

# Film exposes residential schools

**Fallen Feather:** Movie paints picture of a government that condoned eradicating an entire race.

Feb 24 B6

By Barb Brouwer  
OBSERVER STAFF

**B**eloved Neskonlith elder Mary Thomas died almost three years ago, but the flames of her dream are slowly being fanned to life again.

Despite the suffering she and her people endured in residential schools and beyond, Thomas held fiercely onto her dream to bridge the gap between First Nations and other races.

One of the chief components of that dream was a cultural centre, a place where First Nations people can learn the ways of their ancestors and non-natives can be amazed by the richness of the culture in a working museum setting.

It is a dream that has long been on the books.

In the mid '60s, lawyer Don McTavish was continually defending local natives against overzealous RCMP officers, "who tried to charge the natives with all manner of things," says retired United

Church minister Dan MacQuarrie.

In an effort to change attitudes, McTavish created the Mika-Nika Friendship Club.

"It was a mixture of native and non-native people and an effort to bridge the gap between the two," says MacQuarrie, noting people toured Thomas' land, made crafts and set up displays. "The club was going strong five years until I was sent to a church in the Lower Mainland, and when I came back the club had disbanded."

But Thomas never gave up her efforts, and now her son Louis, daughter Bonnie, and MacQuarrie are working together to move the cultural centre forward.

To understand Thomas' drive and enormous ability to forgive, catch *Fallen Feather*, a movie about the First Nations experience at residential schools.

This is a movie that lays out another version of Canadian history — not the one most learned in school.

Part Cree, Jannica

Hoskins was encouraged by a relative to seek out Mary Thomas to help her in her own journey of discovery.

Her search took her to a residential school in Kamloops, now a museum, and the story of what the children bore — starvation, illness, hard work.

The greatest damage was inflicted on their collective psyche as they were told they were spawned by evil, beaten for speaking their own language and treated as if their lives were insignificant at best.

Not only did the school experience cause great harm and even death to many children, the separation from families broke whole communities.

Treated as slaves, many youths "graduated" at the age of 16 with minimal education.

It presents a harsh view of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's government that was willing to eradicate an entire race in order to successfully develop the country.

It is not maudlin. Nor

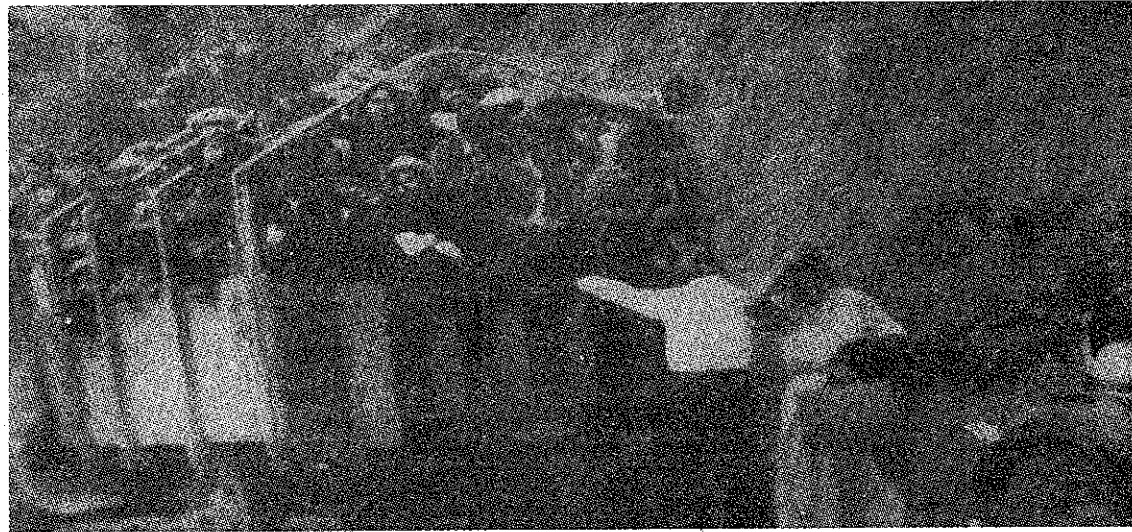


PHOTO SUBMITTED

**Rounded up:** Indian agents would arrive in communities and cram native children into filthy cattle trucks for a trip to a residential school in Kamloops.

does it berate today's Canadians. In the film Thomas tells of how the government used the churches, who would later take the brunt of the blame for the residential school debacle.

Champion dancer Ernie Philip tells about the harsh treatment children received if they tried to escape the schools.

*Fallen Feather* brings light to the devastation the schools wreaked on native families and their communities — children picked up in dirty cattle trucks without warning.

One of the gravest effects was the use of alcohol, says Louis, noting that, at one time, alcoholism was a prob-

lem for almost 100 per cent of the Neskonlith population.

"That's down to about 50 per cent now," Louis says proudly. "It's slowly changing because we're getting recognition, there's a new generation and there are 45 young natives at Okanagan College right now."

*Fallen Feather* runs tomorrow, Feb. 25 at the Salmar Classic Theatre at 7:30 p.m. It will also be run at First United Church as part of this year's Lenten series at 7 p.m. on March 3.

Tickets to the Salmar showing are \$8 and Jannica Hoskins will be on hand to discuss the film.



FILE PHOTO

**Expert:** Joyce Kenoras watches Mary Thomas prepare salmon.