

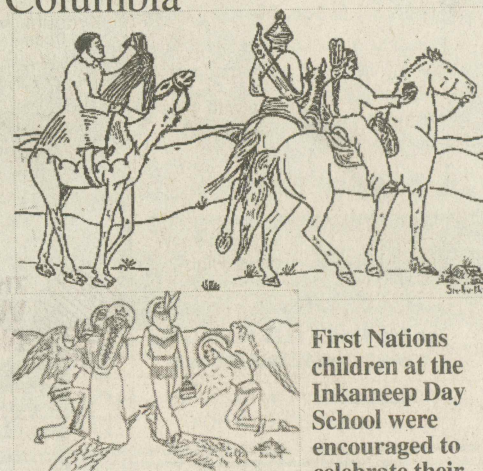
Arts

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Seventy years ago, Inkameep students sidestepped the tyranny of the residential school system to become famous throughout Canada and beyond. Today, their story is revived at a UVic conference called Untold Stories of British Columbia

Native prodigies that time forgot



First Nations children at the Inkameep Day School were encouraged to celebrate their native culture through their creations — a notion well before its time.

BY ADRIAN CHAMBERLAIN
Times Colonist staff

IT'S LARGELY FORGOTTEN TODAY. But during the 1930s, as British Columbia's notorious residential school program reached its peak, a small miracle was taking place in the community of Oliver, B.C.

A school teacher, Anthony Walsh, was instructing First Nations children at the Inkameep Day School to draw and paint; to create stories, plays and dances. What makes this unusual is the fact Walsh encouraged these youngsters to celebrate their native culture through their creations — a notion then considered both avant-garde and experimental.

His approach, believed to be unique in Western Canada and possibly beyond, led to a fascinating hybrid of artwork that melded Christian and First Nations traditions. Take, for instance, a surviving drawing of a nativity scene.

"You have a First Nations Mary and Jesus," noted Victoria visual anthropologist Andrea Walsh, pointing to a computer image on her screen. "Jesus looks like he has wings. He has a fringe buckskin, and he has an eagle head-dress."

Another drawing depicts the three wise men. One is on the traditional camel; however, the other two ride horses and wear feathers and a traditional First Nations hat. One bears a miniature canoe on his back.

"The teacher was allowing the kids to be truly of two worlds, but not to see it as being complicated," said the anthropologist.

Today, Andrea Walsh (no relation to Anthony Walsh) will speak at a public conference, Untold Stories of British Columbia, at the University of Victoria.



At left, UVic's Andrea Walsh displays copies of works of art done by First Nations children at the Inkameep Day School (photo below) in the 1930s.



Jones, Molly Parker
star in *Rare Birds*,
today.

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salty, cod-scented New-

Edward Riche from his
e name, *Rare Birds* gets
razy scheme hatched by
(Andy Jones) to save his
holic neighbour Dave
Purcell's restaurant The

Miracle: Oasis of learning

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An associate professor with UVic's department of anthropology, she'll discuss the cache of 200 drawings and paintings created at the Inkameep Day School between 1931 and 1943, as well as accompanying photographs and documents.

During this time, First Nations children were typically packed off to residential schools and forced to repress their language and culture. In contrast, the Inkameep school — situated on a reserve — flourished as a tiny oasis of enlightenment. This mini-Renaissance in a one-room school-house ended when Anthony Walsh left to enlist for military service.

Not a great deal is known about Walsh, a Canadian who received some teacher training in Alberta. After the Inkameep children became famous, Walsh was invited to lecture on his "experimental" teaching philosophies throughout Canada.

Following his departure, the new teacher at Inkameep deemed the artwork "pagan" and even burned some of it.

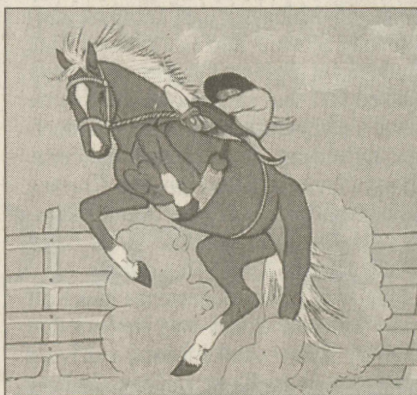
Until recently, the tale of the Inkameep Day School was, more or less, one of B.C.'s forgotten stories. Most of the artworks come from Osoyoos Community Museum, a converted curling rink.

