

This narrative history of a Residential School was researched and produced by the Government of Canada as part of its response to litigation and the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation has not verified the content of this document. It is provided here for reference purposes only. Documented incidents of sexual and physical abuse are based on the documentary record and do not take into account survivor testimony.



You are welcome to contact the NCTR if you wish to add, comment on, or challenge any versions of the history presented herein.

St. Martin's (Desmarais) Indian Residential School IRS
School Narrative
September 20, 2005

This School Narrative summarizes documents that provide an over-view of the history and administration of the school.

NAME OF SCHOOL AND VARIANTS

St. Martin's IRS [01593]
Wabiscaw Roman Catholic Boarding School [01776]
Wabasca Roman Catholic IRS [01313]
Desmarais IRS [00050]
Desmarais Student Residence [01095]

CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY

- 1900 Bishop Grouard establishes a boarding school at St. Martin's Mission on Wabasca Lake. The building was partially built, but requests were made for grants of land and for the operation of the school. The estimate for 1901-1902 was for 30 students [08629].
- 1901 Sisters of Providence from Montreal came to work at St. Martin's IRS in July [04185] and the school opened in August of 1901 [04017].
- 1928 A small temporary, two-storey hospital was built and linked to the school by a corridor to transport food from the school kitchen [04017].
- 1959 May 1, 1959, the Oblate Order assumed responsibility for the new St. Martin's IRS and on May 2, 1959 the "Sisters and the children started occupying the new building" [03495]. The official opening ceremony was to be held on December 10, 1959 [01914].
- 1961 It was proposed to integrate the junior high school from Desmarais into the Wabasca Public School effective September, 1962 [02532].
- 1962 Effective September 1, 1962, Desmarais junior high school students (grades 7, 8, and 9) lived in residence and attended schools operated by Northland School Division [00771] [03390].
- 1963 A public high school, Mistassiniy School, opened in Desmarais for all students Grade 7 and up [04017].
- 1964 Administration of the Desmarais Indian Residential School was "turned over to the

Northland School Division effective September, 1, 1964. The Desmarais Indian Residential School will no longer be operated effective September 1, 1964” [01765].

- 1964 Northland School Division leased and operated four classrooms in Desmarais IRS effective September 1, 1964 [03252].
- 1965 Except for one primary class, all pupils in residence attended schools operated by Northland School Division (Mistassiniy School or St. Theresa School). The Bigstone Band requests the remaining operating IRS classrooms to be transferred to the Northland School Division effective the beginning of the 1965-66 school year [01774] [00843].
- 1973 The Residence is closed as of June 30, 1973 [03934].
- 1974-1976 Northland School Division continues to rent classrooms in the Residence building at a rate of \$300 each per month; C.V.C. and A.V.C. (A.V.C. may refer to Alberta Vocational Centre, but this is not confirmed) rented one room at a rate of \$250 [02959].
- 1975 The Bigstone Band operated a Kindergarten out of an IRS classroom [02959].
- 1975 The Government discussed the future use of Desmarais Residence with the Bigstone Band and requested proposals for the “best possible use” of the building “for the benefit of the treaty people of the area” [01092]. Negotiations were underway with the Band regarding turnover of the building [00820]. It appears that the province “was unable to take over the Residence” [02962A].
- 1980 The land and buildings were sold to Bigstone Band Enterprises Ltd. [00912] [04006] [04005] [04005A]. The sale was authorized by Order in Council P.C. 1980-2268 dated August 27, 1980.

MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOL

Dates managed by Church

- 1901 - 1956 The Oblate Order managed the operation of St. Martin’s Indian Residential school and residence [01776] [01766]. The government pays the Church authorities a per capita grant for the number of pupils enrolled at the school [00216].

Dates managed by Government

1956 - 1964 St. Martin's IRS is government owned as of April 1, 1956 [00706]. As of September 1, 1956 the government assumes responsibility for the employment and payment of teaching staff at St. Martin's IRS [00077]. In 1958, cost controlled funding replaced the per capita grant system [150136].

