



CONFRONTING THE SIXTIES SCOOP

From the 1960s to the '80s, some 20,000 Aboriginal children were removed from their homes and placed with non-Native families. Now adults, many want redress for the loss of cultural identity.

BY ANNE BOKMA

Sally Susan Mathias was four years old in 1967 when child welfare services removed her and her six-year-old sister, Doris Lynn, from their home, part of the Beaverhouse First Nation near Kirkland Lake, Ont. They were put in a boat and, through a blur of tears, watched as the solitary figure of their mother receded into a faint outline and then vanished, like a lost dream. Sally wouldn't set eyes on her mother again until she was 18.

Their five older siblings, inexplicably, were left behind. The two sisters stayed together in foster care until Sally, then nine, was adopted by a Catholic family with four kids. Her new parents changed her name to Marcia (she is known as Marcia Brown Martel today). She says her adoptive father treated her well. But Brown Martel says her relationship with her adoptive mother was very harsh, leading her to break off ties with her adoptive family at age 17. She says she remains completely estranged today.

By the time she returned to the reserve where she was born, she could speak only English, and the absence of her original Ojibwa dialect made it difficult to connect with family members, including her mother. "I could not speak my mother's language," she says. "How do you talk about your emotions when you cannot even speak the words?" She discovered there had been alternatives to being whisked away as a little girl to the foreign territory of a white, middle-class household where love was scarce and loneliness a constant companion. "I know now that there were many people in my community who could have raised me — my grandmother was one of them — and I could have known my language."

Brown Martel was part of what is becoming widely known as the "Sixties Scoop," an era from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s when an estimated 20,000 Aboriginal children were removed from their families and communities to be fostered and adopted, mostly by white families across North America. Some Aboriginal scholars say there is evidence these children were sometimes taken forcibly and without consent from their parents — often simply because they lived in poverty — while others argue they were removed primarily because of neglect and abuse. But both sides agree the wholesale removal of these children resulted in the loss of their language, ceremonies and spirituality, and in many cases their Indian status, which conferred privileges such as subsidized education. Contact with their natural families was severed.

They've been called a lost generation. Caught in limbo between a white world where they didn't fit in and an Aboriginal culture they couldn't access, many had no sense of who they were. As in Brown Martel's case, names of children were changed and personal histories simply

vanished because of incomplete, falsified, sealed or missing adoption records. (After Brown Martel reclaimed her heritage as an adult and fought to win back her Indian status, she discovered the Canadian government had declared her deceased under her original identity.)

Most Canadians believe the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their communities and reserves was limited to Canada's 130 church-run, government-funded residential schools, which operated from the 1870s to the 1990s and were designed to assimilate the students into mainstream society. But others argue that attempts to "kill the Indian in the child" continued, with the child welfare system becoming the newest tool of assimilation and colonization. The term "Sixties Scoop" owes its genesis to a social worker who reported in a government study that it was common practice in British Columbia in the mid-1960s to "scoop" almost all newborns from their mothers on reserves. Advocates say the removal of these children from their communities had devastating consequences, including high rates of adoption breakdown (as great as 95 percent by some estimates) and, as they aged, social problems such as addiction, depression, suicide, incarceration, poverty, low education and unemployment. Even some Aboriginal children adopted into the most privileged of homes — such as former prime minister Jean Chrétien's son, who was adopted as an 18-month-old — had lives marked by addiction and incarceration.

Residential school survivors have had their day in court with a \$2-billion class-action settlement, an apology from the federal government and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Now adult scoop survivors want the same recognition and redress.

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Several thousand have signed on to class-action lawsuits in a number of provinces. They want Ottawa held accountable for the impact of "identity genocide," the loss of culture they say Canada — with constitutional authority for Aboriginal people through its Indian and Northern Affairs department — condoned by allowing them to be placed in non-Native homes. Federal initiatives such as the Adopt Indian Métis program, for example, aggressively advertised Aboriginal children in catalogues to appeal to white adoptive parents, including many in the United Church (see "The best of intentions," page 28).

Brown Martel is the lead claimant in a \$1.3-billion Ontario lawsuit that received permission from a court of appeal this past December to proceed with its unprecedented case. It's the first time in Canadian history that

Demonstrators march in support of Sixties Scoop survivors at a Toronto rally in October 2011.

the loss of cultural identity is being raised as an actionable legal wrong, says her lawyer Jeffery Wilson, who estimates the federal government has already spent more than \$1 million to have its legal team fight the case through numerous appeals. Wilson says he was willing to negotiate for a greatly reduced settlement — about \$25 million — that could have been put into a general fund to provide counselling and support for people affected by the scoop.

