

751 unmarked graves discovered at Canadian residential school site in Saskatchewan

Alexandra Greene
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The Cowessess First Nation has announced that 751 unmarked graves have been discovered on reserve land that once housed the Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan's Qu'Appelle Valley.

This grisly discovery comes just weeks after the remains of 215 children were discovered on the site of an Indian residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia, and sheds light, yet again, on the brutal and inhumane treatment Canadian capitalism and its state have meted out to the indigenous population.

Cowessess Chief Cadmus Delorme addressed reporters at a virtual news conference last Thursday morning, where he relayed details of the operation that has been underway to locate the graves.

The First Nation partnered with technical teams from Saskatchewan Polytechnic to begin the search in early June. Using ground-penetrating radar (GPR), the teams covered the 44,000 square metres that previously constituted the residential school's Roman Catholic cemetery.

Delorme said that there could be more than 751 bodies buried at the site. GPR registered 751 "recorded hits" during the searches. However, it is possible that more than one set of remains are buried at some "hit" locations. He noted that penetrating radar has a 10 to 15 percent error rate and that technical teams will announce a verified number of how many remains have been found in the weeks to come.

"This is not a mass grave site. These are unmarked graves," he clarified at Thursday's press conference. He explained that the community will now be treating the site "like a crime scene," with the goal of matching names to those in the graves and eventually erecting a monument on the site to memorialize them. On Saturday, a vigil involving members of the First Nation band was held at which 751 solar-powered lamps were placed on the 751 grave sites identified to date.

The search efforts are "Phase 1" of ongoing work within the Cowessess First Nation, guided by the community's oral history, to locate the victims of the residential school system as well as other unmarked gravesites. These include unbaptized babies whom Church authorities refused to allow to be buried alongside those inducted into the Catholic faith.

Chief Delorme says that oral history indicates that adults were buried at the site, as well as children, and that it is possible people who attended the church or lived in nearby towns may be among the remains.

The Marieval Indian Residential School operated from 1899 to 1997 and was long run by organizations affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. The school building itself was controversially demolished in 1999. However, the church, rectory and grassy plot of land that was the cemetery remain.

The federal government—which at one time funded 130 residential schools across Canada—purchased Marieval for \$70,000 in January 1926. The site is located approximately 140 kilometres east of Regina, Saskatchewan. On government orders and with the support of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and "Indian Agents," the Department of Indian Affairs' representatives on reserves, native children, as young as five or six from across southeastern Saskatchewan and southwestern Manitoba, were separated from their parents and sent to the Marieval School.

Saskatchewan had the highest number of residential schools of any province or territory in Canada and has the highest number of survivors. It is currently known that 566 children died at residential schools within the province, although the single site at Marieval indicates that the true death count is much higher.

In the face of mounting protests by residential school survivors and native groups, the Harper Conservative government convened a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2008 to investigate the abuse faced by First Nations, Inuit and Metis children at Canada's residential schools. The TRC's final report, issued in 2015, identified 4,100 children who had died at or while trying to escape residential schools. However, it estimated the real death toll could exceed 6,000. It also documented tens of thousands of cases of physical and sexual abuse.

An estimated 150,000 children were enlisted in Canada's government-ordered, church-administered residential school system during its more than century-long existence. This puts the odds of dying in a residential school as high as a Canadian soldier who served in the armed forces during World War II.

The youngest survivor to provide the TRC with a statement about Marieval attended from 1993 to 1997. Amber K.K. Pelletier wrote that during her time there, students had their hair cut by teachers upon arrival. They were also assigned numbers, and when staff were upset, they would refer to students by these numbers instead of their names. As well as the haircuts that Pelletier described, children were stripped of their traditional clothing upon arrival.

Classes at the school were taught in English and French; it is widely known that children were routinely beaten in residential

schools for speaking their native language. Survivors that attended Marieval report that staff at the school were very physical with the children and that students were repeatedly slapped, kicked, hit and punched.

Residence at Marieval was enforced. Local parents were allowed to visit their children and take them home for a meal during the first few decades after the school's establishment, but this was disallowed in 1933. From then on, children were only allowed to visit their homes and families under special circumstances.

