

# Chapter 1

On the sunny afternoon of October 16, 1966, 12-year-old Charlie (a.k.a "Chanie") Wenjack was enjoying himself on the swings in the playground at the back of Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School in northwestern Ontario.

Seven days later, his lifeless body was found lying beside the railway tracks about 70 kilometres east of the Ontario/Manitoba border.

Today, Charlie Wenjack is the most famous Indian residential school student in Canadian history.

Books have been written about Charlie. Buildings have been named in his memory. He is featured in more than 50 "Legacy Spaces" across Canada sponsored by banks, major retailers, universities, performing arts centres and governments.

Thousands of Canadians from coast to coast "Walk for Wenjack" every October.

Children in more than 65,000 classrooms across Canada and in the United States are being taught about his altogether too short life and tragic death in a book called *Secret Path*.

School boards have incorporated lesson plans based on *Secret Path*.

However, most of what is written and said about Charlie Wenjack has no basis in fact.

Here, for the first time, is the true story of his short life and tragic death.

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There was no way of predicting how famous Charlie was going to become back on that sunny afternoon of Sunday, October 16, 1966.

Two orphaned brothers were with him at the swings that afternoon, 13-year-old Ralph McDonald and his 11-year-old brother Jack.

Their parents had been run over by a train in the middle of the night two years previously. They were buried at the Ojibwa Presbyterian Cemetery at the opposite end

of Round Lake from the Cecilia Jeffery Indian Residential School on the outskirts of Kenora.

According to the June 19, 1958, issue of the *Kenora Daily Miner and News*, the cemetery “is a last resting place for Christian Indians in this area.”

Staff from Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School took care of the cemetery until after the school was closed in 1976 and the property was transferred to the Grand Council Treaty #3. Since that time, the cemetery, where a significant number of Christian Ojibways were buried, has been neglected and is overgrown with weeds.

If you're not familiar with Kenora, it's an almost entirely white community of approximately 15,000 at the north end of the Lake of the Woods, about 50 kilometres east of the Ontario/Manitoba border.

The school, which was operated by the Women's Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, was on a former 60-hectare farm.

Most of the 150 students from far-away reserves without schools, including Charlie at the time of his death, were attending public schools in Kenora and boarded at Cecilia Jeffrey.

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The Indian Act had been amended in 1951 to enable the federal government to arrange with the provincial governments and school boards to have Indigenous students educated in public schools. By 1960, the number of students attending public schools (9,479) was equal to the number in residential schools (9,471).

At Cecilia Jeffrey, however, a reverse form of integration had taken place. Starting in 1960, a significant number of white students were relocated to the Indian residential school.

In a letter to the editor published in the January 18, 1961, *Kenora Daily Miner and News*, Principal Stephen T. Robinson said a new school was to have been built on the Cecilia Jeffrey property to accommodate 50 to 60 Indigenous students – plus

students from white schools in the immediate area to relieve overcrowding in the public system.

However, the project was delayed and, in consultation with the Jaffray Melick school board, it was decided that 80 white students would join the Indigenous students at Cecilia Jeffrey.

“Working and playing in these surroundings,” Principal Robinson said, “have given both of these groups of children a good understanding of each other.”

A local newspaper reporter interviewed two white and two Indigenous students in Grade 8 to get their reaction to the reverse integration process.

The article said the reporter had expected there would be both pros and cons on the issue “but except for some shyness on the part of the girls, there seems to have been no problem.”

One white student said he’d been at the Rabbit Lake School until 1960 and was told he was being moved to Cecilia Jeffrey.

“I did not have any feeling against it,” he said. “I am here [at Cecilia Jeffrey] and I like it. There is more to do, and we are able to take shop which I like. There are bigger playing fields. I don’t care whether Indians or other boys are on the team.

“If I were asked to choose on my own whether or not to come to Cecilia Jeffrey, I would come.”

An Indigenous student from Sandy Lake, more than 500 kilometres north of Kenora, had been at Cecilia Jeffrey for several years.

“I did not mind when I learned that Rabbit Lake [School] pupils were coming to C.J. school. I think it is nice having them here. If we go on to high school it will be good for us to get used to non-Indian friends before we get there. We learn more English with more English-speaking kids around.”

