

# *With Wise and*



# *Benevolent Purpose*

## Poor Children and the State

## Public School at Owatonna, 1885–1915

Priscilla Ferguson Clement

DURING the 1880s several hundred new child-care agencies came into being all across America. The founders of many tried to implement the newest welfare policies, including the removal of children from undifferentiated almshouses to specialized children's asylums. There indigent youngsters would remain for a short time, to receive an education in a homelike atmosphere before permanent placement in family farm homes. While the goals of such asylums are well recognized, the degree to which they accomplished them and their effect upon youngsters is not so clear. Most studies heretofore

made of 19th-century child-care agencies have been rather general and have not utilized actual records of children, along with asylum board minutes and annual reports.<sup>1</sup>

One such institution, the State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children at Owatonna, Minnesota, retained excellent case studies of its young inmates as well as superintendents' records and annual reports. These data allow the historian to assess: First, how successful was this asylum, from the date of its founding in 1885 as one of the most innovative of American child-care institutions to World War I, in putting its goals into practice? Second, how, during this period, did the Owatonna school affect the lives of needy children?<sup>2</sup>

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My own analysis, computed from United States Bureau of the Census, *Benevolent Institutions, 1910* (Washington, D.C., 1913), indicates that 218 asylums for children were founded in the 1880s; only in the 1890s were more (256) established. Peter L. Tyor and Jamil S. Zainaldin, "Asylum and Society: An Approach to Institutional Change," in *Journal of Social History*, 13:23–48 (Fall, 1979) ably demonstrate how explanations of institutional history recently advanced by David Rothman, Gerald Grob, and Christopher Lasch are overly broad.

<sup>2</sup>The period selected covers the years when the school became fully established as an integral part of Minnesota's welfare system. Data were derived from a sample of 300 children (150 youngsters, 75 girls and 75 boys, admitted in each of two decades, 1887–1897 and 1898–1907) drawn from Histories of Children, 1886–1922, in Owatonna State Public School Records, in Minnesota State Archives, MHS. Unless otherwise noted, all statistics on children in this article are based on that sample.

BY the late 19th century most child-welfare workers had agreed on certain principles, one being that almshouses were improper places in which to lodge indigent children. As early as 1856, some New Yorkers protested against incarceration of needy children alongside adult paupers, and by the 1860s and 1870s several states had initiated plans to remove youngsters from public poorhouses and care for them in alternate ways. Also beginning in the 1850s, Charles Loring Brace, founder of the New York Children's Aid Society, popularized a program of permanent dispersal of city children to country

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homes in the Middle West, some in Minnesota. While Brace did not necessarily dislike the city, he did feel that opportunities for children were enhanced by their removal to a more open, free environment. He objected to institutions that he felt turned youngsters into "automatons" and favored immediate placement in family homes without indenture contracts; he believed that the latter prevented children from leaving bad homes.<sup>3</sup>

Brace's program was a controversial one, but eventually many child-welfare workers agreed that a family home in the country rather than the city was best for the child, and that institutionalization, if utilized, should be temporary and employed in as homelike a setting as possible, with youngsters housed in small cottages rather than in large congregate dorms. Brace's unwillingness to use indenture contracts and the failure of his Children's Aid Society (at least in its early years) to check on children placed out were more generally criticized. Many felt that a firm indenture contract, spelling out the educational and other obligations of the foster family, was necessary for the child's protection, as was careful choice of foster homes and, after placement, frequent visits by agency staff members to them.<sup>4</sup>

The legislation that created the state public school at Owatonna in 1885 closely followed current social-work thought. It was proposed by Minnesota Governor Lucius F. Hubbard, who persuaded the legislators to adopt many new health and welfare programs. The project was seconded by Hastings H. Hart, then secretary of Minnesota's State Board of Charities, itself a new body established by the governor and comparable to similar boards in eastern states. Hart, who became one of the most innovative social workers of his day, had conducted a study in 1884 of 340 children placed in Minnesota by Brace's New York society and was thus familiar with that novel program. In accordance both with current attitudes toward almshouses and with Brace's views on child care, the Minnesota plan called for the transfer of children from poorhouses and from impoverished natural families to farm homes. Minnesota, however, did rely on interim institutionalization of children in a cottage-style asylum to insure that they were in good health and educated in some measure before being placed out. In Minnesota, also, indenture contracts were used, and a state agent was to be appointed to select proper homes and to visit children in them. Hubbard and Hart were confident that their plan would work, for since 1874 it had been tested successfully at the state public school in Coldwater, Michigan.<sup>5</sup>

Governor Hubbard appointed five prominent businessmen from around the state to determine a location for the new school and to supervise its construction. After considerable political jockeying, they resolved to situate the school in Steele County in the southern, most well-settled part of the state, at the junction of two key



CHILDREN at the state school, enjoying a recess period on the lawn in front of Cottage Number Three

railroad lines, on a farm near Owatonna.<sup>6</sup> Children committed by courts at the request of county commissioners could be easily transported there from all parts of the state. Moreover, they would benefit from the healthy country atmosphere and learn something about farming in the barns and fields about the institution. Such knowl-

<sup>3</sup>Homer Folks, *The Care of Destitute, Neglected, and Delinquent Children*, 72-81 (Reprint ed., New York, 1970); Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York, and Twenty Years Work Among Them*, 84 (New York, 1872); Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*, 100 (Cambridge, Mass., 1978); Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America*, 143 (Lexington, Ky., 1975); Miriam Z. Langsam, *Children West. A History of the Placing-Out System of the New York Children's Aid Society, 1853-1890*, 18 (Madison, Wis., 1964).

