

## BIRTLE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

The Presbyterian Mission Society opened a day school on Birdtail Sioux reserve in 1888 but expanded this into a boarding school in Birtle in 1889. The church rented a greystone building, erected in 1882, which was suitable for a school but not necessarily for a boarding school. Principal, George McLaren reported that there was “*considerable opposition against it by Indians at first, but this quickly disappeared.*” The day school at Birdtail Reserve was closed because of its proximity to the boarding school. There were 24 students attending the boarding school in 1891, including 11 children from Waywayseecappo reserve.

By 1892, Birtle was drawing children from four reserves, although children from the region also attended industrial schools at Elkhorn and Qu’Appelle. The bestowing of a government per capita grant of \$60-72 a student encouraged the church to construct its own building when the rented quarters proved too small. In 1894, the Presbyterian church constructed a new school building on the hill overlooking Birtle.

The stone structure, 80x30 feet, was three storeys plus a basement, with accommodation for 45-50 students. The surrounding farm consisted of a large barn with a stone foundation, 10-12 head of stock, and four acres under cultivation by 1897. The school flourished, bringing its 30 acres under cultivation and renting an additional 28 acres. A 30x36 feet addition was made to the school in 1899, to increase accommodation to 60 children. The addition, which cost \$4000-\$5000 and was paid for by the Women’s Foreign Mission Society (WFMS) of the Presbyterian Church, provided an upstairs dining room, and more dormitory and classroom space.

In 1900, there were four teachers for the 40-45 students. Five pupils were working for local families and earning wages. There was a new henery and a six-acre garden. Classroom teaching of reading, writing and English was accompanied with religious instruction of prayers, morning and evening, and church and Sunday School attendance in town. Recreation included football and baseball, with two large indoor playrooms for winter activities. The school children enjoyed good health in these early years, although the school was already suffering from the chronic poor water supply problem which would plague it during its early years. Water had to be hauled from a spring in Birtle, located across the Birdtail River. The Indian agent reported that: “*This institution is doing splendid work and its influence for good is felt on the reserves represented.*”

By 1910, 15 % of the students had progressed to grade V level academically, which was a fairly high percentage. The school increased its livestock and poultry holdings but there was a constant concern that the land connected to the school was too hilly to be cropped successfully. Older students frequently transferred from Birtle boarding school to industrial schools after a few years attendance.

The school administration seemed to do some innovative things to encourage the students and to keep them connected with their home community. This was probably easier for them to accomplish than other schools because Birtle’s students came from the local area. Annual Victoria Day picnics were held for students and parents, 10 miles north of town. The female students made beadwork belts and chains and sold them for pocket money. Boys raised individual gardens and competed for prizes from the Birtle Agricultural Society. The girls entered the local fairs as well, winning cooking and needlework competitions. If the children sold the produce from their garden plots, the money was “*placed to their credit in trust accounts.*” From May to October, delicate students often slept in tents, since “*it improved them very much.*”

