

Early Days OF THE State Reform School

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A crime occurred in Minneapolis on September 22, 1873. While Charlie Easthagen kept watch outside, his brother Fred entered Schaefer's bakery, rifled the till, and slipped out. The Easthagens were soon caught but the money never recovered. Justice moved swiftly in those days. On September 24 the brothers were sentenced to indefinite terms of confinement. Charlie ended up inside for nine years, Fred for twelve. This is one way of looking at what happened.

There is another: On that September day, the Easthagen boys went to Schaefer's for ice cream. When Fred walked in, with a dime in his pocket, there was no one at the counter. Out of curiosity, or mischief, or—who knows?—budding criminality, he reached into the cash drawer, grabbed some coins, and left. He and Charlie took off, but they had been seen and did not get far. What happened to the money? "I spent some of it and dropped some of it," explained Charlie. Justice moved swiftly and within two days the boys were packed off to reform school. Charles Easthagen was nine years old, Frederick, six. They never went home again.¹

The Easthagens serve here to get us inside Minnesota's first state institution of juvenile justice, originally called the House of Refuge. These boys were both typical inmates, in the triviality of their offense, and anomalous, in their youth and long stay. They embodied some of the parallel and sometimes competing missions of the

institution—protecting society from wayward boys and protecting boys from cruel society and, often, incompetent parents.² Their story provides a look—necessarily partial and imperfect—at the state reform school during its first stage, from 1868 to 1891: how it came to be, who was sent there and why, how the inmates got in, and how they got out. This look reveals something about juvenile crime in early Minnesota and how a very young democratic society tried to deal with it.

As the Easthagens left Minneapolis, they "bid farewell to civilization

plea to the city council. There were at least seven gangs of young criminals at work in the city, he wrote—200 boys or more, many younger than ten, some armed—stealing from businesses and people. Just as bad, maybe worse, was what happened to the offenders. "Let anyone not hardened by crime step into our city prison and see these little children cast shivering and weeping into a prisoner's gloomy cell, and he must say that it is a sin to longer delay action in this matter—a sin that will be visited on the heads of all the people before many years."⁴

The criminal-justice system made no formal distinction between adults and children, so 12-year-old shoplifters might find themselves in jail with real criminals.

... [and] all along the breezy route to the reform school, from the river on the south to the north as far as the eye can see, scarcely a dwelling house could be discovered," a journalist later reported. The wagon or carriage ride, due east, would have taken about two hours and brought them to an elegant French Second Empire-style house (incongruously set on the prairie) attached to a big new dormitory, with outbuildings scattered nearby and an enclosing fence—reform school.³

The criminal-justice system made no formal distinction between adults and children, so 12-year-old shoplifters might find themselves in jail with real criminals. Heard proposed that St. Paul do what several states in the East and Midwest had already done: "The expense which the city would incur in the erection of a House of Refuge must be of small moment in comparison with the salvation of a generation which is now slowly but surely fitting itself for the penitentiary and the gallows."

His proposal, which must have met a felt need across Minnesota,

FACING: Minnesota State Reform School's original building, near the intersection of Marshall and Hamline Avenues, St. Paul, looking south. The building is no longer standing.

I n the fall of 1873 the reform school was not quite six years old. Its origins dated from late 1865, when St. Paul City Attorney Isaac V. D. Heard made a dramatic

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passed quickly from St. Paul to the state legislature. The new institution, authorized by the legislature in early 1866, opened its doors in January 1868 as the House of Refuge of the State of Minnesota in vacant Rose Township (soon to become part of St. Paul). During the next 23 years some 1,250 boys were sent there by courts across the state.

Reform school did not simply spring from the brow of Isaac Heard or from that of its chief legislative sponsor, Sen. William Pitt Murray of St. Paul.⁵ Its roots in the United States go back to East Coast reformers and to England in the early-nineteenth century. People observed then—still true today—that children ought not be put in adult jails and prisons; that young criminals were often as much or more victims than malefactors; and that some parents were so neglectful or

(1826), and Philadelphia (1828). Massachusetts opened the first statewide reform school in 1847, followed by Pennsylvania (1851), Maine (1853), Ohio (1856), Wisconsin (1860), New Jersey (1864), and Indiana (1866). Heard and his collaborators based Minnesota's school on Ohio's.

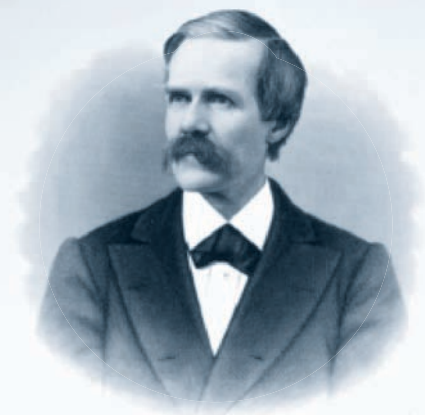
Minnesota's legislation created two main categories of boys under the age of 16 who might be committed to reform school. Those guilty of crimes other than murder went in through the ordinary criminal-justice process. Those whose conduct showed them to be "incorrigible" or "vicious" could be brought to court by their parents, guardians, or third persons, if the parents or guardians were abusive or incompetent.⁷

Often, there was a story behind the story: a broken family, a struggling single parent, a boy with a bad reputation.

abusive that children needed protection from them. Furthermore, existing institutions, such as the courts and private charities, were not meeting these needs. Something new had to be tried, hence reform school: reform for behavior (and protection of society); school to prepare the child for a self-sufficient life.⁶

The first Houses of Refuge sprang up in New York (1825), Boston

The men in charge of the school could hold the inmates until age 21 and bore the responsibility for the inmates' "religious and moral education, training, employment, discipline, and safe keeping." Commitment to reform school was not a penalty but a "guardianship." The school was run by a board of managers, appointed by the governor, and a superintendent, chosen by the board.



