

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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A Temporary Shelter for
Six Children Under 12:
St. Joseph's Orphanage

Page 10

Spring, 2002

Volume 37, Number 1

'The Best School in the City,' 1896–1916

Mechanic Arts High School: Its First 20 Years

—Page 4



The first Mechanic Arts High School building, right, shares the site at Central and Park Avenues with the old Madison School, left, where grade school pupils are playing. This spectacular 1911 photo by Charles P. Gibson also reveals a long-vanished neighborhood in downtown St. Paul. Minnesota Historical Society collections. See article beginning on page 4.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

In this issue historian John Larson takes us back to the turn of the twentieth century to the founding and early years of one of St. Paul's best known educational institutions: Mechanic Arts High School. Founded in 1896, Mechanic Arts High School exemplified the educational philosophy that identified vocational education and training is a prerequisite for the citizens of a nation that was rapidly undergoing industrialization. Using materials such as the high school's own student publications, Larson chronicles the first two decades of the school's history, its years under the leadership of Principal George Weitbrecht, who was an extraordinary educator.

Janet Postlewaite Sands shifts our attention to another kind of institution in a memoir of her months living at St. Joseph's Orphan Home in 1945-46. Although she was only seven at the time, Janet Postlewaite's recall of the events in her family's life that forced her and her brothers and sisters to take up temporary refuge at the orphanage is both clear and vivid. Paul Nelson follows Janet Sands's memoir with a brief essay that provides the background and history of St. Joseph's Catholic Orphan Home. In light of current newspaper headlines that raise probing questions about the function and value of orphanages today, Janet Sands's family story asks us to consider these issues in a broader context and complexity than we might first have thought necessary.

Newspaper headlines and world events are a theme that's present in Ray Barton's account of how he reacted to the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. As Barton explains, the events in New York, Washington D.C., and western Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, helped bring back his own recollections of his youthful years between 1941 and 1945 when the United States was fully committed to war with its Axis foes.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Donations and Their Own Pockets—

An Orphanage's Roots in 1869 St. Paul

Paul D. Nelson

When little Janet Postlewaite stepped into St. Joseph's orphanage that October day in 1945 she entered a nineteenth century institution, a creation of the German culture that flourished in St. Paul from the 1860s to World War I.

St. Joseph's roots went back to Assumption Parish in downtown St. Paul and the creation of the St. Joseph's German Catholic Orphan Society in 1869. St. Paul was a booming frontier town in those days. The steamboat still ruled, but not for much longer: its more powerful rival, the railroad, had reached the city in 1862 and would soon take over utterly. The hurly burly of rapid growth, tens of thousands of people moving through the city every year, poor housing and sanitation, and rudimentary medical services combined to create large numbers of neglected and orphaned children.

In 1877, the German Catholic Orphan Society—led by George Mitsch, Jacob Simmer, and Henry Timme—opened an orphanage in rented quarters at Ninth and Robert streets downtown, near the current site of Pedro's Luggage. Two Benedictine nuns, Benedicta Klein and Agatha Nachbar, came from Shakopee to take charge of the home. Six children took up residence there on St. Joseph's Day, March 19, 1877. Later that year the home moved to another Ninth Street location, near Assumption Church. Ten years later the Society added a wing to the building, increasing capacity to ninety. Despite its name, St. Joseph's German Catholic Orphan Asylum, the home did not restrict admission by ethnicity.

In the earliest days the men of the German Catholic Orphan Society supported the orphanage from their own pockets and whatever donations they could scare up. In 1881 Bishop Thomas

Grace, successor to Bishop Joseph Cretin, brought the home under control of the diocese and arranged diocese-wide financial support.

Even with the new wing on the Ninth Street building, demand for space quickly surpassed supply, and the Society began looking again for larger quarters. Because downtown land was too expensive, board members looked elsewhere. Fortune smiled on them. In 1869 the St. Joseph's Aid Society, another German Catholic group, had bought forty-seven acres of land at Randolph and Hamline—then the countryside—for a German cemetery. That plan had fallen through, leaving the land available. The Orphan Society bought it and began construction of a new building in 1899. That building, completed in 1900, was the one where Janet Postlewaite took up residence in 1945.

