

The history



A group of students and parents from the Saddle Lake Reserve, en route to the Methodist-operated school in Red Deer, Alberta. Woodruff, Library and Archives Canada, PA-040715.

It can start with a knock on the door one morning. It is the local Indian agent, or the parish priest, or, perhaps, a Mounted Police officer. The bus for residential school leaves that morning. It is a day the parents have long been dreading. Even if the children have been warned in advance, the morning's events are still a shock. The officials have arrived and the children must go.

For tens of thousands of Aboriginal children for over a century, this was the beginning of their residential schooling. They were torn from their parents, who often surrendered them only under threat of prosecution. Then, they were hurled into a strange and frightening place, one in which their parents and culture would be demeaned and oppressed.

For Frederick Ernest Koe, it started when the Anglican minister and the Mounted Police arrived with a message that he had to leave his parents' home in Aklavik in the Northwest Territories that morning. "And I didn't get to say goodbye to my dad or my brother Allan, didn't get to pet my dogs or nothing."¹

The day she left for the Lestock, Saskatchewan, school, Marlene Kayseas's parents drove her into the town of Wadena. "There was a big truck there. It had a back door and that truck was full of kids and there was no windows on that truck."² Larry Beardy travelled by train from Churchill, Manitoba, to the Anglican residential school in Dauphin, Manitoba—a journey of 1,200 kilometres. As soon as they realized that they were leaving their parents behind, the younger children started crying. At every stop, the train took on more children