State senator William Pitt Murray, chief legislative sponsor of the reform school bill

For almost the entire period covered here, St. Paul businessman D. W. Ingersoll served as chairman and the Reverend John G. Riheldaffer as superintendent.⁸

Thus, less than eight years after statehood, Minnesota established that children who committed crimes other than murder were not to be punished but reformed; that parents could ask the state to take custody of their children; and that the state had the power to take custody of children against their parents' will. The statute represented an extraordinary expansion of government power, right into the very heart of home and family.

More than half of the boys committed in this early era—640—came in for simple theft. Their thievery involved a variety of items—coins, canned goods, fishing tackle, pencils, plumbing—and almost all of it was petty, even by standards of the time. The Easthagens' pilfer was more petty than most, but not by much.

Typical cases include Tim Rawley, 12, of St. Paul, who stole 25 *Pioneer Press* newspapers, worth perhaps



For more on the inmates—their ages, dates of commitment, charges against them, and other details—see the author's compilation, drawn from case files: <http://people.mnhs.org/reformschoolroster.pdf>.

50 cents. He may have been a newsboy; many newsboys went to reform school. William Gardner of Stillwater, also 12, stole a pocket watch. His widowed mother testified that he had been stealing for two years—and that she had four other children to support. Two 15-year-olds from Goodhue County, Ashford McNutt and John Fogelson, stole a can of oysters from a store. Henry Parmelee, 10, of St. Paul, stole 18 gas burners. His father testified that that he would be gone steamboating during the summer; reform school would be in his son's best interest.⁹ Often, there was a story behind the story: a broken family, a struggling single parent, a boy with a bad reputation. Rarely did the

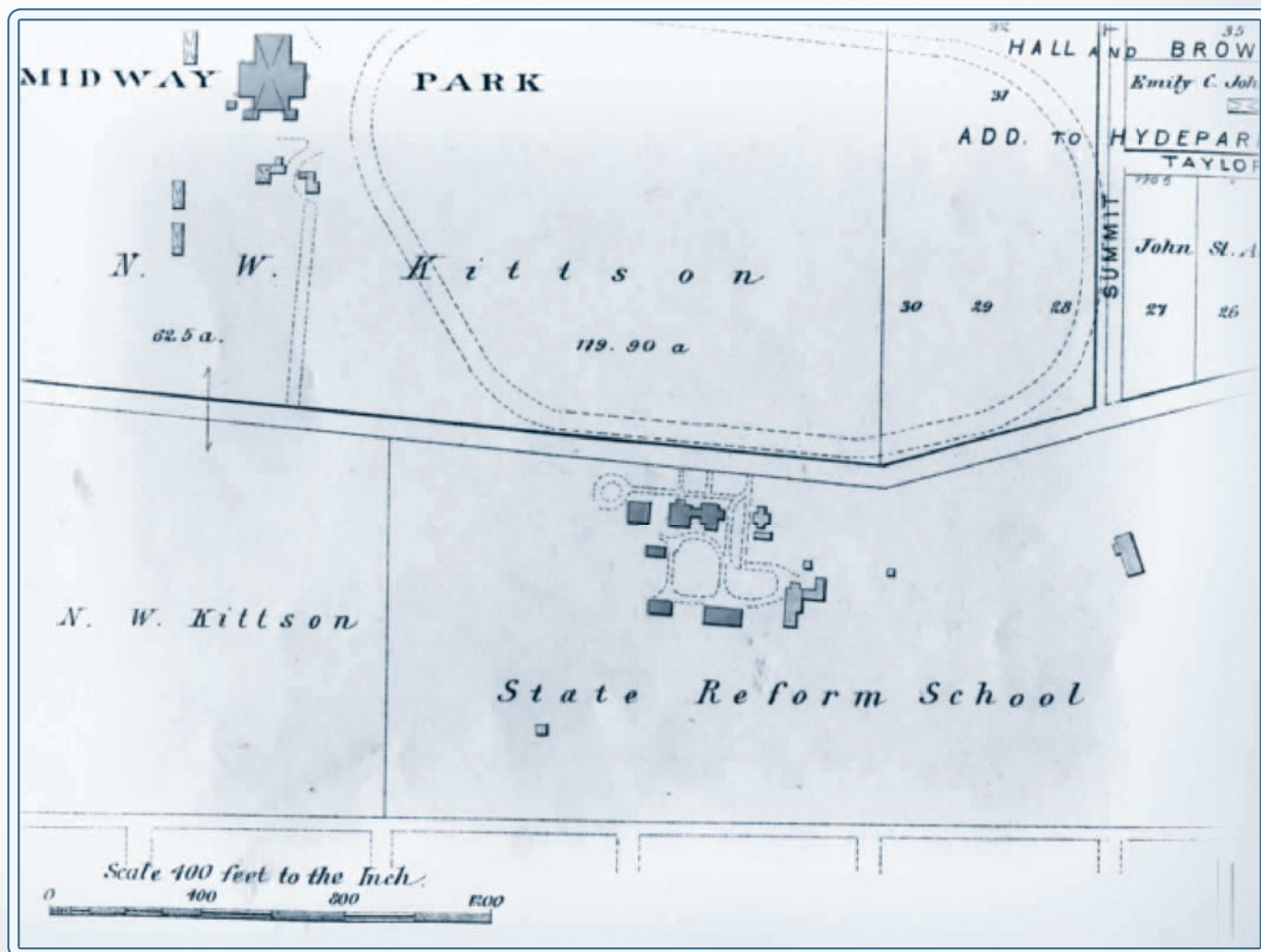
reported value of the theft reach even 40 dollars.

