



Museum Musings

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Quilt Questions: The Background on the Blanket from Birtle, Manitoba



The Museum recently received its first artefact from the former Birtle Residential School, Manitoba -- one of the First Nations residential schools established by the federal government through the *Indian Act* and administered by The Presbyterian Church in Canada throughout seven decades of the 20th century. It is a modest hand-tied woollen quilt with woollen batting. (For the non-quilters among us, the purpose of the ties is to prevent the batting from bunching.) The Museum Advisory Committee is quite thrilled to receive this rare item which exists as a tangible reminder of this specialized ministry in the history of the Christian church in Canada.

Questions about this quilt (and the very likely thousands of others similar to it that would have been created for the use of the residential schools) abound. Two of the most obvious are: Who crafted it? Who used it?

Some background to the First Nations residential schools will provide a sense of the societal and religious context in which the quilt was needed, created and used. Known in an earlier period as the Indian Residential Schools, The Presbyterian Church in Canada was among the various Canadian denominations which participated in this system of Christian education and instruction -- the primary goals of which were to improve the societal, economic and spiritual conditions of First Nations. The Presbyterians entered this field of ministry in the 1880s and eventually established 11 residential schools. After Church Union in 1925, only 2 – namely, Cecilia Jeffrey School in Kenora, Ontario and Birtle School, in Birtle, Manitoba -- were not transferred to the jurisdiction of the United Church of Canada. The residential schools were operated by the denominations until full responsibility was transferred to the Federal Government in 1969-70. Both of the schools belonging to the Presbyterian Church were transferred on Mar. 31, 1969. The Birtle school was closed in 1972. (For more background, see *The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives* website. See page, “Exhibits - Residential Schools”. www.presbyterianarchives.ca)

Birtle (Man.) Residential School



The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives: Photo #G-6-SB-18
1931, the year of its construction



The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives: Photo #G-3912-FC-3
ca. 1960s

Kim Arnold, Archivist of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, provides this perspective on the quilt’s purpose and early provenance.

The children would have used it while at the school. Blankets were created by the local Women’s Missionary Society (W.M.S.) auxiliaries and sent to the schools as part of the large bales of goods that they regularly donated. Most of the items would have been home-made – that is, knitted, sewn and quilted. These would include various items of clothing and blankets for the children’s beds. The Birtle quilt the Museum has is a fine example of this W.M.S. support as it is hand-tied and hand-sewn (as well as being machine sewn). One could say it offered a cozy human touch juxtaposed against an overall situation of institutional living.

We are indebted to the donor of the quilt to learn about its later intriguing provenance. Larry Mullen lived at the Birtle School after it had closed. He found the quilt at the school as it was when it had been left behind and used it while living and working at a communal co-op. He was in the co-op from Spring, 1974 through Spring, 1975. The co-operative was a program of the Canadian government known as the *Company of Young Canadians* (CYC). The hallmarks of the organization were to recruit young Canadians and to train them in ‘social animation’ techniques and to provide a moderate salary (Bothwell) as they contributed to the economic, social and cultural benefits of the local community. Larry noted that the Birtle CYC slowly disbanded in Spring, 1975 due to disorganization and disharmony among its members.

One quilt, and yet, it testifies to the many connections with the people who cherished it.

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