



Minnesota State Public School Orphanage Museum & Historic Cottage 11 Boys' Dormitory
~ Summer 2011 Newsletter Edition ~

NATIONAL REGISTER RECOGNITION

We are extremely proud and pleased to share with you that effective December 28, 2010, the State School Campus was selected for listing in the National Register of Historic Places by the National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior. How ironic that 125 years after legislation was passed establishing the State School, that it would receive national recognition.

The property was awarded the highest possible level of significance, meaning this institution held influence on a national – international level. This post-Civil War public institution played a central role in the development of Child Welfare Policies. Considered a state-of-the-art facility, operating from 1886-1945, it was created to mitigate poor conditions of almshouses and children's exposure to criminal, mentally ill and physically ill adults.

Galen Merrill, Superintendent from 1886 until his death in 1934, played a central role in the national discussion on child welfare. His pioneering efforts played a pivotal role in the development of Minnesota Child Welfare Laws enacted in the Progressive Era.

Plans are underway to formally dedicate new signage on the grounds on June 23rd.

THE ORPHANAGE CEMETERY

by Volunteer Barry Adams

How terrible it is to die of inanition or marasmus, before age four, with no family at hand, and to be buried beneath a small stone with just a number on it. You will soon be forgotten.

Most of us in the twenty-first century are unfamiliar with “inanition” or “marasmus.” Look at the standard medical definition. Inanition: emptiness; a state of advanced lack of adequate nutrition, food or water, or a physiological inability to utilize them. Starvation; a spiritual emptiness or lack of purpose or will to live. Marasmus: a form of severe protein-energy malnutrition characterized by energy deficiency. A child with marasmus looks emaciated.

Do we see the definition as words on a page? Or the experience of many of the youngsters who arrived at the State School. By the time they had arrived some had already reached the point of no return. The best medical care at the State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children could not change the inevitable. Often, even with everything that Dr. Clarence McEnaney, Nurse Dorothea Putter, or the rest of the staff did, they could not change the course that child neglect had set in motion. The sadness of this reality hung like a cloud over the institution throughout its entire existence.

In May 2010 a group of volunteers at the Orphanage used a CEMETERY TOUR as a means of helping



THE ORPHANAGE CEMETERY CONT.

visitors understand part of the story of the State School. Volunteers Robin Spande, Dr. Jim McEnaney, Maxine Ronglien, and Barry Adams revived the memories of the 198 children who are buried in the Orphanage Cemetery. Perhaps this brief article can highlight a few noteworthy parts of the cemetery story.

Of the 198 children buried in the cemetery, only 33 ever made it to age ten. Ninety-four, or about half of the burials, were age three or under; and 60 of those were under one year old. A close look at the tombstones (or crosses which, thanks to contemporary volunteers, have names on them) shows us that, sadly, two of the children arrived at the State School when a “baby factory” was shut down in Minneapolis. Malnutrition, failure to thrive, inanition, starvation; call it what you want, these youngsters couldn’t survive it.

As we know, the state of medical knowledge is ever-changing, evolving, improving. It wasn’t until 1963 that a vaccine for measles was licensed in the United States. Prior to 1963, measles was an expected part of life. So, back in 1905 when a first case of measles was reported at the State School, a newspaper article showed little concern. Not-to-worry, it is a common thing. But, if you walk along the first two rows of tombstones in the State School Cemetery, you will find eight youngsters who died of this highly contagious disease. Eight children, not one of whom had grown older than age three. Sisters Lovie and Jessie Jackson of Winona died of measles three days apart in May, 1905. Fifty cases of measles hit the State School in 1905, some died.

A case-by-case study of the burials offers an unlimited supply of human interest stories. There are still among us (like Harvey Ronglien) who suffered the trauma of seeing a friend die at the institution. Fourteen-year-old David Elmer Freeman is buried along the row of crosses closest to the west side fence. The records simply say that he died of a broken neck. But the boys like Harvey who saw the football injury also saw the suffering on the ground and were present at the funeral. One hundred and ninety eight burials are just the tip of a thousand stories.

The tombstone of Joe Woz may be the first one a visitor will encounter upon entering the cemetery. It is located on the left side of first row. A complete reading of his obituary shows that the story of a youngster in Owatonna in 1905 can be connected to the lives of children of Owatonna today. Joe accompanied some of the other boys (under supervision) to a place on the Straight River locally known as Sandy Beach which was “about a mile up the river.” Joe was nine years old and not a good swimmer. Joe went just fifteen feet from the shore and drowned. The second last paragraph of his obituary (unusual because of its length) claimed that “The need of public baths (meaning swimming pool) in this city has been brought forcibly to the attention of the public by the sad drowning of Joe.” Today the community’s answer is Lake Kohlmeier and River Springs Swimming Pool.