The second largest category, during all 23 years, was incorrigibility. Four hundred fifty boys—36 percent of the total—were adjudged incorrigible, and 361 of them were brought to court by parents or stepparents. Put another way, about one-third of the boys committed to reform school got there through a caretaker pleading with the state, “Please take this child off my hands.”¹⁰

The behavior that brought boys to that point varied enormously, but there were some patterns: truancy, running away, foul language, disobedience. As in theft cases, fractured families often lurked behind the

accusation of incorrigibility. Simon Howe, 11, of Faribault, was brought to court by his father, who testified that his son ran away, stole, and could not be controlled. The father had “tried whipping frequently have shut him up in a room and starved him have tried these remedies so often that I found it did him no good.” Rosanna Oakes of St. Paul, whose husband was killed in the Civil War, had her sons Theodore and Charles, 11 and 13, sent to reform school: “They remain out in the streets until very late at night, spending their time about the steamboats in the daytime, about the Opera

Detail from an 1886 plat map, showing the reform school campus





The First Superintendent

Though governed by statute and a board, the reform school was dominated by one man, the remarkable John Riheldaffer. From 1868 to 1886, everything that happened within its walls, and almost everything that mattered to the inmates, came from him.

It would be hard to imagine a person better suited for the job. He was a farm boy (born in 1818) from the Ohio frontier, orphaned as a youth, mostly self-educated yet well enough to get trained as a Presbyterian minister at Princeton. His first wife died very young; he married again, this time to Catherine Ogden, a minister's daughter from Michigan. They made a formidable team. Together they moved to St. Paul in 1852 and founded, first, Central Presbyterian Church and then St. Paul Female Seminary, a private school for the daughters of St. Paul's early elite.¹

Riheldaffer had the practical skills of a frontier boyhood, a Princeton pedigree, the experience of building institutions, and a passion for education. Like so many reform school inmates, he had lost parents. He had a wife just as committed as he was, and he enjoyed a muscular, active, and confident religious faith. No one else seems to have been considered for the job.

It was more than a job—it was an all-consuming life. He and his family lived at the school; in the first years, they and the inmates shared the same house. He did all of the hiring, took charge of religious instruction (his aggressive Calvinism offended many Catholics), and supervised all of the many building projects—most of them carried out by inmates and staff.² He lobbied the legislature, wrote the annual reports, and took the whole inmate population camping every summer. Except when the board or politicians interfered (which he resented), he decided when every boy got out.

It was a 365-day-a-year, dawn-to-dark life, so intimately bound up with the lives of the inmates that when typhoid fever struck them (due to the pestilent water supply he complained about for years) it struck him too. He and Catherine lost a daughter.³

Above: John G. Riheldaffer, from a Central Presbyterian Church (St. Paul) anniversary program. Right: Riheldaffer family home on Ashland Avenue, near the school, about 1885

He never wavered from certain principles:

- His charges were boys, not criminals, and not so different from other boys.
- Reform School was not a place of punishment.
- Education was foremost, as most of the inmates came in with low levels of literacy.
- Work came right behind education, as the boys needed to be prepared for a life of labor.
- He could succeed with almost any boy.⁴

In the end politics, not the boys, drove him out. Or maybe he had just stayed too long. He came to feel that he was being watched, suspected of overspending, and undermined by both his superior, Chairman Ingersoll, and his deputy, J. W. Brown. He resigned to take a pastorate in Redwood Falls.⁵

1. Biographical information from undated typescript and an obituary by Richard Marvin, Sept. 1895, both in John G. Riheldaffer and Family Papers, MHS; T. M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota* (St. Paul: the author, 1886), 312–14; George E. Warner and Charles M. Foote, comps., *History of Ramsey County and the City of St. Paul* (Minneapolis: North Star, 1881), 271–73.

2. There was a public controversy when a Roman Catholic priest publicly accused Riheldaffer of using his position to turn Catholic boys Protestant; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Feb. 25, 1874, p. 2; *Pioneer Press*, Feb. 19, 1874, p. 1.

3. *Eleventh Annual Report*, 1878, p. 10.

