

BACKGROUND

Royal BC Museum Support for Indigenous Communities with Residential School Sites

OVERVIEW

On May 27, 2021, the Tk'emlúps Nation issued a [news release](#) stating that in the preceding weekend preliminary findings from a ground-penetrating radar specialist indicated the presence of the remains of up to 215 children who had been students of the Kamloops Indian Residential School.

Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Kukpi7 (Chief) Rosanne Casimir said that “these missing children are undocumented deaths”. The release noted that the “Secwépemc Museum Archivist is working with the Royal British Columbia Museum, amongst others, to seek out any existing records of these deaths.”

Since this first preliminary report, a number of other Nations have released findings relating to ground penetrating radar conducted in their communities. This includes sites connected to the Kuper Island and St. Eugene (Cranbrook) Residential Schools, from which we hold records.

HOW THE BC ARCHIVES IS SUPPORTING TK'EMLÚPS AND OTHER COMMUNITIES WITH RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SITES

The Royal BC Museum is providing support to Indigenous communities by digitizing records relating to Residential Schools and engaging with community representatives to determine access policies that will align with local protocols.

The most significant group of records in the BC Archives are those of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the religious order that operated the school.

THE OBLATES RECORDS

The BC Archives has held copies, not the originals, of a small number of OMI records since 1977. At the time, the Oblates operated their archives in Vancouver, and were open to the public on an appointment-only basis.

To make their holdings more accessible, the Oblates microfilmed the majority of the collection and donated them to the Provincial Archives of BC (now the BC Archives) to provide access. With permission of the Oblates archivist, this



gave Victoria-based researchers the ability to view the records in the reference room, rather than having to travel to Vancouver. This was a common arrangement often made between repositories at a time when it was not easy to share materials at a distance (for example, through photocopies or digitally).

In 2018, the Royal BC Museum and the Oblates initiated discussions for the BC Archives to acquire these records (a far greater volume than what was copied in 1977).

The BC Archives accepted these records in 2019.

OMI Lacombe (the Ottawa-based English-speaking branch of the Oblates in Canada) donated records held in their repository relating to BC to the BC Archives. The French-speaking branch of the Oblates in Richelieu, Quebec, may have some records relating to BC; the BC Archives and OMI Lacombe are working with them to determine if there is any overlap in the records.

The only restrictions on access to the records outlined in the donor agreement relate to the personnel files of individual oblates. These files are restricted until 50 years after the death of the oblate. Restrictions of this kind are common practice and align with federal and provincial protection of privacy laws. Restrictions may be placed on some other records at the request of Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc.

When the records were brought on site, the BC Archives invited two Indigenous women to conduct a cleansing ceremony. Using cedar boughs, they brushed the records and all the staff members that would come into contact with the records.

LONG-TERM WORK WITH TK'EMLÚPS, THE KTUNAXA NATION, AND OTHER FIRST NATIONS IN BC

The BC Archives reached out to Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, the Ktunaxa Nation, and other communities in which Residential Schools were located, to alert the Nations that it was in possession of the OMI records immediately after acquisition in 2019.

Based on consultation with the [Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre](#) at UBC and Indigenous residential school survivor groups, the BC Archives decided that it should start by contacting the communities in which the schools were located.

The Oblates operated 10 schools in BC. The BC Archives reached out to all Indigenous communities in which these 10 schools were located and have received a mixture of responses.

PROCESSING THE OMI RECORDS AND MAKING THEM ACCESSIBLE

The OMI records in the BC Archives comprise approximately 100 linear metres (approximately 260 boxes in varying sizes of material).

The BC Archives has not processed all the OMI records. We expect that staff will have completed this task and made most of the records available to the public in late 2022.

Through the processing work done to date, seven series of records have been identified:

1. Series one: MS-3396 Mission and School records
 - Includes codex historicus, visitation books, etc. (bound journals kept by the priests about the daily activities of the missions and residential schools), correspondence with the Department of Indian Affairs, correspondence with Oblate administration and other priests, financial records from missions and residential schools, photographs and scrapbooks documenting the schools, audio-visual records of the schools, publications, school registers, maps and plans of mission and school sites and much more.
2. Series two: MS-3397 Personnel records
 - Files kept on Oblates, both lay and ordained (priests and brothers); NB: these files are restricted until 50 years after the death of the individual.
3. Series three: MS-3398 OMI archives
 - The administrative records of the OMI archives in Vancouver, BC (the prior custodian of the collection), and subject files developed to aid researchers.
4. Series four: MS-3399 Writing and research
 - Includes sermons and other writing done by Oblates; research files made by and about non-Oblates closely connected to the organization (e.g. Kay Cronin and Andy Paull); drafts of publications made by and about the Oblates; etc.
5. Series five: MS-3400 Provincial administration
 - Records of a number of committees and other administrative records related to OMI in BC
6. Series six: MS-3401 Foreign mission work

- OMI in BC is involved in foreign mission work, particularly Peru. Records in this series include textual, graphic, and audio-visual.
7. Series seven: MS-3402 Multi-media
- Graphic and audio-visual records that do not fit into other series, such as images of Oblates anniversary celebrations, information videos made by OMI BC, etc.