Another white student from the Rabbit Lake School said she’d been at another public school before Rabbit Lake.

“I felt a little funny about coming here [to Cecilia Jeffrey] at first, but I like the girls and we all get along fine. One thing which I enjoy a lot at C.J. School is our nice home economics department.”

A student from the Lac des Mille Lacs band at Upsala, about 350 kilometres east of Kenora, described her feelings when the white students first arrived at Cecilia Jeffrey.

“We girls felt shy when outsiders first came to our school, but now we are glad they are here. I have some non-Indian friends among my classmates. My sister has a very close friend who is a white girl. They phone each other every night. There doesn’t seem to be much difference between us all.”

By the time Charlie arrived at Cecilia Jeffrey, a new public school had been built nearby to accommodate local white students and Indigenous students who would board at Cecilia Jeffrey.

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Ralph McDonald had run away three times since the start of school that fall. Jack played hooky on a regular basis. Charlie, on the other hand, had made no attempt to run away during the three years he’d been at the school. However, he did skip class at the public school he was attending one afternoon a week previously.

For that, Charlie was spanked by the new principal, Colin Wasacase, a Cree/Saulteaux from the Ochopowace Band east of Regina who had attended residential schools as a child and taught at two of them as an adult.

According to a report on the inquest into Charlie’s death in the *Kenora Daily Miner and News*, it was a restless Ralph McDonald who took the initiative to leave that Sunday afternoon “because he wanted to visit his uncle whom he liked.” The newspaper quoted Ralph saying he much preferred trapping with his uncle to being in school.

The newspaper also said that Charlie’s best friend, 10-year-old Eddie Cameron, testified that Charlie was lonely and, when the McDonald brothers headed for their uncle’s cabin, he decided to tag along with them.

According to an article that was published in *Maclean's* magazine in February, 1967, the decision to run away was made on the spur of the moment. "Right there on the playground the three boys decided to run away," Toronto writer Ian Adams wrote. "It was a sunny [Sunday] afternoon and they were wearing only light clothing. If they had planned it a little better they could have taken along their parkas and overshoes. That might have saved Charlie's life."

Three of Charlie's sisters, who were also at Cecilia Jeffrey, might very well have been on the playground that Sunday afternoon. If he had no intention of returning after the visit to the uncle's cabin, it is reasonable to speculate that he would have given his sisters a hug goodbye.

Ian Adams wrote that "slipping away was simple". It was.

During one of our many interviews in Kenora, former senior staffer Abe Loewen told me the doors were never locked. There was no gate at the open pillared entrance from the road and no fence on its north side. Nothing would have prevented Charlie or any other child from leaving the school whenever they felt like it.

In a letter Principal Colin Wasacase wrote to the Women's Missionary Society a month before Charlie's death, he said a large number of children had taken advantage of the warm weather "by staying away from school and wandering away from the premises." He said he hoped they would soon recover from the urge to wander "and settle into the school situation as the year progresses."

He wrote another letter a few days later saying the children had started to settle down a bit and only a few persisted in wandering away from the property whenever they pleased.

In response to his letter, a senior staff member of the Women's Missionary Society in Toronto wrote saying she recalled being at the school a few years previously and "it was very difficult to get the youngsters in for their meals.

“It was the kind of weather which must have made them think of home. I realize that it will be a very trying period for the staff and I do trust that while we do not hope for poor weather they will soon become accustomed to the routine of the new school year.”

In a letter dated November 17, 1966, Mr. Wasacase wrote: “At present the children have settled down somewhat. We have a few hookey [sic] players but there are a few attempted runaways. We have been successful in getting them back all the same day.”

Two months later, Mr. Wasacase wrote: “Things seem to have quieted down here at the school somewhat. There were a few who began to play hooky but have settled in after a talk with them. A few of the younger girls have tried a small escapade, but they have returned on their own. We hope the extreme cold will keep them in for us for the time being.”

