

The Radiator Brush



Minnesota State Public School Orphanage Museum & Historic Cottage 11 Boys' Dormitory
~ Winter 2012 Newsletter Edition ~ **HAPPY NEW YEAR!**



HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROJECTS

The Orphanage Museum is currently working on two historic preservation projects. Both of these projects have been funded in part by the Minnesota Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, in part by the Museum, and conducted through the work of our dedicated contractors and volunteers.

Project 1: The Children Remember, Life at the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children – Digitization.

There can be no doubt that our culture has seen huge changes in technology in the last decade. One area of advancement has been in film and video. When filming commenced on “The Children Remember,” the technical team selected the best available option for capturing video, a technology called Beta SP. Even at that time, just a decade ago, who would have guessed that advancements would make professional quality video editing available to everyone on a common computer?

By 2012, the Museum found itself in possession of an entire series of extremely valuable interviews (conducted in 2001 – 2002) that were only accessible to

professionals who owned very specific equipment. You may remember reading some months back that steps were in play to rectify this. We are now in the final steps of completing this important work.

Our result speaks for itself, through the voices of the children who lived this history. Researchers who visit us and future Museum staff now have access to over 25 hours of interviews with various local State Schoolers and institution staff. All of these videos are stored on computer and DVD here at the Museum.

Interviewees include: Helen (Hoover) Bowers, Vivian Manthe, Buzz Kaplan, Arlene Nelson, Eugene Bliss, Eva Jensen, Robert Charnell, Elva Mae Freiheit, William Hollister, Helen Petterson, Harvey Ronglien, Oscar Ronglien, Grace (Larson) White, Louella Keller, Maxine Ronglien, Lester Felien, Richard Webber, Burnadette “Bunny” Haberman, Jane Jacobson, Avis Wright, Ruth Fizer, and Vivian Conlin.

In the process of completing this project, we discovered another great resource—approximately 40 tapes (20 hours) of video-recorded pictures. We did know these tapes existed but we did not think of them much

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HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROJECTS CONTINUED...

as the vast majority of the pictures are already included in Museum archives. The true value was discovered in the digitization process. It was learned that the video crew left the camera microphone on, allowing the camera to record the discussions happening in the room at the time of filming.

This “error” has yielded a vast wealth of knowledge. As each photograph was discussed, stories were told while it was filmed. Of note, the camera captured discussions by Maxine Ronglien (longtime Museum Board Chairperson and Museum Founder), Michael Maas (*The Children Remember* Project Director), Silvan Durben (Director of the Owatonna Arts Center), and Kathleen Laughlin (Producer, *The Children Remember*).

While some of the conversation does revolve around such subjects as what to have for dinner, the majority of commentary discusses *The Children Remember* Project, interviews, campus history and, of course, the content of the pictures. It is certain that the coming generations who work to preserve this history will be thankful for this happy mistake.

Project 2: A Campus in Motion – Interview Project
Our second project also exceeded our expectations. This past fall, five interviews were conducted here on the grounds. These interviews focused on the lives of Vivian (Swan) Manthe, Lucille (Houim) Andrus, Harvey Ronglien, James “Peter” Razor and Richard Webber.

Both a three hour sit-down interview and a walking tour of the campus were recorded. The Museum Board extends a grateful thanks to these individuals for their efforts in this historically important process.

As a part of the project, each individual completed a 12-page questionnaire in advance of his or her interview. The answers to these questions in themselves are valuable; however, they also allowed us to better tailor

each interview to the specific individual.

Interviews were divided into two days, and were completed while facing all forms of scheduling and weather complications; coinciding events, excessive wind, cold and threat of rain. The interviews were extremely thorough and while we were able to capture over six hours of interview with each of these individuals, in several cases we actually felt we could have continued for several more hours.

All subjects did not go into each building, but the total interview process covered the entire grounds and included the interior of many of the buildings. Information was gathered on the interiors of the 1934 School, Gymnasium, Laundry, Hospital, Administration Building, and Cottages 6, 8, and 11. We also conducted interviews at the former locations of Cottages 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, and 16, the Nursery, Greenhouses, farm site, Root Cellar, and the Superintendent’s Cottage.

