



In 'A Historic Survival,' Red Deer elder Bertha Poor speaks about her life being "ruined" by years spent at residential schools in Northern Saskatchewan. (Contributed photo)

# Residential school experiences recounted in Red Deer documentary film

'A Historic Survival' is available at the Red Deer museum

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Stories of strapping, forced labour and sexual abuse were recounted by two residential school survivors in a documentary film made for the Red Deer Museum and Art Gallery.

Local filmmaker Rueben Tschetter said his 22-minute documentary *A Historical Survival* is not easy to watch — and the stories of abuse were even harder for him to hear while making the film in 2018.

But Tschetter feels it's important to preserve experiences recalled by local residential school survivors — especially in light of the discovery of 215 Indigenous children's graves on the ground of a former Kamloops residential school.

The window on this very dark chapter in Canada's history is rapidly closing, said Tschetter, as these aging survivors will someday no longer be around.

Retired Canadian Senator and Justice Murray Sinclair, who led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, imparted this same message when he spoke at Red Deer College in 2016. As a result, Tschetter and the Red Deer Museum and Art Gallery decided to take up the challenge and capture some of those stories on video while it was still possible.

In *A Historic Survival*, Red Deer elders Bertha Poor and Rosina Winnie speak about their lives being "ruined" by years spent at residential schools in Northern Saskatchewan.

Poor's grandfather attempted to prevent her being taken away to a residential school by trying to enrol her at a local public school in North Battleford. But a public school official had shooed them off, saying "Go away, you savages!"

When Poor and Winnie were brought to their respective residential schools in Northern Saskatchewan, their long hair was immediately shorn off.

"My grandpa and my mom had asked that they not cut my hair and that was the first thing they done... it made me sick," said Poor. A doctor who later came to examine her concluded "I had a broken heart...."

Poor said she was abused in "every kind of way" by school staff as well as other older students. She recalled a big girl would grope her while she was trying to go up the stairs.

Poor and her sister eventually ran away from the school, but were caught and sent to another institution even further from home, to prevent them from leaving again.

She still has stress dreams linked to her residential school experience.

Winnie recalled how she and a few other Indigenous girls were laid across their beds in their nightgowns and strapped for trying to run away. She remembers the school official who did the punishing “frothed” at the mouth in his zeal.

“The next day we were scrubbing the floor in our nightgowns on our hands and knees,” Winnie recalled.

She added all the Indigenous kids gave their principal a Cree nickname meaning The Devil.

Hearing these “horrifying” stories shines a more intimate light on this country’s historic injustices, said Tschetter. “We all know what the history was — Canada was a colonial country. But with these personal experiences, our perceptions of reality is changed.”

He believes it’s taking too long to implement the Calls to Action made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

“The graves should be found sooner and the history should be talked about more.”

*A Historic Survival* can be viewed at the Red Deer museum after it opens on June 15, or through a YouTube link on the National Screen Institute’s website, [nsi-canada.ca](http://nsi-canada.ca).

Other related films made by Tschetter's Cache Project — *Being Kokum* and *Sacred Transitions* — can be found on [thecacheproject.ca](http://thecacheproject.ca).

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