Dates taken over by Province

1964 - 1975 Northland School Division (Provincial) rented classroom space from the Government at Desmarais IRS and by 1965, all pupils in residence attended at Mistassiniy school or St. Theresa school operated by Northland School Division [00883] [03252] [00806].

1965 - 1969 The Oblate Order provided boarding services for students living in the residence [01028] [150136].

1969 - 1973 The Government took over management of the residence [01028] and entered into contracts with the Oblate Order for liaison duties (with Church authorities), advice relating to the operation of Student Residences, as well as recruitment of "student Residence Administrators and Child Care Workers" [010255][013170][010455] [150136] [150137] [014076] [014801].

Dates managed by Band or other aboriginal group

1973 to at least 1975 Bigstone Band operated a Kindergarten out of IRS classroom [02959].

SCHOOL BUILDINGS

Circa 1899 A school was built out of logs [01331].

1927 The school building was said to be in unsatisfactory condition [01313].

1928 The Government is urged to "provide a grant of \$15,000 next year" for the reconstruction of Wabasca Roman Catholic school [04193].

1930 The school was rebuilt in 1930 [01327] and a new larger convent was opened to house the Sisters and boarders who numbered about 120 [04017].

1933 The means of escape in case of fire is said to be difficult for children on the top floor [01350]. This was brought to the attention of Bishop Guy [01351] and estimates were received for fire escape tubing [01386].

- 1933 The school had a 25 acre farm with 16 more acres to be cleared. They also had a large garden [01350].
- 1934 Bishop Guy requested funding from the Government to build a stable and a barn [04203].
- 1934 The new 20-bed St. Martin's Hospital opened [04017].
- 1935 A machine shed and chicken house were built during the year [04210].
- 1948 The floor in some of the rooms was in very bad condition and new linoleum was needed for repairs and replacement [04446].
- 1953 The building is in need of major repairs such as a new roof, new foundation and concrete floor to replace rotten wood, a new heating system which is noted as being "of some urgency," and the insulation of walls and ceilings [03294].
- 1954 The school buildings are said to be in very poor shape [01591]. Conditions are so bad that "the roof may be blown off and the building crumble" [03297]. There is question that "we should not permit children in residence under the present circumstances" [01596]. Plans for reconstruction of the school begin [08803].
- 1954 The Bishop offers the land necessary for the school site free of charge to the government. No specific area was agreed upon, but the feeling was that the Department might take what was needed for the buildings, or some four or five acres [01603].
- 1956 The new Residential School was to begin construction at Wabasca [01608].
- 1957 The first Church was built (religious services were held in the mission's chapel until then) between the Father's house and the Hospital [04017].
- 1958 Construction of new, government-owned school building commenced in 1957 [00284] and was completed by the summer of 1958 [01537].
- 1958 Proposed construction for 1960 - 1961 included a Duplex Residence for teachers and two additional classrooms [02723] [02664].
- 1958 The Principal assumed charge of the new building [01762].
- 1959 May 1, 1959, the Oblate Order assumes responsibility for the new St. Martin's IRS and on May 2, 1959 the "Sisters and the children started occupying the new building" [03495]. The official opening ceremony was on December 10, 1959 [01914]; the school represented a cost to the government (including furnishings) of

approximately \$2,000,000 [03106].

- 1964 The collection of “left-over building materials and other odds and ends” in the tank room of the school has been deemed a serious fire hazard. A request is made to remove these stored materials [06839].
- 1972 There is a problem with the roof leaking since the construction in 1957, due to poor design [00811]. It is necessary to re-roof the Desmarais Residence at a cost of \$50,000 [01426].
- 1975 Equipment is said to be “very old and in some cases obsolete.” Indications that a major electrical problem was corrected and that Desmarais would continue to be operated, but only on a “day to day basis” [02959].

