
We Missed the Bus

George Peequaquat (as told to Gordon Lobe)

"I remember the hurt in my parents' faces when they couldn't provide enough food and had to send us away."

I was five years old when I first attended the Lestock Indian Residential School in 1948. Lestock is 100 miles from Nut Lake. In those days it seemed like a thousand miles. From home our parents took us to the farm instructor's office where the Residence truck was waiting.

No matter how cold it was we travelled in the back of the truck. It had a tarpaulin over the top. In the winter we used it for hockey trips. When it got really cold we made a wood fire in the little stove in one corner of the truck box. Temperatures sometimes dipped to minus forty.

But when we went to school in the fall we didn't need the stove. The size of the group increased as we went from reserve to reserve. It was not uncommon to have up to forty children ranging in age from five to sixteen piled in the back of the truck.

Every autumn the truck would come to collect children from the reserves in our area. The farm instructor was notified of the date that the truck was going to arrive. He then notified all the parents of school age children.

Parents often sent their children to residential school because they were assured that there was plenty of food at the school. They knew that their children would not starve over the winter. Starvation was a very real scare. If the hunting and gathering had not been good or the store of food was not adequate to get us through the winter, we starved. This was in the late 1940's when the rest of the country was experiencing the post-war boom. Often one less mouth to feed made the difference in being able

to last the winter. Sending the children to residential school solved part of the food problem, but it did nothing to keep our families together. I remember the hurt in my parents' faces when they couldn't provide enough food and had to send us away.

Most of the parents could not read and did not understand about calendars. If they missed the date that their children were to be picked up, they were thrown in jail.

One time my dad got his weeks mixed up and missed the truck, so we went back home. A few days later, two policemen and the priest from Lestock came to the camp where we were living. People were transient in those days and we lived in camps. There were no permanent houses or settlements on the reserve. Our home was a big white tent. Some of our people still lived in teepees. So-May, one of the elders, and other old people preferred the teepee. When the priest and policemen came to our camp, the priest took us school children along with him to school. I think his name was Father Belladeaux. We didn't know the difference between the priests. They all looked the same. He was driving a dark panel truck.

The policemen took my father off to jail.

We didn't have holidays till the following June. There were no open weekends or breaks when we were allowed to go home for a visit during the year—not even at Christmas time.

When we got back from school in June, Dad was back at home. We never found out how long he had spent in jail. He never understood why he was sent to jail.

my red face hurts (1.)

my red face hurts
and i walk with my head down
to hide the tears

my red face hurts
as i watch my brother die before me
white bullets riddle my body
and i hide my face to cry

my red face hurts
as i watch my father stagger out of neon lit bars
and crumple on piss-stained sidewalks
as hate filled eyes step over him
i hide my shame behind shadows

my red face hurts
as i watch a white man hiding his white sheet
beneath his suit and tie
condemn me because of one man's greed
sentencing me to an early death
my red face hurts as he smiles

my red face hurts
as i see my sister stand on darkened streets
selling her gift to strangers
that use her till she has nothing left to give
and i cry as i pull the needles from her arms

my red face hurts
when i hear the hate on the radio
directed at my hopes and dreams
and another party is born
on the wings of a white horse
and i scream in anger as i watch the door close on me

my red face hurts
as i see the stirrings of a white nation
follow blindly the words of a salesman
with visions of a wall between us
and i cry for my unborn brothers and sisters
for they will feel the sting of this party's hate

my red face hurts
but the feel of the gun
comforts me

The title of this poem was inspired by a painting done by Charles Favell of Winnipeg, Manitoba. He is a student of Argyle High School, an inner city school in Winnipeg.