It was located at 1458 Randolph Avenue. The forty-seven acres extended to Hartford on the south, Hamline on the east, and Warwick on the west. This parcel now includes the buildings and grounds and playing fields of Cretin High School, Holy Spirit school and church, Expo school, plus some houses and apartment buildings. The orphanage's main building had three wings. Behind it, during Janet Postlewaite's time, stood a small school, a boiler and laundry building, a chicken coop, a tool shed, a corn crib, and a root cellar.

In many ways little had changed at St. Joseph's in the intervening decades. Benedictine nuns still ran the place, still on a shoestring. Though some of the adjoining acres had been sold, the orphanage still relied to a significant degree on the land itself for sustenance. Until the mid-1920s the sisters had operated a farm on the grounds. With the help of a single

employee and the labor of children, they had raised cattle and chickens, grown corn and vegetables, and kept an orchard. According to the home's historian, Claire Lynch, "practically the entire food supply for the Home was raised on this property." By the time Janet Postlewaite arrived, the productive area had been reduced to twenty acres of gardens. These remained vital to the operation: As late as 1957 orphan labor produced 800 bushels of potatoes, 80 bushels of tomatoes, 35 of sweet corn, 25 of beans, and 20 of beets. The previous year the nuns and girls had canned more than 1,000 gallons of produce (including 100 of peaches!), made 15 gallons of jam, and frozen 96 gallons of raspberries. This food, plus donations of day-old bread and many other gifts, enabled the nuns to keep per capita costs at an astonishing \$1.30 per day as late as 1949.

The sisters themselves earned tiny salaries, and kept operating costs low by maintaining a small hired staff: one man to run the building and another general farmer/handyman. The nuns and the children did the rest of the work. By the early twentieth century the home's sources of money had broadened to include Catholic Charities and the Community Chest, but the overall budgets remained exceedingly modest. In 1957, for example, total support barely exceeded \$35,000, about \$700 yearly per child—less than \$2 per day each. Putting the children to work was a necessity.

The closely regulated life that Janet Postlewaite Sands recalls dated from an earlier era. Historian Claire Lynch observed that "the activities of the day were . . . minutely scheduled in an effort to help the children develop orderly habits of work and play."

For children of Janet's age, the week-

day schedule for many years looked like this:

6:10 or 7 a.m.	Arise
6:30 (M,W & F)	Mass
7:00 – 7:20	Personal care
7:20 – 7:30	Work
7:30 – 8:00	Eat
8:00 – 8:15	Work
8:45 – 11:55	School
11:55 – 12:00	Personal care
12:00 – 12:40	Eat
12:40 – 1:00	Leisure time
1:00 – 3:00	School
3:00 – 3:10	Personal care
3:10 – 3:15	Snack
3:15 – 5:30	Leisure time
5:30 – 5:40	Personal care
5:45 – 6:00	Rosary
6:00 – 6:30	Eat
6:30 – 7:00	Personal care
7:00 – 8:00	Leisure time
8:00	Retire

By her time, apparently, the work requirements for even younger children had increased. The children took their schooling in the orphanage until 1951.

Enrollment at St. Joseph's naturally varied with the times. When the Randolph Street residence opened in 1900, it housed 129. That number grew to a peak of 283 in 1923, then declined, first gradually (to 188 in 1931, 150 in 1948, 104 in 1951), then faster through the 1950s. As Janet Sands notes in her memoir, most of the children were not true orphans; by her time only a handful had lost both parents. The home served the function that foster homes do today; a temporary shelter for the neglected, the abandoned, or those whose parents simply could not cope.