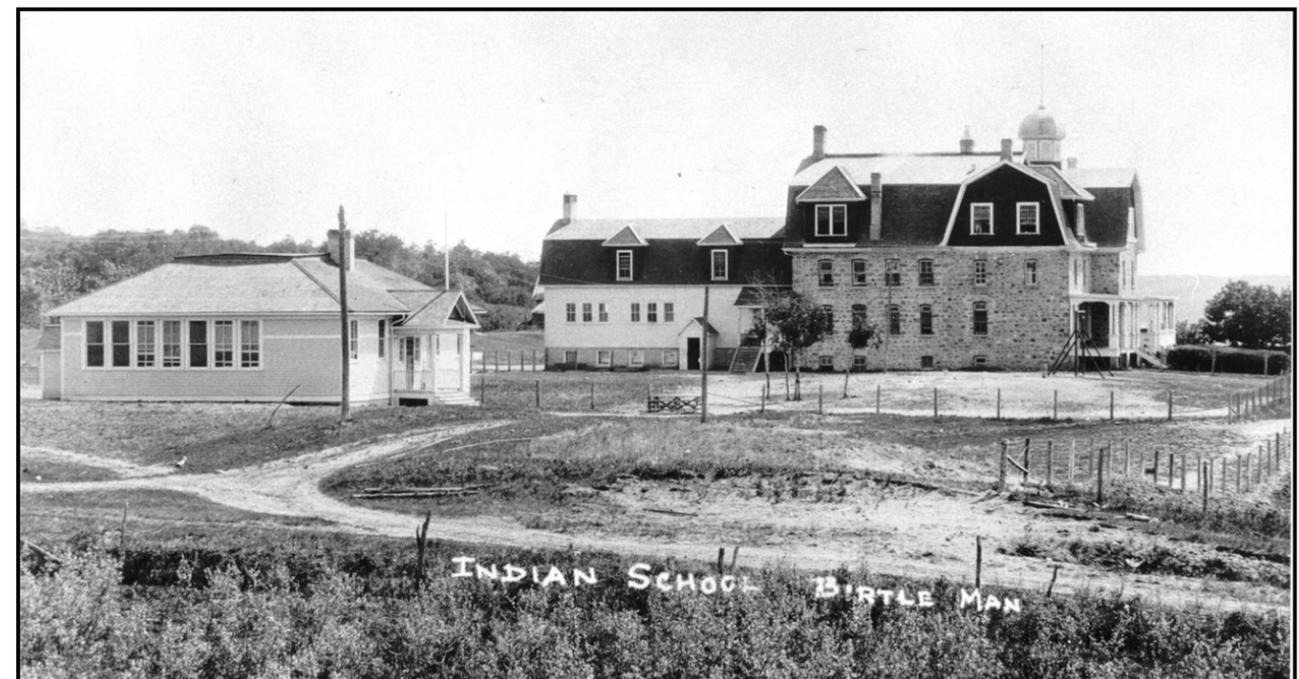
In 1906, a plumbing system, with 1000 cubic foot septic tank, was installed and the ventilation system was improved. More land was brought under cultivation, giving the school a total of 35 acres for crops. Although the Women’s Foreign Mission Society (WFMS) contributed greatly to these improvements, the cost of which was shared with the government, the school ended up with a \$757 debt in 1907. This had to be eliminated by frugality. One way to improve the school’s financial status was to grow more agricultural produce for food and for sale, but the school had only limited arable land. In 1908, school administrators purchased an additional 160 acres two miles north of the school.

The upswing in agricultural produce was evident the following year, when the land under cultivation jumped to 65 acres, with a corresponding increase in the amount of livestock. New equipment, in the form of a wagon, buggy, fanning mill, steel rake, and a team of horses, was added to deal with the 70 cords of wood and the 15 tons of hay the school had harvested. This was likely sold locally. With its new sources of revenue, the WFMS was able to add two porches to the main building, as well as to alter the ventilation and lighting systems.

