

to them.”³⁴² At the Moose Factory school in Ontario, Nellie Trapper said, students “used to steal food, peanut butter, whatever’s cooking in a pot. There were big pots in there. I remember taking figs from that pot.”³⁴³

Complaints about the limited, poorly prepared, monotonous diet were intensified by the fact that at many schools, the students knew the staff members were being served much better fare than they had. At the school she attended in Saskatchewan, Inez Dieter said, “the staff used to eat like kings, kings and queens.” Like many students, she said, she used the opportunity of working in the staff dining room to help herself to leftovers. “I’d steal that and I’d eat, and I’d feel real good.”³⁴⁴ Gladys Prince recalled how, at the Sandy Bay school in Manitoba, the “priests ate the apples, we ate the peelings. That is what they fed us. We never ate bread. They were stingy them, their own, their own baking.”³⁴⁵ When Frances Tait was given a position in the staff dining room, she said, she thought she had “died and gone to heaven ’cause even eating their leftovers were better than what we got.”³⁴⁶ Hazel Bitternose, who attended schools in Lestock and Qu’Appelle, said she enjoyed working in the priests’ dining room. “They had some good food there and I used to sneak some food and able to feed myself good there. So that’s why I liked to work there.”³⁴⁷

The federal government knowingly chose not to provide schools with enough money to ensure that kitchens and dining rooms were properly equipped, that cooks were properly trained, and, most significantly, that food was purchased in sufficient quantity and quality for growing children. It was a decision that left thousands of Aboriginal children vulnerable to disease.

Health: “For sickness, conditions at this school are nothing less than criminal.”

The number of students who died at Canada’s residential schools is not likely ever to be known in full. The most serious gap in information arises from the incompleteness of the documentary record. Many records have simply been destroyed. According to a 1935 federal government policy, school returns could be destroyed after five years, and reports of accidents after ten years. This led to the destruction of fifteen tonnes of waste paper. Between 1936 and 1944, 200,000 Indian Affairs files were destroyed.³⁴⁸ Health records were regularly destroyed. For example, in 1957, Indian and Northern Health Services was instructed to destroy “correspondence re routine arrangements re medical and dental treatments of Indians and Eskimos, such as transportation, escort services, admission to hospital, advice on treatment, requests for treatment, etc.” after a period of two years. Reports by doctors, dentists, and nurses were similarly assigned a two-year retention period.³⁴⁹

Often, the existing record lacks needed detail. For example, it was not uncommon for principals, in their annual reports, to state that a specific number of students had died in