LAND

St. Martin’s IRS was located on the north shore of Wabasca Lake, usually referred to as South Wabasca. It was approximately 165 air miles due north of Edmonton in Desmarais, a remote settlement surrounded by reserves [01593]. St. Martin’s IRS was located within Treaty 8 *Source - “Alberta Indian Residential Schools,” Resource Data Division, Alberta Environmental Protection, 1996*] - Treaty 8 executed June 21, 1889

- 1923 As of February 13, 1923, the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Grouard is owner of Lots 25 and 27 of the Wabiskaw settlement [03828].
- 1956 It appears that the school building is located on Lot 25 of the Wabasca Settlement (Lot 25, Section 23, Township 80, Range 25, West 4th Meridian) [08999][04028].
- 1958 The Roman Catholic Church owns Lots 24, 25, and 26, and possibly Lot 22, of the Settlement of Wabasca.¹ It appears that the land on which the school is situated had not been transferred to the Government [00418].
- 1972 The Government acquired the land upon which the government-owned Desmarais school sits, consisting of Lots 22, 24, 25. Prior to this, the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Grouard had Title to part of Lot 22 containing the Sewage Lagoon, Lot 24 containing the sewage line and Parcel B on Lot 25 containing the St. Martin’s IRS building [03727] [03721][03028].
- 1980 The land and buildings were sold to Bigstone Band Enterprises Ltd. [00912] [04006] [04005] [04005A] authorized by Order in Council P.C. 1980-2268 dated August 27, 1980.

¹ Although [00418] indicates that the school is located on Lot 22, this appears to be in error. Perhaps Lots 22 and 25 were mixed up in the document; it makes more sense that the school is located on Lot 25, that this lot is still Church-owned, and that the Church also owns Lot 22, 24, and 26.

PHOTOS, PLANS AND OTHER MEDIA

Item #	Date	Description
02692	Undated	Location of skating rink, student residence and sewage lagoon
02764	Undated	Dominion Lands Office document with denoted school sections and RC Mission section
02727A	Undated	Sketch of location of school in relation to the Church, Father's Residence, Hospital, post office and air strip with Lot numbers identified
02987	Undated	Diagram noting the location of Mistassiniy school and Desmarais IRS and other buildings including location of proposed Health Centre
04028	12/24/1914	Plan of Wabiskaw Settlement – Township 80 and 81, Range 25, West of Fourth Meridian – contains Lot numbers and dimensions
01315	11/28/1927	Floor plan of the proposed building built c. 1931 – notes the rooms on each floor including the basement and 1st, 2nd and 3rd floors
01593	Undated – circa 1954	Photographs of St. Martin's IRS
08999	06/06/1956	Site Plan noting proposed property line between the Church owned and Department owned land and buildings
04001	Undated – circa 1959	Photograph of St. Martin's IRS
03874C	October 10, 1959	Hand sketch of locations of reserves and numbers of Indians on reserve
01866	05/01/1961	Site plan including location of new school built c. 1959 and old school built c. 1931 as well as other buildings such as church, staff residence and hospital
03888A	09/25/1962	Hand drawn sketch showing distance from Desmarais to Edmonton, Slave Lake, Grouard and Trout Lake – Hand drawn sketch showing relative locations of buildings in Wabasca in relation to the Residential School at Desmarais and the swamp in between
04029	10/23/1963	Plan of survey of Parcel B in Lot 25, Wabiskaw settlement
08998	08/10/1965	P. 1 Floor plan of Mistassiniy school; P. 2 Sketch plan of proposed addition to Mistassiniy school
08997	08/00/1969	Ventilation Improvements - Sketch of floor plan

		Desmarais Student Residence
04091	01/07/1970	Sketch for 2 nd Floor Boys Washroom addition
02990	11/00/1977	Floor plan of what appears to be the Desmarais Residential School building noting Northland use of the various rooms