<sup>4</sup>Frank J. Bruno, *Trends in Social Work, 1874-1956: A History Based on the Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work*, 60-64 (2nd ed., New York, 1957); Langsam, *Children West*, 61-64. Joy Parr argues in *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924*, 82-84 (London, 1980) that foster children in Canada were not entitled to inherit from foster parents and thus needed indenture contracts to insure some financial reward.

<sup>5</sup>William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:143, 152-157 (Reprint ed., St. Paul, 1969); Bruno, *Trends in Social Work*, 31-39; Langsam, *Children West*, 61-64. Board of Control of the State Public School, *First Biennial Report*, 10, 32-34, 35, 42 (St. Paul, 1887), in Owatonna State Public School Records, MHS. (These two-year reports, which also are published in Minnesota, *Executive Documents of the State of Minnesota*, were issued with varying titles; they will be cited hereafter as *Biennial Report*, with appropriate date.) Wisconsin, Rhode Island, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Montana, Nevada, and Texas also adopted the system of sending all poor, dependent children to one state public school; Folks, *Care of Destitute Children*, 82-102.

<sup>6</sup>Board of Commissioners, Minutes, April 22, June 1, 2, 9, 26, 27, 1885, in Owatonna State Public School Records, MHS. The commissioners were L. F. Hubbard, Anthony Kelly, William Morin, Charles S. Crandall, John Byers, and B. B. Herbert.

edge would prove useful to three-quarters of the school's inmates who were to be placed in farm families, mainly in Steele and other adjacent southern counties.

Although construction proceeded apace, the grounds were not yet properly landscaped when the Owatonna school opened in late 1886. The physical plant consisted of three cottages: an administration building, a part school and part dormitory hall for girls, and living quarters for boys. In the next few years the institution expanded to include a hospital, a schoolhouse, and three more cottages. Each cottage housed 20 to 30 youngsters of similar age and the same sex who were attended by a motherly, middle-aged matron. By the mid-1890s there were assistant matrons in most cottages as well.<sup>7</sup>

The Owatonna school succeeded in establishing a homelike environment for children in the manner approved by late 19th-century social workers. In the early 20th century, that atmosphere was probably reinforced by family feeling among the institution's employees, for at that time fully a quarter of them were related. The largest such family was headed by Edward W. Lansing, the school carpenter, and his wife; of their nine children, three were teachers at Owatonna and a fourth was the asylum druggist. Since women have traditionally been homemakers, it is not surprising to find them predominant in this school, which was so deliberately patterned after the home. Between 1887 and 1915, from two-thirds to three-quarters of Owatonna's employees were women, and there were a goodly number of them. If a homelike atmosphere is one in which children receive much personal attention, Owatonna had that character. It opened with a ratio of eight children to one employee, but in two years, with the addition of several new employees, the ratio improved to four to one, a proportion that continued through World War I.<sup>8</sup>

If homeyness was a new concept in child-care institutions, educating the youngsters within them was not. The earliest orphanages in the United States all con-

tained schoolrooms, for it was generally recognized that only through education could a child escape poverty. In fact, many such orphanages antedated the creation of public schools and thus offered the children of the poor their only chance to learn to read and write. Only one year before the Owatonna school opened, legislators passed Minnesota's first compulsory education law, which required children between 8 and 16 to attend school 12 weeks a year, although this was "an expression of sentiment and little more." In this large rural state, where child labor on farms was essential and where many schools were situated miles from a rural home, truancy was commonplace.<sup>9</sup>

Thus public schooling was in its infancy in Minnesota when the Owatonna school opened with an aggressive ten-month educational program for children of five or above. The state public school maintained a kindergarten (itself a new and unusual program which the nearby city of Owatonna was not to establish for some years to come) and the first three grades. By 1901-02 teachers at the school taught classes through the seventh grade but enrolled the oldest and ablest of their students in the local public high school. This practice originated when high-school education was coming increasingly into vogue. About the same time, vocational training gained in popularity, especially for children of the poor. By the turn of the century, in keeping with this trend, the school's administrators added to the basic curriculum a new industrial education program developed in Sweden called "sloyd," designed to teach children the use of basic tools and simple carpentry. In 1901-02 they introduced a domestic science program for girls and, a few years later, a course in sewing skills for girls and boys. At first, such programs were intended to make young children appealing to farmers who sought boys who were handy with tools and girls who were good housekeepers. By 1910 manual training was used to prepare older boys and girls — those who had not remained with foster parents — to be independent and self-supporting.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, from 1887 to 1909, the few children who stayed several years in the Owatonna school probably obtained a more complete education than did the majority, who were placed with foster families within a year of their arrival at the asylum. Of course, it was expected that once they were indentured, they would finish their education in reading, writing, and mathematics by attending local schools at least five months a year until they were 18 years old. This requirement unfortunately was often ignored by foster families, especially those who took in older boys and girls chiefly for their labor. In 1899 the Owatonna agent in charge of placing children noted: "It is almost impossible to secure the consent of strangers to take a child fifteen or sixteen years old, provide it the necessities of life, and allow it more than a very meager amount of schooling." Rarely

<sup>7</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1886, p. 8-10, 16, 17, 32, 1896, p. 32-34.