4. Principles drawn from Riheldaffer's frequent writing on the subject in his annual reports, 1869–83.

5. John G. Riheldaffer, diary, 93–94, Riheldaffer papers.



House at night.” Patrick Hollihan of Anoka asked that his son Francis, 11, be committed (and he was): “He runs away. I fear that if he is left without proper restraint, harm and trouble to himself and friends would be the result.”¹¹

Sometimes it was clear that a boy was seriously disturbed. Ernest Lohman, 14, of Cottonwood County, had a history of abusing animals; beating a pony to death was the last straw. Such cases were rare—about 20 in 23 years—but they illustrate how reform school was sometimes used as a last resort for young people mentally ill or cruelly abused.¹²

Petty larceny and incorrigibility comprised 1,130 of the 1,250 cases that put boys into reform school between 1868 and 1891. Here, the school’s records may tell us something about juvenile crime in this era: Over 23 years, there were only 120 cases of serious crime. Of these, 63 were major thefts. The rest: burglary, 16; assault, 15; arson, 9; sex crimes, 7; manslaughter, 2.

These totals invite us to consider: When the school opened in 1868, Minnesota had been a state for less than ten years, and it had not been a triumphant decade. Statehood came amid a devastating depression; then came the Civil War and the U.S.—Dakota War of 1862, the most violent events in national and state history. Minnesota was a rough-edged place on the frontier. By 1891, when the reform school moved to Red Wing, the Twin Cities had become railroad boom towns, with all of the disorder and social distress that accompany rapid growth. And yet, crimes of violence made up less than three percent of reform school cases. It seems that these years were, in terms of youth violence, a gentler era than our own.

Boys who went in dissolute, ignorant, and useless were to come out literate, disciplined, useful, and God fearing.

The legislature had charged reform school with tasks implied in its name. First, reform—the correction of proclivities to vice and crime. Second, education—in this case, elementary learning plus the habits and some skills of work. Boys who went in dissolute, ignorant, and useless were to come out literate, disciplined, useful, and God fearing.

The daily routine imposed on the Easthagens and the others expressed these imperatives well. As an annual report related:

At six o’clock in the morning, the rising bell rings. Boys rise immediately, dress themselves and make their beds; then they fall immediately into line and march in military order to the wash-room; wash and comb; no conversation is permitted during these duties. They again fall into line and pass to the school rooms; here they join in singing a few verses; the officer in charge reads a portion of Scripture, then all rise, and standing repeat, in concert, the Lord’s Prayer. Again they fall into line and pass quietly to the dining hall . . . ; all sit down at the same time, and eat their breakfast in an orderly and quiet manner, in the presence of an officer, who sees that . . . proper decorum is observed.¹³

When breakfast was over, all inmates filed in the same order to the washroom, where they stood in

line until the morning’s schedule was made. Half then were marched off to school and the other half to work until 11:30, when it was time to wash, eat, and have an hour of play. Then they switched, those in morning school working in the afternoon.

At five o’clock the bell rings for the close of school and work. After supper, in winter, the boys assemble in the large school room where time is spent, until half-past seven, in hearing reports, study, and reading. At half-past seven the bell rings for evening devotions, which are conducted by the Superintendent . . . and consists of reading a portion of Scripture, singing, and a prayer. . . .

The work of the day is now over and the boys proceed in military order to their dormitories, where each one takes his position beside his bed, and at a given signal all kneel down, and each one utters a silent prayer according to his own desire or previous training.

All now retire to rest, and no talking or disorder is permitted until they leave the dormitories the next morning. This day is substantially the same as every other day of the year.

This routine must have come as an unpleasant shock to the many boys accustomed to the freedom that came with absent or incompetent supervision at home.

The boys’ work was serious. The school mostly fed and clothed its

inmates and also produced a small income from making and selling toys, tinware, and surplus farm products. The farm, covering about 30 acres (later expanded), included fields, gardens, and orchards. If the reports are to be believed, the school provided all of its own vegetables—potatoes, beets, onions, carrots, beans, cabbage—and oats for the livestock. Some years it had as many as 10,000 strawberry plants, 150 crabapple trees, and 500 grapevines. It kept small numbers of horses and cows and up to 18 pigs, producing as much as 4,000 pounds of pork in a year. The boys provided almost all of the labor.¹⁴

And that was not all. The inmates also did most of the kitchen work, under the supervision of a cook, plus the laundry and cleaning. Starting in 1870 the school added shops: first, a shoe shop, tailor shop, and tin shop, then a carpenter shop and greenhouse. The tin and carpenter shops made items for sale, and the school employed as many as two peddlers to sell the goods—including toys, such as sleds—some years at a profit.

Though some of the boys must have felt the rigors of reform school punitive, physical punishment was rare and there is no evidence of the kinds of systematic abuse that is sometimes reported of such institutions today. For many boys, maybe most, reform school provided better order and nutrition—and more kindness—than they had recently known.

Inmates came from many parts of the state (mostly the southern half, where the people were), but overwhelmingly from Minneapolis, St. Paul, Winona, Red Wing, Lake City, Rochester, and Fairmount.



