

# Community Archival Practice: Indigenous Grassroots Collaboration at the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre

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## ABSTRACT

Community-based archives can provide a voice for marginalized groups, add new viewpoints to the traditional historical record, and preserve heritage that has been left out of traditional archives and museums. Canada's colonial roots have greatly affected the relationship between archives, libraries, museums, and Aboriginal communities. The archival record in traditional repositories has often presented a fragmented, one-sided version of Aboriginal history. Indigenous community archives have the potential to correct this bias and include Indigenous voices in the historical narrative. The Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre was founded in the hope of creating an archival space that is rooted in residential school survivor narratives. This case study analyzes the importance of archival practice that is informed by cultural and ethical best practices, offering a model for Indigenous community archival practice.

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## KEY WORDS

Community Archives, Indigenous Archives,  
Indian Residential Schools, Community Engagement

The establishment of community archives around racial and ethnic identities has significantly affected archival heritage and history. Grassroots archives that actively involve communities have the potential to complement traditional archival collections. Community archives such as the South Asian American Digital Archives, the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, and the Black Cultural Archives are examples of grassroots efforts undertaken by communities to document their own heritage. Many Indigenous community archives have grown out of the desire of communities to document their own pasts.

Community archives generally rely on participation from their founding communities at all levels of archival work including acquisition, description, outreach, collection preservation, and oversight of the archives.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, many community archives are born out of political activism and a desire for marginalized groups to see themselves in the historical record.<sup>2</sup> The establishment of community archives is often rooted in the desire to rewrite dominant narratives and stories about a collective past. Some of the earliest grassroots archives formed out of response to political and social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Groups who have been marginalized by mainstream society and mainstream archival repositories have found that the establishment of community archives can contribute to greater self-representation and historical authority. Community archives can have an “impact on exclusion and perhaps even contribute to the healing trauma of alienation and disempowerment.”<sup>3</sup>

The Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (SRSC) is an example of a community archives born out of a desire to see the history of residential schools from the survivor<sup>4</sup> perspective. Recognizing the importance of involving the people whom the historical documents represent has contributed to the SRSC mandate, which actively engages residential school survivors, families, and communities in collection development, description, and education programming. This community-based approach to archival management has aided the development of the SRSC and enabled the SRSC’s programming to be trusted and welcomed among Indigenous communities in Canada.

### Documenting Indigenous Heritage: A Historical Perspective

The acquisition and description of archival materials created by Aboriginal peoples or materials that document their lives has not always been inclusive of the Aboriginal communities to which the archival materials relate. In Canada, the majority of archival materials relating to Aboriginals was initially collected by the Government of Canada via Indian Affairs.<sup>5</sup> These early archival documents were most frequently created and preserved by the Canadian government in the administration of various forms of colonialism such as Indian Residential Schools, the reserve system, and the Indian Act.<sup>6</sup> The official records were not

created by Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal communities often did not have access to their own records. Archival institutions appropriated Aboriginal culture, and archives were created about Indigenous people instead of including them in the process. Archivists “applying arrangements and descriptions of the ‘other’ to form incomplete and decontextualized representations of cultural groups”<sup>7</sup> compounded this lack of inclusion. The archival record in traditional repositories did not truly represent Canada’s Aboriginal people and often presented a fragmented version of Aboriginal history.

As Jeannette Allis Bastian maintained, documentary heritage plays a crucial role in community memory and constructs of identity: “To construct and maintain reliable memory, however, communities above all require access to their written documents, ownership of the primary sources of their history.”<sup>8</sup> The ability to create collective memory and collective identity is directly linked to confronting and interpreting a community’s own past. Collective memory can include not only written records but also oral traditions, public commemorations, and artifacts. Oral history and written records often exist in a complementary relationship, and without access to both forms of history, a community is left with only a partial version of its own history and identity. This interconnected nature of collective memory can be seen in the work of Kenneth Foote, who cautioned that “the cultural role of the archives is hard to isolate from the contributions of other institutions and traditions.”<sup>9</sup> Institutional memories are interdependent; looking at all sides of an issue is essential to creating a collective memory.

