6.29.21 / Canada’s residential schools

Podcast SUM currently up: The discovery of mass graves of Indigenous children …

[THEME]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Americans love to put Canada up on a pedestal. It’s easy to live through what felt like the longest election of all time, followed by an outgoing president discrediting the results of said election, only to end up with an insurrection and think: “Maybe I should move to that calm country closeby with all those generous social welfare programs.” But if you talk to a lot of Canadians, they’ll tell you things aren’t as rosy as they seem north of the 49th parallel. And back in late May, the world was given a grotesque lesson in Canadian history.

*SCORING <Singing Thumbs - Acoustic Version>*

*<CLIPS>*

*DW: A devastating discovery has been made in Canada. The remains of 215 children have been found buried at the site of a former boarding school for indigenous students.*

*CBS: A Canadian Indigenous group says it found the unmarked graves of more than 700 people at a Catholic residential school in Saskatchewan this week. Many of the remains are believed to be those of children.*

*CANADIAN PRIME MINISTER, JUSTIN TRUDEAU: Indigenous communities across this country have my commitment that they will get the resources necessary to recover and document as much as possible.*

SEAN: The world is just now learning about Canada's residential school system, but Connie Walker’s known about them her entire life.

CONNIE WALKER (reporter): I think that every indigenous person in Canada probably has been affected by residential schools.

SEAN: Connie’s an investigative journalist based in Canada. She’s also Cree.

CONNIE: I'm probably the first person in my family, first generation of my family, to not go to a residential school. My grandmother is a residential school survivor. And she ran away from residential school. And she was one of the- the lucky ones who made it home. A lot of kids ran away from residential schools and were either forced to go back. Some even died on their way trying to get home. I was really close to my grandfather growing up, like I -- he helped raise me and my grandmother helped raise me. He went to a residential school when he was six years old, that he went to the residential school near where I grew up, actually, like in Lebret, Saskatchewan. He was really close to his grandfather and that that they were super close and he would go with his grandfather wherever he went, but that when he was at residential school, his grandfather died and he he wasn't allowed to go home and he wasn't allowed to go to the funeral and that he remembered sitting under a fire escape and and crying and being upset.

*<SCORING OUT>*

SEAN: How is the country's understanding of these residential schools changed in the past few weeks?

CONNIE: I feel like it's it's gone from like not knowing about it or not talking about it or not understanding to really kind of being shocked and for there to be this awakening that's happening now. White people or other Canadians are paying attention to it in a way that they've never, never have before.

*SCORING <My, That Does Sound Serious>*

CONNIE: So for over 100 years and at over 100 different schools across the country, indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families by the Canadian government and forced to attend these residential schools. And what they were were these large boarding schools where children as young as three, four, five, six years old were taken from their families, often by force. Often it was actually the RCMP, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who would take these children away and force them to attend these schools where their hair was cut. They weren't allowed to speak their language, even if it was the only language they knew they weren't allowed to practice their culture. They were separated from not only their parents, but even their other siblings within the school. And the goal was total assimilation. They wanted to- to strip indigenous kids from their culture and identity and teach them that- that what they were indigenous, you know, children was wrong. And along with, you know, this kind of what's been described as cultural genocide that occurred, a lot of these children experienced terrible physical and sexual abuse in these schools. A lot of them also, you know, didn't receive adequate nutrition. There was a lot of disease that was rampant in these schools. But these schools were not something that, you know, are a distant past. These are- these are schools that were in operation until 1997 here in Canada.

*<SCORING OUT>*

SEAN: Do we know how many children died or went missing in the 100 plus year history of this residential school system?

CONNIE: No, we don't know how many kids died or how many went missing, but we know that- that it was a significant amount, like thousands, you know, at least 6000, maybe something like 15,000 kids died at these schools. But the truth was that all of these schools were designed with graveyards.

SEAN: Why? Why was that part of it- were the other schools in Canada built with graveyards?

CONNIE: No, I know. I know not not that I know of. I mean, they say that the odds of dying in a residential school was actually greater than a soldier in World War Two.

SEAN: Unbelievable.

