



# St. Barnabas School,

Onion Lake, SK

Today's Onion Lake First Nation occupies two adjacent reserves—the Makaoo and Seekaskootch—straddling the Alberta-Saskatchewan border, 70 km north of Lloydminster. Anglican missionary work in the Onion Lake area generally began after Treaty 6 was signed in 1876, which affected most of northern Saskatchewan's Cree and Stoney nations. However, this mission activity was interrupted during the North-West Rebellion of 1885, which saw some local Cree warriors joining in hostilities against the Crown. Probably for this reason, the government and Diocese of Saskatchewan were reluctant to support a mission school for native children at Onion Lake in the years immediately following the peace. The Roman Catholic mission was the first on the scene and in 1891 established a boarding school at Onion Lake, which had become a busy trading centre with new Hudson's Bay Co. post (relocated from Fort Pitt) and police detachment.

The Anglican mission at Onion Lake was re-established in 1892 by lay catechist John R. Matheson and his new wife, Elizabeth. In the previous two decades, Matheson had been a western adventurer and entrepreneur, and had become fluent in Cree. However, in 1891 Matheson realized his true calling was in missionary work among native peoples. His brother, Canon Edward Matheson persuaded Bishop William Pinkham of Saskatchewan that John was the right man for Onion Lake.

The Matheson couple quickly enlarged the mission house and opened a boarding school for native children in 1893. John was soon ordained as priest and Elizabeth completed her medical training. Together they served as Principal, teacher and doctor and hired staff as needed. When Rev. Matheson died in 1916, Elizabeth briefly served as school principal until 1917 when the Diocese took over the residential school. During the Mathesons' tenure, the school, mission and hospital were greatly expanded and remained largely self-supporting through revenues derived from farming and ranching.

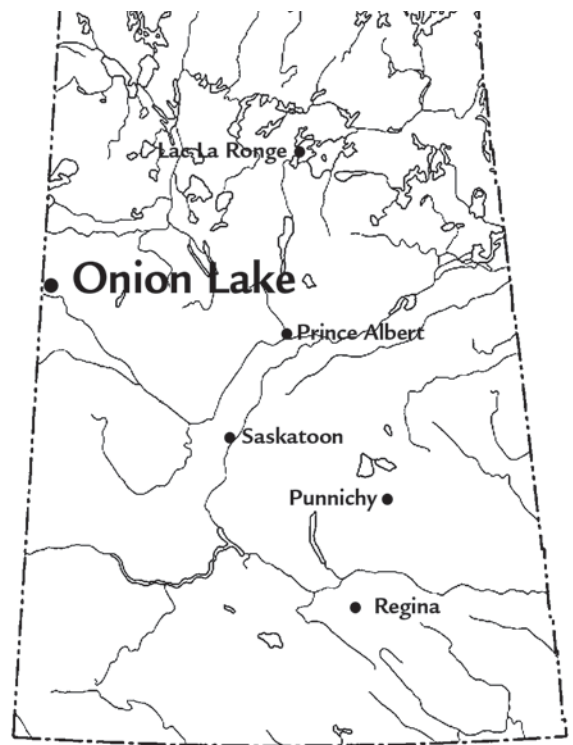
When the Missionary Society of the Church of England in Canada (MSCC) assumed responsibility for the school in 1922, the Onion Lake buildings were found to be sub-standard. A new and larger building was urgently needed. Other locations were considered in the province but in the end Onion Lake was selected for a new government-built residential school, which opened in 1926. It was destroyed by fire 17 years later, forcing the relocation of students and staff to the newly established (1944) St. Alban's School in Prince Albert.

# Milestones



- 1893 Boarding school opens on Makaoo's Reserve, paid for and constructed by Rev. John R. Matheson. Dormitory accommodates 10 native children, a number that increases rapidly in the following years. Additional white and part-native children enrolled as day students. Government provides modest operational grant.
- 1900 Residential students number 60, including some non-natives (40 over government funding allowance).
- 1911 Ottawa and Diocese agree to standards for admission requirements and school building but government funding remains capped at 20 students, about a third of those actually in residence. Rev. Matheson uses his private funds to support these extra children. Relations are strained with Diocese.
- 1916 Rev. Matheson dies in August and his wife Elizabeth becomes Principal. Residential students number 29.
- 1917 Diocese of Saskatchewan takes over administration of Onion Lake Anglican Boarding School.
- 1922 Diocese transfers school administration to the Indian and Eskimo School Commission of MSCC.

- 1923 Indian Affairs Dept. raises authorized pupilage to 41. Ottawa recognizes urgent need for modern replacement building to accommodate up to 100 pupils.
- 1926 Jan. 2 St. Barnabas Indian Residential School opens at Onion Lake, with authorized pupilage of 80, a number soon exceeded. School farming operations expand, with 220 acres available for cultivation and pasture.
- 1935 106 students in residence.
- 1943 June 118 students in residence.
- 1943 Dec. 1 School destroyed by fire. All 115 residential students are returned to their homes. In 1944, most of these displaced students and staff will be transferred to the quickly remodelled St. Alban's School in Prince Albert.



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