

PROJECT REPORT

"That's my Auntie": Community-Guided Residential School History

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada called for increased access to archival material documenting the history of Residential Schools. What does this access and associated programming look like? How can archives approach sharing Residential School history in an ethical and culturally appropriate way? This project report provides examples of reciprocal approaches to archival work by drawing on a case study of the community-guided work undertaken by the Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association (CSAA) and the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (SRSC).

Keywords: Archives; Residential Schools; Indigenous communities; Indigenous knowledge

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Records created during Residential Schools' operation and administration can play a crucial role in reclaiming Indigenous family identities and community healing. The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) called for increased access to archival material documenting Residential Schools' history. Today, many archival and cultural heritage institutions are still looking for ways to implement these calls to action. This project report seeks to address what this access can look like and how archives can approach sharing Residential School history in an ethical and culturally appropriate way. This case study highlights a community-focused archival practice model by discussing the work of the Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association (CSAA) and the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (SRSC) practice. By sharing the work of the SRSC, the authors hope to highlight community models of care and kinship-based archival methods that can be considered by other archives.

The SRSC is a grassroots community archive founded by the CSAA, a Residential School Survivor organization. CSAA and the archives were established following the 1981 Shingwauk Reunion, which brought together Survivors of the Shingwauk Residential School to talk about their experiences at Residential School. This reunion saw over three hundred people attend throughout the weekend. During the reunion, many Survivors expressed a desire to have their experiences shared and to have a place to share information about Residential Schools with other Survivors. The SRSC archives were formalized, with community-based information sharing as the foundation. The work of the SRSC prioritizes the Shingwauk Survivor community's desire to document Residential Schools from the students' perspective, with an emphasis on preserving the lived experiences of those silenced by colonial archives. The mandate of the SRSC is "sharing, healing, and learning," and this focus on care and healing is central in how the SRSC makes the history of Residential Schools accessible. The community-based nature of the SRSC means that every archival, museum, and educational project is under the guidance of Survivors and the community (McCracken and Hogan 2020).

Kinship ties and connections to Indigenous understandings of knowledge are at the foundation of any work undertaken by the SRSC. Krista McCracken is a settler who has worked with the SRSC since 2010 and has a background in public history. They are tremendously grateful for the Survivor community's guidance and are continuously learning from the CSAA members. Skylee-Storm Hogan is of mixed Kanien'kehá:ka, originating from the Mohawk Nation of Kahnawà:ke, and settler ancestry and began working with the SRSC as an assistant in 2015. Their work with the SRSC and the resilience of the CSAA shaped their method of approaching and advising on public history projects.

Sharing Residential School Photographs

It is a regular occurrence for people to drop into the SRSC with the simple statement, "I heard you have photos. Can I take a look?" The answer is always yes. No matter what else is going on, SRSC staff prioritize helping Survivors and their families. This priority means dropping whatever task staff might be working on to pull out reproduction photo albums and help visitors try to locate images of themselves or their families. Visitors can sit in a comfy chair, spread materials out across a table, and have as many family members around them as they want. The SRSC welcomes children, extended support networks, laughter, tears, and whatever else someone might need to support them while they look at photographs.

The SRSC is a community archive that is rooted in telling history from the Survivor's perspective. Michelle Caswell et al. (2016, 74) have argued that community archives create a form of representational belonging and that "archives provide an empirical basis of evidence on which to assert communities' historical presence; they allow communities to prove the facts of their presence in the face of silencing, marginalization, and misrepresentation." The records in the SRSC act as records of truth, acknowledgement, and connection to a community past. The act of naming people in photographs, identifying family in photographs (Figures 1 and 2), brings the history of Residential Schools into the present and transforms static archival records into active parts of individual, family, and community history.

In practice, this community-focused archives looks like visitors pointing to relatives in photographs, snapping photographs with their cellphones to share with family on Facebook, and multiple generations of families visiting the SRSC together. For example, while visiting the SRSC, an Algoma University student spotted her last name and found never-before-seen wedding photographs connected to her family. The student expressed wonder at seeing for the first time the faces of aunts and uncles she had only heard stories about but never met. Later the same week, the student's family came in to find more records and make their copies. The records became a living connection to their family stories. Likewise, while working in the SRSC, Skylee found photographs of relatives they never knew who attended Residential School. This came as a surprise as their community relied heavily on the day school system. Skylee was able to share with their family a part of their history that was previously unknown. This article's title comes from these and many other examples where visitors have exclaimed, "That's my Auntie" or "That's my Dad" while looking at photo albums and connecting with family members' images.