We have digitized a small number of the OMI records and expedited the digitization of all records.

Not all of the digitized records will be freely available to the public. All records will go through an engagement process with the relevant Indigenous community first.

Records that are deemed appropriate by the Indigenous communities will be made fully accessible to the public. If a community does not want certain information made public, we will respect their wishes.

OVERVIEW - PROCESSING ARCHIVAL RECORDS

When archivists receive new records, they must be processed: archivists first arrange, and then describe records, so they are easily searchable.

Archivists arrange records to ensure that records from the same creator are kept together.

Archivists describe records according to their arrangement. Descriptions of records are provided through online databases, finding aids and file lists, which allow researchers to identify the specific records related to their search.

Archivists also rehouse the records (often the boxes and containers they come in are degrading) to prevent deterioration.

You can find more information about processing here:

<https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/bc-archives/what-we-do/processing-records>

THE SISTERS OF ST. ANN ARCHIVES

Though the Oblates ran the Kamloops Indian Residential School and the Kuper Island Residential School, nuns from the congregation of the Sisters of St. Ann also worked at these locations. Archival records from the Sisters of St. Ann may help shed light on the deaths and burial of students at the schools.

On June 10, 2021, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation released a [statement](#) confirming they hold a number of records from the Sisters of St. Ann provided to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

The Sisters St. Ann archives are located on the same precinct as the Royal BC Museum but have their own locked and self-contained office space.

On June 21, 2021, the Royal BC Museum and the Sisters of St. Ann signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) (MOU) that replaced the current [agreement](#), effective July 1, 2021.

The MOU outlines a process for providing enhanced access of the SSA's private archival records to the Royal BC Museum and to the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at UBC.

The MOU identifies that Indigenous community needs are at the centre of the process of reviewing the SSA records.

A priority is making Indian Residential School records and associated records that contain information about SSA involvement at residential schools accessible to Indigenous communities—including goals to share the records digitally. This MOU will make the SSA records accessible to Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc, as requested.

The MOU also acknowledges both parties' desire to accelerate the complete transfer of the SSA archives to the BC Archives in 2025. The transfer of all records held by the SSA Archives was originally scheduled to occur in 2027.

THE PENELAKUT TRIBE

On the morning of Monday, July 12, 2021, the Penelakut Tribe in BC's Southern Gulf Islands said it has found more than 160 undocumented and unmarked graves in the area, which was also once home to the Kuper Island Industrial School, a residential school.

The tribe informed neighbouring First Nations communities that they had confirmed the existence of the graves in a newsletter posted online on July 12.

The BC Archives does have records related to the Kuper Island Industrial School from the order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the religious order that took over the school in the 1950s.

While the Tribe has not yet reached out to the Royal BC Museum to ask for assistance in looking through records in the BC Archives related to deaths or burials at the site of the school, we have already begun digitizing these records to provide access to the Tribe.

THE ROLE OF ARCHIVAL RECORDS RE: RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

All archives with records from organizations that managed residential schools can play a role in the process of truth-finding and reconciliation by providing Indigenous communities, media and the public with access to records that chronicle these organizations' actions, official statements and correspondence.

Archival records provide evidence about events and activities of people and organizations at a particular point in time. Records corroborate personal histories and accounts, and can help reinforce an understanding of the truth.

Knowing one's truth and history is empowering and can lead to healing. This has been proven in cases of human rights abuses around the world. People have a right to know what happened to them, their family, and their community, and records add to the body of evidence speaking to the truth.

About the Royal BC Museum

The Royal BC Museum explores the province's human history and natural history, advances new knowledge and understanding of BC, and provides a dynamic forum for discussion and a place for reflection. Located in Victoria on the traditional territory of the Lekwungen (Songhees and Xwsepsum Nations), we are a hub of community connections in BC—onsite, offsite and online—taking pride in our collective histories.

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