Twins are buried in the cemetery; suspicious deaths are found there; an 83 year-old is buried there because he so wanted to be buried with the children he so loved. The stories are limitless. One hundred and ninety-eight of God’s children are buried there. Go visit them!

THANKS FOR YOUR FEEDBACK....

We are grateful for the many nice comments received regarding our Winter Newsletter. It obviously was one of the most popular editions. Here’s a sampling of the comments we received:

1886

The Radiator Brush

1945

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From the wife of a State Schooler: *"I enjoy reading your newsletter. I'm sure if Herbert was alive he would too. He had so many memories of the Orphanage. Some good – some not so good. It was a part of his life."*

A son of a State Schooler wrote of his father's indenture experience: *"I was able to acquire copies of all records from his file at the School, which I dearly treasure. Thank you, Harvey and all your co-workers for the wonderful Radiator Brush."*

A relative wrote: *"A very interesting newsletter. My Aunt and Uncle were early residents in the late 1800s."*

A NOTABLE SAYING....

*If you treat children as they are
they will remain as they are.*

*If you treat children for what
they could be, they will become
what they can be.*

CEMETERY TRIVIA

A local newspaper reported on June 26, 1891: "A cemetery has been laid out on the State School farm which will be used for such of the Wards of the School who die there."

Little could they imagine that this cemetery would become the final resting ground for 198 children. The first 51 children were buried with a tombstone. However, the practice was then changed. The next 151 children who died were buried simply with their identification number etched on a slab of cement.

What we have learned since is that between 1886 and 1997, almost 13,000 Minnesotans living in State Institutions were buried simply by a number.

In 1993, one of our first restoration efforts was erecting named crosses for the 151 children buried by number. Later that summer, a group of citizens from "St. Paul Advocating Change Together" visited our Children's

Cemetery and then formed a project "Remembering with Dignity." Their goal: placing named markers on the other 13,000 graves located throughout the State. They went to the State Legislators and were successful in obtaining \$200,000 to launch this project.

Today we are aware they have been successful in placing thousands of markers on State Cemeteries in Faribault, St. Peter, and Rochester. What great news to hear others have followed step in our preservation efforts.

IN A SPIRIT OF SHARING...

Over the years we have collected many, many stories of children who lived the State School history. Recently, a lady who heard Harvey speak recognized a State School story printed in the Carver County (MN) Historical Society newsletter. We are pleased to share it with you to give insight into the adult lives of State School children and the trauma experienced in childhood.

NOW I DON'T HAVE TO WALK ALONE HILDEGARD'S SEARCH FOR A FAMILY

On July 16, 1911, Signe Mattson, a Finnish immigrant, gave birth to a baby girl in Hancock, Michigan.

This is the story of how baby Hilma lost her family, her name, and her sense of identity—and how she reclaimed herself and fashioned a family of her own here in Carver County.

LOSING HER SELF

Soon after Hilma's birth, Signe answered John Erickson's ad for a "mail order" bride. Signe took her baby to St. Louis County, Minnesota, where she soon found that John was a brutish, cruel man. In 1915, two years after the birth of their first child, Signe took Hilma, now called Elnora, to the St. Louis County Children's Home in Duluth for her own safety. Two years later, by law, the Children's Home had to declare the little girl as abandoned. They sent her to the State School in Owatonna.

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HILDEGARD'S STORY CONT.

Four children later, Signe still lived in fear. John killed a man during an argument over moonshine in July 1915, and Signe assisted the police by leading them to his body. The court sentenced John to life in prison for murder, and Signe asked for help to raise John's five children. The state responded by taking all but the nursing baby, Peter, from Signe. Signe eventually remarried but died from complications following childbirth in 1925.



John Erickson, Signe with children

INDENTURED

The State School in Owatonna placed children in foster homes, where they often served as housekeepers, baby sitters or field hands.

Elnora's first foster experience was with a pastor and his wife. They renamed her Hildegard at age 6, and may have baptized her (no records have yet been found). But the couple soon had a child of their own, and accused Hildegard of being a bad influence. They returned her to Owatonna and refused to pay the money specified in their contract with the State School. Luckily for young Hildegard, a German farm family from Norwood was looking for a foster child just at that time.



Hildegard and half brother Peter, 1939



Hildegard on the way to Owatonna, 1939

ONE OF THEIR OWN

In 1920, Albert and Louise Herrmann requested a girl from the State School to help care for their children. Nine-year-old Hildegard traveled by train to Norwood, where she thrived with the Herrmanns. In many ways, she was a member of the family. The children thought of her as a sister. Hildegard completed eighth grade at District 29 and was confirmed at nearby Zion

Evangelical Church of Schnappsburg.

When Hildegard turned 18 in 1929, the Herrmann's contract with the State School expired. Mr. Herrmann paid the \$100 due to Hildegard by the contract, but informed the school that Hildegard would be staying on with his family. He told Hildegard that she was always welcome in their—her—home.

