

At the Forks: Where Indigenous and Human Rights Intersect

First published on: July 27, 2021

Volume 1

Journal site: <https://ojs.lib.umanitoba.ca/index.php/forks>



The Three Sisters

William Osborne and Margaret Anne Lindsay



Clearwater Lake Sanatorium, after 1947. This picture shows the staff accommodations and medical headquarters for the Clearwater Lake Sanatorium. Doctors lived in some of the houses nearby. Airport is also shown in the picture since it was closeby. Sanatorium used to be the location of US Army camp during WWII.

Credit: [Sam Waller Museum](#), PP2002.23.87

At The Forks

CONTENT WARNING

Some of the information, content, and language in this essay may be difficult, triggering, and/or offensive. Where such content is included, it is used because it is important to understanding the history and context of the topic. The appearance of such content in this document in no way implies its acceptability, nor does it endorse any sentiments expressed in such language.

If you or anyone you know is experiencing difficulty related to this topic or the information in this article, help is available 24 hours a day through the [Indian Residential School Survivors Society](#) Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.

People able and interested in supporting work associated with addressing the history of residential schooling might consider donating to the [National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#).

The authors of this paper acknowledge and honour Betsy Oniskie, William Osborne's cousin-sister, who was first asked by their late granny, Sarah Jane Osborne, to try to locate her 3 daughters. They also acknowledge and honour William Osborne's late father, Charlie Osborne, who asked his son, Jackson Osborne, to try to locate his 3 sister's burial sites. It was by chance, or by our loving Creator's work that the authors came across William Osborne's 3 aunties in the research work that they have been doing for the Cross Lake Education Authority. Members of William Osborne's family traveled to St. Clements and The Pas, Manitoba to visit the locations of the three sisters' graves in the fall of 2020. Their experiences on that trip are not included here.

At The Forks

Over the past several decades, as researchers we have worked, on and off, with Indigenous individuals and families who have approached us looking for genealogical records that might be able to provide them with answers to questions, or to document relationships with their communities and their families. Peoples' reasons for wanting to find these records have ranged from personal interest, to being able to access significant health or education resources. Because Indigeneity has been defined by governments in Canada as a biological and genealogical quality, open access to quality genealogical resources for Indigenous people has implications that reach far beyond hobby genealogy. Yet at the same time, and despite a robust mainstream genealogy industry, for a number of reasons access to the sorts of genealogical records Indigenous people may need can be much more difficult than it is for, say, a middle-class white person. This in turn may disconnect Indigenous people from needed funding, from a better understanding of who they are and how things in their lives came to be and can leave many with unanswered questions that hover around families, generation after generation. This can be especially true in cases of missing children or young people who went away to school or for medical treatment, and never returned.

This case study involves the family of three sisters who left their family and their Cross Lake community in the twentieth century, and never returned. The family knew the girls had passed away and had been looking for more than three generations for the graves of these three sisters. As we worked to find more information about the sisters, it became apparent that, while records existed for all three of them, these records were dispersed through a maze of different levels of government and several faith communities. As well, while many of the records were now described and some even available online, the family's northern home community, Cross Lake, is relatively remote, with generally poor internet connectivity. As many organizations focus more and more of their access resources online, the disparity in internet access between large centres



Aerial view of **Cross Lake Indian Residential School**, buildings and barns, Cross Lake, Manitoba, Summer 1940.

Credit: Canada. Dept. Indian and Northern Affairs / [Library and Archives Canada](#) / e01108028; Copyright: Expired; Restrictions on Use : Nil.

At The Forks

(many of them southern) and more remote locations serves to further widen the gap in access to genealogical information for Indigenous people living outside of urban centres. This situation is compounded by the fact that online databases tend to be much more legible to archivists and records managers, than to people outside of these professions. And finally, language barriers can add to the opacity of these systems. This case study will discuss the process that the family of three sisters – Betsey, Isobel, and Nora – have gone through to find information relating to the sisters’ deaths and places of burial over the past year.

For more than seventy years, the family of Betsey, Isobel, and Nora have been searching for information about where the sisters were buried. Early in 2019, we searched publicly available records, many of which had only been recently released, for answers to the question of what had become of the sisters and where they were buried. Since the time that each of the sisters had left for school, generation after generation had tried to learn more than the barest of information about what had happened to them. Up to this point, the family had only been able to find the dates the sisters had died. These dates they located through band records. The band records also included approximate dates of birth for two of the girls, but not for the third. So, the search began with the names of the sisters: Betsey, Isobel, and Nora Osborne; their parents, Sarah Jane and Solomon Osborne; their siblings; their home community of Cross Lake, Manitoba; and dates of death.