In a letter dated March 21, 1967, Mr. Wasacase wrote: “The students have not fully settled down as yet [after returning from the Christmas break] especially on the girls’ side. A few of the girls have been wandering away from the school but with no real intent of running away home but only to visit friends or hang around town. These are a few who have started a few more [to wander off]. We are hoping that they will become settled.”

Abe Loewen told me that Stephen Robinson, who was principal from 1958 until a few months before Charlie’s death, used to arrange for sandwiches to be left in the bush so wandering children wouldn’t go hungry.

He knew where they were and that they’d be home in time for supper. They’d most likely wandered away because they hadn’t settled down after the freedom they had enjoyed spending summer vacation back on the reserves.

In fact, the senior boys had a trapline which extended all the way around Kenora.

Charlie and the McDonald brothers were free to come and go as they pleased, outside of classes, and this was, after all, a Sunday afternoon.

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According to the article in *Maclean's* and the report in the *Kenora Daily Miner and News*, Charlie and the McDonald brothers spent the first night away from the school about 30 kilometres north of Kenora at a cabin owned by a white man the brothers referred to as "Mr. Benson". He gave the exhausted boys something to eat and let them sleep on the floor.

They walked less than a kilometre the next morning to the cabin where the brothers' uncle, Charles Kelly, lived with his wife Clara and two teenage daughters.

Ian Adams wrote in the article in *Maclean's* that the uncle, like many Ojibways in the area, lived a hard life and, despite the modest income he derived from welfare and trapping, his family was often desperate for food.

He said it was obvious that Charles Kelly cared for his nephews and was uncertain about what to do about the fact that they were supposed to be in school.

"I told the boys," he quoted Mr. Kelly saying, "they would have to go back to school. They said if I sent them back they would run away again. I didn't know what to do. They won't stay at the school. I couldn't let them run around in the bush. So I let them stay. It was a terrible mistake."

Yes. It most certainly was.

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Charlie Wenjack was born on January 19, 1954, at the remote, fly-in, Ojibway community of Ogoki Post on the Albany River up near James Bay. His father was a fur trapper.

Ogoki Post is part of Marten Falls Indian Reserve No. 65. Starting around 1784, Marten Falls was a Hudson's Bay Company supply depot for traders from Hudson's Bay heading to points farther south.

Marten Falls is one of the reserves included in Treaty No. 9 which covered 145,000 square kilometres inhabited by approximately 2,500 Ojibways and Crees. When the treaty was signed in 1905, the population of Marten Falls was approximately 150.

Here's how the treaty commissioners described the community in their report: "This is an important post of the Hudson's Bay Company, in charge of Mr. Samuel Iserhoff. A number of Indians were awaiting the arrival of the commission. The first glance at the Indians served to convince that they were not equal in physical development to those at Osnaburg or Fort Hope [farther south], and the comparative poverty of their hunting grounds may account for this fact."

Despite the fact the people at Marten Falls did not fare as well as their counterparts farther south, a feast was held after the treaty was signed. Here's how the commissioners described it.

"At the feast Chief [William] Whitehead made an excellent speech, in which he described the benefits that would follow the treaty and his gratitude to the King and the government for extending a helping and protecting hand to the Indians."

Later in their report, the commissioners said: "The commodious Roman Catholic church situated on the high bank of the river overlooking the Hudson's Bay Company's buildings was the most conspicuous object at this post."

One of the four headmen who signed Treaty No. 9 with an X at Marten Falls on Tuesday, July 25, 1905, was listed as William Weenjack (sic). He could very well have been one of Charlie Wenjack's relatives.

In the 1930s and 1940s, when Charlie's father James and mother Agnes were growing up, people at Marten Falls lived in teepees and prospector tents. There was no electricity or plumbing. The only means of transportation was by dog teams, canoes and York boats.

Most babies were born in the bush with assistance from midwives. In winter, the newborns would be wrapped in blankets made of rabbit fur to keep them warm. Dried moss was used instead of diapers.

Homemade cradleboards were used to keep the babies safe on their mothers' backs. As they got older and started to walk, bigger cradleboards were made.

The girls learned at a young age how to make lacing for the snowshoes and moccasins and mittens.

The boys would be out in the bush with their fathers learning how to trap and hunt and cut wood.

