

Memories of St. George's Residential School in the 1940s

I went to school when I was seven because I wanted to go to school. Stanley and George (my two older brothers) used to tell me about St. George's when they were home in the summer. They told me there were lots of kids there to play with, so after they went back I asked my father to let me go to school. Dad wanted me to go to school in town at the Public school but I didn't want to go there because I didn't know anybody going to that school.

I was by myself on the Reserve so I kept asking my mother to send me to School. Not long after my birthday they took me to St. George's on a Sunday afternoon. I remember coming down the road in the car and I could see the big building. It was all red and made of bricks and it looked real big to me.

Father, mother and I waited in the Waiting Room for the Supervisor to bring Stanley and George. I was kind of scared until Stanley and George came in. After Mom and Dad had left, the Principal told Stanley to take me to the Boys' Matron.

She gave me a pair of blue overalls, a pair of socks, a night-gown and towel – all of them had the number 423 on them. I didn't know then as I know now that I was going to remember that number forever. Stanley folded my clothes for me and put them in his suitcase and took them to the storage room. I did not see them again until the school term was over.

The Dining Room

I remember my first meal at St. George's. The Boys' Supervisor blew his whistle and all the boys – about ninety – lined up in the boys' basement three long lines six feet apart. I didn't know where to go so I

stood beside Stanley in the second line; George was in the third line behind us against the lockers.

The Boys' Supervisor told Stanley to put me in the front line near the end beside an older boy. After a while the Superintendent (called the "Sup") ordered, "Stand at ease, attenshun, left turn, forward march!"

When we got in the dining-room the girls were coming in from the other side of the room in the same way as the boys. The older boy who was in the lead was at one end of the table with the eight kids divided into two fours on each side of the table while the other older boy was at the other end.

Before sitting down, the nine tables of boys and the nine tables of girls stood in their place at the table until all was quiet and "Grace" had been said. On the wooden tables knives and forks were laid for each person and in the centre on a plate were ten pieces of cake. At one end ten tin cups stood with a jug of milk and at the other end ten tin plates, a bowl of potatoes and a bowl of stew.

It was the job of the older boys sitting at the ends of the tables to dole out the food, and the kids along the sides of the tables passed the food along. After supper the Supervisor said, "Quiet, Stand, Grace," then we filed out again into the basement.

Bed Time

When we got back into the basement all the small boys lined up against the lockers and the Supervisor sent us upstairs. George led me up flights of stairs to the Third Floor. There the Boys' Matron showed me to my bed and put two sheets and one pillow-case on it. The three blankets were already on the straw-filled mattress. George helped me make my

bed while the other boys were getting into their night-gowns.

I got into my night-gown which was a long dress past my knees. There were about forty kids in the dormitory and we were called Number Ones. Stanley was older and he was a Number Two. The biggest and oldest boys were called Number Threes.

Then we all got down on our knees beside our beds and the matron led the dormitory in saying the Lord's Prayer. We all got into our beds. The matron before leaving said "Good night children," and the kids said, "Good night Mrs. Smith."

Then she locked the door (with a latch bolt) and turned out the lights. A short interval after the lights were out the boys started whispering or talking with one another. It was dark and I was scared, but George, whose bed was not near mine, tip-toed over to my bed and talked to me until I fell asleep.

Morning Routine

The next morning about seven-thirty the matron unlatched the door and woke the boys with a good morning. As the other boys were getting up I suddenly realized that I had wet my bed for the first time since I could remember. After we were all dressed and washed we lined up at the door and the bell rang.

The matron opened the door and we marched down the stairs, slowly at first down to the second floor and by the first floor we were quicker. On the basement flight we were running since the older boys were no longer in sight of the matron.

Stanley, a Number Two who had been awakened half an hour earlier, was playing marbles with a few of his friends on the cement basement floor. Some Number Threes were around since they were awakened about six by

the farm boss to milk thirty cows to supply the school milk.

Ten minutes after I reached the basement I could see them through the window coming back, three of them pushing a two-wheeled cart loaded with two or three eight-gallon cans of milk to the kitchen for breakfast.

The Supervisor, shortly after the milk delivery and after he had finished his breakfast in the separate staff dining-room, blew his whistle and the boys lined up as before and entered the dining room.

