installation behind the St. Albert Catholic School District building. The St. Albert Catholic School District released a report stating no unmarked graves were discovered in the parking lot area. Supernant said that the surveyed area was part way down the hill towards the Catholic School Board building. The Métis community plans to search four other sites across the city.

Supernant says that a formal search has not yet begun in the area. “I have not done any ground-penetrating radar in the area yet, so there is no way to say whether or not we will find unmarked graves. However, I anticipate there may be some of the children who died at the school buried in nearby cemeteries that have unmarked graves, so I would surmise that there are some children in unmarked graves around the Youville School.”

BEVERLY ASMANN AND LINDA BUFFALO ARE SISTERS.

Their mother, Rose Evelyn, attended the Youville residential school in St. Albert. She didn't like to talk about what happened to her while she was there, but her daughters did learn some of her history. They know that, at 16, their mother was sent away from the school, and put on a bus and sent to go and work as a maid.

Buffalo says that when her mother was discharged from the school, “they sent her down to Drumheller, where she was told that she was going to clean out a hotel when the hotel closed that night, that she had a job, that they packed a suitcase and put her on a Greyhound bus.”

Asmann adds, “She never knew anyone. And she was 16 years of age. And they sent her down there and they said she was going to go work for these white people. And that's what she did. She cleaned the bar after it closed and she cleaned up in the morning. That's what she did. She never went home again. They never sent her home.” From there, she married and had children, but remained disconnected from her family.

Both Asmann and Buffalo married Indigenous men and established their own connections to their ancestry, but they carry the stories from Youville that haunted their mother.

“My mother told me that a girl in bed next to her had a nosebleed and they went to get the nuns. The nuns

came and wiped her face and yelled at them to get back into bed. The next morning the girl was dead. She bled to death and the nuns never came back to check on her,” says Buffalo. Her mother had said the girl’s name was Mary. Buffalo went to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission website, which lists the names of children who died in care. There are two girls named Mary listed.

“One thing I remember mom talking about, she used to say if kids tried to run home, she said there was this black bus, and they called it a Black Mariah. That is what they would send after the kids that would run to bring them back,” says Asmann,

The Black Mariah, or Maria, is a term imported from the United Kingdom. It is a name given to a police van.

“That reminds me of a story my mom did tell me when I was pretty young. She was crying and I remember we were talking about the bus that came to get them [to round up the children and take them to a residential school]. She said ‘We would all yell the bus is coming and we would all run and hide.’ And then she started to cry and she said, ‘One day I wasn’t fast enough and they caught me.’ She was five years old,” says Buffalo.

The sisters share an incalculable loss of their culture and history, compounded by the fact that they are a part of Michel Band, a group that lost Indian status and struggles for recognition (though many members have individual status). Buffalo visited Ottawa in the early ’90s to dig out records of their reserve and what happened to her family.

Their grandmother, Louise Callihoo, was placed in a mental institution and sterilized so she couldn’t have any more children. She did not have a relationship with her daughter.

The sisters obtained the medical records of their grandmother from the Ponoka Institute, which was a mental institution at the time.

“They talked about her as being this dirty obese Indian woman who shouldn’t have procreated and doesn’t need to have more children,” says Asmann. Their grandmother was one of four women who were not included when the Michel Band was enfranchised (lost



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its status rights) due to medical status or language barriers (though she kept her individual Treaty status her entire life). Their reserve land was sold and families were scattered. The members who were enfranchised are not able to claim status under the Indian Act.

The sisters agree that it is difficult to know what to do with this sort of history. The old Youville school doesn’t exist anymore. “I’ve been asking myself what is going to make me feel better, and I don’t have an answer,” says Buffalo. “I’ve talked to counsellors because I am so distraught, but I don’t know what would help.

“So many people still want to believe that residential schools didn’t happen. So many people in this country say it didn’t happen.”

Her sister says, “Maybe a memorial with all the children’s names who went there. Maybe a monument to honour them. Something to make people recognize that the names listed are actual children.” **ED.**