<sup>8</sup> Minnesota Manuscript Census schedules, 1905, Steele County, Owatonna Township, Ward 3, MHS; *Biennial Reports*, 1886, p. 20, 21, 1890, p. 2, 4, 26, 1892, p. 45, 48, 1894, p. 45, 50, 1896, p. 45, 54, 1898, p. 47, 54, 1900, p. 47, 68, 1920, p. 2, 5.

<sup>9</sup> On education, see Raymond A. Mohl, *Poverty in New York, 1783-1825*, 173-189 (New York, 1971); Folks, *Care of Destitute Children*, 46. On the Minnesota law, see Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 4:163.

<sup>10</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1886, p. 21, 1890, p. 29-31, 1894, p. 57, 1900, p. 12, 15, 79, 1902, p. 5, 1904, p. 7, 1906, p. 9, 1912, p. 33; Edgar Bruce Wesley, *Owatonna, The Social Development of a Minnesota Community*, 139 (Minneapolis, 1938). On high school and vocational education in the late 19th century, see David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*, 182, 189-191 (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

did children placed from the Owatonna institution attend school more than 40 days per year. Such youngsters quickly fell behind in their learning and were often embarrassed to return to school at all. Some Minnesota farmers, of course, did not send their own children to school either, but if any youngsters in a farm family were to acquire an education, they were more likely to be natural-born rather than foster children. By 1909 the state agent reported that a new, more rigid Minnesota law requiring all school-age children to attend classes six to nine months a year enabled more children from Owatonna in foster families to obtain a proper education. Notwithstanding, as late as 1919 a new state board of education reported large numbers of children throughout the state, some of them no doubt from Owatonna, either out of school entirely or attending only irregularly.<sup>11</sup> Seemingly, the Owatonna school, in the first 30 years of its existence, failed to realize its ideal of securing for most of its charges a complete elementary education.

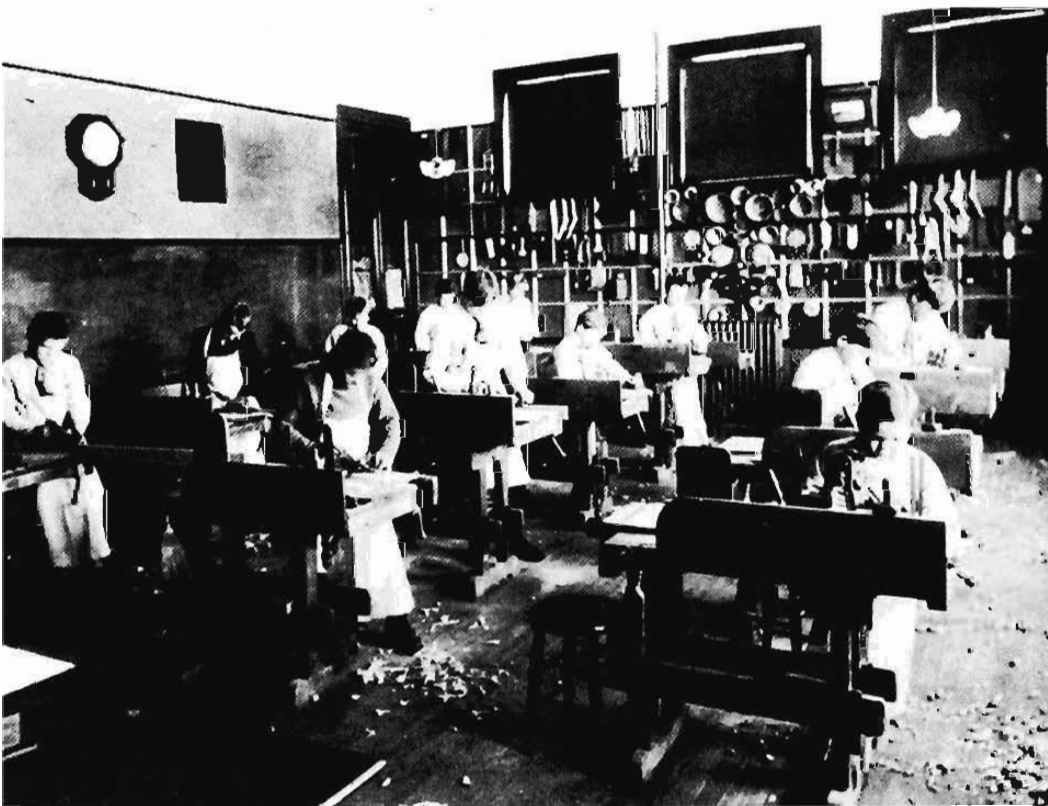
THE Minnesota state public school was consistently more successful in physically rehabilitating than in educating youngsters. Upon entrance children were often sickly, weak, hungry, and poorly clad. The superintendent soon began isolating new arrivals until doctors ascertained that they were in good health. In this way the spread of communicable diseases like diphtheria,

