



Mike Durocher

MIKE'S STORY CARD

Based on an interview between Mike Durocher and Mireille Lamontagne in March 2020.

Mike Durocher was born in Fort San, Sask., in 1954 and was adopted by his aunt and uncle who raised him from birth. He lived with them on an island at Île-à-la-Crosse called Sandy Point.

Mike always considered his aunt and uncle as his parents and felt fortunate to have been raised in Île-à-la-Crosse with family as opposed to having been placed in foster care.

Mike's father was a trapper, a hunter, and a commercial fisherman, and he worked for the mink ranchers, while his mother was a homemaker.

Together, they would travel to go berry-picking—picking strawberries, saskatoon berries, raspberries, blueberries and cranberries as the summer seasons passed. They would also set up fishing camps with other families along Halfway Lake, where they would camp for a couple of months. His father would fish, while he and other children would swim around, play, and have a good time.

In the winter, they stayed home and would go tobogganing. Everyone had a team of either dogs or horses for travelling in the winter months. There were no snowmobiles and no roads. Playing hockey was very popular.

One of Mike's grandmothers, his dad's mom, would come and spend a couple of months with him during the summers, and she would stay in a tent. She would prepare moose hides collected from the moose that his father hunted during the winter. Mike would help her because it was a lot of work.

His grandfather, who also lived in Sandy Point, had big gardens, dairy cows, and chickens. His family, like most in the area, were self-sufficient. They bought staples like sugar and flour at the store, but they mainly lived off the land, fishing, hunting birds and rabbits—there was never a shortage of food.

Mike grew up going to church on Sundays. He was an altar boy and, even while attending residential school, would get up early in the morning, go to church and serve mass before eating breakfast and then going to class. He was not allowed to miss Easter, Christmas, or any other religious functions, and he always took part in them. Mike described it as being very regimented and very strict. Mike also said that he “had no clue what a free lifestyle was” because the church played such an important role in the town and dictated day to day life since the late 1700s.

Mike attended the Île-à-la-Crosse residential school. Most of the children he knew started school in grade one at seven years

old. Parents were often very reluctant to let their children start school any sooner.

The majority of students only spoke Cree or Michif-Cree, and almost no-one spoke any English when they first went to school. The school was run by the Catholic Church, the diocese from The Pas, and the nuns and the priests who ran the school all spoke French. If students were caught speaking Cree, they received a lecture or were disciplined physically with a leather strap.

All the students at Mike's residential school were Métis. They came from Île-à-la-Crosse, as well as other nearby communities including La Loche, Turner Lake, Big River, Doré Lake, Sled Lake and Dillon. Mike didn't really want to go to school because it meant he often had to stay in the residence. His parents lived across the lake so he was forced to stay at the school during the school year. He and his friends did not want to stay there and would have preferred staying at home with family.

Sometimes, one of his parents or uncles was able to come to the school on Fridays and take him home for the weekend. Mike remembers three children who stayed in the residence with him that were white. Some students never got to go home during the school year and had to wait until June to go home for summer holidays.

Mike describes the nuns that ran the school as “mean” but most of the teachers and principals as “good” and “Catholic.” The white teachers were never supposed to mingle with the Métis students, who had to stay within the fenced-in yard of the school.

Mike said that there “was a big difference between the Aboriginal [Indigenous] community and the non-native [non-Indigenous] people.” There were a lot of rules established by the church as to what he and his fellow classmates could do and who they could spend time with.

Mike attended the residential school until Grade 9 and was particularly fond of science. He was a bright student and usually at the top of his class. He remembers reading the *Bobbsy Twins*, the *Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*, *Tom Swift*, *Life Magazine* and *Time Magazine*, which he thinks contributed to his ability to do well in school. He says that “a lot of times the teachers were quite surprised about how much [he] knew about current events, considering [he] lived in the bush with no TV and only a little transistor radio.”

Mike remembers there being no love and no hugging at the residential school. He felt as though that was the reason why he

The background features a decorative wavy line in shades of purple, pink, and orange. Along this line are various Indigenous-style patterns, including colorful geometric shapes like diamonds and zig-zags, and a series of small, stylized human figures. Below the wavy line, there are faint, light-colored floral and leaf patterns.

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never knew how to hug or embrace someone and why he never felt comfortable going on dates.

Mike was expelled from residential school after learning about the Vietnam War protests happening in the United States during the 60s and decided to stage a protest of his own about residential school. He ended up creating posters at school and giving them to three of his cousins. They paraded around, displaying the posters, which pointed out all the mean and terrible things the teachers, nuns and priests had done to the Indigenous children at the residential school. They were protesting their mistreatment and ended up getting kicked out.

Since then, Mike has had issues dealing with authority and people trying to tell him what to do. He says that “getting kicked out of the school was a blessing in disguise.” He got out of the abusive system and ended up on the trapline, started working, and started making a living.