IN SEARCH OF HERSELF

Although she was shy, Hildegard enjoyed going to church activities and dances with the Herrmann kids. She met Jacob Bentz at a dance

and they dated for a few months. But Jake's mother rejected her because she worried about her background.

Hildegard found a job and returned to Owatonna in 1936 or 1937, hoping to find her history. She didn't know that Signe had tried to locate her almost 20 years earlier, but the laws wouldn't allow it. Sadly, by the time Hildegard began her search, her mother had already been dead for many years. After much research and nearly a lifetime, Hildegard eventually reconnected with all of her half-siblings.

NOW I DON'T HAVE TO WALK ALONE

In the summer of 1939, despite his mother's objections, Jacob proposed to Hildegard. On their wedding day, November 9, 1939, Hildegard said to Jacob, "Now I don't have to walk alone."

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The wedding was a lovely affair that included members of both the Bentz and Herrmann families. Hildegard baked her own sheet cake for the guests, but they also had a frosted cardboard wedding cake for “looks.” Jake and Hildegard celebrated their wedding with a dance at the Community Hall in Hamburg.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

There is no fairy tale ending to this story. Jake’s mother never really accepted Hildegard. Jake and Hildegard’s first son died of spinal bifida. They had little money, and life with hard-drinking Jake was sometimes difficult. Hildegard survived cancer and a heart attack. But she worked hard to give her children the family that she never had.

Hildegard died on January 16, 2005 after a brief illness, encircled by the loving family that she had created.

NOTE: This story reprinted with the permission of the Carver County Historical Society using research and materials provided by two of Hildegard’s children, Eleanor Bentz Kottke and Ron Bentz. Visitors in the area are encouraged to stop at the Carver County Historical Society in Waconia and visit the exhibit of “Hildegard’s Life.”

TOURISM - 2010

The State School story seems to have become a top tourist attraction for the City of Owatonna. In 2010, Harvey Ronglien entertained 63 adult tour groups with 2,438 people, and 14 student tours with 440 students. In addition, Harvey gave 13 out-of-town presentations.

Here are two of the many testimonials received after Harvey’s presentation from two different Iowa bus tours.

“I was fortunate to tour the MN State Orphanage Museum complex on March 18 with Northland Travel. The presentation by Harvey Ronglien was fantastic. I have a suggestion. Please make a video of Harvey doing one of his presentations so as not to lose this valuable story when he is unable to do them anymore. This should be shown to

visitors who come to the Museum, even if they are not with a tour group.”

“Mr. Ronglien – Thank You for your superb presentation Friday afternoon for the bus group of 24. Yours was the highlight of the trip to the Twin Cities.”

It is difficult to accurately know how many walk-ins visit the Museum each year because many do not sign the Guest Register, but we estimate a minimum of 5,000 + visit each year. In addition, Harvey also personally meets with many college students who are writing papers on the history of the State School.

Opening Cottage 11 has proven to be an excellent addition for sharing the State School story. Here visitors can actually see how children lived in a cottage. We are most grateful for the local volunteers in our community who help staff the cottage and answer visitor questions.

Thanks to a grant recently received, we are enlarging the outdoor audio stations from four to six effective June 1. A new stations will be installed where the first school was located and a second at the Cemetery.

If you are looking for a great historic site to visit this summer, please consider the State School grounds. It is an experience we believe you will treasure. Please check our website for hours.

STATE SCHOOL REUNION PLANNED

Mark your calendar for September 4th!

For the past two years, the Museum has held an open house event in the Spring. However with the local flooding last fall and all the work to be completed on the campus early this year, it was simply not feasible to host a gathering this spring.

Instead, this year we will be hosting an event in the fall. As it happens, September 4th of this year marks the 35th Anniversary of the first State School Reunion that Oscar Ronglien spearheaded. It was held at Arthur’s

Four Seasons in Minneapolis, MN. In a recent issue of the Radiator Brush we brought back memories of the old time State School Reunions.

Now, despite the fact that the ranks of State Schoolers are getting thin, we implore all State School children and their families to visit the grounds this fall for one last reunion. This will be a one-day event on the morning and afternoon of Sunday, September 4. If you plan to attend please detach the RSVP form on the last page of this newsletter and send it in or e-mail us. Please let us know how many to expect in your group and the names of the State Schoolers in your group.

More event details will follow in our next newsletter.

VOLUNTEERS

Nicole Kilanowski signed up to volunteer during our Christmas event. In addition to tour guiding, Nicole has put her genealogical skills to use for the Museum conducting research into former employees. She then enters this information into a computer so that future generations may access and enjoy this information.