measles, and scarlet fever was curbed. Dining-room fare at Owatonna was substantial and wholesome, with plenty of bread but also fruit, vegetables, and dairy products from the school farm. Each child acquired several suits of heavy, warm clothing, and all were encouraged to exercise daily in the open air in the play areas adjacent to each cottage. By the 1890s youngsters amused themselves on ball fields, a tennis court, and swings, and by 1915–16, in a gym and swimming pool as well.<sup>12</sup> The best evidence of the success of this program is the low death rate at the Owatonna school — between 1887 and 1907 just 2 per cent of youngsters died in the asylum. Two per cent more succumbed while in foster families.

As important as a homelike atmosphere and adequate intellectual and physical training was what happened to youngsters once they left the school. Since permanent institutionalization of the young was frowned upon by

<sup>11</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1886, p. 31, 1890, p. 64, 1900, p. 27, 1902, p. 13, 1904, p. 14, 1910, p. 14. Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 4:166. On similar treatment of British emigrant apprentices in Canada, see Parr, *Labouring Children*, 108.

<sup>12</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1886, p. 19, 1890, p. 33, 1900, p. 16, 1908, p. 6, 1916, p. 7; Superintendent's reports, September 3, 1888, July 28, 1897, November 7, 1898, in Owatonna State Public School Records. Although state law required that all youngsters be certified by their home-town doctor as being in good health and free from exposure to contagious diseases within 15 days before admission to the school, the law was not conscientiously observed.



A WOODWORKING CLASS at the Owatonna school; note the display of finished products on the back wall.



*THIS FIFTH-GRADE reading class, on its best behavior under the watchful eye of an Owatonna teacher about 1902*

social reformers of the period, Owatonna was designed to house youngsters temporarily; its function was to prepare them for permanent placement in family homes. To this end Owatonna officials recognized the need that child and home be carefully matched and that both be checked frequently until the child was of age and self-sufficient.

Until 1915 most children remained at the school less than a year. Indeed, the mean length of stay decreased from 11.5 months in the decade between 1887 and 1897 to 8 months in 1915–16 as the school's placing-out program became more aggressive.<sup>13</sup> The goal of temporary institutionalization of boys and girls was realized.

In Owatonna's first two years of operation, however, the state failed to provide funding for an agent to investigate homes, place children in them, and check on the youngsters periodically. Thus, Owatonna's superintendent acted cautiously and placed only the few youngsters he had time to check on personally. Then in 1889 the

first state agent was hired, and thereafter the placing-out program expanded and prospered. By 1893 there were two such agents; in 1897 two local agents (headquartered in Minneapolis and St. Paul) joined them; and by 1908, two more state agents had commenced work. When there were just two agents, only about two-fifths of the children placed in family homes could be visited once a year. When four state and two local agents were on the job, however, all of the youngsters could be seen at least once annually. A single call each year from a school representative may appear inadequate, but in this farm state, where children were often placed a hundred miles from the institution and where before World War I most homes could be reached only by a combination of train and wagon travel, it was difficult for the agents to visit more frequently.<sup>14</sup>

Because visitation had to be limited, school officials early on determined to try to insure successful placement by careful matching of child and home. The agents lived at the school and there became acquainted with the youngsters and their individual needs. Such knowledge enabled them to select the most appropriate home for each youngster. They recognized that a very bright child should not be sent to a home with "tolerable advantages" and that not all boys and girls were right for "the very

<sup>13</sup> *Biennial Report*, 1916, p. 7. These figures are for children from the date they entered the school until the time of their first foster home placement.

<sup>14</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1890, p. 12–14, 1894, p. 27, 1898, p. 13, 53, 1900, p. 21, 67, 1902, p. 9, 18, 1906, p. 7, 1910, p. 4.

best home." Applicants were routinely rejected for "poverty or vicious personal habits" or if they had "purely mercenary motives in applying." Of course, the agents realized that in this farm state most children were welcomed, at least in part, for their labor. In depression times such as the late 1890s, when farmers could ill afford to pay wages, they sought out the cheap labor of youngsters from Owatonna. The agents recognized this problem and tried, not always successfully, to find homes where foster children were treated as members of the family and required to work no more than other youngsters in the locality. They were quick to perceive that applicants who requested a teen-ager purely for "company" were not being entirely honest. They avoided placing youngsters in families "where the drudgery is never done."<sup>15</sup>