“The government’s position on this was essentially ‘Get lost,’” he says. “Canada could have satisfied its

SOME BELIEVE THESE CHILDREN MAY HAVE FARED WORSE IF THEY HAD STAYED WITH THEIR NATURAL FAMILIES.

mission to resolve this in a better way . . . but this action as it proceeds will have, as its measure of justice, money for every individual claimant. But I’m not sure giving everyone \$10,000 or \$15,000 is the right answer.” (The lawsuit calls for individual claims of \$85,000, but Wilson estimates a more likely result will be the lower figures he cites here. Residential school survivors, by comparison, received a general payment of upwards of \$10,000, depending on how long they were in residence.) For her part, Brown Martel says money is not her motivation in seeking justice for what happened to her as a girl. She wants any financial award to be put into a foundation that would provide support and healing for those affected by the scoop. The federal government is now seeking permission to appeal the ruling that the class action lawsuit can go ahead. At press time, the decision about whether an appeal would be allowed had not been made. Wilson estimates it will take until 2019 before this case is fully resolved.

The wholesale removal of children from reserves began in the mid-1960s when the federal government struck deals to delegate its authority and pay the provinces to deliver Aboriginal child welfare services, guaranteeing funds for children who were removed from reserves and offering little money for preventive programs. This shift resulted in a sudden influx of keen, young, white social workers who had never before stepped foot on a reserve. Many were shocked by what they found: dilapidated and crowded homes (often designed by Indian Affairs) with no indoor plumbing; barefoot kids subsisting on dried fish and berries; rampant poverty and alcohol addiction; and a relaxed communal parenting style that was completely foreign to their Eurocentric view of the nuclear family. It was considered “in the best interests of the child” to rescue the kids from this perceived neglect and place them in white, middle-class homes with material comforts and access to opportunity.

“They’d walk onto these reserves, see all this poverty and devastation and children from the residential school

system — who are now parents in a lot of trauma — and, instead of seeing that for what it was, they removed the kids all over again,” Cindy Blackstock, executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, told the National Post.

Children started being removed en masse. In 1959, only one percent of children in care were Aboriginal; by the late 1960s, this figure jumped to 30 to 40 percent — even though Aboriginals represented less than four percent of the population.

At the scoop’s peak, one in four status Indian children were separated from their parents for all or part of their childhood — a fate that was in some ways worse than the plight of children in residential schools, who at least were surrounded by other Aboriginal children and had the benefit of living on the reserve and seeing their families during the summer (though some residential schools operated year-round). Wilson, the Ontario lawyer, says the scoop saved the federal government money since many adoptees’ records were sealed and they lost their treaty status and corresponding benefits. “This kind of assimilation saved expenses, since adoption is the cheapest form of childcare,” he says. “Somebody on some level saved a lot of money.”

Raven Sinclair, an associate professor in the faculty of social work at the University of Regina who has done extensive research on the scoop, says money and cultural superiority were the driving factors behind what she views as the mass abduction of Aboriginal children. “Children were apprehended by the thousands, in questionable circumstances, with economic incentive rather than neglect or abuse emerging as the motive for removing children from their homes,” she writes in a paper titled *Identity Lost and Found: Lessons from the Sixties Scoop*. “The white social worker, following on the heels of the missionary, the priest, and the Indian agent, was convinced that the only hope for the salvation of the Indian people lay in the removal of their children.”

But some believe these children may have fared worse if they had stayed with their natural families. Sherri Swidrovich, a lecturer in the department of Native studies at the University of Saskatchewan, wrote her master’s thesis on the positive experiences of Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal foster and adoptive care — a topic she admits hasn’t made her popular in Aboriginal circles. The 13 subjects she interviewed for her thesis generally had good outcomes as a result of their placements. For example, she quotes “John,” who talks about the sense of security he experienced after being placed in foster care at age six: “It made me feel safe, right, because there was no drinking involved. There was no violence. . . . It was a lot better than the life I was living in the community.”

She paints a picture that stands in vivid contrast to claims of deliberate wholesale apprehension by overzealous social workers determined to swipe kids off the reserve. “Contrary to the image of large scale unchecked apprehensions, neglect and/or abuse was also a primary

contributor to the high numbers of First Nations children who were placed into care,” she writes, adding in an interview, “Many had their lives saved.”