CONNIE: It's- it's a horrifying- it's a horrifying truth, it's a horrifying reality.

SEAN: Who is in charge of these schools? Was that the government? Was it the churches? Was it a collaboration between the two?

CONNIE: This is something that was organized and run by the government and paid for by the government. But- but it was often actually a lot of the schools were run by churches. So two thirds of the residential schools in Canada were run by the Catholic Church. But there were some that were run by the United Church. But but it was it was largely the Canadian government

SEAN: And the Canadian government had to eventually reckon with this past.

CONNIE: So what happened actually is in the 1990s, you know, a lot of residential school survivors started coming forward and sharing their stories about the terrible physical and sexual abuse that they experienced in these schools. And they started suing the federal government and they started suing the churches that ran these residential schools. And so the federal government then came together, came to the table, and they negotiated this residential school settlement, Indian residential school settlement. And so as part of the residential school settlement survivors, if you attended a residential school, you got a lump sum payment of ten thousand dollars. But if you experienced if you could prove that you experienced physical or sexual abuse, you had to go through this separate process called the independent assessment process, which was basically a hearing where you had to divulge in graphic detail the level of abuse that you experienced. And if you could prove that- that this abuse had occurred and if it could be corroborated in some way, then you were eligible for a larger payment.   
  
SEAN: Hmm.   
  
CONNIE: And it was through this residential school settlement process that led to the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was a commission that traveled across Canada for six years hosting these events in order to gather testimony from residential school survivors.

*<CLIP> ETHELE LAMOTHE (SCHOOL SURVIVOR AT TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION): My mother and father had 13 children and every single one of us had gone to residential school.*

CONNIE: So bringing as many residential school survivors as they could to these gathering places where they could share their story so that we could understand the truth about what actually happened in these schools.

*<CLIP> THEODORE (TED) FONTAINE (SCHOOL SURVIVOR AT TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION): I went through sexual abuse. I went through physical abuse. And the one thing that we suffer the most is the mental and spiritual abuse that we carried the rest of our lives. And I- I've passed that on. I've passed that on so dreadfully to my, my daughter.*

CONNIE: And then when they released their final report, there was a whole section in this final report that was delivered to the Canadian government along with 94, what they called ‘calls to action,’ which were kind of a guide map, a road map for the Canadian government and other governments and organizations to follow that are supposed to lead towards reconciliation or an understanding of what happened in this country. And in that final report, you know, they talked about these missing children. They talked about the unmarked grave sites that- that were at these schools across the country. And they actually asked for funding to try to find them and to try to- to locate them. And that funding request was denied.  
  
SEAN: Hmm.   
  
CONNIE: Obviously, with the discovery of what's happened in Kamloops and with the public outrage and uproar about this truth. You know, governments are committing money and committing to- to, you know, face this truth about our shared history. Actually, it's the First Nations who have been leading, leading that, you know, the Cowessess First Nation -where they discovered 715 graves just last week - you know, that was- that was an initiative that- that they took on. Same with in Kamloops, like - and now, since this news has broken, now there are pledges from the federal government and the provincial governments to help identify and find these gravesites.

SEAN: For all the pain that's out there in Canada right now, who is owning this in this moment?

CONNIE: Well, I think there's- uh there are a lot of places to look for accountability. Absolutely. And I think that a lot of people are you know, certainly the federal government obviously, you know, has apologized previously for residential schools. But I think that what people are pointing to now is, you know, the Canadian government's inaction around the calls to action that were identified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and then also the churches. You know, I think that a lot of people are looking at the Catholic Church and their role in residential schools and really looking to the Catholic Church for an apology. A number of churches have burned down since these discoveries were made.

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*GLOBAL NEWS: The two fires took place in the early hours of National Indigenous Day. No one is saying there’s a connection yet, but leaders say it’s time for reconciliation to be expedited.*

*GRAND CHIEF STEWART PHILLIP (UNION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA INDIAN CHIEFS): We cannot go on with the crippling legacy of racialized violence.*

CONNIE: So, you know, I think that this is something that, you know, people feel obviously really strongly about. But but I think that that's also a big question. Like, you know, they had this residential school settlement. They had that independent assessment process where people had to name their abusers and say exactly what happened to them and how graphic like, you know, go into graphic details about the abuse they experienced. And through that process, they identified thousands of alleged perpetrators of violence against these children. You know, people are saying they should be held accountable. Those people should be facing criminal charges. So should people who were running those schools.