Once in his or her new home, a child could anticipate the appearance of a state agent within two to three months. The child who was not being properly treated could then be promptly removed. On this first and all subsequent visits, the agents made every effort to call at foster homes at unexpected times and to interview parents and children separately. They checked local school registers to ascertain if youngsters obtained all the education promised them in their indentures. They were also careful to visit when a youngster's term of service was complete to make sure that he or she received proper financial settlement from foster parents and had secured good employment at fair wages.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, a proper fit between child and home was not easy to achieve, and between 1887 and 1907, 67 per cent of the children did not do well the first time they were placed. The agents tended to blame the child rather than the foster family for whatever problems developed. For example, 11-year-old John H--- was returned in 1887 by his master for "disobedience," and in the next year, Annie B---, age eight, re-entered Owatonna because her mistress pronounced her "disagreeable." Undoubtedly many children were troublesome. In 1891, for instance, Howard W. B---'s master, before returning him to the state school, asked the boy to write a letter to the superintendent describing "all the mischief" he had done. Here is part of Howard's confession: "I had three different chores to do and I said I done them all when I did not. I run the pitchfork into a mare and killed her colt but got no whipping for it. Said I watered the bull when I didn't. Swung on the buggy top one day and broke off the back curtain and said I didn't. Said I watered a cow when I didn't. I wet my bed a good many times and only got whipped 2 or 3 times." Of course, agents recognized, "With some, who are considered doing poorly, probably the trouble is only a superabundance of energy, which by and by will work off, and they will become fairly good children." Such may have been the case with Howard.<sup>17</sup>

Still, noted one agent, "Much of the future success of the child depends upon the unselfishness of the guardian." And "it is nevertheless too often true that people who take children expect them to be furnished exactly as ordered and conform to their ideas without any help or training on their part." Some guardians were prejudiced against the Owatonna children because they came from impoverished families. Reported one agent, "These prejudices cause unjust suspicions and sometimes lead to wrong judgments and accusations." He gave examples of two children who were unfairly charged by their masters with stealing and were beaten until forced falsely to confess. More commonly, in their new foster homes children were simply denied affection. In 1898 the state agent argued: "I think one of the principal causes of failure of our children is the lack of foresight and the penuriousness of the foster parents, some of whom take children, not from a desire to do them good, but as a business venture, expecting to do little for them and get much from them." Yet somehow most children survived and learned to accept their lot. "It is a very rare thing to find a child who will complain of his surroundings if they are at all endurable."<sup>18</sup>

The agents knew that a youngster who was returned from one foster home was discouraged and reluctant to go to the next. Thus they worked harder to reconcile children and their guardians, and seemingly succeeded. In the state school's first ten years of operation, just over half of the children were placed only once, but in the second decade of the school's existence, two-thirds of the children settled permanently into their first foster homes.

LEGAL adoption of Owatonna children by foster parents was the ultimate goal of the school's officials. They expected that most children, after spending a year in a new home, would become permanent family members. Such was not the case. From 1887 to 1897, just 6 per cent of them were adopted, and in the next decade, 20 per cent. Those who were formally adopted were very young, with an average age of three years, and female. The majority of youngsters at the school were over six

<sup>15</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1890, p. 57, 1892, p. 33, 1900, p. 20, 1908, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1890, p. 58, 1896, p. 30, 1898, p. 10-12, 18, 1900, p. 20, 29, 1902, p. 18, 1904, p. 14-17, 1906, p. 7, 14, 1908, p. 23, 1910, p. 4, 1912, p. 325, 1914, p. 334, 1916, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> History of Children, 1886-1893, cases 56 and 96, and Howard W. B---- to Galen A. Merrill, (April, 1891?) in *Letters from Children, 1889-1895* — both in Owatonna State Public School records; *Biennial Report*, 1898, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Quotations in this paragraph are from *Biennial Reports*, 1900, p. 34, 35, 1908, p. 11, 1898, p. 19, 1890, p. 59. On class consciousness among Canadian foster parents during this period, see Parr, *Labouring Children*, 95, 115.



*THE SPACIOUS dining hall, where older students oversaw the manners of younger children, about 1900*

and male, and such boys were sought chiefly for their labor.<sup>19</sup>

While Owatonna officials were only too happy to place children in foster homes, they were extremely reluctant to return boys and girls to their own natural families. In common with many late-19th-century child-welfare workers, the administrators were determined to rescue children by removing them once and for all from their impoverished natural families. Delegates at the 1909 White House Conference on Children agreed "that no homes should ever be broken up for reasons of poverty alone," but not until 1922 did the National Conference of Social Work entertain the suggestion that social workers try to help indigent families remain together and improve their lot rather than divide families to save children.<sup>20</sup>

To separate poor parents from their offspring, Minnesota law required applicants to make the state school their children's sole legal guardian until the youngsters were 18. Once a child entered the institution he or she became a ward of the state and all relationship with his or her parents was cancelled. School officials defended this arrangement by disparaging needy parents: "If parents could withdraw their children at will after they have been placed under the care of the state, an institution large enough to care for those who would seek

admission could not be constructed." And, "The excessive fecundity of many of the poorest and lowest classes is proverbial, especially of those who have no qualifications for caring for their offspring."<sup>21</sup>