Swidrovich notes that federal-provincial wrangling over who was responsible for Aboriginal child welfare services meant there was actually reluctance on the part of child welfare authorities to intervene except “in ‘life or death’ situations.” As a result, many children who entered care were already so emotionally damaged it was inevitable they would have adjustment problems. She also points to the role of fetal alcohol syndrome as a factor in adoption breakdowns. And while she acknowledges that Aboriginal children removed from their homes would have been better off with Aboriginal foster or adoptive families, her research shows concerted attempts were made to recruit such families but few could be found.

“The Sixties Scoop ideology is strong because it fits in so well with current ideas of colonization of First Nations,” she says. “That ideology glosses over the fact that many children needed to go into protective care.”

She herself was one of those children, having been removed from her family at age four after she and her six siblings were found living in a granary under the care of her oldest sibling, who was 11. “Our mother and father had gone into town drinking and left us — the youngest was just nine months old — and someone finally reported us. It was cold out, and we’d been there for a few days living on wild meat that had been buried outside.” Swidrovich, who bounced through seven foster homes — the last of which was a happy placement with “young, hippie parents who treated me as one of their own” — also endured traumatic experiences. She recalls one “wicked” foster mother who scrubbed her and her sister with a vegetable brush until their skin was raw the night they arrived. “She called us ‘dirty little Indians.’ She saw us as subhuman.”

Regardless of whether adoptive homes were kind or cruel, lawyer Wilson says the impact of the scoop was the same: a loss of heritage and personal history. “Yes, there are terrible stories of abuse, but there are also wonderful stories where the adopted child greatly

TAUGHT TO HIDE HER HERITAGE

Raised in a Jewish family, Nakuset says she ‘just never fit in’

Little effort was put into preserving adoptees’ Aboriginal culture once they were removed from reserves. Some were not even aware of their Aboriginal status. Others were told to keep it quiet.

Nakuset, who goes by just one name, was adopted at age three by a Jewish family and raised in the tony Westmount area of Montreal. Her adoptive mother told her she was picked — because she was “cute” — from a catalogue of Native children circulated by Montreal’s Jewish Family Services. She was told to tell people she was adopted from Israel. She went to Hebrew school, Jewish summer camp and was encouraged to date Jewish boys, “but I just never fit in,” says Nakuset, whose birth name, Margaret,



Nakuset then and now. Her childhood photo appeared in a social services catalogue promoting Aboriginal adoptions.

was changed to Miriam when she was adopted and changed again at age 22 when a Mi’kmaq elder renamed her Nakuset.



Like many Aboriginal adoptees, Nakuset left home as soon as she could, when she was 18. She floundered for a few years and then

gained back her Native status, which paid for a university degree. The only positive thing about her adoption was the relationship she had with her Jewish grandmother, who lived down the street and doted on her. “My bubbe was the most incredibly loving woman. She was my salvation, and she saw greatness in me.”

Today, Nakuset, 44, is the executive director of the Native Women’s Shelter of Montreal, co-president of the Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy Network and host of the community TV show *Indigenous Power*. Last year, the Montreal Council of Women named her Woman of the Year. In her speech at the awards event, she thanked her deceased grandmother for believing in her.

As for her adoptive parents, she says in an interview, “I totally disappointed them. There is no relationship.”

— A. B.

benefited. The larger issue is about a process that inadvertently resulted in the loss of cultural identity.” He and many others argue that child welfare efforts should have focused on keeping children in their community by finding relatives who could care for them and by offering supports such as respite care and addiction and family counselling to their parents. In cases where removal was essential, there should have been training for foster and adoptive parents to ensure they helped these children preserve their heritage.

The Sixties Scoop came to an end in the mid-1980s

after ongoing criticism that included a judicial inquiry, headed by Manitoba Judge Edwin Kimelman. The inquiry led to policy changes resulting in more culturally sensitive legislation and a move toward Aboriginal-controlled child and family service agencies. “Cultural genocide has taken place in a systematic, routine manner,” Kimelman wrote. “The miracle is that there were not more children lost in this system run by so many well-intentioned people. The road to hell was paved with good intentions, and the child welfare system was the paving contractor.”

