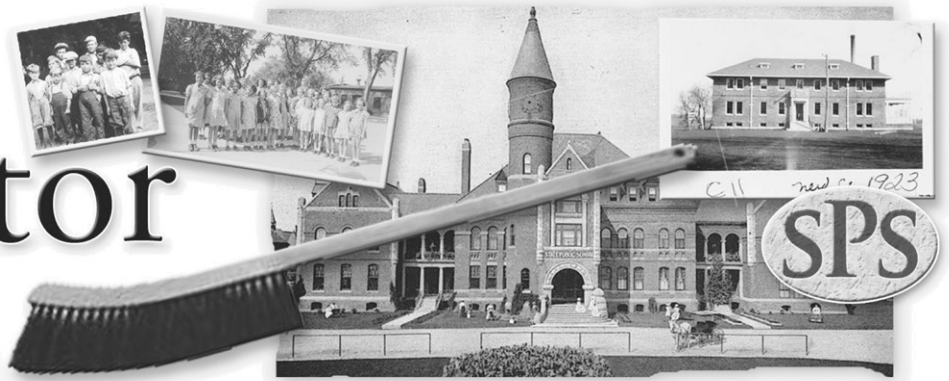


The Radiator Brush



State School Memories from 1895 Uncovered in File

by Anne Peterson

Do you remember the final scene from the movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark" when the Ark of the Covenant was put in a generic box and placed in storage? In November, I uncovered a real historic treasure in a file drawer, no doubt placed there nearly 30 years ago by Maxine Ronglien. In a folder of State School stories was a letter with two chapters of a memoir titled 'I Remember When' written by George Queseth. I'm going to share a few of its revelations.

Young George (9) and his sister Olivia (7) came to Owatonna in 1895 to help alleviate the financial strain on their family after their father's death. It was a family decision to surrender



Olivia and I, on a day in the Spring of 1895, when we were sent to Minnesota State School, at Owatonna, Minn.

the middle children to the State School. George remembers the day they departed from the Fergus Falls depot:

"Mother had decided to have our picture taken. So, Chris (a neighbor) took us to what I believe was called the Alldrin Studio. They made Olivia and me stand against a wall. Back of me there was a receptacle with a forklike affair that I had to hold my head against so I wouldn't move. This didn't feel very good, but it didn't take very long.

We didn't see the picture (left) as a matter of fact. I doubt whether Olivia or I knew what was going on. There was so much to occupy our attention."

After a meal and introduction to indoor plumbing, the children bid their mother farewell and boarded the train. They were accompanied by a county official, Mr. Hoffling. George recounts their arrival in Owatonna:

"After riding a long time we came to Owatonna. When we came out of the train, there was a man standing by a beautiful buggy with top with fringes, and a pretty white horse. This was Mr. Merrill, Superintendent of the State School. I guess the State School authorities knew we were coming, so Mr. Merrill was there to meet us. The phaeton (carriage type) and white horse was the conveyance used to bring the incoming children to the school from the depot. Olivia and I sat in the back seat and Mr. Hoffling sat in the front seat with Mr. Merrill, the driver.



"We all went into the large building, called the Administration Building. Here all the affairs of the Institution are conducted. Here Mr. Hoffling finished his job by delivering us into the hands of the

proper State authorities. He then bid us goodbye, and that was the last time we saw him."

After a physical examination, George got his introduction to cottage life:

"Miss Emily took me for a walk and told what all the buildings were and the different walks and grounds, in order to get me interested and acquainted with my surroundings. When we came to the playgrounds, Miss Emily left me with a group of boys from our dormitory. They were nice boys and they took me in hand and asked me to join them in their game.

"There were about 30 boys in our cottage. Their ages ranged, I believe, from 8 to around 16. There were only about three 'big' boys in our cottage. I imagine they were about 15 years old.

"When I came there, the beds were all pretty well occupied. Several beds held three boys at a time. Then they slept two heads one way and the third boy headed toward the foot of the bed. Sometimes this did not work so smoothly. When I came, I had to sleep between two boys, with my head toward the foot of the bed. The boys I slept with resented the idea that I slept with them so they caused me some trouble. However, the matron was watching and she came and gave my bed-mates a talking-to. So, after that, things quieted down and we got along O.K."

continued on next page

It seems George had an easier entrance into cottage life than some boys in later years. He also was placed directly in a cottage; there was no three-week isolation:

“I must tell you about a part that I didn’t care much for. It seems it was the rule that every new able-bodied boy past 8 years of age had to serve in the dining room for a certain period. So, one day I was ordered to stand in a separate line with about a dozen other boys. When the others had all marched out, we were told to don aprons. Then we were each given a table to take care of. There were 14 long tables, each table seating about 20 people. The first thing we did was to clear off the dishes from the table and carry them to a large table where they were washed. Then we took off the tablecloth and placed all the chairs on the table. Then the sweepers went to work and swept the floor. Then we put the chairs back on the floor again and put on a clean tablecloth and set the table ready for the next meal.”



State School Children's Dining Hall circa 1900

How do we plan to use George's story?

These are just a few gems from George's memoir. We have many other first-hand stories and memories stored in our archives. Our goal is to eventually pull together individual stories--like George's--into one book. While we are grateful for the 11 books we do have in our Gift Shop, there are many other stories to tell. Do you have a family story you would like to share with us?

City Council Chambers to Undergo Facelift

Since the mid-1970s, Owatonna City Council meetings have been held in the north wing of the former State School Administration Building. The space was originally used as the State School chapel and assembly hall. The project includes adding an attached structure in the style of the main building. We'll be documenting the remodel this summer, which is being done for accessibility, safety and structural reasons.



Architect's rendering of the new exterior. The State Historic Preservation Organization (SHPO) approved the final design to help keep the integrity of the original building.

Memorial Donations

Ann Marie Vinopal – in memory of her father Owen Phillips
 Greg & Darlene Thomas – in memory of Gladys Herrly, widow of State Schooler William Herrly
 Sandy Weicht – in memory of her mother, Faye Randall Fredericksen
 Gary & Kathleen Hadley – in memory of Emery, Ben & Vernon Hadley
 Roger & Corinne Brenke – in memory of Stella Smith
 Anne Peterson – in memory of Otto J. Havelka
 Anne Peterson - in memory of Jackie Shimpach McMahon