The photo albums where individuals often find photographs of themselves or family members are part of the long-standing "Remember the Children" photo identification project run by the SRSC. Established in 2004, "Remember the Children" aims to connect Survivors, families, and communities with Residential School photographs. Connections are made by bringing reproduction photographs into First Nation communities, sharing photographs at community events, and inviting visitors to sit with the photo albums. Staff also provide copies of photographs free of charge to Survivors and their families. People are encouraged to write the names of anyone they recognize on the photo album; SRSC staff then use it to update archival records and reprint the albums with student names. The vast majority of students pictured in Residential School photographs are unnamed in the images, so the act of community identification has been tremendously useful in identifying students, connecting families to images, and further sharing the history of Residential Schools (McCracken 2015).

Community Care and Kinship as Archival Practice

Archival practice is rooted in caring for and managing archival materials. Likewise, archival work is often focused on preserving materials and making them accessible to researchers. In the SRSC, the practice of care is more focused on community well-being, with SRSC staff emphasizing caring for the people connected to and represented in the archival records. This community care includes providing health and cultural support and creating space for visitors to interact with the archival records in different ways.

The records held by the SRSC can document colonial violence and racism. Cree-Métis scholar Jessie Loyer (2018, 147) has identified the trauma many Indigenous scholars encounter in their work, noting that "if I want to research even my own family history, trauma is inevitable; to research as an Indigenous scholar is to confront horrific stories, many of them directly tied to my own experiences or the experiences of people I love." The SRSC archives contain material that can be traumatic, with many records documenting the pain and abuse that many Indigenous people suffered during the Residential Schools era. In an attempt to create a supportive space for looking at these records, visitors to the SRSC can access health support, smudge, or talk with an Elder. Visitors are offered tea, water, and comfortable seating. They can talk to staff, visit with family, or reflect on the records in silence. Creating opportunities for visitors to process what they see in the archives in their own way is part of how the SRSC practices care. This act of care in archival practice acknowledges the existence of trauma and works to support Survivors.

