

Steele County Historical Society

"Preserving and interpreting the history of Steele County and making it accessible to all."

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Steele County Historical Society

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Village of Yesteryear 1962

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West Hills Complex Awarded National Register Certification

By Daniel Moeckly

Some history is remembered in our culture, people are honored and dates are marked on our calendars. But most history passes quietly. In fact, we can each think of history that, while significant, most would rather sweep under the rug. There is history here in Steele County that was swept aside for 50 years and nearly forgotten; and it is the story of thousands of people. Most were children who lived here in our county for at least a brief period.

The Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children (*a fancy name of an orphanage*) operated from 1886 – 1945. This institution operated on the grounds now known as the West Hills Complex, and it changed lives forever.

Considered a state-of-the-art facility, the orphanage was created to mitigate poor conditions of county poor farms and children's exposure to criminal, mentally ill and physically ill adults. You see, before the state orphanage existed, children were simply put into these farms with all manner of people that society simply wanted to forget. Can you even imagine the situation described here? Sure, some people placed there just hit a streak of bad financial luck, but others... hardly a good mix for young impressionable minds.

So when Reverend Hart (Secretary of the MN State Board of Charities) proposed the creation of an institution, he found an open ear in former orphan, Governor, Lucius Hubbard. The institution was founded on 160 acres, four buildings were built in that first year. Over time the orphanage grew in proportion to its population, peaking in the 1930's with 47 buildings, approximately 40 acres of campus, and 300 acres of farm land.



Today, the people who remember this history first-hand are few, yet this institution employed up to 140 people at its peak and gave work to hundreds more through construction and support roles, bringing many families to our county. Then there were the children. Going to school, working on the farm, the yards, in the kitchens, cottages, power plant, hospital and nursery; this was considered training, preparing these children for adoption or indentured placement. All effort was expended to help these children to become productive members of society.

While children were indentured across the entire State of Minnesota, many were placed right in Steele County. Some families took in children, others noted when a neighbor brought one home, many met State School Kids at Owatonna High School (*the institution's school only went through the 8th grade*), and still more befriended these children as they grew into adults. The simple fact is, few native Steele County resident can claim no connection. A lack of knowledge about this connection is far more likely.

Many children arrived at the institution in deplorable condition, starved, sick, neglected, and abused, over 300 died as a Ward of the State. For 198, these grounds became their final resting place. There are many stories, passed in whispers, about the treatment of the children at the school or after being placed in a home that was far from ideal.

Then there was the social stigma. In talking with adult State Schoolers today, for years these children felt 'this was something you just didn't talk about.' There were many reasons to forget.

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Look inside...

- *Cemetery Walk*
- *"Burn the Mortgage" Campaign*
- *Cabin Fever Reliever Fundraiser*
- *Time Traveler's Program*
- *President's message*
- *New exhibits on the way!*

West Hills Complex continued...

The restoration of the lives of 10,635 children who lived the orphanage history began back in 1992 with the simple idea of a permanent memorial. Museum founders, Harvey and Maxine Ronglien, saw the project through with great local support. One example, late in 1992 Bud Bleckeberg spearheaded the restoration of the Children's Cemetery, also a small museum was established. The Orphanage Museum (incorporated in 1999) only picked up steam, tackling new and bigger projects. As the restoration continued more was accomplished than the simple restoration of history. Lives were restored. At last, State Schoolers began to feel that they could talk about their experiences, lifting the veil.

On December 28, 2010, the restoration reached yet another plateau. On this date the National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior endorsed an application to list the orphanage campus and buildings in the National Register of Historic Places as a Historic District. How ironic that 125 years after legislation was passed establishing the State School, that it would receive national recognition.

The property was awarded the highest possible level of significance, signifying that this institution held influence on a national – international level. This post-Civil War public institution played a central role in the development of Child Welfare Policies, influencing thought on child-care across the entire United States and further.

The major influence of the Minnesota State Orphanage is personified by Galen Merrill, Superintendent, from 1886 until his death in 1934. Merrill began his career at the state-run orphanage in Coldwater, Michigan. A proponent of the cottage plan, Merrill's career brought him to Minnesota in the early stages of the planning for this institution. As his career developed, Merrill was a regular keynote speaker at conferences on child-care and orphanage operation.



Above: Galen Merrill

Whether we agree or not with Merrill's thoughts and methods of handling dependent children, it is essential that we realize that he was a pioneer.

Thanks to the Rongliens, City of Owatonna, the West Hills Commission, the Orphanage Museum Board, and many local supporters, without whom this history would not be preserved. Thanks to all for lifting the veil that so long covered this history. Special thanks also to Dan Hoisington and Nancy Vaillancourt for their effort in preparing the National Register Nomination.

This is obviously a huge topic, one that we can only scratch the surface of here. So consider yourself invited to stop up to the West Hills Complex and learn more about this history.

Our thanks to Dan for his contribution of this story, and our congratulations to the City of Owatonna and the everyone involved in making this National Register designation a reality!

Pictured below: Some of the Orphanage Board Members at the presentation of the plaque recognizing the National Register Designation of the West Hills Complex



Don't miss it!

CEMETERY WALK
SATURDAY,
OCTOBER 1ST
1-4 P.M.

SACRED HEART CEMETERY
COUNTY RD. 45 SOUTH
TICKETS \$5 EACH
Available at the Cemetery

History Center Building Committee
Tours Viracon

Members of our History Center's Building Committee toured Viracon on September 16th. The tour was conducted by Don McCann, Director of International Sales, and Farrah Hoffman, Senior Marketing Specialist. The committee got to see the History Center glass just before it was scheduled to be delivered to the construction site. The specialty glass with UV protection is an in-kind donation from Viracon. Our thanks to everyone at Viracon for their part in making the History Center dream come true!



Above: Members of the Committee visit with Don McCann prior to the tour.
Below: The Committee looking at the crated glass