The main food was moose meat, supplemented by rabbits and partridges.

In late September of each year, the families would head for their traplines and stay out in the bush until May or June. Game was getting scarce at that time. Families would sometimes have no pelts to trade at the Hudson's Bay Company store for food and other items.

The families would often get together for square dancing, playing cards, and renewing acquaintances. When the children returned home from residential school in June, a square dance was held to celebrate having them home for the summer months.

According to records kept by the Department of Indian Affairs, townsite planning and development didn't start until the 1970s. Up until the 1980s, there were no sewers or waterworks.

As of June, 2022, approximately 650 individuals were registered as status Indians at Marten Falls. Of those, about half were still living on the reserve and the others were living off-reserve.

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Charlie Wenjack was nine when he first attended Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School in Kenora, which was about 600 kilometres away from the remote, fly-in, reserve

where he was born. To get there, he had to spend about an hour on a plane and more than 10 hours on a train.

There is no record of anything Charlie said about the way he was treated during the three years he was at Cecilia Jeffrey. However, students who were at the school at, or around, the same time as Charlie wrote letters describing the school as a place where they felt loved and cared for.

A significant number of the students called Principal Stephen Robinson and his wife Agnes, who was the school matron, “Mom” and “Dad”. Several signed their letters “Love”. Many thanked them for being such good parents to them while they were living hundreds of kilometres away from their homes and family.

Parents who had attended the school wrote letters saying they had enjoyed their time there and appreciated the way their children were being cared for.

A teenage student at home for the holidays at a fly-in reserve about 520 kilometres northeast of Kenora wrote on the back of the envelope “R.T. [return to] one of your Indian daughters” and addressed Mrs. Robinson as “Dearest Mom”.

Towards the end of her letter, she wrote: *Moms say hi to Pops for me and happy holidays to both of you. Thanks for everything you've done for me during the year.*

*I better close off with May God be with You.*

*Love.*

The letter was dated August 13, 1965, a little over a year before Charlie Wenjack's death. Her name, as with the names of the other students and parents from whose letters I will be quoting, is being withheld for privacy reasons.

Former students wrote saying they received letters from their children saying they enjoyed being at Cecilia Jeffrey and that they, the parents, had also enjoyed the years they'd spent at the school.

Students who had left to go to high school in North Bay wrote about how they were adapting to their new surroundings and expressing thanks for how well they had been cared for at Cecilia Jeffrey.

Former students who had left because they were needed at home, or for other reasons, like running away, wrote asking if the school would please take them back. Others said they wanted to come for a visit and renew acquaintances with the staff and friends they had made while they were at the school.

There isn't so much as a hint in the more than 300 letters that I have read about any child being emotionally, physically, or sexually abused by any member of the staff at Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School.

However, as you will see later in this book, there was a significant amount of bullying. You will also note that younger children were reluctant to report bullying or any other abuse for fear of retribution.

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Charlie's best friend Eddie Cameron showed up at Charles Kelly's cabin Monday morning. He was another of Mr. Kelly's nephews and, according to Mr. Adams, this "gathering of relations subtly put Charlie Wenjack out in the cold."

Mr. Adams said that when he interviewed them after Charlie's death Mr. Kelly and his wife referred to Charlie as "the stranger". He also wrote that the Kellys "had no idea where Charlie's reserve was or how to get there."

As Charlie was with them for four days, there was more than enough time to get an approximate idea of where his home was by asking how he got to the school. He had made the approximately 600-kilometre trip seven times over the last three years.

If they had asked, Charlie would most likely have told them about having to take the plane and the train. It would have become abundantly clear that there was absolutely no way the 12-year-old boy could make it home on foot.

However, it would appear that no one bothered to ask Charlie how long it took to get from the school to his home.

According to the article in *Maclean's*: "Nobody told Charlie to go. Nobody told him to stay either. But as the days passed Charlie got the message."

I have often wondered why Charlie stayed with his friends and the Kellys for four days after leaving the school. It strikes me that he wasn't in any particular hurry to get home.

Perhaps, and it's only a perhaps, he might have tagged along with his friends if they had gone back to the school, just like he did when Ralph McDonald decided he wanted to visit his uncle.

