

1916-1923

In the spring of 1916 the author and his brother, Lyle, were committed to the Iowa Soldiers' Orphans' Home from Story County. Divorce and a mother's inability to support four small children had made the step necessary. The author, whose memories are the basis of this chapter, went to Ottumwa in January of 1923 and his brother returned to his mother in Nevada some months later. Lyle now lives in the Los Angeles area, and has since his discharge from the army in 1945, following nine years' service.

The basic physical arrangement of the home has changed little since I left there. The administration building formed the small middle arm of an E. Nine cottages for girls and nine cottages for boys made up the left and right arms. At the end of the line on the boys' side was the chapel. At the other end, on the girls' side, were the school buildings. Also behind the girls' cottages were the gym, hospital, barns, laundry, and a building housing the canning and sewing rooms as well as quarters for male staff members. The storeroom was behind the main building. The power plant was to its left. The land behind the boys' cottages dropped off sharply into Duck

Creek valley. The main playground was on the lower level.

The cottages were alike. On the first floor were the front parlor, sitting rooms for the matron and children, bath and washrooms, and a clothes room with a hook for each child. You hung up your clothes! Upstairs were the matron's quarters, dormitory with a bed for every youngster, and a closet that held Sunday's change of clothes as well as providing storage for clothing and bedding according to the season.

The children's life centered around the sitting room. Chairs ringed three sides of the room, ranging from small to large, depending on the occupant's age. Your chair was your castle. It was where you went to wait for the meal bell; where you read and studied; where you found your gifts on Christmas morning.

The home in itself was a well contained unit. There were schools, hospital, the usual service shops, farm, power plant, etc. The children, with supervisory assistance, staffed many of them. Everyone was expected to carry his share of the load. In the cottages older children helped the younger and all pitched in to keep their quarters neat and trim. When the children reached the fifth grade they started going to school only a half day. The other half was spent in working — and there was always plenty of that.

F. S. Treat, after 20 years' service as secretary

of the Board of Control, succeeded Fred Mahannah in March of 1920. Dignified in appearance, he was loved by all. He did much to remove the monotony of institutional life. During his regime a program was begun which brought home children into greater contact with those on the outside. Boy Scout and Girl Reserve groups and a Junior King's Daughters Circle were organized. Churches, recreation groups, and individuals aided his efforts. A statement made in Treat's 1922 biennial report is typical of the thinking of this great man:

Another two year period has passed into memory. It has been a time of readjustment and unstable values so far as material matters have been concerned, and we have hardly been able to live within our allowance. We take comfort in the thought, however, that perhaps we have done something to make some child's life better and brighter, and after all, the child life of the commonwealth is its greatest asset.

The war held up major construction and remodeling projects. But with the armistice, the long awaited gymnasium was begun. An appropriation of \$30,000 was enough to complete the building but did not cover, because of rising prices, the installation of a filter system for the swimming pool. Previously home boys had learned to swim at the Davenport Y through the courtesy of its officials. This is only one instance of the good done by Davenport institutions and its

citizenry. One could also mention the names of Harry E. Downer, head resident of the Friendly House, and Chris Behrens of the Family Theatre, as among the many who provided pleasure and entertainment for the children.

R. E. Zerwekh, some five years after I left the home, paid tribute to the warmhearted and generous people of Davenport in these words:

It has been our privilege to have the cooperation of many local organizations in bringing happiness and special pleasures to our family. The Sunshine Committee, which is the operating organization of the combined efforts of the luncheon clubs located in Davenport, Station WOC, the Tri-City Symphony Orchestra, the Mississippi Valley Fair Association, Captain Quinlan, owner of the ferry boat, the theaters of the city, as well as churches and many individuals, have all combined in giving to our children advantages equal to if not greater than those enjoyed by the average child in private homes. . . .

Another example: William D. Petersen first arranged for home children to enjoy boat rides on the Mississippi in 1912 and continued to do so each year until his death in 1927. By the terms of his will, Petersen left an endowment of sufficient size to defray expenses of an annual river boat trip for the children. Such trips have continued to this day!

Experiences of home residents must follow a pattern from year to year. Thus my memories may duplicate those of a boy 20 years ago or even 20 years in the future. They will highlight the good

(and seldom any of the bad) in institutional life.

Among my memories . . .

During World War I we were fed well but had an expression — "More dirt, more grub."

