One by one, the students read aloud the names of children buried in this grassland graveyard beside a dirt road marked only by two plaques erected by the government of Alberta. Then they released butterflies in the children’s honour.

In some cases, there was no name to read. Enrolment records from Dunbow Industrial School, which operated just south of Calgary from 1884 until 1922, when Ottawa closed it in favour of residential schools, are scant. But the names weren’t their birth names anyway. They were the Christian names (along with numbers) given to aboriginal children taken from their families for assimilation into Canada’s burgeoning colonial society. Of the 430 students trained here, 73 died due to what the province called “poor living conditions and health care.”

For a group of 32 young students from Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School, a private school in Okotoks, Alta., a field trip to this sacred place on Wednesday was a poignant step back in time.

“It’s a very interesting site just because it’s sad that there’s nothing left any more, but there are still all the memories that are here,” 12-year-old Alice Yates said.

As part of her school’s Humanitarian Outreach Program, this visit was the conclusion to a year of studying the challenges facing aboriginal people around the world, but also in their own backyard. Teaching about residential schools is included in many school curriculums across the country. In Alberta, the topic is mandatory at the Grade 10 level, but arises elsewhere in the curriculum. In British Columbia, it is woven through several courses in Grades 6 through 12, and, in Ontario, residential-school lessons are a key part of several courses in Grades 10 and 11, but appear elsewhere in the curriculum as well.

During this, Aboriginal Awareness Week, teachers and volunteers with Strathcona-Tweedsmuir were reading out 27 Christian identities uncovered so far by a researcher. They didn’t sugarcoat anything that went on here – and the students, Grades 4 through 6, responded.

“It’s extremely emotional,” Alice said. “And I really loved the experience of being here even though it’s sad; it’s an experience I won’t forget.”

During the 19th century, the fledgling Canadian government created its “aggressive assimilation” policy as it took over education of aboriginal peoples. Native traditions and languages were banished, and in their place English and Christianity were taught in church-run boarding schools. An estimated 150,000 children of aboriginal, Métis and Inuit descent were forced into schools nationwide. Stories emerged of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Children were kept from contact with their families.

Over time, commissions were held, apologies came, including from various churches and by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to Parliament in 2008, and compensation packages flowed. Payments are now expected to top $4-billion as the number of former residents alleging abuse has climbed to 37,716, according to the Indian Residential Schools Adjudication Secretariat. That’s more than triple original estimates, and doesn’t include another fund, which handed out an additional $1.62-billion in compensation by the end of last year to about 80,000 former students, whether they were abused or not.

The Dunbow school, also known as St. Joseph’s and operated by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, was a kind of precursor for the formal residential school system and was once described by the Edmonton Journal as “a blueprint for despair.”

Built in a lush valley on the Highwood River, it was purposely placed far from nearby reserves and Métis communities. Students were taught farming, industrial and domestic skills along with some academic lessons. Stories of maltreatment were also found here. The facility eventually closed in debt and with some buildings unfit for human habitation. Crumbling structures and the marked gravesite are all that’s left.

As the new generation of students gathered on this chilly, rainy day, local resident Marian Davenport explained her unusual attachment to this site. She recalled rafting (pushing, propelling) down the river years ago, then engorged after a flood, when she spotted something unusual jutting out of the banks.

“It was horrifying,” she recalled. “Coffin boxes sticking out.”

On a similarly cold, grey day in May, 2001, a group of elders gathered here to rebury the remains of 34 children who had been unceremoniously unearthed due to years of flooding and erosion. The rest remain lodged somewhere in the riverbanks, unmarked, largely forgotten.

But not to Laurie Sommerville, another local resident who took a special interest in this place, and started looking through archives and church records. So far, she has come up with the names of 27 students who died here and helped organize this field trip to “gift” at least some of them back their names.

“Our research isn’t done,” she said. “We’ll still try to find them all. The rights of a child, I think, they have the right to an identity and I learned that from these [Strathcona-Tweedsmuir] kids.”

