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Editorial Note: Until 2016 almost all published references to Chanie Wenjack referred to him as Charlie Wenjack, and this article written in 2014 follows that pattern.

Charlie Wenjack and the Indian Residential School System

by Peter Bush

The body of Charlie Wenjack, a 12 year old Ojibway from the Marten Falls First Nation, Northern Ontario and student at Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School, Kenora, Ontario was found on Oct. 23, 1966 by railway tracks near Redditt, Ontario some 40 miles from the school. Wenjack was trying to walk home. Cecilia Jeffrey School was operated by the Women's Missionary Society of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Charlie Wenjack's short life and tragic death quickly became iconic in the debate about the Indian Residential School (IRS) system. The jury at the Coroner's Inquest in 1966 offered a challenge to the IRS system:

"The Indian education system causes tremendous emotional and adjustment problems for these children. It behooves we who are responsible for this organization to do everything possible to mitigate their problems."

Among the recommendations was the following: "A study be made of the present Indian education and philosophy. Is it right?"

Charlie Wenjack's death became an opportunity for Ian Adams to confront the larger Canadian society with the reality of Residential Schools. The "Lonely Death of Charlie Wenjack" appeared in the February 1967 issue of *MacLean's*. The article was straight forward telling of what the Coroner's Inquest learned about the last days of Wenjack's life. Among the witnesses were the boys who ran away with Wenjack. Adams wrote:

"It was through the stumbling testimony of the boys, and in the bewildered silences behind those soft one-word answers, the full horror began to come out. No, they didn't understand why they had to be at school. No, they didn't understand why they couldn't be with relatives. Yes, they were lonesome. Would they run away again? Silence."

A revised version of the article appeared in *The Poverty Wall* (1970) under the title "Why did Charlie Wenjack die?" The answer framed Aboriginal-Newcomer issues in terms of poverty, rather than race.

Charlie Wenjack's death had an impact on the First Nations community in Canada. In the early 1970's Trent University was building its new campus. Trent was to be a collection of colleges, each with a particular emphasis. The Trent University Native Association suggested "College Five" which would house the Native Studies program, of which Trent was proud, be named for Charlie Wenjack. First Nations students saw in Wenjack resistance to the power of colonization, seeing in his death a legacy leading to change and hope. They described their conversation with the naming committee:

"We told them that while Charlie Wenjack was indeed a symbol of all the brutality and ugliness represented by Indian education in Canada here was a chance to end that...instead of Charlie Wenjack being a negative symbol his death could be the symbolic cornerstone, not of death and pain, but of a positive force spearheaded by Trent with its Native Studies Program."

The college was not named for Wenjack, instead the theatre in the college was. Although for many years no plaque explained the theatre's name.

Charlie Wenjack's story has become part of the cultural life of Canada appearing in song and art. Singer, film maker, and activist Willie Dunn, a Mi'kmaq, in his 1971 self-titled album recorded "Charlie" later known as "Little Charlie". The song describes Wenjack's loneliness hauntingly: "he's looking out for love" and "just a lost little boy." The loneliness of Wenjack's journey and death are reminders of the loneliness endemic in

the Indian Residential School system. [Willie Dunn can be heard singing the song at wawatay-news.ca/node/17640 or a slightly different version: mocm.ca/Music/Title.aspx?TitleId=277368]

Walk on, little Charlie
Walk on through the snow.
Heading down the railway line,
Trying to make it home.
Well, he's made it forty miles,
Six hundred left to go.
It's a long old lonesome journey,
Shufflin' through the snow.

Lonely as a single star,
In the skies above,
His father in a mining camp,
His mother in the ground,
And he's looking for his dad,
And he's looking out for love,
Just a lost little boy by the railroad track
Heading homeward bound.

He's lonesome and he's hungry,
It's been a time since last he ate,
And as the night grows colder,
He wonders at his fate.
For his legs are wracked with pain
As he staggers through the night.
And he sees through his troubled eyes,
That his hands are turning white.

Is that the great Wendigo
Come to look upon my face?
And are the skies exploding
Down the misty aisles of space?
Who's that coming down the track,
Walking up to me?
Her arms outstretched and waiting,
Waiting just for me.

Walk on, little Charlie,
Walk on through the snow.
Moving down the railway line,
Try to make it home.
And he's made it forty miles,
Six hundred left to go.
It's a long old lonesome journey,
Shufflin' through the snow.

Roy Kakegamic, an artist and economic development officer from the Sandy Lake community in Ontario, in 2008 painted "Little Charlie Wenjack's Escape from Residential School." Kakegamic views Wenjack's action as escape, a heroic act of seeking freedom from oppression; he did not run away, a phrase which implies irresponsibility and disobedience.

The oil on canvas painting is large, 122 cm high and 182.5 cm wide (4 ft high and 6 ft wide – the size of hockey net), with strong colours of orange and red, yellow and green. Across the lower portion of the painting are railway tracks on which a silhouetted figure stands alone amongst the rocks and against the tree line.

The figure is Wenjack, who Mother Earth sees with an eye on the far right of the painting. As well an eagle or Thunderbird in the background provides a protective presence. Two circles are in the sky, the one to Wenjack's left is half red and half white and it is connected to Wenjack by a black cord. Kakegamic said the red represented Wenjack's Aboriginal heritage which was being changed to be more like white culture. The second circle, to Wenjack's right, is not uniform with parts off center creating a jagged edge around the circle. Wenjack appears to be looking at this circle. For Kakegamic the circle's lack of unity indicates that Wenjack was not whole either, torn in different directions.

[To see the painting, from Trent University collection, go to trentu.ca/admin/artcollection/htmlfinearts/2008.016.1.htm. Artist's description: cbc.ca/player/Shows/ID/2276091784/]

The story of Charlie Wenjack remains alive today nearly fifty years after his tragic death. CBC Thunder Bay has recently told his story again, using it as a way to ask questions about how young Aboriginals are educated today often hundreds of miles from their families.

[www.cbc.ca/thunderbay/interactives/dyingforaneducation/]

As The Presbyterian Church in Canada marks the 20th anniversary of our Confession [in 2014] regarding Aboriginal People the story of Charlie Wenjack still has echoes today.