



Chooutla School

Carcross, Yukon

Anglican missionary activity in the Yukon began in 1861 when the Church Missionary Society (CMS) sent Rev. William West Kirkby to make contact with the indigenous peoples of the Mackenzie River and northern Yukon districts. That year, he travelled by canoe down the Mackenzie from Fort Simpson to the Peel River, west to the Richardson Mountains, and along the Porcupine and lower Yukon Rivers to Fort Yukon (Alaska). His evangelizing efforts in this region were brief (he returned once more in 1871) as he had a young family and preferred being missionary in charge of the station post at Fort Simpson. He was replaced in 1862 by Rev. Robert McDonald who served for 40 years on the Mackenzie-Yukon Missionary Circuit, using the northerly Fort McPherson as his base.

Soon after McDonald commenced his missionary work, he became gravely ill and a worried CMS thought best to send a replacement. McDonald soon recovered, unbeknownst to his sponsor, and his “successor,” the Rev. William Carpenter Bompas, was despatched from England on June 30, 1865, five days after his ordination. After a six-month journey, he reached Fort Simpson on Christmas Day. Thus began the long, pioneering missionary career of Rev. Bompas, spent entirely in Canada’s remote northwest until his retirement in 1905 and death at Carcross in 1906.

In late Victorian times, the work of the Church steadily increased in the far north and, as communications improved, the vast Diocese of Rupert’s Land was divided into smaller dioceses, which in turn were further restructured. Few men were more qualified in the region than William Bompas, who became the first Bishop of Athabaska (1874), Mackenzie River (1884) and Selkirk (1891). On assuming his position in Selkirk (renamed Yukon in 1907), Bompas made his See City at Forty Mile, about 80 km down the Yukon River from the future Dawson City.

At the time, Forty Mile was the largest mining community in the district, attracting large numbers of white entrepreneurs from the “outside” and natives (Han people) from the region. Here a mission and school were established in 1887 in response to the needs of this diverse community. It became known as the Buxton Mission, named for the English family that provided most of its early financial support. The mission day school also became a home for a few orphans and neglected native children in the years following 1891, while the bishop was in charge at Forty Mile.

Following the discovery of gold on Bonanza Creek in 1897, there soon arose a rush of gold seekers, mostly American, to creeks and rivers around Dawson. Forty Mile was largely vacated with its population of miners heading up river to better riches in the Klondike. By 1900 the White Pass and Yukon Railway was completed from tidewater at Skagway to its northern terminus at Whitehorse. The Yukon was rapidly opening up. These events encouraged Bishop Bompas to relocate his See to Caribou Crossing (mile 67.5 on the railway) in 1901. He purchased a former construction camp bunkhouse to be used as his residence, mission school and church.

Caribou Crossing was the first major Canadian community on the railway north of the Alaska boundary and was at the head of Bennett and Nares lakes served by steamboats connecting with the railway. In earlier times, this location had been a natural crossing point for herds of caribou that migrated through the area, until their numbers dwindled in the 1890s. The local Tagish and Inland Tlingit peoples used this place as a seasonal hunting and fishing camp. Carcross was the new name adopted by the post office in 1904, following a petition from the bishop (the former name was common in the north).

In 1903, Bompas moved his school children from Forty Mile to Carcross where he had expanded the mission and established a small boarding school in two shacks. St. Saviour's Church was built the following year. Selection of native children and school staff was the responsibility of the Bishop, with the overseas Church Missionary Society providing funding. At the time, the Yukon's aboriginal peoples were not governed by treaty and the federal and territorial governments' responsibilities were limited. Conversely, "south of 60" most native Indian groups had signed treaties and were given reserve lands and government funded education, through a system of church-run residential and day schools.

At Carcross, the boarding school enrolment grew rapidly and the mission facilities were soon taxed. Bompas urged Ottawa to take more responsibility for native education in the Yukon by funding a new large Indian residential school. The government agreed and built a replacement facility on 160 acres of land (most of it a source of firewood), about 3 km north of the village on Tagish Road. It opened in September 1911 with capacity for 40 students (soon increased) in the primary grades, drawn from throughout the Territory. A standard operating agreement was drawn up (similar to those in effect at other Anglican schools) between Ottawa and the Diocese outlining the Church's responsibilities for staffing, care of children and school maintenance and the government's obligation for sustained per capita funding. A rushing creek and small waterfall on the school property provided inspiration for the schools' name, Chooutla Indian Residential School. "Chooutla" means "laughing water" in the local Tagish dialect.

