This is Not My Story, But Yours: The Russ Moses Residential School Memoir

The residential schools experience looms large in the history of my family, just as it does for so many other Indigenous families across the country. The following memoir was written by my late father Russ Moses (Delaware band, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory) upon his leaving the Canadian military in 1965 and starting new work that year as a civilian public servant, with the then-Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Citizenship & Immigration. Written from the vantage point of December, 1965 when he was 33 years old, the memoir recounts Russ' childhood experiences at the Mohawk Institute Indian Residential School in Brantford, Ontario; he attended the school from 1942 until 1947. While Russ' wife (my mother), Helen Monture Moses (Upper Mohawk band, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory), had the benefit of being raised at home by her parents alongside her siblings, Russ was in fact the third generation of the Moses family to attend *the Mush Hole*.¹

Each residential school was a unique sub-culture in its own right: different schools met different perceived needs in different regions of the county during different decades, and different conditions applied. When my great grandfather Nelson Moses attended the Mohawk Institute in the 1880s, it was run as a religious training school where selected young men and women from the Six Nations community were sent to be trained as Indigenous Anglican missionaries and teachers, to be sent to Indigenous communities out West as the process of signing the Numbered Treaties continued and as new reserves were created. When my grandfather (Russ' father) Ted was there in the 1910s, it was essentially a military academy during the era of global militarization that would culminate with the outbreak of the Great War. My father and his siblings had the misfortune of being sent there during the 1940s at the height of the Second World War, by which time any pretence toward providing education or training had been abandoned: the Indigenous children were there to provide the forced agricultural labour necessary to keep the large farm operation going, as a contribution to the civilian food production effort on the Canadian home front during wartime.

The Mohawk Institute itself sat on 350 acres of prime southern Ontario farmland with varieties of crops, livestock and orchards under cultivation. Sadly, the child inmates derived no benefit from their labours, and as you will read, were reduced to begging on the streets of Brantford to help sustain themselves.

The accompanying photograph of Russ and his sister Thelma, according to Russ' own writing on the back, was taken in October, 1943, during the course of one of the once-monthly, fifteen-minute visiting sessions for brothers and sisters. The condition of the children's clothing in the photograph speaks volumes. Although not specifically described in the text, the other accompanying photo is of a metal rattle that was made and used in secret by the children at the Mush Hole, to keep alive some vestiges of traditional Six Nations cultural practices. The photograph of Russ and his sister, and the rattle, are the only two heirlooms that my father retained from that childhood period of his life. Made with the materials at hand in imitation of a traditional Iroquoian (Haudenosaunee) wood and cow horn Longhouse rattle, the children would have been severely punished had the rattle been found by Mohawk Institute staff.

Notwithstanding the tragic circumstances of childhood abuse and neglect described in his memoir, as Russ' son it is important for me to convey to all readers that Russ refused to be defined by his residential school experience. Beyond his upbringing, my father was a decorated naval veteran of the Korean War, an air force veteran of the Cold War, an accomplished public servant, and most important, a loving husband, father, grandfather, father-in-law and uncle. In the end, his was a life that was truly well lived. Safe home, Russ, and we'll see you back in port.

John Moses
Ottawa, 2016

ⁱ The Mush Hole was the name applied to the School for many generations by the children who attended it.