The comprehensive history of Aboriginal people in Canada and the history of residential schools depend on the merging of documentary heritage collected and created by the Canadian government and religious bodies with the oral histories, artifacts, public ceremonies, and written records of Aboriginal communities. Indigenous communities need the space and tools to tell their own histories based on their own understandings. Until recently, “settler cultures denied Indigenous peoples the authority to tell their own histories from Indigenous perspectives. To be Indigenous was to be studied, examined, and categorized by non-Indigenous scholars and audiences who assumed that Indians did not have their own history.”<sup>10</sup> The growing presence of Indigenous perspectives in historical interpretation is reflected in communities establishing their own archives and traditional archival institutions turning to communities for assistance in description and cultural protocols surrounding Indigenous heritage. This can be seen in community-based programming developed by institutions such as the Glenbow Museum, the Royal British Columbia Museum, the Museum of New Mexico, and the Auckland Museum.

Archives and other heritage organizations have begun to see the importance of integrating Indigenous modes of understanding and traditional knowledge

into best practices. Many libraries, museums, and archives have begun to seek active participation of the Indigenous peoples their collections represent.<sup>11</sup> In Canada, the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre has been a leader in community-based programming and Indigenous archival practice.

### The Development of the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre

In the spring of 1970, the Shingwauk Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, closed its doors. The closure was part of the Canadian government's larger decision to phase out residential schools. Following this closure, in 1971, Algoma University College in partnership with the Keewaitnung Institute moved onto the Shingwauk site. Since its relocation to the Shingwauk campus, Algoma University has undertaken many initiatives in cross-cultural education and prides itself on working with local Anishinaabe communities to create an inclusive and multicultural education environment.

One of the most enduring and significant of these cross-cultural efforts has been the establishment and development of the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (SRSC). The SRSC, developed under the auspices of the Shingwauk Project, began as a cross-cultural research and educational development project of Algoma University and the Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association (CSAA). It was founded in 1979 by Prof. Don Jackson in collaboration with Dr. Lloyd Bannerman of Algoma University, Chief Ron Boissoneau of Garden River First Nation, and Shingwauk alumnus and elder Dr. Dan Pine Sr. (1900–1992) of Garden River First Nation. They recognized the importance of the commitment to the Shingwauk Trust and the relationship with Canada's First Nations that Algoma University assumed upon its relocation in 1971 to the site of the former Shingwauk and Wawanosh Indian Residential Schools.

The first major initiative undertaken by the Shingwauk Project was hosting a residential school survivor reunion for former students of the Shingwauk School. In 1981, over four hundred students, family, staff, and community members returned to the Shingwauk site to begin to address their communal past. After attending the first reunion, many students, families, and former staff felt compelled to share their photographs, scrapbooks, and documents with each other. As a means of facilitating this sharing, Prof. Don Jackson established the Shingwauk Archives to promote the sharing of residential school photographs and documents. The archives was established with joint governance between the Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association (CSAA) and Algoma University.

From 1981 to 2008, the Shingwauk Archives was staffed by volunteers and coordinated by Jackson. Funding for the project was minimal, and it initially had no dedicated space. The archives had no governing policies, no real organizational system existed for the collections, and no one with archival experience

was associated with the project. Its main focus was to provide copies of materials to First Nation communities and act as a repository for materials relating to residential schools. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Jackson received a small grant to hire staff. He hired community members and allies of the local First Nation. Under this initiative, a card catalog was created in an attempt to organize the collection. The focus of the archives was still on preserving as much material as possible and providing research services to residential school survivors. The staff dedicated much of its time to community outreach and liaisons with First Nation communities.

The professionalization of the SRSC began in 2008 when operational funding was secured from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. From 2010 to 2012, Ken Hernden, Algoma's university librarian, also acted as codirector of the SRSC, shepherding it from an externally funded operation to a unique resource with its own staff and mandate. The period from 2010 to 2012 also marked the hiring of a trained archives technician and several student assistants. During this period, the collection was made compliant with the Canadian Rules for Archival Description, digitization of the collections was started, and file-level description of the holdings began being placed online. The professionalization of the SRSC also included the development of formal acquisition, de-accession, display, and access policies.<sup>12</sup>

In 2012, Algoma University hired a full-time director to manage the SRSC. The archives is still jointly governed by the CSAA and Algoma University, and CSAA remains involved in the governance of the SRSC. A heritage committee has been established to provide guidance on Indigenous best practices, outreach programming, and policy development. The committee comprises members from CSAA and Algoma University. The SRSC staff currently includes a director, an archives technician, and a researcher/curator, and staff members are all employees of the university. Indigenous persons with connections to the residential school legacy and First Nation communities currently hold two of the three positions. Funding for the SRSC still remains largely grant based, with Algoma University providing in-kind support. The current mandate of the SRSC includes the maintenance of an archives, support of residential school survivor healing initiatives, exhibit and display of materials relating to residential schools, and education of the general public about residential schools.

