



Nadleh Whut'en
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News Release

November 30th 2024

For immediate release

Note: This news release contains content about Residential Schools which can be upsetting. If you are find yourself becoming upset, come back to the story at another time.

If you are an Indian Residential School survivor or have been affected by the residential school system and need help, you can contact the 24-hour Indian Residential Schools Crisis Line: 1-866-925-4419.

Nadleh Whut'en Finds Evidence of Potential Unmarked Graves at former site of Lejac Indian Residential School

(Nadleh Whut'en Village) – After nearly two years of geophysical surveys, Nadleh Whut'en can confirm that there are newly identified potential unmarked graves at Tseyaz Bunk'ut, which holds the former site of the Lejac Indian Residential School. A preliminary report on a ground penetrating radar and magnetometry survey has identified several geophysical signatures that have traits consistent with burials. The report was commissioned by the Guiding Team of the *Nez Keh Hubuk'uznootah* project, which means "Let's Look for our Children" in Dakelh.

Unlike the schools that non-Indigenous Canadians attended, the Lejac Indian Residential School has had an active cemetery on the grounds since it was founded in 1922. Matching the geophysical survey results with archival records, the preliminary data points to a number of unmarked graves that have not been accounted for.

"This is the work we need to do as a community to ensure that the truth can come to light. The work is hard and it takes a long time – and we are bringing information forward as we receive it

because survivors have a right to know,” said Nadleh Whut’en Chief Beverly Ketlo. “For non-Indigenous Canadians, we ask you to respect this process as we come to know the truth. Remember – we have always known that there were children buried at Lejac because many of their graves are marked in a cemetery. I want you to ask yourself if your elementary school had a cemetery,” she continued.

The Lejac Indian Residential School impacted over 70 Nations across British Columbia. Between 1922 and 1976 at least 7,850 Indigenous children, including day school students, attended Lejac. It is important to note that students at Lejac and other Indian Residential Schools spent as much or more time working for the institution as they did learning in classrooms. They were prohibited from speaking their own language, were fed a low quality diet, experienced overcrowding, and were often subjected to mental, physical, spiritual, and sexual abuse – beyond the fundamental trauma of being taken from their parents. The Indian Residential School System was designed to be a total upheaval of the family unit; parents who refused to send their children were threatened with incarceration. Nadleh Whut’en carries the solemn responsibility of stewarding the site of the former institution on Tseyaz Bunk’ut, Indian Reserve #4.

These findings bring a new wave of grief to impacted communities and all residential school survivors hearing the news today.

“The abuses endured at Lejac and other Indian Residential Schools are not just a thing of the past,” stated Chief Ketlo. “The horrors experienced at Lejac are still very real for the survivors who lived through this genocide. Hundreds of people have died as adults due to the trauma they experienced there. Lejac relentlessly taught the children that they were inferior. They were forcibly taken from their families, lands, and cultures, leading them to believe that everything about their identity was wrong in this world. This loss of belonging and safety during childhood has profound and lasting impacts on our community’s health,” she continued.

A Guiding Team of survivors and intergenerational survivors of the Lejac Indian Residential School is determining how to manage the former site, including directing the ongoing geophysical survey conducted on-site.

“Lejac is still with me. As a survivor of Lejac, I continue to deal with the upheaval of being taken from my parents, and the daily trauma of living at that place. But I am so pleased that the stories of survivors are finally being brought to light. The Guiding Team is united in our commitment to uphold the spirits of those who suffered and ensure their voices are not forgotten,” said Former Chief of Stelat’en First Nation Archie Patrick. “In our time of mourning, we carry the stories of these children forward for justice aligned with the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” he continued.

Nadleh began geophysical surveys at Tseyaz Bunk’ut, in areas identified by survivors, using ground-penetrating radar (GPR) and magnetometry. These surveys were conducted in the winter of 2023, and the spring and summer of 2024. Approximately 142,500 square metres were searched, about 27 football fields, with GPR lines spaced every 9 centimetres, collecting over 1900 kilometres of linear GPR data. The data was analyzed using industry standardized protocols, with each dataset verified by two independent analysts. The interpretation was based on analysis of several datasets simultaneously and included consideration of expected burial practices, visible surface features, and soil conditions.

GPR works by sending energy pulses through a grid of radio-frequency energy. These pulses detect changes beneath the ground surface, revealing underground soil conditions, potential object presence, and potential disturbance. When this disturbance is in a regular pattern, it may point to the presence of unmarked graves. Magnetometry detects magnetic and conductive metal objects beneath the surface.

This geophysical work is one part of the ongoing search for missing children from Lejac. Provincial and federal archives continue to be pored over, and survivors continue to be interviewed. The Guiding Team directs research comparing this archival and qualitative data to the geophysical surveys. Today’s announcement is preliminary, and this work continues.

The Guiding Team continues to provide stewardship and guidance on the next steps in caring for our relatives. They will oversee further geophysical surveys and the extensive engagement with survivors needed to determine next steps for potential unmarked graves. There is no immediate intention to excavate or exhume.

In October 2022, the House of Commons unanimously passed a motion officially recognizing the residential school system as an act of genocide. The federal government committed to funding work to ensure the truth about residential schools is discovered; the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites associated with Indian Residential Schools' most recent report estimated that this will take a further 20 years of painstaking work.

The intergenerational trauma stemming from Lejac Indian Residential School and other residential schools continues to significantly impact Indigenous communities across Canada. It is essential that this acknowledgment leads to meaningful action and healing for those affected.

For more information please email contact@lejacirssearch.ca.

Quick Facts

- Tseyaz Bunk'ut is the name of the area on which the federal government and the Catholic Church chose to build the Fraser Lake Industrial School, which was renamed the Lejac Indian Residential School after an early priest there. Nadleh Whut'en has reclaimed the original name of Tseyaz Bunk'ut.
- Throughout the 54 years the institution was in operation, a minimum of 7,850 Indigenous children attended the Lejac Indian Residential School including students who attended during the day, referred to as day scholars.
- Canada's federally supported 139 Indian Residential Schools (IRS) operated between 1883 and 1996.
- An estimated 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit students attended Indian Residential Schools.
- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has found that at least 4,100 children died while attending Indian Residential Schools.
- GPR is not a bone detector. GPR is used to locate a variety of changes or readings beneath the surface.
- GPR is not sonar. It consists of radar signals and is systematically utilized on a grid pattern that is closely spaced.

- Magnetometry is a complementary method to GPR. Magnetometry is used to detect properties and changes of magnetic aspects within the soil.

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