After breakfast we marched through the basement and under the archway into the chapel. The chapel was only about sixty feet away from the north wall of the boys' basement. After a short service we were marched out and up to the dormitories to make our beds.

The Work List

The working assignments that were carried out every morning after we made our beds were scheduled once a month by the Supervisor. On the work list each boy had a chore to do each morning before the school session started. The boys' matron supervised the second and third floors, sweeping the three dormitories, washing the washroom and the toilet. The two teachers, while they put work on the board, watched the sweeping and dusting of their classrooms.

The boys' supervisor was in charge of the boys sweeping the basement, cleaning the washroom, sweeping the stairs and the woodpile boys splitting wood for the kitchen and laundry. One of the farmhands in charge of the meat house had boys deliver meat to the kitchen and to the married workers of the school living in houses around the main buildings.

Another farmhand saw that boys filled sacks with vegetables and boxes with apples from the roothouse and delivered them to the kitchen, also a box of apples to the boys' and girls' supervisors to use at recess. On the way from the cellar to the woodpile boys would grab an apple if the coast was clear.

After the work was done we would report to the one in charge who would inspect the job. If he was not satisfied with it he would make you do the whole thing all over again. If there wasn't time before school you would have to do it after school between four and five which was a free period every day.

These work jobs were graduated according to age. The Number Ones started out by sweeping their own dormitory, then the stairs, the washrooms and finally the classrooms in consecutive order as they advanced through school. I went through this work list while I was passing grades one to three; at grade four most of us who were still too small for farm or barn-boy work were sent to the manual training room.

This room had about six work benches, a pile of lumber along one end and a blackboard and at the other end long, benched desks. We made milking stools, tea trays, tie racks, bob-sleds for winter, coffee tables, cabinets and other things.

Some of the bigger boys would be a farm or barn-boy only every other month. Some larger than we were would make a complete circuit, being in manual training and then a boiler room boy. I never got to be a boiler room boy. Two boiler room boys helped the engineer in the engine room. It was below the auditorium and had two boilers to keep the water hot and in winter to keep the school radiators hot. The boiler room boys cleaned out clinkers from the furnace and restoked it with coal.

One of them went to school at nine, the other helped the engineer and one of the cooks open preserves of tomatoes, peaches or pears from the kitchen or from the cannery. These had been canned in the fall when cannery-boys and girls peeled and cleaned the fruit and put it in the tins. If the boiler-boy was not doing this he and the engineer would check the plumbing system. Most of the time, however, the boiler boy just sat in the boiler room trying to look busy in case someone came in. It was a good place to be because you could always set aside a couple of tins for later.

Farm Work

I remember when I as a barn-boy for the first time. We carted empty milk cans to the dairy and garbage to the piggery. The boys, without turning the cows out, started cleaning the gutters. I looked down the sides and could see the cows' hooves an inch or more away from the edge of the gutter. The bigger boys pushed the debris down to the far end while walking in the gutter behind all those hooves. Then one gave me a push-broom while another stepped into the gutter saying, "I'll show you."

Grades 1, 2 and 3 went to school the whole day. However, grades 4 and up had to go to school only half a day. They were divided in 4a, 4b, 5a, 5b etc. In the morning the A division of the two grades would distribute themselves according to the work list. After the empty milk cans and garbage had been taken care of the boys put on coveralls and rubber boots, turned the cows out to pasture and the heifer into the heifer pen.

The farm boys assembled in the granary where the farm Sup. dished out the chores according to season. In the fall they picked fruit, reaped the harvest, dug and hauled potatoes and vegetables,

gathered corn for school use or processed it for silage stored in a huge silo for cattle feed. In winter there was woodcutting. Trees were cut, limbed, hauled to be cut in blocks by a buzz saw and stacked into a pile. This was about a mile away from the school. When school was closed we had to haul a couple of wagon loads to replenish it.

Sometimes we had to help slaughter a pig or cow. We did no actual butchering but had to help clean and wash the carcass and weigh and quarter it. Sometimes we worked in the granary selecting and separating seeds in preparation for the spring planting. Planting and general farm work occupied the growing season.

In the winter when it was too cold to work the barn-boys cleaned the barn. Fewer farm boys and more barn boys were needed in winter because the cows had to have straw bedding and gutter cleaning was increased. In the spring and fall this was reversed and more farm boys were needed.

