

# The Radiator Brush



Minnesota State Public School Orphanage Museum & Historic Cottage 11 Boys' Cottage  
~ Spring 2015 Newsletter Edition ~

## *You Can Go Home Again*

### OWATONNA PEOPLES PRESS ARTICLE – DECEMBER 2014

**Anne Peterson, Museum Director**

If we just look at the numbers, 2014 was a successful year for the Minnesota State Public School Orphanage Museum. However, I've noticed something just as remarkable going on, which is harder to quantify and often very private. I'd like to share some behind-the-scenes stories that help convey the personal effect the Orphanage Museum has had on some of our guests.

A highlight of any day at the Museum is when a former State Schooler pays a visit. While their numbers are dwindling and their ages increasing, they still come. Some make an annual pilgrimage from as far away as Florida and Texas. While the State School closed in 1945, the passing years have not diminished the pull to this place which they called home as children.

Three "girls"—now ages 80, 89, and 92—whom I met during their visits shared fond memories of their lives at the orphanage. We often use the phrase, "For some it was a circle of hell; for others, a safe haven" to describe the circumstances of the children who were placed at the State School. These women represent the "safe haven."

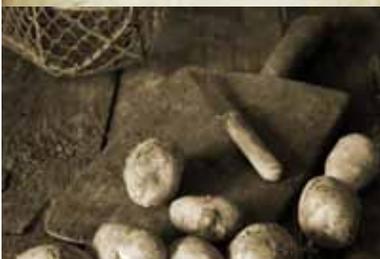
One woman named Leila recounted that she came to visit Owatonna in the 1970s and when she drove up West Hills Circle and saw Cottage 4 had been torn down, she turned around and vowed never to return. Her childhood home had been destroyed. It took more

than 40 years for her to come back. She was delighted to see a photo of Cottage 4 in the Museum and spent a lot of time reminiscing with the friend who drove her this time. She also said, "I'll poke anybody who says anything bad about the State School." (Being feisty seems to be a common trait among former State Schoolers.)



The other two women, Iris and Gretchen, happened to come on the same day. Iris is much younger and was not here at the same time as Gretchen, but we witnessed an instant connection. They were speaking to each other in a way that only former State Schoolers must understand because of their shared experiences.

*"I always feel like crying over the orphanage and I am not sure why, as I was treated well there. I think it might be the feeling of having lost... or never really having... a father or mother, as the family I went to never felt like a father or mother to me. The State School was my home."*



Iris wrote a note after her visit and in it she said, "I always feel like crying over the orphanage and I am not sure why, as I was treated well there. I think it might be the feeling of having lost...or never really having...a father or mother, as the family I went to never felt like a father or mother to me. The State School was my home."

In 2013, Gretchen came back to Owatonna for the first time since the 1950s. More than once she was in tears going through the Museum because she was so happy to see that the memories had been preserved. She insisted on sitting on one of the little chairs in the basement of Cottage 11. All cottages used chairs to keep order, so Gretchen was able to relive a bit of her childhood. This year she returned with her daughters, granddaughter, and great-grandson so they could also visit her State School "home." Gretchen also had a request. She wanted to find out what was in her file. Every child who entered the State School was a ward of the State of Minnesota and individual records were kept on each. The Orphanage Museum does not have these records, but they are available through the Minnesota History Center's research library for a fee.

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*Imagine being 92 years old and finally reading a letter from your mother where she calls you "my baby girl."*

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Gretchen gave permission to our volunteer researcher in the Twin Cities and he was able to send her copies of letters written by her mother—in the 1930s. The original letters were put in her file and never delivered. Apparently, the practice at the time was to not give children letters from home because the institution did not want to deal with homesick children. Imagine being 92 years old and finally reading a letter from your mother where she calls you "my baby girl."