CONNIE: I think we're off like a long, long way from closure. I think we're actually just at the beginning. You know, I think that until we have an understanding, until we actually peel back and- and acknowledge the truth about what indigenous people have experienced, then we can't really even talk about reconciliation or moving forward. There's still so much more work to do.

*SCORING <Look How the Stars Shine For You>*

CONNIE: As the daughter of a residential school survivor and the granddaughter of a residential school survivor, you know, so much of my work has been immersed in trying to understand what it means to be an intergenerational survivor of residential schools and how the trauma that my parents and grandparents experienced as children has continued to impact, not just my family and my community, but every single family.

*<SCORING>*

*Randy Wood: Look how the stars shine for you,*

*my one and only you.*

*They’re telling you, “I love you.”*

[MIDROLL]

SEAN: Alright. So Canada’s got some unbelievably dark history to work out, but to the surprise of probably no one, the United States does, too.

*<CLIP> INTERIOR SECRETARY DEB HAALAND: Like many of you, I was deeply impacted by the news of 215 indigenous children found in a mass grave at a boarding school in Canada. I couldn’t help but think of their families.*

SEAN: This is Interior Secretary Deb Haaland -- the first ever Native American in a White House cabinet level position.

*<CLIP> INTERIOR SECRETARY DEB HAALAND: Today, I’m announcing and sharing with you all, first, that the department will launch the federal indian boarding school initiative. At no time in history have the records or documentation of this policy been compiled or analyzed to determine the full scope of its reaches and effects. We must uncover the truth about the loss of human life and the lasting consequences of these schools.*

NICK ESTES (Professor of History): We shouldn't be surprised that something similar happened in the United States

SEAN: *This* is Nick Estes. Professor of history. Member of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe. His family members survived Native American boarding schools.

NICK: And in fact, federal Indian boarding school policy, the removal of Indian children from their families and the placement of them into off reservation boarding schools or sometimes into white families themselves has been a long standing tradition going back to the early 19th century, at least in the United States. And as a result of which by, like, 1900, three quarters of native children were enrolled in boarding schools in the US.

*SCORING IN <STR\_STR\_RETURN\_TO\_HOMELAND>*

NICK: One of the most egregious examples of a federally run boarding school is the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which was open from 1879 to 1918. It was founded by a man named Colonel Pratt. He was a civil war veteran and he got the idea for Carlisle Indian School in 1875 where he, you know, he served as a jailer at a prisoner of war camp called Fort Marion. He kind of concocted an experiment, that's what he called it, to indoctrinate these leaders with military discipline and the values of Protestant Christianity. He took that idea and the successes of that, quote unquote experiment and, you know, proposed to the Department of Interior, which managed Indian affairs at the time of opening a school at the Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania. And so in a weird arrangement between the Department of Interior and the US military, they opened up this school, which was an army barracks for the kind of reeducation or indoctrination of native children. So the Carlisle Indian School in many ways became the model, you know, the hegemonic model for other boarding schools, including church run boarding schools, where they enforce that kind of militarized discipline among students.

The other I think the most disturbing thing for me, however, was looking at the child jail that they had there. There's no other word for it other than child jail, because it's it's a jail that's set aside. And, you know, you go there and they have this kind of like whitewashed history where it's like, oh, during the Revolutionary War, you know, this is where they housed the British soldiers. And it's like, yeah. And if you read- if you read the history of the school, the Carlisle Indian School, it's also where they held recalcitrant children. And that to me is it should be is such a like a dark spot on that, that history. I don't know any other way to think about it other than a prison.

*<SCORING OUT>*

NICK: The professed intent of the United States to send Indian children to boarding schools was civilization through education. But as we look back at the policy, especially in the late the latter half of the 19th century, the express purpose of boarding schools was to remove native children from their families and in some instances to force to, quote, force the good behavior of their parents. And in this instance, especially in places where I'm from in Lakota Country, in the western part of the United States, they were trying to implement or force upon Lakota people or the Western Indigenous nations a policy of allotment to force native people into what would be considered kind of the civilizing effect of private property ownership.