## Introduction of Participatory Programming

Following the 1981 Shingwauk Reunion and the establishment of the Shingwauk Archives, the main thrust of the SRSC has been increasing the accessibility of residential school documents and photographs. Historically, residential school photographs were used to justify the need for and to celebrate

the perceived success of the residential school system. Residential school photographs belonged to and were predominantly created by school administrators and staff.<sup>13</sup>

The longest running and most successful community program at the SRSC is the Remember the Children: National Residential School Photo Identification Project. Started in 2005 as a pilot project in collaboration with the National Residential Schools Survivors' Society (NRSSS), Remember the Children aims to connect communities with residential school photographs and documents. The initial pilot project was funded under a grant from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and was administered by CSAA, NRSSS, and SRSC staff.

The aims of the Remember the Children project were twofold: to connect survivors with photographs of themselves and to gather information about the individuals portrayed in the photographs. Many residential school survivors do not own photographs of themselves as children or of their time at residential school. By bringing photographs into communities, the SRSC reconnects survivors with lost portions of their histories. This initiative also allowed for inter-generational survivors to see photographs of their family members and to piece together parts of their family histories that are often not talked about. Very few of the students in the photographs were labeled by the photographers or in the photograph metadata. The Remember the Children project tried to rectify this by having community members identify individuals and update the holdings to reflect the community-generated names.

The initial pilot project focused on creating and distributing reproduction photo albums containing photographs from the residential schools located in Spanish, Ontario, Canada. The idea to create reproduction photo albums came from the desire to share archival photographs in a tangible way that would not damage the original images. An SRSC staff member designed the layout of the albums and used inexpensive comb bindings to create albums that could be circulated. The Spanish photo albums were created with images from the Rev. Father Maurice *fonds*, which contains over 1,200 images of the Spanish Indian Residential Schools. The size of the collection dictated the need for multiple photo albums and an organizational scheme. The pilot albums for the Spanish Indian Residential Schools were organized thematically and included albums on confirmation, graduation, staff and students, sports, festivals, boys, girls, and early years. By thematically grouping images, the SRSC hoped to allow community members to easily identify which photo albums might be of interest and which might contain photographs of themselves or family members.

The pilot saw members of the CSAA acting as community liaisons with First Nations in the Algoma-Manitoulin region of Ontario. These liaisons worked with communities to set up times when the project could be explained and community members could begin to identify individuals in the photographs. At the

conclusion of the pilot, each participating community was given a complete set of the Spanish photo albums to be kept in the band office or local library. These albums could then be accessed by community members at any time.

## Program Evaluation

The pilot phase of Remember the Children exceeded the expectations of all involved. Communities greeted the photo album initiative with open arms and were very willing to work with members of CSAA on the project. This willingness has been largely attributed to residential school survivors taking the lead role in introducing the project to communities. CSAA members could easily identify with the past and present realities of communities as they themselves attended residential schools. In most cases, the CSAA members belonged to the community for whom they acted as the project liaison. For example, the individual who acted as the liaison for Sagamok First Nation was a perfect fit for the role. He was a long-standing member of CSAA, he attended the residential school, and he was a former chief and respected elder of Sagamok First Nation. The community connection made this individual and many others ideal candidates to work at a grassroots level and engage communities in this part of their histories.

At the conclusion of the pilot, over 40 percent of the individuals pictured in the photo albums had been identified. Initially, these names were merely updated on the photo albums and not connected back to the archival records. This was due to limited staffing in the SRSC, the time-consuming nature of the task, and the lack of archival expertise in the SRSC. However, as the SRSC professionalized and trained archival staff were hired (2008–2011), the collected names were added to the corresponding physical and digital archival holdings of the photographs. The linking of collected photo album names to the physical and digital archival holdings is an example of the SRSC's dedication to the involvement of residential school survivors in the archival description process.

