

The Children

The children all came from FN communities along the Alaska Highway and the incomplete Highway 17. Principally from the reserves in Fort Nelson, Lower Post, Good Hope Lake and Telegraph Creek. The children were all pre-school – some as young as 18 months – meaning that they had been apprehended when they were new born. Most school age children were all in residential school where it was ‘assumed’ they were being well cared for

The children that had been apprehended were now all in foster homes in Fort St John or the surrounding countryside. None of the foster homes were FN homes – indeed the idea that one could have FN foster homes would have been considered impractical. In some cases the foster parents saw foster care as a prelude to adoption – although the department discouraged this thinking.

The vignettes that follow are composites – none of them being actual accounts – but each of them being true to the encounters I observed and the actions I undertook.

Lana (we will say) was about 18 months – she had been apprehended from the Fort Nelson reserve on the advice of the Indian Agent who was concerned that she was malnourished. Sounds reasonable – until you understand that the Indian Agent controlled the distribution of welfare on the reserve – and had decided not to issue ‘rations’ to her family as in his view the father should have been out working on his trap line. Perhaps a threat to call us to the home was also part of his way of intimidating the family. Lana had been in care in Fort St John in a white foster home for about a year.

I visited the home, met the parents, talked to the priest. The home was a one room cabin on the Fort Nelson reserve. There were several older children. We sat and talked about their family and about Lana. I could see no reason that Lana could not go home. I had the joy of returning her to them on my next trip and seeing their joy on her return

Ricky (we will say) also about 18 months -Ricky had been apprehended in the Non-aboriginal part of Fort Nelson (basically a truck stop along the highway with a few services) as he had been left unattended by his mother (Mary) – a girl of about 17 – who was drunk. As far as I could see, no thought seemed to have been given to where she came from or of whether there was an extended family. Ricky’s mother, Mary, would have come back and found that he was gone. The ‘welfare’ had taken him

Mary was no longer in Fort Nelson - but where was she? Perhaps she had gone to Edmonton. Perhaps she had gone to Prince George? I was expected to find her so as to assess whether Ricky could be returned. In retrospect my efforts were poor. I checked our own records to see if she had applied for welfare. I checked with the health authority and RCMP to see if they had had any contact with her and I advertised in local papers along the Alaska Highway – The idea of finding contacts in

her own community did not occur to me. However I did find her – one day Mary came into our office in Fort St John. And where was she living – in a cabin that was within sight of the window of my office .

Ricky was returned - but a few weeks later Mary came back to the office – she didn't think she could properly care for him. We tried to encourage her to make arrangements to care for him. But in the end brought out the adoption consent forms and obtained her signature.

Joan (we will say) was about 3. Joan had died while her parents were working on a trap line. It was not clear how she had died. However the worker was concerned that her parents had (by taking her with them when they went to their trap line) exposed her to a risk that they should not have. The family lived in on the Lower Post Indian reservation. The reservation had a poor reputation with the local RCMP and Indian Agent – they had attempted to stop alcohol reaching the reserve by enforcing the provincial boundary on liquor transportation between the Yukon and BC. They were not very successful but as a result nearly all adults in the village had charges against them.

In the home where Joan had lived there were two other small children. These children had been taken into care to prevent their being exposed to the same risks as she had.

I visited the home and could see nothing different about this home from all the others on the reserve – apart from the recent tragic death of Joan. Sadly child hood mortality rates were high for FN families – childhood illnesses, poor diets, cramped living conditions and open fires all contributed to hazardous conditions. But none of this seemed to equate to neglect. The children went home.

John (we will say) about 2 years old. John's mother, Elizabeth, (about 20 and unmarried) lived in the village of Good Hope Lake close to the mining town of Cassiar. Elizabeth was known by the local priest to have been going into the local mining camp bunkhouse. There had also been an outbreak of gonorrhea in the camp. The priest thought that John should be taken into care as Elizabeth wasn't always there to care for him and to protect him from the moral hazard of Elizabeth's behavior. The worker had not been sure what to do as there wasn't an immediate problem – but erring on the side of the child's safety, John was taken into care and was now in a foster home in Fort St John.

As with Ricky – Elizabeth disappeared after the apprehension. As Good Hope Lake is close to the Yukon border (and we were now in the jurisdiction of the Yukon Indian Agency) the various authorities in the Yukon were added to the people to be contacted. But in John's case the searching was not successful. And so after about 4 months of searching, the 'adoption approval without consent' process was started. This required a court application supported by an affidavit saying I had searched for the mother. It required legal notices to be placed in local papers. And it needed the

provincial Superintendent of Child Welfare to assert that adoption was in the child's best interests. All of this was begun before I left Fort St John to go study social work at UBC.