

# First Nations Struggle

## Residential Schools

Part of the social reform movement in Canada at the turn of the century involved assimilating First Nations people into Canadian society. There was a determined effort by the government to force the First Nations to give up their culture and their separate identity in the community. A big part of this effort was forcing First Nations parents to send their children to Christian residential schools. The schools were spread throughout Canada.

The main goal of the schools was to train the children to be Christians, let go of their cultural traditions, and to give up their First Nations identity. Some schools taught basic trade skills and also trained students to be domestic and unskilled labourers. The children lived at the schools and had no contact with their parents. It was a completely new environment for them.

**FAST FACT**  
About 3000 First Nations children died while in residential schools.

The living conditions were cramped and crowded, and the children had to follow strict rules. They had to attend church. If they spoke their own language, the children were punished. Only English or French was to be spoken. They were even given new names. Physical abuse was common at the schools and many children ran away.

Daily lessons were combined with heavy-duty chores throughout the long days that typically started at 5 a.m. and ended at 9 p.m. The children were exhausted and often not fed very well, which led to sickness. Tuberculosis and Spanish flu swept through the schools, taking a heavy toll on the students.

Residential schools tore First Nations families apart. There was a lot of pressure for children to attend. The parents did not want their children to be sent to these schools and some of them refused. But others felt they had no choice if they wanted their children to be prepared to survive in the new society.

The missionaries, church leaders, and the Canadian government thought that they were doing what was best for the First Nations, but they did not respect their cultural rights or take into consideration what they wanted.



*Students at a Catholic residential school*



*Students learning to sew in a residential school*

# First Nations Struggle (continued)

## Land Loss

In the early 1900s, the laws concerning the rights of the First Nations were not created to be beneficial to them, but to serve the best interests of the general public and the Canadian government. More and more settlers were moving onto the prairies, which is where many of the First Nations reserves were. The government wanted to make the First Nations land available to the settlers. For this to happen, the First Nations people had to agree to sell their land, which they did not want to do. In order to persuade them to sell, **Frank Oliver**, the Minister of the Interior, changed the **Indian Act** in 1906. This change gave the First Nations 50% of the money from the sale of the land instead of 10%.



Minister of the Interior,  
Frank Oliver



First Nations family on a prairie reserve

This strategy worked and the sale of land on the reserves dramatically increased. Between 1896 and 1909, almost 300 000 hectares of reserve land were bought and then sold by the government for over \$2 million. But this was not the end of the land loss for the First Nations.

In 1911, Oliver changed the Indian Act again. This change allowed the local governments to take reserve land to build railways and service roads. The federal government decided how much the First Nations would be paid for this land. If a town sprang up too close to a reserve, the government moved the reserve – even over the objections of the First Nations residents. They had no say in these matters.

## Fighting Back

For the most part, the First Nations people felt powerless against the mighty force of the Canadian government. But they didn't want to lose their culture, their land, and their way of life. So they fought back in ways that they could. Some refused to send their children to the residential schools. Others continued to have their traditional potlatch and Sun Dance ceremonies in spite of the government ban.

The leaders in different provinces came together to form tribal councils. They wrote letters to officials and even petitioned the King of England to hear their case. But the Canadian government continued to believe that the First Nations people should be assimilated into Canadian society.



First Nations Potlatch ceremony