In each case we discussed the building, its surroundings and function, as well as how these children used the space. Through the many reminiscences, the museum will now be able to explain in far greater detail the processes of how the campus worked and how the buildings interacted.

Oh the stories we heard—how classrooms were arranged, paths to specific buildings, the location and amenities of playgrounds, the location of secret hiding places, contraband caches, hidden shortcuts, and the “nooks and crannies” where teenage boys and girls could find that occasional moment of privacy to steal a kiss!

Special thanks go out to the State School kids who endured the endless stream of questions. Also, a huge thanks to the project staff; Kathleen Laughlin – site director, Ossian Or – camera person, Cheryl Finnegan – interviewer, and Daniel Moeckly – secondary camera, grip, and Museum representative. These individuals enthusiastically survived all 9 of the 14 hour days required to capture this rare glimpse into the function of the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children.

DECEMBER 2 — A RED-LETTER DAY FOR OWATONNA

December 2, 2012, came and went in Owatonna without special fanfare. Yet December 2 is a date that forever changed the history and landscape of this community. On that day in 1886, the State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children opened its doors to three Steele County children. Opening this institution brought about a new era of childcare for Minnesota's orphaned, dependent, neglected and abused children — a giant step forward in caring for such children. History records that up to that point, such children were placed in County Poorhouses “with the drunks and derelicts.” A newspaper of that day states, “there are now between 30 and 45 children in Poor Houses who will probably come under the care of the new State School; and the number will increase with the growth of population.”

Those words certainly held true. Over the next 60 years from 1886 to 1945, 10,635 Minnesota children were placed in the State School as Wards of the State. That time span covers a lengthy history — from new immigrants still settling in Steele County in 1886 to telephones and electricity coming into homes, Model A cars, World War I, the Great Depression of the 30's, World War II, and finally to 1945 when the Orphanage era ended.

In September of 1933, the headline in the Journal Chronicle read “State School Has a Mounting Waiting List, Now Over 300.” The article stated, “More than 500 boys and girls are now included in the population of the School, which has a capacity for about 430 and no further ability to absorb the more than 300 already on the waiting list.” And at that time, the School employed over 100 staff.

So what was different about the State School from the beginning? By 1885 when the Minnesota State

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THANK YOU TO OUR WONDERFUL COTTAGE 11 VOLUNTEERS!

*front row: Maxine Ronglien, Dan Moeckly,
Paul Nelson, Kathy Force; middle row: Nina Zak,
Shirley Petri, Wanda McLagan, Carol Raetz;
back row: Mark Rasmussen, Harvey Ronglien,
Joel Jensen, Janice Jensen, Tom Bonacci*

DECEMBER 2 — A RED-LETTER DAY FOR OWATONNA CONTINUED

Legislature considered opening a State Orphanage, many orphanages had already existed for years in several Eastern states. However, Minnesota chose to follow the new Michigan State School model. Unlike the Eastern orphanages where children were kept indefinitely, Michigan's State School advocated preparing such children for placement "in good new homes" where they could thrive "being taken away from crime and poverty." In fact, Minnesota was so impressed with the Michigan model that they hired their young social worker, Galen Merrill, to be their first Superintendent. Under Merrill's guidance, the Owatonna State School gained national prominence over the next 48 years, prior to his death in 1934. Example: In 1909, Supt. Merrill was honored with an invitation from President Theodore Roosevelt to share his views of childcare with a group in Washington, D.C.

Another interesting part of State School history is that in 1885, two sites in Owatonna were actually considered for the new State School. In addition to the "west side of Owatonna," "the east side of the community" was also considered, namely an area that would have come within two blocks of the "Baptist Academy." Had this spot been chosen, what a difference it would have made in the Owatonna landscape. Thankfully, after much discussion, it was strongly recommended "that a site be chosen on the western hills on account of the excellent opportunity it would afford for drainage. Governor Hubbard especially recommended this school in his message, and he seems earnestly desirous that it shall be established on a scale suitable to its importance. The other commissioners appear to be imbued with the same liberal spirit." Thus, we have "West Hills" today, a unique "People's Center," and the former farmland now houses our Industrial Park.

