

Four deaths, no action: 'notorious' B.C. residential school explored in new project

 [cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/lejac-residential-school-four-boys-runaways-death-1.4473885](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/lejac-residential-school-four-boys-runaways-death-1.4473885)

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Children line up outside Lejac Residential School circa 1907-1951. (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation)

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On Jan. 2, 1937, four boys — two aged seven, and an eight-and-nine-year-old — were found dead, their bodies frozen trying to cross Fraser Lake in northern B.C. after running away from the nearby Lejac Residential School.

Their story, and the failure of the Canadian government to make changes following their deaths, are being highlighted by the Winnipeg-based National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, which is posting historic images and documents from Lejac to its [website](#) in coming weeks.

The story of the Lejac runaways is being shared on social media, 81 years after their deaths.

"We've got an obligation to tell these stories," said centre director Ry Moran. "It illustrates just how difficult it was for communities and just how difficult it was for the children in those schools... and how real the harms were."

The centre is tasked with preserving and sharing stories from Canada's residential schools in the wake of the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Report, which provided a detailed account of Indigenous children who attended the schools in the 19th and 20th century.

An estimated 3,200 children died in residential schools, mostly from disease and malnutrition, but close to a dozen also died while trying to escape, the report said.

The Lejac Residential School operated from 1922 to 1976 west of Prince George. Thousands of children from across northern British Columbia attended. (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation)

Moran compared the Lejac runaways to Chanie Wenjack, who died after escaping his northern Ontario residential school and whose story was highlighted by Tragically Hip

frontman Gord Downie in 2016.

Moran noted that in both cases, there was a public outcry followed by a lack of action, which failed to prevent future deaths.

"You start to see public interest bubble up and people paying attention to what's going on in those schools, but really nothing substantially changing as a result of it," he said.

The Lejac deaths made national headlines and prompted multiple investigations in the late 1930s, including a B.C. government inquiry and a report, which was ordered by Ottawa's Department of Indian Affairs.

A telegram from an Indian Affairs official to The Indian Commissioner of B.C. concerning the deaths, said: "Understand there is local feeling over tragedy whereby four Indian boys perished...Please investigate fully."

In March 1937, the Indian Commissioner of B.C. investigated the deaths of four boys who had run away from Lejac Residential School. His orders from Ottawa read, 'Understand there is local feeling over tragedy whereby four Indian boys perished at Le Jac School New Years Day. Please investigate fully as soon as possible.' (Nadleh Whut'en First Nation)

"It begins to delve into why these kids were running away," Moran said. "And a big part of the reason they were running away was because of the abuse that they were actually suffering at the school, and the relatively extreme levels of physical abuse."

However, the deaths failed to generate any reforms at the schools, Moran said, and the story fell out of the public eye.

Residential schools operated into the 1990s, and Lejac, which was located about 160 kilometres west of Prince George, remained open until 1976. At hearings for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, former student Marlene Jack testified about her time there.

Marlene Jack provides testimony at the Smithers hearings for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. (The Canadian Press/Darryl Dyck)

"Always telling us how we're gonna be so useless. I still haven't gotten over those ... I feel ashamed of my life."

B.C. Assembly of First Nations regional chief Terry Teegee said he heard many similar stories.

"Many of my community members were brought there, including my older brother and sisters," Teegee said.

"It was quite a notorious school... they witnessed a lot of abuse."

Moran said it is important for Canadians to recognize what happened at residential schools was wrong.

None of this is normal," he said. "This is not make-believe. These are real lives, real families, real communities."

Listen to the full interview with Moran