During the flu epidemic of 1918 I was one of the boys who helped move sick youngsters into isolation cottages. The sick were separated from the well quickly as we worked around the clock. It worked because no deaths were reported for the home. I do remember, however, that when it was all over Nurse Sade LeFevre put me in the hospital because "it might just be your turn" and fed me on egg-nogs. I did not like them then and I do not like egg-nogs today.

Working in the home's library on Wednesdays led to my greatest break. That was the day books were picked up for the next week's reading. Miss Rowles, in charge of the library, had a friend, Grace Shellenberger, who was librarian of the Davenport Public Library. When the home's annual supply of books came in, Miss Shellenberger would come out and help get them ready for shelving. I helped her. She became interested in me and told her sister in Ottumwa, Iowa, about me. To make a long story short that sister and her husband, Dr. and Mrs. D. E. Graham, gave me a home, love, and an education. Many Iowans over the years have done the same for other children.

Having my hand spanked by a teacher who used two rulers — lots of noise, little pain!

Shelling peas or stringing beans after the evening meal was a summer certainty. We had to handle several bushel baskets of peas and beans before we could play.

B. J. Palmer talked to us in the chapel occasionally. He always passed out purple buttons bearing the word "Smile." The chapel was also used for Sunday devotional services, Saturday night movies, concerts by the band, graduation exercises, school programs, etc.

It was a big day when Billy Sunday conducted a revival meeting in Rock Island. He not only visited with us at the home but arranged for a group of children to be brought to the tent and there they sat in the front row. It was easy to accept Christianity with Billy Sunday as the leader.

One of my happier days came when I was selected as a member of a group to stand guard at the Union and Confederate Cemeteries at the Rock Island Arsenal on Memorial Day. A green army car picked us up and took us to the arsenal. In addition to guard duty we were fed in the mess hall and toured the museum and grounds.

There was little intermingling of the sexes. The boys ate on their side of the dining hall; the girls on theirs. It was the same in the chapel; even the classrooms found the sexes separating. There was no dancing, no boy and girl parties as such. However, there was one job both enjoyed — working in the canning room during the canning

season. Miss Rowles was in charge and she had boys and girls working together, peeling tomatoes, fruits, etc., washing, filling, and capping quart jars. This was a busy few weeks and the kids really worked. When the season was over, Miss Rowles would throw a party for her workers — a taffy pull and games — one of the few times boys and girls had a semblance of freedom. Under the circumstances it was pretty hard for budding romances but occasionally a way was found to pass notes back and forth — usually through intermediaries.

Such a romance blossomed for me, only to be nipped in the bud when the girl, Martha Williams, returned to her parents. Now, some 50 years later, I would not know Martha if she walked into the room — but I would like to know what became of her, of Mabel Wheeler, of Alice Hoddy, and many others. It is puzzling that I remember names of girls rather than boys.

It was a great day when my matron, Martha Emmons, gave me my first safety razor. She used her own money to buy it. Everyone gathered in the washroom to watch me test it — even Miss Emmons.

A memory I cherish to this day was knitting for the Red Cross during World War I. The home contribution to the Davenport Red Cross was most extensive. The yarn was furnished and the older boys and girls, after learning to knit, turned

out items by the hundreds. I held the record for home knitters with 36 sweaters, 36 helmets, 36 over-the-tops, three pair of socks (I even heeled and toed them), and one pair of gauntlets. I was finally forced to stop knitting because those in charge thought I was ruining my health.

As an older boy I was placed in charge of several groups going to Iowa City for minor operations. Mr. Treat would put the children on the Rock Island at the station in Davenport. Arriving in Iowa City I marched the group to the hospital on Iowa Avenue and then hiked over to Macbride Hall to tour the museum until it was time to catch the train back to Davenport. I was considerably surprised one day when I found I also was scheduled as a patient.

My first job was in the shoe shop. I cut off the upper leather section of worn-out shoes. These were tossed in one pile, the sole section in another. I wondered then, and I wonder today, what happened to those uppers. Later I worked in the laundry and then in the office as errand boy.

There are other memories — Did Bedford Brown, a strapping colored boy, ever make it as a baseball player? What became of Hook Martin (with a logical reason for his nickname) after I ran into him briefly in Ottumwa years later? The Lott boys of Waterloo? You do not spend six years with some 500 youngsters and not have memories.