At one time, says volunteer museum president Leslie Plaskett, the paintings and drawings were actually stored in a box underneath a citizen's bed. They were displayed on a peg-board at the museum as a curiosity — a charming collection of art by First Nations children presented without context.

"Over the years, the story of its significance had been almost lost. It had faded into the background," said Plaskett, who brought the collection to Andrea Walsh's attention two years ago.

It's a far cry from the 1930s, when the Inkameep students were celebrated throughout Canada and beyond. When Victoria's Thunderbird Park opened in 1941, the students were invited to dance and sing. Their stories were often broadcast on CBC Radio. In 1938, Anthony Walsh sent their drawings — produced mostly by children aged 12 to 14 — to the Royal Drawing Society's wartime art competition in London. They won awards, and the Queen Mother purchased two pieces for Buckingham Palace. The artworks were also displayed in Dublin, Glasgow and Paris.

Group of Seven artist Lawren Harris sparked up a correspondence with one of



One of cache of 200 paintings created at the Inkameep Day School between 1931 and 1943.

young artists. The Inkameep youngsters even attracted the attention of Walt Disney. In 1941, they sent Disney a Christmas card in which the baby Jesus is nestled inside a teepee of reed mats.

"We have a letter from Disney saying to the kids, thanks for the Christmas card, that he had it in his office," said Andrea Walsh. "He said he was working on a film he thought they'd find very interesting, given their interest in animals. And he was thinking of calling it *Bambi*." (The film opened the following year.)

The collection is now the focus of a project being funded by the federal Community-University Research Program (CURA). Andrea Walsh and Plaskett of the Osoyoos museum — both project directors — have overseen a year of researching Inkameep artworks and documents located not only in Osoyoos, but Vancouver and the Royal British Columbia Museum. This summer, Walsh, Plaskett and students will team up with Clarence Louis, chief of the Osoyoos Indian Band, to interview former Inkameep students and Oliver residents who still remember the school.

Virginia Batiste, an Osoyoos Indian band member from Oliver, said her mother attended the Inkameep Day School. Her mother's drawings are in the collection, and Batiste still owns stories she wrote under the tutelage of Anthony Walsh.

"She liked it when she was there," said Batiste, who's pleased with the CURA project but hopes the collection will ultimately be donated to the Osoyoos Indian Band.

The CURA project will conclude in August 2003, with an exhibition of the drawings at the Osoyoos Community Museum. Plaskett said there will also be

a travelling exhibition.

One of Inkameep's star pupils was Francis Batiste (a relative of Virginia Batiste's). He later studied at the Santa Fe School of Indian Art, and became a professional artist who won awards in Canada, the United States, Great Britain and Europe. Andrea Walsh said correspondence indicates his teacher was worried that Batiste would lose his "focus" and become influenced by the very commercial and distinctive Santa Fe style. This clouds somewhat the idealized image of Anthony Walsh as a saint-like teacher who allowed his charges to do whatever they wished, she said, adding: "It wasn't all rosy."

The success of the Inkameep Day School students led to the formation of a committee calling itself the Indian Arts and Crafts Society. It was this society of non-natives that saved the collection of documents and drawings from almost certain destruction after Anthony Walsh's departure. During the teacher's tenure, the group worked not only to bring the artworks to the public's notice, but lobbied to government and even British royalty to bring attention to the poor living conditions of First Nations peoples living on the Oliver reserve. They wrote letters about equal rights, improved education, cultural centres, home industries and protection for Indian properties.

"It was like an underground civil rights movement," said Andrea Walsh.

Fostering the talents of the Inkameep children almost certainly boosted their self-esteem. Not only were their talents internationally recognized, the students found themselves undertaking fund-raising projects. For instance, they collected \$400 for the war-time "Indian spitfire fund" — a great deal of money in the 1940s.

The anthropologist admits to a special empathy for the Inkameep story, and the struggles of First Nations peoples in Canada. Walsh's great-great-grandmother, Nlak'pau, was a member of the coastal Nuuchah-nulth tribe.

"I see that woman there as someone who lived through this kind of stuff," said Andrea, pointing to a small silver-framed photograph of her ancestor in her office.

Meanwhile, Plaskett — the volunteer museum director who got the ball rolling — is pleased that Inkameep story is back in the public eye.

"It's amazing," she said. "It's the story of something that was almost lost."

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