

The Whitehorse Baptist Mission School

by Rev. Jodi Spargur

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While not a part of the Baptist Union of

Western Canada, there was a Baptist work in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, from 1946-1962.

Mr. and Mrs. Harold Lee came to Whitehorse from Alberta, though sent through an American Baptist mission to Alaska. Their objective was to plant a church in Alaska, but as they arrived in Whitehorse to gather supplies for the last leg of their journey they encountered school-aged children running the streets, not in school. When they inquired as to why this was they discovered that the children were ineligible for schooling. Because their mother's were Indigenous they were not eligible for the regular school in town. But because their fathers were Hudson Bay employees of European descent they were not eligible for one of the two residential schools nearby. Parents began to petition the Lees to abandon their original plan to continue on to Alaska and to stay instead and start a school for these children who were falling through the cracks.

Mr. Lee secured an old army building for the school and hired teachers, and the school was filled to capacity as soon as it opened. As word spread there were increasing requests for students to be enabled to transfer from the neighbouring residential schools (one Anglican, one Catholic) into the Whitehorse Indian School, partially at least because initially the school was a day school where children could go home at night.

Soon Lee found his resources depleted and petitioned the government for a subsidy. This began a back-and-forth conversation between Lee and the Department of Indian Affairs with further input by the Anglican Bishop who argued that any funds available should go to the Anglican school rather than this “interloper”. The Bishop asked, “What is a Baptist anyway? Where did they come from and how long will they remain? They are hardly a stable partner with whom to enter into such an undertaking.”¹ In the end Lee finally succeeded in securing a provisional grant but did not enter into a formal partnership with the government.

The legacy of the Whitehorse Baptist Indian School is mixed. Attendance at the Baptist school was never compulsory, though school attendance in general was enforced at various times through its history. The reputation of Rev. Lee and the early days of the school seems to be quite good. However, he died tragically in a car accident in 1952. Three hundred people, mostly students of the school and their families attended his funeral. His brother Earl took over the school from 1952-1962. Earl sought to expand government funding and the reputation of the school under his leadership was a mixed bag. A 1956 Indian Affairs report found the residence “very unsatisfactory.” When the building was condemned in 1960, the federal government stopped funding the school, but it remained in operation until 1962.²

Earl Lee and some of the other staff transitioned to working for Yukon Hall, a residence that accommodated students attending Whitehorse public schools. Although non-denominational, the residence was intended to house students from Protestant families, and chaplains were provided for the facility although the residence was government funded and operated. By 1963 the hostel was providing accommodation for non-Aboriginal students when space was available. In 1985 the residence was closed as a federal facility.³

Survivors of the school have put together a book called [“Finding Our Faces”](#) which includes photos and recollections from their varied experiences at the school.

¹ Canada’s Residential Schools TRC report Northern Canada. 67

² Yukon Archives Bibliography p.7.

³ <https://nctr.ca/residential-schools/northern/whitehorse-baptist-lee-school/>