

by First Nations educational authorities. Of the 360 people working in the Saskatchewan schools in 1994, 220 were of Aboriginal ancestry—almost two-thirds of the total.⁶⁴⁸

Most of the Aboriginal people who were hired by the schools worked as cooks, cleaners, and handymen. In 1954, Mrs. Clair, a Cree woman who had attended the school at Lac La Ronge, Saskatchewan, was working at the Carcross school in the Yukon. She was described by a superintendent as a “very fine person, willing worker and everyone likes her. Can certainly get the most out of the children.”⁶⁴⁹ At the Wabasca, Alberta, school, Alphonse Alook was seen as being “a tower of strength to the Principal especially of late. Can do fair carpentering and is loyal to the school. Principal recommends an increase in his salary.”⁶⁵⁰ Four young Aboriginal women, three of whom were sisters, had been hired to work at the Fort George, Québec, school in 1953.⁶⁵¹ A 1956 report on three of them said, “The Herodier girls are all doing a fine job.” They were not, however, being housed in the same way as non-Aboriginal staff. The report observed that it was fortunate that “the native girls do not mind doubling up in cramped quarters otherwise staff accommodation would be insufficient.”⁶⁵²

A number of former Aboriginal staff members felt they helped make an important difference in the lives of the students. Jeanne Rioux went to the Edmonton school and later worked as a supervisor at the Hobbema school in Alberta. There, she challenged staff about the way they disciplined children.⁶⁵³ Mary Chapman was a former residential school student who later worked in the kitchen of the Kuper Island school. At her prompting, the school began serving students and staff the same meals. It was her rule that “if we run out of roast, the kids run out of roast, I don’t give them bologna, I take the roast from the staff and I give it to them.”⁶⁵⁴ Vitaline Elsie Jenner, who had unhappily attended the Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, residential school, worked as a girls’ supervisor at Breynat Hall, the Roman Catholic residence at Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. To her surprise, she enjoyed most of the experience. She recalled being asked by one staff person what sort of games she thought the children would like to play to make them feel at home. “I said, ‘You know I bet you they all want to be hugged, like I was in that residential school. ‘Cause you know what? They’re away from their parents.’”⁶⁵⁵

Former staff and the children of former staff members have expressed the view that much of the discussion of the history of residential schools has overlooked both the positive intent with which many staff members approached their work, and the positive accomplishments of the school system. Although they certainly believed the system was underfunded, they also believed that they and their parents devoted much of their lives to educating and caring for Aboriginal children.

Most of the staff members did not make a career in residential schools, spending only a year or two at a school before moving on. Others stayed for many years in conditions that were often very different from what they grew up with, working for low pay, and living in cramped and confined quarters with, at times, less than congenial colleagues. They spent their time teaching, cooking, cleaning, farming, and supervising children. On their own,