Based on the success of the pilot project, the SRSC began to create photo albums for each residential school in Ontario. This process saw the SRSC collaborating with many organizations, including the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF), Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), the Anglican Church of Canada, and many individual First Nations, to gather additional photographs and funding to produce the photo albums. Prior to 2010, the SRSC did not have a formal acquisitions policy, and many of these relationships and acquisitions were built on an ad-hoc basis by SRSC staff, with the sole aim of expanding the photo album project. Beginning in 2010, a more formalized process of acquisition was undertaken, and the previously collected photographs were formally accessioned and arranged and described according to archival practice. Staff also began to build

more formal relationships with existing partners and to solidify the relationship between the photo album project and the SRSC archival holdings.

From 2006 to 2012, hundreds of communities and thousands of individuals participated in the Remember the Children project. Between 2010 and 2012, the SRSC participated in twenty-two community-based events, all of which included the showcasing of the residential school photo albums. These community events have varied considerably in size. The SRSC participated in the events primarily by the invitation and financial support of the organizing communities. The hosting organizations typically assumed travel, shipping, and staffing costs, and the SRSC assumed the cost of photo album production for the events. At a community event, the SRSC displayed its photo albums and used a photocopier or printer to create reproductions for event participants. These reproductions were free of charge to the participants, and the cost was typically absorbed by the event organizers. For larger reproduction requests, the SRSC collected pertinent information on-site and mailed or emailed the photographs in the days following the event.

At a smaller event such as the one held May 12–13, 2011, in Little Current, Manitoulin Island, Ontario, by the Noojmowin Teg Health Access Centre, sixty-one survivors and community members viewed the photo albums on the first day, and fifty-four individuals on the second day. At this event, forty-eight names were added to residential school photographs, and the SRSC made photo reproductions for fourteen individuals.

At a larger event such as the Shingwauk 2012 Gathering and Conference that was hosted by the CSAA in August 2012, over four hundred individuals attended, fifty-five individuals were identified, and the SRSC processed seventy-five requests for photo reproductions. Similarly, the SRSC has been involved in a number of the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)<sup>14</sup> events across Canada. Hundreds of survivors typically attend these national TRC events, and the SRSC is there to provide photographs and research support to all participants.

In addition to the community events that feature the Remember the Children project, since 2010, the SRSC has had an average of five to ten visitors a month who wish to look at the photo albums. The SRSC also averages thirty-four email or phone requests per month relating to residential school photograph reproductions, identification, and research.

Since 2005, the photo albums used in this project have been revamped a number of times, which has contributed to changes in content, style, and general presentation. The changes were made based on user feedback, cost analysis, and staff input. Some of the problems discovered with the early versions of the photo album included text too small for elders to read, lack of contextualization of photographs, no uniform numbering system of photographs, and high



printing costs. Changes made to address these concerns were relatively simple but took considerable staff time to implement, as by 2010 there were over thirty-five photo albums used regularly, many with over 150 pages.

As an example, archival staff discovered the issue of not having a uniform numbering system when they wanted to link the names written in the photo albums by survivors to the corresponding archival records of the photographs. Since no accession or file numbers were included in the original photo albums, staff had to search manually through digitized collections to find the corresponding archival records. To rectify this problem and to eliminate the hours spent looking for a handful of photographs, the photo albums were revised to include collection names, accession numbers, and digital file numbers. These inclusions helped speed up retrieval of digital copies for high-resolution reproductions and facilitated the updating of archival records with survivor names.

On a more physical level, double-sided printing, reinforced covers, and changes in binding style were also undertaken to improve the photo albums. The aim of these changes was to provide more durable, longer-lasting photo albums that could be handled by many people without falling apart.

## Future Initiatives

The SRSC hopes to expand the number of schools covered by the Remember the Children project. Currently, the SRSC has very few photo albums relating to the residential schools located in Western Canada. Through collection development and partnership-building, the SRSC hopes to acquire more images relating to these schools. In 2012, the SRSC worked with the Grey Nuns of Montreal and the Jesuits of English Canada to further develop the SRSC photo album project. Through these partnerships, the SRSC has been able to gain access to yearbooks, newsletters, and additional photographs of schools about which the SRSC previously had little or no information. In the case of the Grey Nuns, an arrangement has been made for any relevant duplicate materials held by their archives to be donated to the SRSC. This has resulted in the collection of materials relating to numerous Catholic residential schools in Western Canada as well as the *Indian Record* publication. The partnership with the Jesuits of English Canada has been primarily digital in nature. As the Jesuits undertook the digitization of their holdings, they have provided digital copies to the SRSC to facilitate the sharing of information and resources. Going forward, the SRSC hopes to work with new and existing partners to continue this positive momentum and to develop a national dissemination strategy.