Precise and accurate dates of birth for Indigenous children born in the early twentieth century in remote communities is a luxury few researchers can count on; yet dates of birth can be critical in locating records, and particularly in establishing that a record is connected to the right person in the labyrinth of vital statistics records generated and controlled by various levels of government and religious entities. Rigorous vital statistics reporting came late to remote areas of Canada, and while most non-Indigenous vital events from at least the inter-war years of the twentieth century and later can be found in provincial Vital Statistics Agency records, vital statistics records for Indigenous people who fall under the *Indian Act* may be kept by either a provincial or the federal government in separate systems. As well, because of the softness of many recorded birth dates even as late as the twentieth century, establishing a date of birth is often more a matter of finding a date range through various public and religious records. So, starting with the names of the girls’ parents, we first searched census records to try to establish some basic information, as it was officially recorded, about the family.

Through census and other records, we found that Betsey, the youngest, was born in the early 1930s; Isobel had been born in the mid-1920s; and Nora was born around

At The Forks

1920. Like most of their community, the family lived on the land for most of the year, almost certainly a factor in their later being sent to residential school. At this point, access to federal treaty annuity paylists might have been helpful in tracking the trajectories of the three girls, but such paylists are only publicly available to December 31st, 1909. While it is possible to make a limited Access to Information and Privacy (ATIP) request for information from later paylists if the individual can be shown to have been dead for at least 20 years (or if the request is made at least 110 years after their birth), this becomes a Catch-22 situation: accessing the paylists to lead you to information about the individual's birth or death, yet the precise date of birth is not available.

Provincial vital statistics records can be critical in locating family members who lived and died in the twentieth century or later. This is especially true for trying to locate records relating to former Indian Residential School (IRS) students who moved from the schools to hospitals, as well as for those who died at the schools themselves. And is generally truer for later records. But it is also tempered by the fact that Indian Affairs had its own vital statistics recording process, so deaths could be recorded in either system. However, because many "Indian Hospitals" were operated by provincial organizations on behalf of the Federal Government, provincial vital statistics records can be critical locations of information for many Indigenous families and individuals. At the same time, there is no rule that will consistently predict whether a vital event will be recorded federally, provincially, in the sacramental records of various faith communities, or in more than one of these systems. However, with the date range (provided through band records) for the deaths of all of the girls being in the 1940s, it was worth checking the provincial Manitoba Vital Statistics Agency's online records database,^[1] which did show three death records that were quite possibly for the three girls in question.

In the case of Manitoba's Vital Statistics Agency, requests for open vital statistics records take a minimum of three months. If we were to locate the graves of these three sisters before snow cover that would make it impossible to visit them, we needed to move quickly. To order the records, the requester must download and fill in a form that must be mailed to the Vital Statistics Agency along with payment. Many people outside of large urban centres do not have good internet connectivity, or for that matter, printers to print downloaded forms. Moreover, the forms themselves are far from intuitive. Language barriers can compound these issues. This, combined with cost and method of payment, means that people may decide to rely on the vital statistics database entry (if they are able to find it) without ordering the full record to confirm the information. Fortunately, we were able to

At The Forks

order the relevant records from the Manitoba Vital Statistics Agency. Once we had filled in the form, a copy was emailed to the family, who were eventually able to find someone who could print the form and include payment. It then became a matter of waiting for the records, which would hopefully include burial information that would allow the family to locate the graves.

In the meantime, questions about what had happened to the girls, where they had gone to school, and how they had died, continued to hang in the air. We wanted to see whether publicly available Government of Canada RG10 Schools Files^[2] and other Indian Affairs records might hold some clues. Our first step was to search the online records at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation;^[3] however, with the exception of the school attended by one sister, their indexed records begin later than what was needed for this research. The next step was to read through available Government of Canada, Indian Affairs, RG10 School Files records for the time periods that the girls were most likely to have attended a residential school. This is a time-consuming process that involves going page-by-page through entire reels of microfilm online. Archival information at Library and Archives Canada's (LAC) Archives Search^[4] can help to narrow in on the particular file, but the microfilms are not connected to the archives search result and may be located in several other places. Anything other than a reliable high-speed internet connection makes this process all-but-impossible.