Actually, between 1887 and 1907 the average size of households from which Owatonna children came was 4.1 persons, smaller than the national average in 1900 of 4.76. Just 5 per cent were full orphans and over half had two living parents. Yet very few children (11 per cent) resided in two-parent households; most dwelt with a mother or a father in families separated by desertion, sickness, and sometimes death. Just 6 per cent were the victims of child abuse and only 4 per cent were illegitimate. Moreover, the majority of the fathers of children in Owatonna held low-wage jobs in cities, most as day laborers, and their mothers, if employed, were either domestic servants or washerwomen. Two-thirds of these parents were foreign born, most of them German, Swedish, or Norwegian. The majority of parents of Owatonna wards were not well off. They resembled the parents of Elmira H---, age ten, who, with her two sisters, was registered in Owatonna by her "unreliable" father, a scavenger by occupation, after her mother took sick and entered a hospital, or the Scandinavian-born mother of Flora S---, who, after her husband, a Minneapolis day laborer, deserted her and their three children, sent them all to Owatonna in 1889.<sup>22</sup>

As in the cases of Elmira and Flora, parents generally turned over not one, but several children to the state school. Customarily they never saw their sons and daughters again until they reached adulthood, for, between 1887 and 1907, just 11 per cent of all children admitted to the school were not placed in foster homes but returned to their natural families, and only 27 per cent eventually re-entered these families after some time spent in foster homes. Infants placed by parents in Owatonna were usually later adopted and were almost never reunited with their natural mothers or fathers. The most troublesome child, the one who refused to obey foster parents or who repeatedly ran away, had the best chance of rejoining his or her family. Such a boy was William R---, whose Irish-born mother enrolled her ten-year-old son in Owatonna in 1891. Within half a year William had been indentured, but he frequently ran off from his foster home, so school officials indentured the boy again, only to have him decamp once more, this time to his mother's home. There they let him remain.<sup>23</sup>

Not only were children infrequently reinstalled in their parents' homes, so too were they parted from their brothers and sisters. Although most children entered Owatonna in the company of one or more siblings, they were often assigned to different cottages and later indentured into diverse families. Owatonna officials had little respect for family feeling among the poor. In later life, children often tried to locate their brothers and sisters,

<sup>19</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1890, p. 60, 1900, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Bruno, *Trends in Social Work*, 56, 177.

<sup>21</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1886, p. 32, 1890, p. 19; quotations are from 1898, p. 6, and 1892, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> *History of Children, 1886-1893*, cases 33, 184.

<sup>23</sup> *History of Children, 1886-1893*, case 534.





*THE HOMEY atmosphere encouraged at Owatonna shows in this 1900 view of the girls' parlor in Cottage Number Two.*

as did Frank H--- in 1891. Frank was 18 and had not received a letter from his brother in three years. He complained about not being able to contact the boy except through the school and threatened to pursue him to where he was last known to be.<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, indigent parents did not always realize when they signed Owatonna commitment papers that they were relinquishing to the school all rights to their sons and daughters. Some began to despair. Wrote one mother to her daughter: "I feel very lonesome without you and I did not think I would miss you so much [sic] nothing would please me so much as to step in and take dinner with you my little Lamb." Wrote another mother to the superintendent of Owatonna: "Let me know weather she is dedd or alive yet and how she is and if she is well. . . it brakes my hart when I think I may nevere see theme again on earth." Others appealed to school officials to return their sons and daughters. If the child had not yet been placed out, authorities often complied with parental wishes, but if the youngster was already in a foster home adjudged "good" by the school, it was almost impossible for the parent to secure restoration of the child. One mother, whose petition for the return of her two sons was endorsed by no less a personage than the governor, was turned down because it would "be detrimental to the children to be removed from their present homes and returned to their mother." Parents who were not particularly deferential to school officials were most unlikely to get back their children. Owatonna administrators adjudged that Lewis S---, father of three children at

the school, had a "bad spirit" and denied him any information about his children, even after he and his wife submitted a petition signed by the mayor and other leaders of the community of Owatonna endorsing the parents' request for their youngsters.<sup>25</sup>

THE cottage-style design plan, its school facilities, its foster-home placement program all made the Owatonna school a model social-welfare asylum from 1887 until World War I. The person largely responsible for keeping the school in tune with contemporary social thought was its superintendent, Calen A. Merrill. Born and raised in Michigan, educated at the University of Michigan, and thereafter agent for the state public school at Coldwater, Merrill moved to Owatonna at the age of 26. During his years as superintendent, he became conversant with the most progressive social-work theories through service as director of the National Association of Charities and Corrections, contributor to the 1893 volume on the history of child saving in the United States, and delegate to the first White House Conference on Dependent Children in 1909. It was Merrill who pressed for more and better cottage facilities at Owatonna, who continued to modernize the school's educational system, who im-

<sup>24</sup> Frank H--- to Merrill, March 23, 1891, in *Letters from Children, 1889-1895*.

