

Orphans of the 1950's, Telling of Abuse, Sue Quebec

By CLYDE H. FARNSWORTH
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MONTREAL — Herve Bertrand remembers the day well — March 26, 1955 — when a nun told him and the others in his third-grade class at the Mont Providence orphanage in Montreal that they had all been declared "mentally deficient."

He was 12 and did not fully realize the implications. The nun, Sister Celeste Francoise of the Sisters of Providence, was in tears. Outside the small windows of the massive redbrick structure, the sullen gray sky was like a slab of cold steel.

By declaring the orphans mentally deficient, Quebec and the church had found a way to live with the excesses of the province obtained by subsidies from Ottawa for building hospitals and it is now paid the charges for more than twice as much for caring for psychiatric patients as it did for orphans.

What happened next is part of one of the darkest chapters of Quebec history, which is only now coming to light as hundreds of victims like Mr. Bertrand relate their stories and seek compensation and an apology from the Quebec government and seven Roman Catholic religious orders.

No More Schooling

Schooling stopped. Young Bertrand and his classmates were no longer students; they were inmates. They received instruction and would be subjected to mending, physical, mental and sexual abuse by lay nuns and the nuns themselves.

Oddy, the worst experience led to his release two years later. He was riding in an elevator with a nun, who stopped it between floors and entered him. When he told the chaplain, he was called a liar and sent to the Mont St. Annas reform school, also in Montreal.

"That was a paradise," Mr. Bertrand, 56, a plumber, said. "At Providence, we were slaves. Quebec locked us up and threw away the key."

The orphanage had been converted into a psychiatric hospital. A later investigating commission accused a number of psychiatrists from the Province Government of receiving \$1.75 a day for psychiatric patients and only \$1.25 a day for orphans.

Tensands Wrongly Classified

As the tale has unfolded, it appears that more than 1,000 abandoned children of the 1940's and 1950's were improperly classified as mentally retarded and committed to several of Quebec's 14 psychiatric hospitals, then owned and run by the Roman Catholic Church.

Mr. Bertrand, who heads a committee of the orphans seeking recognition as among the most fortunate. Thanks to the reform school and later a two-year stint in the Royal Canadian Air Force, where he learned the trade of plumber, he has been able to put his life back together. Others have not.

Gilles Bourgeois, 55, lives on tranquilizers and still cannot read and write, and Denis Le Goff, 53, has testicular problems from early beatings and has taken antidepressant pills for the last 25 years. They went with Mr. Bertrand at Mont Providence, but did not get away until much later.

Denis Lacroix, who was practicing psychiatry in the early 1960's and is now a member of the Quebec Legislative Assembly, said he was part of a commission that investigated the mental institutions in that period. "One of our main findings was that out of 23,000 patients we felt that at least one-third had no treatment being given to them."

Bernard Piché, 75, the doctor who signed the document certifying the mental deficiencies at Mont Providence, will announce plans to sue the Louis H. Lafontaine psychiatric hospital in Montreal.

He declined to respond to requests for an interview. In a comment on Photo Police, a Montreal crime tabloid, he described the forms he signed as "democracy, paperwork" and ac-

Quebec and the church classified orphans as retarded.

knowledged that he could not accurately remember examining any students.

Mr. Bertrand said he recently confronted Dr. Piché and asked heatedly, "Why did you sign that?" The doctor, according to Mr. Bertrand, replied, "I did it because the nuns asked me to."

Group Seeks \$1.5 Billion

Robert Fessenden, the lawyer for the orphans' committee, said the suits filed in Montreal and Quebec City promise to be the biggest court action in the province's history and predicted they might take three years to play out.

In a class-action petition, the committee is seeking \$1.5 billion, which could be split among as many as 2,000 people. In addition, the orphans have already filed 120 individual complaints against members of the religious orders and say payments supposedly involved in the abusive treatment.

John Paré, chief of staff for Premier Robert Bourassa of Quebec, said that because the matter was now before the courts it would not be appropriate for the government to comment. The orphans are known as the "children of Quebec," after Premier Maurice Duplessis, a Roman Catholic who everyone called "the chief" and whose Union Nationale movement ran Quebec with a strong hand throughout most of the 1940's and 1950's.

This was just before Quebec's so-called "quiet revolution" began the ruling straddled and weakening the role of the Catholic Church as a social force. The two earlier decades had been a period of widespread poverty, few social services and production of the church.