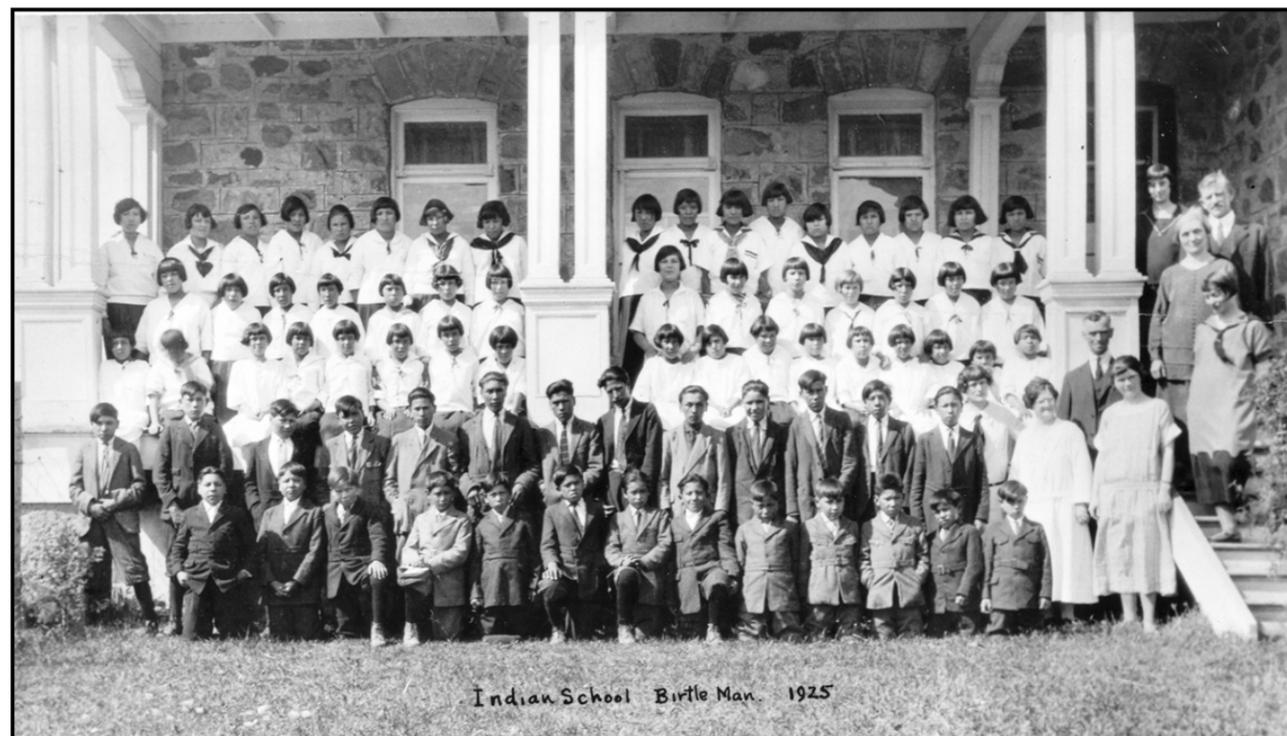
Inspector S. Swinford gave the school a glowing report in 1910, saying, “*The children showed considerable advancement over last year, the pupils speaking out well and plainly.*” Seventy-five percent of the students were in grades IV-VI with only 60% of the students attending classes all day. The school’s good work was reflected in the fact that students rarely transferred to an industrial school anymore, preferring to spend their time at Birtle. In fact, in 1911, seven students, probably local children, transferred from Regina Industrial School to Birtle. The majority of Birtle’s students in these years were from Birtle Indian Agency. The Indian agent reported that he could see the effects of the boarding school experience on the nearby reserves. The ex-pupils affected life on the reserves because they could read and write, built better homes and knew up-to-date farming methods, he reported in 1912. Many former students were good farmers; others included a band councillor, a steam engineer, a teacher, two girls in service, and a seamstress who made clothing for people on the reserve. Of 30 ex-pupils from the previous six years, Principal McLaren reported that only eight were dead, a much better statistic than in Portage agency. In 1914, there were 53 Birtle agency children at Birtle school and another nine at other schools. The Presbyterian missionaries on the reserves recruited



First Birtle Residential School, with parents awaiting summer vacation so they can take the children back to the reserve. (Source: AM)



Birtle School after the 1910-1914 renovations. (Source: AM)



Students at the Birtle School in 1925, presentable to the world. (Source: AM)



Birtle Residential School, 1957

students for the school. The *"Indians ....favour[of] having their children educated....as the Indian is a very cautious person, [he] wants to be certain that the staff of the school will be kind to the children."* Of the ex-pupils, three farmers were doing very well. As for female students, *"In future it would be wise to encourage them to intermarry with their own race and settle down on reserves."*

The change in government regulations in 1910 reduced the capacity of Birtle school from 60 to 40 students. For health reasons, each student was now required to have 500 cubic feet of space. Birtle's children were generally healthy, in part because the Indian agency's hospital was located beside the school. It was presided over by a nurse and doctor and this had eliminated tuberculosis in the school. The band of Rolling River asked the Indian agent to press the Department to enlarge the Birtle boarding school so that they could continue to send their children there rather than being forced to send them as far away as Regina. At least Birtle was close enough for them to visit their children. Ex-pupils seemed to do well. They returned to the reserves to establish good homes and farms. A number of them subscribed to farm papers and Winnipeg weekly newspapers.