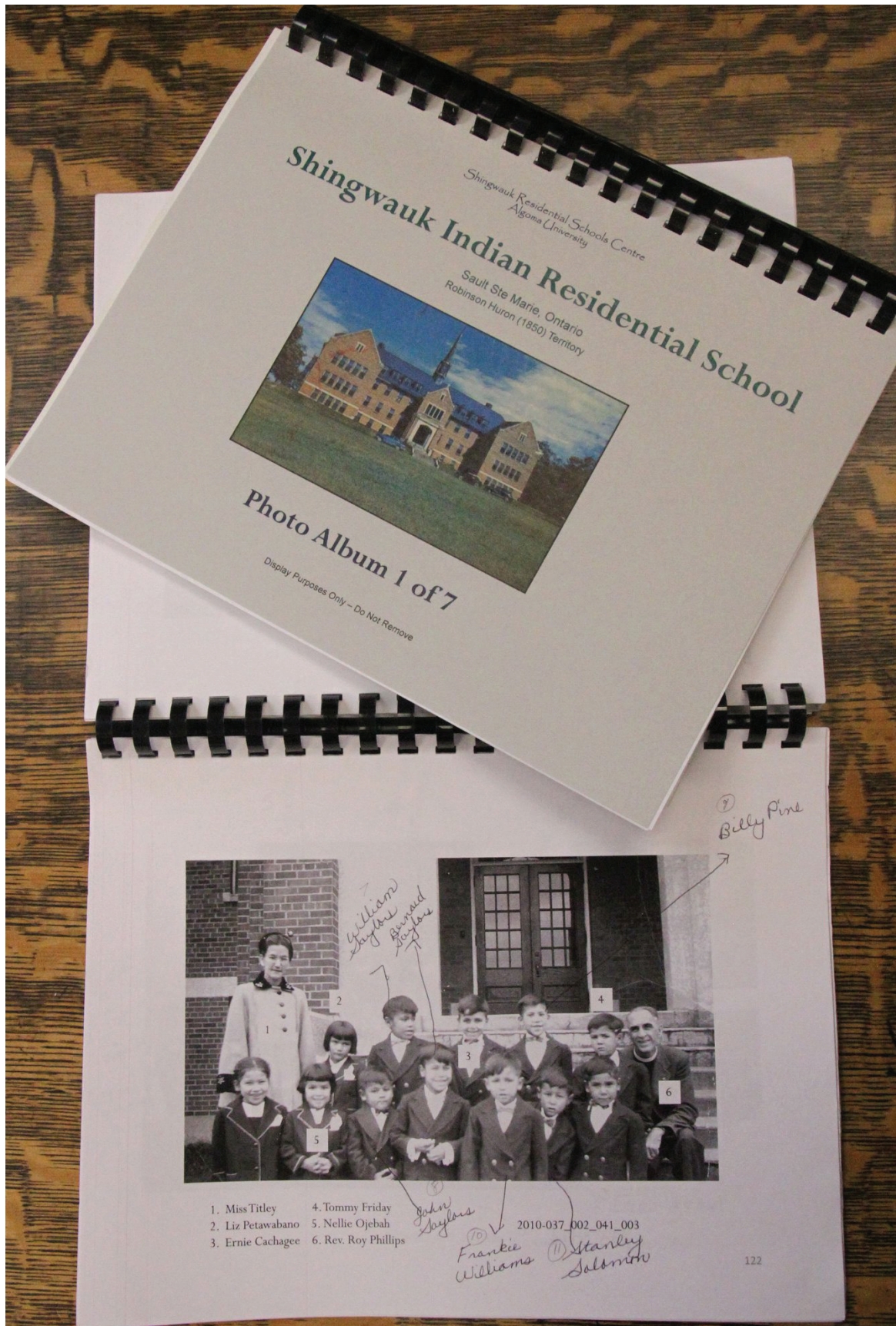


Figure 1: Example of Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre reproduction photo albums with names added in by Survivors and community members. Photo provided by the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre.



Figure 2: Shingwauk Gathering participants looking at Residential School photo albums, 2012. Photo provided by the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre.

In addition to creating spaces for care while accessing archival material, the SRSC facilitates connections to family and family history. Residential Schools disrupted Indigenous families' lives for generations, with many children being separated from their parents and siblings for years at a time. Residential Schools and other forms of colonial oppression removed Indigenous peoples from their families, culture, communities, and identities. The SRSC emphasizes supporting kinship connections in recognition that each photograph and document connected to Residential Schools tells a history and has the potential to provide ties to kin. How does archival practice change when focusing on ongoing kinship ties instead of maintaining static documents? It means that archival records are continually updated and expanded and that archival records are part of living and ongoing history. At the SRSC, Survivors and their families actively contribute to how photographs are described, who is identified in photographs, and decisions around descriptive language.

Archival records relating to Residential School are not just records documenting administrative perspectives on Residential Schools; they are also records of Indigenous experiences, lives lived, generations who have passed on. Archival records can be part of the collective memory of Indigenous communities and families (Ross et al. 2006). A single photograph or a single line in an attendance register can fill in family trees and result in new information being added to subsequent generations' narratives. It is an example of the large amount of power the archives hold in colonized lives. A small piece of information can significantly impact families searching for answers, and community archival spaces can aid in the healing journey.

The goal of widely sharing the history of Residential Schools continues to inform ongoing programming at the SRSC. For example, the *Reclaiming Shingwauk Hall* exhibition (Figure 3) opened to the public in 2018. This exhibition uses archival photographs and Survivor testimony to share the Shingwauk Residential School's history and the community organizing work of the CSAA. *Reclaiming Shingwauk Hall* is the first large-scale, Survivor-driven, permanent exhibition of its kind installed in a former Residential School building. Shingwauk Hall, located in the former Shingwauk Residential School main building, is now used by Algoma University. This exhibition is one way that the SRSC continues to preserve and honour the Shingwauk Survivors' legacy on the site. Overseen by the CSAA, each image, text, and design choice represents a commitment ensuring that this history continues to be remembered in the community. This collaborative process, which prioritizes the Survivor community's input, is community archival practice in action.



Figure 3: Survivors Shirley Roach (left) and Shirley Horn (right) viewing photographs in the *Reclaiming Shingwauk Hall* exhibition, 2017. Photo provided by the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre.

The SRSC also regularly engages the community beyond Algoma University. Their site tours and community partnerships help inform the broader community outside of the academic institution. With events that bring long-time residents of Sault Ste. Marie to the Shingwauk site, the SRSC fulfills necessary reconciliation and healing work. The SRSC brings the archives to community as a tool for education and conversation between settler and Indigenous residents, making space for challenging conversations that would not have happened otherwise. Community-based archival practice situates records and materials as more than just things; records can invoke memories and create tangible changes or healing for marginalized communities.

Conclusion

The SRSC is one example of a community archive that embraces Survivor-driven and Survivor-centred archival work. The community archive broadens its focus beyond preservation and prioritizes healing and education over a rigid archival structure. This people-focused work is a form of community-based archival practice that is rooted in relationships, kinship ties, and kindness. Caring for the people connected to archival records is just as important as caring for the records. This practice opens up the possibilities that archival records can do more than document the past.

Archival records have the ability to transform historical narratives and shape community and family history. They also have the ability to transform the healing process for Residential School Survivors and their families. However, this transformation can only happen when the archives are opened, made accessible, and barriers to access are broken down. It is something that needs to be done continuously with active accountability. For many Indigenous communities and communities of colour, they felt that archives were removed from their worlds. Community archives like the SRSC can be spaces of laughter, reflection, family, and truth.

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