GENERAL ENROLLMENT STATISTICS OVER TIME

Year	Number of Students
1912	10 children in residence
1913	21 children in residence
1914	23 children in residence
1915	22 children in residence
1916	22 children in residence
1917	19 children in residence
1918	22 children in residence
1919	23 children in residence
1920	21 children in residence
1921	22 children in residence
1922	20 children in residence
1923	22 children in residence
1924	17 children in residence
1925	27 children in residence
1926	30 children in residence
1927	33 children in residence
1928	37 children in residence
1929	47 children in residence
1930	53 children in residence
1931	60 children in residence
1932	68 children in residence
1933	115 children in residence
1941	125 children in residence
1942	122 children in residence
1943	120 children in residence
1944	115 children in residence

1945	106 children in residence
1946	93 children in residence
1947	85 children in residence
1948	82 children in residence
1949	72 children in residence
1950	66 children in residence
1951	65 children in residence
1952	88 children in residence
1953	100 children in residence
1954	117 children in residence
1955	131 children in residence
1956	134 children in residence
1957	122 children in residence
1958	114 children in residence
1959	93 children in residence
1960	102 children in residence
1961	99 children in residence
1962	96 children in residence
1963	65 children in residence
1964	96 children in residence
1965	99 children in residence
1966	92 children in residence
1967	136 children in residence
1968	135 children in residence
1969	131 children in residence
1970	40 children in residence
1971	49 (in residence); 16 pupils
1972	28 children in residence
1973	27 children in residence

STUDENTS FROM OTHER RESERVES

Students from, at least the following bands attended St. Martin's IRS:

Quarterly Returns indicate that until 1960, almost all residential pupils were members of the

Bigstone Band. After 1960, Quarterly Returns indicate that some students came from the following Bands:

Tall Cree, Little R.River, Athabaska Agen., Sturgeon Lake, Namew, Saddle Lake, Erminskin, Samson, Enoch, Smith Band, Fort Chipweyan, Fitzgerald Smith, Drift Pile, Whitefish Lake, Blood, Boyer River, Royal River, Non-Treaty, Legoff Band, Alexis, Slavey, Janvier, Alexander, Tall Cree, Lubicon, Prov. Welfare, N.S.D., Ft. Vermillion, Slaves of UHR, Grouard

There may be alternate ways of spelling these band names.

RELIGIOUS GROUPS

The Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Grouard & The Oblates of Mary Immaculate

- 1901-1956 The Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Grouard owned and operated the school. The Oblates of Mary Immaculate were responsible for the day to day administration of the school.
- 1956-1969 The government owned the school, but the Oblates of Mary Immaculate continued to be responsible for the day to day administration of the school.

From September 1, 1956 the Government assumed responsibility for the employment and payment of teaching staff [00077]. The Vicar Apostolic, or Archbishop of Grouard, continued to nominate potential principals for employment at the school after 1956 [00045]. The principal also operated as the head of the St. Martin's Mission and the Administrator of the hospital [01211].

The Sisters of Charity of Providence:

- 1901 – 1969 The Sisters of Charity of Providence of the Province of Holy Angels assisted in the administration of the school. Sisters were employed in various capacities as teachers [01350] [00921] [03323] including home economics instructors [00991], supervisors including Matron and Child Care Workers [01331] [01122], nurses [03858B] [03886A], and domestic staff.

WRITTEN AGREEMENTS

- 1911 Agreement for the Operation of St. Martin's IRS [01776].
- 1962 Indianescom Agreement – Contract wherein the Government, represented by Indian Affairs ["Minister"], entered into an agreement with Indianescom [referred to as "Management" in contract] for the operation of the Desmarais Indian Residential School [01766]. Indianescom was the incorporated body created in 1961 to be the only corporate entity to sign all the contracts concerning schools

administered by the Oblate Fathers. Formerly, this body was known as the Oblate Fathers Indian and Eskimo Welfare Commission, which was created in 1936.