We also received an e-mail from a woman in South Carolina who wanted information on her birth father. Both her father and mother were State Schoolers, but they never married. It was years before she learned that her step-father was not her real father. Fortunately, we had a photo of the young man alleged to be her birth father that we sent her. She responded excitedly that she now knew where her children got their dark curly hair; the resemblance was amazing.

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*"Listening to your story was so good for me to hear. It gave me a better window into what our son's world could have been like in China. He was in an orphanage for 6 years. Your story reminded me to give him grace and to continue to be patient. He is a good boy."*

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As mentioned at the beginning, we had 57 group tours this year. An adoptive mother heard Harvey's presentation in which he always talks about the effects growing up in an institution can have on a child. She wrote Harvey this poignant message, "Listening to your story was so good for me to hear. It gave me a better window into what our son's world could have been like in China. He was in an orphanage for 6 years. Your story reminded me to give him grace and to continue to be patient. He is a good boy."

These are just a few of the many quiet successes we've had this year. We consider ourselves fortunate to have a museum that not only offers a glimpse into history, but also affects the lives of many people who come. We are grateful to the community and our benefactors for supporting this unique place.

### *Obituary Book Project – We Could Use Your Help*

We are putting together a reference book of obituaries of State Schoolers. We often get copies of newspaper obituaries or memorial cards from family members, but we know there are many we are missing. If you have a dear one's obituary, we would greatly appreciate receiving a copy for our collection. Please mail it to the Orphanage Museum.

### *Artifacts Returned to Museum*

Thank you to Becky Johnson who donated back a high chair she had purchased when the State School had an auction in the late 1960s. After using it for her children, she wondered if we wanted it back. The answer was a responding "Yes!" Board Member Greg Thomas gave it some TLC and it's now ready to be added to our Nursery display.

We also recently received two items of clothing donated by Pat Robbenolt, widow of Roger (Tibbetts) Robbenolt, which he brought with him when he was adopted. One is the hand-sewn suit and the other a playsuit, both in very good condition. We want to add them to our display as well. Roger and Pat served as co-pastors of several United Church of Christ congregations until they retired in 1996. Roger passed away in 2004. Pat also included copies of four books that Roger authored, including "Tales of Gletha the Goatlady: Parables from the Heart Land."



If you have an item that originated with the State School and are interested in gifting it to the Museum, please call us!

### THE CHILDREN REMEMBERED *Orphanage Legacy Trust* *Update:*

Balance as of 12/2014:

**\$37,364.26**

Goal: **\$300,000**



### MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

**Sat., September 12**

Third Annual  
Lighting the Path Event

**Sun., Nov. 21 @ 2 PM**

Curtis & Loretta CD  
Release Concert

Owatonna Arts Center  
\$5 Admission; Free to former  
State Schoolers

Curtis & Loretta are an award-winning acoustic music duo from Minneapolis with a special connection to the Orphanage. Funds raised will be shared between OAC and the Museum.

Please visit our website for more information.



*Poem by former State Schooler*

**THUNDERSTORM**

by Peter Razor

The western sky with shortened view  
 Sinister in darkened hue,  
 Wrought with turbulence, other wonder.  
 Marking well its path down under.  
 An ethereal monarch marched the hordes  
 Of nimbus to his rumbling chords,  
 Flashed his scepter amid the gray  
 And chaos of the grand foray;  
 The majestic crackle and twine  
 Of light in endless inscrutable line—  
 Taunting to quell the boldest dare  
 Leering within the deepest lair.  
 The bully stomped and flushed his trail  
 Beyond the ply of man and bail,  
 Belched and ranted through the night  
 Then meekly tiptoed out of sight.

“This poem has nothing to do with the State School, unless it can be imagined as metaphoric to cottage life.”

– Peter Razor, 2014

**Like us on Facebook!** Minnesota State Public  
 School Orphanage Museum

*Important: To ensure receiving future Newsletters, please inform us of any address change. E-mail us if you would rather receive our electronic newsletter. Copies may also be found on our website.*

## 2014 Tourism Wrap-Up

We are happy to report that we saw a significant increase in visitors in 2014... both in planned group tours that come to hear our presentation and casual visitors who come on their own.