Because the family was not sure which school (or schools) the girls attended, we used federal census information about the family's religious identification, combined with the still-unconfirmed information from the vital statistics database about locations of death/burial, and a general understanding of probable IRS school catchments, and decided to start with two particular schools. At the same time, the researchers reached out to the archives of the faith communities that operated the nearest schools or hospitals related to two of the vital statistics database entries for place of death (the Roman Catholic Church and the United Church), and the Anglican Church which operated the Dynevor Indian Hospital near Selkirk, to ask if they had any relevant sacramental register information that might help in the family's search.

The records so far had identified three communities that might be important to understanding what had happened to the three sisters: Cross Lake and the relatively close by Norway House, both in northern Manitoba, where, the records suggested, two of the sisters had passed away; and Selkirk, located to the south, where the third sister may have died. Cross Lake, their home community, had a Roman Catholic denominational residential school adjacent to the community's

At The Forks

reserve; Norway House was the location of a United Church Residential School; and Selkirk had an Indian Hospital nearby that was connected with the Anglican Church.



Distant view of **Norway House Indian Residential School, Norway House, Manitoba, 1927.**

Credit: C.S. Macdonald / Canada. Dept. of Mines and Technical Surveys / [Library and Archives Canada](#) / PA-020236; Restrictions on use: Nil; Copyright: Expired.

Vital statistics database entries indicated that Betsey had died in or near Cross Lake, Isobel had died in the municipality adjacent to Selkirk, and that Nora had died in or near Norway House. It should be noted that, in the end, the places of death for two of the sisters, as recorded in these vital statistics online database, were incorrect; however, fortunately in this case that did not steer the research too far wrong before it could be corrected. Two of the girls had been in their twenties, well past school-leaving age when they died. Census records indicated that the family belonged to the United Church, but other family members had attended schools associated with the Roman Catholic, so it seemed advisable to include both the Cross Lake and Norway House schools in initial records searches. By searching through the surviving publicly available records of the two schools, it was possible to locate school records for two of the three girls, but in both cases the records ended when the girls were transferred to a hospital. These schools' records also held a few unexpected findings.

When Betsey was examined prior to entering the residential school associated with Cross Lake just after Christmas in 1939, she was 8 years old, 4 feet and $\frac{1}{4}$ inches tall, and weighing 55 lbs. According to the BMI Calculator at the Centres for

At The Forks

Disease Control, by today's standards, this places her as entering the school in the 65th percentile, that is, at a healthy height and weight. The examining physician stated that she did not show signs of tuberculosis, and that her general health was good. After about six years, Betsey was discharged from the residential school she had been attending. The available records from the schools and consideration of Paul Hackett's essay, "Tuberculosis Mortality among the Students of St Joseph's Residential School in 1942-44: Historical and Geographical Context,"^[5] suggest that the conditions in the school almost certainly led to Betsey's death, and the deaths of other children at the school, and offered the family some insight into Betsey's short life at the school.

Because full vital statistics records about the sisters' deaths had not arrived at this point, it was only possible to know that the place of death indicated in the vital statistics database for Betsey's death was near the school. So, we contacted the local church responsible for the associated cemetery, as well as the local diocese responsible for that charge to ask if they had any record of Betsey's death or the location of her grave. No response has yet been received. The family was only able to speak to someone by phone after the vital statistics records arrived, and then only after sending several emails and leaving several phone messages. However, Betsey's school records indicated that she had been sent to a sanatorium. As there was no sanatorium near Cross Lake, and as Indian Affairs policy was not to pay to repatriate the remains of those who had died away from their communities unless the family paid the costs, this opened up the possibility that Betsey was buried somewhere other than the location indicated in the vital statistics database.

In the LAC RG10 Schools Files Series records, there was no sign of the other two sisters having attended the same school as Betsey. The archivist for the United Church, which had operated the school at Norway House, had already responded to say that they did not have any record of Nora having been buried at Norway House, however a search of the Schools Files records showed she had been discharged from the school at Norway House at the age of 15 to a "mental hospital" for what was described as "mental breakdown." If it was true that she had been transferred to a provincial hospital it meant that any further research would be subject to a whole new privacy and access to information regime and involve an entirely different records management and archival stream.