- 1962 Agreement between the Crown and Northland School Division regarding payment of tuition [01292].
- 1965-1973 Agreements with Northland School Division for use of classrooms at the Desmarais Residence [00883] [00806].
- 1969-1975 Service Contracts signed between the Indian-Eskimo Council and the Crown for liaison duties, recruitment of Student Residence Administrators, and recruitment of Child Care Workers [010255] [013170] [010455]. Administrators and Child Care Workers did not fall under the Public Service Employment Act [014177].
- 1970-1971 Chaplaincy Agreement [01032].

DOCUMENTS REFERRING TO SCHOOL INCIDENTS

To date, we are unaware of any convictions for abuse at St. Martin's IRS or of any convicted abusers present at the school.

The following suggestions of abuse, listed chronologically, comprise all known identifiable complaints and/or allegations received by government officials and all available information regarding the follow-up and outcome.

Incidents (Sexual)

No information found.

Incidents (Physical)

Two unrelated comments concerning severe discipline at the school: [00922] [00923].

Two reported incidents of corporal punishment of an "approved Indian Residential pupil" [02193] [02178].

One instance of a senior government official reserving his judgment on proposed actions at St. Martin's IRS: "I am of the opinion that many of these difficult pupils are victims of the residential school system. We have often been told that residential schools should not be made houses of correction and, as you well know, we have had a number of most unfortunate instances in some of the remote residential schools with refractory pupils" [01772].

Incidents (Student on Student)

No information found

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- 1944 St. Theresa School was a Roman Catholic School operated in conjunction with the nearby St. Charles Mission [00930] [00016].
- 1949 St. Martin's IRS was not inspected by Provincial Inspectors prior to January of 1949 [00032].
- 1953 A report indicates that there are 131 school children from the Bigstone Reserve and notes the following: "The role of this school, serving a semi-nomadic band, in still undeveloped country, is likely to remain unchanged for the next ten or twenty years. A residential school with a few day pupils would seem to be needed for the education of these children" [03294].
- 1959 Children were not to be admitted to the residential school for "welfare" reasons [016978] [03981] [03982] [03983] [03975].
- 1960-1970 St. Martin's IRS was visited by a Dietician in 1960 [00650], 1963 [00061], 1969 [174957] and 1970 [171879 and 171879A].
- 1960 It appears that "the majority of pupils who are in residence at Desmarais live within 4 miles of the school" [04344]. Also, 105 pupils "reside within a radius of four miles on Reserve 166A" and "another 25 pupils live within a radius of 8 miles" [07078]. Two reports from 1964-65 and 1965-66 [2374A][03120] indicate that children from the Bigstone Band on Reserves No. 183, Jean Baptiste Gambler Reserve, and Nos. 166 A&D, the Wabasca Reserves attend at Desmarais IRS. It is speculated that new road construction in the area "will reduce the resident population by forty to fifty pupils" [02679].
- 1960 With regards to the Wabasca-Desmarais area specifically, J.W. Chalmers, Director of School Administration, Department of Education, Government of the Province of Alberta writes to Mr. L. Jampolsky, Inspector of Indian Schools, Department of Indian Affairs: "You will recall that it is not intended to operate a school in Desmarais S.D. No. 5112, and that Indian children would be accepted without fee at Wabasca S.D. No. 5113 in return for the same courtesy being extended to certain Metis children attending Wabasca Indian School" [03282].
- 1960 In December of 1960, the Crown was approached by the newly formed Northland School Division about the "take over operation of Indian schools in its general territory" [03419A]. Desmarais was one of these schools. Northland School Division took over the education of Indian children from Grade 7 and up, beginning in September of 1962 [03390]. The agreement between Canada and the

Northland School Division for children from Grade 7 and up, was signed in July of 1962 [01292].