The school was altered to accommodate the new regulations. Additional plumbing, a new heating plant, and increased ventilation *"will give us the advantages of an urban school."* The water supply was switched to the CPR pumping plant in Birtle. An addition of new classrooms, a gymnasium, 40x45 feet, with new play rooms of 800 sq. ft beneath it, was completed by the Presbyterian Church. The school was reclassified as a Class A school, which then entitled it to receive a \$125 per capita grant. In 1914, the old attic was replaced by a one-storey addition.

In 1929, negotiations began between the Presbyterian Church and the Department of Indian Affairs concerning the acquisition of a new site, with more agricultural land, on which to build a new school building. Principal H.B. Currie, tired of the dithering about the choice of a site, stated emphatically that he would *"not spend another winter in this building. It is nothing short of criminal. The children have had pneumonia due to the worn out heating plant which gives uneven heat."* Finally, in May 1930, the Indian Agent reported that he had negotiated the purchase of SE 7-17-26W and NW5-17-26W, as well as Blocks 211-214 in Birtle's town limits. Indian Affairs Secretary, Duncan Scott authorized him to purchase W8-17-16W as well, making a 625-acre plot.

In July 1930, the Department awarded the contract to build the new school to Clayden Co. Ltd of Winnipeg. The structure, located between the Birdtail River and the CPR tracks, faced south towards the town. The barns and stable faced east. The water was still piped from the CPR tank by gravity but the school had the same up-to-date water tank system as the new Brandon school. The red brick main building was completed in 1932. The expansion of the arable land owned by the school made the farm an integral part of the institution where the children *"learned by doing."*

In 1945, a new principal, N. Martin Rusaw arrived with his wife, who served as matron. He reported that *"not only must we educate the Indian children, but we must educate white people to accept them in their world."* One way to do this was to integrate the children into the local school system. This was instituted in 1951, when the children who had reached high school level began attending the Birtle high school, while continuing to board at the residential school. Even though the high school students could no longer spend half the day working on the farm, agricultural production at the school continued. By 1960, the farm had 900 acres of land, 42 swine, 600 chickens, and 90 Holsteins, *"of which any breeder would be proud."*

Major renovations were undertaken on the school building in 1959. Integration into the Birtle local schools was expanded to include grades 7-8 in 1962. The last students left Birtle School in 1970. The building has sat abandoned since then and currently exists in a rapidly deteriorating condition.

There were many successful students from Birtle Residential School, including Gordon Williams and Stan MacKay who became ministers, William Thomas who served as Regional Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Manitoba, several teachers and nurses, a photographer, a graphic designer, and a music teacher. The music program at Birtle School was always very strong, with the school's choirs performing all over Canada.

The quality of the education imparted at the schools was *"not as advertised."* A language barrier, inappropriate curricula, inadequate school supplies, and poorly trained teachers all put the residential school children at a disadvantage. Added to this was a half-day system that saw most of the children receive inadequate amounts of time in classrooms. Working hard on school farms, while existing on a poor diet, probably created an inattentiveness that also reduced their ability to learn. Whether there was ever any merit in an educational system that separated children from parents for up to ten months of the year, for twelve years, is highly debatable. Unhappy, lonely children, with no family to support them, were unlikely to be in a mindset to learn, even if the knowledge was being presented by highly skilled teachers, which was rarely the case. The effect of residential schooling on young Native children is best summed up by Cree leader and residential school graduate, John Tootoosis:

*When an Indian comes out of one of these places it is like being put between two walls in a room and left hanging in the middle. On one side are all the things he learned from his people and their way of life and their way of life was being wiped out, and on the other are the whiteman's ways which he could never fully understand since he never had the right amount of education and could not be part of it. There he is hanging in the middle of the two cultures and he is not a white man and he is not an Indian.*