The Schools Files records for both residential schools also yielded no information about Isobel's short life. Based on band, census, and vital statistics database information, we knew Isobel was probably in her twenties when she passed away, and soon the Anglican Church Archives, who operated the Dynevor Indian

At The Forks

Hospital near Selkirk, responded to us with the place and date of her burial, the Mapleton Church cemetery, as well as the date of her death. Their burial record also included a small note indicating that she had died of pulmonary tuberculosis, and that she had been working as a “domestic” prior to her hospitalization.

Isobel’s life raises another issue families may face when trying to find out what happened to their children. Many students were sent by principals to work as domestic and farm labourers in the areas around the schools or in the homes of church members from the faith community operating the particular school. Some of these children disappeared into the local community. This was particularly the case for young women whose names changed if they married. Isobel, who had worked as a “domestic” was not buried in the cemetery associated with the Dynevor Indian Hospital, but rather one in an adjacent municipality. Remarkably, the attending physician indicated in the burial register was the head of the same hospital Nora had been discharged to.



Clearwater Lake Sanatorium, after 1947. This picture shows the staff accommodations and medical headquarters for the Clearwater Lake Sanatorium. Doctors lived in some of the houses nearby. Airport is also shown in the picture since it was closeby. Sanatorium used to be the location of US Army camp during WWII.

Credit: [Sam Waller Museum](#), PP2002.23.87

At The Forks

Although we had begun this current search for the final resting places of Betsey, Isobel, and Nora in February, it was now the beginning of summer. We had located some information about the sisters, and found the burial location of one, but many questions remained until the vital statistics records arrived. When they did, we learned that Betsey had in fact died at a sanitorium, an Indian Hospital that had begun operations not long before she was discharged. But the location of her burial consisted only of a vague reference to The Pas, Manitoba. Through consultation with colleagues, it appeared most likely that Betsey had been buried in a church cemetery in that community. A search of the cemetery through a publicly available cemetery database yielded a possible name, but not enough information to be certain that this was the right person. Emails to the relevant church resulted in no replies, but the local funeral home was able to provide more specific contact information, and after several attempts, the family was able to confirm where Betsey was buried, as well as the details about how to locate and visit her grave at the cemetery.

Vital Statistics death registration records also confirmed that both Isobel and Nora died in the same provincially operated hospital, and are buried in the same nearby cemetery, but in a very different part of the province from their sister Betsey. The archivist from the Anglican Church was able to provide contact details for the active volunteer group at the church where Isobel and Nora are buried. Sadly, only one of the girls' graves is marked, and it would be difficult to narrow down their precise location with the cemetery, but the family now know which cemetery the sisters are buried in. None of the sisters are buried in a cemetery associated with the faith community indicated as that of the family in census records. All three sisters died of tuberculosis.

In the end, the three sisters' lives intersected with four communities. The records needed to identify where they were buried and shed at least a little light on what had happened to them were located in the archives of three different faith communities and two different levels of government. Access to the combination of records needed to find the three sisters required comfort with written English or French, fluency in records management and archival databases, familiarity with residential schools and Indigenous health-related records, good internet service, and access to computer and printing equipment, as well as the ability to pay for services remotely with either a credit card or cheque. Service standards for agencies like the Manitoba Vital Statistics Agency are perhaps more appropriate for hobby genealogy needs than for individuals and families who may need these records for education, health, and healing. Technical barriers created by the choice to focus on the use of

At The Forks

internet technology as an access tool for critical records underscores the challenges of an ever-widening digital divide, further exacerbated by language barriers. The challenges the family have faced and continue to face in trying to answer some very basic questions about the life of their daughters, their sisters, their aunts, illustrate just some of the issues families come up against when they seek answers to where their loved ones are buried.

The costs associated with ordering copies of records can add up, and family members may have to compromise by using online database information which, as this case study indicates, may not be fulsome or even accurate. The records of students who left schools due to illness to receive treatment in hospitals as well as students who were hired out to work in communities near the schools cross federal and provincial lines. Because often these hospitals or Indigenous patients' care were funded federally yet administered provincially, and because access to information and privacy laws can be variable, families may find themselves having to track down records from a variety of sources, each with their own rules and legislation. Records may also reside in religious archives, with even more variability in how records are managed and accessed. And because the people seeking information about their family members are not the person themselves, it is almost inevitable that privacy regulations will restrict access to records in some way or another. It can become a circular quest to try to find the proof of death that may be needed to access the records that would provide that proof of death.