Part of this dissemination strategy will include the continued development of the SRSC website.<sup>15</sup> This website currently provides an online presence for the SRSC and generates a number of email requests. However, it is hoped that in the

future this can become a more interactive digital space for collaboration and dissemination, including the ability for users to identify individuals in photographs online, a focus on the engagement of second generation survivors, and an education component geared toward the general public.

In addition to building archival networks around the issue of residential schools, the SRSC has expanded its focus on educational programming and outreach. In 2013, the SRSC hosted three small-scale, art-based exhibits focusing on residential schools. These exhibits developed out of guidance provided by Indigenous community members and featured the artwork of Aboriginal Canadians. The SRSC committed to integrating traditional knowledge into its curatorial, exhibition, and education practices. By involving elders and community members in programming development, the SRSC hopes to foster inclusive, representative programs and exhibits that draw on Indigenous experiences and knowledge.

## Conclusion

Archives and other heritage organizations containing Aboriginal materials are beginning to acknowledge and address the political, social, and ethical considerations around their holdings. The profile of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the forthcoming National Research Centre highlight the importance of the issue of residential schools in Canadian society today. It is crucial that this portion of Canada's history is told in a truthful and inclusive way that involves Aboriginal communities. The SRSC serves as an example of one organization that has developed cross-cultural policies and initiatives to create an inclusive participatory archives program. Traditional archival organizations and Aboriginal communities can greatly benefit from open communication and active collaboration. The SRSC's inclusion of survivor perspectives in description, arrangement, and outreach practices has allowed for an archives to develop that truly illustrates the survivor experience in the legacy of residential schools.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Andrew Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (October 2007): 152–154.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens, "'It Is Noh Mistri, Wi Mekin History': Telling Our Own Story: Independent and Community Archives in the U.K., Challenging and Subverting the Mainstream," in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Jeannette Bastian and Ben Alexander (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), 3–28.
- <sup>3</sup> Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream," *Archival Science* 9 (2009): 73.
- <sup>4</sup> *Survivor* is the preferred term when referring to those students who attended residential schools.

- <sup>5</sup> Indian Affairs has fallen under the administration of numerous government departments and changed names multiple times since its establishment in the 1860s. However, the department's role in the administration of programs and directives impacting Canada's Aboriginal people has remained fundamentally unchanged.
- <sup>6</sup> Countless works explain the Canadian government's colonization efforts, but one might begin by looking at J. R. Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools*, Olive Patricia Dickason's *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from the Earliest Times*, and Michael Asch's *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada*. See also the Aboriginal Healing Foundation research publication series for insight into the past and current impact of colonialism on Aboriginal people in Canada.
- <sup>7</sup> Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections," *Archivaria* 63 (2007): 89.
- <sup>8</sup> Jeannette Allis Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 6.
- <sup>9</sup> Kenneth E. Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory and Culture," *The American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 380.
- <sup>10</sup> Katrine Barber, "Shared Authority in the Context of Tribal Sovereignty: Building Capacity for Partnerships with Indigenous Nations," *The Public Historian* 35 (November 2013): 26.
- <sup>11</sup> For an example of such integration of traditional knowledge, see "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," by Kimberly Christen, *The American Archivist* 74 (2011): 185–210.
- <sup>12</sup> See Engracia De Jesus Matias Archives and Special Collections, [archives.algomau.ca](http://archives.algomau.ca), for more information on policies, digitization efforts, and access to the collections.
- <sup>13</sup> J. Keri Cronin, "Assimilation and Difference: Two Recent Exhibitions of Archival Photographs," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2003): 135.
- <sup>14</sup> Established as part of the Residential Schools Settlement agreement (September 19, 2007), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has a mandate to educate all Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools (IRS). The commission is also mandated to document the truth of survivors, families, communities, and anyone personally affected by residential schools. More information about the TRC can be found at [www.trc.ca](http://www.trc.ca).
- <sup>15</sup> The SRSC website can be found at [Shingwauk.org](http://Shingwauk.org). It is currently home to over seventy-five distinct, described archival collections and thousands of digitized images and textual records.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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