Toys and furniture made by reform school boys, 1875

Though the boys ranged in age upon admission from three to 16, the majority entered at 12, 13, or 14. Most were poorly educated and many, like the state's population as a whole, were immigrants or sons of immigrants. They were also small in comparison with today's youth; measurements in the late 1880s found the average 15-year-old committed to reform school to be five feet tall. Except for their young age, the Easthagens fit the general profile well. They were city boys, Scandinavians, hard-luck cases rather than young criminals truly bound, as Isaac Heard had worried, for the gallows or the penitentiary.¹⁵

The average length of stay inside was established early and never changed: two to three years. There were probably several factors at work. Most families, even if they had initiated their sons' commitment, eventually wanted them back. At age 15 or 16, it was time for them to go to work. Also, during most of this era their upkeep was paid by the counties that sent them, and county commissioners chafed at the expense.¹⁶

Still, one boy out of every nine sent to reform school between 1868 and 1891 stayed more than five years. In effect, these boys spent their entire adolescence in the care of the state. Some of them were just hard cases. Others were seriously disturbed, disabled, or of such limited capacity that no one, including their families, would take them. And still others came from such neglectful or abusive homes that state and county officials shrank from sending them back. For scores of boys, reform school became an orphanage. This was not its design, but in the absence of a foster-care system or government institutions for neglected children (the Minnesota State Public School at Owatonna opened in 1885), reform school became the first statewide child-welfare facility.¹⁷

While we do not know who the Easthagens' school chums may have been, their long stay gave them the chance to meet some memorable characters. If the concept of street cred existed in the early 1870s, Charles Mickley must have had it. The lawman who had him committed testified, "I have never met so

incorrigible a case,” though the boy was only 11. That officer was his father, the sheriff of Stearns County, and he may have been right. It took Charles six years to get out, and then only briefly; he did not leave for good until age 19.¹⁸

John Wilde had been brought to Minnesota from a poorhouse in Akron, Ohio (several “orphan train” boys made their way to reform school) and placed with a Rice County farmer, Augustus Johnson. When Johnson found that Wilde had been indulging in “immoral contact with sheep,” off to reform school he went and stayed five years. Henry Schaberman of Olmsted County was in for perhaps the oddest crime of any inmate: “administering poison with intent to injure.” He and his brother Frank had been brought to trial for giving the supposed aphrodisiac Spanish fly to the Horton sisters of High Forest. After a trial in which the jury hung, 11-1, for conviction, Henry pleaded guilty, apparently in return for Frank going free.

The Easthagens would have encountered both of the killers committed to reform school (also the only boys implicated in gun violence). Jacob Brucha killed a young woman in an apparent act of heedlessness, firing his rifle at passersby along a road. Charles Seig, egged on by his mother (who went to prison for it), killed a trespassing neighbor with a shotgun. Both were convicted by juries of fourth-degree manslaughter, the lowest available homicide charge.¹⁹

Though we do not know if the Easthagens hung around with any of these, there was one hard character that they almost certainly did: their brother Peter, guilty of stealing \$2.55 from a peddler’s cart. He came in at age seven in 1875 and stayed 11 years.²⁰

The 1866 law did not specify a duration for reform school commitments; they could last until age 21. Although the board of managers had complete authority over how long each boy stayed, in practice the decision was almost entirely at the superintendent’s discretion. Until the mid-1880s, when commitments soared, the inmate population was small enough that the superintendent would have known every boy well. All available evidence shows that both Riheldaffer and his deputy (and successor), J. W. Brown, were sincere and dedicated public servants who took genuine interest in the progress of all of their charges. They released boys when they thought the time was right.²¹

There does not seem to have been a standard, formal process for earning release, though by 1886 the board had developed a policy “to conditionally discharge a boy as soon as there is sufficient evidence he is reformed. . . . a boy can, by uniform good conduct, earn a position in one year that will entitle him to consideration for a conditional discharge.” Many times,

families petitioned for their sons to be returned and, though the first petition usually failed, the second or third succeeded. Some of these releases were outright, but most were called furloughs—that is, they had conditions. Scores of inmates were forcibly returned from furloughs for failure to meet the conditions.

Some boys were released when deemed ready to make their own livings. The school tried to train as many as possible in useful trades, chiefly carpentry and tinning. Nor did it not stop with training; staff also tried to find their charges jobs before letting them go. This practice continued even as the school grew to several times its original size and even after its removal to Red Wing in 1891. Sometimes, when a job placement worked badly, the boy would be returned to reform school for another try. And sometimes the boys, having failed to become self-sufficient, would return on their own and be received. Reform school was not voluntary, but it was not a prison.

We can never know why the Easthagen boys stayed in so long. The

An Escapee Returns

In 1889 Mata Gould of St. Paul had her son William Bouquette committed to reform school for incorrigibility. Her first husband had died and she had remarried. William was seven years old, but a resourceful seven. Little more than a year later, in July 1890, he escaped. He may have been the youngest ever to run from the St. Paul school, and he made a clean getaway.

But on April 14, 1896, almost six years later, Bouquette appeared at the facility, now in Red Wing, asking to be readmitted. “He wanted,” the ledger recorded, “to learn a trade.” Since reform school retained jurisdiction over inmates until age 21, it took him in. A year later he was furloughed for good; he was 15 years old.

Source: Inmate file and ledger #1013, Minnesota State Training School for Boys, Case Files and Commitment Papers, State Archives, MHS.

record does not show (as it does with many other boys) that their parents ever tried to get them out, though John and Hannah Easthagen stayed married, had three other children (two boys and a girl), and lived in Minneapolis well into the twentieth century.²²

The Easthagens could have gotten out on their own. During the school's 23 years in St. Paul, there were 89 documented escape attempts by 80 boys. Many more were kept out of the official records, as other sources show.