Changes in society and physical deterioration put the squeeze on St. Joseph's throughout the 1950s. Child welfare authorities, in St. Paul and all across the country, increasingly favored family foster care over institutional care. The age of the orphanage had passed. What's more, time took a heavy toll on the St. Joseph's building. It had been built of course with nineteenth century needs in mind, and shortage of money precluded the expensive renovations that would have been needed to keep it up to date. From the 1930s forward, state inspectors issued

order after order restricting enrollment due to the building's physical inadequacies. Then in 1958 St. Joseph's directors were told that their license would be renewed only if radical improvements were made or a new building built.

In May 1960 Archbishop Brady made the inevitable announcement. As the result of consolidation of charity work in the archdiocese and the fact that the St. Joseph's building could "no longer serve [its] original purposes," plus the "unfavorable scrutiny of state officials," the home must close. On June 15, 1960, the nineteen boys remaining in residence were transferred to the Catholic Home for Boys in Minneapolis.

The wrecking ball struck two years later. On November 26, 1962, demolition of St. Joseph's Home for Children (its name since 1955) was complete. Apartment buildings and a garage now occupy the site where the building once stood.

The Postlewaite Family

Unlike St. Joseph's Home, neither branch of Janet Postlewaite's family had deep roots in St. Paul. Her father, Russell Postlewaite, had been born in Duluth in September of 1904, but came to St. Paul with his parents when very young. He grew up at 1826 Iglehart, right by Longfellow School (which he attended) and Merriam Park. He graduated from Central High School and attended the University of Minnesota for two years before entering the world of work.

Janet's mother, Helen Karpen, came to St. Paul after graduating from high school in her home town of Webster, South Dakota. She met Russell Postlewaite through a sister of hers. They married in the St. Paul Cathedral in 1932, at a side altar because Russell was Christian Scientist, not Catholic. She was twenty-five years old, he twenty-eight. Their married life would prove to be sadly brief.

Children came along regularly: Judith in 1933, Joan in 1935, John in 1936, Janet in 1938, James in 1940, and Jeffrey in 1942. Postlewaite worked for Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company, Nash Motors, the *St. Paul Dispatch*, Clapp-Thomssen Realty, and finally as an assistant secretary of Northern Federal Savings and Loan, all in St. Paul. He

worked steadily in spite of the depression except, paradoxically, for a period just after the beginning of World War II. The children all grew up in the house on Iglehart, which Helen and Russell bought from his parents.

Ill health struck both of Janet's parents while still young. Records from St. Joseph's state that Helen developed an "arthritic condition" severe enough to require hospitalization in August of 1944, when she was just thirty-seven. Her symptoms were consistent with those of rheumatic fever, though the St. Joseph records do not use that term.

Heart disease hit Russell Postlewaite in September of 1945, and he never recovered. He might have had symptoms of illness long before his collapse, but his Christian Science faith kept him away from physicians. After Russell's initial treatment, his doctor predicted that he might be disabled for years, but this proved too optimistic. He died seven weeks after his first hospitalization, at age forty-one.

Despite all of these trials the Postlewaite family not only endured but, in the long run, thrived. Helen Postlewaite recovered well enough to resume care of the children. The family survived financially through Social Security, the generosity of family and friends, and whatever money the children could earn by working. All of the children attended St. Mark's Elementary School, just across Marshall Avenue and six blocks from their home. The girls completed secondary school at St. Joseph's Academy, not far from the Cathedral. Brother Jack graduated from Central High School, as his father had; James and Jeffrey attended Cretin. Scholarships paid for the private schooling. All three brothers finished college, and two earned advanced degrees.

Helen Postlewaite died, still young, in 1952; her daughter Joan in 1984. Of the remaining five children only Janet remains in St. Paul, but she and the others gather yearly at Gull Lake, near Nisswa, in north central Minnesota.

Paul D. Nelson is the author of the biography of Fredrick McGhee, reviewed in this issue, and a member of Ramsey County History's Editorial Board.



Fredrick McGhee, family and friends on the porch of the McGhee home at 665 University Avenue, St. Paul, around 1910. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See "Doing History in Ramsey County and St. Paul" on page 20 and a review of Paul Nelson's biography of McGhee on page 24.

R.C.H.S.
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