A mother of four, Nicole and her husband moved to the Owatonna area from St. Peter, MN. Nicole endeavors to impress upon her children the importance of history. In fact, we occasionally see her son volunteering at the local historical society. Years ago, she and her family took a trip to a Civil War battlefield. When her son asked why they were visiting this place, she replied, "this was the field where my great-great-grandfather lost his leg in battle." Her quick-witted son replied, "you know mom, we're not gonna find it."

Another of our new volunteers, Paul Nelson, will be a seasonal assistant at the Museum. Paul spends fall, winter, and spring here in Owatonna, now volunteering at both the Orphanage Museum and the Steele County Historical Society. In the summer Paul travels to Fargo, North Dakota where he is employed as a historic interpreter at Fort Abercrombie. It is here that he pursues his historical focus on Native American history.

Paul also employs his computer knowledge to help the Museum to continue to catalog its ever expanding collection. As a retired minister of 36 years, 25 here in Owatonna, Paul knows a relative of just about any local person you could imagine. This local connection and his persistence help the Museum greatly when roadblocks pop up in our research.

Nina Zak has been involved with the Museum since the beginning. As a charter member of the Board of Directors, Nina was there for those pioneering efforts. Nina retired from the board after several years. Nina, however, remained a dedicated supporter of the Museum. In the fall of 2010, Nina returned to activity in the Museum becoming a Tour Guide at Cottage 11. With all her first-hand knowledge of the restoration effort, Nina has a unique perspective to share.

Since moving to Owatonna as a young girl, Nina has been surrounded by ties to the Orphanage. She remembers meeting many people who had children from the Orphanage as well as several wards placed with local families. Her love for the school found roots through the beauty of the campus. Nina remembers her early visits to the campus, in the years before Interstate 35 was built, dividing the grounds. She remembers thinking, "It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen."

To all the volunteers at the State School Museum, thank you so much for helping us to maintain and share the orphanage history. As we look forward to another tourism season, please again accept our thanks. **If anyone in the Owatonna area is interested in volunteering, please give us a call at 507-774-7369 and we would be happy to discuss this opportunity.**

AUDIO TOUR STATIONS

The Outdoor Audio Station system has proven be an extremely popular feature since its installation in 2005. Each of the four stations covered a specific area of the campus. Guests listened to each station in turn as it described the buildings in the area and their purposes.

Despite the popularity of the system it had its limitations. Each station covered a large area of the campus, often times more than was visible. What few of you probably knew was that the Outdoor Audio Tour was always intended to have six stations. When the original system was installed, the museum only put in what it could afford. The project waited in the wings for the right time.

In September of 2010 the Orphanage Museum applied for a Legacy Amendment Grant to expand and revise the tour system. The grant, administered by the Minnesota Historical Society, was won and will cover nearly the entire cost of the audio station expansion, while the balance is a combination of in-kind donations and Museum monies.

Over the course of the winter months museum volunteers, staff, and contractors have re-written the 4 original audio tour scripts, created two new scripts, and assembled the kiosks themselves. The first of the two new units is located on the east side of the campus, at the location of the 1898 School, later Cottage 16. This kiosk will inform visitors about the 1898 School, Cottage 12 (the receiving cottage), Merrill's Home, and Cottages 13, 14 & 15.

The second of the stations is located at a most fitting location for a Legacy Amendment project, at the Children's Cemetery. This kiosk provides historic information and walks the guest through the steps taken at the Children's Cemetery to ensure that the Children will not be forgotten.



DONATIONS

- Amber Carberry
- Gilbert Graus
- Jeff Black
- Bob Charnell
- DeLoyce Anderson
- Victor Laskowski
- Milo Beuthien
- Marilyn Schaefer
- John & Joyce Winters
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- Donna Bruno
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- Harvey & Maxine Ronglien
- Gloria Kolander

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- Joe Barren
- Frank Barren
- Otto Bressler
- Edna(Kangas) Draskovich



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STATE SCHOOL REUNION RSVP FOR SEPTEMBER 4, 2011

September 4th of this year marks the 35th Anniversary of the first State School Reunion held in Minneapolis, MN. Despite the fact that the ranks of State Schoolers are getting thin, we implore all State School children and their families to visit the grounds this fall for one last reunion. This will be a one-day event on the morning and afternoon of Sunday, September 4. If you plan to attend please detach this form and return to the museum. Please let us know how many to expect in your group and the names of each State Schooler attending.

More event details will follow in our Summer Newsletter.

Name _____ Phone _____

Mailing or E-mail Address _____

Number Attending _____ Names of State Schoolers Attending _____

Please mail to: MN State School Orphanage Museum, 540 West Hills Circle, Owatonna, MN 55060 no later than **July 1**. If you would prefer, you may e-mail your RSVP to museum@ci.owatonna.mn.us. Thank you!

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540 West Hills Circle, Owatonna, MN 55060 | phone: 507-774-7369 | e-mail: museum@ci.owatonna.mn.us | www.orphanagemuseum.com

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