<sup>25</sup> Mrs. M. E--- to Jennie, January 12, 1889, and Mrs. Annie K--- to Merrill, September 26, 1889, in Superintendent's correspondence, 1886-1890, in *Owatonna State Public School Records: Board of Commissioners. Minutes, February 16, 1898. December 4, 1889. April 8, July 8, 1890.*

plemented a program to prevent the spread of contagious diseases, who demanded and obtained proper funding of the state agent's program, who required close investigation of prospective foster families, and who often denied impoverished natural parents custody of their children.<sup>26</sup>

GALEN A. MERRILL



Gradually, from 1887 to 1907, Merrill and his staff determined that the children most amenable to the state public school program were the very young. Consequently, the average age of inmates at admission declined from 8.2 in the first ten years of the school's history to 7.0 in the second decade. Over this same time span, the number of youngsters in the lowest age group (one to five) increased from one-quarter to one-third. Such youngsters did very well in foster homes, perhaps because of their adaptability and the willingness of foster parents to treat very young children as their own, to send them to school, and to avoid overworking them. Between 1887 and 1897, the agents reported 40 per cent of Owatonna youngsters below the age of five to be contented and well suited to their first foster homes, and the same was true of 68 per cent of very young boys and girls from 1898 to 1907.

Girls were most in demand in this youngest age group; they were very likely to be adopted, and adoption was unquestionably the ultimate goal of Owatonna officials. Nonetheless, the officials never had as many girls of any age at their disposal as boys. In Minnesota, where from 1890 to 1910 the female population was 47 per cent,

just 40 per cent of the children in the state school were girls. In all likelihood, the comparative scarcity of females made natural parents less inclined to relinquish them and perhaps served also to make girls more desirable to foster families.

The increased numbers of very young children in Owatonna between 1887 and 1907 occurred principally at the expense of youngsters in the six- to ten-year-old age bracket. Such children, particularly boys, were hardest to place because they were not yet old enough to be of much practical use around a farm, and it was for their labor that most boys were sought.<sup>27</sup>

Whether male or female, children in the oldest age group, from 11 to 16, remained a constant one-quarter of the school's population. In the vicinity of Owatonna there was a high demand for the field or domestic labor on farms that these older children were physically able to provide. This high demand is reflected in the fact that between 1887 and 1907 about two-thirds of the youngsters admitted who were in this oldest age group spent the shortest time in the school.

Nevertheless, teen-agers posed problems for school officials because many of them were not adaptable or amenable to discipline. On the other hand, some foster parents antagonized older boys and girls by refusing to send them to school. The agents noted that this practice particularly disturbed teen-aged girls, "many of whom are ambitious to go to school, and cannot understand why they cannot have the same privileges that other children have." Unwanted pregnancies occurred among older Owatonna girls; several had children by their foster fathers or brothers. Teen-aged boys from the school were particularly angered by the unwillingness of foster parents to pay them for their labor. "When the boys reach the age of fifteen to sixteen years they become restless, uneasy and ambitious to be earning some money."<sup>28</sup>

Although all children, when they had completed their indentures, were entitled to be paid between \$75 and \$100 in cash by their foster parents, such a sum must have seemed paltry to adolescent boys who saw their contemporaries earning \$15 per month for the farm labor that foster children performed free. Not surprisingly, many boys departed their foster homes to seek work for wages, often on neighboring farms.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, there was much discontent among the older children placed out from the school, so much so that from 1887 to 1907 less than 20 per cent of boys and girls aged 11 to 16 were happy, satisfied, and well accepted in their first foster homes.

THE FOUNDERS of Minnesota's state public school envisioned it as the model child-welfare asylum of the 1880s, and, under the direction of the forward-looking Merrill, Owatonna became in large part just that. Indi-

<sup>26</sup> For information on Merrill's background, see *Biennial Report*, 1938, p. 1-4.

<sup>27</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1890, p. 64, 1900, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1900, p. 27, 1898, p. 19. See also Board of Commissioners, Minutes, April 29, October 28, 1902, October 27, 1903.

<sup>29</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1892, p. 35, 1894, p. 33, 1896, p. 36, 1900, p. 31, 1904, p. 14, 1906, p. 20, 1908, p. 24.

gent youngsters all across the state commenced their education in a homelike environment where not only their intellectual but also their physical needs were satisfied. Children remained only a short period in Owatonna and were, as promptly as personnel were available to make it possible, placed out in farm-family homes. A central concern of social workers — to rescue children from poverty and indenture them to more prosperous farm families — became reality at Owatonna. Although it was often difficult properly to place children and to visit them frequently, nonetheless Owatonna officials improved their record on both counts in the years between 1887 and World War I.

The ultimate effect of Minnesota's state public school program varied. For youngsters removed from local poorhouses, which were often small and dirty and where children dwelt alongside insane, drunk, and venereal paupers, life at Owatonna in clean, bright cottages with others their own age was a great improvement. Not only those who came from almshouses, but other needy boys and girls committed by the courts profited from the healthy diet, the fine medical program, and the free and open play space available. Moreover, for at least a third of the youngsters admitted to the school, it represented their first exposure to education of any kind. In their own home towns, many such needy youngsters had been ridiculed by their peers and had avoided school. At Owatonna there was no such treatment, but ample opportunity to learn to read and write, to add and subtract, to handle tools, to plant and harvest, to milk cows, to sew, to cook. The latter skills proved most useful to the majority of children who were indentured into farm families.<sup>30</sup>

Indentured youngsters were not always able to complete their education in reading and mathematics. Taken in for their labor alone, as so many were, they were often kept at home to tend the animals or perform household chores, only to watch their foster brothers and sisters and neighboring children go off to the local school. Labor *per se* was not bad for children, but all work, no education, and being treated more as servants than as members of the family was not beneficial. Such seems to have been the experience of most children, especially those aged 11 and above, who were invariably sought purely for their usefulness at an age when they felt most acutely how different they were from their peers who received both education and recompense for their work.