Escape could not have been difficult. The school had fencing but no walls and a small staff, none of them guards. Boys often worked on the grounds or accompanied staff on errands off the grounds. Supt. Riheldaffer boasted that escape was easy but the boys were so happy that they had no interest in doing so. He exaggerated only slightly.²³

Escapees were typically older than the average inmate and made their runs either soon after arriving or after a long stay, probably frustrated by being held for so long. For

nearly all, the only record of their flight is a sentence, sometimes just a word, "escaped," in the inmate ledger. Just a handful of entries tell more of a story.

Jacob Hooper was delivered to the school in July 1868 by a stage-coach driver who had found him wandering, alone, orphaned, and partially disabled by eye infections. He was charged with vagrancy, but incorrigibility would have done just as well. Hooper was 13 years old. Seven years later he was still there, the oldest inmate. His last ledger entry reads, "Escaped from the school while at the state fair." You have to hope that he found happiness somewhere.²⁴

William Ferguson's is one of the oddest stories in the record. The Minneapolis courts sent him to the school in late February 1884 for stealing a shotgun from an office. "His right foot is a clubfoot, walks with a crutch." Two months later he disappeared—but not for long. On June 23, 1885, he "visited the school, was well dressed and had some money. Said he was peddling. Had lost the use of his right limb, said to be from a gun shot wound."

He might have been young enough to be retaken (his age was not reported), but he was not. Riheldaffer and his staff perhaps concluded that, against all odds, Ferguson seemed to be making his way in the world and the other lads should be spared his influence.²⁵

For some boys, persistence paid off. James Henderson, an 11-year-old African American boy from St. Paul, had a long record of theft before landing in reform school in October 1881. He began trying to escape four years later, with dramatic flair. July 23, 1885: "Escaped [with another boy] by sliding down the ventilator." He was caught two days later. "Escaped again from the school on the night of June 29, 1886 by fastening sheets together, throwing them out of the window of the water closet of the dormitory of the second family building and sliding down the sheets outside." He was quickly caught again, but it seems that the managers did not try hard to keep him. "Escaped again July 1st 1886 when out picking currants." There was no need to flee in the night when you could simply walk away. He was 16 years old—time to go.²⁶

Reform school grounds, late 1870s, showcasing the institution's considerable growth



Did the people of the time consider reform school a success? The answer to this is certainly yes.

The first 25 boys to break out of reform school, 1870 to 1880, succeeded. This is one area where Supt. Riheldaffer could not bring himself to honesty. His 1880 report to the legislature noted just three escapes without recapture in the school's history, despite the records in the school's ledgers. Security got much better starting in 1881; still, in 1891 Supt. Brown reported a decade's cumulative total of nine escapes—when there had been more than 40. St. Paul's *Globe* newspaper also reported 23 escapes not noted in the inmate records, including a mass breakout of 11 in 1889.²⁷

Lax security certainly played a role in the escapes, but pragmatic judgments may have contributed, too; an unhappy young man desperate enough to escape was bound to agitate the others. Again, the records show that reform school was not a prison.

The Easthagens eventually got released in a fairly conventional way: the school found work for them. In 1882 and 1887, respectively, Charles and then Frederick were hired to go west—to Colorado and Montana—to herd sheep. After this, they disappear from all historical record. Their brother Peter, furloughed at age 18, returned to Minneapolis to work as a barber.²⁸

What happened to the boys after release? Or, put another way: Did reform school succeed in carrying out its mission of reform plus education?

Neither question can be answered reliably. There is no way of knowing whether any inmate would have gone “to the penitentiary or the gallows” but for the state's intervention.

While the records document scattered failures and successes—Emil Wonnigkeit was executed for murder, William Petran devoted his life to good works among the homeless—the post-release stories of nearly all inmates are lost forever.²⁹

But if we ask the question slightly differently, the answer is clear. Did the people of the time consider reform school a success? The answer to this is certainly yes. The daily press consistently praised the school and its leaders during the entire period (1868–91); in 1876, for example, the *Pioneer Press* called it “[o]ne of the most useful, beneficent and well managed institutions of the State of Minnesota.”³⁰ The legislature, though more laggardly than Riheldaffer hoped, supported it with money and regular improvements in law—most important, by shifting all financial responsibility for inmates from the counties to the state in 1885.³¹

Furthermore, leadership was astonishingly stable: In 23 years there were just two superintendents, and the first chairman of the board of managers served from 1868 to 1890.³² The state supreme court rejected the three cases that reached it to challenge the reform school's authority. Its example as a state institution for youth welfare had inspired two complementary institutions: the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children (ages three to 14) opened in Owatonna in 1885; and the St. Cloud Reformatory, for first-time offenders aged 16 to 30, opened in 1889.³³

There were no popular or legislative calls for major reform. Local authorities, who could have found ways to keep boys out, kept sending them. Inmate population quickly rose to capacity, and even as capacity increased, the place stayed full.³⁴

Was reform school a success for the Easthagens? Their extraordinarily long stays suggest that it was not, but there are complex possibilities. Unlike many other parents, theirs never tried to get them back. Unlike the huge majority of their comrades, no work could be found for them until they were nearly 18, and then the two older boys were sent far away to be shepherds. This suggests that they may have been hard to equip for work—of low intelligence, perhaps. The Easthagens may have been among those for whom reform school was, in effect, an orphanage. If so, then through their adolescence it gave them shelter, food, order, companionship, and, yes, at least some measure of love. In other words, it was a success.