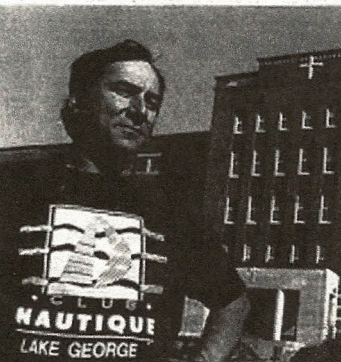
'Just Closed Their Eyes'

Dominique Jean, professor of Quebec history at Carleton University in Ottawa, said there had been a "scape-



Herve Bertrand, at left in middle row, was among the orphans in this 1955 picture who were declared "mentally deficient" in a ruse said to have benefited Quebec and the Roman Catholic Church: the

province got large subsidies from Ottawa for building hospitals; it in turn paid the Church more than twice as much for caring for psychiatric patients as for orphans. Mr. Bertrand was 12 at the time.



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"At Providence, we were slaves," said Mr. Bertrand, shown outside the Riviere des Prairies in Montreal, formerly the Mont Providence orphanage. "Quebec locked us up and threw away the key."

giving "of the church, which she finds 'very sad' because 'the whole of Quebec society was to blame.'"

The lack of caring for dependent children, she said, had been shown at the religious orders, and people on the outside "just closed their eyes to what was happening."

The religious orders, she said, were desperate for money. "Nuns were in charge of rooms of 50 turbulent pre-adolescents. So there were bound to be situations where they looked for expedient solutions."

But she acknowledged "the church had a responsibility to maintain ethical standards, and it did not."

Pedro Gil, a Montreal sociologist who has interviewed many of the orphans, said they "became the victims of the complicity of the government of power of that day — the church, the state and the medical profession."

Chiefly for financial reasons, the Duplessis government made the initial decision to put dependent children into residential hospitals. The provincial government got big subsidies from Ottawa for building hospitals, but hardly any thing for orphanages. Mr. Duplessis was much pruned at the time for his hospital building program.

Deviates Less Than Diligent

To get more children into the institutions, the provincial government offered as even encouragement to the religious orders — the \$1.75 a day for psychiatric patients against \$1.25 a day for student orphans. For the system to work, doctors had to be willing to be less than diligent in their examinations and the certificates they signed.

For other considerations, was the urgent need for labor in the hospitals. The orphans were a cheap supply; they were paid a few cents a week. Mr. Gill comments that under the morality of the times the nuns "thought they had the right to judge and punish dependent children at if those children were faulty of the sin of their parents."

Ms. Gill is the author of "The Children of Duplessis," which was published in Montreal in 1981 and which recounts the experiences of Alice Quinton, now 56, who was confined and mistreated over 36 years at the St. John's hospital in St. Edmund's Hall east of Quebec City.

In the book, young Alice, then a teenager, recalls seeing a nun beat another nun-again with a chain after the latter had complained about a beating the

A professor says, 'The whole of Quebec society was to blame.'

He has filed a charge against the nun who allegedly beat her, whose name is Sister Jeanne Quirion of the Gray Nuns of Montreal. Reached by telephone, Sœur Quirion, who is now 73, said, "I do not know Marion Kirby," and hung up.

The orders named in the court action — the Sisters of Providence, the Sisters of Mary, the Grey Nuns of Montreal, the Sisters of Charity of Quebec, the Little Franciscans of Mary, the Brothers of Notre-Dame-de-la-Merci and the Brothers of Charity — have formed a defense committee.

"These allegations are very upsetting and are the focus of all of our attention," said Sister Genevieve Fortier, a 50-year-old gray-haired nun belonging to the Little Franciscans of Mary, who speaks for the group.

"Very Much Sensitive"

Interviewed in a sparsely furnished room with a crucifix on the wall behind her in a Jean-Couture building in north Montreal, she insisted the situation had been "very much misrepresented and needs to be put into context."

She said the religious orders had begun a thorough review of the situation in light of the "laws, customs and behavioral standards of the period" and would avoid the results of a special task force created for that purpose before concentrating on the allegations.

Asked specifically about the treatment of orphans in mental institutions, she said that was a decision of the doctors involved.

"To think that the individuals that we have helped through some of their most difficult periods in life could have someone discussing and 'teaching so deeply,'" she said.

same eyes had given to a 5-year-old girl, who later died.

The second woman-ager was Marion Kirby, now 59, who recalled in a recent interview being not only beaten, but also strapped to a bed frame in a straitjacket for weeks at a time, forced to take ice baths and force-fed.

"There was no forgiveness at St. John's," said Ms. Kirby, the youngest of 12 children who was handed over to the nuns by her widowed mother in 1944.

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