In 1923, operation of the Chooutla School was transferred from the Diocese to the Missionary Society of the Church of England in Canada (MSCC), whose agency the Indian and Eskimo School Commission had taken over other Anglican run schools in Canada. Federal funding was reduced in the 1930s due to constraints imposed by the ongoing Great Depression. On April 17, 1939 the school burnt to the ground and MSCC scrambled to find temporary facilities in the village for a reopening in the fall. Wartime conditions prevented the government from rebuilding immediately. However, in 1943 health authorities condemned this motley collection of log cabins and old warehouses serving as the school, forcing operation to be suspended in spring 1943.

Rather than wait for the war's end, MSCC put up a new school in 1944 to house 60 children who returned to class that fall. These prefabricated buildings were also temporary, but expected to be replaced by a new government school to be built soon after the war. In 1950, construction was about to begin at a new site when the project was suspended due to impending hydro-electric development work in the vicinity. After another 3-year delay, Ottawa finally opened the large modern replacement Chooutla School, which was built on the site of the old school that burnt in 1939. Its dormitories accommodated about 160 students from all regions of the Yukon and northern B.C. The government provided all teaching staff.

By the late 1950s, students in the senior primary grades were sent to Whitehorse to board at the Anglican St. Agnes Hostel (opened 1952) and to attend the integrated federal day school in town. Through the 1960s, grades 1-4 were taught at Chooutla; students usually ranged in age from 6 to 13. In 1967, Ottawa transferred responsibility for education of native children to the Yukon Territorial Government but the latter was not immediately prepared to run the residential schools and hostels. MSCC continued to manage the Chooutla School until its closure on June 30, 1969. The facilities were then transferred to the Yukon government and were remodelled in 1972 for use as the Carcross Community Education Centre.

Milestones

- ca. 1891 Indian Boarding school at Forty Mile (Buxton Mission) established by Bishop William Carpenter Bompas.
- 1901 Anglican Mission founded at Carcross by Bishop Bompas.
- 1903 Boarding school is closed at Forty Mile and children moved to St. Saviour's Mission Boarding School at Carcross. Primitive buildings have limited dormitory space and need for modern facility is pursued by Bishop Bompas in petitions to Indian Affairs Department.
- 1911 Sept. Chooutla Indian Residential School opens, with authorized pupilage of 40 (later increased). Agreement signed between Diocese of Yukon and Ottawa, outlining standards for admission, Church's obligation to maintain school (built by government), provide staff and care for children. Government provides sustained per capita funding for treaty children.
- 1923 Jan. Operation of the school is transferred from the Diocese to the Indian and Eskimo School Commission of MSCC.
- 1939 Apr. 17 Building destroyed by fire and school year ends. MSCC searches for temporary replacement facility in village of Carcross.
- 1939 Sept. School restarts in Carcross, on south side of the Narrows, using an assortment of cabins and former warehouses remodelled by MSCC. Conditions are substandard but Ottawa cannot fund new school until war's end.
- 1942 Government health authorities condemn the school but allow students to complete school year ending in spring 1943.
- 1943 June School closed by government order.



1967 Sept. Chooutla and Carcross Public Schools exchange students and use of classrooms. Non-native children from village are bused to Chooutla to attend integrated grades 1-4 with residential students. Grades 5-8 are held in the village Public School for Chooutla and local children. Older students no longer need to be boarded at Yukon Hall in Whitehorse.

1969 June 30 Chooutla Indian Residential School closes as sufficient number of day schools exist in home communities of most children. Yukon Government takes possession of school property.

1972 Carcross Community Education Centre opens in former Chooutla School facility.

1944 Sept. School restarts on new site in Carcross, using three prefabricated buildings purchased by MSCC and shipped from Vancouver. Dormitories accommodate 60 children. Facility is also temporary as the Church awaits imminent end to war and Ottawa's obligation to construct permanent building.

1953 After years of planning, false starts, change of site, government finally completes construction and opens new Chooutla School on original 1911 site, 3 km north of town. Authorized enrolment is 135 and will be expanded in subsequent years.

1953 St. Agnes Anglican Hostel (Yukon Hall) opens in Whitehorse (80 km north of Carcross) and takes in some Chooutla students in senior primary school grades. These children attend the local integrated federal day school in Whitehorse until new government public school opens in Carcross ca. 1967.

1960s Grades 1-4 are taught at Chooutla School.

1962 Residential students number 161 during spring term.

1966 Sept. Residential enrolment drops to 80 as new federal day schools have opened at Pelly Crossing and Ross River

1967 Yukon Territorial Government takes over from Ottawa the responsibility for providing education for all children in the Yukon. MSCC continues to manage the Chooutla School under new agreement with Yukon Government.



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