C-11 Groups		C-11 Visitors		Group Tours		Group Tour		Guests Walk-Ins	
2013	2014	2013	2014	2013	2014	2013	2014	2013	2014
431	559	2,279	2,852	41	58	1,123	1,389	1,156	1,463

## A Peek into the Past

Thank you to Lori Pfeifer who shared some photos she took of the third floor of the former State School hospital building. For those who may not know, the old hospital is now known as West Hills Lodge, a residential treatment center providing safe, sober housing and treatment for up to 15 adult males, where Lori works.



Looking for  
ways to support  
the Orphanage  
Museum?

**Announcing  
our 2015  
Online  
Auction  
fundraiser!**

Donations and  
Bidders Needed!

The auction will be  
held May 1-31 on  
[auctioncityonline.com](http://auctioncityonline.com)  
so get ready to bid!

Last year we raised  
over \$3,000 for our  
general operating  
budget and had a great  
selection of antiques,  
gift cards, furniture, and  
much more! Our goal  
this year is \$10,000.

**Donations are needed  
now through mid-  
May.** Please call the  
office if pick-up is  
needed or mail to our  
address below.

**THANK YOU!**

*Donations since the last Newsletter:*

## THANK YOU!

**Legacy Trust Donors**

Alexander Lumber  
 ERA-Gillespie Real Estate  
 Kirchner Siding & Window, Inc.  
 Owatonna Fire & Safety  
 Express Employment Professionals  
 HomeTown Credit Union  
 Owatonna Heating & Cooling Inc.  
 Festal Farms Co  
 Bosch Automotive Service Solutions  
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 Nancy Sletten  
 Kathleen Sherman  
 Sharon Stewart  
 Arlene P. Nelson  
 Charlie & Emby Herrmann  
 Harvey & Maxine Ronglien  
 Shelley Pohlman  
 Elsie Potter  
 Janice & Loren Hyland  
 Jeanette M. Drake  
 Joyce M. Wittenhagen  
 Werner & Jacki Knuth  
 Nina Zak  
 Erwin Varns  
 Fred & Len Fritz  
 John & Denise Perhay - In memory of Tony, Mary, Edward, and Angela Perhie (Perhay)  
 Owatonna Chapter of Thrivent Financial for Lutherans  
 Rebecca Gross  
 Don & Vivian Manthe

Victor Laskowske  
 Don & Vivian Manthe  
 Jerry Prondzinski – In memory of Ray Prondzinski  
 Al & Gloria Kolander - In Honor of Maxine Ronglien's 80th Birthday  
 Fred Curtis, Jr.  
 Harold T. Jones  
 Kathleen & Raymond Lindberg - In memory of Robert & Alpheus Stoneberg  
 Bob Charnell  
 Jodene Richards  
 Margo Dinneen & Jon Zoller - In memory of Margaret Alvide Hansen  
 Pine Island Methodist Church  
 Sue VanderSmith and Patsy Sabatini - In memory of Evelyn Kruckeberg  
 Edith & Jean Zamboni - In honor of the Rochester Franciscans

**General Donations**

DeLoyce Anderson  
 Clayton & Barbara Anderson  
 Gerald S. Anderson  
 Clifford Berg – former State Schooler  
 Stanley Biernat – In memory of mother-in-law Mitzy  
 Dale Bishman – In memory of Lola M. Sorenson, Paul A. Aronson, LaVonne M. Meixner, and LaVonne J. Racek  
 Bev Bloomenrader – In honor of Harvey & Maxine Ronglien  
 Helen Bowers  
 Bernadine Butler  
 Edna Cummins – In memory of Mary and Jack Shimpach  
 Fred Curtis Jr. – In memory of #1285 - Fred Curtis Sr.  
 Rod & Suzanne Erickson  
 Eunice Erickson