Nearly all the boys wanted to be farm boys because we never knew from day to day what we would be doing. The barn work was much more routine. Milking, cleaning, cooking pig feed, taking care of garbage went on day after day and two and a half hours a day must be spent in stinking pigpens. At four o'clock it was time to drive in the cows again. I used to get a kick out of watching the cows watching at the pasture gate for us to open it. Then they would enter the barn and go directly to their allotted stanchions and if one of the younger heifers got into the wrong place the older one would bunt it out with her head. We locked them up and returned to the school grounds.

The Weekend

Saturday was clean-up day. Dormitories and classrooms were mopped out, basement and dining room were hosed and dried with sacks. The two shifts washed the barn and piggery with a hose. All this had to be done by noon. The woodpile boys had to split twice as much wood as usual for the kitchen and laundry.

Every Saturday morning one of the Number Threes, usually the eldest, would have a list of some twenty names who would have their hair lopped off in a crew cut. The barber shop was the boys' reading room between the two classrooms.

After lunch on Saturday we were free and we looked forward to it every week. The Number One boys went for a walk with the Matron. The Number Twos and Number Threes were allowed to choose where we would go for the walk and every other week were allowed to go to town three and a half miles away. We had to dress in our Sunday clothes and walked around town for an hour or so after we had bought what we could afford. Then we assembled to be counted by the Sup. before being marched back again to the "jail-house." The Reserve close by was out of bounds unless special permission was granted.

Sunday was church day. We slept an hour longer, even the milkers. After the cows were milked the boys made a start at cleaning the barn because we would have to come back after breakfast to do it. After breakfast all the Number Threes had to finish cleaning out the barn. We were expected to go to Sunday School at 10 o'clock. After this all the boys had to change into their Sunday clothes - black corduroy pants and clean shirt.

The Sunday clothes were folded and put into cubby-holes with the owners' numbers in the sewing room. Here also once a week we got our change of clothes.

So we were lined up and marched into Church in our Sunday clothes, with still the same work boots. After we left the church we marched upstairs, changed into our blue denims and folded our Sunday clothes away into their cubby-holes for next week. After lunch we did the same as Saturday afternoon with some variations in the walk.

None of the boys did homework in the evenings, some might read comics or Westerns; most of the time we played marbles and those not playing would look on. In the winter they would let us sleigh-ride down the school hill if it was not too dark, or some of us would go to the cellar to steal a few apples. In the fall we would go over the hill which was out of bounds and run to the orchard half-a-mile away where we filled our shirts with apples and cached them by digging a hole and burying them so we could have an apple any time we wanted it.

I became a Number Three when I was thirteen and was allowed then to go into the boys' reading room. It had a long bench, a couple of chairs and a table, a loud speaker and a gramophone, no books, one or two old magazines and a newspaper that the staff had finished with. The loud speaker was connected with the radio in the staff sitting room. We only listened to the news and sometimes a fight, but most of the time we played the gramophone and listened to Western records and we used to know them by heart and sometimes we would join in and sing.

In grades 4 and up the boys and girls were taught in separate rooms as the school did not believe in having them together at any time. I have no clear memory of the teachers. One would be strict and one would be easy. Disobedience meant the strap either by the teacher or the principal. We didn't know where we were most of the time. The teacher might get mad if he asked a question and we answered it, or he might get mad if we didn't. The threat was the strap. The result was we answered, "I don't know" to almost everything. Even now I find myself answering "I don't know," just from habit. After a while they would get mad at us for answering "I don't know" and rap us over the knuckles with a ruler. Most of the time we were just plain scared. We did not know why a teacher was nice today and bellowed at us tomorrow. We were mixed up and confused.

It gets me mad now when I think about the years I spent in that place. If I'd known then what I know now, I wouldn't have taken it. We went through that murder of everything we were and stood for, and for what – very little! I have never been in jail but I know I went through one. They seemed to want to drive out or beat out of us every bit of life and pleasure; they acted as if we shouldn't be alive. I don't know what I hated the most, but whatever it was, it seemed to grow and grow as I got older until I got sick and tired of it all and quit. I want to learn, too; if that was getting education, I'd had enough.

Source: BC Archives, MS 2327