Also disruptive to children were the many separations required of them once they were put in care of the state. Some came directly from almshouses, but the majority suffered a series of jolting separations from natural parents, siblings, asylum parent figures and playmates, and even foster parents, brothers, and sisters. Often family members were able to keep in touch after placement only, if at all, by sending letters to the school in the hope they would be forwarded.

From 1887 to 1907, two-fifths of Owatonna children were placed out more than once. The youngest (below age five), especially females, were the most likely to settle permanently into foster homes. Often they were adopted. Such children were also the most likely to be forever alienated from their natural families. A mother who gave an infant female to Owatonna would probably

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<sup>30</sup> *Biennial Reports*, 1890, p. 27, 1892, p. 9.

*THE SCHOOL FARM, seen here in 1905, provided both practical experience and fresh food for Owatonna students.*





TWO SISTERS, Mary and Clara, were among the children placed out from the state school in 1899.

never see the child again. Herein lies the real tragedy of Owatonna, for many parents did not realize that by entrusting their offspring to this new, modern state school, they were losing their sons and daughters for good.

And what of the ultimate careers of the children themselves? Were they truly rescued from lives of poverty? The only records we have are of the occupations of 55 per cent of the children who reached maturity in the sample of 300 collected from case records and Superintendent Merrill's own account of the subsequent vocations of several thousand youngsters admitted before 1914. Unfortunately, the two data sets are in almost direct contradiction to each other. While Merrill found that two-thirds of the children became farmers, artisans, white-collar workers, or married such persons, in the sample only one-third of youngsters were in this category and two-thirds held low-wage jobs as day laborers, domestic servants, janitors, or factory workers. Perhaps the sample was too small, or Merrill was careful to survey mainly the youngsters who were doing best, or children admitted in the school's earliest years (1886 to 1907, the period covered by the sample) simply did not do as well as those admitted later.

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<sup>31</sup> Merrill, *Minnesota State Public School for Dependent Children: Survey of Results of Twenty-Eight Years Work*, 3-6 (Minneapolis, 1915). Parr also found that among British-born foster children in Canada more females than males moved immediately to cities upon reaching maturity; however, she noted that eventually most males in their 20s and 30s also moved to urban areas and were as likely as their female counterparts to hold low-paying jobs. *Labouring Children*, 124-127, 131-134.

<sup>32</sup> Minnesota, *Laws*, 1917, p. 309, 1945, p. 1100, 1947, p. 114; *Legislative Manual*, 1971-72, *Biennial Reports*, 1917, p. 158, 1923, p. 4, 7, 1937, p. 17.

There are, however, some similarities between Merrill's findings and those of the sample. Boys ended up in higher status occupations than did girls. Most females became domestic servants or waitresses, while many boys became farmers or artisans. Moreover, boys' occupations indicate that they stayed in rural areas, while the jobs girls held (Merrill specified whether they were domestic servants in the city or country) reveal that more of them probably lived in urban areas.<sup>31</sup>

This information is consistent with what we know of Owatonna's placement program. It put both boys and girls in farm homes, but girls lived and worked in the home under the watchful eye of the mistress and acquired only housekeeping skills, while boys labored more independently in fields and barns and became acquainted with all facets of farming. On reaching maturity, many girls probably wanted the greater freedom afforded them in cities, where they could live alone and perhaps learn new trades (as clerks, stenographers, phone operators), but many boys preferred to put the skills they had learned to good use, to apply their freedom dues and the money they could earn as farm laborers to buying farms of their own.

In its formative years Minnesota's modern state-school program proved a mixed blessing to indigent youngsters. While it improved their physical surroundings and their health, it only marginally enhanced their educational opportunities. The program was least damaging to the very young and most disrupting to adolescents. It probably improved the lot of more boys than girls and succeeded in keeping principally the former on farms and out of cities.

In 1917 the board of control for the Owatonna school was abolished, its duties were transferred to the state board of control, and the power of commitment was turned over to the county juvenile court. Increasingly, these courts began to send "feeble minded" children to Owatonna and to entrust young, healthy youngsters from impoverished families to local, private foster-care agencies. Social workers came to reject institutionalization for all but the "unplaceable" child. In 1947 a law recognized what was by then an established fact: Owatonna was a school for educable, mentally retarded boys and girls. Still later, as integrating (or "mainstreaming") of such children into public schools became a reality, the Owatonna institution lost its clientele. It closed in July, 1970.<sup>32</sup>

THE photograph on p. 11 is from *Min of Minnesota*, 34 (St. Paul, 1915); the one on p. 13 is from *Biennial Report*, 1900, p. 49; all others are from the MHS audio-visual library.



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