The school was overcrowded, something that was all too common in residential schools, which were often awarded funding on the basis of how many students they housed. Overcrowding, combined with malnutrition, unsanitary environments and other deplorable living conditions, made the schools ripe for the spread of tuberculosis and other often fatal diseases. Inspectors' reports of appalling health and safety violations recorded at Marieval can be found in TRC documents.

Barry Kennedy, a survivor of Marieval, told CTV News that he "can't find the words" to describe how he feels in light of the discovery of the graves. Kennedy spoke about a friend he had made at Marieval named Brian, who was "taken" one night "like everybody else" and was never seen again. Kennedy wonders today if Brian is among those buried at the site.

Having attended the school from the age of five, Kennedy said that he was witness to frequent burials during his time helping the church as an altar boy. "We were called to the church one early morning ... we were brought outside and they were burying someone. Who it was, whether it was a boy or a girl, I don't know. But what I do know is that this individual was wrapped in a sheet and there was a hole dug," he recalled.

According to Chief Delorme, senior Cowessess First Nation members who are survivors of the Marieval school say that they were forced to dig graves for and bury their own classmates. Delorme also noted that formerly there were headstones on many or all of the now-unmarked graves, but that they were likely removed by Catholic Church officials at some point in the 1960s. This in itself is a crime under Canadian law.

Archbishop of Regina Donald Bolen commented that the graves were unmarked at least in part due to an argument that occurred between an oblate priest at the school and a local First Nations chief. According to Bolen, the priest took a bulldozer and knocked over huge numbers of headstones following the dispute.

On Friday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that he had spoken personally with Pope Francis and implored him to visit Canada and make a formal apology to indigenous Canadians for the Roman Catholic Church's role in operating 60 percent of the country's residential schools. The Catholic Church has steadfastly refused to issue any apology for its role, so as to limit its financial liability and uphold its claims to infallibility. The most Pope Francis would do following the discovery of the 215 corpses on the site of the former Catholic Church-run Kamloops Indian Residential School was to express "sorrow" and call for "healing."

In his initial media statements on the latest discovery of hundreds of unmarked indigenous graves, Trudeau said that the pain and grief indigenous communities are feeling is "Canada's responsibility to bear."

This is a despicable cover-up. The Canadian population at large is not responsible for the 751 unmarked graves in Saskatchewan or the 215 at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. Nor should it be blamed for the genocidal policies pursued by the Canadian capitalist state and its representatives during the process of Confederation and its aftermath. The dispossession of the native people; the deliberate starvation of thousands of indigenous people in order to force them onto reserves and create space for agricultural and industrial expansion across Western Canada; the subsequent violations of "treaty rights" and encroachments on resource-rich reserve lands; and the seizure and forcible placing of children in residential schools with the aim of "killing the Indian in the child" and transforming them into pliant wage-labourers—these were crimes carried out by the Canadian ruling class and its state, not working people. They arose out of the conflict between capitalist private property and indigenous society. Similarly, the appalling conditions the majority of Canada's native people face today derive from the requirements of the capitalist "market."

All attempts to blame the entire population or "white society" are either aimed at whitewashing the role of Canadian capitalism or advancing the interests of a privileged minority of the native elite, which calls for "reconciliation" on a capitalist basis, i.e., the granting of positions of power within government and the private sector to a tiny minority of indigenous people while the majority continues to live in grinding poverty.

The hypocrisy of the prime minister's empty pledges to "walk the shared path of reconciliation" in order to "build a better future" is exemplified by the fact that the federal Liberal government is currently embroiled in judicial proceedings to overturn two Canadian Human Rights Tribunal orders regarding discrimination against indigenous children and their families, resulting from the federal government's decades-long systematic underfunding of child family services on the reserves.

The first of the two orders, issued in 2016, would widen the application of Jordan's Principle, a child-first principle which states that First Nations children on reserves must not be deprived of critical social services in the event that Ottawa and the provinces cannot decide which level of government will pay for such services. The principle was created because native children were suffering and, in some cases, dying while governments wrangled over who would pay for essential services the state was legally obligated to provide.

The terrible oppression of the indigenous population will continue and deepen unless and until a mass political movement of the working class emerges, uniting native and non-native, in a struggle to overthrow the capitalist profit system and for social equality for all, that is, socialism.



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