THE BEST OF INTENTIONS

Many United Church families adopted Aboriginal children during the Sixties Scoop as a way to help children in need

It isn't difficult to find United Church families who adopted Aboriginal children during the scoop era. When contacted by *The Observer*, some were reluctant to share their stories. One parent, who adopted two Aboriginal children who have since died — one had fetal alcohol syndrome and the other schizophrenia — said it was too painful to discuss, stating simply in an e-mail, “Beautiful children; unhappy end to our story.”

Margaret Ward and her late husband, Jack, a psychiatrist, who were active at St. Andrew's United in Sudbury, Ont., adopted two Aboriginal girls ages eight and 12 and made an effort to expose them to their culture by bringing them to powwows and on visits to their home reserve. Ward, 79, a retired college professor who now lives in Arizona, says the adoptions were done “with good intentions” and dislikes the term “Sixties Scoop” since it implies children were taken without good reason. “It denigrates the intentions of the people who were involved.” She says several siblings of her adopted daughters had



Raven Sinclair was adopted by a United Church minister at age five. Today, she teaches at the University of Regina.

early deaths. “I wonder what my daughters' lives would have been like if they stayed.”

Very Rev. Robert Smith, a United Church moderator from 1984 to 1986, and his wife, Ellen, adopted an infant Aboriginal daughter, born to a teenage girl, 50 years ago. Their daughter pursued her Métis roots as an adult, earning a master of education with a focus on Aboriginal art and reconnecting with her birth parents in her 40s. The Smiths aren't sure what to think of the term “Sixties Scoop,” but Robert says today he recognizes that “white social workers did not understand the family structure of Indian society.



They had no concept of the extended family and the fact that for a child to be without their natural mother or father did not mean the child would be raised poorly or deprived, because other members of the extended family could take their place.” Adds Ellen, “Children were taken out of homes with no appreciation of their culture. In most cases, people did it with good motivation, but the philosophy behind it all was that the child's culture had nothing to offer.” Robert Smith offered the United Church's first apology to First Nations people in 1986.

Raven Sinclair, an associate professor in the faculty

of social work at the University of Regina, was adopted at age five by Rev. Robert Bater, a United Church minister and former principal of Queen's Theological College, and his wife. She and her six siblings had been removed from their mother's home in Saskatchewan due to neglect. Sinclair, 53, has nothing but good things to say about her late adoptive father, praising him for “doing some serious evaluation about the motive for my adoption” and admitting he had been “misled” about the idea that she had been “rescued” from the reserve.

“He was accountable and ethical and anti-racist. He recognized that our lifestyle, even in a well-intentioned, United Church, white, middle-class family was racist,” she says. “Growing up, I had so many people say to me, ‘You're not like other Indians. You're lucky you were adopted away from all that.’”

Her father, she says, came to regret her adoption, even though he loved her. “He knew that despite their good intentions, they couldn't give me what I needed: my Indigenous heritage, my language, my culture. People can have the best of intentions, but that doesn't mean it wasn't wrong.”

—A.B.

The scoop era may be over, but its damage is long lasting. Now those affected want the rest of Canada to understand the impact of its legacy. In addition to class-action lawsuits, a documentary, *The Sixties Scoop: A Hidden Generation*, is in the works, and large gatherings of scoop adoptees are coming together to tell their stories in an effort to heal.

Last year, Eric Robinson, Manitoba's minister of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs, called for the country's premiers to have a national discussion on the issue. "This is one of the many arrows sticking out the backs of Indian people," he told the Winnipeg Free Press. "We pulled out one with residential schools. There's another with missing and murdered women. This is another arrow, an arrow of deep hurt." Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for residential schools, has said a similar process is needed to understand the lessons of the scoop. Thus far, it isn't happening. And with the federal government actively

opposing the scoop lawsuits now before the courts, one wonders if it ever will.

Even if scoop survivors receive their measure of justice, the problems continue today. The Sixties Scoop has given birth to what some call the "Millennium Scoop," referring to the high rates of Aboriginal children currently in care: according to a report by Statistics Canada, of the 30,000 children aged 14 and under in Canadian foster care in 2011, almost half were Aboriginal. These children are part of the legacy of disrupted parent-child bonds caused by past assimilationist practices such as the residential school system, which has cast a long shadow, affecting generations of Aboriginal people.

"Those schools left us with terrible dysfunction in individuals and in the families raised by those individuals," says Swidrovich. "They've had a multigenerational impact."

Anne Bokma is a journalist in Hamilton.



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