

feature

10,635 Orphans

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PHOTOGRAPHY **JESSICA SAUCK**



Life for some at the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children was a nightmare while others considered it a safe haven from a circle of poverty and abuse at the hands of their parents.

The orphanage housed 10,635 children from 1886 to 1945. It's said that there are at least 10,635 different perspectives on life in the school for the orphaned, neglected, abandoned and abused. For some, abuse awaited them within the walls of the institution while others found steady meals, clothes and an education.

At the height of the Great Depression, children were being turned over as wards of the state in great numbers. At maximum capacity, the institution housed 500 children at one time and had 100 staff members onsite. Heralded as a model of self-sufficiency, the original 160 acre compound – which later grew to 329 acres – was a small city all its own. With housing cottages, a hospital, nursery, a dairy barn, bakery, water tower, power plant, a large garden

and greenhouse for the production of food, and even its own cemetery where 198 children are buried today, there was little reason for the children or staff to ever leave the grounds.

The backgrounds of the children left at the orphanage followed a similar theme: parents who were down and out, alcoholics, in trouble with the law for bootlegging or were suffering from terminal illnesses and could no longer properly care for their children would leave the upbringing of them to the care of the state. Many were simply down on their luck, but not all children placed at the orphanage were parentless; surprisingly some had parents living within the county throughout their stay at the orphanage.

At the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children, siblings entering the facility were separated. The children were allowed to see only one sibling once each month in an effort to avoid families from making escape plans. Children first entering the institution were sent to Cottage 12, the detention cottage. It was here where they received shots, were

monitored for diseases and had their hair washed in kerosene as their welcome to the new environment. The kerosene was meant to kill any lice living within their locks. Lying side by side on a long wooden table, each child was given the same hair treatment. One particular horrific memory from the orphanage was when a Native American child, who fought this cleansing with his might, was held down to receive the treatment and drowned after being doused with the kerosene.

Life at the orphanage was hard. Days were filled with strict structure, hard work sometimes interlaced with beatings and harsh discipline. There was little love or caring, no warm embrace or heartfelt words. For those who had living parents or family members, visits were discouraged and regulated to once per year. Letters from caring relatives were intercepted as to not encourage emotions in the children – emotions that matrons would have to squelch from the child in the end. It was also here where newborn infants were sometimes abandoned at the steps of the nursery, left without a name. Using little creativity ▶

The Minnesota State Public School Orphanage Museum was founded to remember the children.



Cottages were home to approximately 25 children with a female matron as surrogate mother.

SUBMITTED PHOTOS





Museum director Maxine Ronglien supervises the daily operations of the Orphanage Museum where visitors can learn about the school's unique history.

What was referred to as "the chair" was used as a control mechanism to gather the group before leaving the cottage.

or imagination, staff members often named the abandoned babies after famous individuals of history including: Ulysses S. Grant, Florence Nightingale and Napoleon Bonaparte.

While touring Cottage 11, you find a clean, tidy and deceptively homey porch and immaculate living room. Beyond those rooms are two levels of bedrooms with fixtures and flooring resembling a school. Some rooms contained two beds while others contained four. When the institution was crowded, the boys slept two to each single cot. There was humiliation, sometimes by other boys and oftentimes by the matron, for bedwetters and nightly misery upon a boy that was matched with anyone who wet his bed. In an effort to curb bedwetting, the night watchman would make his rounds, rousting the bedwetters twice a night to

use the lavatory, but the wetting continued.

It was at Cottage 11 where Miss Morgan was the matron ruling with a stern fist for 22 years. This seemingly plain red-haired woman wore sterile nurse uniforms and doled out little love to the children in her charge. The boys living in the cottage – ages 6 to 13 – were only allowed to enter the living room of the cottage to scrub and polish it weekly on their hands and knees. The boys who occupied Cottage 11 would spend a majority of their time in the basement. It was here where they played basketball with makeshift hoops, marbles and board games. It was also here that they again scrubbed the floors with scalding water weekly on their hands and knees.

Lined along the basement of each cottage was a row of wooden chairs.

What was referred to as "the chair" was a wooden chair used as a control mechanism to gather the group before leaving the cottage as well as a form of punishment. Those being punished in "the chair" were required to sit in total silence with their feet flat on the floor, knees together with their arms folded across their chest until the matron determined they had learned their lesson. In the cottages housing girls, female children were required to use these chairs where they would do their daily dressing and undressing in public display of the other girls and with no talking whatsoever. The chairs were where the children kept their only personal possessions hanging in a bag on the back which contained such things as hair brushes, bobby pins and even partially chewed gum for safekeeping.

Each cottage had its own outdoor playground. The children from the cottages were never allowed to mingle with others from neighboring cottages, which is why each cottage had its own playground equipment. The nearby train track proved too tempting for some of the older boys of Cottage 11, and many ran away. Other boys watched the hobos that rode the rails with amusement and threw apples their way.

Each day, the children were awakened between 5:30 and 6 a.m. Many of

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the children had jobs in the bakery, barns, gardens or various other stations. Children of all ages toiled to keep things running smoothly at the orphanage. At 7:30 p.m. in Cottage 11, Matron Morgan dismissed each boy one-by-one for bedtime often requiring each to sing her a song, recite a poem or perform in some manner for her amusement.

Life outside the institution typically meant that a child was “placed out.” Instead of being adopted to a loving, warm family, it was often the case that children were selected to work as indentured servants at local farms, often treated as help or maids. In other cases, children were adopted to replace biological children lost during child-birth or early childhood diseases so prevalent in the day. Adoptive families rarely treated these children as part of the family and abuse was common.

Albeit few, there were some happy memories for children housed at the orphanage. The Fourth of July Celebration was a time where children from all cottages intermingled to celebrate the holiday in an outdoor picnic setting, and Christmas offered a time when the children sang carols, received hard candy and two or three small gifts.

Today Cottage 11 is open for public viewing. Throughout you find audio and video stations narrated by former resident Harvey Ronglien who lived at the institution until he was 16 years old. Harvey describes a difficult life for the children but is quick to point out that the home pulled him from the grasp of poverty where he became educated. The Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children remains as a testament to the lives of more than 10,000 children – all as unique as their fingerprints, with a tale to tell. Find more riveting stories filled with life altering drama by visiting the site at 540 West Hills Circle in Owatonna, Minnesota. [W](#)



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The stories of the children from the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children are compelling and riveting. To learn more about the stories of those who grew up in the orphanage, read the following memoirs or view the DVD available at the orphanage museum. Go to www.orphanagemuseum.com for more information and to find their online bookstore.

- A Boy from C-11
~Harvey Ronglien
- While the Locust Slept
~Peter Razor
- Iris Blossom and Boxing Gloves
~Iris Wright
- No Tears Allowed
~Eva Carlson Jensen
- My Light at the End of the Tunnel
~Helen Bowers
- Crackers and Milk
~Arlene Nelson
- The Children Remember Life at the Minnesota Public School for the Dependent and Neglected Children 1886-1945
~DVD