SEAN: So. they used the taking of these kids to get the adults to comply with this land allotment thing, which was essentially just a land grab?

NICK: Yeah. <chuckles> I mean, it was clearly intended to for or to open the West for, for further white settlement.

SEAN: Do we have any idea how many children went missing, how many children may have died?

NICK: The question needs to be posed to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, how many children died because they kept meticulous records of these children, but would you go into the archives in their so-called dead files, that's the name that they called them. There are entire index cards missing of these children -- how they died. And so what they pieced together is the telegrams that were sent back to the parents. If they, if they were notified of the child's death -- sometimes they wouldn't be notified until, you know, until the spring or until years later. And sometimes they wouldn't be notified at all -- that they were going to bury this child. They very rarely sent the bodies back on the train because it was considered too expensive. It was, it was appropriate to send the children when they were alive on the train, but it wasn't appropriate to send them after they had passed away. And so the accounting of which needs you know, it's all been done mostly by tribes themselves trying to find their ancestors and independent researchers or non-governmental organizations who have been tasked with this. This should really be the burden of the state, who is responsible, you know, literally the war. You know, the these are wards of the state. And the state had a guardianship role in protecting these children. And now to this day, you know, they're saying we don't know what happened.

SEAN: But it sounds like Secretary Haaland would at least like to try and find out what happened now?

NICK: You know, I think Deb Haaland is the first native person as a secretary of interior is an incredibly historic accomplishment. But they knew that this problem existed.

*<CLIP> SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR DEB HAALAND: For more than a century, the Interior department was responsible for operating the Indian boarding schools across the United States and its territories. We are therefore uniquely positioned to assist in the effort to recover the dark history of these institutions that have haunted our families for too long. It’s our responsibility.*

NICK: There have been several FOIA requests, Freedom of Information Act requests submitted on behalf of tribes submitted on behalf of non-governmental organizations, trying to get answers to these questions.

<CLIP> *SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR DEB HAALAND: Each of those children is a missing family member. A person who was not able to live out their purpose because forced assimilation policies ended their lives too soon.*

NICK: So why now in 2021, are we creating an initiative to go forward with this? I think it's important, I think -- I support it 100 percent. But at the same time, what is the scope you know, of this of this investigation?

SEAN: Can the United States learn anything from Canada?

NICK: I think Canada serves more as a warning with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission because there was no land given back to tribes and the purpose of the residential school system is very similar to that in the United States. It was to open up the west, right? And the colonial relationship between First Nations and the Canadian government hasn't changed fundamentally because it's the perpetrator of the crime who's facilitating the justice for that crime. Thinking about how this has affected my own family, who are boarding school survivors, some of them actually went to Carlisle. You know, how do you return those lives that you've taken?

*SCORING IN <STR\_STR\_RETURN\_TO\_HOMELAND*

NICK: I don't know if apology is is enough or even acknowledging it is one thing that's a step in the right direction, but the kind of magnitude of the violence and the and the kind of legacies that we have to live with today of that violence that are a result of it. And it's you know, it's a generation removed. My, my, you know, my parents my, my dad attended a boarding school and his siblings attended a boarding school. You know, and I'm not unique in that. You know, there are many American Indian people in the United States whose parents and whose grandparents have attended boarding schools. I don't fluently speak my language.

*<SCORING BUMP>*

NICK: I think people want to consign it to the past, but it is very much alive in the present and it will continue to be alive in the present, you know, because there will be more graves discovered. We don't, we ... I don't think we will ever know the full magnitude of the atrocities committed in the violence and the trauma that these children have experienced and the ways that it has lived on through their families. I don't think we'll ever fully know and understand that.

SEAN: Nick Estes has a podcast. It’s called The Red Nation Podcast. Connie Walker, who you heard from earlier in the show, has a few herself. Her latest is called *Stolen: The Search for Jermain*. I’m Sean Rameswaram. It’s Today, Explained.