Mary Kay Feltes  
 Fred Fritz  
 Clyde Grant  
 Donna Heil  
 Emby & Charlie Herrmann  
 Evelyn Hershberger  
 Jackie Kent  
 Larry & Marla Kunkel  
 Carly Lageson  
 Victor & Ruth Laskowske  
 Bonnie Lewis  
 Marlene Lilyerd – In memory of Dolly Franklin  
 Mark Livingston  
 Myrtle Loch  
 Yvonne Manijak  
 Diane & Donald Matejcek  
 Larry & Wanda McLagan  
 Dennis Meillier  
 Gloria Stock Mickelson  
 Patricia Moon  
 Mindy Nelson – In honor of a family member who stayed at the school  
 Don Noyce  
 Edward A. Peterson  
 Norma Phillips – In memory of Ann Vinopal, Janet Brockman, Virginia Larsen  
 Elsie Potter  
 Franklin & Elrose Prokopec  
 Luther M. Quale  
 Carol Raetz – In honor of Selma Raetz's 100th birthday  
 Jerry Robinson  
 Wayne & Marlene Rognlin  
 Harvey & Maxine Ronglien  
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 Diane Sparrow  
 Thomas & Dianna St. Aubin  
 Gary & Phyllis Terrill  
 Kathleen Tillotson

Darlene Raetz Ulrich  
 Richard & Marlys Webber  
 Sharon West  
 Arlend "Buzz" Wilson  
 Elizabeth Witt  
 Joyce Wittenhagen  
 Nina Zak  
 Darren & Shelby Zempel  
 Marjorie Zimmerman

**Memorials**

Friends of Lois Knutson  
 Shirley Wilson – In memory of her mother, Betty Glock  
 Shirley Wilson – In memory of Ellsworth Ulland & Elmore Sorenson  
 Harvey & Maxine Ronglien – In memory of Romaine Church  
 Harvey & Maxine Ronglien – In memory of J. D. Bringgold  
 Harvey & Maxine Ronglien – In memory of Lois Knutson  
 Harvey & Maxine Ronglien – In memory of Jeanette Grobner  
 Jerry Prondzinski – In memory of Ray Prondzinski

**Word of Deceased State Schoolers**

Ray Prondzinski  
 Carol Jean Bruski Burkhart  
 Carl John Schra  
 Margaret Rogers Richmond  
 Bruce Douglas Sutherland  
 Margaret "Peggy" Schmidt Hawley  
 Bette Jean Sisson (Johnson) Haefner  
 Albert Turnmire, Jr.

## *Lighting the Path 2014*

The morning and afternoon of September 20, 2014, were beautiful and the path was all ready for the evening's event...and then the rains came! The Lighting the Path event was washed out as an outdoor activity, but thanks to some quick thinking, we were able to move into the Owatonna Arts Center (former children's dining hall) for a shortened ceremony. Although the weather didn't cooperate, attendees were still able to listen to Sheila Rame's beautiful harp music and Barry Adams' moving stories of the Children's Cemetery. Special thanks to Silvan Durben of the Owatonna Arts Center for creating a beautiful setting when the event had to move indoors.



Our corporate and individuals contributions raised more than \$5,000 for The Children Remembered – Legacy Trust.