In fact, if it had been raining that bright, sunny, afternoon of Sunday, October 16, 1966, he would most likely have been asleep in his bed in the dormitory that night instead of sleeping on the floor of a stranger's cabin. We'll never know.

On Thursday morning, Mr. Kelly decided to take his three nephews about five kilometres north to his trapline at Mud Lake. "It was too dangerous for five in the canoe," Mr. Adams quoted him saying, "so I told the stranger he would have to stay behind."

Charlie remained at the cabin and played by himself for a while, Mr. Adams wrote, and then he told Clara Kelly he was leaving. He asked for some matches so he could warm himself by a fire along the way.

It was late October and the temperature dropped significantly at night. All he had to protect himself from the bitter cold was a light cotton windbreaker. Mrs. Kelly gave him some wooden matches in a little glass jar and some fried potatoes mixed with strips of bacon.

*She's a mother. He's a 12-year-old Ojibway boy. Why didn't she give him a big hug and tell him he should stay with her until his friends got back from the trapline?*

Instead of striking east along the Canadian National Railways right-of-way toward his far-away home, Charlie walked north about five kilometres and got to the cabin at the trapline before his friends and their uncle arrived in the canoe.

Again, I take this as yet another example of him not being in any hurry to head for home. Or, for that matter, even contemplating heading east on the tracks in an effort to reach his family and home.

Mr. Adams said all they had to eat at the cabin that night was two potatoes Mr. Kelly cooked and divided among the four boys. He had nothing for himself to eat and drank some tea with them.

Let's bring Principal Colin Wasacase into the story.

During one of our several interviews in Kenora, he told me he became quite concerned when he discovered that Charlie was missing. He searched Rabbit Lake and other areas while an Indian Affairs official searched around the Rat Portage Indian reserve and the Keewatin area. Meanwhile, the police were trying to contact Charlie's parents at Ogoki Post.

On making inquiries, Mr. Wasacase learned that Charlie had been on the swings in the playground with the McDonald brothers. He told me he knew their uncle lived about 30 kilometres away. When there was still no word of the boy's whereabouts by Thursday, he decided to drive to the uncle's cabin on a hunch that Charlie might be there.

When he knocked on the cabin door three days before Charlie's lifeless body was found beside the railway tracks, he said, Clara Kelly told him neither the boys nor Charlie had been there. In fact, Charlie had been at her home since Monday morning

and was alive and well with her husband and nephews at the trapline, less than five kilometres away.

Mr. Wasacase told me he still wasn't sure why she didn't tell him the truth. He thought it might have been because she didn't want to cause trouble for her three nephews. There's also the possibility she might have feared getting herself and her husband in trouble for not notifying the authorities like the inquest jury later said they should have.

According to the article in *Maclean's*, Charles Kelly told Charlie on Friday morning that he'd have to walk back to the main cabin because there wasn't enough room for him in the canoe. Charlie said that was okay because he'd decided to walk home to be with his father and wouldn't be going back to the cabin.

"I never said nothing to that," Mr. Adams quoted Mr. Kelly saying. "I showed him a good trail down to the [nearby] railroad tracks. I told him to ask the section men along the way for some food."

How could anyone turn a 12-year-old boy loose in bad weather with no food or water and without the foggiest idea of where he was going? Mr. Kelly wouldn't have put one of his nephews in harm's way like that.

Charlie was in one of the groups of boys that Abe Loewen was in charge of at Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School.

While reflecting on Charles Kelly's decision to turn him loose on the railway tracks, he said: "He was the least likely to function in the bush."

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In the official form that he filled out to support issuing the warrant for holding an inquest into Charlie's death, Coroner Dr. R. Glenn Davidson wrote: "They stayed at the Kellys for a few days, and then Wenjack was told to leave. Wenjack was given some matches

in a glass container and a map by Kelly's wife. It is believed he left about 3:00 p.m. October 19 [Wednesday.] to head east for Nakina, a distance of 375 miles east of Redditt."