The school's statewide popularity led to its move. It had opened on a silent prairie where, the *Globe* reported, “scarcely a dwelling house could be seen.” By the mid-1880s, St. Paul had grown to surround it. The city coveted the land for residential development, the state may have tired of the endless catch-up improvements to the site, and other towns certainly sniffed economic opportunity. The state created

a relocation commission in 1886, and Red Wing won the competition over Hastings, Shakopee, Buffalo Lake, and Farmington. The move began in the summer of 1891 and was complete by November.³⁵

The Red Wing facility still operates today, though much changed. In 1891 a boy could go in for stealing a stack of newspapers; today, it takes

a serious felony. The former reform school is now a youth prison.

The original site, now surrounded by residential and commercial streets, never in fact changed the character it assumed in 1868. It was mostly open and used for education then, and so it is today. Concordia College (now University) bought the west end of the site in 1892 and used the reform

school buildings, some of them for decades. Central High School has occupied the east end since 1912. Between them, where young people once worked a lot and played a little, for their salvation and betterment, young people now play baseball, softball, football, and tennis—for their amusement and betterment, but probably not salvation.³⁶ □

Notes

1. Inmate files and ledger #200, #201, Inmate Case Files and Commitment Papers, Minnesota State Training School for Boys, State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS). The boys' surname was also spelled Esthagen and Estagin in the records.

For inmate information, this article relies on two main sources in these records (under the school's newer name): with few exceptions, they hold the intake file for every inmate, and there are also two large ledger books with handwritten entries on almost all inmates. All counts and percentages in this article are based on the author's compilation from these records.

2. Girls were also sent to reform school in this era, but only about 100 of them and records are scanty. For reasons of space and paucity of information, this article excludes them.

3. *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Aug. 31, 1884, p. 2 (looking back on an early visit). Description of the house based on a photograph. I am grateful to Donald Empson for identifying the architectural style.

4. Here and two paragraphs below, *St. Paul City Council Proceedings, 1863-1883*, 86-87; J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of St. Paul to 1875* (1876; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983), 424-26.

5. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 3, 1866, p. 1. Sen. Murray introduced the bill on the first day of the 1866 legislative session.

6. Here and below, for an excellent account of the beginnings of the reform-school movement, see Robert M. Mennel, *Thorns & Thistles: Juvenile Delinquents in the United States 1825-1940* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1973), 1-76. *First Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the House of Refuge of the State of Minnesota*, 1868, p. 6-7 (Ohio as a model).

7. *General Laws of Minnesota, 1866*, 22-29. Girls were accepted under the age of 15.

8. *General Laws, 1866*, 24 (quotes), 25; for staffing, see annual reports, 1868-91.

9. Inmate files and ledger #67 (Rawley), #221 (Gardner), #267 (McNutt), #268 (Fogelson), #285 (Parmelee).

10. This did not escape the attention of school officials. Supt. Riheldaffer complained in 1872: "We cannot resist the conviction that there are children sent to the Reform School who ought not to have been sent. . . . It would seem that the impression that this is a good home for them where they will be maintained and instructed without any expense to parents or next friends, is the reason why some . . . procure their commitment"; *Fifth Annual Report*, 1872, p. 6.

11. Inmate files and ledger #65 (Howe); #125, #126 (Oakes); #255 (Hollihan). Another Oakes brother, George, entered in 1874; file #209.

12. Inmate file #1169. His name is also given there as Ernest Johnson.

13. Here and below (through long quote), *Eleventh Annual Report*, 1878, p. 8.

14. Here and below: Several annual reports boast about the school's productivity; see, for example, *Sixth Annual Report*, 1873, p. 13-19, *Tenth Annual Report*, 1877, p. 7-10.

15. From 1885 to 1889, the inmate ledger recorded the height of boys upon arrival; five feet tall is the average of the 41 whose age upon admission was noted as 15. Alas, there is no record of their height or weight upon release.

John Easthagen, the boys' father, was Norwegian; Hanna(h), their mother, Swedish. U.S. census schedules: 1900, Minneapolis, ward 7, enumeration district [e.d.] 74, sheet 1A; 1910, Minneapolis, ward 7, e.d. 117, sheet 1B.

16. *General Laws of Minnesota, 1866*, 27.

17. On the Owatonna school, see Minnesota State Public School, Agency History Record, State Archives, MHS.

18. Here and below, inmate files and ledger #95 (Mickley), #87 (Wilde), #299 (Schaberman).

19. Brucha: inmate file and ledger #471; *Winona Herald*, Sept. 16, 1881, p. 3, Sept. 23, 1881, p. 3, Oct. 28, 1881, p. 3; Winona County District Court criminal case file #689. Seig: inmate file and ledger #392; *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 8, 1879, p. 1; *Wright County Eagle*, Nov. 20, 1879, p. 4.

20. Inmate file and ledger #258.

21. Here and below, *General Laws, 1866*, 25; *Sixteenth Annual Report*, 1886, p. 4.

22. John Easthagen worked as a laborer and, eventually, a clerk at City Sash & Door Co. in Minneapolis. He died in 1909 (death certificate 1909-MN-017042); Hannah last appeared in the record in the 1910 census. *Davison's Minneapolis City Directory, 1890*, 411; *1905*, 551; *1910*, 541. U.S. census schedules: 1900, Minneapolis, ward 7, e.d. 74, sheet 1A; 1910, Minneapolis, ward 7, e.d. 117, sheet 1B.

