



Melvin Whitford
Part 1
Ready to talk...

After a 4-hour drive from Edmonton, I turned off the highway at the sign to Grouard, Alberta. I was there to document interviews of two survivors who, as children, attended the residential school. As the speed limit changed to 50km, I rolled my window down, feeling thankful for the fresh country air while I weaved my hand in and out to meet the wind.

My senses were on high alert, and I surrendered to nature's orchestra of sounds. The birds, unaware of those who listened, filled the airwaves with their songs. The leaves danced in unison with the warm breeze while the fishermen sat at the bridge smoking cigarettes, waiting for their luck to change.

I was unsure where I was going until I saw a chain-link fence covered in brightly colored orange ribbons and knew I had arrived. The Church was up ahead, and I made a right-hand turn into the driveway towards the graveyard to meet Melvin and his family. I drove in slowly, looking around, taking in the sites of buildings I had seen in photographs while doing my research. Suddenly an unexpected heaviness of emotion rose, threatening to expose an onset of unshed tears. I thought to myself, keep it together; this is not your time to cry.

I arrived, exchanging pleasantries about the weather and travels as I unloaded my camera gear from the car. I had met Melvin and his family at their home in Kikino Metis settlement a few weeks prior, and our connection was instant. At that time, we agreed to meet again in Grouard to take a photo of him and listen.

This was the first time Melvin had been back to the residential school he called home for 13 years. He was only three years old when he was taken from his family home in Kikino. He was transported along with three other siblings to St. Bernard Indian residential school, 381 km away.

We set off to find a bit of shade for the interview, and I was keenly aware of the silence that followed us. It seemed to me, everything in nature held their breath while Melvin walked around the graves, pausing to search for names

etched in crumbling stone.

When he sat down, he sighed with relief and told me he was ready. I looked at Melvin, and I saw a strong man who had been strong far too long, and for the first time in his life, he was ready to talk.

Melvin shared with me memories of what it was like to grow up at St. Bernard residential school. He was forced from his family, his culture, and his language and talked about being beaten while he was there. He remembered boys going missing from the residence, never to be seen again and pointed to the window at the top right corner of the building. One night, he couldn't sleep, so he got up and looked out the window. To his surprise he saw flickering lights guiding the nun's way out to the graveyard as they carried something they didn't return with. He shared with me how quickly he forgot he had a mother or father. Melvin talked and talked until he couldn't anymore. He looked down at his hands and paused, stopping to gain his composure, stumbling on his words as he whispered, I'm sorry, I cannot continue. I nodded, and shut the camera off.

I started to pack up, and his grandson Beau, came over to lend him some of his strength. We walked back together, lost in our thoughts, for no words could be said.

We said our goodbyes, and I let Melvin's wife Sandra know, I would check up on them to see how Melvin was doing.

Forever connected, we made promises to stay in touch.

I watched them drive away and loaded everything back in the car. I sat down in the driver's seat, placing my hands on the steering wheel, and I cried...