We're grateful much of this information has been gleaned from newspapers of that era which are available

on microfilm in the Owatonna Public Library. (And a booklet of these articles is on display in the Museum.) In addition to historical facts on the growth of the institution, these newspapers also reveal many of the joys and sorrows of the State School. For example, how contagious diseases claimed many children's lives, and that many small children came in very poor physical condition and died shortly after arriving. During the 60-year history, 330 children died, and of these, 198 are buried in the State School cemetery, unclaimed by family.

Sadly, too, there are many articles telling of children being placed in terribly abusive homes, and in some cases, being returned to the State School. Also, of mothers wanting to get their children back and finding it impossible since they had signed them over to the State. There are many, many stories of runaways, but they were usually caught and returned. Then there are stories of children trying to find their siblings who had been adopted and being unable to find them because of the privacy of adoption. Many families were never reunited. As you might expect, there were few stories of the strict discipline and punishment of the children, but those were everyday occurrences.

There are happy stories as well — children putting on Operettas, celebrating Christmas, and the 4th of July—the only day boys and girls could play together. Then there were the Golden Gloves Tournaments with many State School boys participating, a day at the Steele County Fair, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and a day at Mineral Springs.



1898 School - later Cottage 16



So what is the legacy of the State School 126 years after it opened? There are 10,635+ answers to that question. Some good — some bad! Certainly the School provided jobs for many local residents and helped grow the economy. As for the children, each has their own story and view of their childhood at this institution. My husband Harvey who spent 11 years at the State School sums it up like this: “In my opinion, the legacy of the State Public School for Dependent & Neglected Children is that the environment generated in a large institution is not conducive to raising emotionally healthy children. Let the Museum and outside memorial forever serve as a reminder of that truth and as a remembrance for every child who passed through these doors and their struggle to overcome the scars left by this institution. Yet, it was my home and it gave me an identity that set me apart. I’ll always feel a real sense of pride in saying, ‘I was a State School Kid.’”

If you have never visited the Museum in the City Administration Building or Cottage 11, we encourage you to stop by in this New Year and learn more of this Owatonna, Minnesota, history. There are several books in our Cottage 11 gift shop by former State School children available for purchase as well as our award-winning Documentary “The Children Remember.” You may also check out our website www.orphanagemuseum.com and our Facebook page for more information. Should you have any interest in volunteering with the Orphanage Museum, please contact us at 507-774-7369 or stop in and talk with us. Our Board would very much welcome your interest and help in sharing our Owatonna story with the many tourists that visit each year.

Maxine Ronglien
Orphanage Museum Co-Founder & Board Member

THANK YOU!

Our sincere thanks to the Orphanage Museum Board for hosting a celebration of our 60th Wedding Anniversary in Cottage 11 on December 2. During the eight years I spent in Cottage 11 in the 1930's, I doubt I ever realized people got married.

Maxine and I are most grateful to all who came and made the day one we'll long remember and treasure. We are also grateful for the meaningful cards and the many donations to the Legacy Fund.

Thank you again,

Harvey Ronglien.



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Orphanage Legacy Trust UPDATE:

Balance as of December 2012: **\$18,330.35.**

2013 goal: **\$100,000** | goal by end of 2015: **\$300,000**

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WORD OF DECEASED

Richard R. Erickson
 Lucille Breckey
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Thank you!

Please note: we have increased the cost of purchasing a Boardwalk board to \$50. We will now be using recycled materials instead of wood to increase the life of the boardwalk.



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Return Service Requested

If you plan to change your address please let us know as each returned newsletter costs the museum \$0.41 plus \$0.41 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 for C-11? Please fill in the form below. Your support is greatly appreciated!

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 lush State School afghans at \$49.95 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 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.

Mail your check, along with this form to: MN State School Orphanage Museum, 540 West Hills Circle, Owatonna, MN 55060. Checks should be written out to: MN State School Orphanage Museum.

Minnesota State Public School Orphanage Museum & Historic Cottage 11 Boy's Dormitory

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