One reason why Dr. Davidson had the wrong date – Mr. Kelly didn't show Charlie the way to the nearby railway tracks until Friday the 21<sup>st</sup> -- was because the *Macleans*' article describing Charlie's trip to the trapline wasn't published until more than three months after his death. That important information wasn't available to Dr. Davidson at the time he issued the warrant for the inquest.

Dr. Davidson wrote in his report that one of the reasons he decided to hold the inquest was: "To ascertain if [Charles] Kelly turned the boy loose with no food to travel over 300 miles east, on the [railway] track."

That would have taken Charlie to the train station at Nakina from where he'd have to spend an hour on a plane to get to Ogoki Post. He had no food, water, or money.

The report in the *Kenora Daily Miner and News* said: "There [at Kelly's cabin] they were cared for and enjoyed trips to a trap line with the uncle. After a few days the Wenjack lad took his departure and started to walk along the single-track C.N.R. right of way."

Contrary to what he told Ian Adams, Charles Kelly testified at the inquest that Charlie had left without his knowledge.

Here's what the newspaper report said: "Charles Kelly, the uncle, said the boys had arrived at his place about 7:00 a.m. [Monday morning.], and he looked after them. He told of taking his three nephews trapping and left the Wenjack boy at the house and it was during this time that the lad had made off and was not seen again alive...."

"Checking a diary which he maintains Kelly testified that the boys had run away on October 16<sup>th</sup>, arriving at his home the following day. Wenjack left on Friday the 21<sup>st</sup> and his body was found on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

“When he took his departure, said Kelly, the boy was without food of any kind, **having left without his knowledge** [emphasis added].”

It’s worth noting that Mr. Kelly’s own diary said Charlie didn’t leave until “Friday the 21<sup>st</sup>.” However, it appears that neither the coroner nor anyone on the jury caught the glaring contradiction in his testimony.

You might recall that Mr. Kelly told Ian Adams that he showed Charlie how to get down to the railway tracks on Friday morning and told him to ask section men along the way for some food.

When the six-hour hearing was over, the jury issued a handwritten report that said both “Mr. Benson” at whose cabin the boys stayed Sunday night and Mr. Kelly “should have notified the authorities of the boys [sic] presence.”

They most certainly should have.

We can only speculate about what serious consequences there would have been for Charles Kelly if the coroner and the jury had known that Charlie had been at his trapline cabin Thursday night and that he turned him loose Friday morning with neither food nor water or the foggiest idea of where he was going.

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Charles Kelly was the last person to see Charlie alive.

The boy only made it about 20 kilometres east on the railway tracks through snow squalls and freezing rain, wearing a light cotton windbreaker, before fainting and falling on his back.

The engineer of a westbound freight train spotted his lifeless body lying beside the railway tracks at a rock cut just before noon Sunday morning – seven days after he’d been playing on the swings with the McDonald brothers at Cecilia Jeffrey.

“Charlie must have fallen several times because bruises were found later on his shins, forehead and over his left eye,” Ian Adams wrote in the *Macleans* article. “And then at some point on Saturday night, Charlie fell backward in a faint and never got up again. That's the position they found him in.”

Dr. Davidson listed the cause of Charlie's death as “exposure to cold and wet”. He also said: “The deceased was not strong, and was very quiet and likely timid, as many young Indian children are who have little to do with town life.”

Charlie was, indeed, a very slight, frail, little boy. It would appear from the autopsy report that he had contracted tuberculosis several years before his death. Dr. Peter D. Pan's report on the post-mortem examination said he had a healed right thoracotomy scar where his chest had been opened. He had mild pulmonary congestion. There were focal pleural adhesions on his right lung.

Gravel was found on his face and mouth. His stomach was empty. He'd been dead for about twenty-four hours.

That was a truly tragic end for this young Ojibway boy who had no choice but to attend an Indian residential school 600 kilometres away from his home and family.

Especially when you reflect on the fact that he might very well have been alive today if one, or all, of the three adults he came in contact with after tagging along with the McDonald brothers on that bright Sunday afternoon of October 16, 1966, had acted in a responsible manner and notified the school or the police.

Charlie would have celebrated his 69th birthday on Saturday, January 19, 2023.