

## One Man's Opinion

by Anthony Liah/Leha/Leia (1910-1979), who worked at the Kamloops Indian Residential School from the 1920s until 1975.

In Washington and later on (in 1863) at Mission City and then in other places, the Oblates established Indian residential schools to take the children from the unsanitary conditions and, at times, the evil influences of camp life, and also to give them regular meals, medical care, an elementary education as well as to try to develop leadership qualities and to teach them farming or a trade, or in the case of the girls, to be good homemakers.

The day school, which Fr. Cocola saw on the Kamloops reserve in 1881, gave way to a boarding school with some 50 pupils when the Federal Government erected “a large building for the boys and another for the girls”.

In 1889 (or a little later according to Bishop Durieu), the Government, under pressure from certain people”, confided the management of the school to Catholic laymen.

Although the principal, Mr. Hagan, was an excellent man and a staunch friend of the priests, there was considerable trouble in the school. The Indians were dissatisfied and, because they had no chaplain, the Sisters of St. Ann, after a short s[t]ay, withdrew in 1890.

Finally in 1893, the Government acceded to the Indians' demands and asked the Oblates to take charge of the school. Because he was “the most experienced Indian school principal” amongst the Oblates, Father Alphonse Carion was appointed principal on April 1, 1893. He took charge on April 15. In honor of his patron saint, the school was placed under the protection of St. Alphon[s]us.

His fellow missionaries regarded him as a model principal. In 1904, Bishop Dontenwill wrote: “Father Carion is in complete charge of the Indian industrial school. All who know and can appreciate the difficulties of such a responsible position unanimously say that he is a past master in the art of training Indian children.” (In the same report, the Bishop says: “Father Lejeune is practically always on the go visiting his 1200 Shuswaps—whose language he speaks. He has just built and renovated several churches . . . overflow with zeal and good humour. Fr. Bellot attends to 800 Okanagan Indians (who live at) a great distance from Kamloops. Father Andrew Michel zealously looks after the parish and the Sisters' Academy.)

After serving as principal for 23 years at Kamloops, Father Carion was appointed Master of Novices at St. Mary's Mission in March, 1916. He died a year later. Despite their zeal and other qualities, his immediate successors, Father Rodolphe Desmarais and J.B. Salles, had a very trying time at the school from a financial point of view. The war, and not they, was to blame for this. Besides that, neither remained long enough to prove his worth: Father Desmarais was recalled to Quebec and Father Xalles, an outstanding professor of philosophy and moral theology, was appointed to the staff of the Oblate Scholasticate in Edmonton. Many of his pupils became Indian missionaries.

Unlike Father Salles, his successor, Father James McGuire, had no experience with the Indians and that was a handicap. He had been a brilliant university professor and director of a college which, under rather peculiar circumstances, he had founded.

However, at Kamloops, his difficulties were financial rather than academic. That he might have solved them is suggested in a report made by Father John Welch, Vicar of Missions, in 1920: During the short time he spent at the Kamloops School the Reverent James McGuire placed this institution on a good footing by installing an irrigation system which has given new life to the farm”.

As matters turned out this statement proved to be over-optimistic but it shows that Fr. McGuire had made a good start. And he did and planned a great deal more than that.

Appalled by the old buildings and their lack of modern conveniences and by the low standard of studies offered the Indians, he decided to improve both. With the support of Mr. Fulton, a former Attorney General in the B.C. Legislature and father of the present Minister of Justice, he got the Federal Government to build the present magnificent school.

His successor, Father John Duplanil, had come to B.C. in 1907 and had done good work in a parish, on the white missions in southeastern B.C., as chaplain of the B.C. penitentiary and then as temporary principal at the Sechelt and Cariboo Indian schools.

While in these schools and, later on, at St. Mary’s Indian School, he felt, that while the schools had done much good, they had not kept pace with the times: only the lower grades were taught and “vocational training: was far from what it should be. He realized that to make these schools what he felt they should be would take much time and work. The Government believed that it was fulfilling its obligations towards the pupils and all that most Indians wanted was to get their children out of school as soon as possible.

Father Duplanil’s first step was to visit several Indian schools in the United States and the Coqualeetza school near Sardis where the Reverend Dr. Raley was of the greatest help to him. He returned from this trip with several convictions. (1) The idea that the school was a jail to which the children were forced to go must be destroyed. The necessity and advantage of education, of learning a trade, of getting medical attention etc. must be stressed. The truant officer must never be mentioned. (2) High school was a goal to be kept in mind but only two grades per generation should be added so that there would not be too large an intellectual gap between parents and children.

He noticed that when Grade XII children in those days returned to their reserves from certain schools, they could not stay there, and when they went to the cities they were not accepted by the whites. They often became outcasts and got into trouble. (Note: Even in 1977, very often Indian students come to the cities from small towns and reserves and are not prepared for the racism and prejudices found in the large urban areas. This often results in the Indian being incarcerated in the penal institutions throughout the country. (3) More qualified teachers were needed both in the schoolroom and in the vocational training departments.

When he came to Kamloops as principal. the central building and east wing were completed but, as late as 1928, he had less than a hundred pupils whereas, to make ends meet, he needed 250.

With the co-operation of Father Lejeune and his assistant, the school was soon filled although only persuasion was used to attract the pupils. A former high school teacher and a gentleman who had a university degree helped teach the boys and the Sisters, under a very understanding superior, did wonders amongst the girls.

The school stood in a desert of sand. Various grasses and grains were sown between the school and the river, an orchard and shade trees were planted. The irrigation system was improved, a prize jersey herd was started, chickens were bought and many other improvements were made, thanks to the excellent work of Mr. Jim Bann, and Frank and Anthony Leja. Supervised games and calisthenics were introduced.

Though he was strict, Father Duplanil was very kind. During the “depression years” he took in 80 pre-school children (from 4 to 5 years old) to save them from starving. They slept in the administration building and once or twice every night, he got up to make sure they were all covered.

June 28, was his last day at the schools. That evening, a number of businessmen came to say good-bye and to give him a present. In reply to a [ ] in which a gentleman spoke of all the good he had done, Father Duplanil gave all the credit to his predecessor, Father McGuire. Early next morning he received a telegram: Father McGuire drowned yesterday”.

Father Duplanil had worthy successors in the person of Fathers Thomas Kennedy and Fergus O’Grady (now Bishop of Prince Rupert), James Mulvihill, and Gerald Dunlop, all of whom have built well on the foundation that Father Duplanil and his predecessors laid.

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