**Date for 2015: Saturday, September 12**

## *Why Owatonna?*

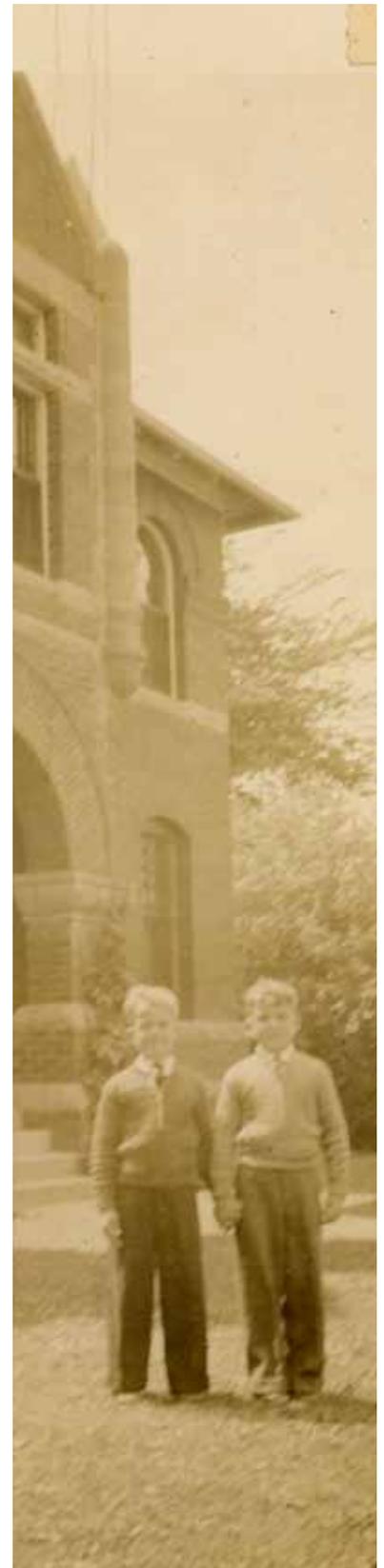
### **How Owatonna Became the Home of the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent & Neglected Children**

More than 100 people attended a presentation given by Anne Peterson, museum director, at the Steele County Historical Society on February 26. The topic covered the political intrigue involved in choosing the site for the State School after it was created by law in 1885.

A commission of five individuals was appointed by Minnesota Governor Lucius Hubbard to determine which town would be home to the State School. Nine towns submitted proposals, but, ironically, four of the five men on the commission had their hometowns in the running. After 16 ballots on the first day— each commissioner voting for his own hometown, except for one who varied his vote from one town to another—the group adjourned for the evening. Finally, the next day, after some more wrangling, Owatonna was victorious! There was a lot of celebrating in Owatonna when the citizens learned the State School would be built here.

### **Watch It Yourself**

If you are interested in watching the presentation and learning the history, you can see it on [www.owatonna.com](http://www.owatonna.com) under the History Center tab.





# State School Orphanage Museum

540 West Hills Circle  
Owatonna, Minnesota 55060



Nonprofit Organization  
U.S. Postage Paid  
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Owatonna, MN 55060

## Return Service Requested

*If you plan to change your address please let us know as each returned newsletter costs the museum \$0.49 plus \$0.49 to re-send. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated and helps us to save \$\$\$.*

Interested in purchasing "The Children Remember" or a board on the Memorial Boardwalk? How about purchasing an "apple" for the Apple Giving Tree displayed in C-11? Please fill in and mail to our address the form below. Your support is greatly appreciated! Checks should be written out to: MN State School Orphanage Museum. Donations are tax-deductible.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

- Yes, I'd like to order a copy of The Children Remember documentary VHS at \$10.00 plus \$5.00 for shipping/handling.
- Yes, I'd like to order a copy of The Children Remember documentary DVD at \$25.00 plus \$5.00 for shipping/handling.
- Yes, I'd like to order  plush State School afghans at \$40.00 each plus \$7.95 shipping/handling.
- Yes, I'd like to purchase  board(s) at \$50.00 each. (\*We are now using new materials for extended life of the boardwalk.)
- Yes, I'd like to pledge an "apple." (  Red (\$1,000+),  Gold (\$500-\$999),  Green (\$250-\$499)  Silver (\$100-\$249)
- Yes, I'd like to make a tax-deductible donation of \_\_\_\_\_. (  Donation for C-11  Legacy Trust  Non-specified)

If you wish to purchase a board, please print clearly the words you wish to have inscribed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_