The story of what happened to the three sisters is still only a thin net of basic information, and the family would like to know more. Where did Isobel go to school and where did she work before she was sent to hospital? What did the sisters do while in hospital? What sort of care did they receive? Did any of them have a family? To pursue these questions may take more years and could well fall on the shoulders of another generation, as answering them will involve accessing provincial hospital records, and possibly faith community archives, as well as Government of Canada records from departments beyond Indian Affairs. But even so, this family has, at this late date, been relatively lucky. Had the sisters, for instance, passed away just a few years later, the vital statistics records that identified their burial locations would not yet be open. For some students, schools' records may no longer exist or are not easily located. These records gaps can sometimes swallow entire families. For all of these reasons and more, for families like that of the three sisters, finding access to necessary records is still proving exceptionally difficult, if not impossible. Knowing where Betsey, Isobel, and Nora are buried and being able to visit these locations, a step that has taken over seventy

At The Forks

years to be able to complete, is a significant move towards closure for the family, and opens up the possibility of further knowledge and understanding in the future. But it is not the end.

As William Osborne writes, identifying and understanding what happened to the three sisters, Betsey, Isobel, and Nora, has come out of a family desire to bring closure to their late grandmother and father, as it was their wish to find where the sisters were buried that has animated the search. This goal of closure can play an important part in healing for families, and for communities, as can understanding the history and historic processes that have led to the present. But knowing where the three sisters, who William Osborne first heard about in 2012, are buried is not an end in and of itself. William Osborne writes:

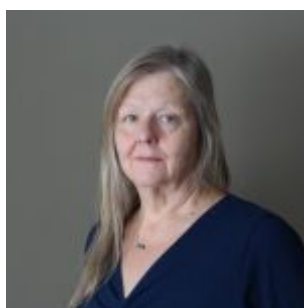
After all the work and reading about my three aunties I never knew about, let alone heard about, and even now, only to know now where they may be buried, I can't help to take in the burden of my loved ones. And I can't help thinking about my late granny Sarah Jane, and my late father, Charlie, of how they must have felt all these years. And I'm in a state of stand-still, of unanswered questions that remain, even now that I have found where the three sisters may be buried, and wondering how do I let my granny and my father know about it, as they passed on without ever knowing. I can't help but to feel the lump in my throat for them and for my aunties. And I stop to ponder perhaps there is a way my Osborne family and our extended family and relatives can put closure to this sad legacy of more than 70 years, to find a way for it to rest, and to move on. Perhaps telling this story is one of the many ways. I am very thankful to my long time-archivist friend, Anne, for her tremendous passion of help and support, as without her I would not have found my three aunties who my cousin- sister, Betsy, and my brother Jackson were asked to find by my late granny and my late father, to find where the three sisters, the three daughters, where they were buried. We did so, and the question now is what to do next, other than visiting their grave sites.

About the Author



William Osborne

William Osborne has a pre-Masters degree in education and counselling. He is a spiritual leader and the former leader for Pimicikamak Cree Nation. He has lived all his life in one of the 4 Pimicikamak communities known as Cross Lake. He is a spiritually-gifted Elder in the Circle of Life teachings, having attained and earned the right of the Elder status through ceremonies.



Margaret Anne Lindsay

[Anne Lindsay's](#) career has focused on archival primary source research, particularly in areas relating to settler interactions with Indigenous peoples, as well as fur trade-era history. A post-doctoral fellow at the University of Winnipeg under Dr. Mary Jane McCallum, she is currently working on a research guide for families whose loved ones went away to Indian Hospitals and Sanatoria, and never returned. As well, she has worked and continues to work as a researcher for a number of Indigenous communities, including work focusing on the present implications for educational planning that stem from the colonial history of education in specific communities.

In addition to this work, she has held positions in archives and research with the [National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#) at the University of Manitoba and before that, with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. She is also currently involved in local dialogues around identifying unmarked burials and tracing missing children as a part of honouring Indigenous histories of Residential Schooling in Canada.

References

[1] Database search is available at <https://vitalstats.gov.mb.ca/Query.php>

[2] School Files Series, 1879-1953 (RG10-B-3-d) are readable through Library and Archives Canada's website at: www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/mass-digitized-archives/school-files-1879-1953/Pages/school-files-1879-1953.aspx

[3] Available at: www.nctr.ca

[4] Library and Archives Canada search: www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/search/Pages/search.aspx

At The Forks

[5] In J. Littleton, J Park, A. Herring, T. Farmer, eds. 2008. *Multiplying and dividing: Tuberculosis in Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand*, No. 3, Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland. Available at https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/2558/RALe_03.pdf;sequence=1