



Jim McKee: The history of the Nebraska Industrial Home for unwed mothers

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Local discussions concerning care for unwed mothers first surfaced in the 1870s.

In 1884, Mrs. Frances P. Clark, an Omaha philanthropist, began crusading to change the age of consent for girls from the age of 12 to 18 and petitioned the Nebraska Legislature to establish an "industrial home" for unwed mothers.

The age of consent was compromised at 15, and the unwed mothers discussion was joined by Nebraska Adjutant General J.H. Culver of Milford, who convinced the city of Milford to donate 40 acres of land a mile east of the city, just south of the railroad, for the proposal.

The name "industrial" related to industrial schools, which enabled "needy children to learn a trade ... and home industries are taught."

In 1887, the Legislature approved \$15,000 to establish an institution for as many as 50 "penitent girls who have no specific disease ... who have met with misfortune ... and thus prevent crime." Two three-story, 25-room dormitories complete with steam baths and library were built, along with a powerhouse, a cattle barn and laundry.

The first "inmate" arrived on May 1, 1889, and was noted as being "more sinned against than sinning."

The school's rules included a provision that the girls stay a minimum of one year and would be trained in practical arts, homemaking, health and "moral teachings." The children, when born, could be kept by the mother, adopted out or sent to an orphanage.

Girls arrived as wards of the state, sent by the courts or on their own.

At the end of the first year, 57 girls had been admitted and 45 babies had been born. Of them, 16 were adopted, two sent to the Home for the Friendless in Lincoln and the balance kept by the mothers.

Newspapers noted that it was "the only state-supported maternity home in the nation."

The biennial report issued in 1902 showed that the average age of the girls admitted was 19.5 years. The state appropriation was \$21,150. Employees were a superintendent, matron, teacher, dressmaker, cook, laundress, engineer and farmer. Because revenue was generated by the sale of excess production from "fruit trees, vegetables, poultry, hogs and dairy products," only \$15,426.29 was expended, leaving a surplus of about \$4,000.

Citing budgeting restraints, Gov. Dwight Griswold suggested in 1943 "that the Industrial Home at Milford be abolished" and the services transferred to the University Hospital in Omaha, leaving the buildings and land "available for other public use."

Although the average per capita daily expense was only \$3.96 with an average of 29 inmates as of July 1, 1952, the buildings, several of which were deemed unsafe by the State Fire Marshal, and most of the land were sold at auction in 1953 for \$18,000, though the sale was vetoed by the governor.

The property was ultimately sold, becoming the Milford Rest Home in 1967.

In 1994, the original dormitories were razed and the complex became today's Sunrise Country Manor.

The only remaining building is the still attractive 1931 brick and stone hospital.

As an aside, Harry Culver, son of the home's early proponent and founder Jacob Culver, was born in Milford and began a real estate career in southern California in 1910. In 1913 he formulated plans for Culver City, Calif., which was incorporated in 1917 with a population of 530. Culver City, still known as the "heart of screenland," played a large role "in the development of ... three major movie studios" - MGM, RKO and Columbia Pictures - and is now the home of their consolidation known as Sony Pictures as well as Hughes Aircraft.

Unlike Lincoln's O Street, which is known as the longest straight main street in the world, Culver City proudly proclaims its own as "the world's shortest main street."

Historian Jim McKee, who still writes with a fountain pen, invites comments or questions. Write to him in care of the Journal Star or at jim@leebooksellers.com.