- 1959 The hospital at St. Martin's Mission is a "contract hospital" [04040B] [03880] which opened in 1958 [03897].² The hospital is referred to as "sub-standard"; Indian Health Services pays the Sister R.N. \$100 a month for her work, which includes care of the Indians in hospital and out-patients, including all x-ray work done [04040B].
- 1961 In February 1961, the Province of Alberta assumed responsibility for providing health services to both Indians and Non-Indians in the Wabasca – Desmarais area. In exchange, the Federal government agreed to provide health services to the population in the Fort Chipewyan area [03880].
- 1964 It is suggested that St. Martin's IRS was being used as a "...rehabilitation centre where potential delinquents can be accommodated and assisted before they become delinquent" [01769] [01770]. It appears that eleven pupils were "involved in this experiment in grades four to nine" and that they were "...directed to Desmarais from the Saddle Lake, Edmonton and Hobbema Agencies" [01771].
- 1964 The Government approved the employment of a teacher-counsellor at High Prairie, Alberta for the 1964-65 school year [02093]. His duties included "(4) Provide vocational counselling for Indian students attending secondary schools in the Lesser Slave Lake Indian Agency" [00051]. In 1965, a Guidance Counsellor position was established at Wabasca [01755A].
- 1964 Bishop Routhier wrote to the Superintendent of Indian Schools requesting that Catholic pupils continue to be taught by Catholic teachers upon take over by Northland School Division [03260C].
- 1968 The Canadian Lay Missionaries were providing some sort of training course to individuals "interested in giving a year or more of their lives to work in missions in Canada or Africa" [01970]. Some of the supervisors at St. Martins IRS indicate that they took part in a 6 week training course offered by this organization [03270C and 03270D]. Whether this course offered instruction in child supervision is not clear.
- 1968 Reasons for accepting children in residence are limited to: (1) isolated home removed from bus services; (2) parents are migratory; and (3) problems in the home. This new policy reflects the desire to have children attend as day pupils: "our real aim should be to strengthen families so that the child may grow up in an adequate home, and attend school from that home" [03228].

² A hospital seemed to be open before this date [04017], however it may not have been a contract hospital under the provincial hospitalization program.

- 1969 Continued move towards having children attend school from their homes if at all possible and in their interests. Application forms were revised and “an application for admission must be made each school year by the parent or guardian and when a student is being re-admitted...”[014706]. Very strict admission criteria had to be satisfied before a child’s application for admission to an IRS would be approved [03833].
- 1969 St. Martin’s Supervisors Larry Anaquod, Sister J. Laporte, John Prefontaine and Sister S. Belanger are noted as attending the Child Care Workers Training Course, August 17th-23rd, 1969 at the University of Saskatchewan [010076] sponsored by the Government.
- 1970 Significant tension is noted amongst Protestant and Catholic staff after the Government took over administration in 1969 [01029] [01027].

PRINCIPALS/ADMINISTRATORS

Name	Position	Tenure Dates
Reverend Father Cyprien Batie	Principal	1917-1923
Reverend Father Alphonse Rault	Principal	1923-1933
Reverend Jean Baptiste Henri Giroux	Acting Principal	1932-1933
Reverend Father Luc Beuglet	Principal	1933-1940
Reverend Father Yves-Marie Floch	Acting Principal	1939
Reverend Father Bernard Rainville,	Principal	October 1940- August 1942
Reverend Father Yves-Marie Floch	Principal	August 1942-May 1944
Reverend Father Benoit Guimont	Principal	May 1944 – August 1951
Reverend Father Elphege Fillion	Assistant Principal	1949, 1951 – October 1953
Reverend Father Bernard Rainville	Principal	August 1951 – October 1953
Reverend Father Elphege Fillion	Principal	October 1953 - September 1959
Reverend Father Benoit Guimont	Principal	September 1959 – January 1964
Reverend Father Louis Joseph Giguere	Assistant Principal	July 1962 – August 1963
Reverend Father Gerard Tessier	Principal	January 1964 – July 1969
Reverend Father Arthur Lamothe	Assistant Principal	June 1965 – September 1966
Mr. Clement Laframboise	Principal/Administrator	July 1969 – 1973

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The original school narrative document produced by Canada also contains a number of records that have been separated pending review.



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