23. *Ninth Annual Report*, 1875, p. 5-6.

24. Inmate file and ledger #24.

25. Inmate file and ledger #573.

26. Inmate file and ledger #802.

27. *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 1881, p. 3; *Eighteenth Annual Report*, 1891, p. 3. *Daily Globe*: Apr. 3, 1880, p. 4, Aug. 20, 1880, p. 6, Sept. 21, 1881, p. 3, Aug. 9, 1882, p. 1, Aug. 27, 1883, p. 1, Oct. 27, 1883, p. 8, Mar. 18, 1884, p. 2, July 27, 1884, p. 8, Aug. 2, 1884, p. 8, Mar. 24, 1888, p. 2, May 22, 1889, p. 2.

28. Inmate files and ledger #200 (Fred), #201 (Charlie), #258 (Peter); *Davison's Minneapolis City Directory, 1895*, 322.

29. Inmate file #893 (Wonnigkeit—spelled Wenneskite); Janice R. Quick, "The Crimes and Times of Wonnigkeit and Ermisch," *Ramsey County History* 43 (Spring 2008): 21-26. Inmate file and ledger #35 (Petran). Petran and two mates burned down a good part of downtown Minneapolis, including his father's business, in 1868. After a short stay in reform school he returned to Minneapolis and the family business. At age 34 he left that to found the Christian Workers Mission in the city's Gateway district. He ran that mission for



Manual training shop at the Red Wing Training School for Boys, about 1920

the rest of his life, while living in a mansion at 1700 Kenwood Parkway. *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 14, 1868, p. 4 (fire); *Minneapolis Journal*, Dec. 3, 1905, editorial sec., p. 3 (mission); *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, July 23, 1920, p. 16 (obituary).

30. *Pioneer Press*, Dec. 16, 1876, p. 7. See also *Daily Globe*, June 16, 1880, p. 4: "The school is in excellent condition"; the boys' schedule "lays the foundation for a good education"; "perfect order and neatness"; "admirable workings of the institution."

31. Legislative support through special appropriations: *Third Annual Report*, 1870, p. 9 (\$20,000 for new buildings); *Sixth Annual Report*, 1873, p. 11 (\$2,000 for new shops); *Seventh Annual Report*, 1874, p. 12 (\$18,000 for new dormitory); *Eighth Annual Report*, 1875, p. 12 (\$5,500 for new heating plant); *Eleventh Annual Report*, 1878, p. 10 (\$1,500 for new water supply, after three years of pleas); *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 1880, p. 6–8 (\$15,000 to repair fire damage). On the financial shift, see *General Laws*, 1885, 82. Riheldaffer had pleaded for this change at least since 1873; *Sixth Annual Report*, 1873, p. 7.

32. On superintendents: *Sixteenth Annual Report*, 1886, p. 1 (naming Brown), p. 7 (tenure and resignation of Riheldaffer).

Daniel W. Ingersoll was replaced as chairman by C. H. Pettit of Minneapolis; *Eighth Annual Report*, 1891, p. 2. By the time Riheldaffer resigned, his relationship with Ingersoll had become bitter; Riheldaffer, diary, 81–87, John G. Riheldaffer and Family Papers, MHS.

33. *State ex rel Olson v. Brown*, 50 Minn. 935 (1892); *State ex rel Connolly v. Brown*, 47 Minn. 472 (1891); *Daily Globe*, July 26, 1880, p. 1 (the Patrick McDonough *habeas corpus* case, resolved by the supreme court without opinion). For the Minnesota State Public School and St. Cloud Reformatory, see each Agency History Record, State Archives, MHS.

34. The original inmate capacity was 20–25, housed in an attic dormitory; *First Annual Report*, 1868, p. 4. Within a year, 36 had been admitted; *Second Annual Report*, 1869, p. 5. A new, three-story dormitory was completed in December 1869; *Third Annual Report*, 1870, p. 9. By the end of 1870, inmate population reached 82; *Fourth Annual Report*, 1871, p. 19. This number had grown to 109 three years later, and the legislature appropriated \$18,000 to add housing for 50 more; *Seventh Annual Report*, 1874, p. 4, 12. By 1885 there were 137 boys and 15 girls inside; Minnesota

state census schedules, 1885, St. Paul, ward 7, p. 19–23.

35. *Seventeenth Annual Report*, 1889, p. 11. *Daily Globe*: Aug. 31, 1884, p. 2 (the area around the school "will be very valuable residence property"); May 13, 1887, p. 2 (competition); *Pioneer Press*, Oct. 5, 1891, p. 4 (move). Sen. William Pitt Murray, who introduced the original House of Refuge bill in 1865, chaired the removal committee, suggesting that it met with St. Paul's approval.

36. Oswald B. Overn, *History of Concordia College* (St. Paul: Concordia College, 1968), 8. The playing fields are Jimmy Lee Recreation Center (Midway baseball), Robert Griffin Stadium (Central High School football and soccer), Toni Stone baseball stadium, Central High School tennis courts, and city Parks and Recreation baseball and softball fields.

The plat map, p. 135, from G. M. Hopkins, Atlas of the Environs of St. Paul, including the Whole of Ramsey County, Minnesota (1886) is courtesy Donald Empson. All other images are in MHS collections.



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